

Coming Out in College Residence Halls: Negotiation, Meaning Making, Challenges, Supports

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In this qualitative study, researchers examined the coming out process experienced by 20 gay, lesbian, and bisexual students in the residence halls of a major research institution. The students ranged in age from 18-26 and included 10 men and 10 women. Eighteen were White, one was Asian American, and one was Latino American. Students reported how they disclosed their sexual orientation, factors influencing the process, and reactions to their disclosures. Recommendations for residence hall professionals are provided.

Coming out, the process of identifying oneself as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, is an important developmental step for many youths. Because students frequently begin coming out during the college years (Evans & D'Augelli, 1996), student affairs administrators need to be familiar with this developmental process and ways to be supportive as students begin to disclose their sexual identity to themselves and others.

Until the late 1960s, coming out was viewed as a single event—the first time a homosexually-oriented person identified himself or herself as such to another individual who also self-identified as homosexual (Hooker, 1965). Cohen and Savin-Williams (1996) later suggested that coming out involves two components: acknowledging one's sexual orientation to oneself and disclosing one's sexual identity to others. "Others" would include other gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, heterosexual friends, family, coworkers, and the public at large (Troiden, 1989). Recently, researchers have defined coming out as a process that occurs over and over throughout an individual's life (Davies, 1992; Rhoads, 1994). Coming out is viewed as an important component of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity development (Cass, 1979, 1984;

Troiden, 1979, 1989).

Many theorists have attempted to describe the coming-out process. Three types of models exist based on whether the primary emphasis is on internal processes (identity), external manifestations (disclosure or overtness), or a combination of the two (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996). Stage models have predominated, with identified stages centering on (a) self-awareness, (b) self-labeling, (c) self-disclosure, (d) stabilization of lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity, and (e) active involvement in the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community (e.g., Coleman, 1981-1982; Hencken & O'Dowd, 1977; Lee, 1977).

Research has shown, however, that rigid stage models do not provide an accurate picture of identity development for many individuals, particularly lesbians (Brown, 1995; Kahn, 1991). Rhoads (1997) stressed that extensive diversity can be found in the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community. Recently, models have been developed that emphasize external influences on coming out. For instance, Harry (1993) saw coming out not as the final step of a developmental process but as the product of occupations, places of habitation, and sexual orientation of friends. D'Augelli (1994) viewed coming out as a fluid process influenced by personal subjectivities and actions, interactions with others, and sociohistorical connections.

Researchers have investigated factors that influence the coming-out process. Motivating factors include a desire to be closer to others, to validate one's own self-worth, and to stop having to hide (Moses & Hawkins, 1986). Pressure from peers who are more open about their identity is also a factor (Hencken & O'Dowd, 1977). By contrast, individuals hesitate to come out because they believe their attractions are wrong or

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because they fear reprisals (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996).

Harry (1993) asserted that "people adapt their degree of self-disclosure to the circumstances in which they live" (p. 38). Individuals who are politically aware and involved in lesbian, gay, and bisexual organizations are likely to disclose their sexual orientation to others (Elliot, 1982; Savin-Williams, 1990), as are individuals who receive support and acceptance from others (D'Augelli, 1991; Savin-Williams).

The campus environment has a significant effect on students' willingness to disclose their sexual orientation and on the reactions they receive when they do disclose. D'Augelli (1989) found that hostility expressed by peers prevents many students from coming out and from seeking support from others. Love's (1997, 1998) study of the climate experienced by students at a Catholic college as well as Rhoads's (1994) study of a large, public institution indicate that campus climates are often unwelcoming and isolating environments for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students.

Individuals who have not disclosed their sexual orientation often experience guilt and anxiety (Lee, 1977) as well as loneliness and isolation (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996). They report thoughts of suicide, self-doubt, and self-hatred (Rhoads, 1994; Saunders & Valente, 1987). Despite these negative feelings, many individuals stay "in the closet" because it provides a degree of safety from bigotry (D'Augelli, 1989).

