Learning From the Coming-Out Experiences of College Males

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The findings of a 2-year ethnographic study of the coming-out experiences of gay and bisexual college men are presented. Four themes related to coming out are discussed: coming out as an ongoing process, personal changes related to coming out, negative experiences of coming out, and ongoing experiences of harassment and discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

Coming out is the process of disclosing one's sexual orientation (Coleman, 1982); it begins with self-acknowledgment and expands outward to others. Coming out marks the rite of passage to a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity (Herdt, 1992). For many, early actions of coming out (such as telling a friend) mark the beginning of the development of a positive sense of self (Cass, 1979, 1984; Miranda & Storms, 1989; Troiden, 1979, 1989). A gay college student who participated in the study that forms the basis for this article described coming out: "Coming out involves taking all the negative things that you've heard about yourself—heard about those people —and just saying to yourself that none of it matters as much as you do. It means opening up the door and letting out all the internalized hatred, fear, self doubt, and self worthlessness. I think it's the point of breaking. You either come out or you sort of die."

D'Augelli (1991a) has maintained that gay adolescents often acknowledge to themselves their affectional orientation while in high school but wait until college to *self-disclose*—that is, to share personal information about one's sexual orientation to one or more others intentionally (Nelson-Jones & Strong, 1976). Closeted lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students are at a point in their lives when self-disclosure becomes a paramount issue (Rhoads, 1993, 1994a, 1994b).

College is a challenging time for students; for students who also have sexual identity issues to confront, the college experience is even more difficult. D'Augelli (1991b) has pointed out that sexual orientation issues are highly psychologically salient for lesbian and gay college students: the college years are "critical years, times of high risk" (p. 3).

College life represents a degree of freedom from parents and high school social networks (D'Augelli, 1991b). Students make acquaintances and form new friendships. The constraints and expectations imposed by parents and high school friends seem less relevant as students struggle to develop their own sense of identity. For students who experience same-sex attractions, seeing other lesbian, gay, or bisexual students interacting around campus is an added incentive to self-disclose.

Although coming out often brings with it an improved sense of self, as well as a sense of pride about one's gay or bisexual identity (Rhoads, 1994c), for many college students it also involves a degree of vulnerability (La Salle & Rhoads, 1992). Mohr (1992) has maintained that coming out is not necessarily a means to increased happiness because it involves subjecting oneself to discrimination and harassment.

The vulnerability that lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students experience has been highlighted by research on campus climates (Cavin, 1987; D'Augelli, 1989a, 1989b, 1990; Herek, 1993; Low, 1988; Nelson & Baker, 1990; Nieberding, 1989; Reynolds, 1989; Shepard, 1990; Tierney, 1992). D'Emilio (1990) summarized the findings: "Despite the changes in the last two decades, gay people are still swimming in a largely oppressive sea. . . . There are still many campuses in the United States where no lesbian or gay man feels safe enough to come out. From a gay vantage point, something is still

wrong in the academy" (p. 17).

Although coming out is a crucial process in the development of a positive sense of gay identity, there is little research about the coming-out experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students (Rhoads, 1994b). This article represents one effort to begin to fill that void by focusing on the coming out experiences of gay and bisexual college men.

METHOD

This article is based on a 2-year ethnographic study of gay and bisexual college men at a large research university. Ethnography is a method frequently employed by anthropologists and sociologists to make sense of the complexities of culture and social life (Spradley, 1979). Ethnography involves an extended period of time immersed in the culture of another society, community, or social group (Fetterman, 1989).

A variety of data collection techniques were utilized. Forty formal ethnographic interviews, which lasted from 1 to 3 hours each, were conducted. These interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview participants were given copies of the transcripts and asked to add comments and make clarifications. The format for the ethnographic interviews followed methods highlighted by Spradley (1979) in which descriptive, structural, and contrast questions are asked of interview participants. Descriptive questions are used to obtain a sample of the language and culture. An example of a descriptive question used in this study is: "How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation?" Structural questions provide direction for understanding the basic units of an individual's cultural knowledge: "What does *coming out* mean to you?" Contrast questions seek information related to the meanings of various words in the informant's language: "What does the term *gay community* mean to you, and how is it different from or similar to the term *queer community*?"

