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Outing

Outing refers to revealing an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity to other people. While individuals can "out" themselves, which is generally referred to as "coming out," "outing" occurs when someone other than the individual reveals the individual's sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Outing can occur with the individual's permission, but the phrase generally refers to informing others about the individual's sexual orientation or gender identity without the individual's permission. Outing has been used by some sexual minority rights activists as a political weapon by exposing public figures who are perceived to be anti-LGBTQ+ but are themselves LGBTQ+.

Outing can occur at any social level, from telling a peer, colleague, or family member about someone's sexual orientation and/or gender identity to making a public pronouncement about a public figure's sexual orientation and/or gender identity. While individuals coming out and being open about their sexual orientations and/or gender identities is generally associated with positive psychosocial outcomes (Vaughan & Waehler, 2010), there are risks involved in doing so. Risks include social and/or familial rejection, social ostracization, harassment, and physical violence (Orne, 2011). For youth, these risks are greater as they can be kicked out of their homes, lose parental monetary support for college, and be subjected to considerable harassment, assault, and bullying within their social and educational environments.

When youth are able to choose the time, location, and to whom they will come out, they are able to judge the safety of the situation and to plan for various reactions. Youth generally evaluate the benefits and possible costs involved with coming out, making individualized decisions (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). When outed, however, youth are unable to control

who learns about their sexual orientations and/or gender identities and may be unprepared for the negative responses that may occur. Many youth fear being outed so much they do not report harassment or assault as doing so might out them to parents, peers, or others (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Vilenas, & Dansichewski, 2016). Arguments in favor of outing youth include others feeling the youths' parents, school personnel, service providers, etc. deserve to know the youths' sexual orientations and/or gender identities, that youth need to be able to discuss their sexual orientations and/or gender identities with adults who can help guide them and they cannot do this without those people knowing their sexual orientations and/or gender identities, and that letting others know the youths' sexual orientation' and/or gender identities will aid in protecting the youth (Schafer, 2015). Yet, the youth often also feel their privacy has been violated and may experience considerable distress, leading most mental health professionals to strongly recommend youth come out on their own terms and at their chosen time.

For adults, while problematic for many of the same reasons as noted for youth, outing may have less impact due to adults having more social and financial independence; being able to change their educational, occupational, or living environment with more ease; and having a more developed ability to control emotional responses. Even with that, adults who are outed may experience significant negative psychosocial outcomes such as mental health and substance use concerns, loss of employment, social isolation, and many of the other noted difficulties for youth (Johnston & Jenkins, 2004). As with youth, it is generally believed that adults should also be able to control to whom they come out and when and where that occurs.

Politically, outing can have significant repercussions. Starting in the later 1980s and becoming much more prevalent in the early 1990s, gay rights activists began publically exposing

public figures who they felt were being hypocritical by supporting legislation or policies that were harmful to LGBTQ+ individuals while either being LGBTQ+ themselves or engaging in same-sex sexual relationships. This practice was very controversial, with some viewing outing as a violation of individuals' privacy while other prominent gay rights figures such as Michelangelo Signorile and Peter Tatchell defended the practice.

The politics of outing were heavily debated during the mid and late 1990s and early 2000s by authors such as Larry Gross, Richard Mohr, Warren Johansson, and William Percy. Arguments made in favor of outing included exposing perceived hypocrisy, forcing individuals to publically acknowledge their sexual orientations and/or gender identities and confront the possible repercussions of their political and/or public positions and/or statements to themselves and others like them, combating homophobia that may be linked to internalized homonegativity, helping others recognize that they know individuals who are sexual and/or gender minorities so that the others are forced to reconcile their assumptions about sexual and/or gender minorities and the reality of the people they know, and using it as a means of self-defense against those who threaten the LGBTQ+ community while secretly being a part of it (Gross, 1993; Johansson & Perry, 1994; Mohr, 1992). Opposing arguments generally focused on the invasion of privacy that occurs when individuals are outed, questions of mixing individuals' public and private identities, and the hypocrisy of LGBTQ+ rights activists promoting the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals to have private lives not subject to social or legal judgement from others while violating those rights for public figures (Gross, 1993; Johansson & Perry, 1994; Mohr, 1992). Other concerns were raised about possible mistaken outings and the effects that these could have on the careers of those erroneously exposed as LGBTQ+.

Outing has ended the careers of several politicians and led to the resignations of prominent religious leaders. In response to ethical concerns about these consequences, Johansson and Percy (1994) provided a matrix for making decisions about whether outing an individual was ethical, focusing on areas such as the motive for doing so, the source of the individual's public reputation, and the likely consequences of doing so on the individual's career, family life, and sexual life. Public discussion of the practices of political outing largely dissipated by the mid-2000s without any consensus about the propriety of the actions.

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See also: Coming Out, Sexual Identity, Gender Identity

Further Reading:

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