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## "It Can Never Be Just One Thing": Constructing a Grounded Theory of Coming Out

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“IT CAN NEVER BE JUST ONE THING”:  
CONSTRUCTING A GROUNDED THEORY OF COMING OUT

by  
Kristy Jagiello

A Dissertation Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in Communication

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## ABSTRACT

### “IT CAN NEVER BE JUST ONE THING”: CONSTRUCTING A GROUNDED THEORY OF COMING OUT by

Kristy Jagiello

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2019  
Under the Supervision of Professor Lindsay Timmerman

The current study investigated the ways in which LGBTQ individuals define and understand “coming out.” Specifically, participants explained how they define the term “coming out,” how their definitions correspond with their lived experiences of coming out, whether they believe “coming out of the closet” is a fitting metaphor for the experience it describes, and their suggestions for components that should be included in a definition of coming out. Fifty-one participants took part in semi-structured interviews, either face-to-face, via video chat, or via email. Their responses were analyzed using the constant comparison method and used to construct a grounded theory of coming out. This theory frames the reason for coming out as the crux of the coming out experience; that is, coming out exists as a response to the expectation that most individuals are heterosexual and cisgender. Related to this, the present theory de-centers disclosure in the coming out experience, emphasizing the role of the internal aspects and stating that coming out can occur even in the absence of self-disclosure to others. The grounded theory constructed here also frames coming out as a process that is ongoing and unique to each individual. Based on the present findings, coming out is defined as an ongoing and highly individualized process, consisting of multiple activities and experiences, during which an individual makes known their LGBTQ identity to themselves

and/or others, through implicit and/or explicit means. Implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

To Patricia, no part of this could have happened without you. I know you weren't expecting a *full* decade when you suggested I go back to school, but your willingness to adapt throughout the experience has made it possible. Thank you times a million.

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## Introduction

Coming out of the closet, often called “coming out,” is typically defined as the act of disclosing an LGBTQ identity (Bacon, 1998) and is often understood as a particular type of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure refers to the act of revealing information about yourself that your conversational partner would not otherwise know, and plays an important role in close relationships (Bowman, 2009; Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Theiss & Solomon, 2008). I use the acronym LGBTQ (as opposed to other versions of the acronym, such as LGBT or LGBTQIA) because it is likely to be used and understood by readers (Wagaman, 2016) and functions as an umbrella term which encompasses the entire community. Extant research commonly discusses coming out as a process that involves completing a number of steps, such as realizing and gaining comfort with one’s identity, sharing that identity with others, and involvement in the LGBTQ community (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). Individual disclosures are often viewed as “so important that they oftentimes consume the minds of LGBTQ youth and adults alike. How will I tell Dad? What will my coworkers think?” (p. 343) which leads to an understanding of coming out as purely focused on outwardly sharing one’s identity; as a means to an end, with the end being the act of full disclosure (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016).

Using the coming out metaphor to describe this experience can create impressions about what the experience is like. Much like the phrase “time is running out” is likely to send the message that a deadline is approaching — rather than to evoke the image of a nearly empty hourglass — the phrase “coming out” is likely to be understood as the disclosure of sexual orientation — rather than to evoke the image of a person stepping out of a small, dark space; however, the connotation of the closet can have implications for how the coming out process is

understood. Because the term has so frequently been used to refer to the act of disclosing sexual identity, individuals are likely to assume that everyone understands the definition the same way they do. This occurs not just in everyday discourse, but in published research as well.

When given a broad prompt like “tell me your coming out story,” people begin and end their narratives at different points, include (and exclude) different parts of the experience, and describe events other than the disclosure itself as salient ([www.comingout.space](http://www.comingout.space); Guittar & Rayburn, 2016), suggesting that individuals understand and experience coming out in different ways. For instance, some narratives begin well before the disclosure, some start with coming out to self, some start with disclosure and discuss the responses and the time afterward. This is particularly relevant for researchers (Guittar, 2013); simply assuming that participants understand “coming out” the same way may cause them to miss out on important information. Additionally, assuming that coming out has a universal definition can prevent researchers from exploring the variation in individual experiences (Guittar, 2014).

Books (e.g., Borhek, 1993; Savin-Williams, 2001) and articles (e.g., Baptist & Allen, 2008; Chrisler, 2017) on coming out often neglect to define the term, instead jumping straight into research and recommendations. This suggests that authors assume that their readers — whether they are other researchers or individuals seeking information on navigating coming out — likely have prior understanding of what coming out means; however, given the various ways coming out experiences are described, it is possible that the readers’ understanding of coming out is not identical to that of the researchers.

Although “coming out” is also commonly used to refer to disclosure of gender identity, existing definitions were developed based on sexual orientation and often mention only lesbian

and gay (and occasionally bisexual) identities, which does not account for those who identify in other ways and also engage in coming out. Much of the existing interpersonal communication research on coming out focuses on parents coming out to their children (Breshears, 2010; Breshears & Braithwaite, 2014; Breshears & DiVerniero, 2015). Turning to fields outside of communication, sizable bodies of psychological and sociological research on coming out exist. Much of this research investigates the role of coming out in various aspects of individuals' lives, including their own health and well-being (Herek, 2003) and their close relationships (Borhek, 1993; Savin-Williams, 2003). Other scholars have analyzed LGBTQ individuals' experiences in an attempt to clarify existing definitions of coming out (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; Orne, 2011).

Coming out has been conceptualized in a number of ways, from a single disclosure (Baiocco et al., 2014; Borhek, 1993; Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012) to a series of disclosures (Denes & Afifi, 2014) or developmental stages (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982), to a process that unfolds over time (McLean, 2007), to a perpetual endeavor (Evans & Broido, 1999; Guittar, 2013; Orne, 2011). The term is used to refer to both the act of engaging in a single disclosure and the span of time during which these disclosures occur (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). Though all definitions center on disclosure to some degree, some are framed as simply sharing or telling (Baiocco et al. 2014; Legate et al., 2012;), while others are framed as revealing hidden information (Denes & Afifi, 2014; McLean, 2007). Many researchers acknowledge the importance of both coming out to self, or realizing same-sex attraction and naming one's identity, and coming out to others, or disclosing that attraction and identity (Adams, 2011; Manning, 2015; Rust, 1993). Others argue that coming out is an interactive process, belonging not just to the LGBTQ individual, but to those to whom they come out as well (Evans & Broido,

1999). Despite the differences in framing, coming out researchers agree that coming out involves some degree of acknowledgement of an LGBTQ identity (whether to self, others, or both) and that it takes place over a period of time. Because of the various ways individuals experience the closet and coming out, as well as the inconsistency in existing definitions, the current study will investigate the ways LGBTQ individuals define and describe coming out.

Coming out is often assumed to have a clear point of demarcation: being in the closet is the period before disclosing a sexual or gender identity, coming out is the process of disclosing, and once a person has disclosed they are viewed as being out (Rasmussen, 2004). Because coming out occurs over time rather than in a single event (Dindia, 1998), individual experiences of coming out can vary greatly in terms of length and other characteristics. Individuals may be out in some contexts (e.g., friends and family) and not in others (e.g., work), and they may experience the coming out process differently depending on the relationship (Legate et al., 2012). Additionally, people may come out to the same person more than once (Denes & Afifi, 2008), for example, when a parent denies or ignores their identity. Alternatively, because many people understand sexuality as fluid, individuals may need to come out more than once, if the way they identify changes (Guittar, 2013), or in response to people questioning what it is or what it means (Denes & Afifi, 2008).

## **Rationale**

Although many existing definitions acknowledge that coming out occurs over a period of time, disagreement exists as to what events or experiences are included in that period, and when it begins and ends (or whether it ends at all). Some researchers place emphasis on disclosure itself, framing disclosing as the single most salient act even while acknowledging that

it occurs in the context of a longer process. Others emphasize understanding the process itself, acknowledging the other experiences that may be salient for LGBTQ individuals (e.g., close others learning about their identity through other channels, the use of nonverbal communication such as physical appearance and environment) in addition to sharing their identity with others. Guittar and Rayburn (2016) urge researchers to investigate these understudied aspects of the experience.

Because coming out is commonly understood as a type of self-disclosure (and, in turn, the bulk of coming out research focuses on the disclosure-related aspects of the experience), it is also necessary to consider interpersonal communication research that focuses on self-disclosure more broadly. Extant research suggests that, when disclosing, individuals may use strategic communication based on the environment or context (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011). Because individuals may disclose personal information to close others in order to seek social support (Derlega, Winstead, Mathews, & Braitman, 2008), close others' responses may influence the discloser's perception of the experience, as well as future communication. When an individual disclosure elicits a positive response or outcome, disclosers may be more likely to self-disclose in the future; similarly, negative responses or outcomes are associated with a decreased likelihood of future disclosure (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Positive responses may decrease fear of disclosure and increase trust in relational partners (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010) and trust can increase the likelihood of disclosure. Because these factors play a role in individuals' experiences with self-disclosure, they may be salient in experiences of coming out as well.

Interpersonal communication scholars have put a considerable amount of effort into

clarifying ambiguous definitions. Perhaps the most notable area in which this work has been done is in defining family. Family has been defined in a variety of ways in the past, and many researchers (e.g., Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006) prioritize inclusivity when conceptualizing family in their research. In addition to definitions, approaches to studying family have evolved over time (Coontz, 2015). Like the definition of family, the definition of coming out has evolved over time (Chauncey, 1994) and has been framed in a number of slightly different ways, resulting in definitional ambiguity (Guittar, 2014). Much like undertaking to construct a definition of family that is broad and inclusive enough so that every family is represented contributes to the body of family communication scholarship, constructing a definition of coming out in which all LGBTQ individuals can identify their lived experiences contributes to the body of scholarship on coming out and related experiences. Clarifying the definition of coming out benefits future research in several ways. First, it aids researchers in ensuring that participants understand their questions and prompts, and in turn aids in ensuring that researchers are interpreting participants' experiences responsibly. Second, it impacts other information that is derived from that research (e.g., follow-up studies, translational research, programming). As Guittar (2014) states, "coming out is a social construct that today garners a fair amount of empirical inquiry, yet rarely do researchers stop to question the usage and subsequent meanings of the concept itself" (p. 3).

Much of the existing research on coming out focuses on the factors that influence the ways individuals seek, receive, and evaluate social support in close relationships, particularly in families (Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Kurdek, 1998). Because close relationships can be a site of both stress and support (Vincke & Van Heeringen, 2002), it is important to understand how LGBTQ

individuals experience both in relation to coming out. Although heterosexual and LGBTQ individuals likely experience support in similar ways, they may seek it out and evaluate it differently (Friedman & Morgan, 2009). Depending on the type of support an individual is looking for, they may seek out an LGBTQ friend because they have had similar experiences, or a parent because they believe they will love them unconditionally. In deciding to whom they will disclose their sexual orientation, individuals may take into consideration the perceived attitudes of others (Evans & Broido, 1999; Lasser & Tharinger, 2003), perhaps based on previous indications of (non)acceptance.

Despite the differences in framing, researchers rarely provide an explicit definition of coming out to readers, instead relying on the assumption that individuals necessarily understand coming out the same way the researchers define it. As Orne (2011) states, “coming out merely has accrued so many meanings that researchers and participants often assume shared understanding” (p. 684). While most do discuss extant research on coming out, they do not provide a clear definition of the term, which means that readers who understand coming out differently than do the researchers may interpret the research in different ways. Because coming out is often a significant experience for LGBTQ individuals, it is crucial for researchers to gain an understanding of how they define it (Guittar, 2013). The following sections provide a review of existing literature on coming out.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Closet**

The closet is typically conceptualized as the period before an individual comes out; that is, once someone discloses their sexual identity they are no longer seen as being in the closet.

This conceptualization relies on heteronormativity, or the idea that individuals are assumed to be heterosexual unless they state otherwise. The existence of heteronormativity necessitates the closet, and in turn coming out (Gray, 2009), both in close relationships and in brief, everyday encounters (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). Of course, disclosing sexual identity to one person does not usually mean that it is known to everyone else with whom a person is acquainted; however, the framing of the closet implies that once someone comes out, they cannot go back in again.

For some, the closet is understood as associated with fear; a place that people are afraid to leave because of the potential for negative repercussions of disclosing their sexual identity. Remaining in the closet can prevent these individuals from receiving identity-related social support (Sheets & Mohr, 2009). Before individuals come out they may experience emotional stress related to keeping their identity a secret (Corrigan & Matthews, 2009; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2017). Conversely, exiting the closet is often framed as a liberating experience (Rasmussen, 2014) that — even if difficult — is ultimately beneficial for the individual. Interestingly, the closet is typically described as a circumstance that an individual is placed in; that is, the closet is the starting point, and there is little mention of what happens before the closet or how it comes to be.

There is no agreed-upon origin of the closet metaphor, although it is unlikely that its use was widespread before 1940 (Chauncey, 1994), and it started to gain popularity around the mid-1960s (Barnhart, 1995). Though some speculate that the phrase is derived from “water closet” (i.e., a restroom) or the phrase “skeletons in the closet” (i.e., shameful secrets), its exact origins are unknown (Brown, 2000, p. 5). Although the contemporary use may call to mind a

situation in which one is forced to hide their LGBTQ identity under the guise of heterosexuality (Guittar, 2014), this was not always the case. The meaning has evolved over time, referring to different actions during different eras. In the 1920s “coming out” referred to the realization of same-sex attraction (as a pattern, not an isolated experience) as well as the formal introduction to gay society. Adopting this phrasing was a play on the ritual of debutantes coming out to society, referring to the formal presentation of gay men at drag balls (Chauncey, 1994). In the following decades, it was more common to say someone was “brought out” (Chauncey, 1994, p. 8), referring to someone being introduced to the gay “lifestyle” by another person. At this time, individuals “did not speak of *coming out of* what we call the gay closet, but rather of *coming out into* what they called ‘homosexual society’ or ‘the gay world,’ a world neither so small, nor so isolated, nor, often, so hidden as ‘closet’ implies” (Chauncey, 1994, p. 7). By the 1950s, coming out referred specifically to a gay man’s first sexual encounter with another man. Only in the 1970s did coming out begin to refer to the disclosure of sexual identity to others, typically close others (Chauncey, 1994). Around this time, the phrase became associated with the gay liberation movement and in subsequent years, quickly became a well-known term (Brown, 2000).

Despite the evolution of the term over the years, the current conceptualization is often described as being related to hiding or shame. A closet is “an extremely evocative metaphorical location” (Kushnik, 2010, p. 678). A closet suggests isolation and lack of participation in the social world outside of it (Kushnik, 2010). Closets are enclosed spaces in which we store items we rarely interact with or think about (Brown, 1999). We say someone “is” in the closet, as if it is a part of who they are, which suggests that sexual orientation is often viewed as central to

identity (Kushnik, 2010). In common use, it doesn't necessarily evoke the image of a person stepping out of a small dark space into the light, nor does it imply the fear, shame, and dishonesty that is often included in academic definitions (and of course, many lived experiences); instead, these images are replaced by a casual reference to "telling." Because "coming out of the closet" does not seem to paint as vivid a picture as it once did, the implications of the metaphor may not always be apparent.

**Metaphor.** Like coming out, metaphor itself has been conceptualized in various ways throughout its study. Contemporary theory of metaphor frames it as a necessary part of ordinary language, used to make sense of the world (Lakoff, 1993). In many cases, metaphors are "ordinary, everyday English expressions. They are not poetic, nor are they necessarily used for special rhetorical effect" (Lakoff, 1993, p. 4).

Metaphor involves mapping one conceptual domain onto another (Lakoff, 1993; Reddy, 1979). Though metaphor does involve using language to represent abstract ideas, "the locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another" (Lakoff, 1993, p. 1). In other words, the impact of metaphor is not in the structure of the words themselves but rather in the way the words allow the listener to create a mental image of the subject of the metaphor, as well as the connotation. The power of metaphor lies in its ability to represent a concept without using an explicit comparison; the second concept is not framed as similar to the first, it is exactly the same. Regarding the closet metaphor, the act of disclosing LGBTQ identity is not *like* leaving a small, confined space, it *is* leaving a small, confined space.

The term “metaphor” refers to the mapping of one concept onto another while the term “metaphorical expression” refers to discrete linguistic expressions (Lakoff, 1993). For instance, a common metaphor is “time is money,” which maps the abstract concept of time onto the somewhat more concrete concept of money. Metaphorical expressions related to this metaphor include referring to time as being “spent,” “wasted,” or “invested” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In the case of coming out, the metaphor is mapping realization and/or revelation of sexual and/or gender identity onto the concept of first being inside of and then exiting a closet. The most common metaphorical expressions are “coming out of the closet,” or “coming out,” as well as terms like “closeted,” and “outed.” As Lakoff (1993) argues, “metaphor is not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason” (p. 6). In other words, the structure of the language (the metaphorical expression) is less important than the ways the concepts are mapped onto one another.

