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Coming Out: An Analysis According to Gender

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Abstract

Eight men and five women who identify themselves as gay men and lesbians participated in confidential taped interviews and were assigned pseudonyms. They were asked questions concerning their coming-out process, including their realization of their homosexuality, worries about coming out, family relationships, and changes in their lives. It was assumed that men and women would have different experiences coming out because of the different expectations and roles under which they grow up.

The men and women in the study had similar experiences during their coming-out processes and were not very divided along gender lines. They had worries about the effects their coming out would have on their relationships with family and friends. Most went through at least a few difficulties with their families, but several of those families have since begun to accept their son's or daughter's homosexuality.

Overall, the experiences of men and women in the study did not differ greatly. The few differences found were accompanied by a universal experience that they all seemed to go through.

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Foreword

During the spring semester of 2003, I took a qualitative research methods class as an elective for my sociology major and was assigned the task of conducting an interview project. I was very excited at the prospect of contributing, even if in a small way, to the field of sociology and actually putting to use the things I had learned in my first sociology classes. I began thinking about what topic I wanted to explore with my project at the beginning of the semester, but I could not come up with any ideas. I probably drove my friends crazy brainstorming ideas practically all the time.

Finally, as the deadline for choosing a topic for the interview project drew near, a friend of mine and I were discussing her roommate, who at the time was dealing with adjusting her parents and family to the first serious relationship she was involved in--with a woman. She had come out to her parents three years before and had found it relatively easy, if only because she and her parents never really talked about it. When she became involved in a significant, long-term relationship, however, she found that she wanted to share that important part of her life with her parents; so she set about introducing her girlfriend to them and beginning a dialogue with them about their life together. It was a difficult, delicate process, the complexities of which neither my friend nor I, being heterosexual, could really understand.

"Why don't you interview gay people?" I remember her asking me. "Ask them what it's like to come out. See if they have similar experiences [as our friend], or totally different experiences, or something in between." I thought it was a great idea. When I pitched the idea in my next class meeting, my professor liked it as well, so I got to work. I also wanted to include part of my Women's Studies background as well, so I expanded the initial topic from just interviewing people about their coming-out process to looking for differences in experiences according to gender. I wanted to see if men and women had fundamentally different experiences coming out, or if coming out was a pretty universally similar experience.

For that first project, I only had to interview five people, and I only had about three weeks to complete it. I began right away and enjoyed myself thoroughly. I had found the part of sociology that I really enjoyed--talking to people and finding out what goes on in their lives and discussing how it relates to the universal experience of being a human being. When the project was finished, I had produced the paper that, until the completion of my thesis, I was most proud of in my college career. I felt like a true sociologist, and of course I wanted to continue that feeling with my thesis project. As I was finishing the qualitative research methods project, I knew that I had not finished examining the coming-out process. I wanted to continue to speak to people about their experiences and make the project better. So, with the exhilaration of contributing my small piece of research and analysis to the field of sociology in particular and society in general still in mind, I started the project again. This time there were more difficulties--getting approval from various people and organizations, scheduling interviews with a greater number of people, losing discs and dealing with tape recorder and computer malfunctions--but I would say that the process of writing my thesis has been one of the most rewarding experiences of life.

Introduction

It is a widely accepted fact that men and women grow up with different expectations and roles. The socialization of males and females to these roles produces people who have differing, and often contradictory, values and points of view of the world (Wood 1997). This paper will concentrate on those different points of view.

This study, unlike most other research on the subject of homosexuality, will focus on both gay men and lesbians. It will look at the differences they may experience coming out because of their unique gender roles and points of view. It will explore the process men and women go through realizing their homosexuality, the worries they have about coming out, and the relationships they have with their families before, during, and after coming out. Several of Erving Goffman's theoretical perspectives, such as virtual and actual social identities, will be used as the framework for analysis for this paper (Goffman 1963; Ritzer 2000).

This study will add to already existing research on gays and lesbians, and at the same time introduce a new perspective on gays and lesbians by examining differences in experience along gender lines.

Literature Review

There has been much research done on the subject of gays and lesbians. Various aspects of the homosexual life and experience have been studied, from the size of the gay community in the United States to the importance of disclosure, so that other gay people will not feel as if they are alone in the world (Pruitt 2002). Also of concern has been the relationship between the struggle for gay rights and the biological argument of homosexuality (Stein 1994). Other studies have explored the ethical merit of researching a cause of homosexuality, some concluding that to look for a cause of homosexuality is to give it a connotation of being a disease (Schulenk and Ristow 1996). Studies have connected the emergence and flourishing of capitalism with the emergence of a gay subculture (D'Emilio 1983), while others have looked for universal characteristics of male homosexuality cross-culturally (Whitman 1983).[1]

It may even seem at times that homosexuality is becoming more widespread, or at least more openly accepted, because of the increasing visibility of celebrities who are gay and partnered, such people as Ellen DeGeneres, Rosie O'Donnell, Melissa Etheridge, and Elton John. Equally telling are mainstream movies and television shows that portray gay characters--the

[1] All of the studies cited in the above paragraph come from SOCL 359 In-Class Notes. They will be cited in the bibliography accordingly.

television shows *Will & Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, or *The L Word*, and movies like *Kissing Jessica Stein*, *Philadelphia* and *Chasing Amy*. And recently there have been widespread efforts to legalize homosexual marriages in Massachusetts and California. With the culmination of all of these things, it may seem as if a homosexual person coming out would have a fairly easy time, because support seems to be growing for homosexual unions and, at the very least, more people seem to be quietly accepting and letting homosexual people live their lives. However, many academic studies have found just the opposite. In her analysis of lesbians coming out in the workplace, Schneider (1986) summarized many national surveys that conveyed the hostile environment in which homosexuals must come out. For example, two-thirds of Americans interviewed said they did not like homosexuals, and 80% of those people wished to have no contact with them whatsoever. "Substantial majorities" even went so far as to say they would not permit gays and lesbians to obtain positions of "power or influence; that is, as judge, schoolteacher, doctor, or minister" (Schneider 1986, p. 465). While that study is somewhat dated, more recent research still seems to concur with Schneider's findings; a 2000 study (Risdon et al.) of gay and lesbian medical students and residents found that society has not changed drastically at all. The overall findings of this study were that the environments surrounding medical training programs, much like the environment of society at large, were "at best, indifferent, and, at worst, hostile" (Risdon et al. 2000, p. 332). These and other studies highlight the fact that coming out is so difficult precisely because it is not widely accepted in society.

In coming out, there are several obstacles that must be overcome; many people must be told, and the decision to come out to someone or remain closeted must be made many times over. All the important aspects of one's life can be affected by coming out--family relationships, friendships, and work and school environments. Heterosexuals rarely realize it--because we do

not have to--but the decision to come out brings with it many difficult decisions and questions: Should I tell my family? How will they react? Will I have to deal with being kicked out of my family if they react badly? Should I come out at work? Or even, Can I put carry pictures of my partner or talk about him/her in public, or would that be too risky? Some people carefully consider many of these factors and others before they decide to come out to even one person. Others feel the need to tell everyone they meet, as soon as they realize they are gay. As with everything else, the type of family one grew up in seems to have an effect on the decision to come out.

Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) studied the effects of being part of a traditional family upon the coming-out process. Denying this identity that is often seen as detrimental to traditional roles was found to be a common coping strategy for many young homosexual people. They concluded that while traditional family values have a stronger effect on the coming-out experience for young homosexuals, race and ethnic background and the individual and group differences that result from the characteristics/backgrounds have not been taken fully into account when studying the coming-out process.

Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) highlighted the important role of parental support in the coming-out process and the subsequent development of a healthy homosexual identity. Boxer, Cook, and Herdt (2002) looked at patterns of disclosure and found that mothers were more likely to be the ones told first, or at all, by their children. Griffith and Hebl (2002) found that several factors affect disclosure, ranging from how accepting one is of his or her homosexual identity, to how much of a fundamental part of one's identity being gay is, to how much support one feels he or she will receive once homosexuality is disclosed. Fields (2001) looked at the coming-out process from the parental perspective and examined several different kinds of parental responses.

Many of today's explanations for homosexuality blame parents by arguing that a parent who did not follow the traditional gender role that came with being a mother or a father or who was involved in a dysfunctional marriage was the cause of his or her child's homosexuality. With that in mind, Fields argued that parents, the very people whose support has been found to be most vital, often have the most difficult time dealing with the fact that their son or daughter is a homosexual, because their status as a parent has suddenly changed. If a parent is told that his or her child is homosexual, the identity of the parent, which often conveys a certain moral authority, Fields contended, becomes the identity of a parent of a gay man or lesbian woman, a stigma instead of a status of "moral worth" (Fields 2000, p. 165).

Further complicating the lives of gay men and lesbian women is that the homosexual identity is not one that can easily be "confined to private life" (Schneider 1986, p. 483). Gay men and lesbian women can choose to be closeted in their public lives, but rarely are attempts to hide one's homosexuality for an extended period of time successful, as can be discovered by talking to almost any gay man or lesbian woman or by reading accounts of coming out in books or on the internet.* Eventually, people in the workplace or in the school environment begin to ask questions or make comments, or a "mistake" is made in hiding the homosexual identity, and coming out in the workplace or at school must be considered.

When coming out at work, a gay man or lesbian woman must deal with the possibility of losing a job, experiencing discrimination in promotion practices, being harassed by a homophobic coworker, or suffering isolation from previous "interpersonal networks" that benefited work opportunities (Schneider 1986, p. 466). While Schneider found that once they come out,

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* For example, several coming out stories can be found at http://www.bibble.org/gay/stories/comingout.

homosexuals tend to be more at ease in their jobs because they have successfully negotiated such a difficult process, the fears listed above cause many to shy away from disclosing their homosexual identities. These fears are even more pronounced in a small environment, as Sautter (2002) pointed out in her *Time Europe* article entitled "Coming Out of the Farm." She interviewed gay farmers in Germany and emphasized the difficulties they have, because they are trying to maintain successful business relationships in small communities without offending customers they have known personally for years and driving away business.

The same problems exist in an education environment, another place where heterosexuality is, first of all, assumed, and secondly, strictly enforced by a series of sexual scripts that one must follow to be considered "normal." Renold (2000) explored the primary school as "a key cultural arena" for enforcing heterosexuality and outlined several pressures that boys and girls experience in the quest for "compulsory heterosexuality" (309). Renold found that girls in particular defined "attractiveness" by how desirable they were to the opposite sex and felt it necessary to spend long periods of time defining the trappings of heterosexual attractiveness, such as skirt lengths, makeup, and hairstyles, not according to what was attractive to them, but what would be seen as desirable by the opposite sex. Someone who did not follow these mandates and did not attempt to make herself desirable was outcast and labeled a deviant. And, as most people can probably remember from their own primary and middle school days, to be labeled a homosexual is one of the worst stigmas that can be attached to anyone.

The underlying current of all of this research is that the coming-out process is often one of the most difficult experiences a person could ever have to go through. While his is not an academic study, David Lipsky (1998) said it well when he called the experience of coming out "the most charged few hours of their [homosexual people's] lives, the moment the theoretical part

of homosexuality ended, when being gay was no longer something over there, it was you" (54).

While all of the research that has been done is valuable, it all seems to focus on one or the other, gay males or lesbian females. No existing research studies both males and females and compares the possible different experiences that result from coming out because of different genders. Also, no research has been conducted that looks specifically at family relationships in relation to gender. It is for this reason that this thesis seeks to compare these two groups and see if gender does play a role in the coming-out experience and if it affects family relationships, just as Newman and Muzzonigro (2002) found that race plays a role in the coming-out experience.

Research Methods

In the social sciences, there are primarily two types of research used, quantitative and qualitative. Babbie (2001, p. G8) describes quantitative research as "the numerical representation and manipulation of observations for the purpose of describing and explaining the phenomena that those observations reflect." Data obtained by quantitative methods can be read and managed by computers and similar tools. Examples of quantitative research are surveys/questionnaires, content analyses, and laboratory experiments (Babbie 2001). Such research quantifies phenomena and can often make observations "easier to aggregate, compare, and summarize" (Babbie 2001, p. 36).

The second kind of research, qualitative, is described by Babbie (2001, p. G8) as "the nonnumerical examination and interpretation of observations, for the purpose of discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships." This type of research is less focused on objectivity than quantitative research and is directed more towards understanding behaviors and institutions by becoming part of the subjects' "lifeworlds," or, in other words, getting to know the people being studied well--their values, beliefs, outlooks, and feelings.

Qualitative methods often obtain data that are richer in meaning, as qualitative methods do not present the subjects with specific, limited choices of answers to questions asked, like quantitative methods do. Examples of qualitative research are in-depth interviews, as this project utilized, and participant observation (SOCL 404 Notes; Babbie 2001).

Interviews are especially effective because they can obtain information about sensitive issues, such as homosexuality; in this case, the interviewer can establish a relationship with the subject, gain trust, and assure the subject of confidentiality and of the importance of the contribution being made with the project. Qualitative methods such as interviews can also be used to discover patterns in behavior and attitudes that are not appropriate for quantitative measures. For example, when answering a survey, respondents have only a few choices--all of which have been defined by the creator of the survey and influenced by that creator's own experiences and attitudes towards the subject. Respondents may be forced to fit themselves into categories that they may not otherwise choose. Qualitative research methods allow "respondents to create their own categories," thereby remaining more true to the attitudes, feelings, and experiences of those being studied (Cooper 1990, p. 17).

Sample and Data Collection

In social science research, randomly selected samples are ideal so that the results may be generalized to large populations. Because of the nature of this project, however, random sampling was not appropriate. A random sample would have the potential for including a majority of heterosexual people, a group of the population that was not desirable for being interviewed, as they would have no personal experience in coming out. As there are no lists of homosexual people for researchers to draw samples from when studying the homosexual

population, snowball sampling* was the most appropriate and effective method of gaining interviewees in this case.

To find people to interview, I contacted a person on campus who is active in the university's Diversity Coalition, an organization for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) people. This person sent out an email to the organization's listserv that included a description of the project, the criteria for a subject, and my contact information. Anyone who was interested in being interviewed was to contact me. In addition, several people who initially contacted me for an interview also provided other people who they thought may be interested and/or willing to be interviewed and were not on the listserv with my contact information. Five of my interviews were obtained in this way.

Shortly after the email to the listserv was sent, I began receiving emails from people willing to be interviewed. Finding people to interview was not a problem, but I did find that keeping the balance of women and men interviewed equal was difficult to do. For some reason, more men volunteered for my study; I believe that this is so perhaps because men seem to be more involved in the leadership of most of the GLBT-centered organizations on campus. Despite assumptions and concrete findings that women tend to be more involved in political and social action, I found it very difficult to get women to talk to me.

