

Straight Until Proven Queer: Exploring Young Queer Attitudes Towards Coming Out

by

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Abstract

Much has been said about the coming out process in sociological literature — including varying characterizations of the process and varying claims about the significance of the process. This study aims to uncover how young queer people today — an emerging generation of queer people — feel about the process to explore what from the literature holds true, how queer people today characterize the process, and the attitudes they have towards it. Through a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with twelve self-identifying queer people between the ages of 18 and 24 living in Halifax, Nova Scotia, this study finds that today, queer people characterize coming out as a highly complex process that differs depending on identity and geographical location, and which happens continuously. It finds an ambivalence in how young queer people today feel about the process: participants ascribe various values and meanings to the process — including value in its strategic component, meaning in self-affirmation, and meaning in being able to share a part of themselves with others — while simultaneously longing for a life where queer people do not have to come out, for the process upholds heteronormativity and the assumption that everyone is heterosexual until otherwise stated.

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Introduction

Last summer, a friend of mine came out to me. It was an exciting time — they were able to explore a new, more authentic identity, and share it with those they love most. However, it was also a time marked by turmoil — some of their friends had adverse reactions, family members failed to understand, and overall, it was a time of adjustment and continuous, almost burdensome, identity disclosure. It is this moment in time that inspired this study. The coming out process is seemingly taken for granted, but perhaps it should be questioned — how do queer people feel about it? Is it valuable to them, or would they be better off without having to disclose their identity in such a way?

Much has been said about coming out in the sociological literature, and the process has been conceptualized in many ways — from a developmental process with stages (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982) to a socially constructed process shaped by context (McLean, 2007; Rust, 1993). Additionally, studies offer differing arguments and perspectives about various aspects of coming out, including how queer people engage in the process (Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Orne, 2011) and whether the process remains valued or significant in the lives of queer people (Guittar, 2013a; Seidman et al., 1999; Williams et al., 2009). This study aims to add to this rich literature by exploring how much of it holds true today — it aims to uncover how today's emerging generation of queer people define and feel about the coming out process. It is guided by the questions: *how do young queer people today characterize coming out? What attitudes do they have towards the coming out process?*

To answer these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with young queer people in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I then coded and analyzed the data, looking for themes from the literature as well as themes emerging in my research. In doing so, I aimed to delineate what parts

of the sociological literature on coming out are applicable to interview responses as well as what aspects of the interview responses have yet to be explored in the literature. Overall, participants described coming out as a highly complex process that differs based on one's identity and geographical location, and which happens continuously throughout queer people's lives. They acknowledged value in the process — in its strategic component, in self-affirmation, and in being able to share a part of themselves with others — while simultaneously longing for a life beyond the closet, a life where queer people must no longer publicly disclose their non-heterosexual identities. Therefore, this study identifies an ambivalence in how young queer people today feel about the coming out process — it is both valued and significant, and outdated and heteronormative.

This research strengthens our understanding of the coming out process and contributes to the sociological study of sexualities through testing and modifying extant ideas. Further, it demonstrates the value of various social theories in conceptualizing coming out experiences, including symbolic interactionism, Erving Goffman's (1986) stigmatized identity management theory, and theories of the narrative self. In addition, it has important social implications. The study demonstrates that the coming out process, in the eyes of participants, may be outdated. It shows that the coming out process upholds heteronormativity and forces queer people to engage in a process that heterosexual people do not have to confront. However, it also points to some of the values that participants ascribed to the process. So, this research presents a need for us to question the coming out process, and to not expect it from queer people — for some, it may be a meaningful moment, and for others, it may be an unfair burden.

Literature Review: An Evolutionary Look at Ideas About Coming Out

In this section, I will provide an overview of the sociological study of coming out to situate my research. I will begin with ideas from the fields of psychology and sexology (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982), and the sociologists who critique these ideas (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; McLean, 2007; Rust, 1993). Then, I will move to explore themes and debates in recent sociological research. Following that, I will consider the various theoretical frameworks that have been used to study coming out — including symbolic interactionism, Erving Goffman's (1986) theory of stigmatized identity management, and theories of the narrative self. Finally, I will delineate a brief history of queer life in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to provide useful contextualization.

Before I begin, I will first define some of the key terms of this study. The term “coming out” is inseparably associated with the phrase of “coming out of the closet”, a phrase that illustrates the patterns of secrecy, identity development and identity management that some consider to be foundational to modern queer life (Seidman et al., 1999). While precise definitions vary, most sociologists define “coming out” as some form of transformative exchange in which a queer individual discloses their non-heterosexual identity to friends, family, co-workers, or others, in a heteronormative society — a society where heterosexuality is the norm (Guittar, 2013a). Coming out has been described as a process organized around heterosexuality as the societal norm (Seidman et al., 1999). Similarly, precise definitions of “queer” vary and have varied over time; for this study, I will be using queer as an umbrella term for all individuals who identify as members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and two-spirited (LGBTQ2S) community, as other scholars have (Guittar, 2014).

The Early Works: Developmental Models and Their Critiques

Much of the early work on coming out comes from the fields of psychology and sexology and consists of models that conceptualize coming out as a linear, developmental, staged process (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Rust, 1993). Notable models are proposed by Vivienne Cass (1984) and Eli Coleman (1982). Cass (1984) proposes a six-stage model: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride and identity synthesis, and Coleman (1982) proposes a five-stage model: pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationship, and identity integration. They both assert that coming out, or homosexual identity formation, is a developmental process demarcated by a series of changes or stages (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982). Sociologists often position their work on coming out as responses to or critiques of these models, asserting that they are ineffective in conceptualizing the complexities of coming out (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; McLean, 2007; Rust, 1993).

Paula Rust (1993) was one of the first sociologists to critique these models. In a groundbreaking piece, she asserts that these models assume universality and linearity in all coming out experiences, and further, assume that coming out has a clearly marked beginning and ending. In a quantitative analysis of self-administered questionnaire responses, she finds that lesbian and bisexual women do not have structured, orderly coming out experiences — they move back and forth between identities and often experience periods of ambivalence in which they do not associate with any sexual identity (Rust, 1993). Rust (1993) explains her findings through a social constructionist lens, saying that “coming out is the process of describing oneself in terms of social constructs rather than a process of discovering one’s essence” (p. 68).

Scholars have built on Rust’s (1993) critiques with their own studies (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; McLean, 2007). Kirsten McLean (2007) interviewed bisexual men and women to learn

about their coming out experiences. She asserts that linear, stage-sequential models position coming out as healthy and desired, and non-disclosure as deviant — creating what she calls a disclosure imperative (McLean, 2007). McLean (2007) finds that there are factors unique to bisexual individuals, such as stereotypes of bisexuality as a transitional identity, that make deciding whether to come out particularly stressful for them — they face unique struggles in coming out and achieving what is considered a “healthy” queer identity. In a similar vein as Rust (1993) and McLean (2007), others have noted that rigid coming out models and narratives depict all queer people as having the same experiences and suffering the same fate (Saguy, 2020; Seidman et al., 1999).

