

THE REPETITION OF THE COMING OUT PROCESS IN DAILY LIFE

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Coming out is often thought of as a defining, one-time event in a queer person's life. For many, however, the reality is that they must constantly renegotiate their identity and determine who they will ultimately reveal their identity to and when. Power structures have determined that those who choose to remain closeted by not "confessing" are at fault and deemed to be untrustworthy. This study utilized qualitative in-depth interviews with queer-identifying individuals to explore the ways in which people determine how and when they will come out. I found that compulsory heterosexuality and safety were two driving forces behind queer individuals' decisions to come out. Those who were consistently misidentified as heterosexual felt compelled to disclose their identity to others, but ultimately prioritized their physical and mental safety above all. Finally, contrary to the popular model for coming out, queer individuals felt as though their coming out process never ended and simply started over with each new person they encountered throughout their days. Despite the general narrative defining coming out as a once in a lifetime event, actual queer experiences differed greatly. The coming out process is never truly complete and is something that will persist throughout their lives as they encounter new people and situations every day.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Coming out, or disclosing one's sexuality identity to another, is often thought of as a one-time event in an LGBTQ\* person's life, and for some, that may certainly be the case. For many others, however, they must constantly renegotiate their identity and determine who they will ultimately reveal their identity to and when. Research in the area of coming out has thoroughly explored the various stages someone must go through prior to coming out, but it still implies a "once in a lifetime" event (Plummer 1995; Vargo 1998; Mosher 2001; McLean 2007; Guittar and Rayburn 2015; Miller 2016). It is not surprising that that this "one and done" idea of coming out has persisted over the years, as the language used to describe the experience of coming out almost compels it and describes the act as vital to establishing an LGBTQ identity. Plummer's (1995) research in particular has implied that the completion of this process is the only way one can ever hope to achieve happiness in their life, and this sentiment has persisted over time. Plummer (1995:82) says that it is "the most momentous act in the life of any lesbian or gay person." There is a substantial amount of symbolism and meaning attached to the coming out process and, as a result, it has been placed upon a pedestal where it has become the penultimate goal for every person. Although some have criticized this procedural model, the experience has continued to be discussed and studied in this manner (Liang 1997).

Due to elements like compulsory heterosexuality, which states that people are innately heterosexual, I argue, that coming out is not a once in a lifetime event, but rather an ongoing process that repeats with every new person encountered (Rich 1980; Tolman

et al. 2003). One must evaluate and decide who they will reveal their identity to and to what extent on a daily basis. For example, a queer identified person may come in to work to find a new employee and must now repeat the process once more to determine if and when they will come out to their new coworker.

Since the narrative surrounding coming out is that one must be “out and proud” in order to be a truly honest person, delaying coming out to a new person is easily perceived as deception and dishonesty (McLean 2007; Guittar and Rayburn 2015). Despite the generally unsafe environments that many queer-identifying people find themselves in, I argue that this can be a tactic used to shame people into coming out against their best interests; their shame is then used to call attention to them and reinforce heteronormativity. By regulating homosexuality and queerness in this manner, the notion that heterosexuality is the only “correct” identity can easily persist (Seidman 2005; Jackson 2006). Alternatively, masking queerness in an effort to appear “straight-passing” and, therefore, non-threatening to heterosexuality is another tactic used to reinforce heteronormativity (Clarkson 2005). The underlying message of dishonesty can be potentially damaging to the mental health of young queer individuals – a group that already suffers from a large number of health disparities – who may feel an intense sense of guilt by remaining closeted, despite it being the safest option for them (Fish and Pasley 2015). Reports of anti-gay violence have only increased over time, which may be due in part to the increasing number of individuals expressing their sexual and gender identity, and safety remains a major concern for anyone who may be considering coming out (Amnesty International 2001; Doan 2006; Gruenewald 2012).

As previous research in this area has tended to conceptualize coming out as a one-time event that culminates after completing a linear process, the goal of this study seeks to explore the coming out process as both repetitive and non-linear through in-depth interviews with queer-identifying individuals. Specifically, it will explore the following research questions:

1. How do people determine when they will come out?
2. How do people determine who they will come out to?
3. Does being out make them feel more “fulfilled”?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Closet*

The concept of the closet is intimately linked to the notion of coming out (Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999). Essentially, the closet is a metaphor for disclosure – if someone is closeted, it means they have not yet disclosed to the public some personal detail about themselves regarding sexual identity, gender identity, or illness. Once someone is “out” it means they’ve exited their closet and that their status has become public (Seidman et al. 1999). However, the concept of “the closet” is not a catchall, and research has shown that it can take on many different forms depending on the context.

### *Family Closet*

Queer children force themselves to remain closeted to their families for a number of reasons. Fear is a driving force keeping children closeted as they feel their families will not accept them because of their identity and, as a result, never fully make the declaration of their identity to those closest to them (LaSala 2000). The fear of being estranged from those closest to them drives people to remain closeted to their family members. They believe that revealing their identity and attempting to have that discussion will have a negative impact on those relationships and find themselves choosing to stay in the family closet (LaSala 2000; Savin-Williams 2001).

Despite being disproven a number of times, parents of queer children tend to believe that their identity is a result of failed or bad parenting (Shavelson 1980; Bernstein 1998; Patterson 1992). This reaction can be explained by the concept of “fusion” where people are unable to separate thinking from feeling and become completely immersed in their emotions (Bowen 1978). The opposite of this is “differentiation” where people are

able to remain thoughtful and objective, and family members are able to safely discuss disputes without becoming encumbered by emotions (Bowen 1978; LaSala 2000; Spencer and Brown 2007). Despite this, some families with bisexual children may attempt to focus on their child's opposite-sex attractions and minimize their same-sex attractions, making it more difficult for their child to feel accepted as a result (Tanner and Lyness 2003).

Although popular media has tended to depict queer identifying individuals facing outright rejection and estrangement from their families after coming out, research has shown this negative reaction to be rare (Weston 1991). In the real world, families do tend to work with their children to accept their new-found identities (Weston 1991; Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998). It is important to keep in mind, however, that despite research showing a more positive trend toward acceptance within the family, those individuals whose families would react negatively are far less likely to participate in research on the subject. A queer individual who anticipates a negative reaction from their family is typically far less likely to actually attempt coming out to them in the first place (Tanner and Lyness 2003).

### *Classroom Closet*

Children in school tend to self-impose a closet in order to avoid bullying by their peers, as children who are out at schools tend to face higher levels of harassment (Rofes 1989; Smith and Smith 1998). This excessive bullying leads many queer children to drop out and leave school completely (Rofes 1989; Uribe and Harbeck 1992). Their goal, then, is to remain under-the-radar and avoid the subject of their sexual and gender identity completely in order to minimize their risk of being outed (Lasser and Tharinger 2003).

Queer children become isolated from their peers out of fear, which ultimately has a negative impact on their mental health well into adulthood (Rofes 1989; Smith 1998; Lasser and Tharinger 2003).