Metaphor is used to create new connections between already-understood ideas (Lakoff, 1993) to make sense of difficult, taboo, or abstract concepts. Although metaphor is beneficial in the sense that it can make an abstract concept easier to grasp, it can potentially lead to an incomplete understanding of that concept. By creating a focus on one aspect of a concept, metaphor necessarily obscures other aspects (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Regarding coming out, framing the experience as exiting a closet maintains a focus on disclosing to others, which can create the perception that the other aspects of the experience are less important or perhaps not a part of coming out at all, rather than considering them as separate (yet related) concepts.

Framing the disclosure of sexual and gender identity as exiting a closet, particularly in academic research, has several implications. It suggests that people can only be in or out,

creating a dichotomy that leaves no room for coming out in some contexts (or about some aspects of identity) and not others. Further, it contributes to the characterization of the time before disclosure (e.g., being in the closet) as marked by dishonesty or hiding, and the time after the disclosure (e.g., being out of the closet) as evidence of authenticity and freedom. Some researchers explicitly frame the closet as necessarily characterized by dishonesty, pain, and burden (Coleman, 1982; LaSala, 2000), contributing to a dearth of research on other pre-coming out experiences. Research on coming out, like many other topics related to identity, is not best served by conceptualizing it as a binary (i.e., in or out of the closet; before or after the disclosure).

### **Coming Out**

Much of the early research on coming out focused on developing models of the stages individuals experience when engaging in coming out, and subsequent research applied these models to examinations of individuals' experiences. Cass (1979) developed a six-stage model of identity development based on gay men's and lesbians' evaluations of their own behavior and their responses to these evaluations. During the first stage, *identity confusion*, the individual realizes some level of same-sex attraction, leading to anxiety as they consider (presumably for the first time) that they might not be heterosexual. *Identity comparison* involves awareness that they are different from others, leading them to alienate themselves, while *identity tolerance* involves believing that they are likely gay and seeking out gay and lesbian acquaintances to relieve this alienation. During *identity acceptance*, they seek out more involvement with other gay people, allowing them to begin to view their identity as normal, and during *identity pride* they become aware that although they accept their own identity,

others might not, so they actively reject heterosexual others (and traditions such as marriage) and seek out other lesbians and gays. In the final stage, *identity synthesis*, they move away from these assumptions of rejection and acknowledge that they can be accepted by others. Though this model focuses more on internal identity development than disclosure to others, it is often referenced in coming out research. While this model does explain coming out as occurring over time, it differs from other process-oriented models (discussed below). Although the model frames each stage as occurring in order, and necessarily being completed before moving to the next (Cass, 1979), process-oriented models describe coming out as more fluid and ongoing.

While Cass (1979) focused primarily on identity development, other models emphasize the act of disclosing. Coleman (1982) identified the following five stages: *pre-coming out*, during which individuals may have some awareness of their same-sex attraction but have not yet named their identity; *coming out*, in which they name their identity and disclose it to others; *exploration*, in which they begin to interact with the LGBT community and “try on” their identity and come to view themselves as capable of engaging in same-sex romantic relationships; *first relationships*, which are conceptualized as necessarily tumultuous and likely unhealthy; and *integration*, during which the individual experiences complete acceptance of their identity and satisfying personal relationships. Coleman (1982) acknowledges that individuals experience these stages differently and not necessarily in the order he proposed, but notes that each stage is a part of most coming out experiences.

These models are still widely cited, both in published research and in applied settings, including LGBTQ center websites and resources for both LGBTQ individuals (e.g., [emptyclosets.com](http://emptyclosets.com)) and allies and family members (e.g., [pflag\\_olympia.org](http://pflag_olympia.org);

strongfamilyalliance.org). Though many authors acknowledge that these models are unlikely to represent every coming out experience, their continued use contributes to the perception that the ultimate goal (and thus, the end) of coming out is complete disclosure (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). Extant research has found that LGBTQ individuals do have experiences similar to many of the stages described above, suggesting that the stage models accurately represent many individuals' lived experiences; however, Guittar and Rayburn (2016) argue that it is equally likely that individuals have heard coming out discussed in ways similar to these models, which influences how they subsequently understand and describe coming out. A final consideration is that, despite the widespread use of the term coming out to refer to disclosure of a sexual or gender identity, these models were originally developed with only lesbian- and gay-identified participants. Though researchers often acknowledge this when referencing stage models, their prominence on LGBTQ websites and to refer to coming out in general may lead to misunderstanding.

**Coming out over time.** Coming out is commonly described as a process that unfolds over time (Dindia, 1998; Evans & Broido, 1999). Often, this process is described as ending once a person is out; that is, once they have disclosed their identity to everyone they know (Rasmussen, 2004). Because it would be logistically impractical for an individual to disclose their identity to everyone they will ever encounter, and because "process" indicates an eventual endpoint (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016), some researchers suggest that coming out is continual. Orne (2011) resists the idea that the coming out process ends, instead acknowledging that people continually disclose in different ways to manage their identities, which he refers to as strategic outness. Strategic outness is accomplished through the use of both direct and indirect

disclosures, deliberately avoiding disclosure, or allowing relational partners to draw their own conclusions (Orne, 2011). Similarly, coming out has been conceptualized as a career that one manages over their lifetime (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). Rather than focusing on the goal of reaching complete outness, a career perspective acknowledges both the internal (i.e., coming out to self) and external (i.e., coming out to others) aspects of coming out (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016).

Coming out is often framed as a process, but no research to date investigates the entire process; scholars have not yet conducted longitudinal studies of coming out experiences as they occur, nor have they directly asked participants to identify the endpoints and salient events (besides disclosure) during the process. Despite the presumed salience of the act of disclosing, researchers have typically focused on the periods before (e.g., Evans & Broido, 1999; Savin-Williams, 2003) or after (e.g., Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Kurdek, 1998) a particular disclosure, with significantly less attention paid to the disclosure itself. Acknowledging that individuals may be out in some relationships but not in others is beneficial to understanding the coming out process more clearly. Additionally, people may disclose some details about their identity but not others (Gray, 2009), suggesting that examining communication either before the disclosure or after the disclosure neither captures the complexity of coming out nor envisions it as a process.

**Individual disclosures.** Coming out is often understood as a disclosure of sexual orientation or gender identity. When conceptualized in this way, the focus is on a single disclosure rather than a period of time. Cain (1991) identified six types of coming out disclosures based on the needs of the discloser. *Therapeutic* disclosures are used to increase

self-esteem or lessen self-stigma; *relationship-building* disclosures are typically used in close relationships, particularly when the discloser anticipates that their close other will be understanding and accepting; *problem-solving* disclosures are used when there is an issue within the relationship that the individual believes they can solve by disclosing; *preventive* disclosures are used to prevent future relational problems; *political* disclosures may be used to convey a particular ideology, or to use one's own identity as a means to challenge stereotypes; and *spontaneous* disclosures are the result of a spur-of-the-moment decision to disclose, or an accident or slip of the tongue.

Similarly, Manning (2015) identified seven types of coming out conversations: *pre-planned*, in which the discloser enters into the conversation with the intent to come out; *emergent*, in which the topic naturally arises or disclosure becomes relevant; *coaxed*, in which a conversational partner broaches the topic, indirectly suggesting that they would respond positively to the disclosure; *confrontational*, in which a conversational partner directly (and perhaps with a negative connotation) asks about an individual's identity; *romantic/sexual*, in which someone discloses in the context of expressing their attraction to another person; *educational/activist*, in which a disclosure is made to share (or correct) information about LGBTQ identities; and *mediated*, in which the disclosure is made through a mediated channel such as text or email. Interestingly, other scholars have distinguished coming out from being outed, which occurs when one individual discloses another individual's identity (Chirrey, 2003). Coaxed and confrontational conversations (Manning, 2015) may be substantially similar to being outed, particularly if the LGBTQ individual discloses because they feel pressured. Again, this suggests that people understand and define coming out in a variety of ways. In addition to

categorizing types of coming out experiences, researchers have investigated the time before and after the disclosure.

**Before disclosure.** LGBTQ individuals consider various factors when deciding whether and how to come out. The expectation that a relational partner will respond positively or supportively to a coming out disclosure is associated with a greater likelihood to disclose (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006; Legate et al., 2012), while a perceived lack of support may lead to avoidance of disclosure (Evans & Broido, 1999). The decision to come out to family members, for example, is influenced by many factors including perception of family relationships, concerns about rejection or lack of understanding, and availability of LGBT-supportive resources (Grafsky, Hickey, Nguyen, & Wall, 2018; Waldner & Margrader, 1999). Though negative repercussions may be a concern for anyone considering coming out, youth and young adults may find it particularly difficult to come out to parents because of concerns about negative reactions (Savin-Williams, 2003).

Early in the coming out process, individuals may seek out information about LGBTQ identities and the experience of coming out. Social media and other mediated channels of communication allow LGBTQ youth greater opportunities to seek information, explore their identities, and prepare to come out to their close others (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Youth with satisfying family relationships may be less motivated to seek out additional information and/or express their identities, because they may be concerned that violating implicit heterosexual norms could negatively impact their family relationships (Waldner & Margrader, 1999). Regardless of family relations, youth may avoid seeking out resources because doing so would violate family members' expectations (Waldner & Margrader, 1999).

**After disclosure.** Research on the time following an initial coming out disclosure has revealed that friends and romantic partners are more common sources of support for LGBTQ individuals than are family members, possibly because of familial responses to or attitudes toward the individual's sexual identity (Kurdek, 1998). Being out to more people is associated with higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety, particularly when responses are positive or supportive (Jordan & Deluty, 1998). When individuals evaluate their parents' responses as positive (Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999) and their friends' responses as supportive (Vincke & Van Heeringen, 2002), they experience greater relationship closeness and well-being.

Several factors impact the way that parents will receive and respond to their child's disclosure. One factor is age; the younger the child is when they come out, the more negatively the parent is likely to respond (Baiocco et al., 2015). Another factor is relationship satisfaction; children who are more satisfied with the parent-child relationship before coming out are more likely to disclose and to receive a positive reaction (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Individuals in families that share traditional values (e.g., emphasis on religion, focus on marriage, and importance of having children) are less likely to come out (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). Additionally, individuals in "highly enmeshed" families (e.g., families with a high level of interdependence) are more likely to experience negative responses than those in less enmeshed families (Biacco, et al., 2014), perhaps due to the expectation of similarity between family members. Families that consider themselves to have a high degree of closeness and similarity may be more surprised, or have their expectations violated to a greater degree, than families with less closeness and anticipated similarity. Finally, family members may view a

coming out disclosure as more intimate than other disclosures, seeing it as inappropriate or as an unnecessary disclosure of sexual activity (Herek, 2003).

Immediately following a coming out disclosure, parents may have trouble overcoming their initial negative reactions (Savin-Williams, 2003). Some parents react in extreme ways including verbal attacks and physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; as a result, some individuals report thoughts or attempts of suicide (Savin-Williams, 2003). In other instances, parents may deny or ignore the disclosure, pretending it never happened. Although they initially acknowledge that their child has come out, they may refuse to discuss it again (Valentine, Skelton, & Butler, 2003). In these cases, or when individuals come out and are dissatisfied with the recipient's response, they may be inclined to repeat the disclosure (Denes & Afifi, 2014).

**Positive and negative experiences.** Coming out experiences are often conceptualized as generally positive or generally negative, but some fall in the middle or are comprised of a combination of positive and negative experiences (Schroeder, 2015). Despite this, little research exists that examines these experiences, and some existing research explicitly seeks out wholly positive or negative experiences, to the exclusion of accounts that may be evaluated in other ways. Manning (2014) identified behaviors that individuals felt made their coming out experience more positive (e.g., open communication, affirming relational statements, and nonverbal immediacy) and behaviors that individuals felt made the experience more negative (e.g., denial, shaming, and aggression). Though this does provide evidence of the variation in coming out experiences, it does not identify behaviors that are seen as neutral or mixed, such as ambiguous hostility, uncertainty, mere tolerance, or invasive questioning (Orne, 2013). Evaluating an event as positive or negative, particularly in the absence of other options, does

not necessarily mean that they perceive it as salient to their overall experience. This focus on only positive or negative experiences contributes to the perception that the most likely responses to coming out are either acceptance or animosity (Orne, 2013), when lived experiences involve many other characteristics such as ambivalence, dismissal, and more.

**Non-disclosure.** Not all LGBTQ individuals ultimately disclose their identities — or every detail about their identities — to all of their close others. For some individuals and in some contexts, not disclosing is the safest choice (Crews & Crawford, 2015), but these individuals may still be engaged in activities that are typically associated with coming out. Acknowledging one’s own orientation, or coming out to self, is sometimes understood as a step that precedes coming out, and other times as an early stage of the process, but it is rarely conceptualized as the entire process; in other words, if one comes out to self but not to others, they are unlikely to be perceived as out. Some individuals, however, consider accepting and naming their identity, even in the absence of disclosure, to be coming out (Guittar, 2013). This suggests that the typical framing of coming out as being focused solely on disclosure may not represent the experiences of all LGBTQ individuals.

It is necessary to draw a distinction between active non-disclosure (e.g., deliberately concealing information, deception, hiding) and passive non-disclosure (e.g., not disclosing while also not deliberately concealing). Remaining in the closet is often assumed to be active; in other words, if one has not explicitly disclosed it is assumed that they are actively concealing their identity. “Passing” refers to an LGBTQ individual being understood as heterosexual and/or cisgender, and is often framed as the result of deliberate action (Shugart, 2003). It is possible, however, to pass unintentionally (i.e., being read as heterosexual/cisgender without putting

forth any effort to create that perception), likely as a result of hetero- and cisnormativity. In these instances, LGBTQ individuals must decide whether to disclose their identity. In some instances, an individual's LGBTQ identity is disclosed by a third party without their consent, known as "outing." Coming out is often distinguished from outing, suggesting that an essential component of coming out is agency.

LGBTQ individuals may have various reasons for not coming out (Cain, 1991). For some, disclosure of sexual or gender identity is viewed as inappropriate or irrelevant to the relationship while others view it as simply not worth it; they believe the costs of disclosing outweigh the benefits. Some individuals may avoid coming out because of their own emotions, like fear, or personal characteristics, like insecurity, while others may avoid coming out to a close other out of respect for that person's beliefs (e.g., their religious or political beliefs "disagree with" LGBTQ individuals and they do not wish to offend them). Finally, individuals may avoid coming out for political or ideological reasons (Cain, 1991). For instance, when an individual's religious or personal beliefs conflict with their perception of their sexual or gender identity, they may resist disclosing this identity to maintain their self-concept. A common assumption in previous research is that coming out-related stress is a result of keeping a secret that one does not wish to keep (Corrigan & Matthews, 2009). Conceptualizing the closet in alternative ways may lead to different impacts and emotions. For example, if someone views the closet as a negative experience, they may evaluate positive responses to coming out as more important than individuals who viewed the closet less negatively. Alternatively, individuals who do not view coming out as a negative or risky disclosure may experience surprise or disappointment if a close other does not respond positively.

## Research Gaps

The metaphor of coming out of the closet creates the perception of “in” or “out” as the only options for LGBTQ individuals. Extant research and public discourse on coming out contributes to a narrative in which coming out necessarily involves moving from a place of shame to complete personal acceptance (D’Augelli, 2003). This narrative suggests that this progression is a crucial element of LGBTQ individuals’ lives, but the variation in definitions of coming out, as well as the multitude of ways individuals experience coming out, suggest that it is not universal.

As noted previously, researchers often advocate for viewing coming out as a process rather than a one-time occurrence, but coming out is still frequently conceptualized as one event or one conversation. Coming out is typically studied as a particular disclosure that occurs at a particular time, and is frequently described as the dividing line between being in the closet and being out of the closet (Rasmussen, 2004). This is done explicitly (e.g., referring to “the” coming out conversation) and implicitly (e.g., conceptualizing coming out as one moment in time; referring to the time before the disclosure or after the disclosure). For example, Denes and Afifi (2014) studied the experiences of individuals who came out to parents “a second time” (p. 18). While it is certainly important to expand our view of coming out beyond a single disclosure, this approach still does not conceptualize it as an ongoing process. That it can be done “again” implies that the first experience has ended and can now be repeated.