Further, Patricia Hill Collins (2004) has explored how other identities beyond sexualities complicate the coming out process. Hill Collins (2004) argues that gender, race, and class all impact and potentially complicate coming out. She explains that White queer men maintain a high level of privilege when they come out through their whiteness and masculinity while Black queer women do not (Hill Collins, 2004), demonstrating that several identities impact the decision to come out and how the coming out process is experienced. In considering the work of Hill Collins (2004) along with other sociological scholarship, it can be determined that coming out must not be conceptualized as a linear, universal staged process; coming out experiences differ — and become more challenging — depending not only on sexual identity (McLean, 2007; Rust, 1993), but also other identities, such as gender, race, and class.

Nicholas Guittar and Rachel Rayburn (2016) also build on Rust’s (1993) critiques. They agree that stage models conceptualize coming out as having a beginning and an end (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). They conducted qualitative interviews with lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ) individuals, finding that coming out is a life-long process that queer people never finish,

something that they manage over varying contexts and in front of different people (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). They present a new way of thinking about coming out: coming out as a life-long career (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). They argue that coming out is not a point-in-time event, but instead a gradual process (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). For example, queer people come out to some people at one point in time, and to other people at a later point in time (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). Or queer people assume one specific label and then later assume a different label, like coming out as bi-curious and then later as bisexual (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). Guittar and Rayburn (2016) find that for most queer people, there is no end to coming out in sight.

Beyond The Models: Recent Findings in Sociological Literature

Recent sociological works on coming out focus on how queer people come out and the strategies they employ to disclose their sexual identity (Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Orne, 2011). Nicholas Guittar (2013b, 2014) studies the way in which queer people compromise their coming out to make it more palatable — what he calls “the queer apologetic”. In analyses of qualitative interviews, he finds that a significant number of gay people come out as bisexual before coming out as gay (Guittar, 2013b), or with an affinity instead of an identity, saying “I like men” instead of “I am gay” (Guittar, 2014), either to make their coming out more palatable to friends and family, or due to their own internalized heteronormativity and homophobia. Likewise, Jason Orne (2011) also studies coming out strategies. Orne (2011) draws on Erving Goffman’s (1986) theory of identity management to suggest we reconsider the way we think about coming out. He suggests we shift our thinking from understanding coming out as identity development to instead understanding it as identity management, as queer people strategically come out depending on context — where they are and who they are with (Orne, 2011). Orne (2011) offers the term

“strategic outness” to describe the strategy involved in the coming out process. Both Guittar (2013b, 2014) and Orne (2011) uncover ways in which queer people strategically manage and disclose their sexual identity, so to make coming out a more feasible experience — consequently demonstrating that coming out may not be a feasible experience for some queer people.

Aside from coming out strategies, another area of focus in recent literature is the significance of coming out, or the potential lack thereof (Guittar, 2013a; Saguy, 2020; Seidman et al., 1999; Williams et al., 2009). Guittar (2013a) finds that coming out is valued as a crucial part of queer life, and that it holds many meanings among queer individuals, such as self-affirmation, sharing a part of themselves with those around them, or a combination of the two. However, some scholars argue that progressive attitudes have made coming out less relevant to queer people today (Saguy, 2020; Seidman et al., 1999; Williams et al., 2009). Steven Seidman et al. (1999) argue that contemporary society is “beyond the closet”; Christine Williams et al. (2009) follow suit and also take up this idea. They contend that coming out was once an act of political defiance against heteronormativity, but that normalization of homosexuality has led to its diminishing significance (Seidman et al., 1999). They argue that, while discrimination against queer people persists, “the closet” is not as relevant as it once was due to popular opinion growing more accepting of homosexuality (Williams et al., 2009). My research provides useful contributions to this debate in particular, as I asked young queer people about their attitudes towards coming out, and what values or meanings they ascribe to the process.

Sociological studies on coming out exemplify the ways in which coming out, and ideas about coming out, have changed. These works show that queer people are becoming more strategic, and in some cases, strategically apologetic, in their coming out endeavors (Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Orne, 2011), and that there is a lack of consensus on whether coming out today is

significant or valued (Guittar, 2013a; Seidman et al., 1999; Williams et al., 2009). The majority of these works share a common theme: they ground their studies in symbolic interactionism, or the work of Erving Goffman (Guittar, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Orne, 2011; Williams et al., 2009). I will now explore how this body of literature uses these theoretical frameworks, as well as explore another valuable family of theories: theories of the narrative self.

Common Approaches: Symbolic Interactionism, Goffman, and the Narrative Self

Throughout the sociological literature on coming out, symbolic interactionism has been consistently used and applied as a theoretical lens to guide research (Guittar, 2013a; Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; Williams et al., 2009). This is logical given that symbolic interactionism is a key component to the sociological study of sexual diversity and queer existence (Epstein, 1994; Plummer, 2003). Symbolic interactionism, coined by Herbert Blumer (1969), is a micro-level sociological theory contending that social interaction produces human conduct — individuals act based on the meanings that they ascribe to the things around them, and these meanings are ascribed based on the social interactions that individuals have with others. In short, symbolic interactionism “addresses how society is created and maintained through repeated interactions among individuals” (Carter & Fuller, 2016, p. 932). It highlights the importance of context in human behaviour — different people are exposed to different social interactions, meaning they will ascribe different meanings to the things around them and accordingly, act differently (Carter & Fuller, 2016). When applied to coming out research, symbolic interactionism is used to understand “the socially situated meaning of coming out at a given moment” (Guittar, 2014, p. 390). Through symbolic interactionism, coming out can be understood as produced by meanings derived through interaction, as well as an interaction that produces meanings itself.

The work of Erving Goffman (1986) — an influential symbolic interactionist (Carter & Fuller, 2016) — has also been consistently applied in sociological coming out studies, specifically his work on stigmatized identity management (Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Orne, 2011). Goffman (1986) argues that there are discredited stigmatized individuals, those whose stigma is known, as well as discreditable stigmatized individuals, those whose stigma is not known and are therefore able to manage the information about their stigmatized identity. The idea of a discreditable but not discredited identity that can be managed through concerted efforts is valuable to coming out scholarship. Queer people control and manage their stigmatized sexual identity through deciding who to come out to, demonstrating a discreditable, but not discredited, stigmatized identity (Orne, 2011). For example, when a queer person comes out to their friends, but not to their parents, they are managing a stigmatized identity that is discreditable — a stigmatized identity that is not overtly known to their whole social network.