While at school queer children not only have to be aware of their peers, but their educators as well. Children who have ultimately dropped out have expressed that their decision came about due to a combination of harassment by their fellow students as well as the administrators' failure to address the problem or, in some cases, even encouraging it (Smith 1998). Alternatively, many educators tend to miss their queer students because they "blend in" so well (Uribe and Harbeck 1992). Many children have expressed that they tend to throw themselves into their schoolwork or extracurricular activities in order to avoid focus on their personal lives (Uribe and Harbeck 1992; Smith 1998). They believe that by placing the focus on their academic achievement they can reduce the risk of anyone inquiring too closely about their identity.

### *The Corporate Closet*

The idea of the corporate closet has been primarily associated with jobs in business, medicine, law, and education. It has stemmed from the occupational expectations of "professionalism" given that the ideal type for a professional is a heterosexual white male and places a special privilege on heterosexual masculinity (Grey 1998; Orzechowicz 2016). People will often actively work to conceal their sexuality and to pass as heterosexual in order to minimize the risk of losing their jobs because of systematic homophobia. In these situations, people experience unique stressors including the fear of being outed at work, the time and energy spent on information management regarding their sexuality, isolation from their coworkers, and diminished career

opportunities (Rumens and Kerfoot 2009; Connell 2014; Orzechowicz 2016). Essentially, people are spending their time and effort while at work on managing perceptions about their identity and are isolated from their fellow employees. As a result, they are not able to develop relationships in the workplace as effectively and are often overlooked for advancement (Orzechowicz 2016).

Organizational structures, such as company policies and hierarchy, also reinforce the corporate closet. For example, policies excluding same-gender partners from healthcare or other work-related benefits put people in a position where they might feel a need to conceal their identity (Woods and Lucas 1993). The absence of minorities at high levels of the company hierarchy also reinforce hegemonic forms of normativity by suggesting that only those who fit those norms are suited to lead (Scott 2005). The societal expectation that your career should unfold within a single company increases the likelihood of repeated assessment by homophobic superiors and the potential to experience discrimination (Fleming 2009; Williams 2013; Orzechowicz 2016).

Some companies have put forth an effort to reduce heterosexism, which has led to the rise of “gay friendly” closets wherein employees who are out are subject to tokenization (Williams et al. 2009). Within these closets, people must still manage “undesirable” information about their identities (Yoshino 2002). There is still a rigid set of boundaries that one must fit into and limits on what types of “queerness” can be acted upon or spoken about. It is acceptable to be queer, but unacceptable to speak about it. Identity management must still take place in order to match what the workplace and society have deemed as “morally correct” (Orzechowicz 2016).

The adoption of sexuality based “sensitivity” training within many companies has somewhat reduced the risk of coming out in the workplace (Rumens and Kerfoot 2009; Williams 2013). However, as demonstrated above, this does not necessarily translate to an inclusive workplace free from discrimination. Some diversity initiatives have even been met with negative backlash by non-minority employees who felt pressured to accept a lifestyle they “disagreed” with or by LGBT employees themselves who felt they were having unnecessary attention placed upon them (Kapaln 2006; Hill 2009). The efforts put forth by regular employees to dismantle homophobia and discrimination are far more meaningful and impactful than policy changes by management (Willis 2009).

The decision whether or not to come out is complicated depending on the field in which one is employed. In the political world, prior to the decriminalization of homosexuality, many people in the public eye were forced to actively conceal their sexuality (Lafferty 2013). Upon decriminalization, however, many politicians have still chosen to aggressively closet themselves because of their careers. Similar to other minorities in politics like women or People of Color, queer identifying individuals share many of the same struggles in actually achieving political success (Everitt and Camp 2014). Unlike those other minority groups, however, queer identifying individuals can simply not disclose this aspect of themselves and attempt to “blend in” more with the majority. Should they be discovered, the politicians found lying about themselves and their lives are placed in what researchers have called the “bad politician pile” which is nearly impossible to climb out of (Lafferty 2013; Everitt and Camp 2014). Coming out prior to campaigning can greatly hurt their chances of large-scale success, despite reports that people are more “accepting” of those deemed as different (Everitt and Camp 2014).

### *Mental Health Impacts of a Delayed or Denied Coming Out*

Queer adults are far more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual peers - 21.5% for queer identifying adults vs. 4.2% for heterosexuals (Hatzenbuehler 2011; Grant et al. 2014). Sexual identity is marked as a high-risk factor for youth suicide in both the US and UK, but both nations have done little to actually address the issue (McDermott, Roen, and Piela 2013). Victimization (being made to feel differently, atypical family stress due to sexual orientation, and a higher frequency of verbal and physical attacks from others) is one of the major factors contributing to the overall poorer mental health of the queer community (D'Augelli 2002). Minority stress theory explains how queer individuals experience heightened levels of stressors that are unique to their status as a minority group (Meyer 2003). Some of these stressors can be alleviated through various support groups (either face to face or online) by being able to explore their sexuality anonymously without fear of backlash or stigma they may experience in their daily lives (Shilo and Savaya 2012; Bockting et al. 2013; McDermott et al. 2013).

Specifically, transgender individuals can experience very unique types of violence due to the nature of their closet (Zimman 2009). For example, trans-women who experience domestic violence that attempt to seek assistance at a women's shelter can potentially be turned away if they choose to come out due to not being perceived as "real" women; attempting to conceal their gender or sexual identity can open the door for them to experience even more violence at the hands of those purporting to help (Greenberg 2012). In the Survivor's Project *Gender, Violence, and Access Survey* of transgender and intersex individuals, fifty-percent of respondents stated that they had been raped or assaulted by a romantic partner (1998). Transgender individuals may fear

to call the police for fear of being abused by them, or be unable to turn to women's shelters due to the shelter's policies (Greenberg 2012). The resources available to the "LGB" are, thus, not an option for transgender individuals. Their closet – one they have likely constructed out of a need and desire for safety – can be the most violent of all.

The choice of whether or not to come out can have important ramifications on LGBTQ persons. Later in life, queer adults are twice as likely to be diagnosed with mood disorders, including anxiety and depression (Bostwick et al. 2015). Transgender individuals experience even higher levels of psychological stress due to their gender identity (Bockting 2013). Those who have experienced a negative coming out experience or were "denied" their coming out also see a negative impact on their mental health in the form of prolonged feelings of fear associated with the process and their sexuality (King and Noell 2005). Queer identifying individuals who have discussed their negative experiences with coming out – such as reactions in the form of outright hostility and isolation from whomever they disclosed to – have experienced nearly the exact opposite of what other popular models present in the form of happiness and freedom (Plummer 1995; King and Noell 2005; Guittar and Rayburn 2015).

