

## Article 21

### **The Coming Out Journey: A Phenomenological Investigation of a Lifelong Process**

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#### **Abstract**

This phenomenological study explored the coming out experiences of individuals who identify as lesbian or gay. The phenomenon of coming out was examined in an effort to better understand the complexity of the coming out process. Participants shared their general experiences in addition to what was helpful and unhelpful through their journey. The findings revealed a complex definition of coming out that includes two major components: personal development (intrapersonal) and layers of disclosure (interpersonal). The data included what was helpful and difficult in the coming out process in addition to recommendations for counselors and clients.

*Keywords:* coming out, counseling, phenomenology

Coming out is a complex phenomenon in the lives of sexual/affectional minority individuals. As an individual seeks self-understanding and self-acceptance, internal discord may prompt feelings of loneliness, disconnection, confusion, grief, shame, anger, fear, vulnerability, and depression that lead to potential suicidal ideations (Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Lewis, Derlega, Berndt, Morris, & Rose, 2001). Due to societal bias, LGBTQ+ individuals are often faced with the task of disclosing identity to others such as friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors. Overall, during the coming out process, individuals are at-risk for a multitude of concerns such as anxiety, isolation, and depression (Baams, Grossman, & Russell, 2015; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). It is essential for counselors to be aware, knowledgeable, and prepared to assist clients through the coming out process in order to be ethical and effective with sexual/affectional minority clients (American Counseling Association,

2014; Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling, 2013).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of coming out for sexual/affectional minority individuals. By understanding the contemporary phenomenon of coming out, considerations can be made for future counseling practice with clients who are experiencing concerns related to coming out. The present investigation examined: (a) how participants define coming out and (b) recommendations participants have for individuals enduring the coming out process.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative methodology was chosen to facilitate discovery-oriented, holistic research (Forman, Creswell, Damschroder, Kowalski, & Krein, 2008). Approval was granted by the institutional review board (IRB). Aligned with phenomenological methods, criterion sampling was used to identify and understand cases that were information rich (Creswell, 2013; Patton 2002). Additionally, it was determined that interviews would allow for thorough exploration of experiences (Creswell, 2013). Participants were identified on the following factors: (a) being an adult above the age of 18, (b) identifies as a sexual/affectional minority, and (c) has experienced coming out. Flyers, online postings, e-mail invitations, and referrals were utilized for recruitment. Internet invitations were designed based on the Tailored Design Method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Internet correspondences were used to collect demographic data and to schedule interviews. Participants were offered three methods for the interview: in-person, via telephone, or via Skype.

### **Data Collection**

Participants who expressed interest were sent a packet via e-mail including informed consent, description of research, and a short questionnaire. Demographic information is displayed in Table 1. In accordance with the IRB, numeric participant identification codes were used in the data collection; however, arbitrary names were assigned and can be found in this text and in the tables. In addition to current age, the researcher was also interested in age in of the participants when they recognized they identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and the age at which they disclosed. This data can be found in Table 2. Participants were informed that they may experience cathartic benefits from sharing their experiences; however, no additional incentives were provided. Furthermore, participants were warned that discussing their experiences may cause them to become triggered; thus, contacts were provided for free, local counseling services.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed prior to the interviews. Questions were developed within three topics: definition, experience, and recommendations. Participants were asked to share their definition of the coming out process. Further, they were asked to compare and contrast their experience(s) to their provided definition. Aligned with the phenomenological method, a majority of the

prompts were within the second topic of experience. Participants were asked to share their experiences in the coming out process; within this, inquiry delved into values, benefits, and challenges. The interview concluded with questions pertaining to recommendations for individuals who are coming out as well as counselors who are assisting clients with coming out concerns.

Table 1.

*Participants' Demographic Characteristics*

<b>PID</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Biological Sex</b>	<b>Orientation</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Faith</b>	<b>Education</b>
Alex	29	Female	Lesbian	Chinese	Christian	MA
Lee	23	Female	Lesbian	Pakistani	Muslim	BA
Devin	26	Female	Lesbian	Taiwanese	Christian	BA
Jaime	36	Male	Gay	Nepalese	Hindu	MA
Billie	31	Male	Gay	Caucasian	Atheist	BS
Casey	24	Female	Lesbian	Caucasian	None	BA
Kerry	24	Male	Gay	German-American	Atheist/ Buddhist	BA

Table 2.

