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Gender identity development in self-disclosed gay men in Hidalgo County, Texas

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**GENDER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN SELF
DISCLOSED GAY MEN IN HIDALGO
COUNTY, TEXAS**

**A Thesis
By**

SAMMY LEE FLANAGAN JR.

**Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

MASTER OF SCIENCE

August 2000

Major Subject: Sociology

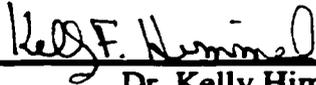
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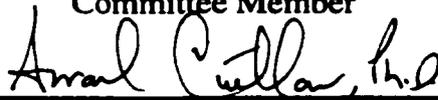
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Although gay individuals are now more visible than ever, homosexuality remains among the most stigmatized of personal identities. It is because of the various variables associated with coming out and being out and the multitude of persons affected by an individuals' decision to disclose his orientation that are the focus of this research.

This research is designed to document the “coming out” experiences of self disclosed homosexual men, in Hidalgo County, Texas a predominately Mexican American, Catholic community. This research will look at the identity change that takes place when people choose to disclose their homosexual identity to other people. In particular, what meanings do gay men give to coming out and what are the factors that have either enabled or hindered them from coming out to other people?

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Although gay and lesbian individuals are now more visible than ever, homosexuality remains among the most stigmatized of personal identities. The decision to disclose a gay identity can trigger severe discrimination and other harms; on the other hand, staying 'in the closet,' can exact high tolls in human happiness, dignity and integrity (Stramel, 1998).

It is one thing for someone to recognize the truth about their sexual orientation; to share the news with their friends, family, and co-workers, to 'come out,' is quite another. "First, it should be said that the term 'coming out' poses certain difficulties. For one thing, it reduces a complex psychological and social process to a simple cut-and-dried one-time ritual. For another, it implies that the proper way to deal socially with the discovery of one's homosexuality is to tell everybody in one's life about it, in so many words and as soon as possible. And finally, it implies a moral judgment on those who choose to keep their homosexuality to themselves or tell only selected friends (Bawer, 1993, p. 234)."

“Two or three generations ago there was no such thing as coming out; virtually all homosexuals felt obliged to remain more or less closeted in order to survive. Nor would there be such a thing as coming out in a society where sexual orientation was a matter of indifference, taken no more seriously than the difference between left- and right-handedness; in such a society every gay person would be ‘out.’ It is only because homosexuality is still considered a problem that there is such a thing as coming out (Bawer, 1993, p. 234-235).”

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

“The act of coming out retains a private and highly individual character that does not lend itself to being organized. Everyone has had his or her own story. And each is indeed unique, although there are some typical experiences, such as coming out to parents, siblings, in the media, coming out to co-workers or employers, coming out at the PTA meeting or at a conference with the teachers of one’s children (Vaid, 1995, p. 222).”

Coming out is not a cut and dried event but an ongoing process, and it should only begin when the person in question is psychologically, socially, and financially prepared to face the consequences. “Since there are so many possible outcomes and divergent paths on the road to being out or not, a sequenced stage model cannot easily explain all the exceptions. A further problem with the stages of coming out model is that it is usually rather atheoretical in that it lacks a set of motivations impelling the person to move from one stage to the next. It also lacks a set of forces inhibiting such movement, which might also explain retrogression or stasis. Typically, the usual model of coming out is more empirical than theoretical.

It is the various variables associated with being out and multitude of persons affected by an individual’s decision to disclose his or her sexual orientation that are the focus of

this research. Why do some gay men choose to come out of the closet? Under what circumstances did they do so? And, what has their experience been since coming out? Coming out and being out are not cut and dried events but are ongoing processes and they should begin when the person in question is psychologically, socially, and financially prepared to face the consequences.

This research is designed to document the “coming out” experiences of self-disclosed homosexual men, in Hidalgo County, Texas, a predominantly Mexican Americans and Catholic community. It will look at the identity change and acculturation that takes place when people choose to disclose their homosexual identity. As Erving Goffman said in his book *Stigma*, when discussing moral careers, “stigmatized individual’s may single out and retrospectively elaborate experiences which serve for him to account for his coming to beliefs and practices that he now has regarding his own kind of normals. A life event can thus have a double bearing on moral career, first as immediate objective grounds for an actual turning point, and later as a means of accounting for a position currently taken (Goffman, 1963, p. 38).”

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In looking at the forces that either enable people to come out to others or inhibit them from coming out, this researcher feels that it is only through understanding the meanings that people associate with being gay and what it means to “come out” that the phenomena of being out can be understood. Symbolic Interactionism will also be useful

in understanding the interactions that take place between those that choose to come out and those they tell.

Symbolic Interactionism is a leading American social psychological theory, which focuses upon the way in which meanings emerge through interaction. Its prime concern has been to analyze the meanings of everyday life, via close observational work and intimate familiarity, and from these to develop an understanding of the underling form of human interaction. Heavily influenced by pragmatism, the Chicago tradition of sociology and the philosophical writings of George Herbert Mead, the term itself was coined by Herbert Blumer in 1937. Other people associated with this perspective include Charles Horton Cooley, W. I. Thomas, and Erving Goffman.

Instead of focusing on the individual and his or her personality characteristics, or on how the social structure or social situation causes individual behavior, symbolic interactionism focuses on the *nature of interaction*, the dynamic social activities taking place between persons. In focusing on the interaction itself as the unit of study, the symbolic interactionist creates a more active image of the human being and rejects the image of the passive, determined organism. Individuals interact; societies are made up of interacting individuals. People are constantly undergoing change in interaction and society is changing through interaction. Interaction implies human beings acting in relation to each other, taking each other into account, acting, perceiving, interpreting, and acting again. Hence, a more dynamic and active human being emerges, rather than an actor merely responding to others.

Lower animals do not have selves, nor do human infants at birth. The self arises with development and through social activity and social relationships. To Mead, it is impossible to imagine a self, arising in the absence of social experiences.

The general mechanism for the development of the self is reflexivity, or the ability to put ourselves unconsciously into others' places and act as they act. As a result, people are able to examine themselves as others would examine them. The self also allows people to take part in their conversations with others. That is, one is aware of what one is saying and as a result is able to monitor what is being said and to determine what is going to be said next.

Mead traces the development of the self through two stages of development:

1. **Imitation:** developing the "Me", 6mon – 3 years.
2. **Play:** beginning to get a hold of what we are supposed to do, although we have not quite learned the rules of the "game", 3 years – 7 years.
3. **Game:** We understand the purpose of the "game" and the rules.

The game stage yields to the **generalized other**. The generalized other is the attitude of the entire community. We don't just think about what is good for us, but what is good for others.

The self is critical to Mead for the development of his sociology.

Mead uses the term *society* to mean the ongoing social process that precedes both the mind and the self. At another level, society to Mead represents the organized set of responses that are taken over by the individual in the form of the "Me". Thus in a sense, individuals carry society around with them, giving them the ability through self-criticism,

to control themselves. Although society is central to his theoretical system, Mead has little to say explicitly about it.

Symbolic Interactionism, The Basic Principles

1. Human beings, unlike lower animals, are endowed with the capacity for thought.
2. The capacity for thought is shaped by social interaction.
3. In social interaction people learn the meanings and the symbols that allow them to exercise their distinctively human capacity for thought.
4. Meaning and symbols allow people to carry on distinctively human action and interaction.
5. People are able to modify or alter the meanings and symbols that they use in action and interaction on the basis of their interpretation of the situation.
6. People are able to make modifications and alterations because, in part, of their ability to interact with themselves, which allows them to examine possible courses of action, assess their relative advantages and disadvantages, and then choose one.
7. The intertwined patterns of action and interaction make up groups and societies.

The assumption that human beings possess the ability to think differentiates symbolic interactionism from its behaviorist roots. "Individuals in human society are not seen as units that are motivated by external or internal forces beyond their control, or within the confines of a more or less fixed structure. Rather, they are viewed as reflective or interacting units, which comprise the social entity. The ability for thought enables people

to act reflectively rather than just behave unreflectively. People must often construct and guide what they do, rather than just release it.

People possess only a general capacity for thought; it is only through social interaction and socialization that thinking can develop.

Interaction is the process in which the ability to think is both developed and expressed.

Interaction is constantly refined.

Thinking is important to understanding *objects*. (Blumer)

1. Physical objects: such as a tree or chair
2. Social objects: such as student or mother
3. Abstract objects: such as an idea or moral principle.

Objects are seen simply as things “out there” in the real world; what is significant is the way people define them.

