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Distinguishing but not defining: How ambivalence affects contemporary identity disclosures

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Abstract

Coming out, or the disclosure of a minority identity, features prominently across disciplines, including several subfields of sociological research. In the context of sexuality, theoretical arguments offer competing predictions. Some studies propose that coming out is increasingly an unremarkable life transition as the stigma associated with non-heterosexualities attenuates, while others posit entrenched discrimination. Rather than testing these theories or providing incremental evidence in support of one position, we use 52 in-depth interviews with recently-out individuals to explain how identity disclosures in the present moment can validate plural possibilities. Our findings show that ambivalence is the core narrative which animates the contemporary coming out process. Respondents identify three interpretive frameworks that structure their experience of sexuality as at once incidental *and* central: generational differences, identity misrecognitions, and interfacing with institutions. We also detail a fourth theme, intersectionality, which shows the analytic limits of ambivalence in the coming out process. These patterns suggest more broadly that sexuality, like ethnicity, may provide symbolic resources—"distinguishing but not defining"—in the service of crafting a modern sexual self.

Keywords Closet · Coming out · Identity disclosures · Symbolic sexuality · Post-gay

"Coming out" is a metaphor, narrative device, and life course transition (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006) that describes the process of disclosing discreditable identities (Goffman, 1963) generally related to sexual orientation (Sedgwick, 1990) and gender (Zimman, 2009), although not exclusively (Saguy, 2020). Disclosure rates for

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minority sexual identities have increased over time. A 2022 Gallup poll of more than 10,000 adults estimates identification as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or something other than heterosexual at 7.2% of the U.S. population. That number is up from 4.5% in Gallup's count in 2017, 5.6% in 2020, and it is double what it was when Gallup first measured sexuality a decade ago in 2012 (3.5%). Younger generations come out more often as non-heterosexual. Specifically, 19.7% of Generation Z (born 1997–2004) and 11.2% of Millennials (born 1981–1996) self-identify as such, compared to 3.3% of Generation X (born 1965–1980), 2.7% of Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), and 1.7% of the Silent Generation (1945 and earlier).[1] In this article, we examine the cultural articulations of these statistical trends. More people, on average, are expressing non-heterosexual identities today, but how do they make sense of the disclosure process?

In the decades since Goffman conceptualized identity disclosures, coming out has featured prominently in sociological research about sexualities (Robinson, 2020), gender (Kade, 2021), culture (Moon, 2008), and social movements (Saguy & Ward, 2011). Theoretical arguments about the concept are also central in education (Poteat et al., 2021), geography (Lewis, 2012), psychology (Hammack et al., 2022), political science (Egan, 2012), and public health (Corrigan et al., 2013). This vast literature exhibits diverse propositions. One set of studies documents how the closet is losing its stigma as homophobia declines in its significance for structuring social life (McCormack, 2012). This weakens the centrality of sexual orientation as a defining feature of self (Savin-Williams, 2005) and collective identities (Ghaziani, 2011), especially as rates of same-sex sexual contact increase in the population alongside flexible (Silva, 2021; Ward, 2015), fluid (Diamond, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2017), non-exclusive (McCormack & Savin-Williams, 2018), and non-traditional (Goldberg et al., 2020; Morandini et al., 2017) identifications. If the closet is a historical oddity (Seidman, 2002), then the greater visibility of non-heterosexuals should affect what it means to come out of it. Thus, we would hypothesize that coming out narratives will describe the disclosure process as less remarkable and less stigmatized.

Another branch of scholarship offers a critical perspective. While attitudes about sexuality are liberalizing, these trends are often accompanied by new forms of discrimination (Brodyn & Ghaziani, 2018). Arguments about "tolerance" misdirect attention to a lower bar for civil rights (Walters, 2014). More people were out of the closet in the 2020s, as Gallup shows, yet one in four lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals, along with those who identify as something other than heterosexual (LGBTQ+), still report bias in contexts ranging from employment to housing (Singh & Durso, 2017). Among these individuals, 68.5 percent and 43.7 percent said that it negatively affected their psychological and physical well-being, respectively. Rather than liberalizing attitudes that affect *all* LGBTQ+ people, a second set of studies identifies respectability challenges (Rubin, 1993) and micro-aggressions experienced in particular by racialized (Vaccaro & Koob, 2019) and transgender individuals (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Stallings, 2019), many of whom report alarming rates of assault (Coston, 2020). This leads to an alternate

[1] For 2022 Gallup poll results, see https://news.gallup.com/poll/470708/lgbt-identification-steady.aspx.

hypothesis: coming out narratives will emphasize hardship and struggle due to perceptions of discrimination.

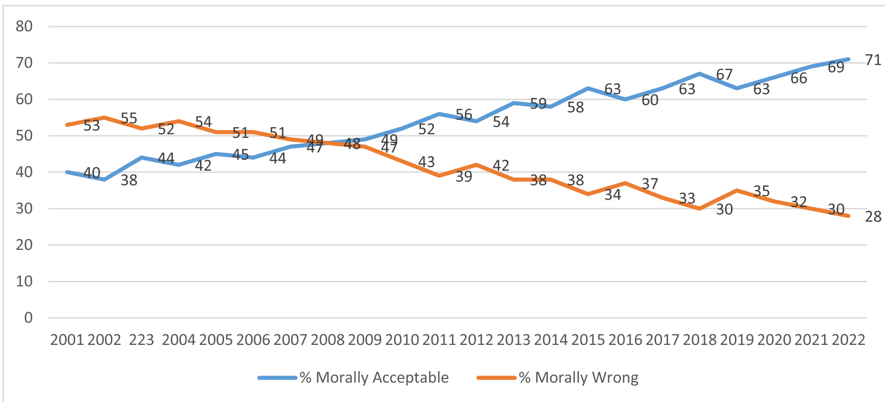
The different predictions that stem from these bodies of work, against the backdrop of the demographic profile of coming out at the start of the 2020s, provide a point of departure for this study. Rather than testing theories, however, we ask how multiple social forces can mutually affect the coming out process. How do people navigate the disclosure of non-heterosexual identities in a moment when sexual prejudice and discrimination are ongoing though uneven and inconsistent? We answer this question by drawing on 52 in-depth interviews with a sample of recently-out individuals. Our findings provide evidence for the concurrent validity of theoretical propositions about progress and persistent animus. To make this argument, we identify ambivalence as a core theme that structures the process of coming out. Not reducing identity disclosures as evocative of either success and social integration or unabated struggle and exclusion suggests that people may perceive sexuality, like ethnicity, as offering optional (Waters, 1990) or symbolic (Gans, 1979) resources for articulating a modern sexual self that is situationally flexible and adaptable (Goffman, 1959).

The cultural dialectics of coming out

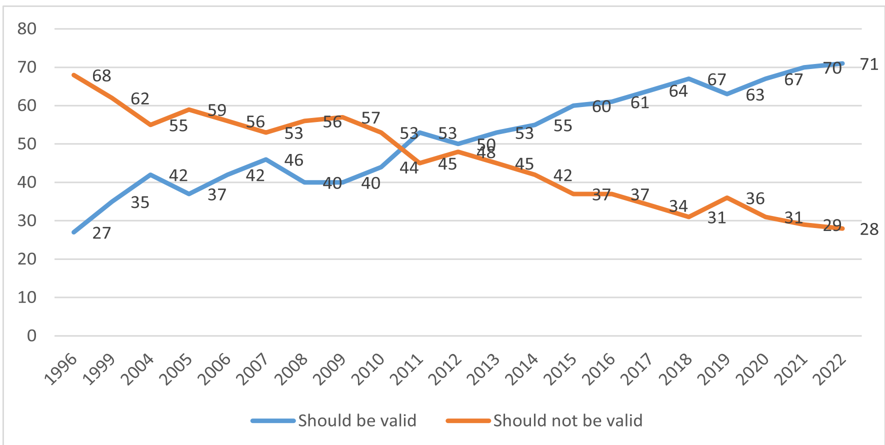
Beginning in 1935 and every year since, Gallup has asked a random sample of American adults a set of questions which present the country's public opinions about major social issues. Two questions capture the moral acceptability of same-sex relations and attitudes about marriage. Figure 1, panels a-b, show time-varying trends for each item, respectively. These measures show that attitudes about homosexuality have liberalized over the years.

Like pollsters, scholars have also chronicled changing attitudes about sexuality in the United States from the 1990s (Loftus, 2001) and onward (Twenge et al., 2015). Favorable public opinions about homosexuality have also emerged worldwide (Roberts, 2019). While this raises the possibility of an opinion backlash, there is little evidence about negative changes at the aggregate level (Bishin et al., 2021). Trends instead point to a broad cultural shift where contact with LGBTQ+ people decreases prejudice while increasing support for rights claims (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2020).