Researchers have reported many positive effects of coming out, including a sense of relief (Dank, 1971), an improved sense of self (Rhoads, 1995), positive self-esteem (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996), and increased authenticity (deMonteflores & Schultz, 1978). On the other hand, individuals who have come out also report that they become targets for homophobic harassment (D'Augelli, 1989; Rhoads) and that sexual orientation is often the only aspect of their identity that others acknowledge (Lee, 1977). They also mention experiencing a sense of obligation to others who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual and a responsibility to educate others (Rhoads).

With the important exception of Rhoads's work (1994, 1995), research related to the coming-out experiences of students in college settings is missing from the literature. Although some researchers (e.g., Savin-Williams, 1990) may have included college students in their samples, none have specifically examined the impact of the college setting on the development process that students experience. This study is designed to provide information about the influence of the college environment on students' coming-out process.

METHOD

This study was conducted using a constructivist framework (Schwandt, 1994). The constructivist perspective emphasizes how individuals themselves make meaning of their own experiences. We assumed, therefore, that students would be the best possible informants about their own experiences of coming out while living in the residence halls. We chose not to predefine the range of possible responses students might give but rather to ask open-ended questions.

This study was based on in-depth interviews of 20 undergraduate students at the University Park campus of Pennsylvania State University (PSUP). PSUP enrolls approximately 40,000 students, of whom about 11,000 live in the residence halls. Students are required to live in the halls their first year. PSUP is a politically conservative and rural campus in a part of the commonwealth without the visible or well-organized lesbian, bisexual, or gay communities more often found in urban settings. The interviews for this study were conducted between the Fall of 1995 and the Fall of 1996.

Participants

Participants included 10 men and 10 women. One man identified himself as homosexual, whereas 6 identified themselves as gay and 3 as bisexual. Five of the women identified themselves as lesbian and 5 as bisexual. Eighteen of the participants were White, 1 was Asian American, and 1 was Latino American. Two participants were British exchange students. Eight seniors, 5 juniors, 4 sophomores, and 1 first-year student

were included. Seven individuals were enrolled in the College of Liberal Arts, 4 in Science, 3 in Arts and Architecture, 2 in Business, 2 in Agriculture, 1 in Health and Human Development, and 1 student had not yet declared a major.

On the basis of their phone screenings and information provided during their interviews, 7 students were categorized as actively involved in lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB) organizations and activities, 3 were identified as occasionally involved, and 10 were not involved in any organized LGB groups or activities. Based on interview data, we identified 8 students as extensively out (e.g., they were known on campus as lesbian, gay, or bisexual spokespeople; everyone on their floors knew their sexual orientation), 10 students as moderately out (i.e., out to selected individuals), and 2 as minimally out (i.e., out to one or two people) at the time of their interviews.

Procedure

We recruited participants for this study through a variety of methods. Information on the study was distributed at meetings of the campus LGB student organization and in a course on sexual orientation issues. Additionally, the information was posted on the campus LGB listserv, an electronic mail discussion group. Participants were recruited through personal contacts and on the recommendation of residence life professionals and the staff of the office of the vice-provost for educational equity. Finally, we used snowball sampling, in which participants were asked to recommend other possible participants.

Participants were selected on the criteria that they were current undergraduate students at PSUP, that they had lived in a residence hall not longer than 1 year ago, and that they currently identified themselves as lesbian, bisexual, or gay. Recognizing the appropriateness of maximum variation sampling, in which “the range of people and sites from which the people are selected should be fair to the larger population” (Seidman, 1991, p. 42), we sought variation in our participants on the basis of gender, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, the area of campus where they had lived, their current living situation (on or off

campus), and their degree of involvement in the campus LGB community.

Interviews were conducted by 4 graduate students: 2 men and 2 women. All had a strong background in listening skills, all were knowledgeable about issues facing lesbian, bisexual, and gay students, all had been actively involved in efforts to educate others concerning these issues, and all had previous professional work experience in residence life. Two identified themselves as gay, 1 as lesbian, and 1 as heterosexual.