*Coming Out Experiences*

<b>PID</b>	<b>Age First Knew</b>	<b>Age First Told</b>
Alex	12	12
Lee	8	17
Devin	12	12
Jaime	12	24
Billie	13	17
Casey	15	18
Kerry	9	13

**Trustworthiness.** In order to account for researcher and overall bias, multiple steps were taken throughout the process in order to improve data quality (Creswell, 2013). Methods used to enhance trustworthiness included prolonged engagement, reflective notes, bracketing, and member-checking.

To account for the potential bias, reflective notes were utilized in order to track thoughts, assumptions, feelings, and inquiries that arose during the research study. This reflexive practice allowed the researcher to explore potential influences and biases and to conceptualize the data (Cope, 2014). These notes were shared with peers enrolled in an

advanced doctoral-level qualitative course in order to assist in a group audit process. Participants were made aware of the reflective process prior to their involvement in the study. One way in which this was utilized in the audit was when additional language, such as tone and nonverbal behavior, helped to better understand a participant's statement.

In addition to the reflective journal, bracketing was used to recognize potential biases that apply to the researcher (Creswell, 2013). The researcher originally wrote a bracketing reflection prior to the creation of the research proposal. This bracketing paper included thoughts, feelings, hopes, aspirations, judgments, biases, and values. Bracketing was revisited at several times in the study including before each interview, before each transcription, and during data analysis. As they arose, the researcher would amend the paper to incorporate novel concepts. Overall, this exercise was completed to allow the researcher to be actively aware of and engage with past experiences in reference to the study (Giorgi, 2009).

The main points of the discussion were summarized at the conclusion of the interviews. Participants were asked if the summary was accurate and comments, amendments, or corrections were invited. As a part of member-checking, after coding the transcripts, a draft table of themes was provided to participants via e-mail. Participants were encouraged to provide feedback (i.e., agreements and discrepancies) on the findings (Patton, 1999). Participants confirmed the major themes and had no clarifications.

### **Data Analysis**

Through the process of horizontalization, the researcher searched for significant statements that were linked to the phenomenon of coming out (Moustakas, 1994). Narrow units were coded into meaning units, thus creating a table of themes. With each interview, the table was revisited to determine if the theme labels still incorporated the essence of the codes and quotes or if the table needed to be adjusted accordingly. For integrity analysis, alternatives and possibilities to initial codes were considered in relation to the overarching research questions and purpose of the study (Patton, 1999).

## **Results**

The results of the analysis display the commonly lived coming out experiences of sexual/affectional minority individuals (Creswell, 2013). The essence of the data equates to three primary themes: (a) definition, (b) what is helpful or unhelpful in the coming out process, and (c) recommendations. The following section details the participants' definitions of coming out in reference to the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. Within these processes, the helpful and unhelpful aspects of navigating these processes are highlighted. Finally, participants' recommendations for clients coming out are provided.

### **Defining the Coming Out Process**

All of the participants conveyed that coming out is a two-fold process that involves the intrapersonal aspect of finding oneself and the interpersonal aspect of disclosing to others. Although participants shared that the intrapersonal process of development is influenced by the interpersonal process of disclosure, there was a general

consensus that the personal process generally precedes the process of sharing. All participants noted that both the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes were emotional experiences.

The emotions shared in reference to coming out included confusion, anxiety, fear, anger, sadness, relief, and happiness. Confusion was generally in reference to the process of discovering oneself; however, participants noted times of confusion when being uncertain about the decision to disclose or not. Anxiety encompassed worries about sharing identity with others. Casey noted, “I was worried about being rejected, not being loved anymore. I was worried about relationships ending.” Lee shared, “It’s anxiety-provoking, even talking about it makes me a little anxious. There’s always butterflies and the shaky voice.” The worries often escalated into fear in which participants expressed instances where they felt crippled by ruminating thoughts and concerns. Casey shared, “Every time I say it to someone I still have that fear. I’m not sure if that will ever go away.”

