

CHAPTER THREE



Post-Coming Out Complications

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COMING OUT—THE ACT OF DISCLOSING AN OFTEN-INVISIBLE AND stigmatized identity—can be a turbulent interactional event (Defenbaugh, 2011; Myers, 2012). There are complications in deciding how and when to disclose, and there may be a variety of dilemmas tied to the disclosure process (Adams, 2011; Barton, 2012; Gray, 2009). Out-ness is not a one-time affair but is instead contingent upon relationship: I may be out as gay with my mother but not with the cashier at the grocery store; I may be out to some of my students but not all of them; and I may be out to my neighbor but not out to my neighbor's cousin (see Halley, 1989; Sedgwick, 1990). While coming out is often a canonical and sometimes scarring event for persons with same-sex attraction, the turbulence and uncertainty within relationships tied to this attraction does not end with the initial disclosure; as Burgess (2005) observes, just because a person comes out about her or his same-sex attraction does not mean that the attraction will no longer be an issue.

For instance, in *Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction* (Adams, 2011), I describe the family situation of James, an interviewee from an earlier project who stopped visiting his parents' home after telling them that he identified as gay (1988). During the times when he did visit, they heavily monitored his activities: They prohibited him from using regular dinnerware, instead requiring that he use "paper cups and paper plates and plastic silverware" (p. 23), and when he would use the bathroom, his mom would make sure to spray Lysol disinfectant on everything that he touched. Initially, James tolerated their ignorant reactions because he had come out to his parents at a time when HIV/AIDS was misunderstood and at a time when being gay was synonymous with having the disease. However,

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such monitoring practices continued, and James stopped going home; he was tired of tolerating his parents' ignorance and dismissive treatment.

I also described the experience of Dave, another interviewee, who had to tell his mother numerous times that he identified as gay (Adams, 2011, pp. 125–126). Dave initially came out to her in 1996, but in 2000 she asked him if he had a girlfriend; he reminded her that he identified as gay. In 2003, she asked him if he was dating any women; he told her again that he found men attractive. In 2007 and in 2008, she asked about Dave's attraction to women and, each time, Dave reminded her about his same-sex attraction. Even though Dave came out to his mother in 1996, her repeated questioning indicates denial about or dismissal of his stated sexuality. As of this writing, Dave continues to find innovative ways of telling his mom about his attraction and about his past relationships with men with the hope of not being surprised by her heteronormative questions and erroneous assumptions.

Others have described life after coming out as well. Wright (2011) notes how his sexuality, post-coming out, "continues to obstruct" the relationship he has with his parents (p. 78); Fox (2010) describes processes of having to repeatedly come out to his father who, suffering from Alzheimer's disease, continues to ask Fox if he has met "any nice, Jewish girls" (p. 8); and Waugh (2009) tells about his mother who, also suffering from Alzheimer's, continues to ask him about finding a wife. Cooper (2010) writes about how some mothers, post-coming out, may now have to worry about their kids being harassed about their mothers' same-sex attraction, and Glave (2005) writes about post-coming out situations with once-close heterosexual friends, situations such as the tensing up by these friends when same-sex attraction is mentioned (especially around children!), the cringe on these friends' faces when he calls his (same-sex) partner "Honey" or "Sweetie," and how, after disclosing his same-sex attraction, they would then rarely ask about his dating experiences or his meaningful and intimate relationships with men.

In this project, I further investigate the characteristics of relationships *after* the disclosure of same-sex attraction, what I term *post-coming out complications*—those moments of distress and the unexpected disdain that can emerge in a relationship *after* the initial coming out act. For instance, I am interested in the complications that emerge in the relationship I have with my mother and father *after* telling them that I am gay, the complications that emerge with other family members *after* they learn about my sexuality, and the possible moments of tension and conflict that occur with others *after* they learn about my intimate and meaningful relationships with men. I tell four stories that illustrate post-coming out complications among my family members, and I analyze each story in terms of the relational impact it has on myself and on the particular other(s). I conclude with suggestions about maneuvering post-coming out complications as well as describe how these complications have thrust me into a kind of queer melancholy especially in relationship to my family.

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Before continuing, I must make two qualifications. First, I do not want to suggest that coming out about same-sex attraction is no longer important, but rather that the struggles tied to this attraction, at least for some relationships, do not end once coming out happens; the struggles of same-sex attraction may continue to perpetually complicate the lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer person's relations with certain others. Second, I focus on the relational *complications* post-coming out rather than the calm and happy moments in a relationship after such a disclosure. This focus is intentional: With most of my writing, I try to make sense of difficult relational experiences—experiences that I do not understand and experiences that need to be changed. While I have experienced many good times post-coming out, and while there may be some satisfying moments in the relationships I describe, the critical thrust in my writing directs me toward experiences of harm and concern; I write to help make difficult relationships better.

