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# Identity, Relationships, and Culture: A Constitutive Model of Coming Out

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# CHAPTER 7

## Identity, Relationships, and Culture: **A Constitutive Model of Coming Out**

*Jimmie Manning*



### KEY TERMS

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The closet  
Sexual identity

Homophobia  
Coming out

Sexual orientation



### ABSTRACT

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For several decades, researchers across many disciplines have developed a large body of research exploring the topic of coming out. This research has provided many insights about what it means for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people to acknowledge their sexualities and to share their sexual identities with others. As helpful as this research has been, little has been done to move scholarship toward a holistic theory of coming out. This chapter provides a step in that direction by offering a constitutive model of coming out. This three-level model proposes that culture informs a person's viewpoints and personal acceptance regarding sexuality; and that both culture and a person's personal viewpoints impact how sexual identities are shared with others. Data from qualitative research studies about coming out help to illustrate the concepts associated with the model.

Unless people do or say something to show that they are gay, most people assume that they are straight. The notion that people are often considered to be heterosexual until proven otherwise, known as *compulsory heterosexuality*, happens both because most people have sexual longings and behaviors that align with heterosexuality; but also because non-heterosexual orientations have been and continue to be shamed or stigmatized in many cultures (Rich, 1980). Of course, many people are not heterosexual and are attracted to people of the same sex. Because of cultural expectations about sexuality, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and otherwise sexually queer (GLBQ) people often find themselves in a situation where they must come out about their sexualities. Rust (2003) characterizes coming out as “the process by which individuals come to recognize that they have romantic or sexual feelings toward members of their own gender, adopt lesbian or gay (or bisexual) identities, and then share these identities with others” (p. 227). This chapter offers a model that explores that definition of coming out, specifically examining cultural, cognitive, and relational aspects.

Because coming out can be tough, many researchers have tried to understand what it entails. These studies have happened mostly in three contexts. First, many *cultural studies* have examined how cultures and societies create rules about sex and sexuality. These studies have primarily focused on two contexts: heteronormativity and the closet. *Heteronormativity* is the idea that people are either heterosexual or not; and that those who are heterosexual are privileged (Plummer, 1992). People are often not even aware of their heteronormative assumptions. These assumptions include that people in general are heterosexual; that men act masculine and women act feminine; and that until someone does something to disrupt these ideas, heterosexuality is the norm.

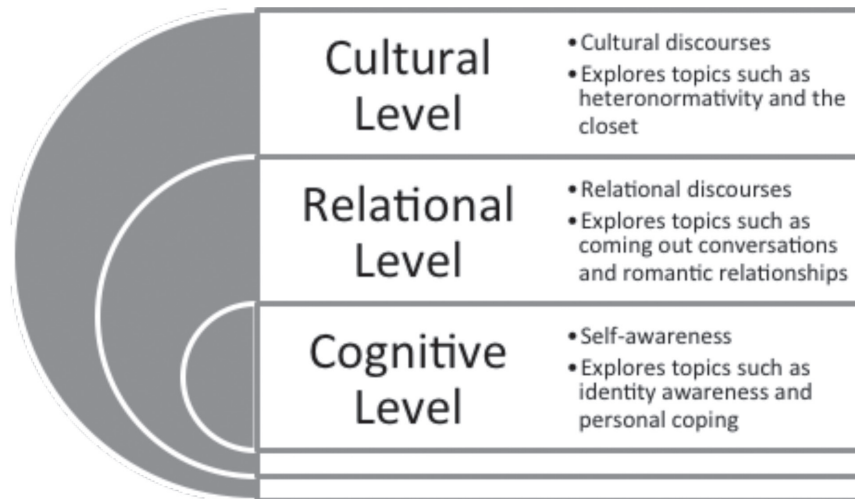
Queer theory is a body of theory that examines, among other things, how gender and sexuality are disciplined when they do not meet heteronormative cultural expectations (Yep, 2003). One way that people with non-conforming gender or sexualities is punished is through the fear of violence. As Yep (2003) points out, many physical threats have been aimed at GLBQ people. Moreover, the fear of such violence encourages people to try and conceal their sexuality; or, if people are open about their sexuality, they know that there are threats. Beyond physical threats, those include being fired from work, rejected from houses of worship, or banished from families. Because this risk can be intense, many GLBQ people choose to stay in

what is referred to as *the closet*. As will be explored later in this chapter, the closet is a metaphorical cultural construction where people are encouraged to hide aspects of their identities that others do not want to see.