Anger, sadness, relief, and happiness were often experienced after the decision to disclose or after the actual disclosure. If individuals decided to not disclose, sometimes they felt sad and angry at themselves or society. After a negative disclosure experience, individuals endured these emotions as well. For some, such as Billie, negative reactions prompted intense and dangerous emotions. Billie’s negative experiences caused him to experience low self-esteem, depression, and suicidal ideation. Contrastingly, when participants experienced positive disclosures culminating in acceptance and deepened relationships, they often felt relief and happiness.

**Intrapersonal.** In discussing the intrapersonal aspect, Alex shared, “Coming out to myself was a one-time, very empowering, long journey . . . that there was a build up—a pinnacle point of like, yeah, this is it, this is who I am.” Participants noted that the intrapersonal process began with a recognition of difference, transitioned to a period of questioning, and ended with personal acceptance. Awareness occurred for participants at different times, as noted in Table 2. Questioning included a process of learning about identity, testing certainty, and gaining acceptance. All participants in this research noted reaching an internal process in which personal acceptance and assurance were hallmarks of their internal process of coming out. Although the phases endured within the intrapersonal process were similar for participants, all participants highlighted that coming out to oneself is a unique, personalized experience.

For the participants, the intrapersonal process began with recognition. Alex noted,

At a young age, I noticed I was different. I didn’t know quite what it was that made me different from my peers. I didn’t have anything to relate to. Things for me seemed unclear, whereas my friends knew what they were getting into when they grew up.

For Alex, a middle school sex education class and the media helped to provide the knowledge she needed to better understand herself and why she felt she was different from such a young age.

From recognition, all participants discussed enduring a phase of questioning. During the questioning process, Lee, Billie, and Jaime shared that relationships were often used to affirm or decline identity. Lee noted that confusion occurred in reference to both gender and affectional orientation:

I had a lot of reservations about what I was wearing and how I was perceived, and how my body was developing. I really wanted to identify as a male. But growing up, that changed somewhere, and when I was in my first relationship, I realized I don't want to look like a male, I just want the privileges of being the male partner in a relationship.

Billie highlighted that he was raised in an environment in which he believed he could change his identity. During his questioning process he believed that a heterosexual relationship could be the answer to his confusion; "The first time I felt close to someone of the opposite sex, I felt it was a chance for change because change was preached, still is preached. If I could just get a girlfriend it would be fine." Jamie asserted that trial and error allowed him to gain comfort and confidence in coming out; "I wasn't comfortable with myself. I thought, unless I try a relationship with a woman, then how would I know? I gave myself the ability to try. Once I was sure about myself, that gave me confidence."

All participants noted gaining a feeling of internal acceptance, culminating their intrapersonal process. For some, this internal acceptance was achieved prior to the interpersonal process of disclosure; however, other participants noted the weight of others' reactions causing their state of acceptance to be influenced. A few participants noted that lack of acceptance from others has the potential to inhibit their personal acceptance. However, others noted that a strong sense of self and acceptance is essential in not faltering to the influence of others. Casey shared that she used to experience the former; however, with time, she embodies the latter: "I was like okay, this is who I am. If someone can't accept that, I guess they don't love me after all. Why am I gonna keep lying? People are gonna have to deal." Contrastingly, Lee shared that she is still working toward internal acceptance. Although she notes that she owns and honors her identity, difficult interpersonal experiences or examination of society and culture at large cause her to revisit the internal phase of acceptance.

**Interpersonal.** Participants noted that the interpersonal process is a way of being true to oneself while deepening relationships with others. Layers exist within the interpersonal process of coming out. Common layers include friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors. Relationships may vary in closeness and importance, and, thus, disclosure may occur at different times or not at all.

Lee shared, "I think when I disclose, it is because I wanna get to a deeper level with you. I find enough substance in the relationship to go further." Lee noted that coming out to others allows for "ease and comfort," and after she discloses she has the "freedom to share about [her] relationships and life." Similarly, Devin noted that it involves trust and commitment to the relationship with the discloser. Individuals may also choose to disclose to others in order to share about their relationships and life overall. This directly applied to Kerry as he noted, "When I first came out it was because I was in a relationship for a year and I wanted to share that with [my parents]."