Although pollsters and scholars describe a positive correlation between public opinion and identity disclosures, they debate its theoretical interpretations. Rather than narrowly conceptualizing "homosexuality" as a deviant social role (McIntosh, 1968), some scholars shifted to a broader frame of "sexuality" as a fluid, socially-constructed artifact (Diamond, 2008) which is accomplished in interactions (West & Zimmerman, 1987), performed through a stylized repetition of corporeal acts (Butler, 1990), and thus the basis for ongoing, situationally specific, and strategic disclosures (Orne, 2011). These frameworks refuse heterosexuality as the benchmark for normative evaluations (Katz, 2007), binary identity categories (Lorber, 1996), and an essentialist sexual self (Green, 2007). Destabilizing essentialism created possibilities for radical self-disclosures (Berlant & Freeman, 1993), as we might expect, but also an assimilationist ethos that normalized the



a "Next, I'm going to read you a list of issues. Regardless of whether or not you think it should be legal, for each one, please tell me whether you personally believe that in general it is morally acceptable or morally wrong. How about gay or lesbian relations?" Source: Gallup.



b "Do you think marriages between same-sex couples should or should not be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages?" Source: Gallup.

Fig. 1 Changing Attitudes about Sexuality

coming out process as more unremarkable than stigmatizing (Sullivan, 2005). According to this "post-gay thesis," the cultural compass in the United States (Ghaziani, 2011) and in Canada (Nash, 2013) has shifted from opposition and difference to inclusion and sameness. Hence, political sensibilities that prioritize privatization and personal freedom (Duggan, 2002), despite racial disparities in LGBTQ+ experiences (Whitfield et al., 2014) and nuances in prejudice (Doan et al., 2014). This affects the coming out process by creating a generally continuous experience before and after the disclosure of a minority identity.

The meanings of a disclosure are a function of the surrounding social context and the more immediate relationships in which people make such calculations. Historical events link lives in generational cohorts (Hammack & Cohler, 2011) and create "fault lines" (Nash, 2013:245) in what it means to come out. During the first several decades of the twentieth century, for example, gay men (Chauncey, 1994) and lesbians (Kennedy & Davis, 1993) encountered hostile environments which created a need for coded language, like Polari in Britain (Baker, 2002), to disclose stigmatized identities. Revelations could result in imprisonment, job loss, and psychiatric treatment (D'Emilio, 1983), especially for lesbians, who were subjected to forcible rape (Rich, 1980). Older generations were socialized in this context of homophobia, government neglect, and during the AIDS crisis, collective death (Plummer, 1996). Anger accompanied the coming out process (Gould, 2009), and it inspired separatist communities (Taylor & Whittier, 1992) and institutions (Ghaziani, 2014b).

While a "narrative of struggle and success" typified coming out in the 1980s and the 1990s, a time when systemic anti-LGBTQ+ oppression produced distinct and defiant sexual identities, the 2000s and 2010s saw a competing "narrative of emancipation" (Cohler & Hammack, 2007:47). Individuals who disclose non-heterosexual identities today are situated in different social positions compared to earlier generations (Seidman et al., 1999). For them, reconciling a minority identity and disclosing it is less often at odds with mainstream norms; less formal, fraught, and anguished; and less transformative (Lea et al., 2015). When describing the process, many report continuity before and after disclosure. What happens though if we reconsider the coming out concept not for what it implies about the outcome of psychological development but how the process of disclosure refracts competing cultural logics?

Disclosures about sexuality have cycled between expressions of sameness and difference, with a presumption that people generally prefer one mode during particular historical moments (Ghaziani et al., 2016). The institutionalization of LGBTQ+ studies in higher education (Lange et al., 2019; Rankin et al., 2019) enabled individuals to integrate both radical and normative worldviews into an overarching self-concept (Halperin 2012). While this inspires a "movement toward non-traditional sexual identities" (Morandini et al., 2017:911), like queer and pansexual, there are ongoing debates around the world about the centrality of those identities, including in Australia (Lea et al., 2015), India (Achar & Gopal, 2023), New Zealand (Adams et al., 2014), the United Kingdom (McCormack et al., 2015), and the United States (Russell et al., 2009; Savin-Williams, 2005). This multinational conversation produces competing expectations. For example, as they disclose sexual identities, individuals can narrate their experiences through the lens of ordinariness (Collard, 1998; Savin-Williams, 2016; Sullivan, 2005), difference (Flowers & Buston, 2001), feeling at-risk due to minority stress (Hequembourg & Brallier, 2009), exhibiting resilience (Russell, 2005), or resistance (Robinson & Schmitz, 2021).

Instead of assuming singular positions like progress *or* animus, continuity *or* resilience, we synthesize existing approaches and propose that contemporary disclosures are defined by a continuum of possibilities (McCormack & Savin-Williams, 2018) and narrative multiplicity (Cohler & Hammack, 2007). Our contribution,

therefore, is to show how plural and potentially contradictory cultural ideas can structure contemporary disclosures. This leads us to conceptualize coming out through the lens of difference *and* sameness, stigma *and* acceptance, resilience *and* vulnerability, belonging *and* alienation. Our integrative proposition shifts the conversation away from the psychological process of identity development, a theme which has dominated research on coming out (Van Dyke et al., 2021). Of course, coming out still happens at the individual level, but for us it also tracks historically-specific forms of oppression and acceptance. As those forms change, so too should the meanings of disclosure.

Our focus on the disclosure process is reminiscent of early studies in symbolic interactionism, particularly the works of Cooley (1902), Mead (1934), and Blumer (1969), who considered how the meaning of a situation is produced through the communicative context of interactions. We extend this work to theorize coming out. For instance, to construct and disclose a concept of the self (Rosenberg, 1979), individuals draw on how they think others perceive them (Goffman, 1959), cognitive schemas that aid in interpreting and verifying those perceptions (Stryker & Burke, 2000), and an awareness of structural constraints on the range of possibilities (Burke & Stets, 1999). As an identity becomes more salient, people invoke it again in subsequent situations (Stryker, 2008). The notion of salience, however, does not require the suppression of heterogeneity; it is compatible with a "multifaceted self" (Owens et al., 2010:482). The interplay between cognitive schemas and structural constraints will shape disclosures differently at an annual pride event, for example, than at an occasional dinner party or daily at work. Coming out is thus an ongoing and relational process, although episodically emphasized depending on the situational salience and significance of sexuality.

While the meaning of an identity changes during life transitions (Howard, 2000; Stryker & Wells, 1988), little research has scaled up to theorize how dialectical cultural structures (Hall, 2000; Sewell, 1992) and a compulsion toward order induced by modernity (Bauman, 1991) pull people in different directions as they disclose their sexual identities. This is the prototypical characteristic of what Merton and Barber (1963) call sociological ambivalence. Unlike emphases on personalities, inner experiences, and psychic mechanisms which enable people to cope with conflicting moments, Merton and Barber propose that ambivalence is "built into the structure of social statuses and roles" (p. 93). Its probability increases when there are "incompatible normative expectations incorporated in a *single* role of a *single* social status" (p. 95, emphasis in original). This line of thinking has received little attention (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips 2011), despite its implications for how ambivalence can shape narratives of coming out.

For us, sociological ambivalence captures competing expectations across the multiple social contexts that mediate the disclosure process. This includes liberal heterosexuals, as we discussed earlier with Gallup, but also *within* LGBTQ+ interactional and institutional contexts. Coming out is no longer an exclusive function of contending with heteronormative audiences, in other words, because there are additional challenges with navigating the regulatory power of queer communities. This is experienced in many ways, including uncertainties over how to properly signal queerness in recognizable ways (Connell, 2009; Pfeffer, 2014), femmephobia (Hoskin, 2019), racialized

unbelonging (Patel, 2019), and a struggle over the boundaries of group membership (Ghaziani, 2008; Sutherland, 2023).

We predict that social context will mediate the disclosure process in three ways. First, the narratives that individuals offer about the salience and significance of their sexuality will shift between occupying a master status in certain situations to operating as a symbolic status (Gans, 1979) that is synthesized with other identities or characteristics of the self. Second, coming out will be an iterative process, a decision to disclose over and over, while pulling individuals in opposing directions about what to expect from one situation to the next (Merton & Barber, 1963). Finally, disclosing a minority identity across multiple contexts and for multiple audiences will elevate ambivalence as a central narrative—but not a universal experience. We anticipate that individuals who are marginalized by multiple vectors of power (Crenshaw, 1991) will represent a negative case empirically, and their narratives will illustrate limits to theoretical arguments about ambivalence. Persistent and multifaceted reminders of discrimination will reinforce a sense of adversity, rather than ambivalence, thereby undermining fluid possibilities (Sumerau et al., 2019) for the disclosure process.