Complicating Family I

December 2006. I travel from Tampa, Florida, to Danville, Illinois (my hometown), with Terry, my then-boyfriend, who members of my family had not yet met.

Jane, my aunt and my father's sister, was one of my favorite relatives. She always supported me through difficult adolescent times, and, when I came out to Jane in 2002, she provided me with much-needed affirmation and support. She encouraged me to tell other family members about my sexuality, and she phoned often, usually once every two weeks. I remember us talking about the irrationality of homophobia. I never thought that her once-supportive stance would change.

"Hi, Jane!" I say on the phone. "Terry and I are driving through Atlanta. We should be in Danville tomorrow. We can't wait to see you and your new house!"

"Hi, Tony," she responds, unenthusiastically. "Have you told your dad where you are?"

"Yes," I answer. "He knows that we'll arrive tomorrow. I can't wait to see you and your new house—and I can't wait for you to meet Terry!"

Silence.

"Drive safely," she says. "I'm sure your dad will be glad to see you."

"Umm ... thanks," I reply. "I'm sure he will be glad to see us, too. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," she mumbles.

I thought nothing of the awkward interaction until I arrived at Danville and talked with my father. He told me that Jane and Mike, her husband, did not want Terry and me to visit them; they didn't approve of the "gay lifestyle" and did not want gay men in their house.

Post-coming out complications: While I perceived Jane as once accepting of me when I came out, my perception changed a few years later. Jane and I still talk occasionally, about once every other month, but we have never been as close as we once were; our relationship has changed in new and painful ways, and my sexuality has fractured our relationship. As of this writing (2013), she still has never met Jerry, my partner of more than five years.

Complicating Family II

May 2010. While attending a conference near Danville, my father picked me up at my hotel so that we could have dinner. Since I had eaten a large lunch and probably would not have much to eat, I told him that he could choose the restaurant. He chose Hooters—a restaurant that features scantily clad female servers and a large male clientele, and a restaurant that celebrates objectification, sexual desire, and heterosexuality.

Once seated, the server comes to our table, rubs my back, and sits on my lap, all the while talking with my dad. I become uncomfortable, not because of the abrupt intimacy and invasion of my personal space by a stranger, but because the hypersexualized context and my complicity in the server's intimate actions might mark me as heterosexual. The server asks how I am doing, and I nervously reply, "fine." I stare at my dad, who smiles at me, and I hope that he senses my discomfort.

I have been to Hooters before, and I know that such intimacy is sometimes a part of the experience. However, I am worried about the assumptions of sexuality that may be thrust on my body, not just the server erroneously reading me as heterosexual, but also my dad reading me as questioning or as ashamed of my sexuality, and/or reading me as a liar if I do not come out to her.

My sexuality strains the relationship I have with my father (see Adams, 2006, 2012). He rarely asks about my partner, and, when I was single, he never asked if I was dating anyone (a common practice for him when I was not yet out). Further, while I sent him a copy of my book about same-sex attraction and coming out (Adams, 2011), he has never asked about any of the content. Given this information, my father's presence and our relational history complicated my response to the server at Hooter's. Had I been alone or with my lesbian and gay friends, I would not have had any reservations about telling the server that I identified as gay (and, consequently, that her overly sexual flirtations were unnecessary). But I was with my father, and I did not want to make the situation awkward by telling the server, upon meeting, that I was gay, not because I feared her reaction, but because I did not know how my father would react to such an abrupt disclosure. A post-coming out complication: I did not just inform my father of my same-sex attraction—I came out to him seven years prior (2003)—but my same-sex attraction continued to thwart my experience with him.

Complicating Family III

December 2010. My mother tells me that she wants a holiday photograph of our family to send in the mail, to (her) friends and (our) family.

"That's a great idea," I say. "I'm sure Jerry [my partner] will agree to it."

"Oh," she replies. "I thought it could be just you, me, and Michael [her husband]."

A picture together, a family picture of the three of us, absent my partner of more than two years. In this moment, I do not believe that she was being malicious or unloving—I believe that she likes and loves Jerry. However, in this moment she did not define him as "family."

"Why can't Jerry be included in the photo?" I ask.