While not used as frequently as symbolic interactionism or Goffmanian concepts, theories of the narrative self also offer valuable frameworks for studying coming out sociologically. These theories argue that the self is not a pre-existing being, but rather, a reflexive being represented linguistically through the stories that we tell others as well as to ourselves (Dunn, 2017). They illustrate the particularities in identity formation — individuals exercise agency in how they narrate their experiences, instead of people with similar attributes sharing a universal experience (Somers, 1994). These theories are valuable, providing an understanding of coming out as a person-specific narration of the self — as the self entering a new group and becoming more authentic (Liang, 1997). Some scholars have used these theories to interpret coming out experiences (Cover & Prosser, 2013; Liang, 1997) and therefore they are useful to consider; they add supplementary interpretations of the coming out process.

Context: Queer History and Life in Halifax and Nova Scotia

As I conducted my study in Halifax, Nova Scotia, it is useful to consider queer history and life in Halifax and Nova Scotia at large. Rebecca Rose's (2019) history of queer life in Halifax from 1972 to 1984 illustrates the struggles gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities in Halifax engaged in, as well as the activists and organizations that emerged. Rose writes that during this time, queer communities in Halifax were slowly emerging from a "collective closet" (Rose, 2019, p. 21). Through interviewing queer community elders, Rose (2019) finds that gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals subverted their identities, only fully embracing them in bars, clubs or other locations deemed "safe spaces" — being "out" in today's society is not the same thing as being "out" back then.

In addition to Rose's (2019) work on Halifax's queer history, other scholars have explored queer life and queer experiences in rural Nova Scotia (Baker, 2016; Marple, 2005). As rural-dwelling individuals make up a large proportion of the Nova Scotian population (Baker, 2016), and as some participants moved from rural Nova Scotia to Halifax, it is important to consider these areas. These scholars situate their work against rural queer studies that position rural areas as the antithesis of queer existence — rural areas as traditional, heterosexual areas, places from which queer people must escape (Baker, 2016; Marple, 2005). Through in-depth interviews, Kelly Baker (2016) finds that while queer people in rural Nova Scotia sometimes feel isolation and pressures to conform to the closeted nature of rural communities, they nevertheless report varying levels of acceptance in their communities. Baker (2016) demonstrates that rural communities in Nova Scotia are not uniformly traditional, heterosexual places that queer people must try to escape, and further, that some of them foster welcoming environments for queer people.

In summary, much has been said about coming out in sociological literature. Coming out has been explored as a non-universal, non-linear process (Rust, 1993) that differs for queer people depending on what they are coming out as (McLean, 2007; Rust, 1993), and other identities they may possess (Hill Collins, 2004). It has been defined as a life-long process (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016) that is strategic (Orne, 2011) and perhaps, losing significance in contemporary society (Seidman et al., 1999; Williams et al., 2009). This rich literature serves as a foundation for this study. My research questions — *How do young queer people today characterize the coming out process? What attitudes do they have towards coming out?* — seek to add to the sociological discourse on coming out by uncovering what aspects of it can be used to encapsulate how queer people today make sense of the coming out process in the context of Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Methods: Handling Queer Data

I set out to interview a diverse sample of self-identified queer people with various sexual orientations between the ages of 18 and 25 in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I aimed to interview people of various sexual orientations so that I could compare their attitudes towards coming out. I limited it to people between the ages of 18 and 25 so that I could focus on the attitudes and opinions of young queer people — representing an emerging generation of queer people — and compare what they say to what the literature puts forth about the attitudes and opinions of previous generations. Past studies looking at young queer people's experiences with coming out have adopted similar age ranges (Guittar, 2014; Orne, 2011). Additionally, the Youth Project — a non-profit organization in Halifax, Nova Scotia that serves queer youth — categorizes

individuals 25 and younger as youth (Youth Project, n. d.). Lastly, I limited the scope to the Halifax region in recognition that queer communities and subcultures vary geographically.

In the end, the participants did not represent as diverse of a group as I originally planned to interview. I interviewed twelve individuals currently living in the Halifax region — all of whom have been assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of this study. All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, a video conference application. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 and all presently identify as either queer, bisexual, or lesbian. Several participants noted that their sexualities have fluctuated over time and that they have previously identified with different labels. The main limitation of this study can be found in the diversity of the participants interviewed; the sample was not as diverse as it could have been and cannot account for the characterizations and attitudes of individuals identifying with other sexualities beyond the identities listed above. Further, the sample could have been more diverse in terms of other social identities, such as race, gender, and class. As well, the study is limited in that the sample is relatively small and cannot be assumed to represent a broader range of attitudes, characterizations, and experiences.

I adopted three recruitment strategies: a poster campaign throughout Dalhousie University and the Halifax region, a social media campaign through my personal accounts, and additional recruitment in Dalhousie University through announcements by faculty members to their students (see Appendices A and B for recruitment materials). All recruitment strategies employed made it so potential participants would be reaching out to me. Catherine Connell (2018) says that in qualitative queer studies, it is important to recruit participants this way as reaching out to participants directly could be a threat to their privacy — you could potentially “out” them against their will.

I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews based on what social scientists have said about the value of qualitative methods to queer research (Compton, 2018; Ghaziani, 2018; Moore, 2018). Mignon Moore (2018) notes that qualitative methods are valuable to queer research as they focus on everyday experiences and the meanings ascribed to them. Others echo this sentiment — D’Lane Compton (2018) contends that qualitative research looks at meaning and specific processes, and Amin Ghaziani (2018) argues that quantitative methods are not as effective for queer research as they are “abstracted from lived experiences” (p. 206). As I aimed to uncover the attitudes of today’s young queer people and the meanings they ascribe to the coming out process, as well as how they characterize the process, adopting a qualitative approach was logical.

In the interviews, participants were asked three kinds of questions: questions about their personal experiences with coming out, questions about their thoughts on the process itself, and questions about their thoughts on the meaning and significance of the process (see Appendix C for the interview guide). Some of the questions aimed to get at themes from the literature, such as questions that asked whether they think coming out is a continuous process, to get at Nicholas Guittar and Rachel Rayburn’s (2016) idea of coming out as a life-long career. Other questions asked about the meaning and significance of coming out, to get at the significance debate that is present in the literature (Guittar, 2013a; Seidman et al., 1999; Williams et al., 2009). However, many of the questions were open-ended with no specific theme in mind. This was to allow participants to say whatever they were comfortable sharing, and to uncover emerging themes that have not been identified in the literature. Probes and follow-up questions were also asked when further information was needed.