All interviewers participated in a 2-hour training, which covered the goals of the study, interview procedures, and input into the structure of the interview protocol. Each interviewer then conducted a simulated interview, which was critiqued by the principal investigator.

Interviews

Data collection began with a phone screening, in which prospective participants were told the purpose of the study, its methods, what their participation would entail, and procedures for ensuring confidentiality. If they agreed to participate, they were requested to provide basic demographic information.

Interviews were conducted by 1 of the 4 interviewers at a private location at a time convenient for the participant. Interviews lasted between 2 and 2 1/2 hours, with most taking just over 2 hours. Interviews were audio-taped, and the interviewers completed an analysis of the interaction following each interview, noting impressions of the interview process, the participant, their own performance, and any unique aspects of the interview.

Structured interview protocols were used, although interviewers did deviate from the protocol to explore issues raised by participants, or to ask related follow-up questions. The protocol covered the general areas of the students’ perspectives on the residence hall climate, their experiences and interactions with other students, interventions by residence life professionals and the participants’ suggestions for changes within the residence halls and the university regarding lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and formed the data set that the two authors analyzed. The transcripts were analyzed using both standard inductive coding techniques in which the data were analyzed for themes and patterns across transcripts (Strauss, 1987) and interpretive techniques that allow examination of the ways themes are expressed within specific interviews (Mishler, 1986). Following procedures outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), analysis began with a small sample of the interview data. The two analysts began with six transcripts. Separately, each looked at two of the same transcripts and two unique transcripts and developed a set of coding categories. The two then compared their categories, reconciled discrepancies and developed a combined coding list. The remaining transcripts were split between the two analysts and were separately coded, although the analysts compared the codes multiple times during the analysis process, and continued to develop a coding system that reflected findings from both sets of transcripts. Six progressively more refined versions of the coding system were developed. The major themes that emerged from the coding process were identified and then compared with the literature on coming out. These themes and comparisons are discussed in the Results and Discussion sections of this article.

Trustworthiness, Authenticity, and Fairness

The criteria by which qualitative research is judged have been characterized as falling into two major categories: those indicative of trustworthiness and those addressing authenticity and fairness (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Trustworthiness criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), whereas authenticity has been described as having ontological, educative, catalytic and tactical forms (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Credibility is established, in part, by stating clearly the procedures by which the study was conducted, the data were analyzed, and the conclusions were drawn (Patton, 1990). Much of that information has been described above.

Although the time frame in which this study was conducted made impossible the sharing of the findings with the majority of the participants, (and thus the findings were not subject to member checks), the findings were shared with residence life professionals at the campus where this study was conducted, with a focus on how the findings might impact the training and policies of the residence life program. Additionally, the findings have been shared with numerous residence life professionals and other researchers with interest in campus-based lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues across the country. These presentations of the study's methods and findings served as forms of peer debriefing and inquiry audit, standard methods of supporting the credibility of the study.

Additionally, Patton (1990) has asserted the necessity of indicating the researchers' qualifications for the study and the paradigmatic orientation and assumptions underlying the study. All members of the research team were visible members of the campus lesbian, gay, bisexual, and ally communities who were at least casually known to most participants. All of the researchers have worked as residence life professionals, and the two analysts both have significant prior experience conducting qualitative research and research on lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues.

Transferability, defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as whether or not the research is useful in another situation, is demonstrated by the use of thick, rich description. In this article, the context of the study and the characteristics of the participants have been described. In addition, numerous quotes have been provided to support the conclusions that were drawn. Confirmability addresses whether the findings are supported by the data (Lincoln & Guba; Marshall & Rossman, 1995). In this study the authors' separate analyses of the data lend support to the findings, as does public presentation of the data and findings to others interested in the subject.

