Est. 1841 | YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

Sauntson, Helen (2015) Coming out stories. In: Whelehan, Patricia and Bolin, Anne, (eds.) The International Encyclopedia of Human Sexuality. Wiley-Blackwell

Downloaded from: https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/1869/

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version: http://eu.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-140519006X.html

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. Institutional Repositories Policy Statement

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

# Coming out stories

HELEN SAUNTSON
York St John University, United Kingdom

Coming out (the short form of "coming out of the closet") refers to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people's disclosure to themselves and others of their sexual orientation. For transgender people, it refers to disclosure of their (trans)gender identity. Coming out stories are the narratives that LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people produce around their experiences of disclosing sexuality. Coming out is a process rather than a single act, and stories reflect this. Coming out stories are seen as constituting the LGBT self—narrators not only describe a process of identity construction, but also simultaneously enact that identity through telling the story.

The act of coming out, and the production of coming out stories, were seen as political acts for breaking the silence around LGBT identities from the 1970s onwards. Coming out stories function on an individual level as enabling the narrator to describe how they came to understand, accept, and share their sexual identity. But coming out stories were also an important political activity within the gay liberation movement because they functioned to increase societal awareness of LGBT people as a minority group and to instil a sense of pride in LGBT identities. Historically, the production of coming out stories has been seen as a means of destigmatizing LGBT identities and of community-building.

As well as considering coming out stories as a form of political action, academic study examines their structural features and rhetorical functions. Plummer (1995) describes coming out stories as typically consisting of three generic elements. The first is *suffering* which provides tension for the story's plot; the second is *epiphany* where the narrator comes to a realization that something has to be done, or a silence must be broken, to alleviate their suffering; and the final stage is *transformation* in which the narrator describes surviving or surpassing their suffering. Liang (1997) presents a different three-stage generic structure: *coming out to self*; *coming out to others*; and *membership in a series of ongoing acts of LGB self-definition* (coming out to a wider range of people).

There are similarities and differences between LGB and transgender coming out stories. Zimman (2009) criticizes the conflation of LGB and transgender stories and argues that there are two distinct ways a person can come out as transgender: before and after a transition. Zimman distinguishes between the terms *declaration* (the initial claiming of a transgender identity) and *disclosure* (sharing one's transgender history after transition).

Coming out stories can be told by parents telling stories of their LGBT children, children telling stories of LGBT parents, and so on. There are also stories of "coming out" which move beyond gender and sexuality to encompass other "stigmatized" identities, for example, coming out as an alcoholic. Recently, there has been criticism of how coming out has become normative within LGBT communities, while staying in the closet is evaluated negatively and constructed as politically irresponsible. Some work examines how narratives about *not* coming out can, in some contexts, be experienced as empowering. Greater attention is now being paid to the different media through which stories are produced and exchanged, as well the divergent practices of producing coming out stories in a wide range of cultures and contexts.

SEE ALSO: Coming Out; Discursive Construction of Sexuality; Sexual Identity and Sexual Orientation

## REFERENCES

Liang, A.C. 1997. "The Creation of Coherence in Coming-Out Stories." In *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality*, edited by A. Livia and K. Hall, 287–309. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Plummer, K. 1995. *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*. London: Routledge.

Zimman, L. 2009. "'The Other Kind of Coming Out': Transgender People and the Coming Out Narrative Genre." *Gender and Language*, 3(1): 53–80.

*The International Encyclopedia of Human Sexuality*, First Edition. Edited by Patricia Whelehan and Anne Bolin.
© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2015 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

## FURTHER READINGS

Bacon, J. 1998. "Getting the Story Straight: Coming Out Narratives and the Possibility of a Cultural Rhetoric." *World Englishes*, 17(2): 249–258.

Gray, M. 2009. "Negotiating Identities/Queering Desires: Coming Out Online and the Remediation of the Coming Out Story." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14: 1162–1189.

Sauntson, H. 2007. "Education, Culture and the Construction of Sexual Identity: An Appraisal Analysis of Lesbian Coming Out Narratives." In *Language, Sexualities and Desires: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, edited by H. Sauntson and S. Kyratzis, 140–164. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.

Saxey, E. 2008. *Homoplot: The Coming-Out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity*. New York: Peter Lang.