When all was said and done, I conducted thirteen interviews. This was short of the goal I had set of sixteen to twenty, but the trickle of volunteers had begun to dry up, and all of the volunteers seemed to be male; if I had continued conducting interviews, the number of men would have far outweighed the number of women interviewed even more than it does now. All in all, I

* Snowball sampling is a method of sampling by which additional subjects are found through someone who has already agreed to participate.

conducted eight interviews with men and five interviews with women, ranging in age from 19 to 45 and of an average age of 27.2 years. The women as a whole tended to be older than the men interviewed, with an age range of 21 to 38, and an average age of 30. The men had an age range of 19 to 45, with an average age of 25.5. All but three of the people interviewed were full-time students at Western Kentucky University. Two of the three non-students work for the university--one as a professor and the other in the University Bookstore. The remaining interviewee had attended Western in the past and now volunteers at The Outlet, the on-campus facility for GLBT students to come to socialize, hear speakers, etc.

The interviewees were at differing stages of their coming-out process and were open about their sexuality to varying degrees. All subjects had come out to at least one person in their families, however. Since a focus of this project is how gay men and lesbians experience coming out in relation to their families, open-ended interview questions were directed at this issue. Other topics of concentration were the realization of being homosexual, fears and worries related to coming out, changes since coming out, and friendships.

I conducted tape-recorded in-depth interviews lasting from thirty minutes to an hour with thirteen people, eight men and five women. Each participant was assured confidentiality and assigned a pseudonym. Before each interview began, both the participant and I signed a consent form.

Of the thirteen people interviewed, ten identified themselves as having a Christian or Protestant religious background, with five of those being regular churchgoers and five going only occasionally, if at all. The Protestant denominations mentioned in the interviews were: Lutheran (1), Pentecostal (2), Unitarian Universalist (2), Baptist (1), Southern Baptist (1), and

general Christian (3). One person identified himself as Catholic, but he does not attend church regularly, and the remaining two said they had no religious background.

Four of the participants grew up in small towns, while four grew up in what they described as small cities about the size of Bowling Green, which has a population of approximately fifty thousand. Two grew up in large cities, and two more grew up in suburbs outside large cities. Finally, one grew up on a series of military bases.

Regarding their families, four of the participants' parents were still married. Eight of the participants' parents were divorced, and one's parents were both deceased; he lived with an aunt and an uncle until he was eighteen. Of the four participants whose parents were still married, two had parents who both knew about their son's or daughter's sexuality, and of the other two, only their mothers knew. Seven of the eight participants whose parents were divorced had only come out to their mothers, while the other had come out to her mother and stepfather, but not her biological father. The participant whose parents were both deceased had come out to both his aunt and his uncle.

Two of the women interviewed had been married and divorced from men, and both of those women had two children. One of the men interviewed had never been married to a woman but had one child. Only one of the men was currently involved in a serious relationship. All of the women interviewed were involved in serious relationships, and four of them lived with their partners, while the other was in a long-distance relationship. The man involved in a serious relationship did not live with his partner.

Limits of the Study

In order for a study to be generalizable, the sample must in some way be considered representative of the population being questioned. Because the sample size of this study is small,

it would be incorrect for me to claim that this sample is representative of the entire homosexual population in the United States, or even of the homosexual population of Western Kentucky University. Instead, it will be considered, as Cooper (1990, p. 23) described, "representative of the responses obtained from the [people] who chose to participate in this study." It is probable that the people who volunteered to be interviewed for this project were more comfortable with their identities than those who chose not to participate. Since all of the people who identified religious backgrounds mentioned a Protestant religion or Catholicism, generalizations cannot be made about homosexual people who follow other religions. Also, no one of color was interviewed for this project, so assumptions cannot be made about the Black, Hispanic, etc. homosexual's experience, either male or female. I hope that future studies can look at these experiences. Although the project has these faults already mentioned, it was written with a careful attempt "to give an honest, accurate, and responsible portrayal" of the people who so graciously agreed to be interviewed (Cooper 1990, p. 24).

Theoretical Framework

Charles Horton Cooley's concept of the looking-glass self and Erving Goffman's dramaturgical analysis are two relevant concepts to use when analyzing the interviews that were conducted and trying to understand the coming-out process and behavior and family experiences of the subjects afterward. These micro-level theories and concepts allow us to concentrate on and analyze the issues that the subjects encounter in their own lives, and they allow for us to see the "private and invisible spheres of social life" that other more macro-level theories, such as conflict theory and functionalism, do not address (Cooper 1990, p. 10). The "private and invisible spheres" are what the questions asked in the interviews were aimed towards--the subjects' individual feelings, fears, and experiences and their interpretation of them.

Cooley's looking-glass self is a concept concerning how we construct our behavior depending on how we think others see us. Cooley argued that the picture we have of ourselves is reflected to us, as though through a looking glass, by the way people interact around us. The reflection that we get in turn influences our behavior. Cooley outlined a three-step process that we go through when engaged in the looking glass self. First, we judge how the other party perceives us. Second, we determine what the other is thinking about that perception that he or she has, and third, we modify our behavior to get the desired perception from the other. This

process is done subconsciously and is sometimes more apparent to us than at other times (SOCL 304 Lecture Notes 2003). This concept of a looking-glass self is especially important when considering how the subjects negotiate in a largely homophobic society.

Goffman's dramaturgical analysis also explains a great deal of the subjects' described behavior in everyday life. Dramaturgy is, at its core, the idea that everyday actions and interactions are very similar to theatrical performances (Ritzer 2000, p. 210). There is always a tension between the behaviors that are expected of us and those behaviors that "we may want to do spontaneously," and so we must perform for our "social audiences" in order to maintain a stable and proper image for the situation we are in (Ritzer 2000, p. 362). Continuing in a theatrical vein, Goffman discusses two aspects of social interaction, a front stage and a back stage. In the front stage, performers act out the situation in a way that they want others to define them and the situation. Manner is an important aspect of the front stage, as it tells the observers the role the actor wishes to play and sets the stage for the observers to define the actor (Ritzer 2000, pp. 211, 363). In this case, manner would mean a "loud and proud" demeanor versus a more subdued, private demeanor. This is where the looking-glass self also comes in; actors much always be judging how their performances are being perceived and interpreted and adjust their behavior accordingly during front-stage action.

In the front stage, actors generally wish to present an "idealized picture of themselves," and so they usually feel the need to hide things during their performance that do not "go" with the image they are trying to present, such as the mentioning of significant others or "typical" gay or lesbian behavior (Ritzer 2000, p. 363).

As well as discussing the dramatic aspects of interaction in front and backstage behavior, Erving Goffman wrote extensively on the concept of stigma. Stigma is possessed when an

individual has "an undesired differentness" from the societal norm, in this case, being homosexual in a heterosexual world. When people are stigmatized, they realize that they do not possess the same identity characteristics or hold onto the same values as society in general does, and so they must develop a "virtual social identity" in order to fit in better and function more easily within the expectations of mainstream society. The virtual identity is different from the "actual social identity," in which stigmatized people express their actual preferences (Cooper 1990, p. 11; Goffman 1963). This virtual social identity for gays and lesbians may include not being as open in wider society as in private or even pretending to be heterosexual.

