

“I’m Not Gonna Go Tell the Cashier at Publix, ‘Oh, I’m Gay!’”: Social Dimensions of Gay Men
Through the Life Course

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“As my partner would say, ‘Everyone loves a good coming out story!’” - Hans

Introduction

As societal changes continue to shape and shift American cultural norms, the realms of sexuality and sexual orientation are beginning to become more understood as variable and are thus gaining greater acceptance. Underscoring this progress, however, is the need for people who are not heterosexual or ‘straight’ in their sexual orientations to announce this sexual minority identity to the important others in their lives. This process of coming out is unique to persons with sexual minority identities since the American world of patriarchal hegemonic heteronormativity purports, similar to the legal phrase that people are ‘innocent until proven guilty’, that people are straight until proven otherwise. Though there is still conflict as to where and how nontraditional or alternative sexual identities come about, it is becoming more commonplace for sexual minority persons to come out. One of these sexual minority groups is men who self-identify as gay.

Gay boys and men are finding it easier to come out in the modern world, which is becoming more tolerant or even accepting or embracing of diversity within sexual orientations and gender identities. The gay rights movement has made grand progress in the cultural landscape for gay people. However, there is much more work yet to be done, and in the lives of gay boys and men, who still are not guaranteed rights in certain fundamental areas of their lives, certain situations can get tricky. Family isn’t always accepting of a gay member (Armesto & Weisman, 2001) and friends aren’t, either. Schools and workplaces can be hostile and treacherous arenas for gay boys and men.

The situation for gay men can become even more interesting and intriguing when it is understood that American culture is founded on patriarchal norms. In this way, though gay men may possess a stigmatized sexual orientation identity, they still reap the benefits of a patriarchal society in that they possess masculine capital and male privilege. Furthermore, coming out as a gay man can be seen as beneficial or harmful depending on the context and position of prestige specific to that context. For example, a gay man may be willing and able to ‘pass’ as straight in order to gain the reward of straight privilege. In a different context, though, his sexual orientation may not be salient at all and so it may make no difference at all. In yet another context, though, a gay man’s sexual orientation identity salience may actually prove to be beneficial to him.

Coming out is not all there is to the life of a gay man. Once he has come out, he needs to maintain and negotiate that identity within every context of his life as he engages in being out, going back in the closet, or some other facet of the continuum of the social identities he will possess throughout his life.

Literature Review

A review of the literature highlights important understandings of gay male identity and the sociological life course perspective. Since gay identity implies a different trajectory from the normative straight identity within a sociocultural context, many typical identity models that may explain the experiences of straight men do not fit the experiences of gay men. Floyd and Bakeman (2006) emphasize that “[t]he life course perspective has focused attention on both maturational and historical circumstances that influence the process of sexual orientation identity development for gays ... and cause wide variations in the content, timing, and sequencing of

relevant milestone events” (p. 288). Peacock (2000) underscores this point, stating that “a gay life course will start at different ages for different people, based on when identity acceptance begins” (p. 14). This diversity of the experience of being a gay male, when viewed through the life course perspective, implies a respect for “multiplicity in human development, whether that multiplicity emerges between or within cohorts” (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 56). Thus, the experiences of gay men can have differential impacts on, within, and throughout their specific life courses. Further, it is useful and important not to generalize a specific lifeway, as this ignores the diversity of experiences inherent to the process.

Just as an individual gay man’s life course can be diverse and nontraditional in its milestones, the gay man’s identity itself is changing across his life and throughout different contexts. Galatzer-Levy and Cohler (2002) underscore the idea that a person’s identity is “dynamic.” In their eyes, there exists “the possibility of continuing change in identity across the life course. This view of identity ... is profoundly salient to the study of sexual orientation” (p. 264). While it can be easy to explain identity as an ever-constant entity, in reality this is an oversimplification of a person’s very subtle and refined experiences of maintaining and negotiating an identity within a society.