Fairness and authenticity address ethical and ideological issues that arise in naturalistic research, particularly research associated with issues of social justice (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Although methods of ascertaining whether these criteria have been met are still largely undefined (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba), as a

whole they entail conducting the research in such a manner that participants and researchers are empowered to understand better both their own and others' lives, and to take action to create more equitable social structures. In our research we attempted to act with fairness and authenticity, as evidenced by our interaction with participants in the selection and interview process (described above), and in our discussion of the findings with decision-makers in the residence life system in which the study was conducted. Our goal in working with these administrators was to provide information that would assist them in creating environments more conducive to the coming-out experience of future residents.

RESULTS

Ten major themes emerged from the data. These themes related to the coming-out process itself, how students negotiated and made meaning of it, factors that positively or negatively influenced students to come out, the advantages and disadvantages of being out, and the reactions of others to the students' disclosure of their sexual orientation.

1. *Participants identified three different populations to whom one must come out.* These populations include oneself, other lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, and heterosexuals. Coming out to oneself was the first step and it often took a significant amount of time. In addition, students frequently kept their identities hidden for some time after they acknowledged their sexual orientation to themselves. For example, one woman reflected, "I didn't even come out to myself until the middle of [my sophomore year]. It was really bizarre because it was so late and I didn't tell anyone that I knew really." Coming out to others who were lesbian, gay, or bisexual was generally viewed as a desired but somewhat awkward process. Sometimes coming out to a valued heterosexual friend who could provide support took place first and more directly. Participants rarely focused on coming out to the general heterosexual
- community. Generally, coming out to each of these audiences was a very distinct process with different costs and benefits, as well as different levels of risk. However, the participants reported a common benefit to coming out to each of these groups: gaining a greater sense of authenticity.
2. *Coming out to one's roommate, whether lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual, presented particular challenges.* Several factors made coming out to roommates unique. Often the choice of a roommate was not voluntary, and because of the close contact and necessary interaction, the stakes were higher with regard to coming out. For instance, one male participant reflected, "I felt like I was in a position where if I said anything about his repeated homophobic comments that I was in danger of being beat up or harassed." Not being out required significant self-censorship and risk if the roommate found out. A female participant explained that she had recently come out to her roommate because "it was getting ridiculous. I'd have to hide conversations, feelings, everything." Being out resulted in varied, often unpredictable responses ranging from active harassment to active support. For example, one participant's roommate literally threatened to kill him when he found out the participant was gay, whereas another participant's roommate offered to introduce her to a lesbian friend who could get the participant involved in the lesbian community.
3. *Participants used a wide range of methods to come out to other people, but the majority of these ways were not explicit.* Many participants assumed that most people would recognize certain symbols used in the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community, including the rainbow, pink triangle, and freedom rings. By displaying these symbols in their rooms, on their doors, or on their backpacks or clothing, the participants assumed they were out. This strategy enabled them to be out without having to directly bring up the issue. One woman

participant stated, "I've had pride pins on my bag . . . because I wanted other people to know . . . , other lesbian people to know that I was there." However, this method of coming out was problematic because participants could not be sure who had seen these symbols, and of those who had, who had understood their meaning.

Another indirect way of coming out was for students to assume that people knew their identities, and to discuss their lives as if their being gay, lesbian, or bisexual were common knowledge. Thus, a person might mention attending a lesbian event but would not explicitly say, "I am a lesbian." One participant, who acknowledged displaying many gay symbols, summed up his thoughts about coming out indirectly in this way: "If they figure it out inadvertently, then fine. I just don't make a point to go out and announce it. But I feel that I am out."

4. *Being out was not an either-or process.* The extent of being out that students exhibited was a continuum, from not being out to oneself (reported retrospectively), to being explicitly out in every setting. Some midway points included being out to oneself, but not others; being out to a few trusted others; being out selectively to friends; and assuming that everyone knew, often because of visibility in the lesbian, gay, and bisexual student organization on campus.