As we have noted several times, the decision to disclose a minority identity is a reiterative and relational process that involves attributions of the self and social interpellations of those expressions. This makes fixing a priori the definitional boundaries of coming out an exceedingly difficult task. Do you come out the first time you disclose your identity to someone else? Does it matter to whom? Or is coming out defined by the first time you admit an identity to yourself? What form must that admission take? What if you retract it, change it, or adjust it, as researchers have described in other contexts (Carrillo & Hoffman, 2018; Diamond, 2008)? Is coming out unidirectional and temporally specific or recursive? We, like others, propose that people are strategic about whether and when to come out (Orne, 2011). Disclosures are thus an ongoing *process* that require continual management, not a fixed, finite, or singular *outcome* that occurs at just one point in time. The modern moment presents unique features which can advance our understanding about how this process unfolds. We argue that ambivalence structures the narrative multiplicity of coming out: neither the same nor different, neither radical nor assimilated—yet somehow all these at once.

Research design

Narratives are a fundamental analytic tool to study identity disclosures (Cohler & Hammack, 2009), because they provide inferential access to how people imagine what something means and how they negotiate those meanings in interactions. Our research thus conceptualizes coming out as a process of sensemaking and social action via storytelling (McCormack & Savin-Williams, 2018; Polletta, 2006).

Data and casings

We used key informant and snowball sampling to collect 52 interviews with individuals who offered cultural accounts (Pugh, 2013) about their identities in their social

networks. We began data collection in 2020, as that year was the first in which Gallup documented perceptible increases in identification as LGBTQ+ (Jones, 2023). Our sample includes adults aged 18 and older who initiated disclosure in 2015 or later. The time frame acknowledges variability in the disclosure process, which often includes a lag between the first instance (Rivers & Gordon, 2010) and fuller disclosures (Guittar, 2013). We selected the year 2015 to capture the influence of legalized marriage in the United States, a judicial outcome which reverberated across North America and initiated debates about the advent of a post-marriage equality milieu (Ball, 2019).

Our respondents come from Vancouver. The third largest metropolitan area in Canada, the city is a tolerant, multicultural, and liberal place with large numbers of same-sex households (Gesink et al., 2020; Lauster & Easterbrook, 2011) and social opportunities (Stillwagon & Ghaziani, 2019). Because Vancouver shares many similarities with American cities in the same region (Inglehart & Baker, 2000), we use it to consider patterns that are locally-specific yet also representative. For example, liberal attitudes toward homosexuality in American and Canadian populations (Andersen & Fetner, 2008) coexist with persisting inequalities (Brodyn & Ghaziani, 2018; Doan et al., 2014; Holmes, 2021), although the Canadian context provides more articulated expressions for queer Indigenous groups (Dryden & Lenon, 2015). As a case, Vancouver represents an urban context with broad acceptance and routinely-articulated associations between diversity and governance (Valverde, 2012). Any findings that depart from this baseline will have added analytic significance, particularly given the continued risks of disclosure regardless of liberal contexts (Ryan et al., 2015).[2]

Table 1 shows the variability of our sample.

Most respondents were young, reflecting generational declines in the average age of first disclosure, e.g., from 20 years old in the 1970s to 16 in the 1990s and 14 in the 2010s (Russell & Fish, 2016). Although our sample was limited by ethical regulations of interviewing youth, we collected data from individuals between 19 to 60 years of age who were navigating a recent coming out experience. Our sample is balanced in terms of sex assigned at birth, yet we captured heterogeneous gender identities and sexual orientations. Nearly a third of respondents elected more than one word to describe their sexualities. The most frequent combination linked "queer" with "gay," "bisexual," or "pansexual." Other configurations included "queer, no label" to the expansive "queer, panromantic, demisexual, polyamorous bisexual, and queer." Three respondents selected labels that are irreducible to conventional categories: "bisexual homoromantic," "biromantic asexual," and "grey-asexual lesbian." Following protocols in queer methods (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019a), we retained these as meaningful expressions, rather than forcing them to fit into prescribed categories like bisexual, asexual, and lesbian, respectively. Although identity labels are not our outcome of interest, they are important indicators of coming out. Finally, our sample reflects educational,

[2] We organized our sample frame around same-sex marriage in the United States (2015) rather than Canada (2005) in light of our interests in examining more recent disclosures.

Table 1 Sample Descriptives

Total Sample (*N*=52)	
Age	
Average	25
Range	19–60
18–19	1 (2%)
20s	46 (88%)
30s	4 (8%)
40s	0 (0%)
50s	0 (0%)
60s	1 (2%)
Sex at Birth	
Female	29 (56%)
Male	23 (44%)
Pronouns	
She/her	22 (42%)
He/him	20 (38%)
They/them	4 (8%)
She/her or they/them	4 (8%)
He/him or they/them	2 (4%)
Gender Identity	
Cis woman	20 (38%)
Cis man	20 (38%)
Trans woman	1 (2%)
Trans man	1 (2%)
Non-binary, genderqueer, fluid	7 (14%)
Agender	1 (2%)
Questioning	2 (4%)
Sexual Orientation	
Gay	14 (27%)
Lesbian	2 (4%)
Bisexual	7 (14%)
Pansexual	1 (2%)
Queer	6 (11%)
Asexual	3 (6%)
Other	3 (6%)
Multiple	16 (30%)

Table 1 (continued)

Total Sample (*N*=52)	
Race	
White	29 (56%)
Asian (unspecified)	10 (19%)
East Asian	6 (11%)
South Asian	2 (4%)
Latinx	1 (2%)
Indigenous	1 (2%)
Multiracial	3 (6%)
Highest Degree	
High school	11 (21%)
Associate	1 (2%)
BA or BSc	36 (69%)
MA or JD	4 (8%)
Socioeconomic Background	
Working	12 (23%)
Middle	27 (52%)
Upper-middle	10 (19%)
Upper	2 (4%)
Retired	1 (2%)
Upbringing	
Big city	13 (25%)
Medium-sized city	10 (19%)
Small city	5 (9%)
Suburbs	17 (33%)
Small town or rural area	7 (14%)

economic, and geographic diversity, and just under half of our respondents identify as members of racialized groups.[3]

Analysis and reliability tests

Interviews averaged an hour each, ranging from 28 to 94 minutes. We organized our protocol around four topics: identity disclosures (descriptions of the coming out process and understandings of the closet); social networks (how coming out affects

[3] Although our sample is diverse in its racial and ethnic composition, there is an absence of Black respondents. This is a function of the particular urban space of Vancouver, which has a 1% Black population. See https://worldpopulationreview.com/canadian-cities/vancouver-population.

families and friendships); activism (how coming out affects political viewpoints); and worldmaking (the significance of sexuality in daily life). We constructed questions for the final theme by drawing again on insights from queer methods to understand the relationship between the self and LGBTQ+ institutions. Articulating this link provides the "conditions that make life livable" (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019b:8) by outlining a "mode of sociality and relationality" (Muñoz, 1996:6).

To encourage our respondents to speak about worldmaking in autobiographical ways, rather than in abstractions, we used photo- and media-elicitation strategies. In this approach, major news stories and the photographs that accompany them provide options for cognitively-focused yet interpretively-flexible frames (Ghaziani, 2014a, 2018; Lapenta, 2011). In one question, we showed respondents images of international public figures, including U.S. presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg, who says being gay does not define him, and Apple CEO Tim Cook, who says it is a gift from God. After presenting these and other images, we invited respondents to locate their sexuality on a continuum from unremarkable to transformative (McCormack & Savin-Williams, 2018). As an indirect questioning technique for sensitive topics (Rosenfeld et al., 2016), we used this strategy to make inferences about imagined contact (Miles & Crisp, 2014) while reducing social desirability bias.[4]

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. This produced 823 pages of text. We loaded this dataset into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, and analyzed each line vis-à-vis theoretical claims and counterclaims about identity disclosures. To identify empirical expressions of theoretically plural or integrative possibilities, we used abductive analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), an approach that sensitizes researchers to unanticipated observations "against a backdrop of multiple existing sociological theories" (p. 169). Surprises point to occurrences that violate "expectations, implicit theories, [and] taken-for-granted assumptions" (Miles & Huberman, 1994:270), thereby prompting revisions of hypotheses.