Learning meaning and symbols, meanings come not from single mental processes but rather from interaction.

Symbols are social objects used to represent whatever people agree they represent. Not all social objects stand for one thing, but those that do are symbols.

1. Symbols enable people to deal with the material and social world by allowing them to name, categorize, and remember the objects that they encounter.
2. Symbols improve the ability to perceive the environment.
3. Symbols improve the ability to think.
4. Symbols improve the ability to solve problems.
5. Symbols allow people to transcend time, space, and even their own person.
6. Symbols allow us to imagine abstract ideas.

7. Symbols allow people to avoid being enslaved by their environment.

Action and interaction

Here the concern is on the impact of meanings and symbols on human action and interaction.

1. Covert behavior is the thinking process, involving symbols and meanings.
2. Overt behavior is the actual behavior performed by the actor.

Meanings and symbols give human social action (single actor) and social interaction (involves two or more actors engaged in mutual social action). In understanding action, people try to gauge its impact on the other actor involved. In the process of social interaction, people symbolically communicate meanings to the other involved, and the others interpret those symbols and orient their responding action on the basis of their interpretation.

Actors have at least some autonomy. That is, because people have the ability to handle meanings and symbols, they unlike lower animals can make choices in the actions in which they engage. People can interpret situations and create meanings about them. "If people (men) define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" W. I. Thomas.

Charles Horton Cooley, *The Looking Glass Self*:

In the *Looking Glass Self*, we imagine how we are seen through others.

There are three components to the *Looking Glass Self*:

1. The imagination of our appearance to the other person.
2. The imagination of their judgement to that appearance.

3. And, self feeling, such as pride as a result of our imagining others' judgments

Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*:

In order to maintain a stable self-image, people perform for their social audiences. Goffman focused on dramaturgy, or a view that social life is like a stage. Goffman assumed that when individuals interact, they want to present a certain sense of self that will be accepted by others. We all try to have good "performances". We try to present an idealized picture of ourselves and try to hide things that hinder this picture.

1. Front stage is where we put our best foot forward.
2. Back stage is where we don't have to impress others.
3. Outside is neither front nor back

Impression management

Impression management is a dramaturgical concept. It highlights the ways in which persons in the company of others strive to present an image of themselves in a particular way and guarding themselves against unexpected actions.

Groups and Societies:

The essence of society is to be found in actors and action: human society is to be seen as consisting of acting people, and the life of the society is to be seen as consisting of their actions.

Criticisms

Of all the presumed difficulties of the symbolic interactionist paradigm, two stand forth as most critical: (1) limited consideration of human emotions, and (2) unconcern with social structure. One is that it Symbolic Interactionism is not psychological enough and the other is that Symbolic Interactionism is not sociological enough.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There are a multitude of books and articles written on the topic of homosexuality, and most address the subject of coming out. The following review is divided into six sub-categories – numbers and possible causes of homosexuality, homophobia and myths, coming out vs. staying in the closet, parental reactions, religious views, and work relations. Although this review is not exhaustive, together it makes an argument for investigating the coming out process.

Homosexuality and the Social Construction of Homosexuality

Recently, new research in the area of genetics has uncovered evidence about what may drive and shape sexual orientation, namely for men. And though there are still unanswered questions, this much seems certain: “sexual orientation is largely innate, dominated by genetics perhaps less powerful than the chromosomal information that dictates physical attribute, such as height, but strong compared with heredity’s influence on other behaviors. Scientist’s estimate that a solid sense of self-worth is perhaps 30 to

40 percent inherited, which allows for powerful environmental influences; shyness, perhaps 50 percent; height, perhaps 90 percent. Male sexual orientation, according to new estimates, may be as much as 70 percent determined at birth (Blum, 1998).”

No one is sure, but the most reliable estimate – based on surveys of sexual behavior, which probably underestimate – is that 2 to 3 percent of men and not quite 2 percent of women have a same sex orientation. This number accounts for 5 million Americans (Blum 1998, p.84). This is a much smaller number than the 25 million (based on the much-quoted statistic that one in ten people in this country is lesbian, gay, or bisexual). In *The Journey Out*, Pollack and Schwartz (1995) are cautious in their estimates noting that the odds on the one in ten claim being true is pretty slim.

“Freud proposed the idea that the cause of homosexuality was a domineering mother, an assertion that prompted millions of women over the years to wonder, whether being a meeker person would have made the child grow up straight. Psychologists also theorized that gays were the product of weak or emotionally distant fathers, or of neurotic family life. Little tested, these explanations became popular wisdom; moreover, the American Psychiatric Association kept homosexuality in its diagnostic manual of mental disorders until 1973 (Blum, 1998).”

In the 1970’s, the Kinsey Institute did a study of 1,500 subjects that included both homosexuals and heterosexuals. This study helped to remove the myth of the guilty parent. “It provided a compelling portrait of a group of people who are distinctive from an early age. By chronicling such visible early behaviors, the Kinsey Study suggested genetics was involved (Blum, 1998).”

Working together in the early 1990's, psychologist Michael Baily and psychiatrist Richard Pillard did a series of studies on families of gay men and women. "Among identical twins, if one brother was gay, the other brother was gay 52 percent of the time. Among fraternal twins, the rate was 22 percent. The numbers were essentially the same for women. Homosexuality, Baily and Pillard found, fit the classic profile for inheritance: The more genetically alike someone was to a gay sibling, the more likely that person also was gay (Blum, 1998)."

Dean Hamer, a geneticist at the National Cancer Institute, wanted to see how this transfer might work. Hammer, was aware of the fact, that the men Baily and Pillard studied had an unusually high number of gay male relatives on the mother's side. So, he examined the genealogy of the 40 families with at least two gay brothers to see if the same pattern emerged. It did: While the father's side showed no pattern. Male cousins and uncles on the mother's side were two to three times more likely to be gay (Blum, 1998).

"Whatever genes might be involved, Hamer figured, would be on the X chromosome. When he scanned the X of gay brothers, in 82 percent of his samples he found distinctive genetic markings in one region. He then repeated the study, this time looking at the DNA of gay brothers, straight brothers, and lesbian women, and again got significant results: 67 percent of the gay brothers had the same markings on the X. But, the surprise was that the straight men also shared telltale markings at that spot, only these imprints differed from those found in the DNA of gay men. On the lesbians' X chromosomes, however, the region showed no consistent marks (Blum, 1998)."

“Hamer could not say exactly what he’d found. It wasn’t a ‘gay gene,’ and it did not apply to women. Still, it was a genetic region clearly involved in setting male sexual preference. Put together with the work from Baily, Pillard, and others, Hamer’s study signaled a new era in the science of sexual orientation (Blum, 1998).”

Although there seems to be a lot of information taking the firm belief that there is a genetic predisposition to homosexuality, “coming out” and living a “gay” lifestyle are socially constructed. Human beings construct reality through interaction. “Sociological analysis of homosexuality identity formation begins with an examination of social contexts and patterns of interaction that make homosexuality personally relevant. ‘Becoming homosexual’ involves the accumulation of a series of sexual meanings that predispose people to identify themselves subsequently as homosexual. The meanings of feelings or activities, sexual or otherwise, are not self-evident. Before people can identify themselves in terms of social condition or category, they must (a) learn that a social category representing the activity or feeling exists; (b) learn that other people occupy the social category; (c) learn that their own socially constructed needs and interests are more similar to those who occupy the social category than those who don’t; (d) begin to identify with those included in the social category; (e) decide that they qualify for membership in the social category on the basis of activity and feelings in various settings; (f) elect to label themselves in terms of the social category, this is, define themselves as ‘being’ the social category in contexts where category membership is relevant (e.g. self-definition as homosexual); and (g) incorporate and absorb these situationally linked identities into their self-concepts over time (Troiden, 1986, p. 49).”

Homophobia and Myths about Homosexuality

In a society full of prejudice, there is no other quite like homophobia.

“Mainstream writers, politicians, and cultural leaders who hate Jews or Blacks or Asians, but who have since accepted the unwritten rules that forbid public expression of those prejudices still denounce gays with impunity. For such people, ‘gays are the other in a way that Jews, Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians are not. After all, they can look at Jewish, or Hispanic or Black or Asian family life and see something that, in its chief components – husband, wife, children, etc. – is essentially a variation of their own lives; yet when they look at gays or, rather, at the image of gays that has been fostered both by the mainstream culture and by the gay subculture – they see [creatures] whose lives seem to be different from theirs in every possible way (Bawer, 1993, p.81).”