To analyze the interview data, I conducted a qualitative thematic analysis. Thematic analyses allow researchers to focus on identifying larger ideas and themes (Guest et al., 2014). As I was interested in identifying the overarching themes in the data, it was logical that I adopted a thematic approach to my analysis. Additionally, scholars note thematic analysis as a valuable analytical method for studies that use data gathered through interviews and focus groups (Guest et al., 2014). To code the interview data, I used both deductive coding — codes developed based on theory and literature, or “theory-driven” codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) — and inductive coding — codes that emerged in the data as it was analyzed, or “data-driven” codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In doing so, I adopted a hybrid approach to thematic analysis, and thus, a more rigorous approach to qualitative analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

As for the ethical concerns, there was potential for discomfort among participants — discussing or reflecting on past experiences with coming out could have potentially involved discussing or reflecting on difficult events, such as adverse reactions that friends or family may have had to a participant’s coming out. To account for this, participants were informed via the consent form that they did not have to answer any questions that they did not feel comfortable answering, and that they could stop participating at any point (see Appendix D for consent form). Additionally, all participants were given a list of phone lines and organizations they could contact for queer mental health support and general mental health support in Nova Scotia. As previously mentioned, the interviews were semi-structured and open ended to ensure that participants could share anything they wanted to about the subject, and further, not say anything they did not want to share about the subject.

Data Analysis: Coming Out Today

In this section, I will present and discuss four themes that best represent participants' characterizations of coming out, the meanings that they ascribed to the process, and their attitudes towards it. First, I will discuss how participants characterized coming out: as a complicated process that differs depending on identity and geographical location, and which happens continuously. The second and third themes revolve around the ways in which participants ascribed value and meaning to the coming out process. The second theme is the strategic engagement with coming out that participants described, and why they value the strategic component of the process. The third theme is the positive meanings that participants ascribed to the process more broadly. The fourth theme is that, despite the various meanings that participants ascribed to the coming out process, they all expressed a longing for life beyond the closet — a life where queer people no longer must publicly disclose their non-heterosexual identities. This fourth and final theme prompts a discussion about the changing politics of the closet, the rise of a new moment in contemporary queer life and demonstrates that while participants value coming out for a plurality of reasons, they nevertheless think of it as an unfair burden placed on queer people that upholds heteronormativity.

It's Complicated

As extant studies have shown, coming out must not be thought of as a universal phenomenon that is experienced in the same way by everyone; to do so would ignore the lived realities of queer people who possess various identities (Hill Collins, 2004; McLean, 2007; Rust, 1993). For instance, Paula Rust (1993) and Kirsten McLean (2007) demonstrate that bisexual individuals experience coming out differently due to specific stigmas associated with bisexuality.

Some of the participants in this study who either presently identify or formerly identified as bisexual spoke to such stigmas. They said that bisexuality is thought of as a “phase”¹ (Jessica) or a “waiting ground” (Hannah) between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Their responses show that bisexuality is not always taken seriously, and that it is uniquely difficult to come out as bisexual.

However, the data demonstrates that coming out is not only complicated by bisexuality, but also by other sexual identities. Some of the six participants who identify as queer² explained that this label is less constraining and allows them to evade rigid identity categorization. In explaining why they identify as queer, Quinn said, “I’m not putting myself into a box.” Some of these participants spoke to the issues that arise in coming out as queer — that for some of the people they come out to, queer is not a sufficient label. Emily explained that it is difficult to come out as queer, especially to heterosexual people, as “there are other identities that are more conceivable to them.” In a similar vein, Hannah explained that coming out as queer leads to further questioning, as people want to know “which side you fall more towards.”

Further, the data shows that there are identities beyond sexualities that complicate the coming out process, and thus aligns with arguments raised by Patricia Hill Collins (2004). Hill Collins (2004) contends that coming out is more complex for women with marginalized racial identities as they will not possess a compensating form of privilege through their race or gender like a White man who comes out as queer would. Hannah, who identifies as a queer Black woman, spoke to this:

¹ All direct quotations from interviews have been edited. Grammatical errors have been corrected and irrelevant repetitions in speech (e.g., “like”, “you know?”) have been removed for clarity.

² While this study uses the term “queer” as an umbrella term for all individuals identifying within the LGBTQ2S community, here it is referring to a specific identity that six participants identify as.

When people see me, the first thing they see is a Black person, and the next thing on top of that is that I'm in a minority group of people that are queer and a person of colour ...

[There's] a very small group of people like me.

Hannah further explained that most of the queer people she knows are White, and that "their only minority is that they are queer. But with people of colour, we have many layers to being a minority." Hannah's responses demonstrate that she feels an intense degree of marginalization as a Black woman who has come out as queer, which in turn, renders coming out a difficult, more complex experience for her to navigate. Another participant, Alex, spoke to how their autism influences their coming out experiences. Alex explained that they believe their autism has led them to reject societal rules, and that because of this, they did not have any reservations in demonstrating queerness: "it just seemed par for the course to me." Alex's responses serve as another example of how a plurality of identities can impact a person's experiences coming out and thus, demonstrates the complexity of the coming out process. Responses such as Hannah's and Alex's confirm Rust's (1993) argument that coming out is a matter of defining oneself in terms of social constructs rather than in terms of an essential, universal essence.

In addition to identities, geography was also described as a factor that impacted participants' coming out experiences. Two participants, Emily and Danielle, had moved from rural Nova Scotia to Halifax, and described Halifax as more queer-friendly than the rural communities they came from. Emily said, "sexuality was never something that was talked about in my life until I moved to Halifax. Queerness and coming out were never things I saw very much." Danielle spoke to more overt forms of discrimination that delayed her coming out:

A big part of living in that small town was that I didn't even know who I was. And of course, coming from that small conservative area, there's a lot of the same kind of ideas

of transphobia and homophobia when it comes to people. So, I pretty much tried to protect myself by just not coming out until I moved to a safer area in Halifax.

While Kelly Baker (2016) finds varying amounts of acceptance of queer identities in rural Nova Scotia, Emily and Danielle spoke about experiences and feelings that align more with Baker's (2016) other findings — that queer people in rural Nova Scotia sometimes feel isolation and pressures to conform. While not always overt, and sometimes just reflecting a lack of discussion about queerness, as demonstrated in Emily's case, the place one lives can complicate or even delay coming out experiences. Conceptualizing rural areas as closets (Baker, 2016) may capture an important truth about young queer people in contemporary rural Nova Scotia, as both Emily and Danielle did not come out until they moved to Halifax, an urban area. Their responses also demonstrate an understanding of Halifax as a more accepting space for queer people, echoing a point from Rebecca Rose's (2019) work — that being "out" in Halifax today is not the same thing as being "out" back then — as Halifax has become more accepting of queer identities.

Beyond the ways in which identities and geographies complicate the coming out process, participants also spoke to the ways in which the process itself is complicated. All twelve participants spoke to the continuous nature of coming out to varying degrees. While some characterized coming out as continuous but eventually ending, the majority (nine participants) conceptualized it as continuous and never-ending, and thus demonstrated the applicability of Nicholas Guittar and Rachel Rayburn's (2016) conceptualization of coming out as a life-long career. For example, when asked how they would describe the coming out process in one word, one participant chose the word "constant" (Emily) and another the word "continuous" (Jenny). Participants recognized coming out as a continuous career in two senses that have been

previously explored by Guittar and Rayburn (2016): in the sense that they continuously come out as they meet new people or enter new spaces, and as they evolve and take on new identities.