Although published studies reference abduction with greater frequency, few scholars have described how to implement its insights. We followed four steps. First, we read each transcript and coded it to capture a set of unrestricted themes. In this round of initial coding, we focused on repetitions and metaphors (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Second, each author wrote a memo that captured surprises from each interview. The objective of this second round of coding was the analysis of unanticipated expressions alongside data reduction. From 823 single-spaced pages of raw data we distilled 52 pages of possible abductive evidence. Third, we independently coded these analytic memos to classify empirical surprises with their degree of fit with theoretical debates. In this cognitively intense round of coding, we identified twenty themes which captured theoretical hybridities. We use these as empirical expressions of ambivalence.

Like all researchers, qualitative scholars encounter challenges with reproducibility, stability, and the dependability of their procedures (Miles & Huberman,

[4] Recently-out individuals, particularly younger generations, rely on the remarks of LGBTQ+ celebrities, public figures, and social media influencers to make sense of their identities. See https://www.ypulse.com/article/2022/03/17/why-gen-z-is-more-likely-than-millennials-to-identify-as-lgbtq/.

1994). We address this concern in our fourth and final step, where we used the proportional agreement method to test the reliability of our themes (Campbell et al., 2013). The first round of testing required an 80% agreement threshold to retain an item. This narrowed our set from twenty to eight themes. We performed an additional round of tests for just these themes, and we raised the inclusion criteria to 90% agreement. This produced four final themes which, as we show in Table 2, represent the inter-subjectively stable, abductive concepts that formed the basis for our core arguments about the coming out process.

Limitations

Because ours is a case study from one city, some caution is warranted when interpreting our results, particularly given high rates of education in our sample, urban–rural variations in sexual identities (Kazyak, 2011), and socio-cultural differences in how people navigate those identities (Carrillo, 2017; Moussawi, 2020; Puri, 2016; Savci, 2020). We are assured, however, by research which shows that North American cities in similar regions share many cultural similarities (Grabb & Curtis, 2010), including in public opinions about sexuality (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Poushter & Kent, 2020). In addition, we leverage the educational background of our respondents to create analytic clarity about ambivalence. These efforts provide measured confidence about our findings–from "what is" to "what may be" and "what could be" (Miles & Huberman, 1994:279)–and we use them to enrich theoretical debates about identity disclosures.

Table 2 Abductive Themes

Code Name	Definition	Example
Generations	Young people say coming out is easier, but awareness of hardships by earlier generations distorts the significance of identity disclosures	"The closet as an idea fits that [older] world so much better than it fits ours."
Misrecognitions	When how you see yourself conflicts with how others perceive you, it muddies the accomplishment of a disclosure	"What do I need to do to get read as queer?"
Institutions	While sexuality may not immediately define a person, queer institutions and community spaces are still vital in abstract terms	"I want spaces, but I also do understand people who say that sexuality is not the number one thing, like living in a post-gay world."
Intersectionality	Respondents who occupy multiple nodes of social difference exhibit greater sensitivity to discrimination, which softens the experience of ambivalence	"If you're a gay cis man who hasn't really seen a restriction of access to things in your life because of your queerness, you might be able to say it's not a big deal that I'm queer, because you haven't seen any ramifications of what would make it a big deal. But that doesn't mean that's not true for other queer people."

Results

Our findings show three interpretive frameworks that structure coming out narratives in a societal context of progress and persisting bias: awareness of generational differences, identity misrecognitions, and interactions with institutions. Each theme articulates the contemporary coming out experience as at once central and incidental, important but not dictating or determinative.

Generations

Several respondents contrasted their coming out experiences with prior generations. Mei, a 21-year-old Chinese cis woman who identifies as lesbian, remarked, "I met some thirty-to-forty [year-old] lesbian women on a dating app. They thought that my generation is more lucky, luckier to come out compared with their generation, because the culture is more open and accepted this kind of thing." Pam, a 27-year-old German-Canadian cis woman who identifies as asexual and queer, recalls her Women and Aging class from college with remarkable clarity. "We watched a video made about a queer couple in the '50s and '60s and '70s, and it talked about the injustices faced by the couple, because one of them passed away. It was a lesbian couple. One of the members passed away, and they weren't legally married, because they couldn't be." Pam swells with compassion and disbelief as she contemplates what it would have been like if she was born in earlier decades: "I cannot imagine coming out in a time like that. I would be devastated. It obliterated me watching that movie to begin with, because I was just like, that's so unfair, the injustices that people faced, the older generations of queer individuals faced was just unreal." Pam recognizes that an arc of progress has affected her life. "I acknowledge, me coming out, far, far easier. Far easier."

Most respondents invoked generational comparisons to assess their personal experiences. Zack, a 28-year-old cis white gay man, says that "reactions" to a person's coming out are "based on how they grew up and their age as well." When he came out, "everyone in my family I've told didn't see it coming." This contrasts with his sister, who is "growing up in this day and age where it's a lot more accepting." It has been "easier for her to understand [my coming out] or be okay with it." Becca, another respondent, adds that coming out is "super contextual." She is 28, white, and identifies as pansexual, panromantic, and queer. Disclosing to her family was "a nerve-racking experience, and I was really doing it indirectly, because I didn't really want to have those conversations." The circumstances were different "with people of my generation." In those instances, "I'll just, like, quip about being gay," and their reaction is often "yeah, whatever." Zack and Becca show how coming out narratives have generational logics. Respondents assume that sexuality is more complicated to disclose to older audiences, and they anticipate that their peers will be more casual.

Some compare themselves with teenagers, the next generational iteration. Baldeep is 36 and of Indian descent. She imagines that coming out was harder in earlier decades: "I think the generation before me, it would have been very difficult, even if they would not come out and would stay single, or get married and

pretend they're heterosexual, or they may kill themselves. I've heard of that too." She contrasts disclosure trends from the past with an anticipation of "the generation after me," people who are "a bit younger in high school." They have access to an "education that will teach them about being non-straight. And I think that will in turn help them a lot." Baldeep did not learn about queerness when she was in high school. "The only education I got was about straight people and relationships, so I always felt that there was something wrong with me." This produced a sense of stigmatized difference, which has lingered. "I think still it can be very difficult," she begins, "but not as difficult as the generation before me," she adds as she grapples with the effects of social changes.

Hugh is a 28-year old cis, gay, Chinese man. He positions his coming out on a generational "spectrum," as he calls it. On one side, he sees "the Gen Z coming out, where the parents go, like, 'Well duh, you're gay, waiting for you to tell us,' those fun YouTube videos that you see online." He compares this with "the other end of the spectrum" where there are "people like my colleagues at work, who identify as gay men, who are in their 40s and 50s and 60s, and they're like, 'Yeah, there was no coming out,' or 'my mom threw me out,' or 'shortly after I came out, a lot of my friends dropped me because I used to be in the military,' stuff like that." As a Millennial, Hugh is "in the middle of that spectrum." His ambivalence becomes discernable when he revisits the YouTube videos he mentioned earlier and which have become popular in recent years (Wei, 2021). "Hate those," he says. When we ask why, Hugh replies by grappling with ambivalence: "[I] don't love watching coming out videos of people who try and make it seem like it's not a big deal, who minimize it, or who edit and present their story as a well-meaning form of encouragement to people who are more progressive than you think." Reality is more irregular. "I'm a Millennial, and my coming out was awful," Hugh offers in a challenge to post-closet theories. "It took years and years to plan. And it wasn't as triumphant as people make it out to be. It just happened. It needed to happen, so I did it." The words he uses, descriptions that range from "awful" to "years to plan," "not triumphant," "just happened," "needed to happen," and "so I did it," blend poignant and cavalier logics, evincing an ambivalence in his coming out narrative. This becomes especially evident when Hugh concludes, "Being gay is a distinguishing but not defining feature of who I am." Sexuality for him is central ("distinguishing") *and* incidental ("not defining"). Neither side pulls on him completely, yet he cannot refute either.

Other respondents, like 28-year-old Max who identifies as a white settler cis woman who is bisexual, reflected on how the closet has changed. "When I think of the closet, it does feel like it's an older, it applies more to an older context, like past situations." Lesley agreed. A 27-year-old who identifies as white, non-binary, and bisexual, they tell us that the closet is "not a super useful metaphor" anymore, although "I understand why it exists." They explain, "I think there was a time when people lived their lives quote-unquote 'closeted.'" Lesley recounts the history of the AIDS crisis, which they perceive as a time when most people were "not open about their sexuality." As a result, coming out "just wasn't done" like it is today. "There were men who were known to be gay," they qualify, "but nobody would ever say that" publicly. Having offered this context, Lesley concludes with how the meanings of the closet, and coming out of it, have both changed: "I feel like the closet

as an idea fits that world so much better than it fits ours." This is not to say that the current moment has moved beyond homophobia. There are "all these conservative politicians both in Canada and the U.S.," Lesley concedes, but this does not negate aggregate trends. "I think it's just a generational thing. I don't think of people who aren't out yet as in the closet if they're of our generation."