According to Goffman, there are two types of people with stigmas, the discredited and the discreditable. In this case, again, the stigma is being homosexual in a heterosexual world. The discredited's stigma is known, while the discreditable's stigma is hidden from most people and not easily perceived. As a result of a discreditable status, many maintain two different sets of associates. One set is made up of the people to whom the person wishes to project the virtual social identity only while keeping the actual social identity private. The other is comprised of people "in the know." In this group, there may be others who possess the same stigma; Goffman called this "in-group alignment," and those possessing the same stigma would be called "the own." Those "in the know" may also be heterosexual, but still supportive. Goffman called these people "the wise," those "who are normal but intimately privy to the secret life of the stigmatized individual and sympathetic with it, and who find themselves accorded a measure of acceptance, a measure of courtesy membership in the clan" (Goffman 1963, p. 28). Also, when people realize that they are stigmatized, they learn to consider people in their stigmatized group as normal; Goffman termed this "moral career" (1963, p. 32).

Additionally, some types of feminist theories discuss the ways in which women and men

are socialized to do certain things and to find different things important. These explanatory theories of gender difference, according to Ritzer (2000), discuss the importance of how institutional roles are given to men and women and how those differing roles produce "a female personality and culture [...] very different from those of men" (2000, pp. 452-453). It is on the basis of such theories that I have hypothesized that gay men and lesbians would have different experiences during the coming out process, and place value on different things during the process.

The most basic question that feminist sociological theory asks in any situation is "And what about the women?" (Ritzer 2000, p. 449). Ritzer (2000) outlined four answers to that question, all of which led me to hypothesize that women and men have different experiences during the coming-out process. The first answer is that "women's location in, and experience of, most situations is different from that of the men in those situations" (449). The second answer is that the location of women in a given situation is not only different, but usually unequal to that of men. The third answer is an explanation of the power relationship between men and women; namely, women are oppressed, while men are the oppressors. The fourth answer is that women's experiences vary according to other locations they have in society, like class, race, age, marital status, etc. While all of these factors would play a part in making the homosexual woman's experience in coming out different from that of the homosexual male, the first answer is especially prevalent. The remaining answers tend to encompass all oppressed groups and can therefore be generalized to homosexual men as well; through the interviews, however, women's unique locations in society come through as shaping the way the women interviewed experienced the coming-out process.

Findings

Realization and Self-Acceptance

Early on in the interview, I asked how the respondents knew that they were gay and how long it took them to start taking steps to integrate their homosexuality into their lives by dating, telling people, etc. The basic answer to this question did not really generate a division among men and women. Respondents identified their realization and self-acceptance as a gradual process. The difference came with the ability to pinpoint an event that finally made them admit their homosexuality to themselves. While all the respondents spoke of their realization and acceptance of themselves as a gradual process, the men were more able to pinpoint an exact event that finally made them sit down and really think about exactly who they were and other events and happenings that had pointed to homosexuality in the past, while the women spoke more generally. All the subjects seemed to experience a period of questioning--usually sparked by puberty or the time in an adolescent's life when it is normal to start having attractions--and spoke of the realization and acceptance as a gradual process.

Basically, at some level, they all knew they were somehow different from their heterosexual peers early on in their lives, but it took a gradual process of attractions and other events to make them realize just in what way they were different and admit their homosexuality to

themselves. The women tended to speak of several events that all culminated into a final realization:

> Well, I knew there was something different about me, because in high school everybody always talked about when are you going to get a boyfriend and all this stuff, and I never really cared. I was more into other things, and I just thought maybe that's just not something I'm into. And you know when I graduated high school, I sort of had an idea. [...] I knew that I admired women but I couldn't pin point it. [...] When I started college I tried to date some guy and he was really nice and perfect, but I knew this wasn't for me. So I knew then after I graduated that I was gay. (Susan)

> Well, there were a few instances in my earlier life that made me question it briefly. One time I met my ex-husband's cousin's girlfriend, and at the time I didn't understand because I just wanted to be around her and to talk to her and to touch her. [...] They were at our house for like two weeks on vacation [...], and after they left I felt like a truck had hit me. I totally didn't understand it and blew it off you know. [...] [Also,] I had seen an interview with Melissa Etheridge and her partner, and they were getting ready to have a baby. They were doing the big 20/20 interview, and I thought, man I would really love to be with someone who treated me--you know to have that kind of relationship. [...] I started having fantasies and thoughts about it. So I decided I was going to do this woman thing [have a threesome with another woman and her then-husband, at her husband's request] just out of curiosity and just to shut him up. I ended up meeting this woman, and he never did get to watch which is kind of funny. But she and I had met at a park and we were both talking about being bi-curious at the time and we ended up meeting that night. She asked me to kiss her and I did, and from that moment I knew. I mean, I was thinking, oh man I am in so much trouble. (Tammy)

The men, on the other hand, were more likely to pinpoint a specific event that made them realize their homosexuality without mentioning any sort of questioning beforehand:

> When I was like 12 or something, like I stumbled across this huge porn stash of my dad's porn, [...] and so of course that made me want to go on the internet--it was all internet porn--and I was just like, well I wonder, you know, what's out there. And so, you know I opened up the computer and I was looking around and stuff and I thought, "well this is interesting, you know, naked women's bodies. Hmm, that's interesting. I wonder what naked men's bodies look like." And I went and I was looking at guys, and I was just kind of more attracted to that. And then later on, you know, I realized that that was the moment that I kind of became aware of who I was, but I remember later on, um, I was sitting in my room one day, and I was just like...I just said the words to myself. I said, "I am gay." And I just broke out in tears. I was like, from that moment on I was like-it was like admitting to myself what I already knew. (Clay)

> Well, I was 11 years old and was living in Alaska, and we had gone to the pool, me and a friend of mine. And I realized that I was after getting ready to change, I realized that I was checking him out. And at first I was like, what is that? And then we moved, and I got heavily involved in the church and thought that was wrong of me. But then about my sophomore year in high school I became okay with gay people, but thought that it wasn't for me. Then I probably say my senior year in high school about 17 [I admitted to myself that I was gay]. (Fred)

All of the people interviewed experienced a gap between first admitting their homosexuality to themselves and actually coming out to other people, even those who could pinpoint a certain event that made them realize that they were gay. When accounting for the need for that time, they all said pretty much the same thing: they were getting used to the idea, building up courage, even denying it, and working through fears of coming out:

> I guess it was just hard to admit it to myself, and I didn't want to be stereotyped as this--you know 'cause I had this stereotypical image of lesbians. You know, how they wear flannel; they have bad hair cuts, you know. 'Cause that's something I was taught, and I told myself that I'm not like those people. [...] I couldn't even say the word gay. [...] I guess deep down I thought there was something wrong with being gay. (Susan)

> I was a high school student. Just trying to fit in. (Dave)

> I was afraid, and I didn't want to be gay. I fought it, cried about it, and just thought that if I just not accept it that it would go away. (James)

Goffman would probably account for this time between realizing and admitting their homosexuality to themselves and coming out to other people as a time for developing a "virtual social identity," realizing what it would take to be gay in this society and preparing to be able to maneuver between the virtual and the actual, which could also be labeled front-stage and backstage behavior, easily. The concept of moral career could also come into play in this case. Between realizing they are gay and telling other people, they must learn to consider the group they are now a part of as normal, whereas previously, homosexuals were defined for those people as deviant.