Research indicates that some of these conditions that exacerbate the coming out process may be difficult for queer persons to avoid. Family is a huge source of stressors for queer identified individuals and their reaction upon the time of coming out can make or break the relationship (Ryan et al. 2010). In addition, media messages leave people feeling guilt and inferiority due to their sexual identity (Grant et al. 2014). Mass media sends the message that it is okay to "have fun" with your sexuality as long as your explorations ultimately reinforce your heterosexuality, completely invalidating any non-

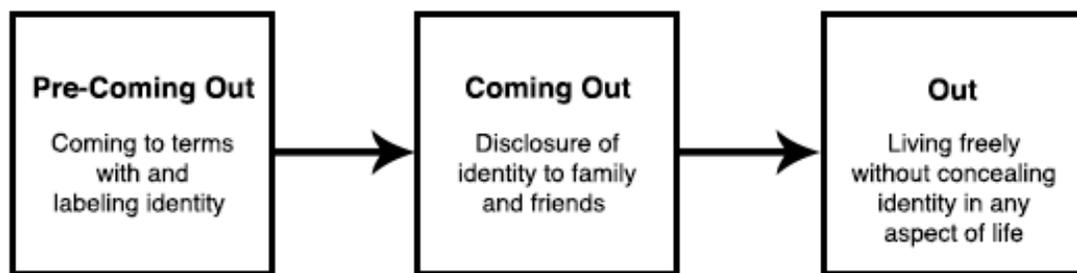
cisgender or non-heterosexual identities (D'Augelli 2002; Diamond 2005; Bond 2015). When present, queer characters are typically portrayed as being “asexual” and are not permitted to have any romantic or sexual identities (Fisher et al. 2007). Queer youth are only able to see this very limited representation, and they are hard-pressed to find anything that may help them explore their own sexual identity (Yep 2003; Bond 2015).

### ***Coming Out***

Coming out is viewed as the highest achievement for queer individuals, and is often presented as the only way they can hope to achieve happiness in their life (McLean 2007; Guittar and Rayburn 2015; Miller 2016). The concept of coming out is heavily rooted in heteronormativity, as heterosexuality is seen as the only valid identity and anything besides that must be ceremoniously revealed (Rich 1980). It also represents the popular ideology that one must also “be true to themselves” or risk a lifetime of unhappiness (Plummer 1995; Vargo 1998; Mosher 2001). Mosher (2001) has also stated that people can be in or out, depending on the context and their social setting and it has been argued that this contextual closet is a necessary part of identity development (Weinberg et al. 1994). There has also been some discussion which says that the process of coming out is not necessarily linear, and that it can be either more or less taxing depending on a person’s gender and sexual identity (McLean 2007). In order to test the waters, many people begin to ask hypothetical questions to their friends and family regarding their identity or, sometimes, make jokes prior to coming out (Coleman 1982b, George 1993).

Typically, coming out is viewed as a process that has a particular set of milestones (see Figure 1) that one must accomplish before “finishing” the process

(Coleman 1982a; Appleby 2001; Taulke-Johnson 2008; Yon-Leau and Munoz-Laboy 2010). A series of tasks must be completed prior to one being able to come out including exploration and experimentation, meeting and interacting with other queer people, coming to terms with oneself, telling family, and ending with public acknowledgement (Cass 1979). Some have argued, however, that it need only include self-affirmation (Guittar 2013). It may also be possible that the language used to describe the coming out experience is just the way it has been perceived, rather than the exact linear process one may have gone through (Guittar and Rayburn 2015).



**Figure 1.** *Model for the steps to coming out.*

A large number of people also now rely heavily on the internet during the coming out process by utilizing an anonymous space where they are able to have more open and honest conversations about their feelings and experiences (Miller 2016). Men in particular tend to take to the Internet to meet others like themselves when they first begin to explore their identity. Using media types utilized by the same social groups significantly impacts an individual's sense of belonging to that group (Hardwood 1997).

### *Differences Among Identities*

Experiences of coming out are different depending on identity. Lesbians who go through the coming out process, for example, are often viewed as simply acting out of a bitterness towards men, effectively invalidating their sexuality, due to compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980). Bisexuals are far less likely to be out than their gay and lesbian peers (Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor 1994). The path traveled by bisexuals during the coming out process is far less linear and ends in the final stage which is referred to as “continued uncertainty.” This stage is characterized by persistent feelings of confusions and self-doubt about their queer identity (Weinberg et al. 1994).

Bisexuals are also far less likely to be out to their family, which is one of the main stages of the Cass model of coming out. This might be due, in part, to the high number of harmful stereotypes about bisexuality including indecisiveness, sexual promiscuity, and attention-seeking (Rust 1995; Israel and Mohr 2004). Some researchers have also stated that bisexuality is simply a stage of sexual development – rather than its own unique identity – where one has yet to fully realize that they’re either completely hetero or homosexual, similar to the way lesbian identity is often erased and a presumed male attraction persists (Rich 1980; Rust 1995). In general, bisexuals are far less likely to disclose their identity to anyone other than lesbians or gays, and will still present themselves as either straight or gay depending on the social context in order to avoid the complications that come with the label of “bisexual” (McLean 2007).

The experience of coming out by transgender individuals is also significantly different from that of a cisgender person. For them, they may come out as a gender identity that clashes with society’s perception of them, or they may have to reveal their

gender history instead of a gender identity (Zimman 2009). Overall, the transgender experience of coming out is heavily understudied and the notions that are applied to cisgender gays and lesbians do not necessarily hold true. As the transgender process deals heavily with gender issues, rather than sexuality, most research tends to ignore their unique experience of the process.

### *Racial Differences*

Racial/ethnic minorities also experience the process differently, as they may also have more complicated cultural factors to combat (Rosario, Schrimshaw and Hunter 2004). White queer-identifying individuals are typically more integrated within the queer community than Black or Latinx individuals because they don't have to contend with the same types of cultural pressures in the way of traditional gender roles or religious values. Black men in particular are typically less involved in the gay community and are less likely to belong to gay-oriented organizations than white men (Stokes, Vanable, and McKirnan 1996; Kennamer et al. 2000). They also experience significantly more stress from the gay social scene as a result of racism (Rosario et al. 2004). However, although Black men disclose their sexuality to fewer people, they do tend to disclose their identity earlier than their White peers due to cultural values like a sense of duty to family and stronger religious affiliation (Savin-Williams 1998; Julian, McKenry and McKelvey 1994; Morris and Rothblum 1999).

Latinx youth also tend to disclose to fewer people, but are ultimately more comfortable with people being aware of their identity possibly due to more nurturing and close-knit family styles being pervasive within Latinx culture (Julian et al. 1994; Rosario et al. 2004). Similar to queer Black men, undocumented queer Latinx have a difficult

time participating in “queer culture” and social scenes because of their migrant status (Messer 2010). They must come out of multiple closets – once as gay, then as undocumented. Many of these individuals have expressed the same feelings of a “closet” both with their sexuality and their migrant status. A significant number of gay bars have attempted to commodify ethnic identities from Latinx in an effort to appear more “local” and attempt to separate themselves from “white gayness” (Hames-García and Martínez 2011).

Asian American men have also described this intersected oppression where they experience both racism and homophobia in a linked manner (Hom and Ma 1993; Kumashiro 1999). In East Asian cultures, both traditional masculinity and heterosexuality is required in order to be viewed as a virtuous Asian male (Kumashiro 1999). Coming out in the American sense places the focus on the individual, which is not a cultural value within many East Asian cultures, which tends to value the well-being of the community as a whole, who have little to gain by coming out to their families or friends (Kumashiro 1999). By putting oneself into that position to out yourself to your community, this makes ones “less Asian” by valuing the “white disease” of coming out (Hom and Ma 1993; Lim-Hing 1994; Kumashiro 1999).