Some participants spoke about continually coming out in the sense that queer people constantly disclose their identities as they meet new people or enter new spaces. One participant, Riley, explained, “I had to [come out to] everybody over a long period of time ... I’m still doing it, I still come across family members that don’t know.” On the other hand, some participants spoke about it in the sense that queer people often come out numerous times throughout their life as they evolve and take on different identities. Alex, who once identified as pansexual and now identifies as queer, explained, “I have come out numerous times, and in fact, I’ve had to come out with various labels to the same people numerous times.”

Throughout the interviews, participants characterized coming out as a highly complex process. They discussed coming out in ways that rejected a universal depiction of the process — such as those offered in earlier psychological studies (Cass, 1984; Coleman, 1982) — and instead discussed it as a process that is experienced differently depending on one’s identities and geographical location. In other words, participants demonstrated an awareness of how positionality can complicate coming out, proving the applicability of previous sociological works to queer understandings of coming out today, including works that argue that coming out varies with identity (Hill Collins, 2004; McLean, 2007; Rust, 1993) and geographical location (Baker, 2016). As well, all participants spoke to the continuous nature of the coming out process — proving Guittar and Rayburn’s (2016) work applicable — and in doing so, demonstrated another way in which they understand coming out as a complex process. Participants also described the process in ways that spoke to its value — such as their discussions about the strategic component of coming out that, according to them, allows queer people to protect themselves.

It's Strategic

While some participants spoke of apologetic coming out strategies reminiscent of Guittar's (2013b, 2014) queer apologetic — "I think bisexuality is a lot more palatable" (Chloe) — strategic outness was a much more frequently discussed coming out strategy throughout the interviews. Jason Orne (2011) uses Erving Goffman's (1986) theory of stigmatized identity management — a theory arguing that individuals with discreditable stigmatized identities control access to the information about those identities — to conceptualize the coming out process as identity management rather than identity development. He argues that queer people continually, on a daily basis, strategically manage where they come out and who they come out to based on their own assessments (Orne, 2011). The data analysis found this conceptualization to be relevant to participants' ideas about coming out in that all participants described strategic engagement in the process, but also in that they valued the strategic component.

All twelve participants either described strategy in coming out or agreed that there is strategy involved in coming out when asked. For instance, eight participants considered themselves to be "fully out" despite not explicitly coming out to either parents, family members or certain friends — illustrating that they understand queer identity as something they can manage through coming out or not in different contexts depending on where they are and who they are with. Jessica explained this quite simply: "I consider myself to be out but it's not like I'm out to my parents." Others spoke to this in more detail, describing the identity management they engage in depending on who they are with. Chloe had the following to say about a time in her life when she had not come out to her family but had come out to her friends:

I felt that I could whole-heartedly be my whole self when I was with my friends and I could speak about my attractions to women, but that was not something that I could speak

to my family about ... For me, I do very much feel like I have separate identities when I'm with my friends compared to when I'm with my family.

The separate identities that Chloe took on depending on who she was with speaks to the strategy involved in coming out and aligns with Orne's (2011) conceptualization of strategic outness — Chloe decides to which people and in which contexts she comes out and demonstrates her queer identity.

Participants also spoke to the power and protection that the strategic component of coming out grants them. They expressed that the strategy involved in coming out gives them the ability to choose who knows about their queer identity, and further, allows them to evade negative reactions to their queer identity. In doing so, they echoed ideas from Goffman's (1986) theory — that individuals with discreditable stigmatized identities control who has access to information about their identity — and subsequently echoed ideas from Orne's (2011) strategic outness. Jenny said the following about strategically deciding which family members to come out to:

Sometimes you don't have to come out to protect yourself ... I haven't spoken to my Catholic grandmother about my sexuality because that would not be a rewarding coming out experience for me ... Whereas talking with my mom or some other close friends has been really rewarding.

Another participant, Maddy, similarly expressed finding protection in the strategic component of coming out: "if they're not important to me and their opinion doesn't matter ... I don't know why I would take the chance of getting a negative reaction ... [Coming out] is just not worth it sometimes." Both Jenny and Maddy — among other participants — described the ability that queer people have to protect themselves from adverse reactions through strategic outness.

The strategic component of coming out was acknowledged throughout all interviews to some degree and was described as something that grants queer people power and protection and thus, can be understood as something that is valued by queer people. Participants also discussed why they value the process and ascribe meaning to it in more broad terms, which I will now explore.

It's Meaningful

It is important to acknowledge that to varying extents, all twelve participants spoke to some form of meaningfulness in the coming out process. For instance, when asked to describe the coming out process in one word, seven participants chose words with positive, meaningful connotations: “empowering” (Danielle), “rewarding” (Hannah), “exciting” (Jessica, Sarah), “liberating” (Maddy, Riley), and “validating” (Quinn). The meanings that participants ascribed to the coming out process align with ideas and theories found and applied in previous sociological studies — namely, they align with Nicholas Guittar’s (2013a) outlined meanings of coming out, symbolic interactionism, and theories of the narrative self.

While all twelve participants discussed the meaningfulness of coming out, some responses were specifically in reference to self-affirmation — one of the meanings that Guittar (2013a) found to be associated with coming out. For example, Sophie said, “[coming out] is rewarding because ... It feels like you’re saying the truth about who you are.” Other participants discussed the meaningfulness of coming out in terms of being able to share a part of themselves with others — the other meaning that Guittar (2013a) found to be associated with coming out. For example, Sarah said, “It was nice being able to talk about [my queer identity] with my

friends”, and Chloe said, “I finally shared a piece of me with people that they were not cognizant of. So, I felt like I was opening up a little bit.”

Some of the discussed meanings — those involving self-affirmation — reflect ideas from theories of the narrative self. Theories of the narrative self have previously been applied to coming out stories to understand them as narrative processes in which the self enters a new group and becomes more authentic (Liang, 1997). These ideas can be found in participants’ responses when discussing self-affirmation through coming out. Participants conceptualize coming out as an opportunity to reconstruct — or narrate — their identity through verbal disclosure, and thus, become a truer version of themselves. For instance, Riley explains, “I think in my experience, [coming out] has overall been a rewarding experience because I am now able to be a more authentic version of myself”, and Emily said, “I could redefine who I was.”

Other discussed meanings — those involving sharing a part of oneself with others — reflect ideas from symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism highlights the meaning-making component of interactions (Carter & Fuller, 2016). With this in mind, some of the participants’ explanations of coming out as an opportunity to share a part of themselves with others can be understood as a meaning-making process — a process in which they inform those around them of their queer identity and thus, assign a “queer meaning” to themselves. For instance, when listing some of the rewards of coming out, Jessica said:

Being able to talk openly about your relationships ... And being able to bring home partners and feel comfortable doing that ... I think the most important thing for me personally is being able to share experiences with dating or relationships openly.