Beyond simply trying to negotiate a "virtual social identity" while being a high school or college student, a few of the respondents had additional complications that made the creation of such an identity even more difficult. Two of the men interviewed spoke of trying to reconcile

religions that are traditionally not accepting of homosexuality with their newfound sexualities during the time between realization/self-acceptance and coming out to people in their lives:

> My religious background [worried me about coming out]. [...] I went to counseling for a little while and continued to go to counseling after I came out [...] I still go to support groups now. I go to one once a month. It's just Christian guys who are not really wanting to get over the lifestyle but just learn to live with it. (Brandon)

> I had worked a lot like with my church and stuff, a lot, and it's been very difficult, like I actually was, um, before I moved here, I did missionary work for a year in the Dominican Republic with my church. And on top of being-you know, the Christian faith in general is not very forgiving towards this, but the Pentecostal belief is much less so, and um, I just wanted to number one, I knew who I thought I was but I wanted to make sure that's who it was before I made any huge steps that would like burn any bridges, say that you know, come out with something this big, and then come out later on, "oh, I'm not really." I wanted to make sure number one. (Clay)

While none of the women spoke of reconciling their homosexuality with a religious faith, two of them did experience a situation that was unique to females, in this project at least--marriage and children. The two women who had been or were married at the time of their coming out both had children to consider. They each mentioned them in their reasons for the gap between realization and acceptance and coming out:*

> I think the hardest part was just dealing with the kids [...] because I was, you know, kind of settled, and had been married and, um, so I think the biggest difficulty was with that. (Jane)

> At that time it was all wrapped around my kids. Because they were 7 and 9 when the incident with the woman happened, and I was very afraid that if I came out that he would take the kids from me. [...] But that was my thing: how am I going to do this? [...] It didn't even occur to me how I was going to deal with facing other people as having been a married woman, although I had talked to a couple people on-line. And so my biggest concern was how am I going to do this and keep my kids, 'cause once he finds out, he's going to go nuts. (Tammy)

These two "complications," religion and children, made for a more difficult time in trying to negotiate between a virtual and an actual social identity. First of all, each of the problems had specific criteria for membership that virtually precluded homosexuality--the Christian religion in

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* One man, Dave, in the study also had a child, but not until well after he had already come out.

its texts and laws, and marriage, by definition. If a woman is married to a man and has children with him, it's widely assumed--and logically so--that she is not gay. Secondly, both their religion or children and their homosexuality was a very important part of them, and they did not want to have to deny one for the other. Each of these people had to figure out a way to combine their religion or children and their homosexuality, or face delegating one or the other to their backstage behavior only. During the gap between realization/self-acceptance and coming out, homosexuality was kept in backstage behavior only. At some point, relegating homosexuality to the backstage became too hard for them to do, and they had to come out and acknowledge all parts of them--not only their religion and children, but also their homosexuality.

Worries

For the people who mentioned religion and children, these were some of, if not the biggest, concerns that they had in regard to coming out:

> The Christian faith in general is not very forgiving towards this, but the Pentecostal belief is much less so, and um, I just wanted to number one, I knew who I thought I was but I wanted to make sure that's who it was before I made any huge steps that would like burn any bridges, say that you know, come out with something this big, and then come out later on, "oh, I'm not really." I wanted to make sure number one. (Clay)

> The legalities of it, with my children [worried me the most]. Um, my ex-husband's parents are very wealthy and we never got along, and so my biggest fear was that they would try to step in and take some sort of legal action, because, you know, this is Kentucky and there are no laws to protect me. (Jane)

The two women with children spoke only of being worried about how their coming out would affect their children's lives and family structure. Everyone else, including the two men who mentioned religion as a big issue, worried about similar things, mainly the reactions of others--parents and friends in particular:

> Question: What would you say worried you the most about coming out?
>
> Probably the reactions of my parents. (Hillary)
>
> My parents, because I'm an only child, and my family is very well known in the community, and so I had a lot of expectations to live up to. (Susan)
>
> How people would react, [that] I would be limited [excluded from certain activities] being a homosexual. (Doug)
>
> I was worried that I was going to lose either friends or family. I had heard stories from my friends of those who had been disowned or kicked out of the house, and you know, and a lot of their close friends left them. (Dan)

The reaction of employers and co-workers was mentioned by two people, but was not mentioned as a primary worry by either gender.

When coming out actually starts to seem inevitable, these people started to realize that the "discreditable" status that they once held is about to become a "discredited" status. Even if they do not tell many people, they will still hold a discredited stigma in the eyes of those they tell, and they know that being stigmatized sometimes means being treated badly. When they weren't sure how important people in their lives would react when being admitted to "the wise" group, they were naturally worried about how their disclosure would affect their relationship with those people. Usually, those with a discredited stigma attempt to tell people ("the wise") who will be understanding and sympathetic, but most homosexual people feel the need to tell important people in their lives, regardless of how supportive they will be. Among the interviewees, if they chose to tell only those who were sympathetic, they might never have told the important people in their lives. As Clay acknowledged:

> I knew that [my mother] wasn't okay with it, but I felt like, you know what, she's not going to feel betrayed, and I don't have to lie to her anymore. (Clay)

His mother was neither understanding nor sympathetic, but he felt she had a right to know; he did not want to hide such an important part of his life from someone who was important to him.

Again, not much of a difference was found between men and women concerning this aspect of the coming-out process. Human beings all value relationships and want to maintain positive relations with those they care about. When something happens that may jeopardize their relationships, they worry about others' reactions, regardless of their gender.

First Coming-Out Experience

After discussing the way they figured out they were gay and the thoughts they had during the time between realizing and telling people, I asked the subjects to describe the first experience they had with coming out. Again, there was not really a difference between genders when it came to whom they chose to tell. Generally, people chose someone they were comfortable with, and someone who they felt would react positively and perhaps give support as they continued in their coming-out process:

> I think I felt most comfortable with her at that point. I don't know, there was something...I don't know what it was; I just felt drawn to her and felt comfortable. (Hillary)

> She was my best friend, and I knew I could confide in her. I knew she would understand. (Brandon)

> She's one of those people I could tell anything to. She and I feel the same way politically and stuff. [...] I know that she's somebody that's always gonna be there, and say, you know, whoever you are, that's who you are. (Clay)

> They were my close friends, and I knew they would accept it. (James)

Interestingly, most of the people chose women for their first coming-out experience; eight of the thirteen people interviewed chose women, five men and three women. The other three men and two women came out to men they were close to.

While most people chose to come out to people they were comfortable with, two of the people interviewed did not really choose to come out at all. Fred and Melissa were both confronted about their homosexuality:

> We were sitting playing cards one night at someone's house, and [...] she came out on the front porch and said, "So when are you going to tell me that you're gay?" I'm like, "I guess I will now." (Fred)

For Melissa, this practice continued, even through today:

> You know, I never told anybody. They figured it out and confronted me, so to this day that's how I do it. I don't ever tell anybody or let people know. People figure it out, and then they ask me. [...] It's an easier way to do it, you know.

For all the others interviewed, however, the question of whom to tell after the initial experience with coming out became an important one. Two main attributes were mentioned when subjects were describing the types of people they chose or will choose to tell about their homosexuality--the degree of closeness they feel with someone and the degree of open-mindedness they feel someone has. Three men, Doug, Dan, and Dave, stated that they had gotten to the point that they did not really consider telling people that much anymore and no longer used such factors to judge people. They were okay with being "outed" by others and did not really care who found out. All of the others, however, still used criteria based on the closeness of a relationship and/or the open-mindedness of a person, as they had from the beginning:

> I consider if one, they have said anything or done anything in the past to make me think they hate gay people, second, If I have known them for more than a few weeks. (James)

> I think the first thing that I thought about I guess were the people who were, that I was closest to and that I felt safest with. And then that the next factor I guess was just their level of open-mindedness. (Jane)

> I tell people now that I feel that I'm going to have a good relationship with. (Fred)

> Open-minded people usually. Usually people I know well enough to know they aren't going to start shouting homophobic slogans or anything. (Jared)

> Now it's just a matter of conversation if the opportunity presents itself. [...] [It used to be] a bigger issue of acceptance for me. I was really worried whether I would be accepted to the people I came out to, so the people I came out to were people I wanted to be friends with. (Dave)

As people negotiated their first experiences with coming out, they sometimes lived out their worries--occasionally, they had people react badly. To avoid this, all of those interviewed

came up with criteria that people must meet in order to be granted admission to "the wise," or the "in-group." In keeping with what Goffman said about the wise, most of the people the subjects told were judged to be sympathetic to the stigma of homosexuality, or at least too caring to cast the subjects out of their lives once they were "in the know."