Jhang (2018) argues that the typical Western understanding of coming out as an individual disclosing their sexual identity may not extend to other cultures. Elaborating on this, I argue that it does not necessarily represent many coming out experiences, even in the United

States. Instead of viewing coming out as a single disclosure, Jhang (2018) proposes a “scaffolding” model (p. 166) in which individuals and their parents identify and reconcile discrepancies in their expectations for disclosure in the relationship using both implicit and explicit strategies.

Studying coming out as a process involves more than simply asserting that it is a process; researchers must consider the implications of existing approaches and be open to adapting them. Instead of conceptualizing coming out disclosures as the defining moment in a broader experience, researchers should endeavor to understand other parts of the process, include multiple disclosures, and reduce emphasis on the initial disclosure. The concept of “strategic outness” is useful in this adaptation. Strategic outness describes the “the contextual and continual management of identity in which people are never fully ‘out’ or ‘closeted’” (Orne, 2011, p. 688). From this perspective coming out is studied as an identity management strategy rather than a single event. Conceptualized this way, coming out includes communication before and after an initial disclosure, as well as other direct or indirect disclosures throughout the process.

The research gaps discussed above have both theoretical and practical implications. Because some questions remain unanswered, the body of research on coming out may not accurately represent the ways in which individuals experience coming out. Addressing these questions may highlight salient aspects or previously unidentified parts of the definition, allowing for more focused and nuanced research, and in turn a more complete and representative understanding of this significant experience. In addition to contributing to existing research, addressing the gaps in extant research can have implications for LGBTQ

individuals and their close others. A variety of programs exist to provide support for people throughout their coming out experiences, as well as for close others and allies to learn more about providing support. Research about the various ways LGBTQ individuals conceptualize and experience coming out can inform these programs, and allow them to provide greater benefits.

Extant research has primarily focused on the positive impacts of coming out conversations on well-being, creating a perception that being in the closet is often characterized by negative experiences (e.g., fear, dishonesty) while the time after coming out is often characterized by positive experiences (e.g., a sense of liberation or authenticity) (Rasmussen, 2004). Although several researchers have addressed the issue of negative responses to coming out (Biacco et al., 2015; Savin-Williams, 2001, 2003), this transformative view persists. It is necessary to investigate experiences that deviate from this narrative, both to contribute to a greater understanding of this experience and to avoid creating inaccurate expectations for LGBTQ individuals who have not come out.

In framing coming out as necessarily beneficial, “coming out researchers routinely subtly express tones of disapproval over their participants’ ‘lies’ ...[and] must guard themselves against these assumptions about the benefits of coming out, inadvertently reproducing the ‘disclosure imperative’” (Orne, 2011, p. 695). This is the most salient implication for future research, as addressing it necessitates close attention to definitions and framing in study designs. Although researchers are unlikely to explicitly evaluate participants’ disclosure-related decisions, they must be mindful of the connotation and valence of the terms used to describe them. Existing research is so focused on some parts of the process (i.e., the disclosure) that other parts may be excluded from the literature; not because they are unimportant but because researchers do

not know to ask about them. For example, although outing is often distinguished from coming out, individuals may include it in their descriptions of their coming out experiences, suggesting that it is necessary to investigate concepts that are otherwise seen as distinct. For this reason, it is necessary to investigate coming out in a way that foregrounds participants' experiences and seeks out the aspects of coming out that they (rather than researchers) identify as relevant. To accomplish this, I propose the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** How do LGBTQ individuals' understanding of coming out correspond with their experiences?

**Research Question 2:** To what extent is "coming out of the closet" a fitting metaphor for the experience(s) it describes?

**Research Question 3:** What definition and/or metaphor should be used to refer to this experience?

### **Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is "inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23). It allows researchers to make sense of these phenomena, and construct a model for future research (Charmaz, 2006). Rather than approaching data analysis with an existing theoretical framework in mind, grounded theorists allow relevant themes to emerge from their data, using these themes to construct their analyses (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Researchers do not try to make existing ideas fit the data, instead they define segments of data and identify connections that emerge (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory was introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as an alternative to the positivist approaches preferred in sociological research at the time (Charmaz, 2006). Since its inception,

the grounded theory approach has been expanded in slightly different ways (e.g., Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987), but they all take a similar approach and “suggest the same basic procedures” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 8).

Grounded theory is the best approach to this investigation because of its rigorous methods and fit with the research questions. Grounded theory meets established guidelines for scientific research; that is, the theory that is constructed from the analysis should be theoretically significant, compatible with the observed phenomenon, generalizable, reproducible, precise, rigorous, and verifiable (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Rather than simply describing the data, grounded theory identifies the relationships between constructs. Four criteria are used to determine how applicable a theory is to the phenomenon to which it relates: “fit, understanding, generality, and control” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23), and when done well, grounded theory meets all of them (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Theory should be constructed from diverse data to represent the reality of the phenomenon, be understood by both the population of study and scholars in the field, and be broad enough to apply to a variety of lived experiences but specific enough to aid in understanding particular contexts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Constructing grounded theory also allows for creativity and adaptability during analysis. Descriptions of grounded theory acknowledge the role of the researcher in the analysis; that is, rather than framing researchers as neutral observers objectively analyzing data, grounded theory recognizes that researchers have prior knowledge and experiences and describes the relationship between researcher and data as interactive (Goulding, 1998). This approach acknowledges the existence of implicit biases, as well as the possible tendency to notice

information in the data that corresponds with a particular theory or concept. Creativity allows researchers to move past previous arguments and assumptions, contributing to successful theory-building (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Because the researcher allows the theory to emerge from the data rather than placing an existing framework onto the data, this approach can encourage analysis of information that is necessarily ignored when applying existing theory. Beginning the analysis with preconceived ideas of what will be salient to the participants can lead the researcher to miss out on unanticipated details that the participants frame as salient, or approach analysis in a way that does not best represent the relationships present in the data. Like any approach, the appropriateness of grounded theory depends on how it is employed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990); in other words, grounded theory is as useful as the researcher makes it.

Although grounded theory is the best fit for this study, the method does have limitations. Because the use of grounded theory does not dictate a particular conceptual framework to guide analysis, its use can sometimes be an attempt to cover up undeveloped research ideas or inadequate analysis skills (Allan, 2003) or to avoid describing methods in detail (Suddaby, 2006). It is not uncommon to encounter a study that claims to do grounded theory but develops no theory, instead conducting an unstructured thematic analysis. Some researchers use “grounded theory” as a catch-all term for other qualitative methods (Suddaby, 2006), again overlooking the importance of theory construction. Common mistakes with or misuses of grounded theory include ignoring existing literature, presenting raw data as results, following a mechanical approach (i.e., going through the motions of analysis rather than creatively interpreting the data), and assuming that grounded theory is easier than other

methods (Suddaby, 2006). I have addressed these limitations by becoming familiar with existing research to ensure that the current research questions are relevant, and by choosing grounded theory only after considering the appropriateness of other approaches.

**Sensitizing concepts.** Grounded theorists often approach analysis with several salient concepts in mind (Charmaz, 2006). Although they do not necessarily dictate the trajectory of the analysis, they can inform it by inspiring questions about the data and providing a sense of structure while coding (Blumer, 1969). For example, the closet metaphor is a sensitizing concept for the current project. I began the analysis with an understanding of extant research and public discourse about the closet, which influenced the prepared interview questions, the follow-up questions I asked during and after interviews, and the questions I asked as I interacted with the data. During analysis, researchers find that initial sensitizing concepts may no longer be useful, while other, unexpected concepts emerge as relevant. Sensitizing concepts are best understood as a place to begin rather than to end (Charmaz, 2006); that is, they may not be salient once analysis is complete, but they provide a starting point.

Additional sensitizing concepts included identity management and “passing.” Managing identity is often included in descriptions of coming out (Guittar, 2013; Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; Orne, 2011), particularly when individuals consider how recipients of the disclosure will perceive them. Passing occurs when an individual is assumed to possess an identity they do not possess, typically one that is less stigmatized than their actual identity (Shugart, 2003). Passing is typically understood as deliberate (e.g., concealing characteristics that one believes might indicate their identity), but some individuals report feeling guilty for unintentionally passing (McLean, 2007). Passing functions similarly to the closet, in that it is assumed to involve hiding

or dishonesty, but may involve neither. These concepts, as well as others that emerged from the data, guided the analysis, described in the following sections.

### **Method**

The grounded theory approach “emphasize[s] flexible guidelines, not methodological rules, recipes, and requirements” (Charmaz, 2016, p. 9), allowing researchers freedom to collect data in multiple ways. With this in mind, I allowed my participants to choose the modality of the interview, with the goals of recruiting more participants and affording interviewees as much comfort as possible. I conducted 51 interviews via email ( $n = 41$ ), video chat ( $n = 7$ ), and face to face (FtF;  $n = 3$ ). Email interviews were copied and pasted into a document with all identifying information removed, and interviews that were completed FtF or via video chat were transcribed in their entirety with all identifying information removed, resulting in 127 single-spaced pages of data.. All participants were assigned a pseudonym. Throughout the Findings and Discussion sections, participants are indicated by the number (in parentheses following quotes) that corresponds to their interview.

### **Participants**

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 61 ( $m = 33.29$ ). Thirty-four participants identified as female (seven of whom specified cisgender), 15 as male (one specified cisgender, one specified transgender, one specified genderqueer), and two as non-binary. Participants identified their sexual orientation as bisexual ( $n = 16$ ; 2 indicated that they also used pansexual, 1 also used queer, and 1 also used both pansexual and queer), gay ( $n = 15$ ), lesbian ( $n = 8$ ), queer ( $n = 8$ ), pansexual ( $n = 3$ ), and homoromantic ( $n = 1$ ). Participants identified their race as white ( $n = 41$ ), multi-racial ( $n = 5$ ; 2 as black and white, 1 as African American and white, 1 as

Latina and white, and 1 as Asian and Caucasian), Asian ( $n = 2$ ; 1 specified Southeast Asian), African American ( $n = 1$ ), Chicano ( $n = 1$ ), and Hispanic ( $n = 1$ ). With the exception of one individual residing in Canada, participants were located in the US, primarily in Wisconsin, Texas, and California, as well as other Midwest, East coast, and Southeast states.

## **Procedures**

I recruited participants who are over 18 and identify as LGBTQ through my personal Facebook page, LGBTQ Facebook groups, CRTNET, and a local LGBT Center. Prospective participants were instructed to contact me at [whatiscomingout@gmail.com](mailto:whatiscomingout@gmail.com), an email address created solely for this project and to which only I know the login information. Snowball sampling was also used; that is, the call for participants included a request that individuals share and forward it as appropriate. No incentives or compensation were offered for participation. After participants emailed me to indicate their interest, I sent them an informed consent form. Once consent was received, I sent a demographic questionnaire and asked participants whether they preferred to complete the interview via email, video chat, or FtF. When participants chose video chat or FtF, I asked them to provide dates and times to schedule the interview. When participants chose email, I sent them the questions and instructed them to contact me with any questions of concerns. Email interviews were initially conducted in two stages: I sent the first two questions and followed up with the last three after receiving the first set of responses. After sending 12 emails in this format but receiving only four completed interviews, I began sending all five questions at once in the hopes of increasing the number of completed interviews. All remaining email interviews were completed fully.

The most important element for the development of grounded theory is rich data. As

Charmaz (2006) states, “rich data are detailed, focused, and full. They reveal participants’ views, feelings, intentions, and actions as well as the contents and structures of their lives” (p. 14). To identify patterns and relationships among the data, research questions were framed in a way that encouraged participants to provide complete and detailed responses. In addition to being rich, data should be suitable and sufficient to depict the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006). Because asking about the same phenomenon in several ways can elicit details that may be overlooked if I only asked one type of question, the survey questions prompted participants to think about coming out from multiple perspectives. Participants discussed how they understand coming out, how that definition corresponds to their own experiences, and how they believe the phrase should be defined. Finally, I asked whether they believe that “coming out of the closet” is the most appropriate metaphor for the process they just described, or whether they could identify an alternative.

Recruiting a large and diverse sample is often a challenge in qualitative research with LGBTQ populations (Guittar, 2013). A large sample can be an asset because grounded theory does not specify an ideal number of participants; rather, analysis continues until saturation is reached, or no new categories emerge from the data (Saldaña, 2016). While some researchers advocate for proposing a number at which saturation is expected, Suddaby (2006) cautions against this, instead recommending allowing the data to guide this process. Having more participants does not necessarily mean a better analysis, but it does increase the likelihood of reaching saturation without having to collect additional data. Further, the confidential nature of an email interview may encourage participants to disclose information they would not be comfortable sharing in a face-to-face interview (Charmaz, 2006).

While alternate methods are useful in other studies of coming out, semi-structured interviews are the most appropriate method to answer the present research questions. A quantitative survey would identify relationships between constructs, but would not solicit participants' own language, which is necessary to understand their unique definitions of coming out. Analyzing existing data, such as online narratives, might provide information about the endpoints and punctuation of the process, but not necessarily about how individuals understand coming out itself. Allowing participants to choose the mode of interviewing was crucial here, as participants can feel pressured or otherwise uncomfortable in face-to-face interviews (Jahangiri, 2008), which is a hindrance when discussing stigmatized information.

### **Data Analysis**

The various scholars who have developed and expanded upon grounded theory use slightly different terms for the stages of data analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), but each iteration follows the same basic process: data is coded and categorized based on the salient details that emerge from the data, and these categories are used to construct theory about a particular phenomenon (in this case, coming out). In general, there are two phases of coding: one in which the researcher locates many codes within the data, considering whether and how they may be relevant to the analysis, and a second in which the researcher identifies themes among the codes and uses them to make sense of the phenomenon. Before beginning the coding process, I gained familiarity with the data by reading the complete transcripts three times.

**Open coding.** During the first phase of coding, referred to as open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) or initial coding (Charmaz, 2006), the researcher should be open to all

possibilities and avoid moving too quickly toward final themes. Open coding involves close reading to identify salient fragments of data and giving them brief, descriptive names that will ultimately be used to interpret them (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process creates the framework of the analysis (Charmaz, 2006). I began open coding in the early stages of data collection and continued throughout the process; this can point to gaps in the data and suggest possible methodological changes (Glaser, 1978). No substantial changes were made to interview questions; I simply added clarification questions such as “how?” and “in what ways?”

During this stage, it is important to “make your codes fit the data you have rather than forcing the data to fit them” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 49). It is crucial not to get too attached to early codes and unconsciously look for them in all subsequent data; instead, I compared segments of data to one another to identify similarities, differences, and relationships (Charmaz, 2006). The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) involves comparing each segment of data to every other segment of data and, once categories begin to emerge, comparing segments of data to the categories themselves. The act of constantly comparing the data allowed me to identify relationships between the various codes and begin to create the framework of the grounded theory. I went through this process twice, refining the names for codes and looking for similarities and differences. I then printed the codes, cut them up, and physically arranged and rearranged the piles to identify as many potential relationships as possible. After three rounds, themes emerged, and I condensed the list of codes into a slightly shorter list of preliminary categories for focused coding. Through careful coding, my goal is to portray participants’ experiences as accurately as possible, thus increasing the contribution of the present study (Charmaz, 2006).

Segments of data can be as brief as a single word or as long as an entire narrative (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), as long as consistent criteria for what constitutes a segment is used. In the present study, segments were typically brief phrases; each time a participant changed topic or mentioned something that stood alone as meaningful, I coded it as its own segment. Regardless of the length of each segment, scholars agree that the codes used to name them should be framed as actions, which can prevent jumping to premature conclusions regarding categories and themes (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser (1978) recommends using gerunds, or verbs stated as nouns, to encourage the identification of processes within the data. As Charmaz (2006) states, “think of the difference in imagery... describing versus description, stating versus statement, and leading versus leader. We gain a strong sense of action and sequence. The nouns turn these actions into topics” (p. 49). The focus on action and process fits the current project because regardless of specifics (i.e., series of disclosures vs. process vs. never-ending experience) all existing definitions acknowledge that coming out is experienced over time, so elements of action and sequence may be salient.

In addition to framing codes as actions whenever possible, I used *in vivo* codes, or those that use participants’ own language (Charmaz, 2006). Instead of summarizing or paraphrasing a participants’ response, *in vivo* codes retain the participants’ exact language, making it beneficial for understanding the ways LGBTQ individuals conceptualize coming out. Three types of *in vivo* codes exist: terms that everyone understands but that have specific meaning in this context or for these participants (e.g., “coming out”), terms created or used uniquely by participants to describe their own experience (e.g., “aperture of a camera lens”), and ingroup language with which outsiders may not be familiar (e.g., “inviting in”). All three types emerged in my analysis.