In addition to formal ethnographic interviews, other interviews took place in less formal settings, such as at a party, dance, or local coffee shop. Participant observation, also used for collecting data, involves extended participation in the lives of those under study while maintaining a professional distance. Finally, documents such as articles from the student newspaper were examined. Diverse data-collection techniques contribute to what qualitative researchers term triangulation, defined by Denzin (1989) as the process of corroborating data through the use of multiple methods.

Seven gay or bisexual students participated as "key informants." These students provided important data and helped during the initial stage of entering the gay student community. An advisory panel of key informants was created to help construct the research methodology and to provide guidance along the way. Members of the advisory panel also reviewed various drafts derived from the project. Their feedback about interpretations and conclusions added to the reliability and validity of the findings and served as "member checks"—a technique used to ensure that study participants have a voice in the interpretation of data and the production of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Interview participants primarily were recruited through the campus Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Student Alliance (LGBSA). All of these students had come out to a degree, although several were out to only three or four people. The sample was skewed toward upper-division and graduate students simply because fewer students are out during their early college years (D'Augelli, 1991a). This study included 8 graduate students, 17 seniors, 10 juniors, 2 sophomores, and 3 freshmen students.

Ethnographic data analysis is not predictive, but instead seeks to make sense of complex social phenomena (Geertz, 1973; Rosaldo, 1989). For this study, data analysis involved comparing and coding recurring categories and themes derived from interview transcripts, notes from informal interviews, field notes obtained from participant observations, and documents. Selecting categories and themes involved both inductive and deductive processes. For example, several questions formed the basis of this study: "What does it mean to 'come out'?" "Why do some students become involved in gay politics after coming out?" "What role does the gay student

community or subculture play in terms of gay identity development?" These questions are part of the interview protocols and form themes around which the data were analyzed. Other themes or categories emerged during the data analysis process. The emergence of these categories is consistent with Patton's (1980) idea that the grouping of data is derived inductively and reveals salient patterns in the data.

A shortcoming of the study was its focus on men only. As a result, implications about the experiences of lesbian and bisexual college women should not be drawn. Because the researcher is a heterosexual male, developing a sense of trust with groups of gay and bisexual college men was difficult, and the crossing of cultural borders that ethnographic research requires would have been even more difficult if women had been included as study participants.

RESULTS

This discussion of students' coming-out experiences is focused on four themes: (a) coming out as a process, (b) personal changes related to coming out, (c) negative experiences of coming out, and (d) ongoing experiences of harassment and discrimination.

Coming Out as a Process

For the 40 students who participated in interviews, coming out was an ongoing process. One student described coming out as "something that has a beginning but never really ends." Another commented on the different levels of "outness" that people reach over time. A similar view was echoed by a third student, who described the number of people he has come out to as "expanding logarithmically with time." Other students discussed coming out in similar terms: "It's a continuous process that goes on every day. It's a process that never ends." "I really view it as a process. I don't think it's over. Every time I put myself in a new situation around new people, there's always the issue of when to come out to them."

In discussing coming out, students continually reinforced self-acknowledgment as the first step in the process. "Coming out to yourself is the first step, and then coming out to others follows," remarked one student, adding, "There has to be a point at which you say to yourself, 'I'm gay.'" Another student maintained that coming out happens on a couple of different levels: "I guess coming out is just being aware of your sexual orientation. And, I think first you have to admit it to yourself." Another student commented on the different layers to coming out, with the first layer involving self-admission: "Coming out involves accepting yourself, coming out to people in the gay community, coming out to people outside the community—like relatives, parents, and friends. You're coming out your entire life. It's a circle that keeps getting bigger and bigger."

The process of coming out typically begins with self-acknowledgment, although sometimes another person may be involved in the self-admission phase, as was the case with two students involved in the project. One student shared his experience: "It was last February that I really came out to myself and someone else at the same time. I always knew, but I never really admitted it to myself. . . . I had to come out to someone else in order to admit it to myself."