Most people who condemn homosexuals are not bad people. More often they’re uninformed. They are not unintelligent but uninformed. They may not be aware that they know any homosexuals, and at the same time, society they live in may help to perpetuate a variety of strange, disturbing, but unrepresentative images of homosexuals. Another reason for their homophobic reactions may be that they are insecure about their own sexual orientation, and thus may be rendered especially uncomfortable by any exposure to people who are openly gay. Or, they may believe that to accord homosexuals full civil rights would be to attack the institution of marriage and invite social breakdown – an argument that is valid only if you assume that most husbands and fathers are suppressing powerful homosexual urges and that in a society where homosexuality did not pose so many difficulties they would be living with other men (Bawer, 1993, p.90).

Coming Out vs. Staying in the Closet

First let me begin this sub-category by saying there is no right or wrong answer to the question of, is coming out better than staying in the closet, and visa-versa. Telling other people about sexual orientation, “coming out,” is a personal decision. “Whether or not a person is ready to come out depends on how strong they feel, what questions they are willing and able to answer, how much support the need and can expect, and their stage of self-acceptance. People also need to consider the nature of their relationships with family, friends, and community (Pollack and Schwartz, 1995, p. 8).”

Stanley Segel and Ed Lowe, Jr. (1995) offer a framework as to how coming out occurs. They say, “accepting homosexuality requires profound changes in the self and in social relationships. The change happens over time, through a series of successive events that help serve to deconstruct cultural ideas and lead to learning new social roles, the sum of which defines being gay (Siegal, 1995, p.113).” Siegal and Lowe continue that the transition takes place in three phases.

“In the first, a gay man may acknowledge his feelings in private, usually to another gay man. In telling, however hesitantly, he begins the process of announcing to the world who he is, of advancing his self-definition from heterosexual to homosexual, of exploring and experimenting, while still modifying his public behavior in accordance with the responses of others (Siegal, 1995, p.113).”

“The second phase is marked by his social debut into a small group of other gays, the beginning of a public coming out. Social identification with gay men helps to shift a

persons self concept homosexual, the dominate societies language for who he is, to gay man, a new defining category with its own social rules and cultural knowledge (Siegal, 1995, p. 114).”

Siegal and Lowe finish by saying that “a person supported by a strong sense of community, solidifies his status as a gay man, having traveled the journey that began with feeling alienated for his different-ness and culminated in his arrival at self-perception that made him feel proud (Siegal, 1995, p. 114).”

But, coming out is not that easy, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals comprise a sexual minority that may be a basis for discrimination in American society. “Bias based on sexual identity pervades American’s culture (social norms, codes of behavior, customs, etc.), institutions (governmental agencies, religious organizations, educational systems, professional affiliations, etc.), and private interpersonal relationships (families, friendship networks, co-workers, etc.). Acts of bigotry are enacted in the form of civil liberty violations, discriminatory treatment in the public sector, and psychological and physical assaults. This malaise of hostile sentiment and resultant overt forms of discrimination have a negative impact on the lives of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals – causing psychological distress, impinged careers and social interactions, and physical harm (Bridgewater, 1997, p. 65).” It maybe only one of these factors or any combination of them that help make the choice for an individual to remain in or come out of the closet.

Parental Reactions

“For many gay and lesbian youths, the most difficult decision to make after recognizing, and then accepting to some degree, their nontraditional sexual orientation is to reveal to their parents that they will not be fulfilling the heterosexual dreams of the parents (Savin-Williams, 1989, p.1).”

“Although parents often react in a less than ideal fashion after learning of their child’s same-sex attractions, limited research indicates that most eventually arrive at tolerance or acceptance of their son’s or daughter’s sexual orientation (Savin-Williams, 1998).”

“The process of coming out is not an easy one and a period of uncertainty, disruption, and in more tempestuous cases, chaos is often created within the family. Various writers have proposed paradigms by which parents evolve through a series of stages from initial shock to eventual acceptance of their child. According to Mahoney (1994), parents mourn the loss of the heterosexual identity of their child and their hopes, dreams, and expectations for a traditional life for their lesbian or gay child; the lack of grandchildren and the special relationship of being in the grandparent role; their perceived lack of success as parents and as individuals; and the improbability of changing their child’s orientation (p.24-25).

Savin-Williams and Dube (1998), propose six categories including shock and five stages that parents may go through. Shock is not considered to be a stage but an initial reaction to the disclosure by a child that she or he is gay/lesbian. Denial provides a buffer zone, a time for parents to re-gain their bearings and equilibrium. Perhaps at some level the parents know the truth but refuse to believe the information, dismiss the child’s homosexuality as only a phase, or search for counter

evidence. Denial can last only so long before a sense of control vanishes. Parents then react with (anger), agitation, dismay, or rage at their child; sometimes it leads to rejection or physical abuse. As a defensive maneuver, parents search for an external cause for their child's homosexuality and become angry at this perceived perpetrator. A bad second parent, an 'alternative' peer group, or a gay teacher may be imputed. By singling out an external cause, a parent projects blame and thus abate her or his feelings of guilt.

Bargaining is an attempt to regain equilibrium by working out a deal. Religious parents may beseech God for redemption. If the child renounces this temporary aberration, then the parent will pretend it never happened. As parents move toward acceptance they bargain with the child to tell absolutely no one, sometimes including the other parent, and never again discuss the issue. Parents may send the child to a religious counselor or psychotherapist in futile attempts to proselytize or cure him or her. These attempts represent the way in which parents regard their child's sexuality – as a phase or illness

The fourth stage of development is characterized by depression and in some cases resigned tolerance. This is the anger of stage two turned inward, a guilt parents feel for not recognizing their child's condition early enough to change the outcome or for causing a child to be gay or lesbian. Parents experience considerable shame and humiliation and may distance themselves from others. Many parents are saddened by the life they believe their child must endure. Consistent with societal stereotypes, they only imagine the sexual aspects of being gay, believe that their child will inevitably be lonely in his or her old age, or face discrimination that will result in the child leading a clandestine life. These beliefs may cause further depression, but they signify that parents are beginning the process of acknowledging that their son or daughter is not going to be heterosexual

Acceptance is the final stage. Support groups, educational materials, and mass media presentations are thought to be instrumental in moving parents toward acceptance, which implies they have essentially completed their mourning and are able to acknowledge their circumstances – they are parents of gay children. During this stage, family equilibrium is restored and the subject is no longer a family secret. Although, very few parents attain the status of a proud, self-professed parent of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual child (Savin-Williams, 1998).

Religious Views

The subject of homosexuality triggers UN-Christian ugliness in some Christian communities and churches. Time and again, in one denomination after another, homosexuality proves to be the exception to the rule of Christian love.

“Most of this countries religious institutions display deeply ambivalent feelings about gay issues. In many cases, these ambivalences are the source of great controversy among church leaders and within their congregations. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, is currently embroiled in a divisive debate over homosexuality. In 1992, the Vatican issued a statement outlining the church’s position that homosexuality is an ‘objective disorder.’ Catholics should in effect ‘love the sinner, but hate the sin’ (Pollack and Schwartz, 1995, p. 82).”

While many religious communities and institutions are debating their church’s policies on homosexuality, some organizations are taking the debate into the larger community. Today, the most vocal group denouncing homosexuals is the radical Christian right. “They believe simply that homosexuality is an abomination, that all homosexuals are damned, and that all homosexuals are a threat to ‘traditional’ American families. They base their beliefs on their interpretations of a handful of Biblical passages, texts which other religious institutions also use in their debates (Pollock and Schwartz, 1995, p. 83).”

Homosexual life and Christianity are not inconsistent. Contemporary Biblical scholars have showed that there is no real scriptural basis for the condemnation of homosexuals. To begin with it should be stated that society was structured very

differently in Biblical times than it is today. It is hard to make comparisons between then and now. “The Ancients’ sexual roles and sexual conventions were radically different from ours, as was their understanding of sexual emotions and sexual identity. Certain acts that most of us would consider wrong – such as Abraham fathering a child by Sarah’s slave girl Hagar – Are recounted approvingly in the Bible, while other actions that we would not take seriously at all are condemned as abominations punishable by death. The English language, moreover, has no exact equivalents for most of the ancient words that bind men to each other or to women, and the ancients would have had no equivalents for some of our words (Bawer, 1993, p. 128).”