**Focused coding.** During the second phase of coding, referred to as focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) or a combination of selective and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), researchers identify patterns among the existing codes and condense them into meaningful themes. After comparing the data to one another to develop codes, I then compared the codes to the data to narrow down and clarify themes (Charmaz, 2006). This process is not typically linear; later codes inform or clarify earlier codes or segments of data become useful that did not seem relevant earlier (Charmaz, 2006). This constant interaction with the data allows relevant information to emerge, and is one of the major strengths of this method (Charmaz, 2006).

While Charmaz (2006) describes this process as one large phase, Strauss and Corbin (1990) break it down into two steps: axial and selective coding. If open coding breaks apart the data, then axial reassembles it in different ways, focusing on connections and relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Selective coding involves identifying the core category and its relationships to the other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The goal is to discuss the phenomenon in terms of its contributing factors, the context in which it occurs, the interactional and communicative actions individuals use when experiencing it, and the effects of those actions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These two steps lead to the construction of the paradigm model, the way grounded theorists connect/show relationships between categories, subcategories, and related information, and serves as the basis of the grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

I began the process of axial coding by reviewing the preliminary categories that emerged during open coding. Again, I printed them, cut them, and physically arranged and

rearranged them to identify all possible relationships. After three rounds of this, clear themes emerged. I then condensed this list of preliminary categories into a much shorter list of tentative themes. After this step, no additional themes emerged.

After ensuring that saturation had been reached and the emergent themes adequately represented the dataset, I repeated the process of printing, cutting, and arranging once more with this final list of themes. This allowed me to consider the relationships between the themes, with an eye toward constructing a grounded theory of coming out. This process of selective coding identified the core category and the ways in which the other themes were related to it (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### **Trustworthiness of Data**

Throughout the process of data collection, I took necessary steps to ensure reliability, including pilot testing, referential adequacy, member checking, and writing memos. The first five interviews were used as a pilot test, primarily to ensure that participants understood the questions. No issues were identified, and I proceeded to the rest of the interviews using the original interview protocol. Before beginning the coding process, I first set aside ten interviews to revisit later to check the themes that had emerged. Finally, the sample of participants is relatively diverse, particularly in terms of representing individuals who identify in ways other than gay or lesbian, which is not included in much of the extant research on coming out.

After all data had been analyzed, I revisited the ten interviews that had been set aside, beginning with open coding and subsequently comparing the segments to the themes that had emerged and seeking out segments that suggested additional themes. No additional themes emerged, suggesting that I had reached saturation within the first 41 interviews; however, I did

use some of the examples to clarify descriptions of themes and distinguish them from one another. Following this step, I contacted 15 participants who had previously agreed to participate in member checking, an important step in triangulating data (Ezzy, 2002; Saldaña, 2016). I sent them a brief summary of the major themes and asked them to answer the question “Do the summaries/explanations represent the ways you understand and experience coming out? (If not, what do you feel is missing?)” Ten participants responded, each indicating that their experiences were represented within the themes. Finally, I used data conferencing, which includes discussing, critiquing, and evaluating the data and analyses with scholars in the same field (Braithwaite, Allen, & Moore, 2017). I consulted regularly with two colleagues throughout data collection, and with the members of my doctoral committee throughout analysis and upon completion of the final manuscript. Engaging in this process aided in clarifying themes and making sense of the data (Saldaña, 2016; Tracy 2013).

From the early stages of drafting the proposal through completion of the present manuscript, I regularly journaled and wrote memos about the processes of collecting, analyzing, and writing about the data, as well as the data itself. I carried a notebook to record spontaneous thoughts, and recorded voice memos on my phone when necessary. Once a week I read through the memos, clarifying or adding to them, and used them to make sense of the data and the process of analysis. I also maintained a dissertation journal throughout the process, which was focused more on regular, structured reflection. Several times per week I wrote about the current state of the project, any concerns and issues, and ideas for next steps. Journaling and memo-writing aided in self-reflexivity by allowing me to interpret the data without my own perspectives having undue influence, and highlighted common themes and

topics in the data and in my interpretations.

Although other methods for analysis could be used to answer these research questions, grounded theory and its associated coding methods are most appropriate. Thematic analysis, or the process of identifying patterns of meaning in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), can be used successfully in similar studies; however, while engaging in thematic analysis produces themes that describe the data, constructing grounded theory also identifies the relationships between the themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this case, a thematic analysis might result in an informative description of the ways in which LGBTQ individuals understand the closet and coming out (both in general and in terms of their own experience), but a grounded theory will discuss the ways each of these informs — and is informed by — the others. Additionally, the acknowledgement of the role of the researcher and focus on reflexivity are benefits to this project. Reflexivity involves positioning myself within the research; identifying my positions and biases and how they may have influenced the process (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013). Engaging in reflexivity throughout the analysis helps ensure that the final theory truly did emerge from the data. Because of my own experiences with coming out, my personal interactions with people who have come out, my volunteer work with LGBTQ populations, and my prior research, reflexivity is particularly important, and following a method in which it is embedded at every step will benefit the analysis and ultimately, the theory.

### **Findings**

Participants described the ways they defined and understood the phrase “coming out” and the ways in which these definitions corresponded with their own experiences of coming out. They also discussed the extent to which the metaphor of coming out of the closet

described their experiences, as well as their recommendations for alternate framing and metaphors to describe the process.

### **What is Coming Out?**

The first research question investigated the ways participants defined and understood coming out. Participants' definitions echoed several existing definitions and varied widely, often related to participants' own experiences. Five themes emerged in participants' definitions of "coming out," describing coming out as an *activity* that is influenced by *expectations* and occurs on *multiple levels*, is *ongoing*, and is *unique* to individuals.

**Coming out is an activity.** Participants most commonly described coming out as an activity or an action; that is, something they do themselves, as opposed to a situation they encounter. Three subthemes emerged within this theme, including compelled, voluntary, and implicit.

Coming out was often described as something participants "had to" or "need to" do, or in some cases, something they were "forced" to do, either by a person or by a situation. Some participants were explicitly asked or pressured to disclose by a close other. Others felt that a particular context made disclosure salient or necessary, such as when a close other presumed their heterosexuality or when they were in a relationship and wanted to introduce their partner to their family. Rosa said, "To me, 'coming out' sounds kind of like an obligation that every queer person needs to go through" (25). Although she did not specify whether the obligation was to herself or to others, it is still clear that she felt that she (and others) are compelled to come out for one reason or another.

Despite the focus on feeling compelled to come out, participants also framed coming out as voluntary. These results may seem contradictory; however, they were framed as two separate parts of the same experience. Individuals report feeling compelled to come out at some point (i.e., they were expected not to stay in the closet forever), but acknowledged that each individual makes choices regarding when and how. For example, “[coming out] typically refers to the active choice that an individual makes to tell others in their life about a significant part of their identity” (11). Coming out was commonly framed as the action of verbally making information (e.g., one’s identity) known to another person, typically one who was previously unaware of this information. This was usually referred to as “telling” or “disclosing.”

Other participants indicated that coming out did not necessarily involve verbal disclosure; that is, sometimes coming out occurs in implicit ways, for example, “I think it happens in lots of subtle ways as your life progresses” (34). Lucas only occasionally discloses his identity explicitly to others, stating, “often it is implicit” (10). AJ “showed instead of told” (22) by bringing his boyfriend home for a family event, despite never having directly addressed his orientation with his family. In cases when participants perceived that the receiver already had some knowledge of the participant’s identity, this action was framed as allowing others to draw their own conclusions, “acknowledging,” or “confirming,” such as “acknowledging to yourself and others a sexual orientation or gender identity differing from what is currently the societal norm” (9).

The most significant part of this theme is the focus on individuals sharing their own information, as opposed to someone else disclosing their identity. Many participants drew a

clear distinction between coming out and being outed, as well as between coming out and others finding out through alternate means. Lucas stated:

At times I have been involuntarily outed by friends or family members. As one example, even though I had never explicitly come out to my aunt, when I was in my late 20s my aunt outed me to my grandmother. I was not there, but supposedly the conversation was my grandmother asking if I was dating anyone or ever going to get married, and my aunt says she told my grandmother, "He is gay, mother!" (10)

Lucas, like many other participants, described being outed as an experience distinct from voluntarily coming out. Interestingly, these participants still included instances of outing within their descriptions of their total coming out experience.

**Coming out is influenced by expectations.** The second theme to emerge in participants' definitions of coming out is expectations. Expectations (whether from the individual, others, or a larger context) were often framed as a reason for coming out. In some cases, individuals came out to confirm or disconfirm others' assumptions (whether general or specific) about their sexual or gender identity. In others, participants discussed the role of their own expectations about coming out in their experiences.

Some participants cited societal and cultural norms as a reason to come out. Because particular nonverbal traits (e.g., clothing or hairstyles that do not adhere to gendered norms) are often assumed to indicate an LGBTQ identity, some participants felt that they would be read as heterosexual and/or cisgender if they did not embody these traits. For example:

As I've gotten older and my appearance has changed people don't often assume I'm queer just by looking at me. I get a lot of assumptions about who I am based on the fact

that I don't look a certain way. Although this gives me a certain level of privilege because I'm less likely to be a target of harassment or violence, I have to make the choice of actively coming out a lot more often than many of my friends who appear stereotypically queer. (25)

Heteronormativity and cisnormativity, or the implicit assumptions that individuals are heterosexual and cisgender unless there is explicit evidence to the contrary (Gray, 2009), were frequently cited as reasons for various expectations. For example, "I'm not very effeminate and American society is mainly heterosexist, so I don't think that most people would naturally assume that I'm gay" (24), and "We live in a heteronormative environment and if we don't represent stereotypes of what being queer is people will often make the assumption that we are heterosexual/cisgender" (25). Lena stated:

We as human beings are designed to make snap judgments about individuals so we can file them accordingly in our brain. This is part of how we interact, and those judgments involve all kinds of things, including the assumed sexual orientation of the other person. "Coming out" is when we redefine ourselves for another person and that person is forced to re-file us. (40)

In addition to general assumptions related to individuals' appearance and behavior, some participants reported correcting assumptions related to their social roles and relationships. For example, Maureen said "people assume I'm straight since I have a child," (3) and Diane said "my typical interaction these days goes something like, 'Does your husband like to travel?' 'You mean my wife? Yes, in fact we are planning a trip to....' Yawn" (41).

Though many participants did frame coming out as the correcting of others' assumptions, others framed it as confirming assumptions. In some cases, the coming out experience involved a discovery that close others had already assumed the participant was LGBTQ, for example "I wasn't aware of how much my queerness showed until... I discovered the whispering going on with my family" (22). Lucas described coming out to his younger brother, recalling "I told him that I had something very personal to tell him that nobody else knew, and he anticipated what I was going to say, telling me he already knew I was gay" (10).

Finally, many participants discussed the role of their own expectations about coming out. These expectations revolved around what they thought the process would be like or how they believed other people experience it. Participants commonly used temporal language (e.g., finally, yet, still). For example, Lena said "When I finally came out to myself, that began an unraveling of the coming out experience" (40) and Liz said "I feel that I am not fully out yet, for the situation I am in makes it hard" (17). This suggests that they have expectations about how long it is typical to remain in the closet, the span of time between coming out to self and coming out to others, and at what point in one's life it is common to come out.

**Coming out occurs on multiple levels.** The third theme includes descriptions of coming out as occurring on multiple levels or to varying degrees. The most prominent topic within this theme is the framing of coming out as both internal and external. While some participants mentioned only the internal action (i.e., realizing and accepting one's identity) or the external action (i.e., disclosing that identity to others), it was far more common to mention both the internal and external aspects, as well as frame them as interdependent with one another. Andrew stressed the importance of both internal and external components, stating "I think that

coming out is best defined as BOTH the internal realization and eventual communication of one's gender identity or sexual orientation" (9).

Internal aspects of coming out included realizing, accepting, and gaining comfort with one's sexual or gender identity, for example "my understanding of the phrase is more of an internal acceptance of your own sexual or gender identity, which influences how open you are about it" (23). For some participants, the internal components were significant enough to be considered coming out, for example "the closet to me is all the things sort of going on in your head before you decide to tell anyone" (28). For several participants, this was true even in the absence of external disclosure, for example "you *can* come out to yourself and never actually tell your family and friends" (9), or "Even if someone is putting an identity on you, until you've rectified that in yourself and admitted that for yourself you haven't come out" (29).

External aspects of coming out include making one's identity known to others in some way, although many participants explicitly acknowledged that the way this is done can look very different for different people. Many participants resisted the idea that an individual must reveal their identity to everyone they know for coming out to have occurred, often using the phrase "to one or many." Even those who did include the phrase "to everyone" in their definitions typically acknowledged that being out to every single person one will ever encounter is virtually impossible, for example:

There is no such thing as 'being completely out' for the average person. Even if you are out to everyone in your life, all it takes is starting a new job, meeting new friends, or talking to a stranger, and suddenly you are faced with someone who doesn't know your

sexuality. You then have the choice whether to come out to them or not to come out to them. (10)

Participants also acknowledged that the experience of coming out differs greatly in different contexts, and that individuals may have varying levels of comfort with coming out in different situations, for example “Being out and then being out publicly in the newspaper is two different levels of being out! And some people are ok being out here but not here” (31).

The biggest point of disagreement among participants was whether “coming out” is only applicable in LGBTQ contexts, or whether it is appropriate to use the phrase to refer to other stigmatized disclosures. Some participants were comfortable with the revelation of any stigmatized identity or vulnerable information being framed as a “coming out” of sorts. Elyse used the term to refer to disclosing her identity as both bisexual and polyamorous, stating “I talk about coming out in different contexts, sometimes it’s coming out as poly, sometimes it’s coming out as bisexual/pansexual, and there are some times where I’m out as one identity and not as the other” (31). Rose said:

I think coming out is just — we often automatically think of the LGBTQ community, but I think coming out is just coming out of anything; you just reveal something about yourself that was unknown before. Particularly when I think about coming out it’s usually like a really vulnerable disclosure, that may be stigmatizing in some way. (28)

Others believed that it was inappropriate to describe non-LGBTQ-related disclosures as coming out, for example “when someone would say they’re coming out as \_\_\_ I’d go ‘oh you’re making fun of it’ or ‘you’re making light of a situation’” (35). Some interviewees associated the term so closely with disclosures of LGBTQ identity that they described its use in other contexts as

stealing or co-opting, for example “it’s clearly a co-opting of the term. I mean there’s a reason that marginalized groups have our own words, have our own dialect, have our own culture. It’s basically co-opting our culture and watering down what it really means” (27).

**Coming out is an ongoing process.** The fourth theme refers to the “ongoing” or “continuous” nature of coming out. Coming out was commonly described as a process, and participants — often explicitly — resisted framing it as a one-time occurrence. Some participants framed the entire experience as one process, placing disclosure at various points, such as “it’s both a destination and starting point” (7). Although framing it as a process can suggest that it ends at some point, or that there is a particular goal, participants stated that an endpoint may or may not exist, and if it does it likely looks different for everyone.

Initial experiences with coming out (either in general or with specific others) were often framed as different than subsequent occurrences: “This is an ongoing process, although I think for most gay/bi/queer people, the first instance of coming out is the watershed moment” (10). Although initial disclosures were often framed as significant and/or memorable, participants also acknowledged the need to come out in each new context and with each new individual they meet, for example “the process by which a person starts to tell other people about how they identify... People always have to come out in different environments and with different people” (25). These subsequent disclosures were often framed as mundane or done out of necessity, as opposed to the more salient experiences with their close others, for example “I also routinely come out to coworkers, acquaintances, etc. who may not be aware of my sexual identity, which feels less momentous and more like work or a hassle” (8).

Part of framing coming out as ongoing was resisting an endpoint; that is, many participants were quick to point out that although individual experiences may look different throughout their lifetime, the process itself continues forever. For instance, Quinn said “I can’t say that there’s an endpoint because I don’t know what my endpoint might be” (33). Similarly, Aaron said “It’s never done. I’ve been in the newspaper in blonde plastic curls and a blue vinyl baby doll dress, holding a giant lollipop, and it’s still never done” (7). Betty noted “I don’t think coming out is ever fully settled” (19).