Jessica categorizes coming out as a valuable meaning-making process in that once she, or another queer person, comes out, they are able to discuss queer dating, queer relationships, and

queer experiences openly. Coming out is understood among participants as a way for queer people to assign a “queer meaning” to themselves so that they can then discuss aspects of their identity openly.

The data demonstrates that coming out continues to carry various meanings among queer people today — be it self-affirmation or being able to share a part of oneself with others. Even participants who associated coming out with mental strain — for example, those who described it as “nerve-wracking” (Alex) or “anxiety-inducing” (Chloe) — still acknowledged value or meaningfulness in the process. Further, these meanings can be understood through sociological theories such as symbolic interactionism and theories of the narrative self to demonstrate the usefulness and applicability of these theories to queer people’s attitudes towards coming out today. However, at the same time, all twelve participants demonstrated a longing for life beyond the closet — a life where queer people no longer must publicly disclose their non-heterosexual identities — and thus demonstrated a certain ambivalence towards the coming out process.

It's Outdated

The most common theme throughout all interviews was a longing for life beyond the closet. A desire for a world where everyone is not assumed straight until they come out was expressed in every interview, and in some cases, numerous times throughout a single interview. This is not to say that participants do not see value in coming out, because as previously mentioned, they ascribe various values and meanings to the process. It is to say that despite understanding the coming out process as valuable and meaningful in a plurality of ways, participants still see unfairness in coming out. Further, it is to say that participants demonstrated ambivalence towards the coming out process.

Steven Seidman et al. (1999) and Christine Williams et al. (2009) both conceptualize contemporary queer life as beyond the closet, arguing that the idea of coming out has declined in significance due to a rise in progressive attitudes. The data here demonstrates that this argument is not universally applicable; participants in my study value coming out in many ways.

Additionally, the data is in tension with Seidman et al.'s (1999) and Williams et al.'s (2009) use of the term "beyond the closet" in another way: participants do not envision a world beyond the closet because of progressive attitudes and increased acceptance, but rather, because they feel as though queer people *should not have to* publicly announce their non-heterosexual identities.

Participants did not express their longing for life beyond the closet in terms of progressive attitudes, but rather, because the coming out process upholds heteronormativity. According to previous sociological works on coming out, the coming out process is a feature of heteronormative societies — societies in which heterosexuality is the norm (Guittar, 2013a). In heteronormative societies, heterosexuality is assumed of everyone until the non-conforming person comes out and says otherwise (Guittar, 2013a). Participants discussed coming out in terms that demonstrate a cognizance of its relationship to heteronormativity: "the coming out process is intrinsic to assuming everyone is straight" (Quinn). They explained that they feel as though queer people, including themselves, come out to evade the default heterosexual assumption in heteronormative society: "anything outside of [heterosexuality] is something that I have to disclose ... because otherwise there would be this default belief that I was heterosexual" (Riley).

Participants long for a life beyond the closet mainly out of defiance of what is expected of them as queer individuals — why should queer people have to publicly disclose their identities when heterosexual people must do no such thing? Chloe said, "I think it's unfortunate

that the onus is on a queer person to have to come out to their family and come out to their friends, when that expectation simply does not exist for straight people at all.” Another participant, Jenny, explained why she takes issue with the concept of coming out:

I’m not really a fan of the coming out narrative as a whole because I think it does reaffirm that idea that straight is the default ... Why do I have to [come out]? You don’t have to come out as straight.

Participants took issue with the process because it upholds heteronormativity and because the burden of identity disclosure is, in their opinions, unfairly placed on queer individuals.

Describing coming out as an unfair burden echoes previous studies that demonstrated a certain unfeasibility of coming out (Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Orne, 2011) as it depicts coming out as a difficult process to engage in that queer people are unfairly forced to confront.

Participant responses may be illustrative of a new moment in contemporary queer life. While the coming out process is not as insignificant as some scholars suggest (Seidman et al., 1999; Williams et al., 2009), there may be a shift in the attitudes that queer people have towards it. Participants demonstrated an understanding of the coming out process as intrinsically connected to the assumption that everyone is heterosexual, and an understanding of rejecting coming out as resistance against heteronormativity. Participants understand coming out as queer people having to explain themselves, explain their queer identity to and among heterosexual people who do not have to explain such an aspect of their lives: “straight people don’t have to explain ‘I’m a man with a girlfriend’, they don’t need to explain that to people” (Alex).

Studies show that it was once political to come out — it was political to announce a sexual identity that deviated from the heterosexual norm (Seidman et al., 1999). Participants acknowledge that this was the case, and that today, it is no longer the case: “I think that [coming

out] has become less overtly political” (Alex). Instead, their responses imply that rejecting coming out as an aspect of queer life may now be political. Participants demonstrated that the idea of coming out, and its associated closet, may be outdated. As Quinn summarized:

I feel like we’re at a point where you don’t have to disclose [your queer sexual identity], it should just be. People shouldn’t be assumed straight. That’s obviously something that is going to take a bit to get to, but I think that’s something we can start thinking about.

Participants value coming out, but at the same time, their responses represent a shift in attitudes towards the process and therefore represent an ambivalence towards the process. While confronted with the process in heteronormative society, participants find meaning in it, however, a new moment in contemporary queer life may be arising, a moment in which queer people defy societal expectations and reject the idea that they must come out to be seen as valid queer individuals.

Conclusion

Coming out: it’s complicated, it’s strategic, it’s meaningful, and it’s outdated. This study demonstrates that — among participants — these are all simultaneously true. Coming out is complex — it depends on one’s identity, geographical location, and overall positionality, and is a common, continuous occurrence, rather than an event that begins and ends. Coming out involves strategy — it gives queer people the power to strategically manage their identity and decide who knows what about them, and thus, is valuable. Coming out is meaningful — beyond the value found in its strategic component, coming out is meaningful in that it involves self-affirmation, and sharing a part of oneself with others. Further, these meanings can be conceptualized and understood through social theories of symbolic interactionism and theories of the narrative self.

Finally, and seemingly in contrast with the various meanings ascribed to it, coming out is outdated — participants demonstrated a longing for a life beyond the closet in which queer people no longer must disclose and explain their queer identity.

How queer people feel about coming out today — the attitudes they have towards the process — involves a certain ambivalence. It is valued, but it is also rejected. While participants find meaning and value in the process — a process that they are forced to confront — they long for freedom from the process's intrinsic relationship to heteronormativity. As previously argued, a new moment in contemporary queer life may be on the horizon. It may be the case that queer people, like the participants in this study, will begin rejecting the coming out process as a form of political resistance — why should they have to disclose and announce their sexuality in this way when straight people do not?