Whereas studies of heteronormativity and the closet deal more with cultural constructions, a second body of research has dealt more with how people think about themselves and see their own identities. These *cognitive studies* have helped to explain how people understand their own sexuality as well as the feelings and emotions that accompany those understandings. Much of the research in this area has been used to develop models that can help GLBQ people as they come out, especially people who might be struggling with self-acceptance or acceptance from others. Although these models have been and continue to be helpful for GLBQ people, they continue to be developed today, as the original studies that helped build these models often did not account for cultural differences, especially in terms of ethnicity (see Gonzales & Espin, 1996 or Greene, 1994). The models also generally ignored bisexuality (Rust, 1996). One of the most discussed cognitive models of coming out (Cass, 1979) will be explored in-depth later in this chapter.

Most recently, a new line of research exploring coming out has examined how people interact regarding their sexual identities. As Manning (2015a) notes, in many instances people explored the cognitive aspects of coming out while assuming the communication that surrounds those processes. Unfortunately, this communication is often filled with anxiety, uncertainty, and stress even in affirming or accepting environments (Manning, 2015b). As such, it is important to consider coming out at the relational level: how do people communicate their sexual identities with others? Because communication involves cognitive processes and because it is situated within a culture, it is included as the middle-level in the *Constitutive Model of Coming Out* (Figure 7.1) presented here that combines all three strands of research. Because culture has an impact on both relating and cognitive processes, it is at the outer edge of the model. The model is labeled as *constitutive* because rather than any level having a direct effect or impact on the other, all three combine to create a constitutive sense of coming out. Similarly, research across all three areas—cultural studies, cognitive studies, and interactive relational studies—constitutively inform a person's coming out experiences. The rest of this chapter explains each level and provides concrete examples.

**FIGURE 7.1** *A Constitutive Model of Coming Out*



## The Cultural Level

The outer edge of the model—the level that engulfs the other two—is the *Cultural Level*. Research at this level reflects how a culture informs, impacts, or otherwise influences the people and relationships within it. Culture is not a container, however; rather, it is a circulating sense of meaning that happens across collected people, artifacts, and ideas across a particular place and space. Within a particular culture, identities and relationships are defined. In addition to being defined, some identities are rewarded, punished, controlled, limited, or contested within a given culture—especially sexual identities (Manning, 2013). Because some identities or relationships are not valued—and, in fact, might be open to cultural scrutiny and punishment—people might choose to hide these identities. This notion of *the closet* is important to a constitutive model of coming out, as the closet is what allows for the idea that people come out.

Many who study the closet, point to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1990) highly-influential book *Epistemology of the Closet* as the starting place for considering how cultures create aspects of identity that must be hidden. Even though many social scientists use ideas generated by Sedgwick in that text,

the book itself relies more on humanistic approaches to literary criticism to make its arguments. To that end, works of literature from writers such as Proust or Melville are considered in terms of how gender and sexuality are established; and how such constructions or representations inform the idea that people are either homosexual or heterosexual. As Sedgwick argues, only having two categories is too simple. One of the most intriguing ideas she explores in the book is how some aspects of identity might always remain closeted. For example, if someone were to come out of the closet as a lesbian, what would that mean? Does that label itself tell you much about the person's whole identity (e.g., lesbians are often different) or even their sexual (e.g., lesbians have different kinds of sex) or gendered (e.g., lesbians have different gender performances) identities? She also asks good questions about why people are so interested in the closet being mostly about sex. As she suggests, many aspects of a person's identity beyond gender or sexuality have the potential to be closeted.

