CONCEPTUALIZING OUTNESS THROUGH SEXUAL MINORITY DISCLOSURE
NARRATIVES

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requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology.

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ABSTRACT

CONCEPTUALIZING OUTNESS THROUGH SEXUAL MINORITY DISLOSURE
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Outness refers to the degree to which one self-discloses or expresses one's personal identity
(Klein, 2014). The concept of outness was first conceptualized as a stage in identity development
(Cass, 1979; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Recent literature shows support for coming-out as a
dynamic process that can vary depending on various social factors (e.g., culture, social support)
as well as internal factors (e.g., motivation; Jhuang, et al., 2011; Klein, et al., 2015). This study
aims to establish a model of outness using sexual minority disclosure experiences to capture the
various domains in encompasses as well as provide researchers with a comprehensive definition
of outness. Sexual minority disclosure narratives were collected through social media
pages/forums. Responses were coded separately by two graduate-level researchers using Braun
and Clarke's (2006) methods of identifying themes within psychological-related narratives. After
coding separately, researchers compared codes and combined the codes into potential themes and
sub-themes that identify patterns within the narratives. Specifics of the themes and sub-themes
were refined and given clear names for each. Results from 30 disclosure narratives reveal three
main themes that conceptualizes the coming-out process: Disclosure Recipients, Disclosure
Considerations, and Disclosure Methods.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Outness can be described as a dimensional representation of the degree to which one exhibits and expresses to others, including self-disclosure, one's personal sexual identity and patterns of sexual attraction, in the context of a heteronormative culture, in cases where one's identity and attractions differ meaningfully from those heterosexual cultural norms (Klein, 2014). Sexual minorities are defined as "individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, or who are attracted to or have sexual contact with people of the same gender" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Currently, there is not a consistent definition of outness used in sexuality and sexual minority research (Orne, 2011). Outness, or the coming-out process, is a unique experience to sexual minorities, as opposed to heterosexual individuals. The impacts of coming-out vary, as experiences are not consistently positive or negative, and tend to be impacted by other variables (e.g., internalized homonegativity, social reactions, cultural upbringing; Legate, et al., 2011; Solomon et al., 2015). Links between outness and mental health have been widely analyzed, such as higher outness being associated with lower psychological distress (Morris et al., 2001) and lower on mental health outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Lewis et al., 2002; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). Additionally, higher outness was shown to be predictive of higher self-esteem in sexual minorities (Halpin & Allen, 2004; Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1989). Concerning sexual minorities' outness in a work environment, greater outness to coworkers was shown to predict an increase in sexual minorities' internalized homophobia (Weber-Gilmore et al., 2011). Although sexual minorities experience high levels of stigma and internalized homophobia, sexual minority people of color have been shown to have less disclosure of their sexual identity due to an experienced

greater risk of heterosexist stigma and internalized homophobia, compared to White sexual minorities (Moradi, et al., 2010).

The concept of outness was first conceptualized in the form of identity development. Identity development is the process of establishing and integrating one's identity into society (Cass, 1979). This process has typically been viewed as developmental and is almost always categorized into stages. Outness typically occupies one or two of the stages and consists of the disclosure of expression of one's sexual identity to others (Cass, 1979; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). However, recent research supports identity management (i.e., expressing one's sexual identity through behavior) as an additional method of sexual identity disclosure (Belous et al., 2015; Imahori & Cupach, 2005).

Past Models of Identity Development

The Cass Model of Identity Development

The Cass Model of Identity Development (1979) proposed a model of understanding same-sex identity formation. Cass viewed the process as both developmental and behavioral. Identity develops over time and throughout an individual's developmental period. The process also includes a change in behavior that is the result of the interactions between individuals and their environment. In other words, individuals' actions correspond to the way they perceive the environment. This environment helps individuals to understand how they are perceived and regarded by others. This perception then develops patterns in individuals' behaviors. This is the basic unit in Cass's Interpersonal Congruency Theory, which forms the basis of his model.

Cass's Model consists of six stages: Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride, and Identity Synthesis. Identity Confusion consists of individuals beginning to obtain an understanding that same-sex attraction may be

relevant to their lives and behavior (i.e., behavior, emotional and/or physiological response). This leads to the second stage, Identity Comparison, where individuals who have not foreclosed their identity begin to move from an opposite-sex attraction self-perception to perceiving the possibility that they may have a same-sex attraction identity. The third stage, Identity Tolerance, allows the individual to acknowledge and address their social, emotional, and sexual needs in relation to their sexual identity. By the end of this stage, an individual has increased commitment to their identity where they will be able to claim they are gay. Stage four, Identity Acceptance, is characterized by increasing interactions with other gay individuals. This leads to a normalization of same-sex attraction as both an identity and way of life. Stage five, Identity Pride, begins with an individual having awareness of the incongruency between the individual's perception of their self being completely acceptable as gay and society's rejection of this concept. Confronting societal norms and values is viewed as the only method of validating the idea that being gay is valid and acceptable both privately and publicly. The confrontation leads the individual to be less concerned with how heterosexual individuals perceive them. In the last stage, Identity Synthesis, individuals are now able to integrate their gay identity with other aspects of themselves. Instead of seeing their same-sex attraction as the prominent aspect of their identity, it is now viewed as being one part of their overall self. This awareness completes the homosexual identity formation process.