Many arguments and ideas from the sociological literature on coming out can be applied to participant responses — including contentions that coming out is socially constructed and experienced differently depending on identity (McLean, 2007; Rust, 1993) and geographical location (Baker, 2016); Guittar and Rayburn's (2016) conceptualization of coming out as a life-long career; Orne's (2011) strategic outness; and the social theories that extant studies have applied to the coming out process: symbolic interactionism, Erving Goffman's (1986) theory of stigmatized identity management theory, and theories of the narrative self. As well, Seidman et al.'s (1999) and William et al.'s (2009) use of the term "beyond the closet" was found applicable with modification — while a life beyond the closet may be emerging, it is not because of more progressive attitudes, but because queer people are rejecting the idea of coming out and its accompanying closet.

In terms of social significance, the findings of this study demonstrate a need for individuals in heteronormative societies to question the coming out process. Coming out could be a meaningful moment for a queer person, but it could also be a moment marked by heteronormative assumptions forcing them to announce their queerness. The process needs to be questioned and not expected from all queer people. In moving beyond the standard expectation that all queer people must disclose their identity before being a valid queer person, we will move towards a more accepting society that is less heteronormative and does not assume everyone in it is straight.

Further research is necessary to fully elucidate what is becoming of the coming out process. The findings of the present study demonstrate that a new moment in contemporary queer life may be emerging, but that it is not yet here. Future studies should continue to question the value of the coming out process, as well as question it in different contexts, as this study was limited to young people in the context of Halifax, Nova Scotia and further limited by the lack of diversity among participants. With studies in different contexts, whether a new moment in contemporary queer life is emerging can be properly assessed and we can further strengthen our understanding of coming out as an unfair burden that upholds heteronormativity.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Poster



CALL FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

"Out of the Closet, Into Questioning: Exploring Young Queer Attitudes Toward Coming Out".

A sociological study about young queer people's attitudes toward coming out is looking for **individuals who self-identify as queer with various sexual orientations (such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, for instance) who live in Halifax and are between the ages of 18 and 25** to participate in interviews.

This study is being conducted by an undergraduate Honours student at Dalhousie University. Your participation would be confidential and would involve a single interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews can be done either virtually (via Teams), or in person at a location that is convenient for you. Interviews will include questions about how you came to define your sexuality, and your coming out experience, as well as your thoughts and feelings about the coming out process more broadly.

If you are interested in participating, or if you would like to find out more information, please email josephlahey@dal.ca.

Appendix B

Email Template for Participant Inquiries

Hello,

Thank you so much for reaching out and expressing interest in my research project! Allow me to introduce myself: my name is Joseph Lahey. I am a fourth-year student completing a Bachelor of Arts with an Honours in Sociology at Dalhousie University. I'm currently working on my Honours thesis — a study exploring the attitudes that young queer people today have towards coming out, and whether these attitudes align with the sociological literature on coming out.

I am looking to interview individuals who self-identify as queer with various sexual orientations (such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, for instance) who live in Halifax and are between the ages of 18 and 25. Your participation would be confidential and would involve a single interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews can be done either virtually (via Teams), or at a location that is convenient for you. Interviews will include questions about how you came to define your sexuality, and your coming out experience, as well as your thoughts and feelings about the coming out process more broadly.

I would love to speak with you and hear what you have to say about coming out! Please let me know if you are interested, and of course, if you have any questions.

Please keep in mind that, as I have previously mentioned, your participation would be confidential; your identity would be protected.

Thank you so much for your time! I look forward to hearing from you.

All the best,
Joseph Lahey

Appendix C

Interview Guide

*Thank them for participating. Present them with the consent form and review. Ask them if they have any questions before beginning, and then ask them if they are okay with beginning (including beginning recording and taking notes). *

General

1. What are your pronouns?
2. Could you tell me your sexual orientation?
3. How did you come to define your sexual orientation in this way?

Coming Out: Personal Experiences

4. Can you tell me about your own experiences with the coming out process?
5. In your opinion, what does it mean to be “out”?
6. Do you consider yourself to be “out”?
 - a. Why or why not?
7. Have you ever verbally disclosed your identity (e.g., “I am gay”, “I am bisexual”)?
 - a. To whom? In what context?
 - b. Why did you feel it was necessary to do this?
 - c. Did you feel some pressure to do this, or did you do it freely?
8. Do you feel as though you’ve had to come out numerous times (e.g., to different people, in different contexts)?
9. Do you have another identity (e.g., ethnic, racial, religious, subcultural) that you think is significant in relation to your experiences of coming out?

Thoughts on Coming Out (The Process Itself)

10. Do you think coming out is a rewarding process?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. What rewards come with coming out?
11. Do you think there are adverse effects and/or consequences to coming out?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. What effects and/or consequences come with coming out?
12. Who do you think coming out is for, the person coming out or those around them?
13. What do you think the ideal coming out process would be, the best possible coming out?
14. Do you think there is a wrong way to come out? What in your opinion is a “bad” coming out?
15. What experiences do you have with other people’s coming out? Has someone else’s coming out been influential to you, either positively or negatively?
16. Do you have anything you would like to share about being “outed” by other people? Either personal experience, or thoughts about this occurrence?
17. How would you describe the coming out process in one word?

Thoughts on Coming Out (The Meaning of Coming Out)

18. Do you think coming out is valued/important to queer people today?
 - a. Why or why not?
19. In your opinion, is coming out a crucial part of queer life?
 - a. Why or why not?
20. How has the meaning, significance, or value of coming out changed over time, in your view?
21. How have attitudes changed towards coming out, in your view? In queer communities? Among the public at large or communities at large?
22. Have you noticed/witnessed any shifts in the value/importance (either in queer communities or among the public at large) of coming out (over time, throughout your life, in general)?
23. How would you like the meaning or significance of coming out to evolve in the near future?

Closing Remarks

24. Is there anything else about your personal coming out experience, your thoughts about the coming out process or the meaning of coming out that you would like to add that we did not cover?

Demographics

25. What is your age?
26. What is your main occupation?
27. What are your living circumstances (e.g., live alone, with roommates/family/a partner)?

*Thank them again for participating, remind them of the last day that they can withdraw their participation in the study, and ask them if they have any questions for you. *

Appendix D

Consent Form

Out of the Closet, Into Questioning: Exploring Young Queer Attitudes Towards Coming Out

You are invited to take part in research being conducted by me, Joseph Lahey, an undergraduate student in Sociology, as part of my Honours degree at Dalhousie University. The purpose of this research is to interview young queer people of various sexual orientations in Halifax to understand what their views and experiences are of coming out, and whether these align with the sociological literature on coming out. I will write up the results of this research in a paper for my class, called the honours thesis.

As a participant in the research, you will be asked to answer interview questions about your experiences of and thoughts on coming out. The interview should take about 60-90 minutes and will be conducted either virtually (via Teams) or in a quiet location of your choosing. The interview will include questions about how you came to define your sexuality, and your coming out experience as well as your thoughts and feelings about the coming out process more broadly. The interview will be audio-recorded. If I quote any part of it in my honour's thesis, I will use a pseudonym, not your real name, and I will remove any other details that could identify you from the quote.