Family Experiences

Nine of the thirteen people interviewed grew up with only one parent, either because of divorce (seven) or because of the death of a parent (two). The other four grew up with two parents who were still married at the time they were coming out. Of the people who grew up with only one parent, they all grew up living with their mothers. Only two people, a man and a woman, actually told both of their parents. Another told his mother, and his mother told his father. Two more, a man and a woman, were not able to tell their fathers because they died before they came out. One was not able to tell either parent because they both died before he came out. The remaining eight, five men and three women, have yet to tell their fathers, if they maintain contact at all with them. This is in keeping with the study of patterns of disclosure by Boxer, Cook, and Herdt (2002) that people are more likely to come out to their mothers first, if at all. The decision to keep one's homosexuality from one's father also did not seem to be divided along gender lines; a roughly equal proportion of men and women chose to keep their homosexuality from their fathers.

The real division among genders concerning families seems to be how comfortable subjects are with sharing the homosexual part of their lives with their loved ones. The women seemed more able to talk to their parents--their mothers at least--about relationships they were in, or even about homosexuality in general than the men were, although several of the men were working towards a more communicative relationship with their parents. It is unclear if this

difference in ability to discuss personal lives is because parents had a more difficult time accepting a son's homosexuality than a daughter's, but judging from subjects' answers to later questions, I believe that many who were interviewed would say that is so.

While the women by no means had it easy when it came to talking to their parents, they seemed to be able to talk more openly:

> My mom went to counseling, because parents always blame themselves for something they did wrong. [...] But her and [my partner] are really good friends. (Melissa)

> My mom [has] [...] really come around. I mean, she knows that my partner is very, very good for me. [...] We've all gotten together several times, and she really likes [my partner]. (Tammy)

> When I told [my mother], I told her, you know, that I had realized this about myself, and that I really needed her to support me, [...] and she did, and it's always been good. [...] It's been great ever since. (Jane)

The men seemed to have more trouble talking to their families about their homosexuality, although a few of them tried, and things were slowly getting better:

> My mom, she was like, "Don't tell anyone in the family," but last time I was down there, she made her first joke about the whole situation. So I think she's feeling better about it. (Jared)

> I think lately, just in the past couple of years, they are more comfortable asking questions, especially my mom about, well, what's going on with this, whereas before she was kind of like, if he wants me to know, he will tell me. She has realized that [she has] to ask sometimes. (Dan)

Nonetheless, the men were less likely to discuss their homosexuality with their families, if at all:

> I told my mom [but] I didn't tell anyone else in the family. I just assumed that she would tell them, so I think they all know now. (James)

> I don't like running into my mother when we have time to talk. [...] I think that it will be something that she will just talk about less. (Clay)

> A: [My aunt and I] don't talk as much, [...] but things are a lot better.
> Q: Do you feel like you can be open with her?
> A: No. [...] I just feel like she looks down on me. (Doug)

This difference could be explained by socialized gender roles that state that women are supposed to be more open while men are supposed to keep things to themselves. Men are not supposed to

show much emotion about their personal lives/relationships anyway, so these men and their families, it seems, were simply trying to conform to the male role that was expected either of them or of their relative.

The average age difference between men and women interviewed should not be a factor, because everyone interviewed, except Tammy, was a teenager or young adult at the time of their coming out. The two older women who came out in their 20s may have had more time to acclimate their families to their homosexual lives, but the one older man interviewed still did not speak with his family about his relationships, a clue that gender roles play a larger part than age in this case.

Changes After Coming Out

I asked each respondent about changes in their lives once they had come out to most of the people in their lives. All but one person mentioned positive changes only. Tammy, the one person who did mention a negative change, acknowledged that her life had changed for the better, but she still had some concerns:

> I've been very blessed, [but] it presents different problems. [...] I've worked places where I actually had to make up boyfriends 'cause at my age men that find out that you're single think that you need to be married. [...] So I guess it's one of those things 'cause you know when you're straight, you don't have to make up stories about who you're with or who you're involved with. [...] As far as jobs and stuff, I've never had any negative experience [...] you know, one gay body is as good as another.

Several people mentioned the fact that they are happier and more confident since coming out:

> A: I think I'm much happier than I ever was.
> Q: Because you don't have to hide it?
> A: Right. (Fred)

> I didn't realize it changing that much at first, until the first time I came back from [college] and a couple of my friends stared at me for the longest time, [...] and I said, "What?" And they said, "You seem so much happier and energetic," and I realized I was. (Jared)

> I was more empowered. I felt more powerful as far as having an influence on what I did. [...] I wasn't keeping a secret anymore. (Dave)
>
> My quality of life has gotten better. I'm happier. I'm not worried about anybody finding out. I am who I am. (Doug)
>
> Yeah, it's been a lot easier. I don't feel like I have to hide anything. (Clay)

This increase in the quality of life, as Doug put it, is only logical if one considers Goffman's analysis of virtual and actual social identities. Before coming out to anyone, subjects had to maintain their virtual social identity, and they were not able to reveal their actual social identities to anyone. As they began coming out to people, they were able to be in their actual social identities more and more. When displaying virtual social behavior, people do not necessarily exhibit behaviors that are uncomfortable to them, but, obviously, they would be more comfortable in exhibiting behavior that aligns with their actual social identities. As they tell more people, they will be able to behave in their actual social identities more often, and they become more comfortable doing so as they exist more and more in the actual social identity. If they do not want it to be, their homosexuality does not have to be a secret anymore. Dave and Clay hit upon this concept when they mentioned not having to hide anything. As they came out and adopted an actual social identity and were able to be more open, they became happier and experienced a greater degree of freedom to be themselves, at least around those to whom they had come out.

Looking Back

Near the end of the interviews, I asked about what regrets they may have had about coming out to certain people, what reactions surprised them, and what they might do differently if they were coming out all over again. Three of the females and four of the males interviewed had only a few regrets about telling certain people in their lives; one female and three males indicated

that they had no regrets whatsoever. The tape of one female and one male malfunctioned before this question was asked, so the answers were not transcribed. Those that did have regrets generally regretted telling those who did not behave as they wanted them to, as in telling other people, or those who had negative reactions. This trend held true for both genders. Tammy, for one, regretted telling a woman with whom she worked because she did not keep it quiet, as Tammy would have preferred:

> She would do things to me at work--like, I mean she has dyke written all over her--[...] and she would come and talk to me and [...] it got to be a rumor going around work and stuff that we had something going on. And that became very uncomfortable.

Similarly, Jared also told someone who did not respect his privacy:

> She was okay and supportive, too, but she started blabbing after awhile, so she probably told more people that I was gay than I have.