While there is support that these stages are present in gay and lesbian individuals (Sophie, 1986), the Cass model has shown to be too linear and rigid (Akerhind & Cheung, 2000; Sophie, 1986). This is primarily because of the nature of stage theories, as it is assumed that every person will go through all of the stages consecutively. Additionally, stage models like this have shown to be outdated because of the increased tolerance and acceptance for same-sex

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attraction both in multimedia such as television and movies, and politically and legally (e.g., increased support for gay marriage; Nichols, 1999). The Cass model is further outdated because of the acknowledgement of only gay and lesbian as a sexual identity. For example, bisexuality is discussed as only a phase in the acknowledgement process of one's gay or lesbian identity, not as a separate identity itself.

McCarn and Fassinger New Model of Lesbian Identity

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) proposed a new model of sexual identity development. This model was made specifically for lesbian identity, as McCarn and Fassinger main critique of Cass's model involves the lack of both support and application of the model to lesbian individuals. The McCarn and Fassinger model is branched into individual sexual identity development and group membership identity development. Each identity development is made up of phases. Both group and individual sexual development consists of four phases: Awareness, Exploration, Deepening/Commitment, and Internalization/Synthesis. Awareness consists of the acknowledgement of one's identity not being the norm. Exploration involves exploring one's sexual feelings. An individual in this phase will seek out knowledge about gay and lesbian people, both as a group and the possibility of incorporating oneself into that group. Phase three, Deepening/Commitment, involves individuals seeking self-fulfillment as a sexual being. They recognize their current forms of intimacy may imply same-sex attraction and attempts to further examine those aspects of themselves. Individuals also seek to deepen their awareness of both the value and oppression of the gay and lesbian community. The last phase is Internalization/Synthesis. Individuals in this stage have moved through a process of conflict and reevaluation of self. This includes identifying themselves as a member of a minority group, redefining what that group means to them, internalizing their new identity, and incorporating the

new identity in their overall self-concept.   While McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) model improves on some of the issues that exist in the Cass model (1979), such as improving on the lack of focus on lesbian identity, it suffers from some of the same criticism. The criticism stems primarily from its conceptualization of sexual identity development as a stage theory, as opposed to a multidimensional, continuous process (Akerhind & Cheung, 2000; Sophie, 1986).

Past Measures of Outness

Mohr and Fassinger (2000) sought to conceptualize constructs related to lesbian and gay experiences. Specifically, they constructed an inventory that measures the degree to which lesbian and gay individuals have disclosed their sexual orientation to others (i.e., outness). They organized the inventory into different social groups (e.g., family, friends, work, religious institution, general public). Mohr and Fassinger (2000) acknowledge that up to their inventory construction, the degree of interrelatedness among outness levels in different social groups has not been established. Therefore, it was still questioned whether outness is unidimensional (i.e., general level of outness) or multidimensional (i.e., levels of outness in different social groups). Another important issue Mohr and Fassinger (2000) found in the conceptualization of outness is the need to establish criteria in determining if disclosure has occurred. Often disclosure is considered verbally communicating one's identity to others, but this approach does not assess ways of disclosing sexual orientation in nonverbal, subtle ways. Therefore, Mohr and Fassinger's Outness Inventory (2000) assesses the degree of outness to a variety of individuals by choosing one of four responses: "definitely knows and we have talked about it," "definitely knows but we have never talked about it," "probably knows or suspects," and does not know or suspect." This inventory can assess outness from a unidimensional and multidimensional perspective by having a two-level factor structure. Outness levels in one social group may only be moderately related to

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levels in another social group, but outness levels in all social groups may be taken together as an indicator of general outness. However, Mohr and Fassinger's (2000) inventory lacks in assessing expressing one's sexual identity through non-verbal methods. The item responses only allow for individuals to indicate whether their identity was expressed through talking, which ignores other various ways individuals may come out to others (e.g., coming-out through social media, identity management).

Meidlinger and Hope (2014) sought to improve build and improve on Mohr and Fassinger's (2000) inventory. They developed the Nebraska Outness Scale (NOS), which is composed of two separate 5-item subscales. The first scale measures one's disclosure of sexual identity (NOS-D), while the other measures concealment (NOS-C). All responses are given on a 11-point Likert scale. This ranged from 0 "Never avoid" to 10 "Always avoid", for the NOS-C, and 0% "None" to 100% "All" for the NOS-D. Meidlinger and Hope (2014) sought to separate concealment and disclosure, as they viewed them as two separate concepts. The NOS-D assesses disclosure by asking the percentage or proportion of a group (e.g., family, friends, strangers) that was aware of the individual's sexual orientation. The NOS-C assesses concealment by asking on a scale from 0 to 10, how often does that individual avoid indicating their sexual orientation. The NOS-C considers avoiding indication of sexual orientation regardless of whether members of that group are aware of their sexual orientation or not. Both of the subscales ask concealment and disclosure across five different groups. These include immediate family, extended family, friends, people at work or school, and strangers.