Though it is understood that a gay identity - or any identity, for that matter - can and should be viewed as dynamic, it is also understood that possessing a gay identity requires first and foremost an announcement of this identity to the person’s larger social world, which is of course what we refer to as coming out. After all, “[i]t is only through the process of coming out ... that acceptance into gay culture occurs, and with this new cultural frame of reference, a new set of symbolic meanings, rituals, and social interactions” which exist independently from the

larger hegemonic culture (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 52). Once the gay male in question has come out, this particular facet of his identity is given much weight and may be the most salient of all his identities for a time (Kertzner, 2001). Indeed, it may be reasoned that the years up until the middle twenties serve as a cornerstone for creating an identity (Drasin, Beals, Elliott, Lever, Klein, & Schuster, 2008). This interacts with the supposed median age for coming out as gay, estimated by some to be nineteen years old (Grierson & Smith, 2005). Cohler and Hammack (2007) speculate that this may occur due to the fact that the American cultural landscape is such that it “privileges identity development as a fundamental process of the life course” (p. 48). That is, identity development may be central to the life course perspective as we know it, but it may indeed be a Western bias centering on individuation of the self.

Once a gay man has come out, the dynamic process of his gay identity requires negotiation in every context throughout his life. As Galatzer-Levy and Cohler (2002) put it: “It is said that one never stops coming out. In each business or personal situation, gay and lesbian people are always confronted anew with the question of whether to ‘tell’ and whether telling in that situation is warranted” (p. 280). Gay identity maintenance requires a savvy understanding of the context at hand, including the pros and cons of being out in each specific context, but it also involves a “freedom to choose” which implies agency residing within the individual (Clarke, 2007, p. 71). The process of gay identity maintenance involves a gay man’s usage of an internal locus of control within which to chart his life course.

Sociohistorical contexts have helped to pave a different life course for modern gay males than for those in older cohorts. As well as the influence of the gay rights movement mentioned earlier, gay males of today are navigating a post-HIV/AIDS world (Grierson & Smith, 2005).

These factors may interrelate to shift forward the “milestones such as coming out to oneself, coming out to others, and same-gender sexual debut” (Groo, Bimbi, Nanin, & Parsons, 2006, p. 115). In turn, technological advances may push these milestones forward, as online communication and the internet can serve as forums with which to discover a gay identity and negotiate it in interactions with others, all within the anonymity and safety of the online world (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 2002). Clearly, gay boys and men today are growing up in a completely different world than the cohorts of gay males before them did.

This research study seeks to explore the ways in which young gay men navigate their social worlds after initially coming out. Specifically, how do gay men negotiate the coming out process and how does this affect their being out in subsequent contexts throughout the life course? Cohler and Hammack (2007) explicitly highlight the rationale for increased research in this area: “there remains very limited recognition of the significance of a life-course perspective in the study of sexual identity either in youth or adulthood” (p. 55). I am curious as to how the facilitation of a gay identity impacts future social experiences of gay men as they decide to be out in a certain context and to which degree, or gain a social reward and ‘pass’ as straight. I am interested in the social dimensions of living that are specific to gay men. The life course perspective seems to be a fitting lens through which to explore these experiences.

Sample Description

This study used a sample of five men who self-identify as gay. These men are all in their twenties, the youngest being 24 years old and the oldest being 29 years old. Each of these men

was selected as I know them personally. Four of these men are of American nationality, and one is of Dutch nationality. Three of the men identify ethnically as white or Caucasian, one identifies as Mexican-Filipino, and one identifies as Latin/Latino. Every one of these men has attended the University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida, at one point in his educational trajectory. All have received bachelor's degrees, one has completed an MBA, and three out of the five are currently attending post-graduate educational institutions. Four of the men currently live in Florida, and one resides in New York. Two of the participants are actually in relationships with two other participants, although I made it a point to interview each man separately.

The interviews were semi-structured in format, and interviews ranged from about thirty minutes to one hour in length. Interviews were conducted in my home, the participant's home, or via Skype. All participants agreed to be audio-recorded during the interview, and all were given pseudonyms in order to uphold confidentiality. Interviews were transcribed and investigated to search for themes that emerged. Memos were completed immediately following each interview so as to create an audit trail.