Depending on the connection and context, individuals may not find it necessary to disclose personal information. Billie shared his experience of being in a negative work environment in which his coworkers were probing him to disclose. Further, coworkers would taunt and tease him to the point in which he questioned his safety. In this instance, considering the environment and given dynamics, Billie was not comfortable sharing and putting himself in danger. Alex, Lee, Devin, and Jaime noted the influence of culture and how this may cause someone to choose to not disclose. Specifically, due to the variable

of conservative culture, Lee and Devin have not disclosed to all of their immediate family members in fear of being isolated or financially cutoff.

Devin noted that, ideally, the interpersonal process involves “getting to a point where you can be you without thinking twice about it.” However, many participants note that this may not be plausible. Billie stated that disclosing is “an ongoing process, something that’s never over.” Billie reflected that originally he believed that it would be a one-time occurrence; however, he recognized that, “it’s not once. You’re gonna meet new people, get a job, get new friends; it’s a continuous thing.” Kerry noted a similar recognition and described the interpersonal as constant—it occurs each time you meet someone new. Participants also reflected on how the ongoing process may also be never-ending. Additionally, participants reflected that the choice to disclose throughout the lifespan is complicated. In realizing the complexity of the disclosure process, Casey finds herself caught between wanting to disclose and determining the necessity: “I don’t want to wear a sign. It’s a double-edged sword. I don’t want to tell everyone, but I don’t want people to assume I’m straight either.”

In addition to their definition of coming out, participants shared their personal experiences. From these experiences two main themes emerged denoting what was both unhelpful and helpful during the coming out process.

### **What Is Not Helpful?**

All individuals concurred that societal influence was particularly difficult. Alex succinctly shared, “Society definitely didn’t help; news and media were not friends.” Jaime noted that perceptions of society, particularly while he was in college, kept him from sharing his identity as he felt unsafe. “The term *gay*, *homosexual*, it was hostile. It was all hidden under . . . people would act like they’re joking but they weren’t. So it seemed like I would be an outcast. I had no other way.” Unhealthy portrayals of identity in the media and common sentiments toward sexual/affectional minorities prompted internalized homophobia for many participants. Individuals spoke of being uncertain of the implications of their identity and some even pondered whether such ramifications were worth outward disclosure. Navigating the cost-benefit analysis was often anxiety-provoking and confusing. Additionally, some participants’ fears, such as Lee and Devin, prompted them to actively choose to not disclose. Alex captured the essence in which internalized homophobia triggers potentially debilitating worries:

I was not questioning my identity but how I fit in this world. I know who I am, but who I am is not being accepted. Do I need to change who I am? I was questioning again but not internally, very externally. Um, where do I belong? How do I fit in? Is my family going to feel the same way? What is life gonna look like? Do I have to hide who I am? Will I be able to make new friends? Do I need to make these decisions based on safety?

Unhelpful messages from society were particularly distressing when reinforced by personal experiences. Billie shared that derogatory remarks at his workplace made him feel unsafe and unsupported. “He said, ‘Wow he’s a bitchy little faggot isn’t he?’ I felt secure before then, but I realized people weren’t as okay as they thought . . . they were putting up a front.”

Personal negative experiences were particularly profound for participants when it came to family members. Generally, all participants noted the ease of disclosing to friends or acquaintances but the increased discomfort of sharing with family. On the other hand, all participants expressed a desire to disclose to family members. Kerry acknowledged that his father came from a “tough background” and was “ignorant when it comes to diversity.” Oftentimes, Kerry was the focus of homophobia jokes and derogatory remarks that would make him uncomfortable. Although his directly insulting father exemplifies the influence of negative experiences with family, Kerry noted that his personal experience in disclosing to his mother was also difficult, yet in an entirely different fashion. “I knew her value system, and I was afraid of hurting her. I was afraid of my dad accepting me, but I was afraid of hurting my mom.”

Several participants shared difficult experiences with family that were culturally embedded. Alex noted her struggle with understanding multiple aspects of her overall identity:

It felt like I was carrying these minority statuses, if you will, that did not necessarily fit in mainstream society. I wasn't just a lesbian—I'm immigrant, I'm Chinese, I speak a different language, my parents don't speak English—there are a lot of different aspects I was learning about myself and learning how to deal with.