While the Nebraska Outness Scale (2014) addresses some of the issues present in Mohr and Fassinger's Outness Inventory (2000), such as acknowledging individuals may come-out nonverbally, it still maintains some of the same problems. For example, both the NOS (2014)

and OI (2000) measure outness in relation to how open one is to certain social groups. These include family, friends, coworkers, and strangers, and the NOS (2014) improved on categorizing these groups, such as splitting family into immediate and extended. However, both scales measure outness based on the assumption that an individual considers all of these social groups to be important in his/her concept of outness. So, sexual minorities' conceptualization of outness may not include certain social group's (e.g., family) knowledge of his/her sexual identity to be important in his/her overall outness. Additionally, neither the OI (2000) and NOS (2014) capture factors relating to coming-out decisions (e.g., motivation, safety, cultural and/or religious background), as well as other aspects of coming-out (e.g., identity management). Therefore, both the OI (2000) and NOS (2014) inventories may not accurately capture an individual's level of outness.

Overview of Recent Qualitative Coming-Out Research

Recent literature indicates the coming-out process to be more dynamic and non-linear compared to traditional stage theories, such as The Cass Model of Identity Development (1979) and McCarn and Fassinger New Model of Lesbian Identity (1996). For instance, different coming-out conversations reveal various methods and possibilities for verbally communicating one's sexual identity (Manning, 2015). In a 2015 study, 258 coming-out narratives were analyzed to identify common ways coming-out conversations are enacted (Manning, 2015). Categories from the narratives were derived from the data using typographic analysis to represent themes and create a typology of different coming-out conversations. This process developed practical categories and types for different coming-out conversations; thus, further supporting the variability within the coming-out process (Manning, 2015). In relation to the dynamicity of coming-out, external factors such as privilege, oppression, and social support were

some ways that the coming-out process was complicated (Klein et al., 2015). Additionally, among lesbian individuals, their motivation in coming-out, the person they are coming-out to, and the timing of coming-out are factors that have shown to influence their coming-out process (Jhuang et al., 2011). Culture, along with familial and societal expectations have been shown to impact African American women's discovery and exploration of their lesbian or bisexual identity (Bates, 2010).

In the context of online communities, A large majority (90%) of gay men indicate they feel anxiety and discomfort in constructing their online identities on Facebook (Owens, 2017). Chester and colleagues (2016) recruited a sample of 12 gay men and asked 23 open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview about this coming-out experiences. Data analysis was conducted in three steps. The first step included selecting three interview transcripts at random and identifying and labeling domains of interest within said transcripts. Second, the core themes within those selected domains were identified from each participant's responses. Lastly, a final list of codes representing key common themes between participants. Chester and colleagues (2016) found from their analysis that among gay men coming-out using Facebook, external factors such as homophobia and previous coming-out experiences influenced their online discourse concerning their sexual identity (Chester et al., 2016). Especially in the context of a heterosexist culture, sexual minorities may seek out information and advice about their identity on internet discussion forums. These forums have shown to have several uses for sexual minorities, such as a way of storytelling or ways of seeking validation, information, advice, and community building (Miller, 2016). Among sexual minorities discussing their coming-out experiences, there are those who have relied on a more intellectual process of coming-out such as reading research, literature, and meeting other same-sex attracted people and those who have

discovered their identity by noticing their own attraction to members of the same-sex (Dunlap, 2014).

Concerning gay men, a contextual and continual management of identity is utilized as a disclosure strategy; however, this identity management is dependent on motivations for coming out as well as the type of social relationship (Orne, 2011). Identity management is described as the expression of one's cultural identities through behavior (e.g., participation in cultural related events, adhering to stereotypes that align with one's culture; Imahori & Cupach, 2005). For example, gay men undergoing the coming out process may manage their identity and enter gay culture through a strong adherence to gay stereotypes and media portrayals of how gay men should look and act (Belous, et al., 2015).

The Current Study

The concept of outness was first conceptualized as a stage in the process of identity development (Cass, 1979; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996); whereas, it now is often conceptualized as less linear, like stage theories, and more of a dynamic process (Bates, 2010; Jhuang, 2011; Klein, 2015). The coming-out process is different for many individuals and can vary depending on different social factors (e.g., social support, culture, oppression), as well as internal factors, such as motivation in coming-out (Jhuang, et al., 2011; Klein et al., 2015). Additionally, the coming-out process has shown to be dynamic because of the various coming-out methods, like identity management.; thus, sexual minorities may adhere to gay stereotypes so others may perceive them as gay without having to come out verbally (Belous, et al., 2015). Outness also has been shown to be strongly related to various mental health outcomes, as individuals who are less or not out to others tend to have more negative mental health outcomes (e.g., psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and stress; Jordan & Deluty, 1998; Lewis et al., 2002; Mohr &

Fassinger, 2003; Morris et al., 2001). Establishing a comprehensive model of outness is important, as there is little to no consistency in the operational definition of outness among researchers. This lack of consistency is partly due to the various methods of coming-out not being well known (Orne, 2011). Furthermore, the most used measures of outness, Mohr and Fassinger's Outness Inventory (2000) and Meidlinger and Hope's Nebraska Outness Scale (2014), fail to measure important aspects of coming-out (e.g., identity management). Creating a new model of outness would provide researchers accuracy in the operational definition of outness and the various domains it encompasses. Additionally, the recognition of identity management as a method of outness expands on previous conceptualizations, such as the OI (2000) and NOS (2014). This study aims to use a bottom-up approach to form a model of outness based on similar themes relating to sexual minorities' individual coming-out experiences.