**Coming out is unique to each individual.** The final theme frames coming out as highly individual, or something that everyone experiences differently, for example “for some people coming out is easy, for some it’s near impossible, some people never have to come out, and others never want to, and there are people at every stage in between” (48). Many participants stated that a single definition cannot (and possibly should not) exist for coming out. Liz framed it as “hard to describe, because I feel this is very different depending on the person” (17). Because the experience is so individual and unique, some participants resisted giving a one-size-fits-all definition, for example “everyone does experience it in a different way and I don’t want to impose my own experiences with and thoughts about coming out on another person’s history” (25).

Many participants indicated that coming out can be difficult and/or have negative aspects. For some, the energy and effort related to coming out was significant, for example “it can get emotionally taxing. If you need to go to the store and you have to put on that front or that face just to get bananas, that’s an emotionally taxing everyday process” (34). Others acknowledge the potential safety risks inherent in coming out, for example “coming out is

definitely not a safe space for everyone” (27). Lena mentioned that these negative aspects are often overlooked in or omitted from popular narratives of coming out, stating:

The popular coming out narrative pisses me off a lot. My Facebook timeline is filled with stories and videos of people who come out to their parents and it’s this teary, joyful moment where the parent says “I knew all along” or “I love you just the way you are” and THESE ARE VALID. I don’t want to say that they’re not, but they’re not the only story. (40)

Although the interviews as a whole discussed positive, negative, and neutral responses, responses in this theme focused primarily on the potential for negative experiences and outcomes. It is possible that participants avoided framing the experience as too positive, perhaps to prepare others for the possibility of having a negative experience.

### **Definitions v. Experiences**

In addition to soliciting participants’ definitions of coming out, the first research question investigated the degree to which these definitions corresponded with participants’ own lived experiences with coming out. Regardless of whether participants felt that their experiences corresponded with their definitions of coming out, many acknowledged that people experience coming out differently. It was common for participants to point out that individuals define coming out in terms of their own experience. This does not necessarily mean that they define it as consistent with their experiences, but that their experiences influence how they understand and define it — even if that means defining it as the complete opposite of how one experienced it. Participants often defined coming out according to their expectations of what it would be like or how they believed others experience it. While several participants

indicated that their experiences corresponded with their definition of coming out, and several more indicated that their experiences were completely different than their definition of coming out, most found both similarities and differences between them.

**Corresponds with definition.** Participants who indicated that their experiences corresponded with the way they defined coming out focused on two aspects: what they did and how they felt. In some cases, the actions participants took while coming out fit the ways in which they defined coming out in general. In others, participants focused on the feelings and emotions they felt related to the experience, and the ways in which those feelings corresponded with the way they conceptualized coming out.

Some experiences corresponded with definitions based on the actions taken by the participants. For example, coming out was often defined as “telling” or “disclosing” a sexual and/or gender identity. Alanna stated that coming out “involved me coming out to myself (acknowledging and admitting to myself that I am a lesbian and doing so without guilt) and disclosing this information at varying intervals in my life to people I trusted and to people who were a part of my life” (37). Jude stated “the first person I came out to was myself, then I came out to my peers. Even though most of them were also gay, it was still a process” (50).

Other experiences corresponded with definitions according to the ways in which individuals felt during the experience, for example “there’s a sense of relief after you do it, of course” (28) and “It was painful at times and relieving at others. When you’re coming out to people you’ve known your whole life it can definitely be a roller coaster of emotions” (48). Some participants mentioned that they felt like they had been hiding and that coming out led

to a sense of freedom, for example, “I did get a glimpse at how freeing it felt to not feel as if I needed to hide from the ones I was close to anymore” (17).

**Deviates from definition.** Several participants indicated that their definition did not represent their own experiences. Because I asked this question after asking participants to define coming out, participants could reflect on their definitions before comparing them to their own experiences. Some interviewees were surprised when they realized that their definitions did not align with their experiences, wondering aloud how that could be.

The most common difference between conceptualization and experience was whether the experience was voluntary. Despite the common framing of coming out as a voluntary action, many participants stated that part of their coming out experience (typically initial disclosures, and often to parents) were involuntary, for example “My coming out was somewhat forced. It was not something that I decided to announce but rather something I was confronted with” (23). While some were confronted or directly asked about their LGBTQ identities, others were outed by a third party: “I didn’t have the choice to come out to my parents. I was kind of outed to my parents by someone” (30). Jane stated, “Generally people assume that coming out is a voluntary process. However, my biggest coming out memory was not voluntary. When I was 16, my parents went through my phone and saw the messages between my girlfriend and [me]” (44). Although some definitions explicitly distinguished coming out from outing, and often framed coming out as voluntary, these responses suggest that being outed may be considered (part of) an individual’s coming out experience. Participants did not suggest that being outed replaced their coming out experience; rather, they suggested that the instances in which they were outed were considered a part of their coming out experience.

Noah said “my coming out experience was thankfully voluntary” (49), acknowledging that even though he was not outed, that it is part of others’ experiences.

Other participants’ experiences differed from their definitions in terms of the action of coming out. These typically related to participants’ own expectations of what coming out looks like for others, and in turn, what it would look like for them. Some participants had initially framed coming out as one significant moment or conversation, but then stated that their own experiences did not look like this, for example “we never sat down and had a heart to heart... I didn’t have the ‘mom, let’s sit down and talk’ moment. It was like ‘you know this? you’ve picked up on this?’” (31). Diane said “coming out meant I not only could make it clear that I was actually dating my ‘friend’ but I could then be honest about all of my LGBT social activities” (41).

Finally, experiences were distinguished from definitions in terms of the ongoing nature of coming out. Participants resisted the idea that coming out has a single definition, stating “I don’t believe coming out is a singular experience” (10). Some participants suggested that framing coming out as “telling” or “disclosing” implies a single event, which was not the case for them, for example “that description may give the impression that coming out is a one-time event that stops once you’ve told someone about your gender/sexual identity, but truthfully, coming out is a lifelong process” (11). Others stated that their definitions placed too much emphasis on the first occurrence, while their own experiences actually spanned a length of time; “it can’t ever be exactly one thing because you have to do it so much” (7) and “there wasn’t just one. I come out constantly, every single day. To random passersby, to government institutions, or legal institutions, or medical institutions — that’s a big one!” (36).

**Partially fits definition.** Most participants indicated that their own understanding of coming out represented their own experiences in some ways but not in others. This was typically framed as a quality of the definition rather than of the experience. Participants described their definitions as being incomplete in some way, specifically, in terms of addressing the different levels on which coming out occurs and in terms of the potential for coming out to be implicit or unspoken.

One of the common themes in participants' definitions of coming out was that it occurs on multiple levels, including internal and external, public and private, and regarding some aspects of identity but not others. When discussing their own experiences, many participants noted that they had omitted some of these levels in their original definitions. Some participants focused on the internal aspects, including Eliza, who said that she "wanted to be radically open and honest with myself before I wanted to experience that with anyone else" (5). Jordan said:

... some LGBTQ folks need to come out to themselves first — as in, not everyone knows they identify as something other than cisgender and heterosexual from an early age... I think a lot of folks assume being LGBTQ is something you always know, and then disclose to others. (45)

Others focused on the external aspects, for example "I'm not living a lie — I am just choosing not to include my parents in the entirety of my truth" (12). Participants with multiple stigmatized identities suggested that they had to manage multiple disclosures in various contexts, for example "I am pansexual and polyamorous, so I have to reveal that constantly... I can't just say 'I have a boyfriend' because that is not entirely true" (6). Finally, some participants' experiences deviated from their definitions in terms of the salience of multiple

contexts (i.e., they had not framed them as important in their initial definition, but recognized their importance after reflecting on their own experiences). Diane said “obviously one may have to still ‘come out’ to others as one meets new people and encounters new contexts, workplaces, etc.” (41).

Related to the theme of coming out as an activity (as opposed to a situation or state of being), participants often indicated that they did not always engage in explicit self-disclosure. These participants indicated that coming out can take place in subtle, unspoken, and implicit ways, for example “sometimes it’s subtle and sometimes it’s nonverbal and sometimes it’s nuanced” (34). Lena stated:

... there are big moments, like when you tell important people in your life for the first time, and there are little moments, like when you tell a co-worker that you have a girlfriend and you see that look, the “I’m being forced to re-box you in my mind” look.  
(40)

This suggests that although coming out was commonly framed as an action, variation exists in how individuals perform that action.

### **Appropriateness of Metaphor**

The second research question focuses on the extent to which “coming out of the closet” is considered a fitting metaphor for the experience described above. Like the responses regarding how experiences corresponded with definitions, several participants indicated that the metaphor fit well and several stated that it did not fit at all. The majority, however, felt that it either fit to some degree or that it corresponded with some parts of the experience but not others.

**Metaphor fits.** Although only a few interviewees felt that “coming out of the closet” is a fitting metaphor for the experience it describes, two clear themes emerged in their reasons. Their explanations revolved around either characteristics of the metaphor itself or their perceptions of what “coming out of the closet” implies. Even those participants who thought it fit were not terribly enthusiastic about it (e.g., “It’s not offensive and makes sense,” 13), or they phrased their responses in a way that suggested that they felt they shouldn’t like the metaphor (e.g., “I actually like the phrase ‘coming out,’ 3) or that acknowledged the various reasons others might not (e.g., “It is a pretty good analogy but I could see how some people would not like it,” 17).

**Characteristics of metaphor.** Some participants indicated that “coming out of the closet” is a fitting metaphor because of some characteristic of the metaphor or its use. Connection to LGBTQ history was a popular reason for favoring the metaphor. Andrew said “I actually like the phrase ‘coming out’ because it has that connection to LGBTQIAA history — a history that is often neglected by both the mainstream and the community itself” (9). Summer stated “given the history of the gay rights movement and the pivotal events of the Stonewall riots in 1969 and lead up to that significant event — it makes sense to me how the metaphor represents coming into public and not hiding” (16), suggesting that the connection to history is precisely what made the metaphor appropriate.

Another characteristic that participants attributed to the appropriateness of the metaphor is the idea that it is well-known and commonly understood. One reason for this is that it is a descriptive metaphor that conjures up a particular image; as Corey stated, “it still paints a clear visual image of the process of revealing that you are part of the LGBTQ+

community” (11). Debbie said “when I keep my bisexuality a secret from my family, I am putting a part of my life and my experiences on a shelf, or in a closet. I’m putting it aside when I interact with them” (12). Maureen agreed that the closet metaphor fit her experiences, but framed it slightly differently than others did, stating “the closet is somewhere people think about hiding when they feel threatened... it’s a great way to describe how scary it can be to reveal yourself and not know the reaction” (3). While most participants framed the closet as a place to hide their identities from others (which can connote shame), Maureen framed it as a place where one could hide from the challenges faced during coming out.

***Implications of metaphor.*** The second theme related to participants’ view of “coming out of the closet” as an appropriate metaphor concerned its implications. Interviewees most commonly indicated that the closet implied hiding, and coming out implied freedom or liberation. Amber said, “It represents coming out of a dark, lonely, cramped, space, into the wide-open world. It represents the freedom to embrace and be who you are and live without those self-imposed bounds. It’s liberation” (18).

It is important to note that many of the reasons cited for either agreeing or disagreeing with the metaphor related to participants’ own experiences with coming out. Because of this, participants evaluated the same characteristics in different ways. For example, while some participants felt that “coming out of the closet” was representative of the experience because of its implications regarding hiding, freedom, and liberation, others felt that the phrase did not represent the experience for the very same reason. Betty mentioned this explicitly, stating “It’s very fitting when one has had the experiences of hiding or repressing same-sex attraction” (19), which suggests that the opposite may also be true (i.e., when individuals do not experience the

feeling of hiding, they may view the implication of hiding as a reason that the metaphor does not fit the experience).

**Metaphor does not fit.** Reasons for stating that “coming out of the closet” is not representative of the experience to which it refers all revolved around what the metaphor implies. Participants often stated that the phrase has a negative connotation, for example “At its essence, the term connotes that sexual or gender identity are bad things that need to be hidden away in a closet from the rest of the world” (18) and “It also connotes that there’s something wrong with being queer that needs to be hidden” (25). Several participants considered the origin of the metaphor, discussing the ways in which its history and use influence their understanding, for example:

If it did come from skeletons in the closet then it is problematic. Thinking about it like that, if you have a problem with it then there’s something wrong with you not me. I think I’m great! I love myself! These aren’t skeletons. (30)

The most common reason that interviewees felt that “coming out of the closet” is not an appropriate metaphor was that it implied that the experience involves hiding. Notably, this is the same reason that other participants framed the metaphor as appropriate, suggesting again that evaluation of the metaphor is related to one’s own experiences. Jason said that the metaphor made the experience sound “like it is a secret that is hidden away because it’s shameful or should be kept from view” (2). Shay indicated that her experience did not fit with this implication, stating:

I struggled with the idea of my sexuality but not in a way where I felt inauthentic to myself... I never felt like I was sacrificing myself or pretending to be someone else as much as there was a part of myself I didn't *get* yet. (32)

Eliza disagreed with the implication of hiding because it “assumes that heterosexuality/cisnormativity is the standard by which we're all defined, and if that is not our experience we are in ‘hiding’ from normative society until we come out. The closet, in that way, is a pretty marginalizing concept” (5).

A second reason that participants evaluated the metaphor as ill-fitting is the implication that coming out is a one-time activity, which falsely frames coming out in terms of a binary — one is either in or out. Many participants resisted this framing, including Maggie, who stated “Coming out of the closet seems to imply a one-time activity. You step out, and then you *are* out. I don't experience coming out in this way” (20). Similarly, Lucas stated:

I think the definition of coming out one time is not representative of the reality of coming out or not coming out that spans someone's entire life. While most people can remember with great clarity and emotion their very first coming out experience, the first coming out is just the beginning. (10)

As was common in the responses related to coming out as ongoing, participants distinguished the first instance of coming out from subsequent experiences, suggesting that although the in-out binary may fit individual disclosures, it does not accurately describe the larger experience of coming out.

**Metaphor somewhat fits.** As previously mentioned, most participants resisted framing “coming out of the closet” as either wholly representative or not representative of the

experience to which it refers. Many indicated that the metaphor either partially fit the experience, or that it represented some aspects but not others. The first reason for this partial agreement related to a perception that the metaphor is incomplete or does not represent the full range of experiences. The second reason involved an evaluation of the metaphor as dated or a perception that society has changed while the metaphor has been in use, rendering it less fitting.

***Metaphor as incomplete.*** Many participants described “coming out of the closet” as an incomplete or insufficient way to refer to the experience. Some participants suggested that the phrase does not represent the whole experience, such as Jackie, who said “it doesn’t capture the full meaning of disclosing something personal about yourself” (6). Others stated that the phrase refers to a complex experience, parts of which are excluded from the expression, for example “since ‘coming out’ doesn’t simply mean revealing a deep and dark secret, it doesn’t really capture the more complex meaning behind the phrase” (22).

Some interviewees described the closet as incomplete because only one part — “coming out” — corresponded to the experience, while the second part — “the closet” — did not. Some participants simply found the closet portion of the phrase to be irrelevant, such as “I don’t think ‘the closet’ is really necessary” (10). Others evaluated the closet portion as negative or inferior to other phrasing, for example “what are closets? dark damp spaces? I don’t know if that’s the best” (30). Similar to the topic of the closet as hiding, participants often indicated that their evaluation of the metaphor as incomplete was influenced by their own experiences, for example “I don’t necessarily like the ‘closet’ part of the metaphor, which is primarily because I didn’t relate to it in my experience” (14).

Other interviewees framed the closet as incomplete because it relates more to initial disclosures and early coming out experiences than to ongoing or subsequent experiences, for example “It’s an imperfect metaphor, but I think it fits most with the initial process of coming out” (40). Similarly, Shane said:

I kind of came out of a closet to the first person I told... once you do that you’re kind of out of the closet so to speak. Like yesterday when I was teaching and I said “as a gay person...” but I don’t feel like I was stepping out of the closet because I wasn’t IN the closet. I was just saying “here’s something you don’t know about me.” (30)

Shane’s explanation suggests that the concept of coming out of the closet may resonate with some LGBTQ individuals’ experiences, but perhaps not with the entire experience. Similarly, Lena stated:

There is a sense of being hidden and of locking one’s own self away, and that first time a person “comes out” there is a sense of liberation to it. A freedom to being your own true sense for the first time. But for every time after that? It doesn’t really fit. (40)

***Metaphor as outdated.*** The second reason that “coming out of the closet” only partially represented the experience was that participants perceived it as outdated or passé, for example “Mmm, I think ‘out of the closet’ is dated” (30) and “I think the term is antiquated, but the metaphor still fits” (27). A number of interviewees suggested that the fact that it is outdated has negative consequences, for example Mark, who stated “I think it’s an outdated metaphor and honestly continues to separate the LGBTQ+ community from the rest of community” (1). Several interviewees suggested that the outdated nature of the phrase is a result of societal shifts in recent years, for example “I’ve seen how this process is changing as

social acceptance has grown” (19) and “I think as society shifts and it becomes less of a thing to be SHOVED into the back of the closet, then I don’t know if it’s the best metaphor” (33). Some participants recommended an evolution of the term based on these societal shifts, such as “I think that it was [a fitting metaphor] in previous years but with the more recent social changes and shifting cultural values it should be updated” (25) and “but as times are slowly changing we should change our language to reflect our experiences” (25). This framing not only recognizes the evolution of the meaning of metaphor, but also calls for a similar evolution in discourse about coming out, with the goal of more accurately representing the experience.