Significant variability existed, depending on the specific setting in which students found themselves, and at different times during the students' academic experience. For instance, one woman described being open about her identity in her residence hall but being completely closeted in her work setting. Another student explained that she had been very out the previous year, but was currently pulling back to reevaluate how she wanted to present herself.

5. *Students' perceptions of their identities as fluid created challenges with regard to coming out.* Some students reported that they had experienced coming out to others as bisexual after previously coming out as

lesbian or gay (or vice versa). Both heterosexual and lesbian and gay individuals, as well as the students themselves, had trouble accepting this shift in identity. For instance, one male student offered that, "The biggest coming out for me was coming out to the fact that bisexuality was an option [for me]. There was so much pressure to make a choice."

6. *The environment had a strong influence on whether and to what extent a person came out to others.* Factors that encouraged individuals to come out included being around supportive people; perceiving the overall climate as supportive; and having lesbian, gay, and bisexual role models in the environment. An example of the latter influence is reflected in one woman's comment that, "[My bisexual roommate] made me feel more confident in a lot of things. . . . It's more comfortable [to come out] with [my roommate] there."

Factors that discouraged coming out included a lack of community in the residence hall, lack of support, and active hostility. Reflecting on the lack of support on his floor, a gay male stated, "I think it was a 'don't ask, don't tell' kind of thing. You know, 'Don't let me know; I really don't care' kind of thing." Another male participant mentioned the hostility he experienced: "I faced a lot of direct and indirect homophobia—a lot of people who would make comments about the fact that all queers should be shot, or put on a desert island and nuked, or stuff along that line."

7. *Motivation to come out often had to do with environmental circumstances as much as internal pressures.* Students talked about coming out because they were tired of hiding and wanted to have closer, more honest relationships with people. However, they also mentioned environmental factors such as (a) being interviewed by the media about a LGB issue, (b) attending a pride rally, (c) starting to date someone, (d) having a lesbian, gay, or bisexual friend visit, (e) transferring to a different institution, or (f) living

with a lesbian, gay, or bisexual roommate who was more out than they were. A few students also mentioned being pressured to come out by other lesbian, gay, or bisexual students or by heterosexual friends.

8. *Participants had a high level of awareness of the complexities of life.* The students had to struggle with complex questions without clear or universally appropriate answers (e.g., “Am I being harassed because I am gay, or because they don’t like me for other reasons?” or “Is it better to come out or remain closeted?”). They gave thoughtful consideration to the multiple aspects of these questions, were able to consider the views of people very different from themselves, and were reluctant to label or ascribe motives to those hostile to them. For example, one student reflected on why his roommate might have been avoiding him: “I didn’t know if [his avoiding me] was because he had noticed something—you know, figured out [I was gay], and he wanted to avoid me, or whether it was just his personality, [or] he got busy. I couldn’t really tell.”
9. *Participants saw advantages and disadvantages both to being closeted and to coming out.* Although the literature has generally focused on the disadvantages of being closeted (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; Lee, 1977) and the advantages of coming out (Cohen & Savin-Williams; deMonteflores & Schultz, 1978), these participants were clear that each status had advantages and disadvantages. Stated advantages to being closeted included feelings of security and the ability to gain confidence in one’s identity without harassment. One student who felt that being closeted was easier than being out noted that, “It’s stressful [to be closeted], but I guess it’s safer; you have that little protective door.” Disadvantages mentioned by the participants of not disclosing one’s identity included internal conflicts, fear of others finding out, needing to self-censor, and having to distance oneself from both the

lesbian, gay, and bisexual community and from heterosexual students.

The advantages of being out that students noted included feelings of pride, authenticity, and relief. They appreciated being able to be open about who they were, and they were confident that they could handle others’ reactions. They also felt that they could make a contribution if they were out. With regard to the latter point, one woman stated: “I think that I’m teaching [others] something as well. I think that the more normalcy that they see, the more normal things are, the better things will be.”