Although many scholars in many different academic disciplines explore aspects of coming out at the cultural level, Sedgwick's (1990) notion of the closet is often at the foundation as it pushes thinking about how a larger social order, or the people who watch us as we relate with others (see Duck, 2011), impinges on our sexual relationships as well as who we are as gendered people. These explorations of sexual or gender identity often intersect with other identity categories such as race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, religion, or age. In the communication discipline, many scholars use rhetorical or media criticism to examine cultural aspects of the closet (e.g., Eguchi, Calafell, & Files-Thompson, 2014) and coming out (e.g., Manning, 2015c), although autoethnography—a combination of ethnography and autobiography (see Ellis, 2004) where researchers examine their own lives as they are culturally situated—is quite common as well. Perhaps the most notable autoethnographic work exploring coming out at the cultural level—research that, similar to Sedgwick's work, asks good questions about how cultures construct closets—is that of Tony E. Adams.

In Adams' (2011) *Narrating the Closet*, he considers how people interact with each other in terms of sexual identity, considering a wide range of cultural influences from modern popular culture representations of LGB people to how people interpret religious texts. In terms of coming out, Adams describes what he calls *situational paradoxes* within a culture, or the culturally-constructed rules of coming out. As he explains,

Paradox occurs when a person with same-sex attraction is held accountable—by self and others—for taking a wrong course of action, making the wrong move: there are consequences for a person who comes out or does not, who comes out too soon or not soon enough, who completes the coming-out process or finds completion impossible, or who comes out most of the time, some of the time, or never at all (Adams, 2011, p. 112).

As that quotation implies, in many ways the decision to come out—if it is a decision at all—is often filled with turmoil, even in circumstances when others are supportive.

In many ways, Adams' (2011) nine paradoxes of the closet serve as a perfect illustrator for coming out at the Cultural Level. As such, I close this section by reviewing each. First, Adams notes that being attracted to someone of the same sex is instantly connected to the closet. That is because, as he explains in his second paradox, that attraction is not immediately visible. So even though people who are attracted to the same sex might be present, they probably are not realized as being present until they give some sort of indication they are there. Third, because of the second paradox, the world is heteronormative in nature. That is, as Adams says, people are “heterosexual until proven otherwise” (p. 112). That leads to his fourth paradox, that if people want to be recognized as full sexual beings, then they must come out. Fifth, coming out is dangerous, both because some people are hostile toward those who are attracted to people of the same sex but also because people are suspicious about how or why someone was private about their sexuality. That is, a person's reason for not coming out is under scrutiny and might even be viewed as deceptive or dishonest.

Yet, as he points out in his sixth paradox, people are expected to come out because doing so is not being culturally constructed as mature, honest, healthy, and politically responsible. Those who do not come out might be labeled as self-hating, immature, secretive, or foolish. Yet, at the same time, other members of a culture will see coming out as insensitive, attention-seeking, or even selfish. To that end, the seventh paradox examines how some people will suggest that coming out is disrespectful to others, and a sign that a person does not care. That might cause some people to come out to some people and not to others. Along those lines, Adams' (2011) eighth paradox suggests that coming out can be discrete, in that



there is an end to the process (e.g., “I came out!”). Yet, at the same time, because coming out is not self-evident, every time someone new is met, coming out has to happen with that person again. As such, the final cultural paradox suggests that coming out never ends.

## The Cognitive Level

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Even though the Cultural Level is not directly connected to the Cognitive Level on the model, it is presented after the Cultural Level because culture has a direct impact on the way people understand themselves and others (see Brown & Weigel, this volume). The *Cognitive Level* of coming out involves the psychological processes involved with how GLBQ people understand their sexual identities as well as how they feel about them. The foundational research for understanding cognitive coming out practices was developed by Vivienne Cass (1979, 1984), whose Homosexual Identity Formation Model (HIM) is widely cited and recognized. Although many coming out researchers are now dismissive of the model, suggesting that coming out research has moved far beyond Cass’ work, it does not change the fact that HIM started the conversation and has influenced virtually all coming out research that has followed. Moreover, it has great heuristic value. As Manning (2014) notes, it is widely used in brochures, pamphlets, websites, and self-help guides to help GLBQ people think about their identities.