Two passages most often cited from the Old Testament as condemnations of homosexuality are: Leviticus 18:22 and Genesis 18:16 – 19:29. And, from the New Testament, they are the teachings of St. Paul, particularly in Romans 1:26 – 27, and 1 Corinthians 6:9 – 11. It then should be said that, “when one reads the Bible on these matters, it is important to recognize that sexuality is a branch of scientific knowledge like any other. The Bible is a book of spiritual teachings, not of scientific revelation. God did not use the bible to explain to the ancient Hebrews how to build an airplane or construct a telephone system or manufacture antibiotic, in the same way, He did not use it to correct ancient misconceptions about human sexuality (Pollack and Schwartz, 1995, p. 84).”

Work Attitudes

“The threat of job discrimination causes many gay men and lesbian women to keep their sexual orientation secret at work (Day and Schoenrade, 1997, p. 147).”

Many U.S. firms are incorporating diversity management into their human resource practices and some employers are including sexual orientation in their list of diversity. Many States and Municipalities are non-discrimination legislation that requires equal employment rights for lesbians and gay men. Firms are publicly acknowledging their commitment to creating discrimination free workplaces for homosexual employees, and some firms are including sexual orientation as a protected class in their anti-discrimination policies (Day and Schoenrade, 1997).

However, in spite of diversity initiations, intolerance of lesbian and gay people still exists in today's society and carries over to the work place (Day and Schoenrade, 1997). Previous research makes it clear that lesbians and gay men fear discrimination in the workplace. In a study of 203 lesbians, 60% reported that they expect job discrimination if their sexual orientation was known, including termination, harassment, taunts, ostracism, or even violence (Levine, 1984). Levine also states that, studies of gay men's perceptions of job discrimination report similar results. Today, in order to avoid public knowledge of sexual orientation, many gay and lesbian people find it necessary to conceal their identity.

CHAPTER II

METHODS

Qualitative Research:

In sociology the work of the “Chicago school” in the 1920s and 1930s established the importance of qualitative research. Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subjects matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals lives. The word qualitative implies an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not rigorously examined, or measured (if measured at all), in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such research emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to the questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 2).

Participants

This research will be based on information retrieved from interviews conducted with self-disclosed gay men. It will investigate how their decision to disclose or not disclose their homosexual identity has affected their lives. “The contextualization of social activities, issues, and processes involves more than providing a descriptive overview of the encompassing context. It initiates an effort to discern and articulate the linkage between the phenomenon of interest and the actual social world in which it is embedded and sustained or reproduced (Snow and Anderson, 1991).”

A total of 12 homosexual men who have disclosed their sexual orientation (at veering levels) make up the sample of convenience.

Sampling

In order to conduct this research, a sample of convenience was used to find participant’s (N = 12). This non-probability sampling technique uses participants in the study as informants to locate new participants and so on until the needed number is filled.

Preliminary access to perspective interviews was gained through one of two different sources. The first relied on personal acquaintances that have disclosed their sexual orientation to the author. The second source used friends and acquaintances as informants to gain access to future subjects.

Interviewing

The interview component of this research utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews, that examined the coming out experience, before/after effects of coming out, perceived reactions of family members and other people, and the evaluation of any services utilized.

Interview Questions

Although these questions were not all that were asked, the following provide some idea as to the questions that were asked: (see Appendix A)

1. What was the reason you choose to come out of the closet?
2. Who are the people you have told? And, why?
3. Who are the people you have not told? And, why?
4. What perceptions do you feel people had to the news?
5. Do you feel better off or not for coming out? And, why?
6. What were the biggest challenges you faced? And, Why?
7. Etc.

Writing Style

Throughout this study, I make use of the personal pronoun I. Although the use of this pronoun has been discouraged in the past, many of the major sociological

journals like *American Sociological Review*, *Qualitative Health Research*, *International Sociology*, and *Social Theory*, as well as others, have accepted its use. (See *American Sociological Review*, Volume 65, Number 2, Page 234 for example.)

Contributions and Limitations

This research is designed to look at the issue of coming out from the perspective of self-disclosed gay men. It will add valuable information to what is already known about coming out. If nothing else, it will help in the understanding of the coming out process, for both those coming out and others affected by someone's decision to come out, in the Rio Grande Valley. If we begin to understand the factors and effects of the coming out experience, we can develop strategies to help ease tension between people.

Since this study deals with homosexuality, a stigmatized group, it may face a few limitations. People may not always be open to the discussion of this topic. Also, people who may consider themselves "out" may still not feel comfortable discussing their sexual orientation with a stranger and in doing so their story will not be heard.

Life Story

When I set out to begin this project, I wanted to look at what factors may be present that lead one person to disclose their sexual orientation to others but may not lead another to disclose his sexual orientation. Along with this, I set out to learn the meanings

other gay men give to “coming out “ and what factors effect a persons level of “coming out “ and “being out”.

In this portion of my methods section, I want to give my own personal account of discovery, acceptance, and disclosure of my own homosexual identity. This method follows the research of Norman Denzin, *On Understanding Emotions* (1984a), which offered a phenomenological analysis of emotionality as a facet of lived experience. This research applies that perspective to the experiences of homosexual men. I assume that coming out is a form of self-experience in which individuals negotiate their discourse through interaction. As well as Denzin, this also follows the more recent work of William Tierney. Tierney states that by using life histories, “the author has the ability to develop a reflexive text. Such a text enables readers to understand the author a bit better, to come to grips with the individual whose life is retold, and to reflect back on their own lives (Tierney, 2000, p. 551).”

I really don't remember when I first realized that I was gay but I do know it was from a pretty young age. I knew that I was gay and that I needed to hide my feelings even before I truly understood sexuality. I would be lying if I were to write that I knew exactly how I knew I was gay, it was just something I knew, I cant explain it.

With puberty, confusion set in. I was well aware of societies norms towards sexuality, yet I was developing attractions towards males. Talk about scary, even at that young age, I was aware of the negative sanctions society placed on homosexuality.

I remember once, standing in line after church at a local cafeteria. I must have been thirteen or fourteen and was still not completely sure of all the implications of being gay, but I for sure knew that I was sexually attracted to other males. Well anyway, there I

was in line and in front of me and my family were two gay men. I probably was standing there staring with juvenile envy. I remember my father turning around and rolling his eyes in a rather disgusted manner which was odd being that dad never talked poorly about anyone. Ever! With that expression, I clearly understood or at least perceived that dad did not like homosexuals. I remember making my own negative facial grimes to match my fathers. I felt horrible, there I was making fun of myself and I knew it. What else was I supposed to do? I have never forgot that moment.

My teen years were rather uneventful. Although I never acted on my feelings, I was always more attracted to boys than to girls. I hung around a good group of friends and was never pressured into dating so I never did. I wanted to fit in and knew that I should be dating girls like all my other friends but I really wanted to be with boys. It was during this time that I really began to become confused about my sexual orientation but where could I go for advice and even if I knew where to go, I would have been too scared to ask for help. I just kept my feelings to myself.

After high school, I went off to college away from home. For the first time I felt I could open up a little more but still never told any one how I felt. While away, I was able to meet a couple of gay guys but only occasionally through straight friends and never in an environment where I could talk to them, not that I would have. If anything, I realized that there were other men in the world beside myself that shared the same feelings and that was comforting.

Being young and having feelings towards another member of your own sex is rough. Nobody would choose to go through this deliberately. I really began to feel the pressure that society wanted me to date girls, after all, all my friends had girl friends and

that was the thing to do. I had to fit in. By this time I was in a college fraternity and the pressure to conform was even greater. I met a really great girl and began to date her although our relationship never felt right. We dated on and off for three years. After a few months of being together, I would tell myself to face the fact that I was gay and would break up with her then I would try to convince myself that I was not gay and get back together with her and the cycle would continue. Until recently, she never knew the reason behind our, or should I say my, frequent break ups with her. Hurting her and not being truthful to her remains one of my most regretful moments.

I guess I really began to understand and accept, at least somewhat to myself, that I was gay when I was nineteen. I was unhappy with myself and really wanted to let people know who I was but feared rejection. My grades really began to suffer around this time and I guess I was at the pinnacle of confusion about my sexual orientation. I mean I knew I was gay but did not know what to do about it. I did not know where to turn for advice. I guess I finally admitted it to myself for real when I was 19. After fantasizing about it for many years, I had my first gay sexual experience. I was scared to death and although we did not do much, for the first time, sex felt comfortable. I had no doubt I was gay after that but I still did not know what to do about it. Not long after this I thought I would test the waters and I told a few of my close female friends. We all cried, not with sadness but with joy over learning that our friendship was strong enough to handle this new situation. Even though my friends never had a negative comment about my sexual orientation, I was still unhappy. My family was the most important part of my life and I wanted to tell them but I was afraid that they would reject me and I would not be able to support myself

if they cut me off. I guess I was horribly depressed and I was doing so poorly in school, I had to drop out.