"Because he's not family," she says. "The two of you aren't married."

"We can't get married," I respond, angrily. "Same-sex marriage is not legal in Illinois."

"Then he's not allowed in our family photograph," she replies.

A scarring moment in our mother-son relationship—I left this conversation feeling invalidated and angry, particularly because Jerry and I didn't matter to her and that, in order to matter, we must get married, a legal impossibility in our state/nation.

Marriage isn't that important to me. I do not need any legal body telling me who I can or should love, and I do not need any legal contract to legitimate my love for a person. However, my mother's comments were larger than marriage—they illustrated ignorance and a lack of acceptance with which I had to confront. Further, this interaction had nothing to do with coming out; I had come out to my mother eight years prior (2002). This interaction indicated a need for me to validate the legitimacy of my same-sex relationship for her, in the name of family.

Post-coming out complications: If my mom does not consider Jerry family and I do, and if she only wants a picture of her, me, and her husband absent my partner, and I refuse, then our family history, as documented in photos, will no longer exist. If she is ashamed of my partner or does not consider us family, and we do, the larger family unit is affected. Our conflict is not tied to coming out to her, but rather from her inability to recognize us—two men—as family. Memories fade; relationships strain.

Complicating Family IV

November 2012. My mom tells me how Jane, her neighbor, spends a lot of time with her son's wife, Jane's daughter-in-law. My mom then says that she wishes that she had a daughter-in-law with whom to spend time. I mention that she could spend time with Jerry, my partner. She says that he cannot be like a daughter-in-law because he is a man and because he isn't as sociable as Jane's daughter-in-law.

I leave this conversation sensing that my mom is upset because she cannot spend more time with my partner. I do not take her comments as a critique against my same-sex attraction, only that she wishes that my partner might socialize with her more.

A few hours later my mom mentions again that she wishes that she had a daughter-in-law and that Jerry, because he is a man, could never be as sociable as a woman. She then says that she wishes she had (biological) grandchildren, something that Jerry and I could never have together. I tell her that she has never mentioned grandchildren before and that if we wanted children we could adopt.

I leave this conversation feeling sad and angry—sad if my mom mourns that I do not have a relationship with a woman or if she misses having a daughter-in-law or if she desires biological grandchildren; and angry because I am tired of justifying my (same-sexed) partner, tired of thinking that I must again say that I will probably date men for the rest of my life, tired of thinking and talking about my (lack of hetero) sexuality with her. What made her comments even more difficult is that I fear further talking about her desire for a daughter-in-law or her desire for grandchildren because of what she might say—I do not want to hear "I wish that you were not gay" or "I wish that you were married to a woman," particularly since I no longer have much tolerance for this kind of heteronormative discourse, especially from my family. If I heard my mom say these hurtful things, I might have to eliminate contact with her, an act that, out of care for myself, I hope to not have to do.

The post-coming out complications: Even though I came out to my mother in 2002, I continue to negotiate my same-sex attraction with her. And this negotiation continues to trouble my relationship with her, manifest by my desire to not want to talk and visit with her much out of a fear of hearing harmful or neglectful discourse about my sexual orientation and about my meaningful and intimate relationships with men. While I understand the sadness my mom might have if Jerry and I do not have children, I am tired of explaining to the same person, again and again, that I am proudly—not apologetically—attracted to men. Further, I would never say to my mom, repeatedly, "I wish you were a man," or "I wish you were not White," or "I wish you were not older than 50." These comments would not make much sense, especially since they would isolate a characteristic that she could not (easily) change—a feeling that I also have about my same-sex attraction.

Navigating Post-Coming Out Complications

Relationship talk is a significant part of everyday life. In many contexts, I hear people asking about boyfriends, girlfriends, engagements, and marriages, and I am exposed to conversations about the size of rings and the

complexities of weddings, the desire to exchange vows, the pros and cons of (monogamous) commitment, the dilemmas of being single, and the importance of family. Pre-coming out, I even remember friends and some members of my family wanting to buy me a celebratory cake once I lost my virginity by having sex with a woman.

Post-coming out, relationship talk among my family has nearly ceased; I came out and into silence (Adams, 2011). There is the aunt who has never asked about Jerry; my father who, while nice and welcoming when Jerry is present, rarely asks about our relationship; the cousin who slowly ended contact with me after I came out to her; my mother who sometimes does not treat my relationship as legitimate or secure because I am not legally "married" (even though marriage is a legal impossibility for me/us); and the numerous other family members who never ask about my dating experiences or my intimate and meaningful relationships with men. And let me emphasize: Before coming out—before I told these people that I found men attractive—all of these people *regularly* asked if I was dating anyone, and, if I was dating (a woman), how the relationship was doing; after coming out, I rarely receive either of these questions.