HIM is a stage model, meaning that it suggests that people go through different phases. Specifically, Cass’ (1979) model suggests that people move from being confused about their sexual identity to, if all goes well, figuring out how to synthesize it with a largely heterosexual culture. The six stages a GLBQ person goes through—Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride, and Identity Synthesis (see Figure 7.2)—are goals of sort that allow people to “acquire an identity of ‘homosexual’ fully integrated within the individual’s overall concept of self” (Cass, 1979, p. 220). Simply put, for someone to try to have good mental health related to sexual identity, progressing through all six stages would be beneficial.

**FIGURE 7.2** *Cass' (1979) Stages of Homosexual Identity Formation*

Stage	Description	Representative Thought Process
Identity Confusion	Realizing you do not have a heterosexual identity	"Okay, there's no more denying it. I have a crush on Amanda. Am I a lesbian?"
Identity Comparison	Comparing your sexual identity to heterosexuality	"If I marry a girl, though, I could have kids and a normal life."
Identity Tolerance	Presenting your sexual identity to others	"Mom said she'd love me no matter what. I might as well tell her and see how that goes."
Identity Acceptance	Sharing your sexual identity more openly and starting to hang out with other GLBQ people	"Sorry, I can't make it to drinks with you all after work today. I play poker with the other lesbians on Thursdays."
Identity Pride	Celebrating your identity, perhaps even pitting it against heterosexuality	"I love that most gay guys don't get all bent out of shape when their boyfriends check out someone else. Being heterosexual and dealing with that jealousy must suck."
Identity Synthesis	Seeing how your identity is, in many ways, similar to others and recognizing that you are a unique part of culture	"I never thought I'd want to get married. But here I am, ready for the ring and kids and the whole shebang."

Even if Cass' (1979) model is helpful for people to think about their sexual identities, other researchers have rightly pointed to some of its problematic aspects. For example, Troiden (1988, 1989) was skeptical that people had to go through each of the six stages one-by-one, and instead thought that people might go back and forth through various stages at different points in their lives. His research, and the work of others, confirmed that he was right. Coming out, in the self-acceptance sense, is probably more like a spiral than a line where people might go up and down the stages as life changes. Taking a completely different approach, D'Augelli (1994) hypothesized

that coming out was tied to a person's life span. Through his research, he developed a model that emphasizes six areas where sexual identities are malleable as a person grows and develops: 1) exiting heterosexual identity; 2) developing a personal gay identity status; 3) developing a gay social identity; 4) becoming a gay offspring; 5) developing a gay intimacy status; and 6) entering a gay community.

In doing his work, D'Augelli (1994) tried to be more sensitive to culture, too. Past models were rightly criticized for being too focused on White people or people with a middle-class lifestyle. D'Augelli recognized that different environmental factors could impact development. For example, it might be harder for someone in Southwest Kansas to accept his or her sexual identity than it would be for someone from suburban Chicago. Even then, a person's family or school might also have an impact. D'Augelli calls these "interindividual differences" (1994, p. 321), recognizing that even though models are good at giving general guidelines, they cannot account for each individual person in the same way. That, in general, is a widely-recognized flaw with cognitive research and models: they often put a single person at the center of the analysis. Scholars have also noted that they lack diversity (e.g., Diamond, 2003; Peplau & Garnets, 2000), even though in the mid-1990s some scholars were exploring how racial and ethnic differences impacted coming out experiences (e.g., Greene, 1994). Finally, many cognitive models assume how people communicate or interact with others, something that was not addressed until recent communication scholarship.