However, students also listed a number of disadvantages to being out. These included feelings of concern for others who might be indirectly hurt by the student’s being out (e.g., closeted friends, family), distress at being labeled, fears and actual experiences of harassment and rejection, needing to limit behaviors to avoid unsafe situations, and negative effects on academic performance because of involvement in LGB activities. A female participant summed up very well the pros and cons of coming out:

There are good and bad consequences to both [being out and not being out in the hall]. I guess it all depends on how people in our hall are going to react, because if you come out and everyone’s really supportive, that can be really, really wonderful in terms of coming to terms with your identity. But, on the other hand, if you come out and everyone’s really hostile towards you, it can just push you really far back in the closet. Not coming out is hard, except if it’s going to avoid having to deal with negative experiences, and you’re not ready to deal with them.

10. *The participants in this study discussed a range of ways in which others reacted to the participant’s coming out.* Coming out is an interactive process. The reactions of individuals to whom one comes out greatly influence the impact of the coming-out

process on individuals who are revealing their identities, and the extent to which they will choose to come out in the future. The reactions of others varied from positive to negative. Often, individuals tried to be supportive but did not know enough to be genuinely helpful. Discomfort at the affective level often conflicted with a cognitive desire to be supportive. But participants appreciated efforts that friends made to learn more. For example, a gay male student reflected that "there were a lot of people who, if they weren't comfortable with it, at least they were comfortable to ask questions."

The reactions of others were rarely a surprise to the participants in the study. Most participants had prior knowledge of where the other person stood with regard to lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues, particularly when the other person was the participant's roommate. Often the participants had "tested the water" first by bringing up sexual orientation issues. Some participants had intuited from the roommate's views on seemingly similar topics, especially their general political or social values, or their congruence with traditional gender roles.

But sometimes coming out to another person resulted in a very pleasant and unexpected occurrence. This happened to one woman in our study who recounted: "I ended up telling [my roommate] I was a lesbian. She's like, 'Oh, that's cool. My aunt's a lesbian, too.' And she was okay with it. And she said, 'They're the coolest people.'"

DISCUSSION

College and university staff and faculty must be made aware that many students first come out during their college years. This study provides insight into the issues involved in coming out and underscores the importance of active and visible support for students who are engaged in this process.

The distinctions made by our participants between coming out to oneself and coming out

to others parallel the more recent definitions in the literature (e.g., Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996). However, the distinctions between coming out to lesbian, gay, and bisexual others and coming out to heterosexual others were more clearly articulated by our participants than they were in the reviewed literature. Student affairs professionals should be aware of these distinctions and help students to understand and negotiate coming out to these various audiences, and the emotions and issues associated with each of them.

No literature that we reviewed discussed the distinct issues involved in coming out to roommates. As noted earlier, with the exception of Rhoads's (1994, 1995) work, no literature discusses the coming-out process on college campuses, an environment in which pairing of roommates who don't know each other is commonplace. Residence life professionals must be sensitive to the issues involved when lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals are placed with heterosexual roommates whom they do not know. They must also be aware of the possibility that closeted students live in the halls and may struggle to keep their identity hidden because of the homophobic comments or behaviors of their roommates. Active intervention and education concerning lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues is crucial. Interventions to address negative situations should be rapid, and room changes to remove students from hostile and physically dangerous situations should be facilitated quickly.

The literature does not address the issue of exactly how the coming-out process is negotiated. An implicit assumption in the literature is that coming out is a direct process of telling others that one is lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Our data indicate that coming out directly to others is more the exception than the rule. To identify lesbian, gay, and bisexual students who may need support, student affairs professionals should be made aware of the symbols used by lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. Being alert to the indirect ways in which students come out should be stressed in training programs for residence life and other student affairs professionals.