I understand these neglectful and silencing experiences with the perspective of (dialectical tensions)—competing pressures within relationships that can motivate dis-ease and conflict (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). For instance, I struggle with the openness-closedness dialectic, with wanting to be honest about my feelings with my family while recognizing that, in so doing, I risk vulnerability and protection. I want to be open about my meaningful and intimate relationships with men and call attention to the silences I feel that family members have cast against my sexuality, but I fear saying something because I do not want to hear more disparaging comments about or disaffirming silences toward my relationship, comments and silences that have already characterized these relationships for more than a decade.

I also struggle with the connectedness-separateness dialectic, with wanting to spend time with my family but also wanting, or needing, to stay separate from them (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Refusing contact has become more necessary for my self-care: I am exhausted from having to tolerate homophobic statements, ignorant and disparaging commentary about my sexuality, and cold silences. When my partner is with me, I am tired of worrying about how to explain to others who he is and why we, as a couple, matter. I also do not want to put my partner in any situation in which his safety may be compromised.

And so I find myself living increasingly separate from family members. I do not attend family events such as birthday parties, retirement celebrations, and funerals, and I do not want or encourage family members to visit me. During the few times that I do visit, I rarely bring Jerry.

I assume that my/our avoidance may contribute to my mother's desire to have a close daughter-in-law, but I am exhausted from having to justify my sexuality and the realness of my relationship with Jerry. However, by living increasingly separate from my mom, she further loses the possibility to better connect with Jerry, which may then motivate her to be open with me about a desire for a daughter-in-law, an openness that may motivate me to question her acceptance of my sexuality and that, again, may encourage me to stay away. We both/all lose.

Navigating post-coming out silences can be difficult as well. It is easy to criticize a member of my family for disparaging me upon coming out—that is, for reacting negatively, for saying mean things, for being physically or verbally abusive upon initial disclosure of my same-sex attraction. However, life after coming out is quite silent: I have less and less explicit content to use as evidence of prejudice and nonacceptance. For instance, in all of the everyday complications I have described, there has never been any overt disdain for my sexuality. Rather, I experience a kind of implicit negligence in my everyday affairs, negligence that I must first address explicitly and then explain why such negligence is unacceptable or how/why it hurts.

I do try to make my same-sex attraction and my relationship a prominent part of my (remaining) conversations with my family—not in a "Hi, I'm Tony, and I'm gay" sort of way, but instead by using phrases like, "Jerry, my partner," or by saying, "Jerry and I" in reference to topics like living together, sharing bank accounts, and making significant purchases (e.g., buying a car, going on vacation). But I recognize that in being subtly open, in reminding others of my attraction and my relationships in seemingly mundane ways, I expose myself to additional post-coming out complications. For instance, if I mention Jerry and the other person abruptly tries to change the topic of conversation, then I may unexpectedly have a post-coming out issue—an issue that may then encourage me to refuse further contact with the person.

While dialectical tensions never fully disappear from relationships, flaring up in uncertain ways and at unknown times, I find myself tolerating acts of prejudice and ignorance much less, especially when these acts come from a family member I once thought loved and accepted me unconditionally. I want to be acknowledged, and I want the relationship I have with my partner to be acknowledged; for me, silence has become an unacceptable act of disconfirmation (Hyde, 2006). My health, happiness, and safety now come first, and sometimes this means refusing contact with homophobic others, and sometimes this means refusing to visit to the place that I once called home.

I do not want to suggest that I do not miss my family—I miss them greatly. But my attempts at self-care and my attempts to integrate my intimate, meaningful relationships with men into my everyday life have strained our relationships to each other. And so, when I think of missing them and

when I think about what I need, when I think of how our relationships are, have been, and could be, I am thrust into a prolonged sadness, a kind of queer melancholy.

(Queer) Melancholy

"Is it painful? Their avoidance, awkwardness, and downright rejection of you and those for whom you care? Well yes, of course. Of course it hurts, deeply. Severely."

—Thomas Glave, *Words to Our Now* (2005, p. 120).