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## The Relational Level

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The Relational Level, located between the cultural and cognitive level because of its strong connections to both, focuses on interpersonal relationships. This level is essential both because it demarcates general social relationships from close relationships such as friendships, family, and romantic relationships. Research studies examining the Relational Level tend to explore *proximal discourses*, the things people say to each other (Manning, 2014). These proximal discourses draw from *distal discourses*, the larger pool of intelligible ideas that allow people to organize a conversation and make it intelligible. In that sense, the Relational Level connects to the cultural level because proximal coming out disclosures and the

conversations that precede and follow are informed by larger cultural understandings of coming out. As I explained in an earlier essay,

[I]f someone says, “I’m gay,” that proximal disclosure ties into a larger, distal idea of “coming out.” Depending on an individual’s experiences and ideas about coming out, he or she will respond with another proximal utterance that draws from a distal discourse. That could be, “You know it’s an abomination” (drawing from a distal discourse of religion); “God made you perfectly, and if that’s gay then so be it” (drawing from a different distal discourse of religion); “But you don’t act gay!” (drawing from a distal discourse that suggests LGB people behave a particular way); or, as was common for the participants of this study, “Are you being careful sexually?” (drawing from a distal discourse that gay or bisexual men are at risk to contract sexually transmitted diseases or infections) (Manning, 2014, p. 34).

The idea that coming out conversations involve proximal discourses that draw from distal cultural discourses is inspired by the second iteration of Leslie A. Baxter’s relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2011). Baxter’s theory assumes that conflict and contradiction are a natural part of dialogue, and that different, competing discourses—both at the proximal and distal level—can result in conversational tensions. These tensions can be productive, in that they allow those involved with the conversation to learn, grow, or reconsider their viewpoints. They can also be difficult, disheartening, or even destructive. Manning’s (2015b) typology of positive and negative communicative behaviors, developed from research with GLBQ participants from diverse backgrounds, illustrates these possibilities (see Figures 7.3 and 7.4).

Although every coming out conversation is different, they tend to follow patterns in terms of how they happen and what details are involved. Drawing from over 260 coming out narratives from GLBQ people of different ages and from around the world, Manning (2015a) developed a typology that helps to illustrate some of the most common ways that coming out conversations occur. The typology is non-exclusive, meaning that in some cases a single conversation can fall into two different categories. This typology revealed that coming out conversations are often pre-planned, emergent, coaxed, forced, romantic, and/or educational/activist (see Figure 7.5).

**FIGURE 7.3** *Positive Communicative Behaviors in Coming Out Conversations (Manning, 2015b)*

Receiver Behavior	Defined	Representative Dialogue or Action
Open Communication Channels	Inviting future discussion regarding relationships and sexual identity	"I hope you know you can always talk to me about this. I want to know about you and your life!"
Affirming Direct Relational Statements	Directly and explicitly expressing care, respect, and affection	"I love you so much. I am proud to be your father!"
Laughter and Joking	Use of gentle humor to show acceptance	"Well, now I know why you are always spending the night at your 'best friend's' house! I can't wait to meet him!"
Nonverbal Immediacy	Use of appropriate touch to show affection	Hugs; comforting rubs on back, shoulder, or arms; holding a hand

**FIGURE 7.4** *Negative Communicative Behaviors in Coming Out Conversations (Manning, 2015b)*

Receiver Behavior	Defined	Representative Dialogue or Action
Expressing Denial	Insistence that the person is not GLBQ or is confused	"I think you want attention. I don't believe for a second that you're really a lesbian."
Religious Talk	Invoking religion as a critique of identity or actions	"Well, you know I don't agree with it. But love the sinner, hate the sin."
Inappropriate Questions, Comments, or Concerns	Asking questions, making comments, or expressing concerns that violate privacy or invoke authority	"You're not the girl, right? I mean, you don't let him, you know... put it there?"
Shaming Statements	Direct admonishment and/or judgment	"We have done so much for you, and this is how you repay us. You should be ashamed of yourself!"
Aggression	Physical or verbal behaviors that are threatening, hostile, intimidating, or violent	"Maybe if I gave it to you right here, you'd see what a woman is supposed to like! Is that what you want?"