I moved in with my sister in a larger city and took a job as a waiter. As I got to know each of my new coworkers, I would let them know that I was gay. This was easy to do because another waiter and my boss were both gay and nobody at work had a problem with them. This helped me tremendously yet I was still not out to my family; I was about 22 years old at this time. This all changed one evening when I returned home from work. I was really feeling down, just a bad day at the office. I was under the impression that my sister was not home and upon arriving at home I threw my shoes across the room to get my aggressions out. Well, my sister came in and told me, “ Just because you are gay that does not give you the right to come home in a bad mood all the time!” My jaw hit the floor. She then proceeded to tell me that it was OK that I was gay and that I did not need to hide it or lie about it to her anymore. We spent the rest of the evening talking and crying about it and for the first time, at least one member of my family knew who I really was and she still loved me. It felt so good to be able to be myself that within a week I called my parents to tell them. Yes, I was a little scared and thought it might be easier to do it over the phone. I picked up the phone and talked to Mom for a little bit before getting to the heart of the matter. I was quite a bit emotional and it took a lot to get it out. I finally told her that I thought I might be gay and silence fell over the phone for what seemed like an eternity. When she did speak she asked me why I thought I might be gay and I told her that I knew I was gay because of the feeling I had inside. We talked and cried for quite a long time on the phone before hanging up. Before we hung up though, my mother assured me that everything was fine and that she loved me. I was still upset

after hanging up the phone but I felt good about my decision. About an hour passed and my mother called to check up on me and reassured me that both her and dad still loved me. Not long after that, Dad called to say the same thing as well as tell me that he and my mom had made plane reservations so that I could come home. I took my parents up on their offer and flew home the next day. I wanted so badly to get home to see their faces, I new I could really assess the situation once I say their faces. When I got off the plane, I could tell that everything was going to be fine. Both Mom and Dad greeted me with loving hugs and I could tell by their expressions that everything was fine. It was as if nothing had changed, they still loved me. When we got home from the airport, we talked about this new news for a little while and they expressed their concerns but reassured me that my happiness was the most important thing and that they would support me. Finally I had told the most important people in my life that I was gay and more importantly, they accepted me and still loved me. After telling them, telling other people was no problem. I don't tell everyone I meet that I am gay and never will but if asked I wont deny it. I look at each situation and assess how I think others will react. I now pick and choose whom I tell. Being gay is only one aspect of my life and there are so many other qualities that people should know about than the fact that I am a gay man.

To me coming out was about being honest and it was about the future. I knew that one-day I was going to meet someone and I wanted to be able to share that person in all aspects of my life and that included being a part of my family. Coming out at first met accepting to myself that I was gay and that that was OK. After that, coming out meant sharing my true self with close friends at first and finally with family. Today coming out and being out for myself go hand in hand. Many people know that I am gay and I feel

great about my own situation but I make conscious decisions of whether or not to disclose my sexual orientation with each new person I meet. Coming out does not change the person you are. People are the same the day before they come out, the day they come out, and the day after that. The only difference is that they have made a decision to let other people know who they really are.

Purpose

The ultimate goal of this research is to describe the coming out process of homosexual men in the lower Rio Grande Valley. By giving a description of all the people affected (gay men, families and other people, co-workers, etc.) and understand the support given or lack of support, that we may begin to see the positive and negative affects that disclosing a homosexual identity has.

CHAPTER III

DATA and FINDINGS

This chapter, devoted to data and findings is divided into two parts. The first section introduces each of the 12 participants and gives some brief demographic information as well as identifying what each participant mean by coming out. In the second section of this chapter, I present tables based on information learned through interviewing each participant. Since this is a qualitative study these tables are not intended for any other purpose than easy clarification of participants. Miles and Huberman (Qualitative Data Analysis) stress two basic modes of presentation: text (with varying degrees of detail and organization), associated with organized displays in either matrix or network form. Miles and Huberman add that these modes are an enormous help in drawing coherent meanings from data and confirming and deepening conclusions. (Miles and Huberman, 1994) The tables I present follow the style laid out by Miles and Huberman (Qualitative Data Analysis), for clarifying data, in which reading across the rows gives a thumbnail profile of each participant and reading down the columns allows us to make comparisons between participants.

Section I

I would first like to introduce the twelve individuals I interviewed for this project. I have changed their names to protect their identities and I do not mention the town they live in although they all live within Hidalgo County.

Adam is a 42-year-old, gay, Hispanic male. Adam has a bachelor's degree and teaches high school. Adam makes around \$38,000.00 a year and is Catholic. Adam had his first homosexual experience when he was 19 and began to come out shortly after this. To Adam, coming out means "being truthful to people you count on. It's telling people that can handle it, that you are gay."

Bart is a 28-year-old, gay, white male. Bart has an MBA and works as an accountant. Bart makes around \$60,000.00 a year and is Lutheran. Bart had his first homosexual experience when he was 19 and away at college and began to come out shortly after this. To Bart, coming out means that "family and friends know you are gay."

Chuck is a 34-year-old, gay, white male. Chuck has a Bachelors degree and is in retail management for a national discount store. Chuck makes around \$47,000.00 a year and is Methodist. Chuck had his first homosexual experience when he was in college. Chuck began to come out when he was 30. To Chuck, coming out means, "letting down the curtain and actually letting people know who you really are instead of being deceitful and hiding your true feelings."

Don is a 59-year-old, gay, Hispanic male. Don has over 18years of education and is a real estate broker. Don makes around \$130,000.00 a year and although not Christian says he is spiritual. Don was married and had 3 children when he had his first

homosexual experience at the age of 38. Don came out to his wife soon after this experience and after an unsuccessful try at counseling, they get divorced. To Don coming out means, “acknowledging to yourself that you are gay and accepting it. It also means acquiring some degree of willingness to share this with people you trust.”

Eddie is 29-year-old, gay man. Eddie is working on a Bachelors degree and works as a fitness trainer. Eddie makes around \$15,000.00 a year and is a member of The Church of Christ. Eddie was 5 when he had his first homosexual experience and did not care to discuss it. Eddie was 26 when he began to come out. To Eddie, coming out means, “to be comfortable with your sexual orientation with your friends but not to shout it out to the world.”

Fred is a 40-year-old, gay, Hispanic male. Fred went to a technical school and works as a massage therapist. Fred makes around \$35,000.00 a year and does not belong to any religious group. Fred was 20 when he had is first homosexual experience. Fred was married previously from the age of 17 to 19 and has one son. Fred was 20 when he began to come out. To Fred, coming out means, “being able to be yourself openly.”

Gerry is a 27-year-old, gay, Hispanic male. Gerry has some college but is not currently working on finishing his degree. Gerry makes around \$18,000.00 a year and works with kids in child protective services. Gerry is Agnostic. Gerry had his first homosexual experience when he was 16 and began to come out when he was 17. To Gerry, coming out means, “taking pride in who I am. It’s being totally out, letting everybody find out and standing up for who you are.”

Henry is a 31-year-old, gay, Hispanic male. Henry went to technical school and works in a large state bureracy. Henry makes around \$25,000.00 and is catholic. Henry

was 21 when he had his first homosexual experience and began to come out at that time. To Henry, coming out means, “that your family accepts you for whom you are.”

John is a 31-year-old, gay, white male. John has some college and has no plans to finish. John works in his family’s business and makes around \$74,000.00 a year. John is Presbyterian. John was 18 when he had his first homosexual experience and began to come out when he was 22 years old. To John, coming out means, “to stop hiding and share the truth even if the outcome is bad.”

Ken is a 19-year-old, gay, Hispanic male. Ken is working on a bachelor’s degree and currently makes \$10,000.00 working as a waiter. Ken is catholic. Ken says that he really doesn’t remember when he began to come out, he says that he and his family just always knew that he was gay and that it was never really a big deal. Ken says that he guesses he really came out when he hit puberty because that’s when he understood sexuality. “I came out early.” To Ken, coming out means, “being yourself, I’ve always been out I guess.”

Lenny is a 54-year-old, bisexual, Hispanic male. Lenny has a master’s degree and teaches. Lenny makes around \$32,000.00 a year and is catholic. Lenny had his first homosexual experience when he was 21 but explains that he did have two other experiences prior to this, one when he was 8 and done when he was 14. Lenny began to come out when he was 21. To Lenny, coming out means, declaring, accepting, rejoicing, and being happy in whom you are.