Analysis

Throughout the interviews, a number of themes emerged from the participants' experiences of initially coming out and then navigating their social worlds throughout their individual life courses. Each specific theme will now be elaborated on in depth.

I Don't Care Enough About You to Come Out to You

Several of my participants underscore the intimate notion inherent to coming out to another. This sensitive information is only given to people who have a close relationship to the

gay man. Coming out to someone implies that there is enough trust and comfort within the relationship that this type of self-disclosure is seemingly warranted or desired in order to strengthen the relationship. If this relationship doesn't exist in the first place, the idea of coming out is viewed as absurd, out of the question, or bizarre. Simon, who is 24 years old, white, and in graduate school, humorously likens the process of coming out to a distant family member to a more mundane chore: "Like I'm not gonna call my aunt if I buy a new car and say, 'Oh, guess what? I bought a new car.' If they happen to see it at Christmas, they happen to see my new car at Christmas." Simon doesn't go out of his way to share this personal information with the distant people in his life, but it is implied that he doesn't hide this information, either.

Many of the participants alluded to this theme in our interviews. George, a 24-year-old white male in graduate school and working full-time, explains, "it's not something that I'm gonna go up and shake somebody's hand and say, 'I'm gay'." Later, he mentions that his gay identity is "not something that I just openly am babbling about." Carlos, 24 years old, in graduate school, and Mexican-Filipino, is more explicit when he explains that he "didn't feel the need to come out to [his late grandfather]." Simon, again, utilizes humor to shine a light on the sometimes ludicrous nature of gay identity maintenance within certain contexts: "I don't go out and, you know, shout out my personal life to my professors ... Just like I'm not gonna go tell the cashier at Publix, 'Oh, I'm gay!'" These experiences highlight that within some contexts inherent to the life course, such as family, work, school, or simply existing in a social world, a person's sexuality or sexual orientation identity is neither relevant for the conversation to transpire nor appropriate to the intimacy delegated by the relationship.

George explains the reasoning for this privacy as pertaining to his general demeanor in all aspects of his life: "I feel like personally I'm somebody who is not an open book to begin with." Perhaps this is the case, although perhaps too this type of explanation acts as a rationalization and a safe method for a gay man's survival within an oppressive heterosexist patriarchal culture. If a gay man is careful about who he lets into his social circle and to what extent, he ensures that the people surrounding him are safe resources for him to engage more intimately with, open up to, and let his guard down - the guard that, to some extent, he must wear in most, if not all, contexts of his life.

However, Mario, a 29-year-old Latino who works full-time, has a different take on this issue, highlighting to me that the most oppressive characteristic of it all entails feeling that you cannot come out or aren't out in a particular context, therefore you cannot be genuine or open. He explains to me quite vividly, "When you're not out, people have power over you. They hold it over you like a sword." In this way, it is almost as if everyone around the gay man already knows of his gay identity, but these people use this knowledge to their own advantage and in a threatening way. Though Mario may not care enough about these people to the extent that he wants to intimately and personally come out to them, he does want to reclaim the power that is rightly his that has been manipulated from him. It seems that this distinction has to do with the variable of personal agency or internal locus of control. It is within a gay man's control whether to come out, to what extent, or not, to people in his life, but if that control is taken away, so is the power inherent within the act of coming out. It is only in coming out that this process can be negotiated.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

Somewhat related to the first theme is the theme of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell.’ This theme differs from the previous theme in that some participants explicitly mentioned this phrase in their explanations of specific social contexts, usually work or family. A characteristic of this theme entails that a gay man perceives or picks up on that his sexual orientation identity is tolerated within the specific context, but it is not accepted per se. In this way, his sexual orientation has been acknowledged as a fact (or in some cases opinion), but that is the extent to which the ‘issue’ is brought up. George says that one side of his family is far less accepting of his sexuality than the other: “I think with them, it’s more of a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ mentality. Like, ‘we’re okay with it, but we just don’t need to talk about it’ sort of thing.” Similarly, Hans, who is 26, white, and works full-time, expresses the same sentiment about his work environment, citing as a reason Florida’s somewhat conservative makeup of citizens: “I think that a lot of people have enough sensibility to ... not go in there and ask that question or go into detail about their private life. It’s kind of a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ type mentality.”