### **Alternate Definitions**

The third research question investigates alternative ways to frame and define coming out. Specifically, participants were asked whether a better metaphor exists for the experience and how they believe the phrase “coming out” should be defined. Although interviewees were directly asked to provide an alternate metaphor or more-representative definition, many resisted answering the question, either by stating that it was difficult or that they believed that the process should not be described by a metaphor at all. Those who did answer the question often stated that one definition is not sufficient, or suggested elements that should be included in an updated conceptualization of coming out. Finally, several participants suggested specific alternate metaphors to describe the experience, most commonly “inviting in” (i.e., instead of coming out into the world, LGBTQ folks invite others into a discussion about their identity, much like one might invite someone into their home).

**Tough question.** A significant number of participants responded to this set of interview questions by stating that they were difficult to answer. Others told me that they did not feel

comfortable defining it for others, typically because the experience is unique to each individual who experiences it. This sentiment relates to the *individual* theme in the first research question, which stated that each LGBTQ person experiences coming out in a different way. At first glance, these responses seemed to be non-answers, but upon further reflection it became clear that they provide greater support for defining coming out as unique to each individual. They also echo the sentiment that perhaps coming out defies a single definition. Corey stated:

This is a difficult question to answer. I think that “coming out” is a deeply personal process, and therefore everyone will have a slightly different understanding of what it is and how it should be done. I don’t feel comfortable putting a *should* label on the term, except to say that coming out should be only defined by whomever is doing it. (11)

Some participants specifically mentioned that they resisted defining coming out for others because of their own experiences with others’ definitions, for example “I’m also really hesitant to define ‘coming out’ in a certain way because I know other people have imposed their own coming out experiences onto me” (25). This suggests that the way the process is defined can impact individuals’ expectations about coming out as well as the ways they experience it.

**Multiple definitions.** It was common for interviewees to state that coming out defies a single definition, and to suggest that multiple definitions (or especially flexible definitions) should be used instead, for example “I don’t think one definition really suffices since the experience is so different for every queer person, and it would be oppressive to say “this is what coming out looks like” and leave it like that” (5) and “I don’t know if there’s any one way it should be defined. I think it’s a unique experience for everyone that’s so personalized that everyone’s definition may be different and that’s okay” (26). Similarly, Emmett stated “I think

it's a definition that can change based on the person... it's dependent on the needs of the individual" (35). The reasons for this included the personal and individual nature of the experience, as well as the idea that each person's understanding of coming out is shaped by their own experiences. This was explicitly stated by Rosa, who said "coming out shouldn't be defined in any one specific way. Although I have a set idea of what I think coming out looks like or is, I also recognize that it has been shaped by my own experiences" (25).

**Necessary components.** Those participants who did make suggestions for a definition of coming out rarely provided a full definition; rather, they suggested components that they viewed as necessary for a complete definition. This relates to the *tough question* theme above; while participants did seem interested in sharing their insight and opinions, they also seemed reluctant to provide a concrete definition. Alice said "If you're gonna put out a definition it really needs to not have a positive or negative connotation" (27), suggesting that the implications of the metaphor were so salient that — regardless of specifics — a neutral framing would be an improvement. Other necessary components of alternate definitions included less focus on others (and more on the self), framing coming out as a process, and recognizing the unique and individual nature of coming out.

**Be more self-focused.** Participants commonly recommended that alternate or updated definitions of coming out should focus less on the other-focused aspects (e.g., disclosure, receivers' responses) and more on the self-focused aspects (realization, self-acceptance, naming identity). For example, Rosa stated "I also think that we should start thinking more about coming out as being something that is impactful to ourselves as opposed to in relation to other people" (25). This relates to the levels theme from the first research question; in addition

to acknowledging that coming out occurs on many levels, they frame the internal levels as being more salient than the definition implies.

Responses in this theme often focused on the voluntary nature of coming out, commonly stating the coming out should occur “on your own terms” (5). Participants emphasized the role of choice and agency in the coming out process, for example “The announcing and the disclosing, those words that imply agency” (31). Diane suggested that LGBTQ individuals may feel obligated to come out, perhaps because of the other-focused conceptualization of the term. She stated “I think there is too much emphasis on people feeling like they owe the world an identity with a neat label written in permanent marker” (41).

***Frame as a process.*** Participants also recommended that definitions of coming out frame the experience as an ongoing process. Although some acknowledged that they had heard it conceptualized this way before, they also stated that general discourse around coming out (and the metaphor itself) still often frames it as a one-time occurrence, for example “It doesn’t necessarily happen just once, but is often ongoing. That second part should be included somewhere in the definition” (8). Some participants acknowledged that the process will look different for every person who comes out, including Tyler, who said:

I would like to get to a point where we don’t conceptualize it as finite, as a thing that we do and it’s over and we can all collectively move on, because that will just never be the case. I think people would understand it better if they began to understand it as a — not like a cyclical but kind of repetitive flowchart almost. It’s not linear, you might go back. You might have to go back eight steps in whatever that process is for you just to go ahead one. (34)

By describing the process as non-linear, Tyler frames all coming out experiences as unique, which relates to the final component.

***Recognize individuality.*** The final component that was framed as necessary for alternate definitions of coming out was a recognition that the experience is unique and individualized; in other words, no two individuals experience it the same way. Rosa noted that coming out is often portrayed as either a positive or negative experience, stating:

I also think that it should be defined with more shades of gray because what we often hear about is either the extremely negative (e.g., stories of rejection, violence) or the extremely positive (e.g., finally feeling that someone can be themselves). Both of these things do happen and I don't want to downplay or disregard them in any way. But I also think that when we define or picture coming out in this way we also overlook more diverse experiences by creating certain narratives. (25)

Other participants focused specifically on the common framing of coming out as positive, and stated that it was necessary for an accurate definition to recognize the potential for negative experiences. For example, Maggie said that coming out “can be a difficult, at times frightening, emotional, and potentially risky process of letting others in on an often invisible aspect of your identity” (20). While they acknowledged that not all experiences are negative, and that even negative experiences typically have some positive or neutral aspects, they also highlighted the importance of not completely ignoring the possibility for unpleasant responses or mental or physical harm.

Another aspect of the uniqueness of the experience identified by participants related to the role of context and identity-related factors. Specifically, they stressed the importance of

considering the cultural context in which an individual comes out. Rosa spoke to this theme directly, stating:

“Coming out” should also be defined within cultural context. Queer expressions and experiences aren’t the same across different cultures and definitions of coming out should take this into account. Much of the research and models that we have centers on white experiences of coming out... this should also extend to class and gender. (25)

Rosa acknowledges that the ways in which coming out is commonly conceptualized focuses on research with white participants, and thus does not account for the complex influences of race, class, gender, and other identity characteristics. Alanna echoes this sentiment, stating:

I feel a lot of anger because I’m a lesbian woman of color and often see how the white LGBTQ+ community marginalizes our experiences and coming out for us is a lot different than white queer individuals coming out to their families and loved ones. (37)

Several participants spoke to this theme by recognizing the ways in which their own privilege impacts their experience (and, in turn, the ways lack of similar privilege impacts others’ experiences). For example, because Alice is typically read as heterosexual, she stated that “I have the privilege of coming out or not coming out” (27). Similarly, Shay stated “Coming out is super privileged. I’m lucky to work [somewhere] where I *am* protected in a lot of ways, so I can come out in a lot of spaces when people of color can’t. And I’m also cisgender” (32), acknowledging that being white and cisgender impacts her experience with and understanding of coming out.

**Specific metaphors.** The final theme for the third research question is the specific alternate metaphors or phrases that participants suggested to refer to the coming out experience.

***Inviting in.*** The most common metaphor provided by interviewees follows a similar structure to the coming out metaphor, but reverses the direction of the activity, for example “I have heard the phrase ‘letting people in’ to your real self. I like it and it is equally active. It works” (38). Instead of the LGBTQ individual leaving a confined space, they allow or invite others into the space in which they reside, for example “the idea of inviting in. Where you’re not so much a person leaving a space, but rather you are inviting other people into the truth of who you are” (36). Rosa stated “I’ve recently been appreciating other people talking about ‘inviting in’ instead of ‘coming out.’ It really aligns with what I thought about in terms of coming out as being something that is an internal process and personal to everyone” (25). She also framed “inviting in” as a better fit for the individual nature of the experience, stating:

“Inviting in” sounds more like it acknowledges that although my queer identity is a big part of my life and something that I don’t want to hide, it is personal and there’s an element of trust and control in sharing this information. “Inviting in” feels more intimate to me than “coming out.” When using this term instead I feel like I’m recognizing the importance of the people to whom I’ve shared aspects of my identity and the emotional connections that I’ve made with them. (25)

As Rosa’s description suggests, “inviting in” has the potential to better represent significant aspects of the coming out experience that may be overshadowed by framing the experience as “coming out.”

**Physical items.** Some participants suggested framing coming out in terms of an alternate physical item or experience. Maggie said “I experience ‘coming out’ more like a revolving door. Every time I think I’ve come out for the last time, I encounter a new environment where I am read as straight and have to come out again” (20), which has been articulated in previous research (e.g., Kaufman & Johnson, 1998). Jackie chose an item that resists the implication of hiding, stating “those children’s books with the little flaps where you open it to reveal something underneath. It’s not necessarily hidden as it’s always there, and it’s not secretive as a closet is” (6). Shane framed the process as similar to opening a gift, retaining the metaphor of revealing something previously hidden, but reframing the negative connotation to a positive one (30). Aiden described the process as being similar to a camera lens, stating:

You have a lens that you turn one way and it opens more and you turn the other way and it closes more. And I feel like with every relationship that you have, whether it be a person or an organization or whatever, you sort of need to calibrate what that aperture needs to be. And not only that but it also allows you to change that over time. (36)

This description frames coming out as something that is unique to each individual, but also frames each individual experience within the larger process as unique from one another.

**Evolution.** The final subtheme related to specific metaphors framed coming out as an evolution or a transformation. Several participants referred specifically to cocoons and the transformation from caterpillar to butterfly, suggesting a positive connotation (as opposed to the negative connotation ascribed to “coming out of the closet” in the second research question). Corey said “Maybe ‘emerging from your cocoon?’ When I think [about] my own

coming out experience, I think of how it involved shedding my old skin to live a life that is both more and less comfortable than my previous life” (11). Dana extended this, deliberately resisting framing the period before the transformation as negative while framing the period after as positive. She said:

I guess for me it was more of a caterpillar to butterfly transformation. Nothing wrong with who I felt I was as a caterpillar, but as I grew and matured in my understanding of myself and my sexual identity, I became that much more beautiful and grown up. (26)

Tina said “It’s not ‘oh, yesterday I was this person and today I’m this person,’ it’s that our identities are always evolving. So it’s just another step in our evolution” (29), suggesting that this transformation does not mean that one’s identity changes completely, but instead that coming out represents just one part of a person’s life.

### **Expectation to Come Out**

In addition to the themes discussed in the previous sections, one overarching theme emerged across the interviews: a framing of coming out as something that LGBTQ individuals “have to,” “need to,” or are “expected to” do. Although these three phrases vary somewhat in terms of both definition and connotation, they all suggest that participants felt compelled to come out for various reasons, for example:

... queer people are forced to constantly disclose their sexual identities to their social circles and other emotional support systems during various moments in their lives — in some circumstances where they are unsafe or cannot assess if they are in a safe space to come out. (37)

Jason described this framing of coming out as necessary as arbitrary, stating “coming out is a strange thing. It’s something that feels like it shouldn’t be necessary but ultimately is” (2). Amy acknowledged that as a bisexual woman married to a man, she does not personally feel pressure to disclose her sexual identity; however, she recognizes that many others do. She said “I haven’t been faced with the challenges associated with coming out — as it’s not required for me to live my best life. I think this answer would be best left to people who are forced to come out to feel free, honest and happy” (15).

Participants discussed the contexts in which they are expected to disclose their identities as well as the reasons for those expectations. They also questioned (and sometimes explicitly resisted) this expectation, often pointing out that heterosexual and cisgender individuals are not expected to come out. Finally, a number of participants mentioned that this need or expectation may be less prominent than in years past, predicting that it will ultimately become obsolete.

**Reasons for expectation.** Participants provided various reasons that they feel a need or expectation to come out. The most common way participants described the need to come out related to the relevance of their identity in a particular context. For example, Shane framed coming out as “disclosure of an identity category when it becomes salient or relevant in a given interaction or relationship” (30), suggesting that an individual who does not come out is not necessarily hiding or ashamed, but instead simply may not view the disclosure as salient. For some participants, the need to come out was related to other elements of the context, such as visibility. Jason said:

The part of coming out that is less often discussed is why the need to come out exists. Visibility is important, and I think that's why people come out. It's the beginning of finding your place in a community. People don't come out as straight because they are so visible in society and have been the majority and recognized as the "norm" by that majority. (2)

Similarly, Shay said "I have to do something to make you straight people in the room comfortable or aware of my existence" (32), suggesting that coming out is expected for the benefit of others, not necessarily for the individual who comes out.

Many participants explained that they felt they needed to come out because of their romantic relationships, for example "I realized if I was interested in dating women I would/should identify as bi... when I was in a committed relationship with one woman I came out to my parents" (26). In some cases, participants did not feel that their sexual identity was relevant in some contexts (e.g., with certain family members) until they intended to bring a romantic partner to an event. Debbie said:

I came out to them because at the time I was in love with a woman and thought that it might become important enough that she would accompany me to family holidays. I was willing to come out to my parents *for* her, if it came to that. (12)

In other cases, they did not know whether their close others would understand and/or accept their identity. For example, Shay said:

I think it would be different as someone who had dated a lot of men previously, if I wasn't validating it with a relationship. If I was like "oh I'm gay now" they'd be like "ehhh are you?" So it was like I'm gay and I'm dating a woman so this is legitimate. (32)

Because Shay, like other participants, did not know whether her identity would be seen as valid, she waited to come out until she could do so in the context of a romantic relationship.

**Expectation should not exist.** Although interviewees acknowledged that they were expected to come out for various reasons, many stated that they wished this expectation did not exist. Alice stated candidly, “Ideally we wouldn’t fucking have a need for it” (27).

Interestingly, they also commonly framed this as being impossible or unrealistic; that is, they perceive that the expectation will always exist in some capacity or in some contexts. For example, Alice said:

I mean, this seems a little unrealistic, but I would like us to not even need a phrase, because it seems so silly that this is even a thing that we’re still worried about... I don’t think we’re there yet. I live in the deep south, in the bible belt, and it is still a big deal.  
(33)

By describing a time where the expectation to come out does not exist, participants highlight the salience of the expectations imposed on them. Shay said “It would be ideal to live in a non-heteronormative society where I didn’t have to default as straight in situations, but I’m also not... dumb [laughs]” (32). Tina also mentioned the role of societal influences on expectations to come out, stating “we have to place less pressure on it as a society” (29).

Many participants attributed the need or expectation to heteronormativity; that is, if others did not assume they are heterosexual, there would be no need for (only) LGBTQ individuals to come out. Hannah said “I wish we didn’t *have* to ‘come out,’ and that people wouldn’t just set everyone to default as hetero” (43). Along those same lines, Sydney said, “I would, in so many ways, love for ‘coming out’ to be unnecessary. I would love a world where

assumptions about sexuality are not made” (38). Because of this tendency, however, LGBTQ individuals are faced with frequent decisions regarding whether to disclose their identities. As Maureen stated, “When someone assumes your identity is straight, which happens all the time, you must make a decision if you want to come out to them or not” (3).