The companion concepts of the closet and coming out are "not the dominant narrative anymore" for Lesley, and thus "not a useful frame" for structuring identity disclosures. "It's just so much more accepted to be queer or to be gay." As an example, Lesley mentions their cousin, "who came out as gay at fourteen." This is a common pattern. "I think that people are coming out way earlier," and for them, "it's not even like a coming out" anymore. Instead, "it's just like people, as soon as they are sexual beings, as soon as you hit puberty, you have models, you have people in the culture, and you see gay relationships in the media, and hopefully in your parents' friend groups or around you, or in your older siblings, or your cousins." The greater visibility of LGBTQ+ lives in many social networks and in the media makes their presence more the baseline than the exception. "There are just gay people around," Lesley casually remarks. "It's a known type." This last remark questions whether sexuality is still discreditable (Goffman, 1963). "It's not scary in the way that it used to be. It's not even considered all that deviant. It's just who you are. And I feel like kids are accepting themselves as gay very, very early, and not going through that period that I did of just like, 'Oh, I have to put this away and not think about it.'" Lesley's awareness of the AIDS crisis, homophobic politicians, and their casual understandings of coming out create temporal distortions and uneven interpretations about the significance of the disclosure process.

Our respondents did not conflate generational differences with uninterrupted progress. Wren, a 23-year old, white, non-binary person who identifies as queer, uses their uncertainty about identity disclosures to mend the metaphor of the closet: "I think the closet for me just, it feels squishy." Coming out of it involved navigating a dialectic of ease and fear: "I don't think [my coming out] is similar in any sort of way [to earlier generations]. I didn't have a formal coming out with my friends. It just happened really naturally," they said when asked about why the concept of the closet did not feel right. Wren interprets this as an informal coming out in contrast to previous generations: "I don't think that's the case for a lot of older generations of people." But this does not mean that the process was without anxieties: "There was fear surrounding it," Wren adds, "but my fear was a lot different." When we ask for clarification, they reply, "It wasn't fear of persecution or social exile. It was more smaller fears. I didn't have to worry about my job or housing security, a whole bunch of things that weren't a factor in my coming out process." The closet as "squishy," the absence of a "formal" coming out, and a narrative which defines the process as "natural" for some but "not the case" for prior generations, along with the omnipresence of "fear," even if it is "a lot different" today, all provide indicators of a sociological ambivalence, one that expresses itself as "incompatible normative expectations incorporated in a *single* role of a *single* social status" (Merton & Barber, 1963:95, emphasis in original). The disclosure of a minority sexuality requires navigating both progress and regression, rather than locating experiences on

a linear trajectory toward uniform acceptance, as we might mistakenly conclude if we only examined trends from Gallup.

Consider one more example. Macey is a non-binary person, twenty-two years of age, white, and identifies as gay. They explain who is more likely to feel closeted today: “I think it was so much easier for me, especially socially. Sure, I was concerned about how my relationships would change, but I was never worried about being disowned or being ostracized or being physically harmed.” Macey, like other respondents, compares their experiences with earlier generations. “It’s so crazy when I see stories or read stories about older generations who were gay, say in the ‘40s, like, they got arrested all the time for dressing up as men.” Today, bigots are the ones who are surprisingly closeted. “If there are people who have those critiques [of being gay] or conservatism within them, they’re the ones that are keeping it on the down low now. It’s less socially acceptable for them to gay bash.” This is why the concept of the closet “feels very outdated,” as it did for Wren. It also shapes how Macey narrates their coming out process. “When I told my friends, it was spontaneous. It was just brought up in conversation.” The experience was different with their parents. “Then with my parents, it was like, I was really, really, really nervous. I don’t know why. I knew it was going to be fine.” The sense of “spontaneity” and “naturalness” with “nervousness” and “fear” pull respondents like Wren and Macey’s disclosure process in different directions. Their narratives do not entirely support post-gay predictions or arguments about enduring discrimination. The result is an ambivalent tone that supports neither position yet still somehow both. This is a distinctive quality of contemporary identity disclosures, and it structures the next two themes as well.

Misrecognitions

Discussions about sexuality in the academy often emphasize liberalizing attitudes among straight people, and a positive trajectory in public opinion presumably diminishes the negative effects of the closet for queer people. Accompanying a liberalization in attitudes, on which all respondents remarked, is greater cultural variability as well: more ways of being, more ways of expressing, and more ways of defining. This freedom creates potential threats of being misrecognized as something other than how you identify. As a somatic and relational effect, the concept of recognition (Connell, 2009), and its related “experience of misrecognition” (Butler, 1993:219), create anxieties about acceptance and authenticity. In other words, the reiterative nature of coming out reflects that heterosexuality is increasingly an untenable assumption in many social interactions, as prior research has shown, and also an emergent struggle over how to properly signal queerness *within* LGBTQ+ settings. This form of ambivalence has two articulations: the legibility of self-presentation and the reception of non-binary sexualities, especially bisexuality and pansexuality.

Twenty-one-year-old Marie, a South Asian cis woman who identifies as bisexual, states that “there is a lot of discrimination which goes on in the LGBTQ+ community itself.” As a result, Marie narrates an ambivalent disclosure experience that

comes from misrecognition: "I feel people from here who are Vancouverites or Canadians, I would say 70%, they're pretty okay with it [being non-heterosexual]. But I have had experiences, when I do say that I may be bisexual or lesbian, or I would say the term is queer, some of them are like, 'Oh, really?'" Although she has much to say about infighting (Ghaziani & Kretschmer, 2018), Marie focuses on appearances. "There was this friend of mine who told me that you don't look gay enough to go around on Davie Street [Vancouver's gay district]." This comment raised impossible questions in Marie's mind. "So, what do I do to look gay? Do I chop off all my hair? Like, what is it you want me to do?"

The stereotypical components of "appearance," as Marie summarizes, suggest a reductive view of sexuality, and our respondents chafe against such requirements. Yet their own presentations of self are often read as somehow lacking or deficient. "I feel the notion of what it means to be gay-talking, hand movements, those are some stuff which my friend even got called out for. And I get those looks that are like, 'Okay, you're not gay enough to be here.'" Some researchers describe this as "gaydar," a concept about inferred perceptions of sexual orientation (Miller, 2018), especially based on physical attributes (Tabak & Zayas, 2012). Our conversations highlight an under-examined reversal: what happens when you, as an LGBTQ+ person, do not look "gay enough" to other LGBTQ+ people, or feel "invisibly queer" (Pfeffer, 2014:30) around them?

Misrecognition by others whom you imagine as members of your community can prompt feelings of non-belonging. Jessica is a 25-year old white cis woman. Like Marie, she also feels like "you're coming out all the time." Jessica describes an instance of ambivalence when her assumptions about acceptance conflicted with how others perceive her: "I'm in Vancouver. I'm in a reasonably progressive, like East Vancouver [neighborhood], progressive family. It's almost like people don't care. And in some ways, that's lovely because that's acceptance." Having established this social norm, she quickly adds a counter-experience: "And in other ways you're like, 'Oh, this *is* a big deal to me.'" In saying this, Jessica ensures that we do not assume that the notion of sexuality as unremarkable ("people don't care") means that it is insignificant ("this is a big deal"). That "big deal" portion of her narrative becomes apparent when Jessica, feeling frustrated, raises her voice and exclaims, "What do I need to do to get read as queer?" In a rapid fire of possibilities, Jessica, like Marie, also wonders if she needs a "queer haircut." She feels defeated, as none of the options resonate. "I've actually thought about getting a haircut," even though "I don't like that idea," she tells us with a sigh.

When Macey came out, they also experienced friction between self-presentation and recognition by others. "I always felt very ostracized by the queer community," Macey says, "because I felt like I was very femme presenting, and I didn't necessarily have the appearance of being queer." This undermined belonging. "I just felt like I wasn't really a part of the community, and I felt like whenever I did try—and I would go to a couple [social] events—it still didn't really stick." For Macey, like Marie and Jessica, the requirement to display a particular self-presentation creates misrecognition—"not being queer enough," as Macey says—and thus an ambivalent narrative. James, a 25-year-old cis white gay man, described his "repeated coming outs" for similar reasons. "People tell me I'm not obviously gay when they meet me

for the first time, so I still have a lot of people make jokes to me." He sees himself as "more straight presenting," and upon reflection, realizes that "some friends" would be "less chill around me if I was extremely flamboyant." James says this not as a source of homonormative pride but confusion, and it suggests that multiple styles of being LGBTQ+ can sometimes impinge on the process of coming out.