It is interesting that the phrase ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ gets thrown around so casually, considering the fact that it represents a particularly appalling and oppressive policy of - up until recently - the United States military. However, I can see that it provides for a gay man a useful working understanding of how to navigate the heteronormative features of our sociohistorical environs. Hans goes on to divulge the sophisticated ways that he picks up on coworkers’ acceptance of his sexual identity as integrated within the other aspects of his identity, where he can truly be himself. He speaks of an experience with a female coworker where he became more comfortable with himself through gauging her reactions to his comments:

Like, I had this girl the other day, we were talking about concerts, and how she wants to go to concerts, and I said, ‘Oh yeah, I love concerts too. I just booked tickets for Cher.’

And then she said, 'Oh, wow, I'd love to go see Cher.' And then I told her that I had been to one of Tina Turner's concerts, and I'm a huge fan of Tina Turner, and she started laughing and she said, 'Oh my God! I've got all these rainbows firing at me right now!'

While Hans did not explicitly come out to his coworker, he subtly estimated her comfort level toward him being himself in conversation with her, and was able to accurately feel out that she seemed approving.

Mario describes the atmosphere peculiar to 'don't ask, don't tell' that exists within his family context, but doesn't name it specifically. Moreover, he explains that this strained atmosphere has hindered the relationship between his sisters and himself. Now, his sisters have repealed their local policy of 'don't ask, don't tell.' They are suddenly asking him to open up to them, whereas for so much of his life this subject was off the proverbial table. Vividly, he says, "You can't expect to beat a dog for a point of time and expect it not to bite. You know, it's the same thing! How do you change a lifetime of conditioning?" It seems that 'don't ask, don't tell' alters relationships in a way that makes them more difficult to repair, even after the policy is repealed.

While several of the participants literally used the phrase 'don't ask, don't tell' to describe certain situations in which the extent to which they were out became ambiguous, I wonder how much this type of description will play out through their life courses. As the United States military has recently repealed this policy, this phrase was popular for many years of my participants' lives to describe a certain way of living or succeeding in a specific context. As the sociocultural tides continue to change, I wonder if this phrase will take on a derogatory tone or will fade away from vernacular usage altogether throughout my participants' life courses.

Closeted Until College

This theme deals specifically with each participant's life course, as every one of them explained to me that, for various reasons, they did not decide to officially come out until they were out of their parents' homes, in college, or financially independent. Though much literature supports the idea that gay males are coming out earlier and earlier due to supportive contexts, I did not experience this type of conversation with my participants. This may be viewed as particular to the life courses of my participants, due to their families' involvements with strict religious or spiritual beliefs and/or upbringing in rural or conservative areas. This could also be seen as a cohort effect in which my participants' parents have more traditional or conservative views. More generally, this theme speaks to the stereotype of sexual experimentation that is allowed or emphasized to be expressed in college, a much freer environment than that of the home of parents or family.

Carlos, who grew up in a strict religious and conservative family, expresses quite honestly the feelings he felt after he came to the realization that he was gay when he was twenty years old: "I felt scared ... as to what my parents would do if they ever found out, if they would cut me off financially or disown me." The physical effects of passing through the milestone of coming out at that point in Carlos's life course are quite severe and may actually outweigh the intrapsychic pain he may have been feeling being in the closet.

Simon echoes these cautious sentiments after he realized he was gay at twenty-one: "I was in school, and didn't have a real job that I could really support myself, and I hadn't built the life that I wanted to lead yet." While Carlos's fear stems from physical or financial consequences

of engaging in the milestone of coming out, there is no denying that Simon doesn't share that fear too. However, Simon's fear of reaching this milestone during that particular point in his life course also speaks to the understanding that if he does acquire this new identity as gay, a veritable stigmatized minority status, this new label could actually detract from his scholarly reputation and successes: "[I]f there was any struggle in dental school, I didn't want [my parents] to be like, 'Well of course you're only struggling because you're gay.'" Through Simon's thought process regarding whether he should disclose his sexual orientation identity or not at this particular point in his life course, he sees that he is adopting a stigmatized identity in the eyes of his family and, to a larger extent, his culture. Thus, he decides to hold off on this milestone in order to build up his reputation as a successful son and a successful student.