Kerry also felt the need to make sense of his multiple, potentially conflicting identities. “I grew up in a Christian home and from what I know, I'm going to hell. I can't imagine a God that loves people, but I'm unforgivable. So I came out as gay and an atheist as well.”

Individuals often agonized over the process of disclosure. Casey stated, “I think I thought too much about the actual process. A lot of it wasn't worth it.” Additionally, many individuals felt alone in their process and longed for role models and peer support. When disclosing, participants found it unhelpful when others forced disclosure, reduced their identity to a phase, and were not supportive.

Several participants mentioned being caught by their parents in ways such as finding letters, messages, pictures of partners, or pornography. Oftentimes, being caught, paired with the lack of readiness, willingness, or general safety to disclose, prompted individuals to pry disclosure from the participants. Billie recollected that his father confronted him with frustration and anger; however, probing is a complex concept for Billie as he noted that it may have paved his way to disclosure: “I wanted to. I hated feeling dishonest. I feel like things went smoother after because I could be me. So in a way, it's good because I don't know if I would have said anything otherwise.” Forcing disclosure is also a complex concept for Lee, who confessed her own attempts to prompt a peer's disclosure: “I tried to force someone to come out in a joking way, and she never spoke to me again. Now I realize it needs to be on your own pace.” Forced disclosure can also extend to a situation that exposes the individual's identity. Participants spoke of feeling betrayed and deprived of their personal experience. Billie shared that his mother took it upon herself to share with his grandmother; however, he was never informed. “That's not her place. Maybe if my mom told me she told her but I didn't know. So I feel like I was robbed for 2–3 years I could have disclosed things with [her].”

A common unhelpful aspect of disclosing was when the discloser reduced the discloser's identity to a phase. Additionally, some individuals were offered to seek a



doctor for help. Similarly, others provided religious and spiritual advice. Kerry recalls conflicting messages of support from individuals in his life who would say, “I love you, but Jesus doesn’t like that.”

Achieving support was aspirational in all participants’ disclosure. As Kerry noted above, conditional support was unhelpful. Brandon expressed that although he is able to bring his partner to family holidays, his father previously ignored his partner at these gatherings. Individuals hesitate to disclose instances in which they would not only be unsupported but also endangered. Devin shared that her mom often probes her to disclose while openly asserting warnings of her disclosure in veiled messages such as, “If you’re gay, just come back to Taiwan,” “I don’t have to support you anymore,” and, “If you’re gay, you won’t get your grandfather’s inheritance.”

Participants noted several unhelpful facets of the coming out process. Unhelpful aspects ranged from internal stresses to the influence of others. Additionally, difficult parts of coming out began from the personal aspect of assessment and extended to navigating the interpersonal process of sharing identity. Further, the reality of the continual nature of coming out may be the most important unhelpful aspect to highlight. Due to the lifelong process of coming out, unhelpful aspects of disclosure will inevitably be revisited and endured throughout the lifespan.

### **What Is Helpful?**

Several helpful aspects during coming out were noted such as (a) personal strength, (b) self-care, (c) support, (d) safety, (e) planning, and (f) patience. Participants shared that reflection allowed for growth, particularly during the personal development and when processing a disclosure. The ability to be aware of the process and to reflect upon it contributed to personal strength. Additionally, participants highlighted that it is helpful to have a strong sense of self and be confident in identity prior to disclosing to others. Jaime explained that he spent a great deal of his life in the questioning phase; however, when he reached a secure level of confidence, he obtained the self-efficacy to disclose to others because he had a strong internal foundation. As noted earlier, several destructive emotions can be endured in the process such as fear, anger, and sadness. Participants found it helpful to not only reflect but also to use methods of self-care to withstand the difficulty of coming out. Reported strategies of self-care included counseling, meditation, prayer, writing, and talking with close family and/or friends.