Respondents made many references to misrecognition. For example, Baldeep finds it "stressful" to interact in LGBTQ+ situations where there is only "one type of demographic," because she cannot escape making comparisons. "I start comparing myself and thinking, 'I don't look gay enough,' or people think I'm straight. I worry about these odd things." Baldeep's self-presentation, combined with the styles of the women she dates, raises concerns. "I think being a feminine gay woman who dates other feminine gay women, it does have its own strange challenges." Although some people immerse themselves in LGBTQ+ contexts after they come out, Baldeep prefers "a mixed environment, whether it's anything—culturally, ethnically, gender, sexuality, all of that," because she experiences those places as less riddled with possibilities of misrecognition.

Michel, a Canadian-Vietnamese cis gay man, is demographically different from Baldeep, but he described a similar coming out experience. "I don't really participate in any Pride events." This decision is intentional although sometimes complicated, he says, since "being gay isn't central to my life, but it is a big deal." Michel explains why, "I have a reason for that. It's because when I'm around other gay people, I feel pressured to act a certain way. I feel like I need to be gayer, if you will, and buy into that gay subculture." Michel becomes self-conscious as his words linger in air. "I feel bad saying that," he follows-up, "because it's brought a lot of good things to the gay community." The problem for Michel is about recognition. "I can't feel like I can be myself around gay people." Sexuality is "a huge part" of the lives of his friends, but for Michel, "it's not central to who I am." In other words, it is distinguishing but not defining.

Another group of respondents emphasized non-binary sexualities. Twenty-four-year-old Lou describes themselves as a cis-passing person who is queer and white. Although they navigate coming out as an ongoing part of their life, it becomes challenging when they are in a heterosexual-presenting relationship. "There's a part of me that still really does struggle with the idea of coming out, or telling people that I'm queer but having a boyfriend. Everybody that I've told who is not heterosexual is like, 'That's great.'" Complications arise when Lou discloses their identity in heterosexual networks. "But hetero people are often like, 'Wait a second.'" These experiences sit uncomfortably with their upbringing. "I grew up in a house where it didn't matter who you loved, and everything was accepting." Even this did not bring Lou clarity, however. "But in the same vein, it didn't feel like I had the opportunity to be straight." Max, whom we met earlier, described a similar experience. "I'm still in a hetero-passing relationship," she says, but "the way that we're read" is frustrating. "I feel like half of myself has been authentic." Max explains how this can create ambivalence: "I think that my bisexuality is pretty central to my identity…I think it is a gift in a lot of ways; on the one hand, that's not the only thing about me that I want people to know."

Twenty-two-year-old Margaret, a cis white woman who identifies as bisexual and pansexual, actively struggles with coming out. “I don’t know if I’m queer enough,” she tells us. When we ask her to explain, Margaret replies, “Because I date girls and guys.” This becomes an issue when Margaret attends a queer event. “If I’m dating a guy at the time, then I don’t feel legitimate, or I feel like I’m going to encroach on their space—even though I know that it is my space too.” Twenty-two-year-old Amanda addresses how misrecognition can undermine a sense of belonging. “Even before I had come to terms with my sexuality, I was like, let’s go to the Pride Parade.” However, “my initial reaction in a lot of those events is to be like, I’m still not a part of this. I’m still not a part of the community.” Max berates herself for feeling this–“I don’t think that’s right for me to say to myself”–but she, like Margaret and Amanda, has not found resolution. “That’s still something that I haven’t truly figured out how to own, how to truly be like, no, this *is* you. This *is* your community. You have a right to participate in this. Because I still feel like, oh, no–no-no, that’s not me, because I still like men.”

Two other respondents also associated ambivalence with queer interactional contexts. Becca describes dating: “What was difficult for me sometimes was feeling like I must be really straight passing.” When we asked why, Becca clarified, “I was having a really hard time getting into the dating scene for a while, and I was like, do men think I’m gay and women think I’m straight? What is going on here?” This confusion made her feel like an outsider: “I totally had imposter syndrome,” she tells us. “I wasn’t really sure that I belonged.”

Silky articulates the same struggles. “I don’t feel like I belong because I’m dating a cis man,” the twenty-four-year-old cis white woman tells us. The experience is most pronounced during Pride celebrations. Although she lives in the gay neighborhood, where “Pride is literally happening all around my house,” she shares stories about “gay people in the crowd [who say] ‘I hate all these straight couples at Pride.’” When Silky hears comments like these, especially at Pride, she thinks, “People just see who you’re dating at the time,” rather than how you see yourself. “It didn’t feel like a space for me,” she concludes. As someone who identifies as pansexual and demisexual, Silky laments feeling like she belongs most when she does not present as heterosexual. “I think I feel a little bit more like I belong when I’m not physically with my partner sometimes, which is really sad. I think when you’re with someone that makes you appear straight, that’s what people see.” She cannot imagine any other way to disclose that she belongs. “I shouldn’t have to walk around Pride wearing this big shirt that says, ‘I’m bi.’”

Being misrecognized forced our respondents to calculate how often, and in what ways, they need to come out. “I feel like I’m just always read as straight,” bisexual- and queer-identifying Jessica told us. She is “read as not queer,” and she “struggles with that.” Jessica thinks it is “really unfair” that she is misrecognized, but she does not want to come out in every interaction. “I don’t want to start every conversation with, like, ‘Hello, it’s nice to meet you, whatever, whatever—and I’m gay.’” Emmy, who is 25-years old, white, and identifies their gender as non-binary, femme, and genderqueer and their sexuality as queer, bisexual, grey-sexual, and aromantic, describes a similar experience. They call it a “secondary coming out” which happens “every time I have to explain my relationships.” This means saying “not just

I'm queer, and I have a female partner," but then broaching "the second coming out" of disclosing that "she's my platonic partner," since Emmy is grey-sexual (someone who experiences limited sexual attractions) and aromantic, "and I have a male partner, and she has another male partner because she's straight, but also queer."

Complexity saturates her narrative, and it illustrates how binary positions about identity disclosures are not viable for individuals in non-traditional relationships. "And we're trying to get tenant insurance," Emmy adds. "On the tenant insurance, they're saying, 'So, are you four people, or are you a family?' And we're saying, 'We're a family.' And they're saying, 'But you're four adults. You're two couples.' And we're like, 'No, no, we're a family.'" This story about securing insurance shows multiple layers of coming out, particularly for "a poly unit," as Emmy describes their relationship. "Please insure us as a poly unit," they say as if speaking to the agent through the interview.

How do we interpret recurring experiences of misrecognition among demographically different respondents? Lesley gestures toward a commonality:

> Who you have sex with within the next ten years will not matter, I think, but not living by traditional family structures, resisting the nuclear family, resisting heterosexual coupling and childrearing models, yeah, resisting gender expectations and conformity, and stereotypes, and all this stuff, that's what's always, I think—it's what's always gotten people in trouble.
> Who I want to sleep with is not that important to my identity. The fact that I am queer is. So, the actual specifics of it don't matter to me, but the fact of it is important still. And I think that's where I land on your ultimate question of this whole study, is that the mechanics don't matter anymore. Whether you're gay, how much you want, like where you are on a Kinsey scale or whatever, none of that matters anymore. The fact of being open to that kind of sexual or romantic experience and thinking that that is both politically and socially important to your identity, that does matter, and that's going to keep mattering.

Lesley can say that "who I want to sleep with is not that important to my identity" because sexuality has in many ways become normalized. Queerness, however, is still non-normative. This is why Lesley can champion the declining significance of sexuality while maintaining that queerness and non-binary identities are resonant features of the self, which Emmy also uses to resist insurance requirements. To be defined by sexuality would mean that it would dictate and determine a person's lifestyle choices, including about coupling, childrearing, and other forms of non-conformity that would unmoor an individual from one set of heterosexual social structures and land them in a different set of queer social structures. However, unlike research on covering (Yoshino, 2006), which shows how certain social contexts can force hiding, our respondents reveal how context can create a misrecognition as straight, despite having come out of the closet of heterosexuality.