CHAPTER TWO: METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited through sexual minority social media pages/forums (i.e., Reddit, Facebook). All participants were 18 years of age or older. Additionally, participants had to self-identify as a sexual minority to be included in the study. To control for language and cultural variables that may impact item responses, participants were excluded from the study if they did not indicate they are located within the United States. A total of 234 participants began the survey and completed the coming-out open-ended question (see below). To narrow this down to a more manageable number, a random sample of 30 participants were selected using random number generator from Microsoft Excel. Recent research supports a sample size ranging from 20 to 50 participants, as little new information is gained after 20 participants, and studies with more than 50 participants tend to increase the complexity of the analysis (Green & Thorogood, 2018; Ritchie et al., 2003). The generator selected 30 numbers ranging from 1 to 234 (i.e., the total number of participants in the entire sample); each participant was numbered based on when they started the survey, and each participant whose number corresponded with one of the randomly generated numbers was retained for analysis.

The final sample was mostly White (76.65%), with 10% identifying as Asian American, 6.7% as Hispanic-American, 3.35% as Anglo-American, 3.35% selected two options (i.e., White & Jewish) and had an average age of 28.67 years ($SD = 8.48$). The sample's highest level of education included bachelor's degree (43.30%), high school diploma or GED (30%), Master's or other professional degree (16.70%), Doctorate degree (6.70%), and less than high school diploma (3.3%). The majority of the sample identified as gay or lesbian (60%). The remining

sample identified as bisexual (26.70%), pansexual (6.70%), and open option (6.70%; e.g., "Queer"). The majority of participants identified as female (60%), with the remaining 40% identifying as male. Cisgender women (40%) and cisgender men (30%) comprised most of the sample, with other gender identities including transgender men (10%), transgender woman (3.30%), gender queer (3.30%), gender non-conforming (3.30%), gender non-binary (3.30%), and open option (6.70%).

Materials

Demographics

Participants were asked to report general demographic information, including their age, race/ethnicity, highest education obtained, and sexual orientation. Participants were also asked their sex assigned at birth in addition to their gender identity. Asking these questions separately gives participants the ability for transgender individuals to select their gender identity as "man" or "woman" over the transgender options. Transgender status was inferred by differences between sex assigned at birth and gender identity. See Appendix A.

Coming-Out Narratives

Participants were asked to describe their experiences regarding the disclosure of their sexual orientation. The first question asked, "Describe your decision-making process when disclosing your same-sex attractions to others (e.g., friends, family, coworkers, online communities, strangers). For example, how do you decide who to disclose to, how to make the disclosure, and when to make the disclosure?" This first question aims to obtain an understanding of the various social group(s) participants have come-out to. Additionally, this question allows the researchers to obtain an understanding of motivation in coming-out, as well as the time frame and method of coming-out. Each participant provided an answer to this

question, with an average word count of 75 that ranges from 3 to 396 words. The second question asks, "Other than by directly telling people, describe ways in which you convey your same-sex attraction to others (e.g., clothing, hairstyle, attending pride, going to gay bars/clubs)." The second question aims to assess the role that identity management plays in participants' coming-out experience. Each participant provided an answer to this question, with an average word count of 33 that ranges from 1 to 195 words. See Appendix B.

Procedure and Analytic Strategy

Participants were recruited through sexual minority social media pages/forums (i.e., Reddit, Facebook). Specific sexual minority terminology (e.g., "gay," "lesbian," "LGBT," "bi," "pan") were used to locate the recruitment pages. The pages/forums included support, pride, and discussion groups for sexual minorities or specific sexual identities (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual). Snowball sampling was included in recruitment, so participants were asked to forward the survey to other sexual minority individuals (e.g., family, friends). Responses were analyzed separately between two graduate-level researchers using Braun and Clarke's (2006) methods of identifying themes within psychological related narratives. First, researchers familiarized themselves with the data. This included reading and re-reading the narratives. In the second step, researchers independently generated initial codes for the narratives. Codes identify a feature of the data that appears interesting and may be assessed in a meaningful way in regard to outness. Next, both researchers collaboratively compared and refined the codes and then searched for themes within the narratives by combining the codes into potential themes. Themes were then reviewed by examining comprehensive thematic and sub-thematic patterns in relation to the narratives. The researchers refined the specifics of each theme and generated clear definitions and names for each.