Mario and George situate the college experience within their respective life courses within a more positive light. These experiences are viewed as freeing and opening up their minds to new perspectives, as contrasted with their previous strict religious and conservative home contexts in which they felt restricted to some degree. In this new, unthreatening, welcoming context, these young men can engage in the individuation process that sometimes goes hand-in-hand with the acquiring and facilitation of a gay identity. Interestingly, Mario feels comfortable when he leaves the physical location where he grew up, while George feels comfortable when he enters that same physical location - Miami. Mario describes his college experience as such: "I was allowed to completely be whoever I wanted to be. So I really liked that. I mean, I felt really free." George's college experience is viewed similarly: "I think that just really being outside of [town where he grew up] was what made me see that I don't have to live there for the rest of my life ... I can go beyond that and be happy." Again, this theme speaks to the personal agency and

internal locus of control that situates participants within their specific circumstances, and thus, their life courses.

Gay Is Not All I Am

The primacy of the sexual identity as a gay man does not show up in every context. My participants were clear about that. Furthermore, participants were adamant in pointing out that their sexual identity is simply one facet of the rest of their complex identities, ever-changing in scope, size, and importance throughout contexts and throughout the life course. Since all of my participants had come out as gay relatively late as situated within their specific life courses, I was honestly surprised that the primacy of this identity was not as salient as perhaps some research has stated that it may be. This goes to show that these men have begun the sophisticated process, which will undoubtedly continue throughout the life course, of negotiating every one of their aspects of identity in different social interactions or contexts.

Mario is quick to point out that his gay identity is not all-encompassing to his master identity as a fellow human being: “[I]t’s not all I am. It’s an enormous part of who I am ... but it has no bearing on, you know, how I do something very mundane or being with casual acquaintances and stuff.” George says, quite eloquently: “your sexuality really has nothing to do with your character.” Carlos gives a nuanced response, integrating the milestone of coming out within the larger framework he has for himself as authentic and genuine within his supportive context of working, going to school, and living in New York City: “I don’t even consider it being out, I’m just myself.” This theme ties into what Simon spoke about earlier regarding his fear of being seen as one facet of his identity. These men are astute to point out that I, as a straight person, perhaps have a bias toward illuminating the gay identity through every context of their

lives, when in reality this identity may have no salience and no relation to many things that they do within and throughout their life courses.

Coming Out To One Group Influencing Another Group

This theme involves the way the milestone of coming out to others may be prioritized by group based on reactions assumed or suspected. The coming out experience to a particular group may shift a gay man's life course away from that group or, indeed, closer toward that group, depending of course on the reaction actually given to the identity disclosure.

George elaborates on why he came out to his dad last of all people in his life: "I had no idea how [coming out to my dad] was gonna go. And I didn't want that to scar my experience with sharing it with other people who were close to me who I figured would be okay with that." Support is central to his reasoning: "[I] had the backing of all the people in front of him." Carlos gives a more explicit reason for his delay in his identity disclosure to his parents: "They were the last to find out, because of the religious thing." These men identified a supportive network with which to surround themselves during the coming out process, and saved disclosure to the seemingly least supportive people for last.

This theme also reflects the opposite type of experience - what I like to think of as a 'domino effect' of acceptance of the gay man's sexual orientation identity. Once the first person is told, the others fall into place. Simon says, "Once you tell one, it's a lot easier to tell the others, so it progressively became not a big deal." It seems that it was the most difficult for Simon to come out to the first person, but since the first person he told gave him a welcoming and accepting response, it became gradually easier to tell other valued people in his life, as he had this supportive experience to back him up. Hans has a different take on his coming out

experience with the groups of people in his life. Speaking about the reasoning he gave for coming out to his father, he says, “I had already come out to my friends, so this was almost like a formality.” It seems that, at least in Hans’s case, the primary group that he shared his identity disclosure with was the most central to his support network, and the disclosures that came after that were not as important or central to him per se.