The accumulation of sad experiences and the rejection by once-close family members has been difficult. It has been difficult to recognize that some of the people whom I love (and once loved) avoid acknowledging my same-sex attraction or the relationship that I have with my partner, especially since I have been out to these people for more than ten years and since my partner and I have been together for more than five years. I also feel the cumulative impact of these experiences—with the exception of three supportive and loving cousins, one of whom identifies as bisexual, *every* relationship I have with family members has been damaged by my disclosure of same-sex attraction. I have had one aunt, two uncles, and one close family friend die and I have not attended their funerals; I thought that if I did go, I would have to go alone, as my partner would not be welcome (even if he was welcome, I would worry about his/our safety or that we, as a couple, would be disregarded). I rarely visit my hometown, and, when I do, I feel weird about going out in public with family members and having interactions similar to the one at Hooters—that is, of being asked, perpetually, if I have a girlfriend or if I am married, questions that require complicated answers, especially if I am around family members who already rarely acknowledge my same-sex attraction.

My avoidance—an avoidance that I now find necessary for *my* well-being—propels me into a kind of queer melancholy, a prolonged sadness heavily informed by my same-sex attraction and others' reaction to/lack of acknowledgment of this attraction. While I miss the familial relationships I once had—relationships that felt different before I came out—and while I sometimes feel guilty for not tolerating the silence and disdain that my family project towards my nonheterosexual body, I also feel as though I can no longer tolerate silence about my attraction, my dating experiences and past relationships, or my long-term meaningful and intimate relationship with a man I love.

What makes such melancholy even more difficult is that I am not sure that it can be remedied easily or any time soon. I could force a discussion about the narrow and exclusive definitions of family, manifest by decisions

about who to (not) include in a photograph and who may serve well as an in-law, but I fear hearing more negligent and hurtful discourse. If melancholy functions as a by-product of self-care and safety, then I guess melancholy is my/our lot in life—I would rather stay silent and protected and live with perpetual sadness than hear honest but negligent or hurtful discourse.

Conclusion

The experiences I have described illustrate some of the relational dilemmas that can happen post-coming out. While I feel as though coming out continues to be an issue for many persons with same-sex attraction, there are also issues that emerge after disclosure; same-sex attraction can continue to influence a relationship.

Before I conclude, I want to acknowledge the ways in which my physical location and social identities such as sex, race, and age complicate my experiences with sexuality.

Much of my once-close family still live in Danville, Illinois, a rural town of about 30,000 people. Because of this, any ignorance or prejudice that they might have towards same-sex attraction may stem from not having much exposure to or experience with persons who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (Barton, 2012; Gray, 2009). I had never met an LGBTQ person until 2000, when I was 21 and after I had moved away from Danville; before then I was, unfortunately, ignorantly homophobic.

Familial experiences of sexuality may also be different from familial experiences of sex and race. For instance, given that families often consist of men and women, being female or male is not necessarily deviant. The expectation that men and women compose families is not a novel or unfathomable expectation either. Many families also have race (or a few races) in common; I have never heard a story about parents *not* liking their child *solely* because of the child's race. However, a LGBTQ child might be the *only* LGBTQ person in a family; as Weston (1991) remarks, "those who come out find themselves called upon to explain how it is that a duck could have come from a family of swans" (p. 75). Because of this, the LGBTQ child may bear the lone task, and burden, of explaining her/his same-sex attraction to (ignorant) heterosexual others, and of combating malicious discourse by family members who do not accept same-sex attraction or who believe that it is the child's fault for choosing to be LGBTQ (Barton, 2012).

Further, I feel that my queer melancholy increases as I age—increasingly, I find myself less tolerant of neglectful discourse about my meaningful and intimate same-sex relationships. In an effort of self-care, I am less able to associate with prejudiced, hateful, and possibly unsafe others. Being older, I also have the privilege of relying less on my family for once-necessary financial and social support.

While I have described post-coming complications that have occurred in some of my relationships, I do have many joyful relationships made possible by my same-sex attraction: the students who tell me that I gave them courage to tell others about same-sex attraction; the gratification that comes with fewer everyday struggles with coming out; the close friendships I have with many LGBTQ others; and the meaningful, intimate, and loving relationships that I have had with men. However, with my family, I do not have many joyful experiences since coming out.

Even though I consider myself very out, my sexuality still influences, even tarnishes, my relationships with others. I continue to create a family of choice, of best friends and close colleagues, especially since the rifts within my family seem to be difficult to mend, at least at the time of this writing. I miss my past relationships, but I also can no longer tolerate prejudice and ignorance. I miss others, and I do believe that they may miss me, and I am saddened that my same-sex attraction continues to complicate our remaining time together.

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