Social support was noted as essential for all participants. All participants indicated that they did not come out to everyone at once; instead, they began with someone who they believed would be accepting, caring, and supporting. The first disclosure for participants varied but often included friends or siblings. Additionally, accepting disclosures were sought for aid in future disclosures. Casey’s parents experienced difficulty in understanding and processing her disclosure, which prompted her to seek another form of support. Since her godparents were accepting, she processed with them and they eventually spoke to her parents. Other participants used discussion with open and supportive individuals to gauge how to disclose to others. Kerry’s mother was “open and approachable” compared to his father; Kerry noted, “I got insight to how my dad was feeling through her. That helped to prepare me for my discussion with him.”

Casey shared, “I knew I could fall back on [the people who already knew]. If I had a bad experience, I had them. Having the support from those who I told first was like a safety net.” For all participants, having support was a safety tactic. In addition to support, all participants shared that assessing the situation was helpful. In addition to knowing who you can rely on for support, participants noted that assessing the characteristics of the disclosee, environment, and context is helpful. Participants noted that it was advantageous when they knew the disclosee was open, accepting, and trusting. It was also helpful to assess whether or not the environment and context posed any danger. Assessing environment and context cleared Devin to disclose to her peers in high school and college. Devin shared, “There were no hard feelings with anyone, so I felt very safe in high school and college. No one said anything discriminating to me, so I felt comfortable to tell my peers.”

All participants shared that planning was helpful in coming out, especially in the beginning of the disclosure process. Recognizing and developing a support system and deciphering the environment and context are parts of the planning process. Planning also includes determining the method of disclosing to others. Some participants would disclose in reference to their partner while others would make an “I am” statement with their identity. Participants also had active discussions in which they assessed the disclosee’s stance on their identity prior to directly disclosing. Letters, phone calls, and instant messages were also common methods that participants found to be helpful, particularly when an individual was far in distance or the direct discussion was deemed overwhelming. Recognizing the power of choice, sometimes planning inevitably included methods of nondisclosure. Several participants noted disclosures that were and are pushed aside due to fear. Some participants found their decision to not disclose directly to certain family members to be a protective mechanism that enabled them to avoid isolation and maintain financial stability.

Finally, participants mentioned the benefit of patience during the coming out process. Several participants noted a time gap between personal development and mustering the readiness to disclose. Generally, personal patience was looked upon as a time of gaining strength and confidence. Participants also shared that it was helpful to be patient with individuals who were not initially accepting. Jaime reflected that change does not occur instantaneously; “It took you 30 years to accept that and you’re just giving them one week? How do you expect them to change?” Similarly, Casey shared, “Now my parents are amazing. They love my girlfriend. They have come a long way, and I tell them all the time.”

## **Recommendations**

Several recommendations were provided during each of the interviews. Many were naturally tied to the inquiry of recommendations; however, multiple suggestions also arose in reference to coming out experiences as well as in reflections regarding both helpful and unhelpful elements, and how unhelpful situations could have been ameliorated. The participants recommended that when coming out, individuals should (a) explore and build a strong identity, (b) reflect on motivations and readiness, (c) assess for safety, (d) understand the disclosee, (e) recognize the consequences, (f) utilize social

support, and (g) be engaged. Several helpful questions for navigating the coming out process are included in Table 3.

Table 3.

*Helpful Questions*

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Who would you like to share with?

What is your relationship or history with the person you would like to share with?

What is \_\_\_\_\_ like?

What is \_\_\_\_\_'s stance on LGBTQ+ rights?

What are your reasons for wanting to share with \_\_\_\_\_?

Do you feel safe telling \_\_\_\_\_?

How do you think \_\_\_\_\_ will react?

How would you handle being teased or bullied?

What would you do if your conversation does not go as you hope?

Would you be okay if you lost communication with \_\_\_\_\_?

Would you be able to allow \_\_\_\_\_ time to process?

Do you have supportive people in your life?

Who are the supportive people in your life?

What is your living situation?

Are you independent?

Are you in danger?

Are you questioning your identity?

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Participants unanimously suggest that prior to considering entering the interpersonal phase of coming out, an individual must address the intrapersonal process first. Individuals who delved into disclosing prior to finding themselves found themselves confused, and at times, more susceptible to internalized homophobia and thus were swayed by negative remarks or discounting reactions from their disclosees. Participants recommended that individuals should explore their identity and build confidence and self-esteem prior to sharing with others. Regardless of a participant's response, the individual who is sharing will always return to the intrapersonal process, and therefore, a sturdy, assured sense of self is essential.