If we conduct the interview virtually via Teams, I will record the interview using the platform's internal recording feature, as well as the Voice Memos app on my iPhone. During the live Teams meeting, audio and video content is routed through the United States, and therefore may be subject to monitoring without notice, under the provisions of the US Patriot Act, while the meeting is in progress. The risk associated with using Teams recording for this research is no greater than using Teams recording for any other purpose. After the meeting is complete, meeting recordings are securely stored in Canada and are inaccessible to US authorities.

I will save the meeting recording in my password-protected personal laptop and my password-protected Dalhousie OneDrive account. Audio files recorded on my iPhone will be immediately transferred to my OneDrive account using the OneDrive iPhone application and will be deleted from my iPhone once the transfer is complete, I will delete the recordings after I have transcribed your interview.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to answer questions that you do not want to answer, and you are welcome to stop the interview at any time if you no longer want to participate. If you decide to stop participating after the interview is over, you can do so until March 1st, 2021. I will not be able to remove the information you provided after that date, because I will have completed my analysis, but the information will not be used in any other research.

Information that you provide to me will be kept private and will be anonymized, which means any identifying details such as your name will be removed from it. Only I will have access to the unprocessed information you offer. I will describe and share general findings in a presentation to the Sociology and Social Anthropology Department and in my Honours thesis. Nothing that

could identify you will be included in the presentation or the thesis. I will retain an electronic copy of anonymized interview transcripts, in case they are useful to my future studies.

The risks associated with this study are minimal but include potential distress as a result of looking back on personal experiences with coming out. These risks will be mitigated by taking breaks, or, at your request, stopping the interview. Additionally, I will provide all participants with a list of places you can reach out to for support. There is also a risk of being overheard if the interview is conducted in a public space. If this is a concern for you, you may choose to opt for a virtual interview. If this becomes a concern while the in-person interview is happening, we can stop and reschedule a virtual interview for a later date.

There will be no direct benefit to you in participating in this research and you will not receive compensation. However, the research will contribute to new knowledge on coming out, and more broadly, queer life. If you would like to see how your information is used, please feel free to contact me and I will send you a copy of my Honours thesis after April 30. Alternatively, I will prepare a 1-2 page lay executive summary of the findings that you can also request to receive, for those who do not wish to read the thesis in its entirety.

If you have questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me or the honours class supervisor. My contact information is josephlahey@dal.ca, and 902-221-2915. You can contact the honours class supervisor, Dr Martha Radice, at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-6747, or email martha.radice@dal.ca.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email ethics@dal.ca.

Participant's consent:

I have read the above information and I agree to participate in this study.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E

REB Final Report

ANNUAL/FINAL REPORT

Annual report to the Research Ethics Board for the continuing ethical review of research involving humans / Final report to conclude REB oversight

A. ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

This report is (<i>select one</i>):				<input type="checkbox"/> An annual report	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> A final report
REB file number:	2021-5895				
Study title:	Out of the Closet, Into Questioning: Exploring Young Queer Attitudes Towards Coming Out				
Lead researcher (named on REB submission)	Name	Joseph Lahey			
	Email	josephlahey@dal.ca	Phone	902-221-2915	
Current status of lead researcher (at Dalhousie University):					
<input type="checkbox"/> Employee/Academic Appointment					
<input type="checkbox"/> Former student					
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Current student					
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain):					
Supervisor (if lead researcher is/was a student/resident/postdoc)	Name	Dr. Martha Radice			
	Email	martha.radice@dal.ca			
Contact person for this report (if not lead researcher)	Name				
	Email		Phone		

B. RECRUITMENT & DATA COLLECTION STATUS

Instructions: Complete ALL sections relevant to this study	
Study involves/involved recruiting participants: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes, complete section B1.</i>	
Study involves/involved secondary use of data: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes, complete section B2.</i>	
Study involves/involved use of human biological materials: <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <i>If yes, complete section B2.</i>	

B1. Recruitment of participants	<input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable
B1.1 How many participants did the researcher intend to recruit? (provide number approved in the most recent REB application/amendment)	8-10

<p>B1.2 How many participants have been recruited? <i>(if applicable, identify by participant group/method e.g. interviews: 10, focus groups: 25)</i></p> <p>a) In total since the beginning of the study: 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted.</p> <p>b) Since the last annual report: N/A.</p>
<p>B1.3 Recruitment for this study is:</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> complete; or</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> on-going</p>
<p>B1.4 Data collection from participants for this study is:</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> complete; or</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> on-going</p>

<p>B2. Use of secondary data and/or biological materials <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>	
<p>B2.1 How many individual records/biological materials did the researcher intend to access? <i>(provide number approved in the most recent REB application/amendment)</i></p>	
<p>B2.2 How many individual participant records/biological materials have been accessed?</p> <p>a) In total, since the beginning of the study:</p> <p>b) Since the last annual report:</p>	

C. PROJECT HISTORY

<p><i>Since your last annual report (or since initial submission if this is your first annual report):</i></p>
<p>C1. Have there been any variations to the original research project that have NOT been approved with an amendment request? This includes changes to the research methods, recruitment material, consent documents, study instruments or research team.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, list the variation here: Two questions were added to the interview guide. The questions are: "How would you describe the coming out process in one word?", and "How would you like the meaning or significance of coming out to evolve in the near future?"</p> <p><i>(You will be notified if a formal amendment is required)</i></p>
<p>C2. Have you experienced any challenges or delays recruiting or retaining participants or accessing records or biological materials?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, please explain:</p>
<p>C3. Have you experienced any problems in carrying out this project?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>If yes, please explain:</p>
<p>C4. Have any participants experienced any harm as a result of their participation in this study?</p>

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No If yes, please explain:
C5. Has any study participant expressed complaints, or experienced any difficulties in relation to their participation in the study? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No If yes, please explain:
C6. Since the original approval, have there been any new reports in the literature that would suggest a change in the nature or likelihood of risks or benefits resulting from participation in this study? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No If yes, please explain:

D. APPLYING FOR STUDY CLOSURE

Complete this section only if this is a FINAL report as indicated in section A

D1. For studies involving recruitment of participants, a closure may be submitted when: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> all research-related interventions or interactions with participants have been completed <input type="checkbox"/> N/A (this study did not involve recruitment of participants)
D2. For studies involving secondary use of data and/or human biological materials, a closure may be submitted when: <input type="checkbox"/> all data acquisition is complete, there will be no further access to participant records or collection of biological materials <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A (this study did not involve secondary use of data and/or human biological materials)
D3. Closure Request <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I am applying for study closure

E. ATTESTATION (both boxes *must* be checked for the report to be accepted by the REB)

I agree that the information provided in this report accurately portrays the status of this project and describes to the Research Ethics Board any new developments related to the study since initial approval or the latest report.

I attest this project was, or will continue to be, completed in accordance with the approved REB application (or most recent approved amendment) and in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2).