After viewing 30 sexual minority disclosure narratives, three themes were identified: Disclosure recipients, disclosure considerations, and disclosure methods. Each theme is comprised of five subthemes. The first theme, disclosure recipients, includes familial relationship, friendship, professional relationship, therapeutic relationship, and strangers and/or acquaintances as subthemes (see Figure 1). The second theme, disclosure considerations, include subthemes of safety, acceptance, intimacy, proximity, and relevance (see Figure 2). The third and last identified theme, disclosure methods, include subthemes of direct language, implicit language, symbolic representation, community association, and showcasing attraction (see Figure 3).
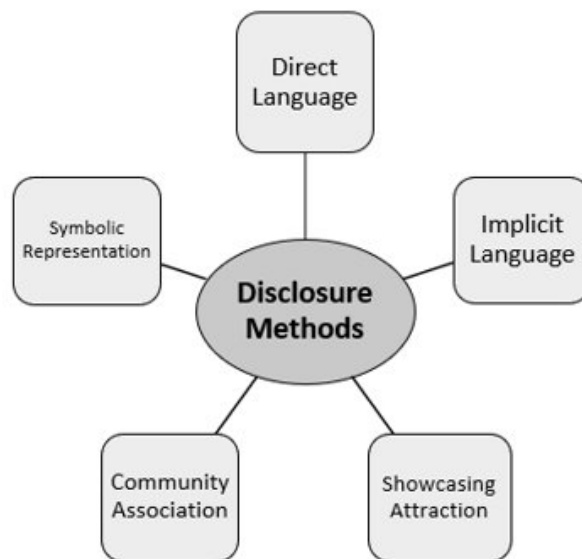
Figure 1

Disclosure Recipients

Figure 2

Disclosure Considerations

Figure 3

Disclosure Methods

Theme 1: Disclosure Recipients

Throughout the participants' discussion regarding coming-out to others, there were consistencies in the individuals and/or groups participants disclosed their sexual identity to. All disclosure recipients were identified and combined into groups that researchers determined were specific and distinct from each other. Those groups made up five sub-themes: Familial relationship, friendship, professional relationship, therapeutic relationship, and strangers and/or acquaintances. For sample narratives and codes for each subtheme, see Table 1.

Familial Relationship

Sexual minorities identified family and/or individual family members (e.g., parents, siblings) when discussing past disclosure or people/individuals for which disclosure is considered.

Friendship

Throughout narratives, the friends of sexual minorities were identified as common recipients of sexual identity disclosure.

Professional Relationship

Sexual minorities identified people in several types of professional relationships (e.g., co-workers, patients) when discussing past disclosure.

Therapeutic Relationship

Sexual identity disclosure to therapists was seen in narratives. Researchers concluded a therapeutic relationship to be both specific and distinct from other sub-thematic relationships to warrant its own sub-theme.

Strangers and/or Acquaintances

While the disclosure to strangers is not explicitly discussed, there was consistency within the narratives of no intention of hiding one's sexual identity. To capture this, researchers concluded that disclosure to strangers, or non-specific relationship, be included as the last sub-theme.

Theme 2: Disclosure Considerations

Throughout the narratives, participants discussed their reasoning for coming-out or not coming-out to other people. In other words, this theme captures the decision-making process sexual minorities experience regarding their sexual identity disclosure. Disclosure considerations contain five subthemes: Safety, acceptance, intimacy, proximity, and relevance. For sample narratives and codes for each subtheme, see Table 2.

Safety

This subtheme was the most prevalent consideration and was often directly stated by participants. When not directly stated, safety was often discussed as an avoidance of potential verbal and/or physical violence from others as a response to participants disclosing their sexual identity.

Acceptance

Like safety, this subtheme was often directly stated by participants. When not directly stated, acceptance was discussed in context to political and/or religious ideologies/opinions of others. Acceptance is distinguishable from safety, as it does not include potential verbal and/or physical violence reactions from others.

Intimacy

Participants also discussed the level of relational closeness as an important component of the decision-making process. Intimacy included different types of relationships, such as friends, family, and co-workers.

Proximity

While intimacy is described as relational closeness, proximity refers to physical closeness. This can also be described as how often participants were physically near and/or around others.

Relevance

Contrary to other subthemes in disclosure considerations, the last subtheme of relevance was often not explicitly stated. Within the narratives, participants discussed disclosure of their sexual identity as it relates to its connection to conversation and/or general interaction with others. Relevance is distinguishable from proximity, as it focusses of the content within conversations and does not include or require the physical presence of other individuals.

Theme 3: Disclosure Methods

Throughout the narratives, participants discussed the ways that would indicate, or make their sexual identity known to others. Disclosure methods contain five distinct subthemes: Direct language, implicit language, symbolic representation, community association, and showcasing attraction. For sample narratives and codes for each subtheme, see Table 3.

Direct Language

Throughout the narratives, participants discussed intentionally communicating their sexual identity to others through language that is clear, concise, and unambiguous.

Implicit Language

Participants also described methods of verbally disclosing their sexual identity that is not directly or plainly conveyed. This method allows for an assumption of one's sexual identity and creates the possibility for the disclosure to be misunderstood by others.