And finally, Matt is a 36-year-old, gay, Hispanic male. Matt went to vocational school and works as a hairdresser. Matt makes around \$18,000.00 a year and is catholic. Matt had his first homosexual experience when he was 16 and began to come out when

he was 18. To Matt, coming out means, “being free and so what if other people don’t like it.

Section II

Tables

TABLE I: Demographic profile

TABLE II: Sexual orientation

TABLE III: Meaning of “coming out.”

TABLE IV: Who is it relevant to come out to?

TABLE V: Whom have you told?

TABLE VI: Should everyone come out?

TABLE I: Demographic Profile

Participant	Age	Race	Religion	Education	Type of Job	Income
Adam	42	Hispanic	Catholic	BA	Teacher (H.S.)	\$38,000.00
Bart	28	Caucasian	Lutheran	MBA	Accountant	\$60,000.00
Chuck	34	Caucasian	Methodist	BA	Manager	\$47,000.00
Don	59	Hispanic	Non-Christian/spiritual	18 + years	Real Estate	\$130,000.00
Eddie	29	Other	Church of Christ	Working on BA	Fitness Trainer	\$15,000.00
Frank	40	Hispanic	None	Technical School	Massage Therapist	\$35,000.00
Gerry	27	Hispanic	Agnostic	Some college	Child Services	\$18,000.00
Henry	31	Hispanic	Catholic	Technical School	State Bureaucracy	\$25,000.00
John	31	Caucasian	Presbyterian	Some college	Family Business	\$74,000.00
Ken	19	Hispanic	Catholic	Working on BA	Waiter	\$10,000.00
Lenny	54	Hispanic	Catholic	MS	Teacher	\$32,000.00
Matt	36	Hispanic	Catholic	Vocational School	Hairdresser	\$18,000.00

TABLE II: Sexual Orientation

Participant	Sexual Orientation	Age when understood being gay	Did being gay bother you then?	Does being gay bother you now?	First Homosexual Experience	Age at Coming Out
Adam	Gay	19 or 20	Kind of	No	19	20
Bart	Gay	Always	Yes	At times	19	19
Chuck	Gay	23	Yes	No	College	30
Don	Gay	38	Yes	No	38	39
Eddie	Gay	10 or 11	Yes	Yes	5	26
Frank	Gay	20	Yes	No	20	20
Gerry	Gay	13 or 14	Not really	No	16	17
Henry	Gay	5	Yes	No	21	21
John	Gay	Always	Yes	No	18	22
Ken	Gay	Always	No	No	16	Always
Lenny	Bisexual	5	Yes	No	21	21
Matt	Gay	9 or 10	Yes	no	16	18

TABLE III: Meaning of "coming out"

Participant	What does coming out mean to you?
Adam	"Being truthful to people you count on. It's telling people that can handle it, that you are gay."
Bart	"Family and friends know you are gay."
Chuck	"Letting down the curtain and actually letting people know who you really are instead of being deceitful and hiding your true feelings."
Don	"Acknowledging to yourself that you are gay and accepting it. It also means acquiring some degree of willingness to share this with people you trust."
Eddie	"To be comfortable with your sexual orientation with your friends but not to shout it out to the world."
Frank	"Being able to be yourself openly."
Gerry	"Taking pride in who I am. It's being totally out, letting everybody find out and standing up for who you are."
Henry	"That your family accepts you for whom you are."
John	"To stop hiding and share the truth even if the outcome is bad."
Ken	"Being yourself, I've always been out I guess."
Lenny	"Declaring, accepting, rejoicing, and being happy in whom you are."
Matt	"Being free and so what if other people don't like it."

TABLE IV: Who is it relevant to come out to?

Participant	Do you tell everyone?	Family	Friends	Work	Church
Adam	No	Yes	Yes (not all)	No	No
Bart	No	Depends	No	No	No
Chuck	No	Yes	Yes	Depends	No
Don	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Eddie	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Frank	No	Yes	Yes	Depends	No
Gerry	No	Yes	Yes	Test it out	No
Henry	No	No	Yes	No	No
John	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Ken	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Lenny	No	No	No	No	No
Matt	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

TABLE V: Whom have you told?

Participant	Mother	Father	Brother	Sister	Grandparents	Other family	Gay Friends	Straight Friends	Co-workers	Other
Adam	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	No, it's not necessary	No	Yes	Most	A few	Doctor
Bart	Yes	No, but knows	No	No, but knows	No	Aunt	Yes	Some	No	N/A
Chuck	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Would have if still alive.	N/A	Yes	Yes	For the most part.	Doctor
Don	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Ex-wife, Daughters	Yes	Most	Yes	Doctor
Eddie	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Some	No	N/A
Frank	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Ex-wife	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A
Gerry	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Everyone	Yes	Yes	Yes	Doctor
Henry	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Some	No	N/A
John	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	No	No	Yes	Some	No, but some know	Doctor
Ken	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Doctor
Lenny	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	Cousin, Aunt	Yes	Some	No, but some know	Doctor
Matt	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	No	No, but they know	Yes	Yes	Yes	Doctor

TABLE VI: Should everyone come out?

Participant	Should everyone come out?
Adam	"No, its up to the individual. It may help others out though if they do, but I'm one to talk."
Bart	"No, it's up to each person."
Chuck	"Yes, so that we become even more recognized. I agree that sexuality shouldn't be an issue but when straight people make it an issue then the only way we can make a difference is to show them the positive effects and outcomes that homosexuality holds. Gay professional people making a positive impact on this country. I want to show people that we are not a bunch of limp wristed slackers that do nothing, but that we are people that actually run businesses, that are doctors, teachers, lawyers, and yes there are a few losers out there but for the most part there is something good in every gay man (and woman) and we help make a positive impact on society. Therefor we have to come out so that people can see we are there sons (and daughters), there neighbors, and co-workers and that we are not really any different from anybody else."
Don	"No, some people don't feel the necessity to come out in their life."
Eddie	"No, it their choice."
Frank	"No, some people have more to loose."
Gerry	"Ideally yes, but each person has to make up their own mind."
Henry	"Yes, but in their own way."
John	"No, to each his own."
Ken	"Yes, how else are people going to better understand homosexuality?"
Lenny	"No, it's up to the individual."
Matt	"Yes!"

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I have taken the 27 questions asked (see Appendix A) of each participant and have grouped them into 20 topics; each will be discussed under its own heading.

Sexual Orientation of Participants

To begin with, I asked each respondent whether or not he was gay, bisexual, or straight. Eleven respondents reported being gay and one, Lenny, reported being bisexual. I felt this was an important question to ask so that I could establish for certain the sexual orientation of each participant. I also felt that self-identification as gay, bisexual, or straight was strong enough evidence to establish a positive understanding of sexual orientation.

Personal Understanding of Being Homosexual

Following identification as gay or bisexual, I wanted to establish when each participant understood for themselves that they were gay and how they new they were gay. Bart, John, and Ken report always knowing that they were gay but not really understanding their feelings until they hit puberty. Henry and Lenny said that they new

they were gay from the age of five. Henry said that he just always knew and Lenny said that he felt different and had boyfriends from that young age. Three participants, Eddie, Gerry, and Matt reported being in puberty when they understood that they were gay. All three said that they had feelings of attractiveness towards boys instead of girls. Adam, Chuck, and Fred were in their early twenties when they realized that they were gay. Both Chuck's and Fred's realization had to do with sex. Chuck said that sex with boys was more fun and Fred said that he had a curiosity about having sex with a man and after having sex, he would not have it any other way. Adam said his realization had more to do with finding a sole mate and has had a 22-year relationship with this person. The final participant, Don, realization also had to do with sex, but Don did not come to his understanding until he was 38. Don was also different in that his first sexual experience with a man occurred as a result of an extra marital affair and his marriage eventually fell apart because of this.

Early Comfort Level with Sexual Orientation

I then wanted to know if each participant was bothered by this realization. One participant, Ken, reported not being bothered. Ken stated that he and his family always knew that he was gay and that it was no big deal. The eleven other participants reported being uncomfortable with being gay at first. All eleven felt uncomfortable about how other people would react upon learning they were gay. Chuck dated girls to hide his true feelings. Henry and Lenny both reported having a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity to

their situation and said that they really did not know what to do or where to turn. Gerry reported wondering why this had happened to him. And, Don reported being ashamed.