Institutions

Organizational theorists suggest that interactions with institutions imbue them with a "force and significance" for people who participate in them (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006:213). Our respondents express ambivalence about interfacing with LGBTQ+ institutions precisely because of this force, which they assume requires them to singularly prioritize their sexuality. Rather than subscribing to that force or its requirements, respondents prefer a mode of elective engagement. For example, Becca acknowledges that "we all move in multiple spaces," but then adds that "while we're in those queer-centric spaces," like a bar, "that might be the aspect of ourselves that is dominant, but it doesn't mean we don't have other things going on at the same time." Connor, a twenty-three-year-old cis Asian gay man, conceptualizes these "other things" as slices of a pie. "[B]eing gay, think of it like a pie, in that you can fill the pie up with lots of different slices." When we ask him to specify how he imagines the slices, Connor captures the ambivalence of the contemporary disclosure process as neither normative nor defiant: "One slice might be clubs, one slice might be your interests, one slice might be taking a very heteronormative framework of what it means to be gay, one slice might be your voice or how you dress, what you wear." So what, we ask? What does this teach us about coming out? "I think the answer to that question would be you maintain that one part of the pie where you keep going to the nightclubs, but then maybe in other parts of your identity, which is obviously plagued by stereotypical images from heteronormative society on what it means to be gay, you take those other parts of your identity and you maybe dial it down a notch."

Conversations about LGBTQ+ spaces captured a divide between an individual identity that is not always primary and a collective one that is crucial. A twenty-six-year-old multiracial individual who identifies as neutrosis (a non-binary gender term associated with a neutral, null, or genderless perspective), Angel tells us that sexuality is not a significant aspect of her identity. "My sexuality is not my primary identifier, or my secondary identifier, or that important to me, and there's things about me that I find to be way more defining of who I am." After saying this, she expresses concern that "it sounds a bit like erasure." When we ask how she reconciles the positions, Angel replies by noting the importance of LGBTQ+ spaces. "Especially gay bars and stuff like that, to pretend that those spaces aren't vital and supremely important as a safe space for queer people is, I think, a gross injustice." Angel recognizes that safety is an aggregate-level concern. "[W]hat are we actually fighting for here," she asks as she reflects on the tension between the group and the individual. "We're not fighting for completely flattening the LGBTQ+ community, and making it like everybody else, and making it appear straight. We're fighting for it to be healthy and thriving. I think that entails letting them have their own spaces because those experiences, like it doesn't have to be the biggest part of your personal identity." This position enables respondents like Angel to disclose their individual identity in a casual way ("not my primary identifier") while emphasizing institutional centrality (spaces are "vital and supremely important").

Efforts to mute the significance of individual identity disclosures while emphasizing the importance of institutions emerged in most interviews. Margaret, whom

we met earlier, expressed the same theme: “I want spaces, but I also do understand people [like Becca, Connor, and Angel] who say that sexuality is not the number one thing.” After a slight pause, Margaret followed-up in a softer voice: “I don’t know, I don’t know.” While her words do not provide direct inferential access to ambivalence, her hesitation is an indicator of it. “Just because we’re starting to look like we’re living in a post-gay world does not mean we no longer need queer institutions,” Margaret explains. “I still think it’s really important to have certain spaces that are just for queer people.” How do we maintain distinct spaces while not disclosing identities as central? “That’s a hard question,” she replies. “I don’t know.” While sexuality is not always her “number one” defining trait, Margaret acknowledges that “sexuality is still a major part in our life.” Therefore, the reconciliation of ambivalence is not obvious, easy, or always desirable.

Marcus is demographically dissimilar to Margaret. He is thirty-one, Indigenous, and a cis man who identifies as queer and pansexual. Yet he too thinks about institutions in the coming out process in multi-scalar ways. The disclosure of LGBTQ+ identities is a “central focus” for how spaces are “activated,” he says. His coming out involved navigating spaces where this activation is variable. “I think about workspaces,” Marcus explains. “If you work in a large company or organization, you have a get-together of all the employees from that space who might identify as being—who might be LGBTQ+ too, but the reason you’re coming together, it’s not really about the queerness; it’s that you happen to be part of the same organization.”

How does our understanding about contemporary disclosures change when we think about institutions which are not totalizing in the way Margaret and Marcus describe? Susan, who is twenty-eight, white, and a bisexual- and queer-identifying cis woman, explores this question. “I do archery, for example, and our archery range is super, super queer-friendly, and we’re asking everyone’s pronouns, and it’s expected that you respect other people’s identities and pronouns,” she says to set up her situation. “But at the same time, it’s a sport club, right?” Susan separates core institutions from something like a sports association. “In these interactions, it’s about more than our sexuality,” she clarifies. “It’s about something else.” These are instances in which “you’re queer, but you also do this other really niche thing,” like archery. “It’s not necessarily about being queer” when you interact in the space, since “it’s about the niche thing.” In common, “there’s the comfort of knowing that people around you are queer.” Spaces where you can be queer are different from queer spaces, in other words. The distinction is not just semantic; it also captures an under-theorized relationship between institutions and identity disclosures.

Considerations about safety contribute to the divide between individual and institutional identities. Rustic is a twenty-four-year-old Chinese-Canadian cis gay man who separates how he defines himself from how others perceive him: “Even if people don’t want to let their sexuality define them, there are people in this world who probably do,” he says. This matters because “there’s a lot of sexual identities that still face oppression, depending on where you are in the world, and those queer spaces most definitely should exist, especially for the sake of safety and just knowing that it’s there.” While Rustic does not need those spaces at the moment, he desires temporal flexibility since he recognizes the ongoing nature of coming out. “I

think there's a reassurance in knowing that the space exists for you in the case that you do feel at risk." This liminal state between present safety and imagined future threat compels Rustic to rethink the closet: "I would like to hope that the closet has become curtained, where it's not as hard to come out of."

Consider as well the remarks of Michel. He, too, recognizes variation in the centrality of identities in the disclosure process. "For some people, it's not central, like me. For others, I think being gay is very defining." This distinction has material effects after disclosure. "I know some people who have been kicked out of their homes, or have no friends, or have no support because they are gay." Institutions acquire an elevated significance for this group. "For those people, those spaces are extremely important, because that's the only support network they're going to have." Michel is grateful he does not require it–"thankfully, I don't need that type of support or those types of spaces because I feel very safe in my everyday life"–but his personal experiences do not negate the aggregate value of LGBTQ+ institutions. "I think that's why we still need those spaces."

Some respondents compare queer and ethnic institutions as a way to think about the relationship between individual identity disclosures and the group. Connor says, "My cultural identity, being Asian, it's one part of me, but I don't revolve around the practices around it, whereas for other people, maybe being Asian, they practice the language at home, they go to the temple, or pray to Buddha, or they always eat Chinese food, or they like cooking Chinese food." Marcus calls this a "humanist approach." He explains, "I support Indigenous people who don't want to be treated as though their Indigeneity is their defining feature. They want to be treated as human first, and they have a bit more of, I would call it a humanist approach around it. I support that, and I would defend people's ability to have that. And then the same way I think with queerness." While Marcus makes a brief comparison with sexuality at the end of his remarks, Karl foregrounds it: "I feel like being gay or straight should just be similar to being Irish or German," said the twenty-four-year-old cis Asian gay man. When we asked him to explain, Karl referenced gay bars: "For example, you get German bars, German restaurants, Irish bars, and stuff like that. I think gay bars should be similar." His logic is crafted around an understanding of identity as elective: "It's something that, if you choose to make a big part, a significant part of your personality, you could." Individuals who do so should have access to cultural institutions. "There should be those kinds of places available for people who like to express their LGBTQ+ identities." Karl sees this as a synergy between ethnicity and sexuality. "But I think overall, for example, when you see a German person, you wouldn't just define them as German. I think it should be similar to LGBTQ+ identity as well." This idea, called "symbolic ethnicity" (Gans, 1979), is well-documented in the literature on race and ethnicity. Our findings point to "symbolic sexuality" as a counterpart that respondents express in the process of coming out: sexuality is distinguishing but not defining.

Intersectionality

We have shown that newly-out individuals think about their sexuality as something they can accent or mute depending on their relational and situational circumstances. The ambivalence that comes through in their disclosure narratives is not universal, however. One important instance of disconfirming evidence, or a negative case that illustrates the limits of ambivalent identity disclosures, comes from respondents who reflect on occupying multiple nodes of social difference. For them, sexuality is informed by their other identities, which can make it difficult to think about the disclosure of one identity in isolation from the others. This notion, called intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), is used by researchers in many ways (Choo & Feree, 2010). We adopt it to show how disclosures are rooted in structural inequalities (Collins, 1995).

When respondents reflect on their configuration of identities in intersectional ways, they switch from ambivalence to decisiveness in their disclosure narratives. Marcus, a queer and pansexual-identifying Indigenous respondent who came out later in life, said, "[T]he reason that I waited until I was thirty was I realized that I didn't have any role models. I didn't see anybody who I felt I could identify with, somebody who was Indigenous, part of the cultural community, and was coming out as queer." Marcus could not grapple with his sexuality apart from his Indigeneity. "One of the most terrifying things about coming out for me was this duality," he says in reference to his queerness and Indigeneity. "I knew what it was like to live a life of being discriminated against because of my ethnicity, of being Indigenous. And I had to, over many years, build up the strength to withstand a world that I knew was going to treat me unfairly."