Variations in the ways and the extent to

which individuals are out are not reflected in the stage models that predominate in the literature. These models assume a linear progression from coming out to oneself to coming out publicly. Our participants rarely experienced such a clear path of disclosure. Context, especially the level of perceived risk, seemed to greatly influence the extent to which students chose to be open about their identity. Many were very open with trusted friends but more closeted on their residence hall floors or in their work or academic settings. Some students widely disclosed their identities immediately after arriving on campus but once they had established themselves within the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community or in a particular friendship network, they pulled back from publicly identifying themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual activists. Moving from less supportive to more supportive halls also influenced the extent to which some students chose to be out. Coming out, then, seems to be less of a stage or developmental process than an assessment of the environment. These findings support Harry's (1993) position that individuals adjust their level of self-disclosure based on the circumstances in which they find themselves. They also concur with Love's (1997, 1998) reports of the negative impact of a hostile environment on the extent to which lesbian, gay, and bisexual students chose to be visible on campus.

Students' comments also validate previous findings indicating the important role of available support in the coming-out process (see Savin-Williams, 1990). Participants reported that floors with a heightened sense of community were more positive and accepting. This finding underscores the importance of the current emphasis on developing community on residence hall floors (Schuh, 1989).

Generally, our findings indicate that coming out is a very complex phenomenon, mediated by development, but impacted by numerous other factors as well. Coming out behaviors appear to be influenced by developmental readiness, motivation, audience, and context. They are conducted in a range of ways and have a wide variety of consequences, both positive and negative.

Although the students in our study generally

perceived the results of coming out as positive, the homophobic nature of the campus environment did present some risks for students who chose to disclose their identity. Our participants reported a number of incidents of harassment. Both D'Augelli (1989) and Rhoads (1994) suggested that being out presents hazards related to homophobic and heterosexist attacks. Certainly the murder of the University of Wyoming gay student, Matthew Shepard, underscores just how dangerous the environment can be for students who choose to disclose their sexual identity. Student affairs professionals must be sensitive to the complexities of the coming-out process and help students to fully explore the implications of coming out for themselves. Educators should understand and communicate that coming out is not easy, can have negative as well as positive consequences, and that it has to be approached thoughtfully.

This study highlights the important role played by the environment during the coming out process of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. Institutions of higher education, unfortunately, too often reflect the homophobic and heterosexist nature of society rather than taking an active part in educating students, confronting harassment and discrimination, and creating a welcoming and inclusive environment in which all students can be themselves in an open and celebratory way. Student affairs professionals need to take the lead in changing the norms and values of higher education to support all students and to demonstrate that homophobic actions and heterosexism will not be tolerated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Researchers need to pay more attention to the environmental and situational influences on the coming-out process and on identity development. The negative impact of homophobic and heterosexist environments on students' willingness to disclose their sexual identity has been clearly demonstrated in this study. We must learn more about the climate and conditions experienced by gay, lesbian, and bisexual students in specific types of settings to address problems and create more welcoming environments. The climates of

different types of colleges and universities, different types of residence halls (e.g., suites or apartments, "athletic" floors, learning communities, special interest halls), sororities and fraternities, and academic departments should be explored. In addition, more research should be conducted related to the unique dynamics that exist in coming out to others when the association is largely involuntary, such as is the case between assigned roommates.

Researchers need to further examine the coming-out process. How do individuals learn to "read" the environment, to find or develop support systems, to prepare themselves to live in a hostile environment, and to assess their own level of readiness to come out? What are the consequences if the student's personal assessment, or assessment of the environment, is inaccurate?

Researchers should consider exploration of the coming-out process for students from various backgrounds and cultures. The current study

included only two students of color, both men. The experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people of color are often different from those of European ancestry (Savin-Williams, 1996; Wall & Washington, 1991). Examining how students from underrepresented groups experience and negotiate the coming-out process would assist in providing a more complete picture of this phenomenon.

Little has been written directly about the reactions of others to having a person come out to them. Because support is acknowledged as an important influence on the individual's decisions about coming out in the future, further examination of the interactional dynamics of this process are particularly warranted.

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