Present Comfort Level with Sexual Orientation

After learning about the participants early comfort level with being gay, I wanted to see if their comfort level had changed any over time. All twelve participants' report being comfortable about being gay although at varying levels. Ken reported never being bothered about being gay. Bart worries that some friends may not accept his homosexuality and Eddie is not sure how his family will react if they ever find out he is gay. Adam, Bart and Eddie all worry that their work place may not be tolerant to a gay life style. Don says that he is comfortable with being gay and that he "does not give a fuck what other people think of him now." Gerry and Lenny say that they are at peace with being gay. Chuck, Fred, Henry, and Matt say that they love being gay and would not want to be any other way. And John says that although he is comfortable with being gay know, he would rather be straight if he could be.

When Did Participants begin to Come Out?

I then wanted to know when participants began the coming out process and I wanted to know what factors had led them to begin coming out. Ken reported that he and his family always knew he was gay and that he was more or less always out, but that he really began to come out when he hit puberty and understood what sexuality was about.

Don began to come out at 39, after admitting to his wife that he had had an affair with man. The other ten participants came out between the ages of 17(Gerry) and 30(Chuck), most of which happened in their early twenties (Adam-19, Bart-19, Eddie-26, Fred-20, Henry-21, John-21, and Lenny 21, Matt-18).

Circumstances Leading to Disclosure

The circumstances leading to disclosure were varying. As I have already stated, Ken said that he and his family always knew he was gay and once he understood sexuality, he was out. I also explained that Don came out to his wife after admitting having an extra marital affair with a man. Don and his wife sought marriage counseling, which failed after the counselor told Don to face up to the fact that he was gay. Don's marriage ended in divorce. Bart and Lenny both told their mothers they were gay after being bugged about marriage and having grandchildren. Bart said that he also wanted to be honest with friends and that also helped him come out. Lenny said that moving to an urban area facilitated the process. Matt also moved out of his family's home and this helped him as well. Frank, who had been married between the ages of 17 and 19 and had a son that was going to move in with Frank and his partner and so Frank disclosed his sexual orientation so that he would not have to lie to his son. Henry slept with his best friend's boyfriend and when she found out about their affair, she began to out him to other friends. Andy said that he came out because he became involved in a relationship. The remaining participants, Chuck, Eddie, Gerry, and John as well as Bart stated that honesty was the main reason for coming out. They all stated that it was too much to

handle and that they were tired of living a lie and wanted to be honest about who they were whether that was either to family or to friends.

Who do You Tell?

I then wanted to know if the participants tell everybody they know that they are gay. Unanimously all reported that they don't tell everybody and the reason given for this is that it's not really any of their business. Lenny says that he just does not talk about it. The eleven other participants state that although they don't always tell everybody, they will not deny being gay if asked. Although Adam says that he would never tell anybody at work although no one has ever asked. Also, all participants report that being gay is only one aspect of their lives and that there are many other more important qualities that people should get to know first.

After establishing that the participants chooses whom to disclose to, I wanted to see if the participants felt it was relevant to come out at or to family, friends, work and church.

Relevance of Coming Out to Family

To begin with family, Bart says it depends on the comfort level with your family members and whether or not you think they will be able to handle it and whether or not they really need to know. Henry and Lenny don't think it is necessary to come out to family for the same reasons as Bart. Eddie thinks it is relevant to come out to family

although he has not told anybody in his family. Everybody else said it was relevant and added that family was the most important group to come out to.

Relevance of Coming Out to Friends

The next group was friends. Adam, Bart and Lenny all feel that it is unnecessary to come out to all your friends. They state that although it would be nice, it is important to maintain a certain comfort level with friends and that level must be negotiated with each individual. All the other participants say it is relevant to come out to friends. Except for Don, all the participants came out to friends first and state that other than family, friends are the second most important and at times the most important group to come out to.

Relevance of Coming Out at Work

Following friends I asked about coming out at work. Although all agree that it would be nice to be out at work, this is one place where it is important to truly understand how other people are going to react and all participants said that it is really unnecessary to come out at work. Fear of discrimination is given as a main reason to keep in the closet at work.

Relevance of Coming Out at Church

It was also not important or relevant for any of the participants to be out at church.

Who Have You Disclosed to and Why Did You Disclose to Them

I asked each participant to tell me whom they were out to and why they came out to that person. Unquestionably, the number one reason given by every participant as their number one reason for coming out was so that they could stop living a life full of lies. Honesty about whom they were was the main reason for coming out. Each of the participants except for Eddie and Henry have told their parents. As Chuck said, I told both of them that I was gay because I love them and it was unbearable to lie to them anymore. Bart and Lenny also added that they came out to their parents not only for the reason of being honest but also to stop their mothers from asking about marriage and having grandchildren.

As far as telling siblings, Honesty was also given as the main reason for coming out although not all the participants are out to their siblings. Although Bart is out to his parents and sisters, he has not come out to his brother because he feels that his brother would cut him out of his life. Where as Henry has come out to his brothers and sister but not to his parents. Adam, Don, and John, are all only children and Eddie has not come out to his brothers and sister yet for fear of rejection.

As far as other family members, Frank, Gerry, and Ken are all out to their Grandmothers. Bart is out to his aunt, whom he says is like a second mother and Gerry and Ken are out to their extended families. They all state living honestly as the reason for coming out.

Don came out to his wife after having an affair with a man and has since come out to his daughters. Fred came out to his son because he was living with him and he did not want to lie to him about his partner.

All the participants are out to other gay friends and for the most part they are out to all their friends. "You have to assess how you think your friends are going to act and decide whether or not it is necessary to come out to them."

Others Reactions to Participants Disclosure

I then wanted to see how the reactions of others have been since learning that the participant was gay? I basically got two responses, supportive was the first, and the other was bad at first but good now, although there can be a mix of the two. Adam, Bart, Chuck, Eddie, Gerry, Henry, and Ken all had supportive reactions from others. Henry even said that his brothers and sisters suspected that he was gay and were just waiting for him to disclose. John, Lenny, and Matt were all kicked out of their homes when they told their parents. John and Lenny have since made amends with their families. Matt occasionally talks to his mother but has not seen or heard from his father since he told his parents he was gay. Frank says that some of his family is supportive and that he is "dead" to the other half. When I asked about friends, all participants unanimously say

that they have been supportive although Adam has lost a few. Adam, Bart, and Lenny say its not necessary to come out to all your friends.

Help in Coming Out

I was curious what had helped my participants come out. The most often stated response was meeting and having gay friends. Adam, Bart, Chuck, Eddie, Frank, John, and Matt all gave this as their answer. Frank also said that his son had to move in with him and he did not want to lie to him about his live in partner. Ken said that his parents were a huge support to him in coming out. Gerry did it for himself, he said he just was tired of lying. Henry said the support that his brothers and sister gave him was the most help for him. Lenny said that being away from the valley and in an urban setting helped him the most and similarly; Matt moved out of his parent's home and this helped him. Finally, Don said that he came out so he could get more sexual partners.

Hindrance to Coming Out

I was also curious what had or has been the biggest hindrances to coming out. Bart says that a hindrance for him is that he has to come out at his own pace and that others cannot rush him. Lenny also says that he is his own biggest hindrance. He says that being gay is not all that important to him and he really does not discuss it with many people. Don says that his biggest hindrance was loosing his family and social standing in the community. All the participants say that, overall, the biggest hindrance is how they

think other people are going to react. This is most evident when the participants are asked about work.

Advice sought before Coming Out

I asked my participants if they had sought advice before coming out and if so from whom. Bart asked for help at the University Student Health Center, but said it really did not do him any good and basically he had to figure everything out for himself. Don went to a professional counselor with his wife, but the counselor eventually told Don to face the fact that he was gay. Lenny also sought professional help. Ken sought the advice of his parents and Chuck, Frank, and John all sought advice from gay friends. Adam had the help from his boyfriend. Eddie, Gerry, Henry and Matt never sought advice.

Are Participants Better Off or Not for Coming Out

I asked if the participants felt better off or not for coming out and across the board all twelve say they are better off for coming out even though all twelve have different levels of being out.

Negative Experiences Related to Being Out

I asked if there was a negative experience to being out. Bart, Chuck, and Ken say they have never had a negative experience. Don says he lost contact with his daughters

for many years and both he and Gerry say that being out exposed them to a lifestyle where drugs and alcohol had a negative effect. Both abused alcohol and drugs. Gerry also says that he does not always like being associated with other gay people, like “effeminate bitchy guys.” Eddie and Henry both say that they regret not being able to share their feelings with their families. Eddie has never told anyone in his family and Henry has never told his parents. John, Lenny, and Matt regret losing time with their parents because of their reaction to the news. Finally, Adam is concerned with his work finding out that he is gay although he says he really has no reason to worry.