Coming out is ongoing because of the pervasiveness of *heterosexism*—the belief that everyone is or should be heterosexual (Friend, 1993; Lorde, 1985). The following comments from a gay graduate student underscore this concern: "I participated in a seminar yesterday with faculty and staff. I think I came out to practically everyone there. I had to help them to understand what it means to be gay." Another student related the frustrations associated with coming out: "Being out has created an awareness within me that everything I do is open to scrutiny by the rest of the world. I feel this incredible pressure at times. Sometimes I just want to blow people's minds by doing something very effeminate or campy. I just get so tired of being questioned about why I am gay and what it's like." Such comments offer insight into what life is like when one has to endure a culture that promotes one form of loving over another. The pervasive attitude that a heterosexual relationship is the only legitimate expression of human attraction and affection is the essence of a

heterosexist society and highlights why coming out is never ending.

Personal Changes

Coming out significantly changed the life of nearly every student involved in this study. Many experienced an improved sense of self, as evidenced by increased openness, self-confidence, and understanding of their lives.

One student described coming out as a matter of being honest; of answering questions about his sexual identity truthfully and openly: "I will not stand on the steps of the auditorium and scream out, 'I'm gay.' I don't wear my heart on my sleeve. Coming out is achieving a state of honesty with my friends and people in general. It's not hiding anything. It's like achieving a new level of self-confidence." A second student noted changes he experienced: "I became more confident, less afraid, more open, relieved. I'm about as happy now as I've ever been." A third student experienced his own "great awakening": "It was a time when everything just hit me and made perfect sense. The whole self-realization was profound." A fourth gained more self-worth and self-confidence: "I'm more interesting, more easygoing, more comfortable with who I am." And a fifth student was finally able to love himself; coming out helped him get rid of the internalized self-hatred and self-doubt that had developed over the years.

Coming out was "the greatest thing that ever happened" to one student: "It's given me courage, strength, and a sense of identity to confront all kinds of things in my life." For another it was a little scary at first. He feared how his friends would react: "I'm always afraid of losing my friends. After they all found out, the reaction was overwhelmingly positive. It felt like a ton of weight being taken off my shoulders." Another student experienced a similar feeling: "The weight is really everyone's expectations of what I should be—a heterosexual. But when I come out to them, the weight or burden is removed."

Several students became more interested in politics, especially issues related to gay rights. One student commented: "My politics have turned around 180 degrees. After I came out, I went from being a staunch conservative to more radical politics. I moved from the right to the left almost overnight. I kind of 'crashed out' instead of coming out." This student and 26 other students in this study frequently described themselves or other lesbian, gay, and bisexual people as "queer." For these students queer means making a political commitment to changing society and improving the social conditions for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Used in this manner, *queer* implies the sense of pride and power they share. As one student noted, "Queer is an in-your-face kind of gay."

Many of the out students in this project went through periods of intense questioning in relation to their sexual identity. Fourteen students identified the beginning of the coming-out process as such a period. These students reflected on the confusion they felt struggling to understand their same-sex attractions. "For the longest time I couldn't even say the word gay. I wished that I was not in this situation. I didn't want to have to explore this side of me. I wished I was straight and didn't have to explain this. 'Why me?' That was my attitude. I'm not like other gays."

For these 14 students, the early realization that they were gay or bisexual brought about a period of reflection as they tried to make sense of their past. One student noted: "When I look back, I remember always making friends with the best-looking guys so that I could hang around them. I don't recall being aware of this at the time." Another student recalled games he played as a child that enabled him to have close physical contact with his male friends. In retrospect, he believes these games were early indicators of his same-sex attraction. The fact that students examine their past in light of the present-and vice versa-is hardly surprising. But for gay and bisexual students, reflections on the past often bring new insights about their sexual identity and help them make sense of confusing childhood experiences.