**FIGURE 7.5** Manning's (2015a) Non-Exclusive Typology of Coming Out Conversations

Conversation Type	Defined	Representative Dialogue
Pre-planned	The GLBQ person decides to arrange a conversation	Bianca: Mom, I invited you over tonight for dinner because I want to talk to you about something.
Emergent	The GLBQ person decides to come out based on an ongoing conversation	Geoff: Sorry to dump all my problems on you. It's just that I don't know anyone who's gay. Bianca: Well, you know me. Geoff: What? You mean... Bianca: Yes, I'm a lesbian. Feel free to invite me for a conversation any time.
Coaxed	The GLBQ person is encouraged to come out by another	Imi: Bianca, you are my cousin and I sense that you are holding back. You know you can tell me anything. Bianca: I know that, Imi. Imi: So if you ever want to tell me anything about your love life, and who you love, know I'm ready.
Forced	The GLBQ person is coerced to come out	Grandpa: I see you with that girl, Bianca. Girls don't behave that way! So you tell me now—so help me or I will write you out of the will. I won't be a fool anymore! Tell me!
Romantic	The GLBQ person comes out by making romantic or sexual advances	Bianca: I know we're best friends. And you probably only see us that way. But... but I want to kiss you so bad right now.
Educational/ Activist	The GLBQ person comes out in order to educate or encourage others, usually in front of an audience	Bianca: Thank you for coming to our Safe Zone panel tonight. My name is Bianca, and I am an out lesbian, and I want to help you learn about what it means to be an ally tonight!

Although the typologies presented in this section are helpful, much more research is needed about how people communicate in their relationships after coming out. As both the Cultural and Cognitive Levels indicate, coming out is a process. It makes sense that as people in a relationship continue to consider their sexual and romantic identities, that the relationship itself will continue to change. Although many studies that would fall into the Cognitive Level have explored how people think and feel about their relationships post-coming out (e.g., Cramer & Roach, 1988; Griffith & Hebl, 2002), few have examined the actual communication in those relationships. More research about communication in relationships after coming out is in order. It is also helpful to consider that each time a person comes out to a friend, family member, or even a romantic partner, that it typically involves three steps: a pre-announcement or introduction that sets the stage (“There’s something I want to tell you”); a disclosure (“I’m gay”); and then a reaction or series of reactions in the form of a conversation (Manning, 2014).

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## Conclusion

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As this constitutive model of communication indicates, coming out can be conceptualized in three different ways: culturally, as societies and their communities continue to forge understandings about what GLBQ identities involve and that work together to create frameworks for how those identities are understood and communicated; cognitively, as individuals realize who they are sexually and romantically and how that is likely to be received; and relationally, as GLBQ people share their identities with others. Even though great progress has been made in many cultures, even the most liberated often set the stage for GLBQ people to spend a great deal of mental energy being in the closet and worrying about revealing their identities to others as well as discursive energy having to explain who they are and how they know. With continued research about coming out—as well as continued education about how individuals and cultures can be supportive of a broad spectrum of relationships and sexualities—it might soon be that coming out as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or sexually queer is not necessary as diverse sexual and romantic identities are expected and respected in society.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Has someone ever come out to you? If so, did you enact any of the behaviors listed on the positive communicative behaviors chart? How about the negative communicative behaviors chart? If no one has ever come out to you, what behaviors from the two charts would you be more likely to exhibit? Why?
2. Think about someone coming out in your workplace. What about your workplace would make it easy? What would make it difficult? What would be the ongoing impact for the person who came out?
3. Why might someone be scared to come out, even in a supportive culture or relationship?
4. When someone comes out, does it change how they are viewed? Why or why not?
5. This chapter examines GLBQ coming out. What identities besides sexual identities might be concealed or uncertain until a person discloses that identity? Try to list at least five, and then look at each and decide: If someone revealed that identity to you, would you say they were coming out?

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