After developing a strong identity, individuals should consider their motivations to disclose. For example, several participants shared that they wanted others to know about their relationships; while for others, sharing a piece of their identity allowed their relationships to deepen and seem more genuine. On the other hand, several individuals spoke of wanting to disclose for the wrong reasons, such as frustration from being taunted or probed. Along with questioning the pure reason for sharing, individuals should reflect on if they are ready. All participants spoke of at least one instance in which their motivations were sound; however, they did not have accompanying readiness. Motivations may arise early, but readiness was based on personal factors as well as variables from the disclosee and the context.

A primary concern that may inhibit an individual's readiness is a lack of safety and security. The disclosee or environment may be disapproving, hostile, and potentially dangerous. Considering this, assessing safety is paramount when considering a minor who is dependent on parents and/or guardians. Minors risk homelessness in the event that their parents or guardians are unaccepting. Several participants spoke of their hesitation or waiting to disclose until independence was achieved. Further, participants who were currently supported by their parents cited dependence and risk of isolation as primary causes for withholding identity.

An individual may be motivated and ready and may perceive the situation to be safe; however, a key component in coming out is understanding the disclosee. It is important to note that all persons are unique and, thus, a positive response from one person does not designate a positive response from another, and the same for the contrasting experience. Each participant spoke of assessing the individuals in which they wanted to disclose. Participants recommended exploring the disclosee's attitudes, values, beliefs, words, and behaviors. Several participants looked for signs which they felt indicated acceptance. Positive signs included, LGB friends or family, positive remarks about equal rights, and safe zone signs. Contrastingly, warning signs included derogatory remarks or slurs, inappropriate humor, and rigid belief systems.

Understanding the disclosee allows the individual to gain perspective and preparation to disclose. When disclosing, particularly when highly motivated and ready, individuals may be blinded by their aspirations and may ignore potential consequences. Participants spoke of instances where receiving love and support from a disclosee caused them to prematurely share with another who was not as receptive. Further, individuals spoke of an intense desire to share, which subdued the potential concerns. All participants suggested that potential consequences of disclosing be explored. Moreover, individuals should create plans to handle the situation should those consequences occur.

One key aspect of planning to disclose is establishing a support system. All participants confirmed that support is essential in the coming out process. Before disclosing, individuals can assist in exploring motivations and readiness. Additionally, supporters can highlight the blind spots that help prevent harm. A supportive, loving circle provides individuals with the assurance they may need during an anxious situation. Further, supporters are essential to the safety plan. In the event that a disclosure does not proceed positively, the individual has supporters who affirm and validate their potentially shaken sense of self. At times, active members in the support system may advocate for and assist the individual. For example, Casey spoke of her supportive aunts and uncles assisting her parents in their process. Additionally, Alex and Lee both spoke of sisters who assisted their mothers in their process. Beyond family and friends, participants shared that it is helpful to extend the range of support within the community. Participants suggested finding a support group or therapist to strengthen the support system and promote growth through the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes.

A resounding suggestion from the participants was to practice patience while being engaged in the process. Personal readiness does not develop overnight; all participants struggled with finding their sense of self when confronted with heteronormativity, expectations, values, and belief systems. Also, participants strongly encouraged patience with disclosees as well. Coming out is often looked at as the process of the individual; however, disclosees have their own experiences as well. Jamie shared,

“They may not understand it. They may take it in a negative way. Not because they don’t love you, they don’t know how to respond.” Patience should be valued at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. Participants highlight that being patient does not mean disconnecting from the process as time lapses; instead, individuals should keep an open line of communication and remain engaged, especially if they value the relationship at hand.

