



The Coming Out Experience...

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Abstract

In this anonymous online study, 171 members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community were invited to describe their experiences after disclosing sexual orientation. Participants included 93 women, 59 male, and 19 indicated another gender. Sixteen participants identified as transgender. Sexual orientation included 51 gay men, 34 lesbian women, 34 bisexuals, and 36 who indicated "other". Ages ranged from 18 to 76, with a mean of 36. Most participants were from the United States, with smaller groups from Latin America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

Two questionnaires, the LGBT Discrimination Survey (LDS) and the Coming Out Survey (COS), were revised from measures used in other studies, and provided numerical indices. Discrimination was associated with higher levels of difficulty coming out and lower levels of Satisfaction with Life. A subsample of 163 responded to open-ended questions with narratives. Forty-five percent described facing violence, and 47% reported hostile verbal reactions. Overall the narratives indicated that disclosing sexual orientation was often met with homophobia, illustrating the potential risks of "coming out." Participants from politically conservative families faced greater discrimination and difficulty disclosing sexual orientation.

Introduction

Disclosing sexual orientation –the "coming out experience" is a pivotal moment in LGBT life in America. While coming out used to evoke something close to terror because reactions were most often negative and even violent, in our era of "marriage equality" it was hoped that anti-gay perspectives were on the wane and coming out might become a less charged though still highly emotional experience. Unfortunately, the political landscape has been darkening, evidenced by the recent expulsion of transgender soldiers from the military, and clearly, being gay in America may not yet be as widely accepted as hoped for. This study was conducted to explore the conditions conducive to self-disclosure of sexual orientation. Our question: "When members of the LGBT community avoid self-disclosure, is it because of an internal discomfort at their own identity, or is it because it is not yet safe to come out?"

To illustrate the significance –even newsworthiness- of the coming out experience, we look no further than MSNBC Cable news, on April 15th, 2019. In the midst of an interview conducted by esteemed political commentator Rachel Maddow of Pete Buttigieg, Mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and a candidate for the 2020 presidency, coming out quickly

became the center of their discussion. Maddow, a PhD and Rhodes Scholar, has always been out as a gay woman though ordinarily she avoids discussing anything personal. But curiosity overtook her. Rachel and Mayor Pete focused on one another, deeply engaged in a discussion of the coming out experience; together they illustrated how important and emotional this is, for the LGBT community. Until three years ago Mayor Pete lived his life "in the closet." He'd graduated from Harvard, been a Rhodes Scholar, and served as an Officer in the Navy before running and being elected as Mayor, while keeping his sexual orientation secret. Then, at age 33, while serving as mayor and soon up for re-election, Buttigieg made the monumental decision to finally come out. He won his re-election with 80% of the vote, including voters from conservative neighborhoods.

The results of this study illustrate why the decision to come out is so difficult, unpredictable, and still, too often, potentially dangerous. The importance of the coming out experience can't be over-estimated. Understanding how, why, and when people make the decision to self-disclose or choose to remain closeted is important for psychologists who are themselves part of the LGBT community, or who work with LGBT people.

“ If my grandparents found out, I'd be very afraid. ”

“ I lost 99% of my friends, became an outcast, death threats, being assaulted, humiliated and paranoid. I had to be careful, I had to hide, mask my emotions. I played dead. ”

Results

Results found discrimination significantly associated with difficulty coming out. Satisfaction with life was negatively correlated with both difficulty coming out and the experience of discrimination. Difficulty coming out and discrimination were correlated with survivor guilt, associated with excessive worry about the well-being of others. Narratives responding to open-ended questions illustrated the dangers faced when disclosing orientation. The impact of gender was noted, and in narrative responses some participants commented upon the effects of racism. Participants who grew up in more politically conservative families reported facing greater discrimination and difficulty coming out.

Survivor guilt was a significant predictor of discrimination and difficulty coming out. Lower levels of life satisfaction were associated with discrimination. Surprisingly, men had significantly lower life satisfaction than women and transgender participants reported higher levels of survivor guilt.

Data Analysis

A cross-sectional correlational research design was used to determine whether difficulty coming out as LGBT, and discrimination after coming out, were associated with interpersonal guilt and satisfaction with life in a sample of LGBT adults. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables. Pearson correlations were used to test hypotheses about the relationships between difficulty coming out, discrimination, and the standardized psychological outcome variables (interpersonal guilt and life satisfaction). Pearson correlations were also calculated to test hypotheses concerning the relationships between discrimination, difficulty coming out, and family background variables (i.e., political attitudes of the family of origin, and whether participants had LGBT siblings or other family members who had come out). To analyze the qualitative narrative responses, a thematic analysis, which is a systematic approach to gather and analyze data (Strauss & Corbin 1994) was used. The responses were first read without any type of coding in mind. Next, themes were extracted and consolidated into categories from the text. Responses were codified and counted for each participant's responses.

Table 1. Correlations between Discrimination, Difficulty Coming Out, and Standardized Psychological Outcome Variables

	Discrimination	Difficulty Coming Out
Discrimination	--	.39***
Difficulty Coming Out	.39***	--
Survivor Guilt	.21**	.16*
Separation Guilt	.05	.03
Omnipotence Guilt	.07	.08
Life Satisfaction	-.18*	-.15*

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 2. Correlations between Family Background Variables, Discrimination, and Difficulty Coming Out

	Discrimination	Difficulty Coming Out
Any LGBT siblings out?	.03	-.06
Number of LGBTQ siblings out	.03	-.07
Number of any LGBT family out	-.03	-.10
Family political liberalism	-.37***	-.41***
Own political liberalism	.02	.07
Community political liberalism	-.10	-.06

*** p<.001

“ I was denied entry into a department store, denied hotel reservations, not able to donate blood or be an organ donor, beaten and thrown in front of a moving vehicle, beaten and harassed at school, arrested for slow dancing (lewd and lascivious conduct) x15, having a garbage can dumped on my head and being spit on at a Pride Parade... ”

Methods

Participants

Demographics. Participants were adults who identified as LGBT. Participants included 93 women, 59 men, and 19 other. Sixteen participants were transgender. Sexual orientation included 51 gay men, 34 lesbian women, 34 bisexuals, and 36 other. Ages ranged from 18 to 76, with a mean age 36. The sample were highly educated, most holding a B.A. and M.A. Most participants considered themselves to be "middle class." While only 42 participants grew up in cities, 109 were currently urban, 6 rural, and 51 suburban dwellers. (See Figures 1-2 above for gender and sexual orientation.) The participants were from a variety of religious backgrounds including agnostic, Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim.

Measures

Coming Out Survey (COS) (Keller, O'Connor, & Berry, 2017) revised from Experience of (Racial) Discrimination Scale, (EOD), (Krieger et al, 2005) is a 17-item scale designed to examine the level of difficulty in coming out for LGBT populations.

LGBT Discrimination Survey (LDS) (Keller, O'Connor, & Berry, 2017), revised from the Outness Inventory (OI) (Mohr & Fassinger,

2000) is a 17-item measure indicating what participants faced when disclosing orientation.

These measures asked participants to rate experience with a variety of people, including family members, friends, teachers, strangers, co-workers, and health professionals.

Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ) (O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, & Sampson, 1997) is a 67-item, self-report measure designed to assess categories of guilt, based on empathy and an unrealistic sense of responsibility for others well-being and success (O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, & Sampson 1997).

Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, 2000) includes five items, measuring feelings of well-being and happiness (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2000).

Narrative responses. Questions calling for narrative responses included experiences when disclosing to family and others, language/terminology, politics, and ethnic/gender/religious identity.

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