For those whose regrets included telling those who had negative reactions, no one mentioned more than one person whom they regretted telling, making it seem as if all of these people had generally positive experiences coming out. Several even mentioned that their experiences were not as bad as they had expected them to be:

> I was needlessly afraid of something, and now that I know how people would have reacted, I would have liked to get it over with sooner. (Jared)

> My mom actually surprised me. When I went to her I was prepared to have my stuff ready to leave. I had money for an apartment and [I was] ready to be on my way. (Fred)

> I had a pretty easy experience of it, so most of the difficulty came from me and my not being fully sure who I was or who I knew I was going to be. (Dan)

> You know, there are horror stories about women who, you know, had these thoughts or had these questions when they were much younger, but got married and, you know, and then their children are taken away and you know, there are a lot of really bad--I'm thankful that mine isn't one of them. (Jane)

It seems that most of the problem many of the subjects had with coming out came from themselves, as Dan described. When I asked the respondents what they would do differently if

they were coming out all over again today, five people said they would have been less worried about coming out, because, given the reactions of people they had told, they really did not have that much to worry about:

> I would have done it sooner, [...] because I was needlessly afraid of something. (Jared)
>
> [I would have come out] early and often. I would have done it very early, the minute I knew. I would have been honest with myself. (Dave)

Interestingly, a gender difference emerges here. The only people who said that they would have come out earlier and not worried about the reactions they were going to get were male. Four of the females said that they did not think they would not do anything differently, because the way they handled it at the time was the only way they knew how to handle it:

> I had to go through what I had to go through. [...] I would say that I would be just completely open, [...] but being 17, [...] I could not have handled doing that. [...] I did it the way I did it because that's the way I had to do it. (Hillary)
>
> I think it's hard for me to say that I would change it now, because if I had explored the feelings and the attractions that I had when I was younger, you know my life would have taken a completely different turn. (Jane)

One female, Tammy, said that she would be even more selective about who she told and when she chose to begin coming out:

> There are some people that I wouldn't have told. I think I would probably still be more conservative. [...] I wouldn't have jumped right out and said, "Yes I am." I would have been more cautious about it. [...] I would be less likely to come out. I would have had a close circle of friends and kept it like that.

Gender Flip

The final question I asked the subjects was how they thought their experience might be different if they were of the opposite gender. A few people pointed out that lesbians have less to worry about when it comes to violence and disease. That is not to say that lesbians do not have to worry about violence being carried out against them, but more people associate violence with

men like Matthew Shepard. One woman, Jane, articulated that worry very well when comparing her experience to her brother's, who is also gay:

> I think as far as what my family would be unsettled about in a different way if I were a man is that they would fear more for my physical safety. I think they would be much more afraid of someone seriously hurting me or worse. Matthew Shepard comes to mind when some parents think of gay sons. Certainly, no parent would feel at ease in light of what was done to him. [...] I have one sibling, a brother, who is gay. He has been attacked more than once and seriously injured. THAT might make it more difficult for a parent to deal with a son's homosexuality as compared to a lesbian daughter.

Additionally, AIDS has also been stigmatized as a gay male disease, making some people less tolerant or accepting of men who come out, according to Clay:

> I think that one big thing for several people [...] is the threat of disease. And I think that if I were a lesbian, if I were a woman, then that threat of disease is practically nonexistent. And I think that would have taken out that big chunk [of problems in coming out].

Five people pointed out that to come out as a woman in society is probably easier; lesbianism has been more widely accepted, or at least tolerated, than male homosexuality:

> It's even become vogue to be bisexual or a lesbian as a female, and I really don't think people have as big a problem with it. (Melissa)

> In America today--or I guess in the world--it's just perceived as okay or as sexy if two women are together, but if two guys are together it's just a little more disgusting . (Brandon)

> From what I've seen society is more tolerant of lesbians. (Jared)

Based on theories of gender socialization, the explanation for the acceptance of lesbians more so than gay men is one of defined gender roles and expectations that everyone grows up with. Several people mentioned these differing expectations when imagining what their experience as a different gender would have been like:

> I don't think I would have got married. 'Cause I would have had another set of expectations as a man. I would have probably just moved to California like I originally planned and probably stayed there and never told my family. I think that perceptions of men and who they should be, especially where I come from, is so macho that as a man, I wouldn't have come out at all to anybody. (Tammy)

> [My experience] probably would have been easier. [...] [Guys] have to live up to the expectations of being a man and being macho and stuff like that. (Brandon)

> When men are feminine in any way, it's a control issue. Other men feel threatened by that. And women don't have that problem. I think that women are more threatened when they try to achieve power or position, and it doesn't have anything to do with their sexuality. (Melissa)

Melissa's argument lines up directly with explanations of gender roles. The sexuality of men is emphasized much more than that of women. Men are defined as sexual beings; they must exhibit "male" behavior at all times or risk not being men. They must think about, talk about, and aspire to sex all the time; they must not show much emotion, etc. When a gay male comes out, he is announcing that he is not necessarily living up to his gender role. While the gay man may still continue to define himself as a sexual being and still place an emphasis upon sex as heterosexual men are supposed to do, he is violating an important stipulation of the male gender role: sexual energy and desire must be focused towards the opposite sex. To be attracted to men is to violate the male gender role totally (SOCL 466 Notes 2003).

Women, on the other hand, have a gender role that is primarily defined by emotions and being attuned to the people around them. When a woman comes out, she is not violating either of those requirements of her gender role. Of course, heterosexuality is built into the female gender role; a large part of being a woman is the expectation that she will get married and have children. To be a lesbian makes this task impossible--if one goes about marriage and children in the traditional sense. But because sexuality is not as emphasized in the female gender role, it is not as big of a violation for women (SOCL 466 Notes 2001).

The Unique Experience of Once-Married Lesbians

As stated before, two of the women interviewed were previously married, and they both had two children. In addition to going through the same experiences as the other people in this study, they had some unique problems to manage. Their unique worries are mentioned in the

section on what people were worried about when coming out; their children were the primary concern while they were coming out. They continually asked themselves questions about how their actions were affecting their children, and they were plagued by fears of having their children taken away from them.

Once their worries were quelled about their children, however, these two women found that they had more problems ahead. They expected the gay community, lesbians in particular, to be accepting of them, because they were also gay. What they found, however, was often quite the opposite:

> Having been married, it was so hard, you know, like my friends--not my close group of friends, but other people that I knew that were in the gay community didn't really completely accept me because I had been married, and I had children, and I didn't fit in to their, you know, schema. And then my married friends of course, and my heterosexual friends, you know, I didn't really fit that anymore either. [...] I think having been married and then coming out, you know, you're kind of isolated within an isolated group of people. (Jane)

> [My partner] found it very hard to be with a woman that didn't have children, who had never been married, because they didn't understand the whole ex and children thing. [...] If you don't get with someone who is very very supportive of you raising your children and the [...] compromises you have to make, it makes it very very hard for the relationship. [...] It's much more difficult for a lesbian who's been married with kids than it is just to be a lesbian. (Tammy)

Because many women come out during their teenage or young adult years, most do not have a previous marriage to worry about while they are coming out. While maintaining relationships with family and friends is important, most young women coming out do not have to worry about legal issues like having their children taken away from them, because most are too young for children to have been an option. Jane discussed the unique difficulties of having to maintain several identities while coming out:

> It's really hard, having been married and then having children [...] and then coming out, because you have all these other identities, you know, and so much more of your life is involved as opposed to you know, just yourself. [...] I had my career to think about and my children. So those were big issues.

This is not to diminish the experiences and difficulties of lesbians--or gay men, for that matter--coming out who have not been previously married or who do not have children, because, as everything in this study illustrates, coming out is not an easy process no matter what is involved. Even if one chooses to tell no one, simply admitting one's homosexuality to oneself is hard enough. When other identities, such as ex-wife and mother are added to the situation---identities that may make a person different from the population he or she is becoming a part of--things can become more complicated. In Jane and Tammy's cases, they were not as completely accepted by other lesbians, and so they felt more outcast than other lesbians who are single and childless may be.