In some areas, racial and ethnic identity is closely linked, not only with sexuality, but personal identity as a whole, and it becomes even more complex to uncover slight differences. One study showed that queer spaces in Israel-Palestine are still heavily influenced by nationalism, despite promoting themselves as egalitarian (Ritchie 2010). Although Israel has seen “advancement” in LGB rights, queer-identified Israelis cannot make demands of the state to be recognized as those in the United States are able to

because of the nature of their culture. Many proponents of queer rights in Israel have argued that the struggle queer individuals face due to their sexuality cannot be separated from the struggle against racism (Ritchie 2010). In the west, the assumption is that, in order for true equality to be achieved, queer-identified Arabs must be changed from “practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as homosexual” (Ritchie 2010:566). The lack of “out” Palestinians is used to justify the military activity of Israel, with claims of liberation and freedom. In cases like these, the racism experienced by the individuals in the area becomes some closely entwined with homophobia that it becomes a twofold struggle.

One study on the racial and ethnic difference in involvement among the queer community failed to find any significance among lesbian adults (Morris and Rothblum 1999). This implies a gender difference among People of Color. Men within Communities of Color tend to have different expectations placed on them as compared to women, which may possibly impact women’s ability to come to terms with their sexuality and discuss it with their families.

#### *New Resources for Coming Out*

An increasing number of teens receive the bulk of their sexual education online and many of those same youth also seek mental health support from the communities they have become familiar with in the virtual world (Boies, Knudson, and Young 2004). The Internet is the second most commonly used method of information-seeking among queer youth (Bond, Hefner, and Drogos 2009). Teens have expressed a fear of discussing sexual topics with their physicians due to the potential risk of disclosure to their parents (Hassan and Creatsas 2000).

For those in rural areas, online networks take the place of a typical gay community found in more metropolitan areas. Queer identifying individuals who have already come to terms with their sexuality have indicated strong feelings of isolation due to the lack of a larger gay community in which to be active (D'Augelli and Hart 1987; Bell and Valentine 1995; Cody and Welch 1997). Through online communities, queer identifying individuals in rural settings are able to form connections and have access to resources which are far more valuable and important to them than someone who does have access to a larger gay community in person (Cody and Welch 1997).

One reason for the popularity of the Internet is that it offers 24-hour support, 7 days a week unlike traditional face to face support groups and also allows people to view content without having to actively participate (White and Dorman 2001; Suzuki and Calzo 2004). Although the Internet has been able to facilitate positive effects, some argue that since being online is inherently a solitary activity, it may lead to more negative mental health effects in the long-term (Shaw and Gant 2002). Loneliness, depression, and stress tend to have a positive correlation with Internet usage, i.e. as a person utilizes the Internet for longer periods of time and more frequently, the risk for them to experience adverse mental health increases as well (Shaw and Gant 2002; Akin and Iskender 2011).

Increased Internet usage may exacerbate poor sleep quality, which itself has been linked with a higher likelihood of diagnosed depression (Woods and Scott 2016; Bei et al. 2018). As queer youth increasingly turn to online resources to educate themselves, they may also be increasing their mental health risk factors by placing a large amount of emotional value in these online communities. Nearly 37% of young adults have reported losing sleep due to frequent checking of social networking sites (Espinoza and Juvonen

2011). Since social media alerts come in 24 hours a day, the fear of missing out (FOMO) increases the level of anxiety that people experience and leads to poorer overall sleep quality (Woods and Scott 2016).

### 3. THEORY

The primary theory behind this study is the idea of power and discourse, as discussed by Michel Foucault in his book *The History of Sexuality* (1978). The concepts of power, knowledge, and truth that originated within the Christian church have shaped the way society perceives both sex and sexuality. The church encouraged “confessions of the flesh” to have more people be open about their sexual desires and dispositions. Through this, they could control the discourse and knowledge around these topics. Discourse defines our social reality and is at the heart of many of the issues surrounding human sexuality. Society did not discover a new identity, but rather created it and then managed it strictly via the church.

Power – in the secular sense – is how people define, manage, and cultivate their sexual identities. It allows people to specifically define this aspect of their lives through the discourse made available to them. This approach is still quite restricted, however, since discourse is controlled and maintained by the church who ultimately define what is acceptable and “right.” A society may define a certain sexual identity as unacceptable and one who falls under that identity may be forced to reevaluate and align themselves with a less appropriate identity. The power of a society is what will define abnormality and members of that society will constantly be measuring themselves to that standard and govern themselves accordingly (Bevir 1999).

People are able to define themselves and their sexuality as they choose because of power, but discourse controls how they are actually able to speak about it. This control over the discourse limits the way people are able to perceive their experiences since they cannot easily or accurately discuss them (Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates 2001). Power

incites a “truth” and creates a form of knowledge which aids in the creation of discourse. As previously discussed, discourse is a very limited mechanism by which people are able to define themselves since it is subject to the overarching power structure. By using the language of truth, it is implied that those who do not “confess” everything about themselves are sinful or immoral. It may be possible that those who are limited by discourse cannot find their “truth” due to a designated label not existing for their particular identity. These individuals then cannot even attempt to alleviate themselves of “sin.”

The discourse surrounding sexuality has fully shaped the way it is perceived within our society and it ultimately affects the way the coming out process is viewed (Wetherell et al. 2001). As a result, people are driven into coming out in order to be “truthful,” regardless of whether or not it is in their best interest. It also means that the “once in a lifetime” opinion directly influences this; if someone wants to be honest and moral, they must submit to this process and come out. The discourse defines the process as a one-time event, despite the reality being much different. This also directly impacts the way that people are able to develop their identities.

Sexuality is repeatedly discussed and regulated by the overarching power structure and, as a result, everything we know about sexuality is produced via this discourse (Namaste 1994). Foucault’s theory of discourse explains the phenomena of coming out being viewed as linear and non-repetitive, as something that becomes both unconscious and taken for granted (Weedon 1992; McHoul and Grace 1993; Manias and Street 2000). The dominant discourse defines someone who is out as honest and truthful and those who remain in the closet as anything but honest. Should someone attempt to

conceal their identity for any reason, they will be viewed as distrustful and immoral. The power structures would have those individuals “confess” so that their “sins” can be atoned for.

Despite this, previous research has found that the reality of coming out does not necessarily match up with this dominant discourse of the linear checklist (McLean 2007; Guittar 2013). It is important to take note of this discrepancy when discussing the nature of the coming out process, as the discourse has limited people’s ability to talk about it in a way that is meaningful and relevant to their actual reality. By discussing this process even more and continuing to unpack the reality of the experience, it will be worthwhile to discover if the dominant discourse will be challenged even more.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

For this study, I conducted in-person interviews with queer-identifying individuals over the age of 18. For the purposes of this study, queer was defined as anyone who is not heterosexual and/or cisgender (Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Zosky and Alberts 2016). I began with personal contacts and asked them to forward my contact information to anyone they knew that might be interested in participating in an interview. Potential respondents were informed of the nature of the study and, upon consent, interviews were scheduled at the respondents' discretion. After conducting the initial interviews, respondents were asked to forward my contact information once again to a new series of potential respondents. The sample was not limited by age, race, or gender identity, and it was my goal to gather a diverse group of respondents using this method in the hopes of understanding the coming out process from as many different perspectives as possible.