As we learn from Marcus, intersectionality has a probabilistic effect in limiting ambivalence when it makes the multifaceted experiences of discrimination, and its interlocking qualities, more salient. Jay is a twenty-eight-year-old non-binary person who also identifies as genderqueer, trans-masculine, pansexual, and queer. The significance that sexuality acquires for them is a function of recurring exposures to restrictions. "There is an idea of intersectionality here where, maybe if you're a gay cis man who hasn't really seen a restriction of access to things in your life because of your queerness, you might be able to say, 'it's not a big deal that I'm queer,' because you haven't seen any ramifications of what would make it a big deal. But that doesn't mean that's not true for other queer people."

Oscar is one of those people. A twenty-three-year-old cis Asian man who identifies as bisexual, he feels inescapably defined by his multiple minority identities. "I have been targeted by ableists, by homophobes, by racists. I won the intersectional lottery when it comes to all these different abuses I've suffered." Whether he is walking down gayborhood streets or applying for a job, his identities can "pose a threat," which creates an acute, rather than ambivalent, awareness about them. "I just felt that I didn't want to go outside," he says. "It's that kind of thing." Alice is twenty-six and a white cis woman, yet she offers similar remarks by drawing on her disability. "People who are disabled and on disability benefits, if they get married, they lose their benefits, because their spouse's income will make their incomes high enough so that they don't qualify." Through this

filter, she thinks differently about her sexuality. "There are queer disabled people. I am one of them." Alice refuses single-identity perspectives. "You have to look at things intersectionally." When she does, sexuality acquires special, not ambivalent, significance. "To say that we have marriage equality, we don't because queer disabled people don't have marriage equality. As I said before, yes, I'm queer, but also, I'm disabled, and I'm a bunch of other things, and I really wish I could find spaces that would uphold and accept and honor my identity as a bisexual person but also as a disabled person. But I don't find this very often." Alice's struggle to find spaces that "honor" her intersectional profile makes her accent all her identities.

Awareness of multiple identities and the struggles associated with them limits sexuality from occupying a symbolic role. Victor, who is 26-years old, East Asian, and bisexual homoromatic, does not perceive Vancouver as a "particularly open and accepting" place for LGBTQ+ people because of "my cultural context." He explains, "I was born in Canada, and my parents were born in Hong Kong. I come from a traditional Asian background, which is traditionally not accepting of queer people." Mei echoed the sentiment: "In Chinese culture, you have a family, and then [if] you came out as gay, it's—they can't understand it. They think you cheated on the whole family." Michelle elaborates: "Being half Japanese is a big thing for me. It's not so much my sexuality that I choose," says the 21-year old who identifies as queer. This is why homophily does not determine her networks. "I don't really assemble with my friends just because they're queer." Instead, she and her friends "talk about how we've experienced racism in the past." Marie also feels less ambivalent about her sexuality because of her ethnic background. "Growing up in an Indian family, and in that culture, it's absolutely forbidden, like you can't. You get married to a heterosexual boy, and that's it." In our conversation, she describes the many cultures of India, and then shares her background. "I am from the Bengali community," Marie says. "In Bengali communities, people are extremely conservative." This affects her disclosures. "When I have initially come out as bisexual, it was absolutely like, 'Whoa, what? How is that possible?'" Repeated experiences like this influenced her coming out. "My mindset was that nobody should come to know about it," especially as she learned the consequences. "I was raised in an environment that taught me that it's a crime, like literally, it's a crime. So, for me, coming out or even talking about it, I never really thought about it."

Discussion and conclusions

Multiple measures, from Gallup in the United States to worldwide opinion trends, show shifting attitudes about sexuality. In this article, we examined how people come out in this cultural context. Rather than supporting arguments about the declining centrality of sexuality or ongoing adversity, our findings show that recently-out individuals articulate normalizing *and* liberation narratives. A sense of ambivalence informs their coming out process, which our respondents expressed using three interpretive frameworks: an awareness of generational differences in

LGBTQ+acceptance; identity misrecognitions that create conflicts between how individuals define themselves and how others perceive them; and LGBTQ+institutions that are imagined as important for others. While these findings extend research on the coming out process for sexual minorities, they also expand our understanding about the disclosure process more broadly by highlighting the situational salience of identities as activated and accented in particular times and interactional spheres. In this way, our arguments amplify similar work in the sociology of gender, disability studies, fat studies, immigration, and trans studies (Kade, 2021; Saguy, 2020; Samuels, 2003).

We also identified a fourth theme of intersectionality. As a type of disconfirming evidence, we used this idea to show the analytic limits of ambivalence. Respondents who occupied multiple dimensions of social difference exhibited greater sensitivity to discrimination, especially when they encountered material threats, like the loss of disability benefits. This softened or neutralized expressions of ambivalence in their coming out narratives.

The disclosure of a discreditable identity can compel a search for a common fate, but newly-out individuals experience feelings of distance between their imagined sense of community and the personal networks in which they are located (Holt, 2011; Winer, 2022). This makes identity disclosures feel messy, uneven, and uncertain. It also prompts a struggle for recognition (Connell, 2009), a relational process that involves scaling up individual identities to social situations (Pfeffer, 2014). Our findings support existing studies, which show that disclosures can entail a companion "(mis)recognition process" (ibid., p. 35). This leads to a liminal state that humanists call disidentification (Butler, 1993; Muñoz, 1999). Its sociological counterpart is what we described as ambivalence: a relational style of disclosure that enables individuals to come out in a moment characterized by culturally dialectical trends about sexuality.

Some respondents offered extensive self-identification labels which seem remarkable in light of our arguments about ambivalence. Reading phrases like "identifies as a white settler cis woman who is bisexual and pansexual" and "multiracial individual who identifies as neutrosis" lays bare a distinction between disclosure as a *process* and the words people use to consolidate that process into *categories*. Are these categories a non-ambivalent form of coming out? Can individuals articulate ambivalence in a disclosure process while expressing precise categories of self-identification? Does one facilitate fluidity, while the other resists it? Our outcome of interest was coming out narratives, not identity categories, yet these unanticipated findings offer a fruitful provocation for future research.

Respondents referenced generational changes, misrecognitions, and institutions to adjust the salience of their sexuality and articulate "nuanced, flexible positions" (Adams et al., 2014:461) about its disclosure. Reminiscent of arguments about symbolic ethnicity (Gans, 1979) and ethnic options (Waters, 1990), our findings lead to a proposition of what we called "symbolic sexuality." The experience of ambivalence may destabilize sexuality as a master status and, like ethnicity, make it "not something that influences their lives unless they *want* it to" (Waters, 1990:7, emphasis in original). Many respondents articulated their sexuality as a distinguishing aspect of the self, yet one that was not

necessarily defining. Ambivalence is the mechanism that maintains this duality, and it enables some LGBTQ+ people, like white ethnics, to feel unique and special as a result of their distinct collective identities while also blending into mainstream culture.

Symbolic sexuality is a useful concept to develop for many reasons. It resists teleological assumptions, for starters. Interpretive frameworks about generational changes challenge whether assumptions about linear progress are justified. Appraisals about time and progress point instead to an ambivalent experience in a moment of advanced modernity in countries like Canada and the United States, where there is a back-and-forth between progressive and regressive changes. Second, the concept acknowledges that anti-gay sentiments can co-exist with acceptance. Therefore, the analysis of identity disclosures requires sensitivity to both synchronic and diachronic trends. Finally, the concept of symbolic sexuality shows how people navigate contradictions in life transitions. Psychological models emphasize individual developmental states but overlook that those individuals are located in milieus with uneven or incompatible cultural trends.

Elective or expressive identities are not always accessible. For example, those individuals who "do not have to admit" their ethnic identities "unless they choose to" (Waters, 1990:7) are often third or later generation white ethnics who can claim pride and occasion-based affiliations without incorporating them into their "everyday behavior" (Gans, 1979:9). For these groups, Gans adds that "old discrimination and segregation patterns" (ibid.) are declining, while Waters (1990:88) pushes further to assert that that they "no longer experience overt discrimination or hostility" at all. The absence of overt discrimination is thus a necessary precursor for voluntary self-identification. Sexuality may not achieve this outcome in the same way, as our findings about intersectionality suggest. Persistent reminders of discrimination preclude imagining identities, and disclosing them, as entirely or always a set of symbolic resources. As sexuality gains intellectual legitimacy in the discipline, this line of thinking, like our provocation about identity labels, also seems ripe for further analysis, gesturing to comparisons between sexual identity disclosures and other minoritized identities.

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Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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