Positive Experiences Related to Being Out

As far as positive experiences are concerned, coming out and being out has allowed all participants to be and express who they really are. It has freed the burden of hiding from their shoulder. On this question there was unanimous agreement.

Should Every Gay Person Come Out?

I then asked each participant, in their opinion, if every gay person should come out? I wanted to know based on their experience if they thought it important or not to come out. I basically got two answers. The first was that it is not necessary to come out, it should be up to the individual. Adam, Bart, Don, Eddie, Frank, Gerry, John, Lenny, and Matt all feel this way. Each said that although it would be nice, some people have more to lose and therefore, the decision should be up to the individual. The other answer given

was yes. Chuck, Henry, Ken, and Matt feel this way although at varying levels. Henry says that gay men should come out but they should do it in their own way and at their own speed. Chuck, Ken, and Matt all feel that it is important to come out so that homosexuals become more recognized. Chuck added that he feels that sexuality shouldn't be an issue. He states that "when straight people make it an issue then the only way to make a difference is to show them the positive effects and outcomes that homosexuality hold, such as gay professional people making a positive impact on this country. I want to show people that we are not a bunch of limp wristed slackers that do nothing, but that we are people that actually run businesses, that are doctors, teachers, lawyers. Yes there are a few losers out there but for the most part there is something good in every gay man (and woman) and we help make a positive impact on society. Therefore we have to come out so that people can see we are their sons (and daughters), their neighbors, and co-workers and that we are not really any different from anybody else."

FINAL THOUGHTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Upon completion of this project, I feel that I have learned a great deal. I have lived through my own experience of understanding that I am gay, coming to accept that I am gay, and disclosing this news with people I choose to. I have read books on this subject but have never felt satisfied with their versions of coming out stories, only after interviewing my twelve participants do I feel that I have a better understanding of coming out.

I choose Symbolic Interactionism as a theory to use in the investigation of this project. I felt at the beginning and still feel now that only through understanding the meanings people associate with coming out and being out that I could understand this phenomena. Because it is only through interaction that coming out can occur and because interactions are changed as a result, no other theory could have been better suited for this purpose, even though there are other theories, such as Queer Theory.

Following the seven basic principles of Symbolic Interactionism I presented in Chapter One, I would like to draw my conclusions about coming out. To begin with, human beings have a capacity for thought. That is humans don't just act out of instinct but rather assess each situation and decide what the best course of action is. My participants don't disclose their sexual orientation to everyone they meet. Rather they think about their decision and the possible outcomes before they choose to disclose or not disclose.

Second, our thoughts are shaped by our social interaction. In other words, we think about what action we are going to take based on the person with whom we are interacting as well as our own and other peoples' past experiences. For instance when faced with coming out, my participants all say that they had to figure out in their minds (i.e. through thinking) how other people would react before they made the decision to come out to them. My participant's thoughts were also influenced through interactions with other gay men and their experiences with coming out. Here too, I am reminded of Goffman's idea of impression management. Gay men are able manage the impressions they present to people by deciding whether or not it is necessary to come out or not.

Third, in social interaction people learn the meanings and the symbols that allow them to think. Both my participants and I had to learn the meanings associated with being gay and that we do not fit into typical male gender roles. Along with this, both my participants and I had to come to an understanding as to what coming out means. This is a key issue in this thesis because although the basis meaning of coming out is understood by all twelve participants and myself, each of us has a slightly different interpretation of what coming out means. There is not just one definition for coming out that suits everyone.

Fourth, meanings and symbols allow people to carry on human action and interaction. That is, because people understand what it means to be gay, they are able to express this to other people. Hence through symbolic meanings and corresponding social interaction, gay men in general and myself in particular are “enabled to come out.

Fifth, people are able to modify or alter meanings and symbols that they use in action and interaction on the basis of their interpretation of different situations. Because people are able to think we look at each situation and choose which course of action to take. My participants and I do not tell everyone we meet that we are gay or bisexual. Rather we pick and choose whom we tell. Each individual confronted with coming out decides whether or not the people they choose to tell will be able to handle this news and what repercussions they may face because of their disclosure.

We are able to make modifications in our interactions because, sixth, we are able to think. We each can play over in our minds, at least what we perceive to be others reactions. Although all of my participants are out at varying levels, every one of them modifies their level of disclosure based on their perceived idea of how other people will

react to learning that they are gay. This follows the work of the early Symbolic Interactionist, Cooley, in his notion of the Looking Glass Self. Using this, we imagine how we appear to others and this effects our interactions.

Along with the seven basic principles, I just wrote about, Goffman's notion of the presentation of self is also a useful theoretical framework for understanding the coming out process. Goffman outlines this dramaturgical framework by using the metaphor of the theater. As I discussed in Chapter One, Goffman assumed that when individuals interact, they want to present a sense of self that will be accepted by others. His theory is concerned with the ways in which people play different roles, and manage the impressions they present to each other in different settings. We can use Goffman's idea to look at how gay men present themselves depending on their setting. After analyzing my data, I came to the conclusion that both my participants and I make conscience decisions as to whether or not to disclose our sexual orientation to other people. It is not necessary to tell everyone that you are gay. A reason for this is that being gay is only one aspect of our lives and there are other more important roles that people should focus on before being influenced by the fact that we are gay. Although this remains true when dealing with family and friends, it is especially true when it comes to the work environment. Many times in presenting an idealized picture of ourselves, we find it necessary to conceal our sexual orientation. In a very real sense while at work many of my participants act in Goffman's front stage. In less public spaces, particularity with those with whom my participants share Goffman's description of back stage interactions, they were more likely to come out.

I have learned in doing this project that many gay men share similar stories and go through many of the same feelings when confronted with coming out. Only through doing this type of research, can the process of coming out be fully understood.

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MEMORANDUM

To: Sam Flanagan, Graduate Student, Sociology Department
Graduate Committee Chair, Dr. Elena Bastida, Sociology Department

From: Dr. Juan Gonzalez, Human Subject Committee Chair *JG*

Subject: Protocol for "Gender Identity Development"

Date: June 14, 2000

The above referenced protocol has been:

- Approved (committee review)
- Approved (expedited review, IRB #56)
- Conditionally approved (see remarks below)
- Tabled for future considerations
- Disapproved (see remarks below)

by the Institutional Review Board – Human Subjects in Research.

As stipulated in the guidelines of the IRB, this protocol will be subject to annual review by the IRB and any deviations from the protocol or change in the title must be resubmitted to the Board. At the conclusion of the study, you must fill out the enclosed report form. Good luck with your investigation.

cc: George Avellano, AVPAA/GP&R

Gender Identity Development Questionnaire:

(Please answer all questions with as much detail as possible.)

1. Age:
2. Income:
3. Educational level:
4. Type of job:
5. Religion:
6. Ethnicity:
7. Are you gay, bisexual, or straight?
8. When did you first understand (to yourself) that you were gay? Briefly tell me how you knew you were gay.
9. Did being homosexual bother you when you first realized you were gay? Please explain.
10. Does being homosexual bother you now? Please explain.
11. How old were you when you first had your first same sex encounter?
12. In your own words, what does "coming out," mean to you?
13. When or at what age did you begin to come out?
14. What circumstances led you to begin the coming out process?
15. Do you tell everyone you know that you are gay?
16. Do you think it's relevant to come out at or to:
 - A. Family
 - B. Friends
 - C. Work
 - D. Church
 - E. Other _____

17. Whom have you told (or not told) about being gay? And, please tell me why you made that decision to disclose or not disclose your sexual orientation?
- A. Parents
 - 1. Mother
 - 2. Father
 - B. Siblings
 - 1. Brothers
 - 2. Sisters
 - C. Grandparents
 - D. Other family member
 - E. Friends
 - 1. Gay
 - 2. Straight
 - F. Co-workers
 - G. Others _____
18. How have others reacted since they found out?
19. What has helped you come out?
20. What has hindered you from coming out?
21. Did you seek advice or guidance about coming out? Who or where? Was it useful?
22. Have you ever been the victim of discrimination, violence, or ridicule because people know you are gay? Could you tell me how this has effected your level of being out?
23. Tell me about a positive experience related to being out? (if any)
24. Tell me about a negative experience related to being out? (if any)
25. How do you think your level of being out has effected your life?
26. Do you feel better off or not for coming out?
27. What have been the biggest challenges you have faced since making the decision to disclose your sexual orientation?
28. Are you ever fully "out"?
29. What would be your ideal coming out experience?
27. Should everyone who is gay come out?