Symbolic Representation

Throughout narratives, participants discussed non-verbal methods of disclosing their sexual identity. Specifically, this subtheme is a method of disclosure that includes portraying one's sexual identity through associating objects or things (e.g., clothing, flags, pins, hair style) with oneself that stands for or is stereotypically associated with their sexual identity.

Community Association

Throughout narratives, various participants discussed associating themselves with groups and/or spaces either created for or dominated by sexual minorities as a form of disclosing their sexual identity.

Showcasing Attraction

This last method of sexual identity disclosure includes revealing one's same-sex attraction through behaviors that suggest romantic and/or sexual relations with another same-sex individual.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

A bottom-up analysis of coming-out narratives identified three overarching themes in sexual minority individuals' disclosure experiences. Those themes were disclosure recipients, disclosure considerations, and disclosure methods. Disclosure recipients was composed of different types of relationships a person might come out to, such as familial relationships, friendships, professional relationships, therapeutic relationships, and strangers and/or acquaintances. Safety, acceptance, intimacy, proximity, and relevance comprised disclosure considerations. Lastly, sexual minority disclosure methods include direct language, implicit language, symbolic representation, community association, and showcasing attraction. In most of the narratives, many of these themes and subthemes co-existed in a multitude of combinations, showing support for outness being a multidimensional, dynamic, and life-long process specific to sexual minorities. (Klein, et al., 2014; Legate, et al., 2011; Orne, 2011).

Additionally, it is apparent through the narratives that individuals may come-out, or disclose their sexual identity, through more subtle and implied methods. This is captured through the disclosure methods subthemes of implicit language, symbolic representation, and community association. These subthemes support identity management as a way of disclosing one's sexual identity to others, as identity management includes an adherence to sexual minority stereotypes and/or communities (Belous, et al., 2015).

Future Implications

Regarding clinical implications, the findings of this study may help to increase healthcare quality for sexual minorities, as healthcare workers may use these results in providing appropriate and effective interventions for sexual minorities undergoing the coming-out process.

Interventions for sexual minorities such as individual-level treatment strategies, school-based programs, and state-level policies that address sexual minority mental health have shown advances in recent years; however, there continues to be a lack of long-term evidence-based prevention and treatment programs for this population (Fish, 2020). Interventions that are implemented within specific contexts (e.g., schools, families, peers, communities) prevent healthcare workers from addressing sexual minorities' health from a multifaceted and multi-contextual perspective. Research supports sexual minorities' experiences being multifaceted and multi-contextual, as different environments influence the degree of sexual identity expression, and this often impacts mental health and overall well-being. For example, sexual minorities that utilize identity management strategies to be "out" in a select few environments have been linked to elevated emotional distress among adults (Riggle et al., 2017) and reduced academic achievement for youth (Watson et al., 2015). The present study can be beneficial in improving clinical interventions for sexual minorities, as it shows support for outness as a multidimensional, dynamic, and life-long process. Future studies that discover similar results would increase empirical support of this model. Increased empirical support may allow this model to be applied to clinical interventions and/or programs for sexual minorities.

In addition to clinical implications, these findings contain important research implications. Results corroborate recent research that provides support for outness being defined as both a dynamic and life-long process, rather than a specific and stringent stage all sexual minorities undergo (Cass, 1979; Orne, 2011). It may be helpful for future researchers to focus on outness with individuals of a specific sexual identity (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual) to examine potential differences in the coming-out process.

The information gained from this study may be used to create a new measure of outness. This would expand on previous measures such as Mohr and Fassinger's Outness Inventory (2000) as well as Meidlinger and Hope's Nebraska Outness Scale (2014). For example, the Outness Inventory (2000) does not measure non-verbal methods of sexual identity disclosure, and only assesses whether individual's sexual identity was expressed verbally to other people. The coming-out methods in Mohr and Fassinger's measure are captured in the present study through theme 1 (disclosure recipients) as well as the direct language subtheme within theme 3 (disclosure methods). This measure fails to capture the various reasons for sexual identity disclosure that is captured through theme 2 (disclosure considerations). Additionally, Mohr and Fassinger's measure does not capture the various methods of disclosure that were identified through the disclosure narratives. The subthemes of implicit language, symbolic representation, community association, and showcasing attraction within theme 3 expands on Mohr and Fassinger's measure and conceptualization of sexual identity disclosure.

While Meidlinger and Hope's Nebraska Outness Scale (2014) improved Mohr and Fassinger's Outness Inventory (2000), such as addressing non-verbal methods of sexual identity disclosure, it contains some of the same limitations. Meidlinger and Hope's scale does not capture any factors regarding various reasons for coming-out (i.e., disclosure considerations) as well as the various non-verbal methods of coming-out that is identified in the present study (e.g., symbolic representation, community association, showcasing attraction).

