Chapter 8
The Coming Out Experience of Individuals Who Identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender

Jonathan Marmo
Center for HIV Educational Studies and Training, USA

Nava R. Silton
Marymount Manhattan College, USA

ABSTRACT
This literature review will explore the relationships of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender and their fears of how their relationships will be affected after coming out of the closet. This chapter will review the stages in Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages of Development that most pertain to the coming out years; stages associated with the fourteen to seventeen year age range. Erikson’s Stage 5 (Identity versus Role Confusion) and Stage 6 (Intimacy versus Isolation) are most relevant to the aforementioned developmental time frame. This review will illuminate how each individual’s life is unique and how he or she can be part of different societies, cultures, and communities that alter his or her coming out experience. This chapter will explore a variety of factors that differ from person to person such as family support, ethnic background, peer groups, and even work environments.

INTRODUCTION
This literature review will explore the relationships of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender and their fears of how their relationships will be affected after coming out of the closet. The term “coming out” refers to when an individual reveals his or her true sexual identity which is not in line with the typical heteronormative environment of society; the term is borrowed from elite debutante balls where women would come out to society (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer & Saguy, 2014). Generally, each LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) identifying person will have a coming out story in

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which he or she will reveal his/her non-heterosexual status to friends and/or family – but each person is
different and may have come out, or not, in different ways or places. There are even people who remain
in the closet throughout their lives due to the fear of rejection or misunderstanding (Alessi, 2007).

This chapter will review Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages of Development that most pertain to
the coming out years; Erikson’s Stage 5 (Identity versus Role Confusion) and Stage 6 (Intimacy versus
Isolation). Identity versus Role Confusion is the stage in which adolescents are seeking to become more
independent, functioning members of society and to explore a variety of professional, romantic and other
identities (Erikson, 1950, 1963). At the end of this stage, the individual should not only be knowledge-
able about his or her sexual identity, but should be happy and confident about it, as well (Bee, 1992).
Intimacy versus Isolation concerns the decision to include a new person outside of your family in your
life and to feel comfortable with the intimate relationships you forge. Problems in both of these stages
can further threaten healthy psychosocial development and can result in unhappiness, depression, and

This review will highlight how each individual’s life is unique and how he or she can be part of dif-
ferent societies, cultures, and communities that alter his or her coming out experience. This chapter will
explore a variety of factors that differ from person to person such as family support, ethnic background,
peer groups, and even work environments.

COMING OUT TO FAMILY

The stakes are high when an individual comes out, but they are arguably the highest when coming out
to the individuals love the most – one’s family. LGBT adolescents and adults claim that their parents are
the hardest people to come out to. Most youth choose to come out to their mothers before their fathers
because it is perceived that mothers are more accepting or have closer bonds with their children. In a
study of 194 lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals aged twenty-one and younger, 68% of participants
came out to their mothers while only 44% came out to their fathers (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993).
However, some individuals do not come out at all. Although the United States and the rest of the world
are becoming more accepting of LGBT individuals and lifestyles, there are still countries that have not
reached that standard. While many individuals do come out to their parents, there are individuals who do
not come out at all because of the fear that their parents will reject or abandon them. Just the notion that
a person’s parents could be intolerant of his or her queer identity is enough to make someone anxious
or upset whether or not he or she actually comes out (Carnelley et. al, 2011).

In their 2011 study, Carnelley et al. examined parent-child relationships in an effort to relate them
back to romantic attachments. As a product of this research, their study was able to reaffirm previous
results and add to them by showing that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals were more likely to come
out to mothers who were viewed as more accepting in childhood. However the story was not the same
for fathers; LGB individuals who viewed their fathers as accepting in childhood did not affect whether or
not they came out to their fathers. The study also found that LGB individuals who had success in coming
out to their parents, which pertains to identity development, also had success in romantic attachments,
which relates back to Erikson’s psychosocial developmental stages- if one has success in a previous stage,
it will allow him/her to progress to future stages (Erikson, 1953). However, the study does not directly
show that negative experiences with coming out to parents or even just perceived rejection of the LGB
individual by his or her parents leads to poor romantic attachments. The study also does not account for