Ultimately, I was able to recruit 16 respondents via this snowball sampling procedure. Respondents had a variety of identities and backgrounds, and worked in several different fields. Their ages ranged from 20 to 33; they self-identified with labels such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, genderqueer, queer, and transgender. Education level among respondents varied greatly as well. Some were still undergraduate students while others were well-established in their postgraduate field. Table 1 includes the major demographics of the participants along with a description of how they describe their own "coming out" status and identity. Each respondents' gender and sexual identity is reported based on how they described themselves.

In-depth interviews are an ideal choice for this research question as interviews provide detailed and rich data, as well as the respondents' unique perspectives on their experiences (Legard, Keegan, and Ward 2003; Milena, Dainora, and Alin 2008). By following a semi-structured interview guide, questions were posed to the respondent, but the interviews developed naturally as respondents discussed their thoughts and experiences as they understood them. As this study is focused on how people decide who they will come out to and when, interviews were an ideal method to explore these experiences. Respondents were asked to discuss a variety of topics including their first coming out experience or how they might go about coming out to someone they consider a stranger see Appendix for complete Interview Guide).

Interviews were audio recorded with the respondents' consent and lasted approximately 62 minutes on average, with the shortest being only 32 minutes and the longest 97 minutes. Respondents were asked to choose a location they felt most comfortable with for their interview, and most took place at local coffee shops or, in one instance, at their home. Audio recordings were transcribed and were ultimately used during final analysis. To protect confidentiality and ensure the comfort of respondents, a combination of written and signed confidentiality statements and verbal instruction were provided to advise respondents that they were able to leave or terminate the interview at any time for any reason. All identifying information (name, address, phone number, etc.) was expunged during the data cleaning and transcription process. References to others' names as well as the names of locations or employers were also removed and replaced with pseudonyms (Kaiser 2009).

After interviews and transcription were complete, I began the coding stage. I

utilized the two-step coding process outlined by Esterberg (2002), wherein I began by open coding and moved into focused coding. I used a grounded theory approach and allowed my data to develop themes naturally rather than beginning the coding process with a set of pre-established themes.

During the open coding stage, I went through the digital transcripts and made note of any repeating words or phrases on a separate page. Any words that appeared to relate to one another (e.g. “uncomfortable” and “awkward”) were listed together. I then assigned a color to each group of words and phrases and went through the printed transcripts to highlight items to their corresponding color. After this stage was complete, I narrowed my codes into six separate themes that matched the words and phrases I had noted in the previous stage. As I entered the focused coding stage, I again went through the printed transcriptions to highlight items according to the themes I had developed at the end of open coding. Finally, I examined which of these themes in particular were relevant to my research questions.

**Table 1.** *Descriptive information for all respondents.*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Sexual Identity</b>	<b>Out Status</b>
Audrey	30	White	Tax Advisor	Female	Lesbian	Friends
Brianna	29	Mexican	Finance	Female	Bisexual	Friends
Casey	25	White	Painting Instructor	Female	Bisexual	Friends and family
Dakota	25	White	Mental Health Counselor	Genderqueer	Queer	Friends
Elijah	26	White	Retail	Male	Bisexual	Friends
Fabiola	25	Mexican	Pet Services	Female	Lesbian	Completely out
Glen	20	Chinese	Student	Male	Queer	Friends
Helena	24	White	Midwife	Female	Lesbian	Completely out
Ian	25	White	Student	Male	Gay	Completely out
Jace	26	White	Admissions Counselor	Male	Queer	Friends and family
Keira	25	Philipino/Mexican	Hospital Administration	Non-binary	Queer	Friends
Leah	29	Native American	Social Worker	Female	Bisexual/ Polyamorous	Completely Out
Maya	33	White	Retail	Female	Asexual	One friend
Noah	28	Mexican	Insurance	Male	Gay	Completely out
Oliva	23	Mexican	Retail	Female	Lesbian	Completely out
Patrick	26	White	Dentist	Male	Gay	Friends and family

## 5. FINDINGS

During my interviews, I was able to identify recurring themes such as compulsory heterosexuality, the value of safety, and the repetition of the coming out process. Many respondents stated that they would not explicitly correct anyone who assumed they were heterosexual in casual conversation and, instead, would allow the person to continue with the assumption. Respondents also indicated that this was a cycle they had experienced countless times throughout their lives as it is a process they encounter nearly every day and each time they meet someone new. In general, respondents tended to prioritize safety over the societal expectation of a “necessary” coming out. They were fine with being misidentified – even at the expense of their mental well-being – if it means they will be physically safe above all else. These constant stressors are ever-present in queer lives, and it is not a process or experience that “ends” upon disclosure to their family members and friends.

### *The Assumption of Heterosexuality*

Compulsory heterosexuality assumes that all people are heterosexual (Rich 1982; Tolman et al. 2003). The assumption can manifest in a number of ways, but one of the most common is when others inquire about significant others and home life by way of small talk. Something as simple as the cashier at the store asking a woman “Are you and your husband doing anything for holiday?” contributes to the pressure to complete the act of coming out. Should a stranger assume someone they’ve just met is heterosexual, many of the respondents indicated that they would not out themselves by correcting them and therefore would continue to be misidentified.

Some respondents indicated that they were not what this study identified as “completed out” – i.e. every individual in their life is aware of their identity and they disclose to anyone new they happen to meet. Those who may not have been out to their immediate family – or, in some cases, only one parent – expressed difficulty in navigating that:

My mother would often pointedly ask me ‘Have you met any boys you’re interested in?’ ... [She] would cry at night and make a scene, so I decided to call my father one morning on my way to work ... he told me he’d always known... my family still does not know about my gender identity or how I use a different name with my friends, my partner, and even my partner’s family whom I met through my preferred name. –Keira (PoC, queer, non-binary)

One respondent, Casey, who is a white cisgender female and identifies herself as bisexual, indicated that even though she is out to her friends and immediate family, she is not out to her extended family. She explained, “I don’t try to hide my identity, but...it just hasn’t come up.” This sentiment was repeated over and over by nearly every respondent. Elijah, a white cisgender male, who also identifies as bisexual simply stated that “No one has to know.”

Respondents indicated that this made them feel mentally “split” by being out to some of the people in their lives but not all. Although they were not willing to out themselves to “correct” these individuals, it was implied to be quite emotionally taxing to them. Again, Keira expressed very powerfully, “I feel as though I’m living two lives and it breaks me sometimes...it’s very tiring.”

These experiences directly contradict Cass’ 1979 model for coming out, and some aspects, such as being both in and out of the closet simultaneously, or being able to share sexual identity but not gender identity, align more closely with more modern models such as Mosher (2001) and McClean (2007). Where the Cass model gives a very specific

series of linear steps that culminate in a once-in-a-lifetime event, the reality that many respondents experience is to be both in and out at the same time.

Respondents also indicated that they felt a sense of awareness of their being “different” since they were very young children and affirmed their identities to themselves early on. Their own awareness of their identity as children sees them already living a significant portion of their formative years closeted and directly leading into these “double lives” because they are only “out” to themselves. Although some are able to expand that to a group of close friends or family, this is not feasible for all. For those individuals, they come to live under the thumb of compulsory heterosexuality.