Forward- or Backward-Thinking

The final theme describes how participants imagine the ways in which their experiences or developmental turning points may have been different if they were situated differently within their life course. This theme also covers how participants define differences in local cultures as accepting or not accepting of being gay, and imagine themselves situated differently within these social or physical locations. There is a lot of speculation as to how a gay man’s life would have turned out if particular variables were changed in one way or another.

Talking to me about how he is no longer as bothered as he used to be about people’s sometimes hostile opinions about sexuality or sexual orientation, George tells me, “Let’s backtrack five years. It’s probably something that would’ve hurt me more than what it does now. I think because now I have a great support system.” George identifies that five years ago, when he was 19 years old and just going through the process of coming out, he didn’t surround himself with as supportive relationships as he currently does. These relationships act as a buffer against the intolerant sociocultural climate that so often is a reality for gay men.

Mario speaks to this harsh social climate and the buffers that exist presently, but laments that they did not exist when he was younger and could have used them: “It’s good that people today have a sort of source where they can turn to, because I didn’t have that source when I was

ten years old, and that was very sad.” In a similar vein, Mario recognizes that kids these days are coming out at earlier ages. He speculates the repercussions that could have come to him if he had come out earlier: “[M]y parents threatened [to kick me out of the house]. I wonder what would’ve happened if I was fifteen years old and I had just fuckin’ come out.” The developmental milestone of coming out, situated for Mario at 15 versus 19, could have wholly changed his life course.

Both Mario and George recognize that the larger sociocultural climate is changing, hopefully in their favor and in the way toward increased tolerance and acceptance of varied sexual orientation identities. They also point out that the factor of developmental age, and the milestones inherent to it which are experienced at differing ages, is so crucial to the life course. Again, George imagines himself to be situated differently to the experience of growing up gay, in a younger cohort and an earlier stage of his life course: “[L]et’s say I was in sixth grade nowadays, I would say there are many more models on TV about what it’s like to be gay and not be one extreme or the other.” More diverse models of gay identity - not solely stereotypes - could have been beneficial to George and helped him pave the way to developing his own gay identity (especially at such a young age), but alas, he did not have this experience and thus had to figure it out for himself.

Physical location, even within the larger sociocultural context, can prove to be an asset or a liability when discussing attitudes toward gay identity, which can set the scene for coming out. George explains, “[I]t probably would’ve been quite different if I had grown up in New York City or something like that, ‘cause [where I grew up] is very conservative.” The physical locations within which these men grew up played some part in determining their life courses.

While the surrounding sociocultural context may be changing in that it may be more accepting of younger gay males coming out, Mario brings up an intriguing point that some push for coming out earlier in the life course may indeed have some root within the gay community. It is clear that he voices some mixed feelings for this forward push:

They say you should never force somebody to come out, but I feel like the gay society almost does ... and maybe that is kind of shaping a lot of people's coming out processes. And in the grand scheme of shaping who they are. Because when you experience certain things at earlier stages of your life than most people might have ... it's gonna affect you differently. I don't know if I would've turned out the same way as I am today had I come out much earlier. I don't think so.

Conclusion

This research illustrates the diversity of experiences that affect gay men after the developmental milestone of their initial coming out disclosure is reached. In a variety of social dimensions, these men have to navigate the waters of acceptance and openness, tolerance and hush-hush conversation, blatant intolerance and hostility, or a combination of these at any given moment without notice or warning. These men illuminate their experiences of toning their gay identities down, pumping them up, or excluding them altogether as dependent on the social context. Coming out is the first step in negotiating a gay identity within society, but, as acknowledged earlier, it is a process that continues throughout the life course.

Furthermore, these participants' experiences shine light on the complicated situation of coming out and being out. While perhaps the sociocultural context is slowly becoming more accepting of gay identity disclosure, it is worth wondering what effects young gay males may feel if the future climate changes so much that they only come out because they are 'supposed to', not that they genuinely feel ready to disclose at that specific point within the life course.

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