Some participants indicated that they wished the expectation to come out did not exist because it creates separation and exclusion, both within and outside of the LGBTQ community. Jackie said, “In theory, I would like there not to be a ‘coming out’ process in the first place. I suppose I would like that no one would have to ‘come out’ because it perpetuates that normative idea and an us-them mentality” (6). Alanna describes how the expectation to come out further marginalizes those who cannot or choose not to disclose their identities:

I would like to move away from this and find radical ways in which we can normalize being queer without having this pressure to constantly come out so we can live our truth more openly and as comfortable as our counterparts. We aren’t acknowledging those who don’t come out or who cannot come out for whatever valid reason. (37)

Instead of tailoring their communication and disclosures to heteronormative expectations, Shay said, “It’d be nice not to have to put the onus on marginalized people to adjust to normative spaces” (32).

Finally, interviewees mentioned that heterosexual and cisgender individuals are not expected to disclose their sexual and gender identities. Many recognized that individuals are often assumed to be heterosexual/cisgender, creating the expectation that anyone who deviates from this norm will “come out” and violate those assumptions. Rosa acknowledged this, stating “Often, people who aren’t queer aren’t expected to ‘come out’ — they’re

considered the normative. It also feels like an obligation to share something about myself and my relationships that can be really intimate because it's out of the 'normative'" (25). Many participants stated that if straight and cisgender people are not expected to disclose their identities, then LGBTQ individuals should not have to either. For example, Alanna said "Is there a metaphor for heterosexual people coming out as straight? No. Why should there be a metaphor for queer people?" (37) and Mark said "why should anyone be expected to announce their sexual identity?" (1).

**Coming out will become obsolete.** The final subtheme related to the overarching theme of expectations involved a prediction that the action of coming out will ultimately become obsolete. In other words, although this need or expectation to come out is salient to their own experiences, they recognize that societal changes may ultimately make it less salient in the future. Participants framed this as positive, for example "I look forward to a time when coming out is as useless and mundane as telling someone what sign you are" (15). This relates to the theme discussed earlier of "coming out" as dated or passé. In addition to the metaphor, participants framed the process itself as outdated.

### **Constructing Grounded Theory**

Based on the results discussed in the previous sections, there are several elements that are necessary to include when constructing a theory of coming out. First, the overarching theme regarding the need or expectation to come out was the most prominent theme across interviews. This suggests that, despite the focus of extant research on outward disclosure, expectations are a crucial aspect of any such definition. As several participants mention, the internal experience of coming out may be sufficient for one to consider themselves "out," even

in the absence of self-disclosure. Further, many interviewees included outing as a part of their coming out experiences, suggesting that purposeful disclosure may not be considered a necessary step in the process. Even though outing is seen as distinct from coming out, when it does happen it seems to be considered a part of the total experience. Second, a single, universal definition is not ideal (and potentially impossible). Because LGBTQ individuals understand and experience coming out in a variety of ways, any definition put forth for “coming out” must reflect these unique experiences. Third, because so many participants indicated that their experiences were outside of the norm or differed from (what they perceived as) the typical coming out experience, it seems that the perceived norm of coming out does not actually represent most experiences. These three factors, as well as the specific recommendations provided by participants, suggest a need for a theory of coming out that is broad, flexible, inclusive, and most importantly, de-centers the importance of outward disclosure.

The relationships between participants’ conceptualizations of coming out and their lived experiences, their specific recommendations for updated definitions or alternate metaphors, and the connection between this information to extant coming out literature form the basis for the following theory of coming out. A theory of coming out that truly represents lived experiences must be flexible enough to accommodate individual experiences. It also must allow for the evolution of both the definition of the term and the experience over time. Because of this, the theory should be flexible enough to allow all experiences — including the unique aspects — to be represented in future research. The premises of the theory are as follows:

- I. The reason for coming out lies at the center of the theory.

- II. Self-disclosure is not a necessary component of coming out.
- III. “Coming out” defies a single definition. Everyone experiences it differently and, in turn, understands it differently.
- IV. Coming out is an ongoing process that may never end.
- V. Despite the common framing of coming out as other-focused, the internal aspects of the process are salient to those who experience it.

Because it was the most salient aspect of coming out, the reason for coming out is the crux of the theory. While other components of the experience may vary, coming out does not exist without a need or expectation to do it. The reason functions differently in various contexts; it may be internal (e.g., to accept their own identity), relational (e.g., needing to disclose one’s identity before introducing a partner to family), or societal (e.g., correcting heteronormative assumptions). Despite the focus of extant research on disclosure, most of the current participants did not describe disclosure as the most salient aspect. Individuals may choose to indicate their identities nonverbally or implicitly, or not at all. This allows room for those individuals who consider outing to be a part of their coming out experience, as well as those who believe that coming out to self is a complete coming out experience. Because coming out is such an individual experience, it is necessary for the theory guiding research to be structured in a way that allows all individuals to locate their experience within it.

Based on the present findings and the theory described above, I offer the following definition for coming out: an ongoing process consisting of multiple activities and experiences during which an individual makes known their LGBTQ identity to themselves and/or others, through either implicit or explicit means. This process is highly individual, and specific aspects of

the process vary greatly. This definition relates to some aspects of previous definitions (e.g., by framing coming out as an ongoing process), but the definition also deviates from previous definitions in two primary ways. First, it allows room for alternate means of others learning about one's identity to be incorporated into accounts of their coming out experiences. Although I acknowledge that outing is often framed as distinct from coming out (including by the current participants), its frequent inclusion in discussions of coming out experiences suggest that it is so closely related that it should not be overlooked in coming out research. Second, this definition accounts for those individuals who come out to themselves only (i.e., they do not disclose to others) and those who choose to come out to some individuals but not others.

### **Discussion**

The present study investigates the ways in which LGBTQ individuals understand and experience coming out. The first research question focused on interviewees' definitions of coming out and the extent to which these definitions correspond with their lived experiences. The second research question investigated whether participants considered "coming out of the closet" to be a fitting metaphor for the experiences to which it refers. The third research question asked participants to provide an alternate definition, phrase, or metaphor to better describe the experience. Based on the findings related to these research questions, I have constructed a grounded theory that creates flexibility in defining coming out. Broad, inclusive definitions contribute to a greater likelihood that LGBTQ individuals will be able to locate their own experiences within the definition.

### **Definitions v. Experiences**

The first research question investigated the extent to which participants' lived experiences with coming out corresponded with the ways they conceptualized the term. Five common elements of definitions emerged, and were combined in various ways in participants' conceptualizations of coming out. These included framing coming out as: *an action* (as opposed to a situation or a state of being), influenced by one's own and others' *expectations*, occurring on multiple *levels*, a process that is *ongoing*, and highly *individual*. Most participants indicated that their own definitions of "coming out" did not correspond (or only partially corresponded) with the ways in which they experience coming out themselves. The primary differences between definition and experience were whether the disclosure was voluntary, the framing of coming out as ongoing, and the possibility of coming out through nonverbal or implicit means.

The individual themes that emerged from the data support previous research on coming out; however, no single definition encompasses every theme that emerged in the present study. Though each element is represented in extant research, they combine in different ways and each study frames them slightly differently. Like Coleman's (1982) participants, the current interviewees acknowledged the variation in individuals' experiences with coming out.

While none of the current participants described coming out as a series of discrete events like Cass's (1979) model, many described the internal aspects of coming out as salient, suggesting that although the structure of the model may not represent all experiences, the focus on coming out to self is still a necessary component of coming out. Although the internal aspects of coming out (i.e., coming out to self) are typically framed as a precursor to the external aspects (i.e., coming out to others), several participants stated that the internal components are sufficient to consider themselves out. In other words, like Guittar's (2013)

participants, these individuals believe that coming out to oneself “counts” as coming out, even in the absence of disclosure to others. Similar to Guittar and Rayburn’s (2016) participants, several interviewees in the current study resisted the idea of an endpoint or goal of the process (i.e., being “completely” out), often stating that coming out is experienced throughout the lifespan. Finally, participants described managing coming out differently in different situations, similar to Orne’s (2011) concept of strategic outness, which proposes that LGBTQ individuals manage their disclosures as a means of managing their identities. The present findings support the concept of strategic outness by highlighting the importance of indirect and implicit disclosures as well as the ways in which LGBTQ individuals manage dissemination of information about their own identities.

Because so many participants framed their coming out experience as unique or different from the typical experience, it seems that it is necessary — for both researchers and laypeople — to reconsider our conceptualization of the typical experience. Rather than framing these experiences as being outside the norm, perhaps it would be more appropriate to consider the idea that there is no norm or typical experience. As I have proposed in the above sections, coming out is best understood as a group of aspects and experiences that combine in various ways for different people and are influenced by a multitude of cultural and societal factors. The most common discrepancy between participants’ definitions and their descriptions of their own experiences was whether they had agency in disclosing to others. Although outing was defined as being distinct from coming out (e.g., “they are uniquely different because [with coming out] there’s this sense of autonomy and control over the narrative” [32]), participants included experiences with outing as a part of the total coming out experience. In other words,

participants did not frame being outed as separate from their coming out experience, they framed it as a reason that their coming out experience was different from others. The frequency with which participants described their experiences this way supports the need for a flexible definition in which disclosure may not be the most salient aspect. Additionally, it suggests that researchers studying coming out should inquire about experiences with outing (despite the fact that it is so often distinguished from coming out) to allow room for those individuals who consider it a part of their overall experience.

Although many participants did include disclosure in their definitions, none described it as the only part of the experience and few described it as the most significant aspect. The lack of focus on disclosure suggests that disclosure may not be the most salient component of coming out. Participants also discussed the implicit or indirect ways that they come out, both in addition to and instead of direct disclosure. These include physical appearance, involvement in the LGBTQ community, and simply allowing close others to draw their own conclusions, each of which have been represented in previous literature (e.g., Evans & Broido, 1999; Orne, 2011). The role of indirect disclosure was often influenced by whether participants were read as LGBTQ by others (both within and outside of the LGBTQ community), for example:

In a lot of ways I previously looked straight-passing so I would have to come out more often than my former partner who was a dapper, butch, queer woman. And now, it's so funny, I got this haircut and now other queer people are like "oh ok I got you." Just because of the hair! I don't have to come out as often! It's a... gay ENOUGH haircut.  
[laughs] (32)

In this example, Shay describes her haircut as an implicit way of indicating her identity (i.e., coming out), which reduces the frequency with which she feels that she needs to explicitly state her identity. Because LGBTQ individuals can send messages about their identities explicitly or implicitly, as well as deliberately or inadvertently, the role of disclosure in the process may not be as crucial as previous definitions have suggested.

### **Appropriateness of the Metaphor**

The second research question focused on the relationship between “coming out of the closet” and the experience to which it refers. While several interviewees suggested that the metaphor represented the experience well, and several more suggested that it did not represent the experience at all, it was most commonly framed as partially representative (i.e., it fit some parts of the process and not others or it fit to some degree). Characteristics that were framed as positive or representative included a connection to LGBTQ history and the idea that the phrase is recognizable or well-known. Aspects that were framed as unrepresentative include a negative connotation and the framing of the metaphor as incomplete and outdated. The idea that “the closet” implies hiding or shame was framed as both a reason that the metaphor did and did not fit. Usually this depended on the individual’s experience (i.e., if they experienced feelings of hiding/shame, they were likely to frame it as fitting; if they did not experience feelings of hiding or shame, or did not want those characteristics associated with the definition, they framed it as ill-fitting).

The ways in which interviewees discussed the implications of “coming out of the closet” as a metaphor for a lived experience relate to previous work on metaphor in general. As they describe it, coming out isn’t a phrase that refers to the experience, it’s a representation of how

it is experienced (Lakoff, 1993). Because metaphors create connections between already-understood concepts by mapping one onto another (e.g, realization and/or disclosure of LGBTQ identity onto exiting a small space), the two concepts are understood as having the same characteristics (Lakoff, 1993). “Coming out of the closet” is often understood as being related to a sense of shame or dishonesty (Coleman, 1982; LaSala, 2000), which is not only an interpretation of the language, but can also have an impact on the way individuals understand their own experience. As Tina explained, “people can internalize that shame and feel such pressure to either stay in the closet or to come out, either way, so I feel like there is a stigma attached to the metaphor specifically” (29). This highlights the importance of studying LGBTQ individuals’ evaluations of the metaphor. Participants’ responses are more than a critique of a particular phrase; they are also a critique of the ways in which using this phrase impacts both their experiences and the way they make sense of them.

### **Alternate Definitions**

The third research question includes participants’ discussions of how they believe coming out should be defined and understood, elements they believe should be included in definitions of coming out, and alternate metaphors to “coming out of the closet.” Interestingly, many interviewees resisted answering this question, evaluating it as “tough to answer” or stating their unwillingness to speak to others’ experiences. Many people suggested that there should be no single definition due to the unique and individualized nature of the experience. If a definition does exist, however, participants suggested that it should be less other-focused and more self-focused, frame coming out as ongoing/continuous, and most importantly, recognize the wide array of individual and societal factors that impact how it is experienced.

Participants' reluctance to define others' experiences highlights the importance of LGBTQ individuals defining coming out for themselves. Similar to the ways in which LGBTQ folks choose their own identity labels (as opposed to having those identities named by others), the current participants suggested that it was not their place to impose their own definition onto others. Several explicitly stated that they were reluctant to do so because others had imposed definitions on them, and that those definitions did not fit their experience. Despite the focus of the current project on identifying LGBTQ individuals' definitions of coming out, it is important that scholars avoid identifying a single, concrete definition and ascribing it to all experiences. Instead, research should seek out the various ways that coming out is defined and experienced, contributing to a more diverse and representative understanding of the process. Because of this, a broad, flexible, and inclusive definition — as is proposed above — is most appropriate when referring to coming out.

In terms of alternate metaphors, the most common was “inviting in” or “letting in.” The reframing of “coming out” as “inviting in” exists in discourse around coming out (e.g., Moore, 2012a; Moore, 2012b), but hasn't yet been included in interpersonal communication research. Similarly, Hammoud-Beckett (2007) has advocated for the use of the phrase “coming in,” particularly as a means of representing those experiences that may not fit common expectations. Framing it this way reverses the direction and focus of the action, which also serves to partially satisfy participants' criterion that the definition be less other-focused and more self-focused. Because different ways of framing the experience seem to resonate with LGBTQ individuals in different ways, it is necessary for researchers to be aware of the various ways coming out is conceptualized, and shift the language and focus of research accordingly.

## **Expectation to Come Out**

In addition to the themes that emerged in the responses to particular interview questions (and their corresponding research questions), one overarching theme was present across interviews. In describing their understanding of and experiences with coming out, interviewees commonly discussed coming out as something they felt they “have to,” “need to,” or are “expected to” do. This need arose in various situations and for various reasons, for example, when they wanted to bring a partner to a family gathering or when responding to an inquiry about a cross-sex partner, or simply because the information does or does not seem relevant in a given situation.

As discussed in the literature review, discussions of the closet (both in research and general discourse) rarely mention what happens before one finds themselves in the closet. The closet is often framed as a starting point or a precursor to the coming out experience. The current findings support the idea that the closet exists because of individual and societal expectations — in short, heteronormativity creates the closet (Gray, 2009). Based on the ways in which the current participants defined and experienced coming out, the closet is not necessarily the beginning of the coming out experience. Instead, both the closet and coming out may be better understood as responses to expectations and norms related to sexual and gender identity.

Because participants discussed the need or expectation to come out as salient, the current findings deviate from the primary focus of extant research on (self-) disclosure. Cain (1991) highlighted the importance of LGBTQ individuals’ motivations to come out, and Manning (2015) described the role of various reasons to engage in a coming out conversation; however,

the bulk of coming out research focuses heavily on the salience of disclosure. By de-centering disclosure in the definition of coming out, researchers can continue to investigate the aspects of the experience that play a crucial role in the ways LGBTQ individuals experience coming out.

It is necessary to recognize that this described need or expectation functions differently in various contexts. As several participants mentioned, expectations of coming out were often developed in relation to a narrow set of experiences (e.g., white, lesbian- or gay-identified individuals) and may not encompass the lived experiences of other LGBTQ individuals. Other participants pointed out the relevance of geographic location (i.e., particularly conservative areas) and characteristics of their close others (i.e., age, religious affiliation) in their considerations of how to address the larger societal expectation that coming out is necessary. As Jhang (2018) noted, many LGBTQ individuals experience cultural expectations that impact whether and how they come out. In some situations, implicit disclosure (or no disclosure) facilitates the desired outcome. Similarly, Hammoud-Beckett (2007) describes this expectation to come out as so strong that those individuals who cannot or choose not to openly disclose their identities may be marginalized within the LGBTQ community. Because of this, it is necessary to recognize the role of cultural influences and the ways in which they interact with one another to create a unique set of circumstances related to coming out. Further, it is important to understand the role of expectations related to coming out, as they seem to be more salient to LGBTQ individuals than is the role of explicit self-disclosure.