Many respondents tended to discuss their coming out process in the “traditional” sense, i.e. going through a series of steps, but all acknowledged that this isn’t necessarily the reality for others, or even for themselves. Although they understand that they did not go through the classic linear process, they attempt to fit their explanations of their experience into the mold of the commonly accepted discourse. Respondents also understand that they are not “immoral” for choosing not to disclose to some people, but their language still reflects this attitude; “free” and “authentic” are two words that were used repeatedly by respondents when discussing their lives post-coming out. Despite understanding on an individual level that they have the ability to define their identities themselves however they choose, due to compulsory heterosexuality being the norm set in place by the overarching power structure, many queer-identified individuals continue to attempt to fit their experiences into the commonly accepted discourse despite their reality being far from it. Since this discourse is incredibly pervasive, it is likely difficult for respondents to disassociate the notion of “truth” from being out.

Compulsory heterosexuality invites a sense of betrayal in some upon disclosure from the queer-identified individuals around them. A type of progression occurs wherein heterosexuality becomes the assumed norm and, upon a queer-identified individual coming out, there is a perceived deception by those around them. The person in question then becomes ostracized by those around them for “lying” when they did nothing of the sort. Jace, a self-identified queer male stated, “...It makes your queerness a ‘whole big thing’ when you have to announce it like that.” Rather than simply being able to exist, queer individuals must call attention to their identities prior to being outed to attempt to avoid these feelings in others.

Misidentification due to compulsory heterosexuality is one of the primary factors in making the coming out process repetitive; it also draws a large amount of attention to those deemed as “other” and turns queerness into an object that is separate from the individual. As society expects a particular identity, and assumes that anyone and everyone is heterosexual unless otherwise noted, it invites the ceremony around the act of coming out and also dictates the popular narrative of coming out as we know it.

#### *Prioritizing Safety Above All*

Respondents frequently indicated that the primary goal should not be only to come out, but rather the ability to feel safe both physically and emotionally. Not everyone can or even should come out, and it is more important that they are in a safe and stable environment than it is that they are out. The data in this theme suggests that people must frequently suppress their identities in certain situations in order to prioritize their security above the “need” to disclose their identities.

I feel like I have to pick and choose who to come out to and when. When I'm not among a community of people I trust, I'm very closed about my identity. Because of the conditions of our country and culture, I don't think I can be open about my sexuality and gender. Anytime I mention my identity, either to a stranger or acquaintance that isn't also queer, I feel like it's both a moment of coming out and a gamble. –Keira

Another respondent, Leah who is a Native American female that identifies as bisexual, discussed how after coming to know her identity at a very young age and attempting to come out to her parents, she was met with hostility and sent to conversion therapy. She began to fear her identity and associated any disclosure with punishment, which she says took her a long time to process and overcome. “No one should have to sacrifice their personal safety for the ideals of others...fear, prejudice, and hatred still run rampant.”

Similar sentiments of prioritizing safety were shared by nearly all respondents. Each of the respondents have, at the very least, completed the self-acceptance stage of the linear coming out process which some previous research has argued is the only stage that truly matters (Guittar 2013). However, in conjunction with the compulsory heterosexuality also experienced, it is clear that more than self-acceptance must take place. This is not to say that their identities are invalidated because they are not constantly disclosing to everyone in their lives, but that these respondents have actively chosen to conceal their identities in particular situations because of both perceived and real threats to their safety and well-being. Fabiola, a lesbian Mexican female said, “There are people in situations where it's absolutely not safe for them to come out...they may feel pressured to come out even if it's not safe...that's not okay

Data in this theme closely aligns with previous research on both mental health and violence, but still contradicts popular models for coming out. Queer identifying

individuals experience violence and external stressors at a higher rate than their heterosexual peers, and the prolonged periods of experiencing heightened levels of fear have a negative impact on overall mental health (D'Augelli 2002; Hatzenbuehler 2011; McDermott et al. 2013; Grant et al. 2014). Prioritizing safety above all is a logical choice as achieving the “ultimate goal” is meaningless if someone’s wellbeing is completely sacrificed. Previous models that emphasize disclosure do not account for the reality that many queer identifying individuals experience where a large number live in genuine fear for their lives. As both society and researchers continue to place the act of coming out as a priority above all else, it can potentially put people in danger who feel pushed into coming out and place themselves in high risk situations similar to the one Leah experienced.

Respondents also indicated that, despite not being able to come out to those in their real lives, they often had a small group of online friends that they did feel safe coming out to. Websites mentioned included LiveJournal, Tumblr, and Twitter where respondents specified they were a part of online communities in which they were completely open about their queer identities. Their openness was often due to either to feeling accepted by their online friends or because they were able to easily connect with other queer identifying individuals. This is similar to the ways in which queer people in more rural areas find a connection to a larger gay community in online spaces (Bell and Valentine 1995; Cody and Welch 1997).

Due to backlash – either perceived or experienced – many respondents indicated that they only truly felt safe when coming out to other queer individuals. Still, others said they would listen to “cues” when meeting a new person. Olivia, a lesbian, said that “Stuff

like homophobic language, political ideology, or religious backgrounds tend to be a tip off.” Unless at a pride event or something of that nature, where the likelihood of a new person also being queer is significantly higher, respondents stated that they would typically only come out once the person in question was perceived to be accepting of their identity in some way.

Some of the other places that respondents stated they felt safe were in queer-oriented community center, pride events, and gay bars. However, respondents who were also a gender minority expressed that, even though they felt better about those spaces, they felt it was still somewhat of a gamble to be too forthcoming about their gender identity. “I just don’t feel completely comfortable sometimes mentioning things that equate with me not fitting the sort of ‘traditional’ gender norms,” said Dakota. Keira stated that they “feared judgement and ridicule” if they did not accurately emulate gender norms. The feeling that these respondents expressed is similar to some previous research which has shown that transgender individuals must go through multiple coming outs in the form of both sexuality and gender identity (Zimman 2009).

As with the previous theme, the discourse surrounding coming out is designed in such a way as to compel people to come out no matter the cost to their well-being. Disclosure due to compulsory heterosexuality is slightly different, however, as being labeled a liar is arguably better than suffering physical or psychological harm. The discourse has been designed to point the finger at those deemed “wrong” as defined by the overarching power structure. Once identified, they can be swiftly dealt with to avoid anyone falling out of line of what has been deemed acceptable. Despite the advancements in queer rights, particularly in the United States, it seems it is still not enough to allow

people to feel completely safe with their identities. Queerness is still viewed as “other” and as a potential threat, and in order for those threats to be identified they must first complete a step-by-step process that allows them to be easily marked. Although the United States is not a strict religious society anymore, many of those values are very pervasive today. Similar to Foucault’s concept of “confessions of the flesh” people are encouraged to come out so that they can be controlled (Namaste 1994).

People determine who they come out to by attempting to discern if they are safe and trustworthy or not. After assessing this, only then can they begin to attempt to disclose their identity to those people. It is not more “fulfilling” or even more “right” to be out, as the real and primary goal is safety. Respondents have shown that it is not necessary to buy into the popular narrative that you should always be moving towards coming out, but instead, they believe you should seek happiness in whatever form that occurs.