Negative Experiences of Coming Out

For the most part, the students in this study experienced their coming out as "a great relief" that was "freeing," "empowering," and "challenging." Even though none of the 40 students

expressed any regrets, 6 did not find the process to be the overwhelmingly positive experience that the majority described. For example, one student experienced periods of self-loathing after he came out. Eventually, however, those periods became less frequent. A second student faced other the difficulties: "It's like I've got to make up for 19 years of defining myself one way and redefine who I am. It's really frustrating." A third student talked about the wall that developed between him and his family after he came out to them.

Even those students who described coming out in positive terms suffered some negative consequences after coming out. One student recounted losing one of his best friends. "We were talking about our lives, our fears, our wishes, and I ended up letting him know I was gay." His friend completely withdrew from him. "He just couldn't deal with it." The friends of one man changed their minds about sharing an apartment with him. One of his friends said that she couldn't live with him because she was applying for a job with the federal government, and if they found out that she lived with a gay man, she might not get the job. "Then my other friend said he didn't want to deal with all the harassment that he felt would come up if he lived with me."

Ongoing Experiences of Harassment and Discrimination

Although a number of students faced specific negative consequences after initiating the coming-out process, others experienced ongoing harassment and discrimination. Several students were physically and verbally assaulted at local nightclubs for appearing too effeminate. One student was harassed by a bouncer for hugging another gay friend whom he had not seen in a long time. He was told to "save it for alternative night," a designated night when the bar acknowledges alternative lifestyles. Another student described five men who had opened the door to the only local gay bar and had yelled obscenities at patrons: "I stopped and said, 'Did someone yell "faggot"?' The guy that yelled and the four others got in my face and pushed me down to the sidewalk. One was getting ready to punch me in the face, but another one stopped him and said, 'You don't want to get any faggot blood on your hands.'"

A student recalled walking home from a party with his boyfriend when a young man hit him in the face without provocation. He had to get 18 stitches. Another student also needed stitches after he was assaulted at a party when he commented on the attractiveness of a straight man there.

Out gay and bisexual students who live in residence halls often face harassment. The bathroom mirror on one man's floor had scrawled across it: "Fag in 408. We don't like cock suckers on our hall." This student often posted on his door information related to gay issues. The flyers were frequently torn down, written on, or spit at. "One time I put my clothes in the dryer and this guy got real upset with me because he was next in line . . . So he left a note on the machine: 'Hey fag, I was here first.'" Two of the students involved in this project worked as resident assistants (RAs) and often had to deal with derogatory notes on their doors. Another recalled how the men on his hall started a petition to "get the fag off the hall." The students were reprimanded by the RA, but in the end, they got what they wanted when the gay student moved off campus.

The stories of harassment and discrimination seem endless. One man described the fear he lives with daily: "I don't feel very safe on campus. I don't really feel comfortable. It's something I put up with, something I tolerate. You just never know when a group of frat boys or jock types—you know those who are probably most closeted—are going to beat your face in because you remind them of what they can't admit to." Another student refuses to wear T-shirts or buttons with gay symbols or expressions for fear that he might be identified publicly as a gay man. "I don't feel comfortable declaring myself to everyone who walks by. If you tell the world you're gay, you have a good chance of getting harassed. I'm not ready yet to be identified to everyone. That would make me nervous. It's almost like you're asking for trouble when you're that out."

A number of students recalled classroom

incidents in which gay and bisexual people were clearly excluded from the class discussion or marginalized by negative comments. In one class students got to ask each other questions on the first day. Almost all of the questions concerned what students look for in dating the opposite sex. A second student remembered a similar incident when the instructor asked the students what they look for in the opposite sex. When the instructor got to this student, he said: "I don't look for anything in women. I date men. I'm gay."

A third student's human development professor talked about behavior modification as a way to treat homosexuals. "I raised my hand to point out that there are some serious issues that we should talk about in relation to whether this kind of strategy is acceptable . . . the idea of 'curing' gays." A fourth student recalled a professor of Black Studies who was pointing out three weaknesses of Bayard Rustin, a key advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr. First, Rustin was a suspected communist. No one in the class said anything. Second, he avoided the draft. Again, no response. Rustin's third shortcoming was that he was openly gay. Everyone gasped. "That was the one unforgivable thing—that he was gay."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Because most people in our society assume others to be heterosexual, coming out is a never-ending process. No matter how many people know about a person's sexual orientation, there will be others to whom that individual will want to or have to come out (Rhoads, 1994b). Herdt (1992) recognized the ongoing nature of coming out in discussing it as a rite of passage to a gay identity: "Although the 'coming out' concept conveys a single event pinpointed in time and space, many writers today recognize a multiplicity of events stretching over years" (p. 30).