The present study shows consistency with the established measures of outness, while also expanding on these concepts. It identifies various reasons for coming-out (i.e., disclosure considerations) as a prominent factor in the coming-out process. Additional disclosure methods were also identified (e.g., symbolic representation, community association, showcasing

attraction) which further expands the previous measures of outness. An outness measure based on the results would not prioritize a obtaining a total number that represents the degree someone is out to others. It would focus on assessing the prevalence of each theme and subtheme within an individual's life. A measure based on this model may have three subscales based on the themes identified (i.e., disclosure recipients, disclosure considerations, disclosure methods), with each subscale containing items that capture the five subthemes within each theme.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. The first limitation is the diversity of the sample. Participants in this study consisted of majority White individuals as well as majority cisgender individuals. Thus, the results cannot accurately be generalized to the coming-out experiences of neither transgender nor non-white individuals. An additional limitation of this study includes the use of convenience sampling to recruit participants. Because convenience sampling limits the generalizability of results, this model may not accurately reflect the breadth and depth of coming-out experiences among sexual minorities. Furthermore, asking respondents to discuss their coming-out experiences through typing may have been an additional limitation. Gathering responses through interviews could elicit more information and detail from participants compared to typed responses. Additionally, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analytic method have disadvantages in relation to some qualitative methods. Braun and Clarke's method provides a wide range of analytic options that allows for a broad range of things to be said about the narratives (2006). However, this broad range presents the possibility that important details may have been overlooked by the researchers. Compared to many qualitative analytic methods, this broad range allows for the researchers' bias to influence the thematic and sub-thematic conceptualization of narratives. Based on these limitations, future

research in this area should focus on replication to observe if the themes and subthemes identified in this study can be found in studies with similar conditions. Future outness studies should also prioritize a diverse sample to improve generalization of results as well as capture coming-out experiences that may vary across demographics.

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Table 1

Disclosure Recipients: Sample Narratives and Codes

Data Extracted from Narratives	Codes
I came out directly to my immediate family one at a time, as simple and fraught as "I have to tell you something, I am a lesbian."	Immediate family (Familial Relationship)
Once I came to terms with who I am, I waited until I could tell my parents in person.	Parents (Familial Relationship)
I only disclose my sexual orientation when I feel safe enough to or feel that I will not be openly judged. For example, my parents are very religious, I did not disclose it with them. But my brother is not religious, and felt more comfortable disclosing it with him.	Parents, Brother (Familial Relationship)
The next time I recall telling someone about my bisexuality explicitly was in talking with my twin sister (who identifies as queer), just kind of casually over text I believe.	Sister (Familial Relationship)
The first few people I came out to were just general friends so as long as I trusted them not to tell people I didn't want to know I'd confide in them.	Friends (Friendship)
I chose the people who mean the most to me including some family and very close friends of 6+ years	Family (Familial Relationship); Friends (Friendship)
If I am working with a nurse I know is gay, I want to find a way to casually mention I am a lesbian if it doesn't come up organically.	Co-worker (Professional Relationship)
I disclose with my coworkers when the environment is calm	Co-workers (Professional Relationship)
Have come out to patients, friends, family, other MDs. Am out on Facebook	Patients, medical doctors (Professional Relationship); Friends (Friendship); Family (Familial Relationship); Facebook (Strangers and/or Acquaintances)
I am not completely "out" to all of the important people in my life, so I consider it a work in progress. The first time I remember verbalizing my attraction for men and women, I was talking with a therapist at age 25 or 26.	Therapist (Therapeutic Relationship)
I've come out to my friends and therapist	Friends (Friendship); Therapist (Therapeutic Relationship)

I don't worry about it. I discuss things that would out me just as straight people talk about things.	Anyone (Strangers and/or Acquaintances)
I don't specifically disclose that I am gay. I will just talk about my husband normally in conversation.	Anyone (Strangers and/or Acquaintances)
At this point in my life, I'll tell anyone when it's mentioned or becomes relevant. I'm accepted by my family and workplace, and for anyone else if they're not accepting I don't need them in my life	Family (Familial Relationship); Co-workers (Professional Relationship); Strangers/anyone
Have to patients, friends, family, other MDs. Am out on Facebook	Patients, MDs (Professional Relationship); Family (Familial Relationship); Friends (Friendship); Facebook (Strangers and/or Acquaintances)

Table 2

Disclosure Considerations: Sample Narratives and Codes

Data Extracted from Narratives	Codes
Once I determined if it was safe when the subject came up I'd just choose not to conceal that I was a lesbian. Growing up until I left home I had to be very careful who knew because my family was very homophobic so that factored in on who I would tell.	Safety; Acceptance
I almost never disclose my identity unless it is absolutely relevant to the conversation. I've found as a feminine person, people automatically assume I'm straight, and I fear of a negative interaction if I break that illusion. I am nonconfrontational and have anxiety on how others may react violently.	Safety; Relevance
I choose not to come out unless I am asked and feel comfortable that the person has a positive view of the LGBT community	Acceptance
When I directly tell people, I typically will go through a flow sheet of questions. The first of which involves do I want to tell them or does it matter to me if I tell them. The next is am I close to this person? If so then do they talk about their significant other or dating life. If these are yes then I'll usually gauge how conservative I think they are and if they are then I ask myself if it would bother me if I was hiding who I was. If I'm wearing something with any lgbt reference I will typically gauge where I will go throughout the day and if i think I might be discriminated or looked at differently then I won't wear it..	Safety; Acceptance; Intimacy
I often wait to see how they discuss members of the LGBTQIA community or other minority groups, to gauge how they would react. I often won't come out to someone if I believe they will have a negative reaction. Once I know they are an open/affirming person, I have no trouble disclosing my identity as soon as possible.	Acceptance
Once I know my workplace is accepting, I would casually come out to coworkers.	Acceptance; Relevance
I have to feel I can trust them to some extent, and have to be close enough with for it to matter (i.e., I'm not going to just say it to random coworker)	Intimacy
I chose the people who mean the most to me including some family and very close friends of 6+ years	Intimacy