### **Counseling Implications**

Counseling recommendations include (a) recognizing the two-part process of coming out, (b) assisting in healthy intrapersonal development, and (c) facilitating safe disclosure. First and foremost, each participant noted that coming out is a two-fold experience. Oftentimes, counselors may perceive coming out as a one-time life instance and minimize the actual extended experience that encompasses the lifespan. However, Vaughan and Waehler (2010) noted that individuals may grow in individualistic and collectivistic aspects from enduring the stressful process of coming out. Therefore, counselors must be aware that coming out includes a process of development in addition to a recurring aspect of disclosure. Utilizing this awareness, counselors should assess where clients are along their coming out spectrum and adjust accordingly, as clients’ may be positioned at points in the spectrum that could greatly influence counseling. For example, a client who is beginning to question his or her identity for the first time may need more assistance in self-identity and development, whereas an individual who identifies as *out* and has been triggered by the stress of sharing identity with a new individual may need specific assistance in examining the context and planning of disclosure.

When counseling clients through the intrapersonal process of development, there are several aspects of identity to explore, such as values and beliefs, culture, internalized homophobia, and sense of self. Cultural variables may support or hinder an individual’s identity. Culture is one component in which an individual may receive, and subsequently internalize, homophobia (Meyer, Schwartzm, & Frost, 2008). Additional aspects that may provide the basis of prejudicial sentiments include family, friends, schoolmates, colleagues, and neighbors. Further, sources for homophobia extend beyond direct connection and may arise from the Internet, television, or media at large (Baptist & Allen, 2008). In order to combat internalized homophobia, an individual requires self-esteem, confidence, and support (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005; Goodrich & Luke, 2015; Hill, 2009). Practitioners should collaborate in assessing levels of these essential components and using counseling techniques and objectives that strengthen these aspects. As an individual explores and develops identity in instances where the deleterious effects of internalized homophobia outweigh strengths, he or she may develop anxiety and depression and consequently be in danger. Counselors should assist clients in processing their complexity of development, assessing for safety, and assisting in creating safety measures for the client.

In addition to developmental assistance, counselors have the opportunity to assist clients in their disclosure processes. A counselor should assess the status of intrapersonal development and past history with coming out prior to facilitating a client’s consideration of disclosure (Ali & Barden, 2015). Assessing development helps to adequately prepare

clients with self-knowledge, which serves as a strong foundation to proceed in the interpersonal process of coming out. Counselors should collaborate in recognizing the layers of coming out and how each disclosure is unique. Within each disclosure, context explored should include information on the motivation for disclosure, the disclosee(s) of interest, and potential environmental dangers (Ali & Barden, 2015; Baams et al., 2015; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011). Helpers should assist the client in preparing for disclosure (Goodrich & Luke, 2015). Preparation may include exploration of the best and worst case scenarios, rehearsals, and creation of a safety plan (Ali & Barden, 2015; Chazin & Klugman, 2014; Chutter, 2007). The counselor plays a pivotal role in the support system for a client who is disclosing—he or she has the responsibility of aiding the client throughout the process from planning to processing the outcome. Counselors should act in the best interest of the client and should refrain from biasing disclosure decisions. Most importantly, counselors should be respectful and recognize the honor in which a client has placed trust in the therapeutic relationship, particularly if the client is in the earlier phases of coming out.

### **Limitations**

This study contributes to our understanding of the lived experiences of individuals who have experienced coming out. A unique contribution of this article is the participant-based recommendations. Individuals in this study identified as lesbian or gay; therefore, we may not know if the stories and suggestions encompass related sexual/affectional or gender minorities.

Criterion sampling was utilized in this study, and therefore generalizability may be hindered. Although the participants were diverse in age and ethnicity, aspects of this study may not hold true for other sexual/affectional or gender minorities or individuals throughout the lifespan. Further, since participants were located in Central Florida and were between the ages of 23 and 36, it may be difficult to generalize the findings to younger, older, or individuals outside of the Central Florida area. Future research should be conducted to further understand the contemporary experience of coming out.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study sought to explore the coming out process and to better understand how counselors may assist clients in their journeys. Three levels of data surfaced from the study including a definition of the coming out process, experiences in the coming out process, and recommendations for the coming out process. Participants defined coming out as a two-fold intrapersonal and interpersonal process that encompasses the lifespan. Experiences provided a wealth of information on aspects that are helpful as well as aspects that are unhelpful when coming out. Finally, recommendations are provided that can be used to facilitate a client's coming out process in counseling.

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