#### *A Never-Ending Cycle of Coming Out*

Despite the negative emotions surrounding the previous two themes, many respondents discussed feeling more at ease with themselves after coming out as remaining closeted tends to make them feel compartmentalized, as though they’re leading a double life. Since this “compartments” exist as little pockets all over queer individuals lives, and with the added factor of compulsory heterosexuality, it means that coming out is never “done.” As a process, it repeats over and over again and despite queer individuals’ best efforts, they must go through a staging process nearly every day.

Although respondents had differing opinions on some of the other questions posed during the interview process, it is interesting to note that all respondents stated that

coming out was a continuous process in a direct contradiction to previous research (Plummer 1995; Vargo 1998; Mosher 2001; McLean 2007; Guittar and Rayburn 2015; Miller 2016). “People often have a go-to story to tell as their ‘coming out story’, but really it’s so many little stories that happen every day,” said Helena, a white lesbian. Other respondents essentially echoed this sentiment with some even indicating that they felt the repetition was specifically due to compulsory heterosexuality. Brianna, a Mexican female who self-identifies as bisexual said, “...especially since most people will do the most ridiculous mental gymnastics to continue assuming you’re straight.”

One word used by some respondents in reference to the coming out process was “ongoing.” The world does not simply get a notice about your queerness because you have disclosed your identity to your family or friends and it is not a process that can ever be finished. Many respondents felt it was “silly” that the common narrative about coming out is that it is the ultimate achievement that everyone should strive for since it is completely unattainable. You can never be done with coming out because it is a process that must be undertaken every single day with every new person encountered. Once again, it appears the impossible goal of completing the coming out process is another way to shame queer individuals for their identities.

Although some researchers have stated that only self-affirmation is required for someone to come out which is not something that needs be repeated, it is important to note that something as simple as a woman telling her cashier at the grocery store that she and her wife are cooking something special that evening is an act of coming out and that small undertaking is something that queer individuals must decide to do every day (Guittar 2013).

The data within this theme shows that, contrary to popular opinion, people are repeating this process of coming out over and over. The concepts of “freedom” and “truth” that are presented as the final rewards for completing the path to come out are simply not attainable in this way. If someone is always having to come out, it is not possible for them to be truthful to everyone they come across. Many resources for queer individuals indicate this as a benefit to coming out, but it remains as an impossible target that simply cannot ever be reached.

Not only is the coming out process a never-ending process, the cycle of fear experienced by queer individuals is repetitive as well. Since it is not possible for anyone to actually finish coming out, it forces queer individuals into dual lives – one where they are out and one where they are in the closet and live in fear of being outed. If you can never be completely out of the closet, you essentially always have one foot in it. “I use the word ‘perform’ a lot,” said Dakota, who identifies as genderqueer, “because I feel like I have to put extra energy into being something I’m not.”

When Brianna used the phrase “mental gymnastics” to describe the lengths that others would go to in order to continue believing someone was heterosexual, it fit another respondent’s story very well. Helena, a lesbian, talked about how despite having the word “queer” tattooed on the back of her neck – effectively outing her all of the time – people often read it as “queen.” This is a perfect demonstration of the lengths that people will go through to continue believing someone is heterosexual. She said that people would often ask her why on Earth she’d chosen that word to be tattooed on her, assuming she was just a bit full of herself, but often reacted even worse when she corrected them. Simply by finding out that she was a lesbian, as opposed to just conceited, shifted their entire

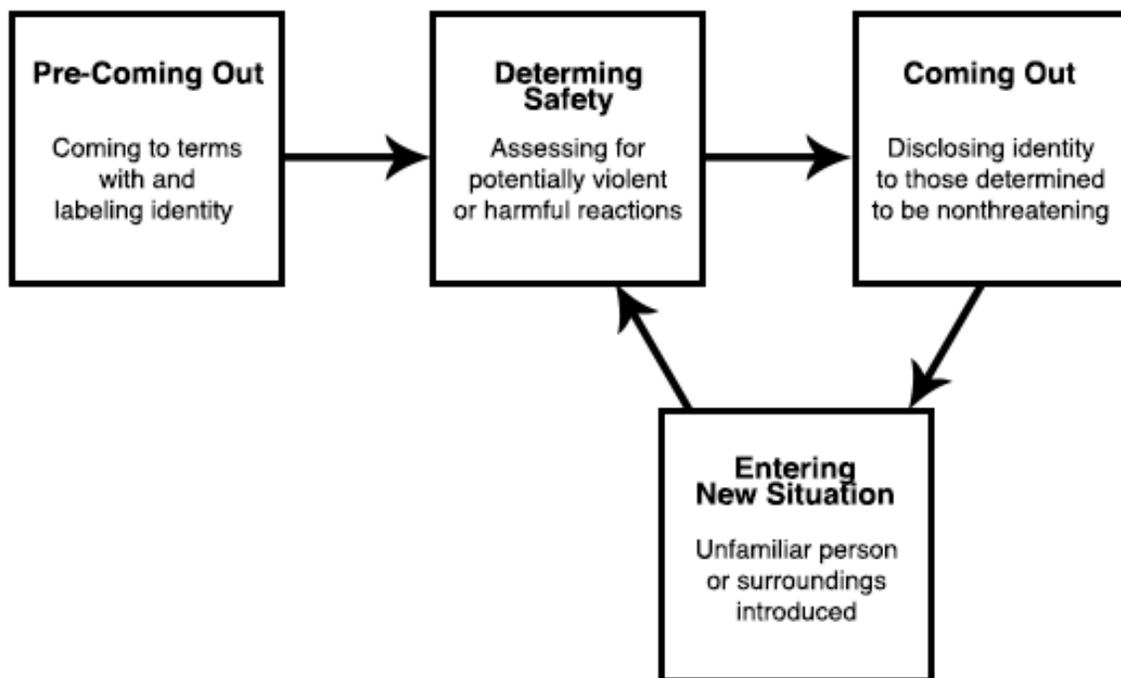
demeanor and they would attempt to end conversation with her as quickly as possible or sometimes, she said, they would get angry with her for trying to “spread her lifestyle to impressionable children.”

Some research has looked at the various different types of closets that someone can experience, such as the corporate, classroom, and family closets, which only faintly touches on the way that the coming out process cannot be completed (LaSala 2000; Lasser and Tharinger 2003; Orzechowicz 2016). Respondents stated that, even if they were what they considered as “completely out” in their personal lives, they often remained completely closeted in professional settings. Patrick, a gay cisgender male, indicated that he felt fear of being totally shunned within the dental profession if he “slipped up” and mentioned his husband. The fear that queer individuals experience in new settings and with new people is repeated alongside the process of coming out and is also something that is never completed.

The power structure has painted being out as the ultimate goal for queer individuals and, as a result, many people attempt to achieve it despite the reality being quite the opposite. This narrative being popularized likely actively contributes to many still speaking of being “free” when they have come out at least one time, but also to the poor mental health of the queer community since they are far from actually being “free.” Those in power have controlled the discourse to encourage people to strive to be out and once they do, they experience little to no positive changes within their lives. They have simply called attention to their queerness to be dealt with by anyone who feels that their identity is wrong.