I decide according to proximity (networking degrees) and degree of familiarity.	Proximity; Intimacy
I disclose with my coworkers when the environment is calm.	Proximity
At this point I make it clear from the get go in almost all situations. I mention my partner in conversation and do not hide it, but I also don't walk up and tell them flat out "hi I'm queer"	Proximity
Only socially if asked or is relevant to the discussion. My sexual preferences are not my identity.	Relevance
At this point in my life, I'll tell anyone when it's mentioned or becomes relevant. I'm accepted by my family and workplace, and for anyone else if they're not accepting I don't need them in my life.	Relevance

Table 3

Disclosure Methods: Sample Narratives and Codes

Data Extracted from Narratives	Codes
I don't worry about it. I discuss things that would out me just as straight people talk about things.	Discuss things that would out them (Implicit Language)
Some people met my boyfriend at the same time I came out. Others I casually slipped it in when I was asked how I am doing. I am very privileged to be able to do it this way.	Met partner (Showcasing Attraction); Casually disclose in conversation (Implicit Language)
Once I came to terms with who I am, I waited until I could tell my parents in person.	Told parents (Direct Language)
Now that I have a partner, I don't hide it anywhere. I'll use the word partner even in job interviews because if that's something that doesn't fly, it's not an environment I want to be a part of	Uses the word "partner" (Implicit Language)
I disclose with my coworkers when the environment is calm	Disclose to coworkers (Direct Language)
At this point in my life, I'll tell anyone when it's mentioned or becomes relevant. I'm accepted by my family and workplace, and for anyone else if they're not accepting I don't need them in my life	Tell anyone when mentioned (Direct Language)
I have a hat with rainbow symbol on it and a shirt that says "I'm tired of pretending like I'm someone I'm not". I have been to two pride parades, and I frequented LGBT+ friendly bars. I also frequent several gay forums online	Apparel with LGBT symbols (Symbolic Representation); Attend pride parades, gay bars, and gay online forums (Community Association)
Sharing jokes that uses terminology unique to the gay community. Also got to gay bars on occasion. Lastly, when I was in a relationship with a man, some forms of PDA were also used	Terminology unique to gay community, gay bars (Community Association); PDA with partner (Showcasing Attraction)
Attending pride, public displays of affection with my partner in public. My hair and clothes probably give off the vibes but I don't wear rainbows or anything	Pride (Community Association); Public displays of affection with partner (Showcasing Attraction); Clothing and hair (Symbolic Representation)

APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET

Please complete the following information about yourself:

Age:

Occupation:

Do you live: _____In the United States or _____Outside of the United States

Ethnicity (choose all that apply):

_____ African-American

_____ Asian-American

_____ Caucasian

_____ Hispanic-American

_____ Native American

_____ Open Option: _____

Please indicate your highest attained level of education obtained:

_____ Less than a High School Diploma

_____ High School Diploma or GED

_____ Bachelor's degree

_____ Master's or Other Professional Degree

_____ Doctorate degree

How would you identify your sexual orientation? With which one of these do you most identify?

_____ Straight / Heterosexual

_____ Gay or Lesbian

_____ Bisexual

_____ Pansexual

_____ Asexual

_____ Open Option: _____

What was the sex you were assigned at birth (sometimes referred to "biological sex" or "sex you were born with)?

_____ Male

_____ Female

_____ Intersex

What is your gender identity – with which of these do you most identify? The term Cisgender means your sex assigned at birth is the same as your gender identity.

_____ Cisgender Man

_____ Cisgender Woman

_____ Transgender Man

_____ Transgender Woman

_____ Gender Queer

_____ Gender-Non-conforming

_____ Gender Fluid

_____ Gender Non-Binary

_____ Gender Expansive

_____ Open Option: _____

APPENDIX C: COMING-OUT NARRITIVES SHEET

The following questions will ask you to describe your experiences regarding the disclosure (making others known) of your sexual orientation.

Please answer the following with as much detail as possible.

1. Describe your decision-making process when disclosing your same-sex attractions to others (e.g., friends, family, coworkers, online communities, strangers). For example, how do you decide who to disclose to, how to make the disclosure, and when to make the disclosure?

2. Other than by directly telling people, describe ways in which you convey your same-sex attraction to others (e.g., clothing, hairstyle, attending pride, going to gay bars/clubs).