Conclusions

This study has examined the coming-out process of gay men and lesbians by conducting interviews and analyzing the experiences of each person for different experiences between men and women. Great gender differences were not found; coming out seems to be more of a universal human experience than one that is greatly influenced by the male and female gender roles and expectations.

Both genders had similar experiences realizing that they were homosexual. Everyone interviewed spoke of coming to terms with their homosexuality as a gradual process instead of a sudden realization, although males were more likely to be able to pinpoint a certain event that made them finally admit it to themselves. Also, males and females both spoke of mainly being worried about the reactions of others when coming out and of looking for positive, supportive reactions from the first people to whom they came out. Females and males equally used the criteria of the closeness of the relationship with a person and the open-mindedness of a person to judge who one should tell. The reluctance to tell a father figure in their lives was another similarity between men and women.

One gender difference of note came from the way others perceived gay men and lesbians. That is to say, men and women both felt that their experiences were different from those of people

of the opposite gender. Women and men agreed that men have a more difficult time coming out because of a greater threat of violence, the stigma of AIDS as a gay male disease, and the macho expectations that men must live up to.

While some gender differences were found in this study, such as the fact that women tended to be more able to share the homosexual part of their lives with their family and friends and what is mentioned above, the similarities found lead me to conclude that being male or female does not necessarily mean a certain experience coming out. Several other factors must come into play to determine the type of coming out one will have--perhaps factors such as personal values, religious and ethnic backgrounds, race, geographic location, and aspects of personal histories like being previously married and having children.

This study did not completely validate the hypothesis on which it was based, but I believe that its findings are still important. Further research should be done on this subject, however, to further validate the absence of significant gender differences during the coming-out process. Other research might also concentrate on specific aspects of coming out, such as the process gay men and lesbians go through when admitting their homosexuality to themselves. Additional future studies could explore the experiences of certain groups of homosexual people--by race, religious background, or, as touched on in this study, past marital status. I think that the unique experience of lesbian women who have been married before or who have children would make quite an enlightening study. It is my desire, however, that this paper has provided a foundation on which further gendered study of the coming-out process can be conducted.

Appendix

Interview Guide

First, thank you again for agreeing to do this interview. I just want to remind you that everything you tell me today will be kept completely confidential. Your name will not be used and any information that could identify you will be removed or changed. If you feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions, feel free to let me know. You are also free to stop the interview at any time.

I. Demographics
What is your age?
What is your religious background, both now and as you were growing up (what religion/denomination do you/did you practice; how often do you/did you go to church)?
How would you characterize the place you grew up? As a small town/rural area, or a big city/urban area?
What is your level of education?
What are your parents' levels of education?

II. Before Coming Out

A. Realization

Were you ever stereotyped as gay/called gay/etc. before you came out?
How did that make you feel?

Is there a specific time or event that you can remember that made you realize you were gay?
Describe it.
How old were you?
What was it about that event that made you realize you were gay?
How did this realization make you feel?
Why do you think you felt this way?

Was there a period of denial between your realization and coming out or a period of adjustment, or what?
Why was there a need for this period?

How did you feel about yourself during this period between realization and coming out?
Why?

Did you have anyone you could talk to during this period between realization and coming out?
Who? How did they help you (if at all)?

Were you or have you ever been in counseling to talk specifically about being gay/a lesbian?
Why? When?
Did it/has it help(ed)?

B. Fears/Worries About Coming Out

What would you say worried you the most about coming out?
Why?

Did you ever consciously worry about not living up to standards or expectations of you as a man/woman?
Why? How so?

How did you think your family would react?
Friends?
Why?

III. Coming Out

How old were you when you came out to the first person?
Who was it?
Why did you choose that person?
Describe that event--how did you tell him/her, etc.?

When considering whom to tell, what factors did you consider (i.e. what kind of people did you tell-what were they like)?

Were you scared to come out?
What were you scared of?
Why?

What about your family? Did you hesitate more to tell them or were they easier to tell?
Why?

Who were you more reluctant to tell--your mother or your father?
Why?

Once you came out to the first person, how did you feel?

How did each of these people/groups react?
Close friends?
Family?
Coworkers?
Others?
Why do you think they reacted the way they did?

How did you feel about yourself after you had come out to most people in your life?
Why did you feel that way?

Have you ever dated members of the opposite sex?
If yes, did you tell past significant others of the opposite sex that you are gay/a lesbian?
Why?
How did he/she react?
Why?

IV. Family Life

Are your parents still married? If not, how long have they been divorced? Has either of your parents remarried? Which parent did you live with after their divorce?

Do you have any siblings? How many?

How would you describe your relationship with your family before you came out (parents, siblings, step-parents, extended family)? Were you close? Did you talk to them about your life/problems/etc.?

Which parent were you closer to? Why?
Which sibling(s) were you closest to? Why?

How would you describe your relationship with your family now, since you have come out (parents, siblings, step-parents, extended family)? Are you close? Do you talk to them about your life/problems/etc.? Why or why not?

Which parent are you closest to now? Why?
Which sibling(s) are you closest to now? Why?
If the parent/sibling you felt closest to changed before and after your coming out, why?

V. After Coming Out

A. Changes

Did your life change after you came out?
If yes, how?
Why did it change or not change?

Do you consider being gay/a lesbian as a fundamental/basic part of who you are, or is it more of just one trait you have?
Why?

B. Friends/Peers

How would you categorize your closest friends? Are they mostly gay/lesbians or straight or an even mix or what?
Why do you think this is so?

Would you say more of your straight friends are of the same or of the opposite sex?
Why do you think this is so?

Do you ever feel as if you don't fit in with straight people of the same sex?
Why?

Did you or have you developed a peer group of other gay men/lesbians?
When--before coming out, during the process of telling people, after coming out?
Why? What was/is the purpose of this group?

Do your straight and gay/lesbian friends hang out together?
Why?

Do you talk about your significant others with your friends?
Family?
Coworkers?
Others?
Why?

C. Reactions/Sanctions/Life After Coming Out

Is there anyone you regret telling because of his or her reactions?
Why?
Is there anyone whose reaction surprised you?
Why? How?

Now that you have come out, do you ever feel sanctions from anyone for not being "normal"?
Why?
From who?
What kind of sanctions?

Have you ever changed your behavior to fit the mold of "straight behavior"?
Why?

Do you ever get stereotyped because people know you are gay/a lesbian?
What kind of stereotypes?
When does this happen?
Why do you think this does (or does not) happen?
How does being stereotyped make you feel about the person doing the stereotyping?
About yourself?

Have you ever been threatened or felt unsafe because of your sexual orientation?
Tell me about it: When? By who? Why?
How did you feel?
Why do you think this happened?

How do stereotypes, sanctions, and the threat of violence, etc. affect how open you are or what you choose to do, if at all?
Why?

IV. Conclusions

Would you do anything differently if you were coming out today?
What would you do differently?
Why?

Can you think of anything the people around you (family, friends, etc.) could have done to make your coming out experience easier?
Why or why not?
Why would these things have made the experience easier?

Do you think your parents/family would have reacted differently if you were a man/woman?
Why?

Do you think your coming-out experience would have been different if you were a male/female?
Why? How?

That's all of the questions I have for you at this time. Is there anything you would like to add or any questions you have for me? Again, I appreciate your letting me interview you, and thank you for your time.

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