Overall, it appears that compulsory heterosexuality forces queer individuals to go

through the coming out process if they want to be recognized for who they are. However, this can potentially create issues with physical and mental safety if the person they have disclosed to reacts poorly. Furthermore, the process is not one that can ever truly be completed, and queer individuals must go through these cycles over and over again (see Figure 2). Despite previous research's attempts to place these cycles into a neat box, the reality is much messier. As those in power have a hold on the discourse surrounding the process, it is expected that discussions about it have remained unchanged for quite some time. Even as actual queer experiences continue to diverge more and more from the popular narrative, it seems that most will still attempt to fit those experiences to the discourse that has previously been set forth.



**Figure 2.** *Coming out experience as described by respondents.*

## 6. CONCLUSION

Coming out has been thought of as the most momentous occasion in queer identifying individuals' lives where they must go through a series of steps so that they can achieve "true happiness" (Plummer 1995; Vargo 1998; Mosher 2001; McLean 2007; Guittar and Rayburn 2015; Miller 2016). Although some researchers have argued against the linearity of this process, few – if any – have taken note of the repetitiveness of the process (Liang 1997; McClean 2007). Queer individuals must constantly repeat this process – sometimes multiple times a day – every day because of their unique status as a minority. Upon completing several in-depth interviews with queer individuals of a variety of identities, I have found that the process is both non-linear and repetitive, which is a mark missed by previous researchers who have explore either one aspect or the other.

The power structure has promoted the discourse that coming out is the only path towards truth and honesty and have clouded the coming out narrative. It makes it all too easy for those in power to pinpoint queer individuals and punish them for their "otherness." As they are the ones controlling the discourse, which states that out is the only way to be, it becomes easy to shame queer individuals into coming out. This guilt can be used as a tool to make people call attention to themselves under the guise of "truthfulness" so that they can be cast out for being "wrong."

Compulsory heterosexuality is one of the themes that heavily influences the coming out process. Within our current society, people are assumed to be heterosexual unless otherwise noted, and queer individuals must either come out or settle with consistently being misidentified. Being misidentified can be strenuous on the overall mental health of queer individuals and can potentially contribute to long-term negative

effects, which leaves the only alternative as disclosure. Respondents who were not “completely out” – i.e. everyone they know and meet is aware of their identity – indicated that they felt a division in the various parts of their lives and had to perform differently in different areas. This is a direct contradiction to previous models for coming out, which assume that once a person has completed the linear steps on the path toward coming out they are now “out” and need never complete these steps again. Although the popular discourse is that true authenticity can only be achieved via coming out, respondents indicated that they felt people were no less moral for choosing not to come out. Compulsory heterosexuality directly influences the repetitiveness of the coming out process as, without the assumption of heterosexuality, queer individuals would not have to call attention to the fact that they do not fit within that category.

Respondents stated that safety was their top priority when determining when to come out or who to come out to. They believed that not every person can or even should come out, and that they should value their wellbeing above all else. Although many still used the language of popular discourse when discussing the act of coming out (e.g. “free” or “real”), they do not believe that those who have chosen to remain closeted are somehow lesser because of their decision. Respondents said that they felt like their identity being brought up in an unfamiliar setting which they had not completely considered yet would be a gamble since they had no idea how those around them might react. Once again, fear plays a large part in people’s decisions to come out or not; constantly living in fear can have harmful effects on mental health and those who have chosen not to come out must always worry about their identity being discovered. Where compulsory heterosexuality places the focus on the nature of lying, here the power

structure has managed the discourse to compel queer individuals to come out even when it is against their best interest to do so. The goal, once again, is to be able to easily identify anyone who is “wrong” to enact punishment upon them.

The final theme discovered was the actual repetitive nature of coming out. Queer individuals must go through the process literally every day and are constantly having to determine how they will come out, when they will come out, and to whom they will come out. The coming out process is never complete and is something that must be repeated day-in and day-out. Despite some differences on other questions during the interview process, every respondent indicated that they felt coming out was a continuous process in another direct contradiction to previous models. Although some research has argued against the linearity of the process, or the duality of being both in and out simultaneously, the repetitiveness was not discussed (Liang 1997; McClean 2007). Not only has the coming out process become something of a repetitive cycle, so too has the cycle of fear that queer individuals experience. Until they have completed the cycle of coming out to the people in their current setting, they must worry about “slipping up” and outing themselves in non-ideal situations. The power structure has designed the discourse in such a way as to shame queer individuals into calling attention to their queerness through “confessions of the flesh” by promoting the idea that it is the only way they can achieve true happiness so that they can be punished for their “sins.”

I was fortunate to be able to interview people with a variety of queer identities, which provides a level of intersectionality to the present study. Many different voices were able to contribute to these findings, rather than a single specific group giving only a narrow view of a topic that affects so many. I was, however, limited by location as the

only people contacted for participation were all residing in the same region. It may be possible that queer individuals in more metropolitan or more rural areas have distinctly different experiences with this process and it is important that they be given the opportunity to speak as well. I also was not able to interview anyone who was over the age of 33 and it may be that queer individuals who are much older also have vastly different experiences with the coming out process due to the differing political climates they have endured. It is also important to note that, while this study does critique previous models for the coming out process, it has not actually proposed a new one.

Future research in this area should seek to explore the experiences of queer individuals in more varied locations, such as those living in large cities or small towns. A more international approach may also be beneficial as this may help identify if these are experiences that are universal or simply localized to the United States. Greater variation in the ages of respondents may also help uncover more detail, as the things you experience as you age can deeply effect the way some individuals process something like the coming out process. A possible quantitative study may also be beneficial to gather a more large-scale impression of the feelings of queer individuals; do “all” queer individuals feel the process is repetitive or only younger people? It may also be possible that the only people willing to discuss the coming out process feel this way, or are attempting to appeal to the interviewer and a paper survey may allow them the ability to express themselves more freely. Finally, although this study did include non-binary, genderqueer, and trans people, a study focusing specifically on these minority gender identities warrants its own focus to fully explore their unique coming out experience.

## APPENDIX

1. Tell me about your background (age, race/ethnicity, occupation).
2. How would you identify yourself (gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, trans, etc.)?
3. How long have you been “aware” of your identity?
4. Are you “out” in all areas of your life, or only some areas?
  - a. If so, which areas (to friends only, to some coworkers but not all, etc.)
5. Could you tell me about your first coming out experiences?
  - a. (Only if they are not discussing it) Did you make a conscious decision to come out or were you forcibly outed?
6. People feel differently about what it means to “come out.” What does it mean to you?
  - a. Do you view the coming out process as a one-time event or a continuous process?
7. Did you feel there was any dramatic change in your life after coming out?
8. Earlier you said you’re not out to everyone in your life. How do you decide who you will out yourself to? (Who is “safe”?)
9. Is it ever uncomfortable for you because you’re not completely out? In what ways? (Do you feel as though your identity is split by not being “completely out”?)
10. What are some of the ways you might come out to a stranger? How about a new friend or acquaintance?
11. Is there a person, either in your daily life or in the media, that may have inspired you to come out or that helped you come to terms with your identity?
12. What safe spaces, if any, do you have where you feel like you can be “completely yourself”? Can be in real life or online or anywhere they feel safe to not hide their identity.

13. Some members of the LGBTQ community believe that everyone's "ultimate goal" should be to come out. What do you think about this?
14. Do you know anyone who has chosen not to come out (e.g. friend, coworker, public figure, etc.)?
15. Do you believe that everyone should be out?

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