### **Grounded Theory**

The present findings suggest a need for a flexible (and thus, inclusive) conceptualization of coming out. The theory outlined above has several components. First, it frames the reason

for coming out as the one universal aspect of coming out, which deviates from previous research that focuses on the salience of self-disclosure (e.g., Cain, 1991; Coleman, 1982). Second, it states that self-disclosure is not a necessary component of coming out. While this is not a common aspect of existing definitions, it does support previous research (Guittar, 2013). Third, coming out is not best described by a single, concrete definition. Everyone experiences it differently and, in turn, understands it differently. Fourth, coming out is an ongoing process that may never end (Dindia, 1998; Evans & Broido, 1999; Guittar & Rayburn, 2016). Finally, coming out may not be primarily other-focused, as the internal aspects of the process are described as equally (and often more) salient (Cass, 1979; Guittar, 2013).

**Theoretical implications.** Using participants' explanations of the ways they understand and experience coming out, I constructed a grounded theory that de-centers disclosure as the focus of coming out and lends itself to application in a variety of contexts and to a variety of experiences. The theory supports aspects of previous research, but combines these aspects in a unique way that is more likely to represent LGBTQ individuals' lived experiences. The major contribution of the present research is its response to the definitional ambiguity identified by Guittar (2013) and his related call to clarify the definition of coming out. Further, the present results address Guittar's (2014) call for researchers to "stop and ask ourselves if the meaning we ascribe to the concept is similar to the meanings held by individuals outside of academia" (p. 24). Finally, the grounded theory constructed from these results contributes to the body of literature on coming out by illuminating parts of the experience that researchers may not currently think to inquire about. For instance, because outing is typically seen as distinct from coming out, researchers may neglect to ask participants about their experiences with outing;

however, the present theory suggests that this may be a salient aspect of some individuals' coming out experiences.

The present results have implications for continued research on coming out, particularly in terms of its relationship to self-disclosure more broadly. First, researchers should use caution when applying research on self-disclosure in general to understanding coming out experiences. Disclosure is certainly a component of the coming out experience — and for many a significant component — however, there are other salient aspects that should not be overlooked. While extant self-disclosure research likely extends to the disclosure-related aspects, it is necessary to incorporate work on identity management and the internal aspects of coming out. Second, rather than framing coming out as a particular type of self-disclosure, it is better understood as a process of which self-disclosure is a part. This allows for the other aspects of coming out to be researched, and allows for future research to investigate the relationship between explicit self-disclosure and other experiences.

**Practical implications.** In addition to theoretical implications, the present research has practical significance for LGBTQ individuals and their close others. First, the findings are relevant for interventions, support groups, and other programming for LGBTQ individuals. If the creators and facilitators of these programs have an incomplete understanding of how coming out is understood, they may not be able to best serve the individuals who could benefit most from the programming. If programming is created using a particular definition, it may be neglecting salient parts of the experience, suggesting that a broader definition may facilitate more inclusive discussions and opportunities support. Second, this information may be useful for programs and information directed at LGBTQ individuals' close others and allies. This may

be particularly true of the findings related to the internal aspects. De-emphasizing the role of self-disclosure may help close others and allies understand the experience more accurately.

Several participants emailed me first to ask if they could participate; they were concerned that their experiences did not “count.” Reasons for this included not being completely out, only being out to self, and being in a cross-sex relationship. These participants wondered whether their coming out experience was too different from the norm to be useful to my research. It is possible that this perception could prevent LGBTQ folks from seeking out support related to coming out. Because coming out is significant, unique, and potentially difficult, providing a broad and inclusive definition may be a key factor in helping LGBTQ individuals navigate this experience.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The current study contributes to the body of literature on coming out by identifying discrepancies between LGBTQ individuals’ understanding of and experiences with coming out, as well as constructing a grounded theory of coming out that is more likely to represent their lived experiences. Despite these contributions, limitations exist. First, 80% of the participants identified themselves as white, compared to 58% of the larger LGBTQ population. Similarly, 67% of participants identified as female, compared to 58% of the larger LGBTQ population (Williams Institute, 2019). While demographic discrepancies are common in interpersonal communication research, the focus of many participants on cultural and societal impacts on their experience suggests that this limitation is notable. Second, I did not ask participants whether they believed their experiences influenced their understanding or vice versa, but several participants did bring it up. It is possible that explicitly asking about this would have

provided more information regarding the ways and reasons participants' definitions corresponded with and deviated from their experiences.

With the present results in mind, I offer recommendations for future research. First, researchers should continue to refine the grounded theory constructed in the current paper. Asking participants directly about whether and to what extent they feel they need to come out, as well as how these expectations impact their experience, can contribute to an even greater understanding of coming out. Additionally, future research would benefit from inquiries into how LGBTQ individuals frame the timeline of coming out. For instance, given that coming out is an ongoing process, at what point does it begin? If the individual believes it ends at some point, at what point is that? Learning more about the parameters of the process, as well as the ways in which it is punctuated by individual experiences, would shed light on how well the grounded theory fits individual experiences of coming out.

Turning points research could be particularly useful here, as it allows participants to identify the events that are significant for them rather than applying pre-existing categories and assumptions onto their experiences. A turning point is an "event or occurrence that is associated with change in a relationship" (Baxter & Bullis, 1986, p. 469). Turning points research has been used as an alternative to existing stage or life cycle models in studying family development (Sahlstein Parcell, 2013), and would be equally appropriate as an alternative to stage models of coming out. Taking a turning points approach facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the multiple paths that coming out experiences can follow.

Second, researchers should apply a critical interpersonal approach to the study of coming out. Because a critical interpersonal approach focuses on "the intersections of politics

and power” (Moore & Manning, 2019, p. 14), it is an appropriate way to apply a definition that de-centers the role of disclosing to dominant society. For example, by asking participants to describe everything about their coming out experiences besides the disclosure, researchers can learn about the ways the various experiences that make up “coming out” influence the way it is experienced, as well as identify salient aspects of the process. By placing more emphasis on the parts of coming out that are not focused on disclosure to others, future research can contribute to a greater understanding of the larger coming out process. Further, a critical interpersonal approach emphasizes the importance of investigating a variety of perspectives (Suter & Norwood, 2017), which is an appropriate extension of the findings reported here related to the unique and individual nature of coming out. While investigations of the disclosure-related aspects of coming out have dominated previous studies, de-centering disclosure allows for other aspects of the process to be represented in coming out research. Additionally, the current study suggests that outing (or alternate means of others learning about one’s LGBTQ identity) may be more commonly considered a part of the coming out experience than previous research suggests. Finally, the present results suggest that coming out to self is considered by some LGBTQ folks to “count” as coming out. Together, these findings suggest that it is necessary to continue investigating those experiences that do not correspond with common narratives of coming out.

### **Conclusion**

The current study investigated the ways in which LGBTQ individuals understand and experience coming out. Despite the focus of previous research on coming out as a form of self-disclosure, the present findings suggest that the coming out experience involves many salient

aspects. Participants indicated that the ways in which they understood the phrase “coming out of the closet” were not entirely representative of their experiences. Additionally, although many participants described similar aspects of coming out, they often evaluated them in different ways, suggesting that the variation in individuals’ understanding of coming out relates to not only discrete events, but also how these events are perceived.

Based on the present findings, I have constructed a grounded theory of coming out that frames the reason, need, or expectation to come out as the crux of the experience; that is, if individuals were not assumed to be heterosexual and/or cisgender, coming out would not exist. This deviates from the common framing of self-disclosure as the most salient aspect of coming out. Related to this de-centering of disclosure, the grounded theory also emphasizes the importance of the internal aspects of coming out. Because individuals are expected to disclose their LGBTQ identities to others, coming out is an ongoing process that continues throughout one’s life. Finally, “coming out” is best understood as being unique to each individual who experiences it, suggesting that a single, concrete definition is not appropriate.

A definition of the phrase “coming out” must be broad, flexible, and inclusive enough to encompass the variety of ways LGBTQ individuals experience it. With this in mind, as well as the specific characteristics described by participants, I have offered a definition of coming out as an ongoing process that consists of multiple activities and experiences during which an individual makes known their LGBTQ identity to themselves and/or others, through either implicit or explicit means. Because this process is highly individual, it allows room for experiences that deviate from existing norms and definitions. In the current study, two noteworthy departures from previous definitions included the framing of outing as a part of the coming out experience

and the framing of coming out to self as sufficient to consider oneself “out.” Future research should continue to examine the application of this definition to LGBTQ individuals’ experiences with coming out.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol

**Please provide the following demographic information. You're welcome to skip any or all categories; simply note that you prefer not to respond.**

Age:

Gender:

Sexual Identity:

Race:

Location (US state, or country if not in US):

**Please answer the following questions, using as much detail as possible.**

1. What is coming out? (When you use the phrase, to what are you referring? When others use the phrase, what do you understand it to mean?)

2. Do you think your coming out experience was like this (in other words, does the definition above describe your own coming out experience)?

-How/in what ways?

3. Based on your experience and understanding of coming out, how *should* "coming out" be defined?

4. Do you think "coming out of the closet" is a fitting metaphor for what you discussed above?

-Why or why not?

-Is there a better metaphor, name, or phrase? What is it, and why?

5. What else do you think is important for me to know about coming out?

## Appendix B

### Recruitment Message

Hello,

I'm conducting a study to look at the ways LGBTQ+ individuals use the term "coming out." If you are LGBTQ+, over 18, and willing to talk to me about the ways you use and understand the term "coming out," contact me at the email address below.

If you agree to participate, I will ask you a series of questions (via email, video chat, or face to face) for a total of about 20 minutes. If you consent (and the interview is via video chat or face to face), it will be audio recorded. You will discuss the term "coming out" and the ways in which your own experiences relate to that understanding.

Your participation is voluntary and there is no penalty for non-participation. Furthermore, you may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time.

In order to participate, please contact me at the following email address:  
[whatiscomingout@gmail.com](mailto:whatiscomingout@gmail.com)

Thank you!  
Kristy

**KRISTY JAGIELLO**  
Department of Communication  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
Milwaukee, WI 53201

**EDUCATION**

Ph.D., Communication, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (anticipated May 2019)  
Emphasis: Interpersonal Communication  
Dissertation: *“It can never be just one thing”*: Constructing a grounded theory of coming out (Advisor: Dr. Lindsay Timmerman)

M.A., Communication, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (May 2015)  
Emphasis: Interpersonal Communication

B.A., Communication, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (May 2013)

A.A.S., Paralegal program, Milwaukee Area Technical College (May 2011)

**PROFESSIONAL TRAINING**

Mediation and Negotiation Certificate, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (May 2015)

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

Introduction to Interpersonal Communication, Fall 2014-Spring 2017  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 3 lab sections per semester (approx. 60 students)  
Gender and Communication, Fall 2017-Spring 2018  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2 sections per semester (approx. 50 students)  
Nonverbal Communication (online course), Summer 2018-Fall 2018  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1 section per semester (approx. 25 students)  
Nonverbal Communication, Fall 2018-Spring 2019  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1 section per semester (approx. 25 students)

**INVITED SPEAKER**

“Skype a Scientist” session: Qualitative Methods in Communication Research. To be presented at Eureka College, April 2019.

**AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS**

Central States Communication Association Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2018  
Service Award, Department of Communication, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017  
Melvin H. Miller Award for Highest GPA, Department of Communication, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015  
Chancellor’s Award, \$5000, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015-2016  
Top Student Paper, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Division, Central States Communication Association, 2015

Lamp of Knowledge Award, Milwaukee Area Technical College, 2011

## **SERVICE**

### DEPARTMENTAL SERVICE

Judge, Public Speaking showcase, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2018  
Activity Coordinator, Communication Graduate Student Council, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016-2018  
Master's Mentor Coordinator, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014-2015

### COMMUNITY SERVICE

Volunteer, Project Q (youth development program), Milwaukee LGBT Community Center-2016-present  
Facilitator, Women's Coming Out Group, Milwaukee LGBT Community Center, 2017-2018

## **PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS**

Central States Communication Association (2015-present)  
National Communication Association (2016-present)  
International Association for Relationship Research (2018-present)

## **RESEARCH**

### PUBLICATIONS

Willes, K. L., Jagiello, K., Motel, L., & Allen, M. (in press). No matter what: A qualitative analysis of how LGBTQ families and allies define family through an interactive art project. *Journal of Family Communication*.  
Quinn, S. F., Jagiello, K., & Ruppel, E. K. (2018). "Attack of the green-eyed monster": A review of jealousy and envy in small groups. *Annals of the International Communication Association*.  
Blight, M., Jagiello, K., & Ruppel, E. K. (2015). "Same stuff different day": A mixed-method study of support-seeking on Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 53, 366-373.

### RESEARCH IN-PROCESS

Jagiello, K. "*It can never be just one thing*": Constructing a grounded theory of coming out.  
Jagiello, K., & Quinn, S. F. "*It's super liberating*": Discussing non-monogamy with a current or future romantic partner. Under review at Journal of Social and Personal Relationships.  
Blight, M., Ruppel, E. K., & Jagiello, K. L. (2018). "*Like clockwork*": Multimodal uncertainty-reducing behaviors in on-again/off-again relationships. Under review at Southern Journal of Communication.  
Jagiello, K., Lambertz-Berndt, M., & Baker, B. M. A., & Timmerman, L. M. *Distancing the B in LGBTQ: Exploring hurtful messages related to bisexuals' identity*. Collecting additional data, preparing manuscript for journal submission.  
Cronin-Fisher, V. A., Jagiello, K., & Timmerman, L. M. (2018, November). *The inherited family: In-law relationships and impression management on Facebook*. Collecting additional data, preparing manuscript for journal submission.

Timmerman, L. M., Cronin Fisher, V., & Jagiello, K. (2018, July). *Stigmatized disclosure: Topics and reasons for withholding from close others*. Preparing manuscript for journal submission.

#### CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Cronin-Fisher, V. A., Jagiello, K., & Timmerman, L. M. (2018, November). *The inherited family: In-law relationships and impression management on Facebook*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association annual convention, Salt Lake City, UT.

Orcholski, M., & Jagiello, K. (2018, November). *Minding the Bs and Qs: The power and problematizing of borderland identity labels in the LGBTQ+ Community*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association annual convention, Salt Lake City, UT.

Peck, B. S., & Jagiello, K. (2018, November). *Sexual risk in LGB population in emerging adulthood*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association annual convention, Salt Lake City, UT.

Timmerman, L. M., Cronin Fisher, V., & Jagiello, K. (2018, July). *Stigmatized disclosure: Topics and reasons for withholding from close others*. Paper presented at the International Association for Relationship Research Conference, Fort Collins, CO.

Jagiello, K., & Quinn, S. F. (2018, April). *Discussing non-monogamy with a current or future romantic partner*. Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association annual convention, Milwaukee, WI.

Willes, K. L., Jagiello, K., Motel, L., & Allen, M. (2018, April). *LGBT Families: No matter what*. Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association annual convention, Milwaukee, WI.

Jagiello, K. (2017, November). *"It really does get better": An analysis of online coming out narratives*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association annual convention, Dallas, TX.

Fyelling, S. Q., & Jagiello, K. (2016, November). *Jealousy and envy in small groups: A critical synthesis*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association annual convention, Philadelphia, PA.

Jagiello, K., Cronin-Fisher, V. A., & Gross, C. M. (2016, November). *I didn't deserve this and neither does anyone else: A qualitative analysis of the function of online postings regarding ex romantic partners*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association annual convention, Philadelphia, PA.

Jagiello, K., Lambertz-Berndt, M., & Baker, B. M. A. (2016, November). *Distancing the B in LGBTQ: Exploring hurtful messages related to bisexuals' identity*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association annual convention, Philadelphia, PA.

Baker, B. M. A., Jagiello, K., & Lambertz-Berndt, M. (2015, April). *The dichotomy of dissolution in same-sex relationships*. Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association annual convention, Madison, WI. \*Top Student Paper, Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity Division

- Blight, M., Jagiello, K., Donelan, J., & Smith, T. (2015, April). *Online and offline social support: Satisfaction and Facebook intensity*. Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association annual convention, Madison, WI.
- Gross, C. M., & Jagiello, K. (2015, April). *Who would you let your child play with: An exploration of parental and non-parental attitudes toward same-sex parents*. Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association annual convention, Madison, WI.

**PROFESSIONAL REFERENCES**

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