Recognizing coming out as an ongoing process is critical to understanding the identity struggles that gay and bisexual college students face. The research participants in this study remarked time and time again about their disappointment and frustration in having to continually come out to new people they meet. Support services need to be in place to help

students during their initial phases of coming out, and should be available to help students deal with the ongoing obstacles that they must overcome.

The notion of coming out as process suggests developmental phases that individuals pass through as they develop a clearer sense of gay identity. The problem with proposing a pattern or model of development is that one runs the risk of constructing a normative view of gay identity. And arguably, it is the normalization of sexual identity—in which heterosexuality is established as the norm—that contributes to the widespread oppression of gay and bisexual men in the first place.

The findings from this study are not intended to be prescriptive, because the students involved described coming out as a complex, variable, and ongoing endeavor. Nonetheless, eight common themes or phases to coming out are reflected in the experiences of the students involved in this project: personal struggle related to same-sex attractions and societal expectations, self-realization, self-acknowledgement, self-disclosure (coming out to an intimate), disclosure to members of the gay community, public disclosure, commitment to a group sense of identity, and balancing of individual and group commitments. These common phases should be seen as guides to understanding and not as recipes for gay identity development.

It is important to note that not every research participant experienced these phases. Also, students who did pass through the coming-out phases did so in a variety of ways, in terms of both time and energy expended, as well as the order in which the phases were experienced. For the most part, the coming-out phases delineated here support previous discussions and findings about the formation of gay identity (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1991a; Troiden, 1979).

Although the developmental implications of coming out are significant, the process must also be understood in terms of its negative consequences. Not every person the gay and bisexual students in this study came out to was accepting and supportive. Additionally, coming out has changed the way these students experience their social environment. Where there once was a self-imposed but socially enforced closet door, there

is now a socially imposed form of confinement-the social environment students encounter. Leaving the closet has meant confronting social stigma and the consequences of living in a heterosexist and homophobic society. Students reported being beaten at college parties, assaulted at downtown nightclubs, harassed in residence halls and fraternities, and marginalized in the classroom.

Gay and bisexual students who come out publicly must be prepared to face the kinds of harassment and discrimination described by the students in this study. But being prepared for abuse does not mean accepting it. Student affairs professionals can help lesbian, gay, and bisexual students organize groups to confront hetero-sexism and homophobia. Improving campus climates requires active and transformative, rather than merely reactive, efforts. A campus incident often sparks a reaction, even though the underlying attitudes have been present all along and will remain until a change is effected.

Student affairs professionals should develop strategies to raise issues that affect the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in order to bring underlying tensions to the surface. This approach views potential conflict not as something to be avoided, but rather as an opportunity for growth.

CONCLUSION

Student affairs professionals as well as other faculty and administrators have a responsibility to their academic communities to encourage more just environments for all students—including lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. Communities in which diversity serves as an organizing concept should be the goal. Tierney (1993) discussed the concept of "communities of difference":

> It is curious, perhaps, that I am suggesting we build the idea of community around the concept of diversity, for communities generally suggest commonality. Such communities, however, have inevitably silenced those of us on the borders. Instead, we need to develop the notion of difference and engage in dialogues across border zones. (p. 25)

By *border zones*, Tierney was referring to social and cultural demarcations such as race, ethnicity, gender, or age that typically divide people. He suggested that difference should be seen as a source of discovery, as something that brings people into dialogue. Sexual orientation differences need to be treated that way, too. This article highlights some of the struggles male college students face as they come out and declare their sexual identity. The research findings serve as building blocks both for future research and for the development of programs and services to better serve lesbian, gay, and bisexual students.

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