

NARRATIVES OF COMING OUT TO PARENTS: RESULTS OF REPLICATING A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF GAYS AND LESBIANS IN SLOVENIA (2014–2015)

Abstract. The article presents the results of a replication study on the everyday life of gays and lesbians in Slovenia (2014–2015), focusing on the narratives of coming out to parents, namely one of the most important events in the life course of many lesbians and gays. Data were gathered through eight focus groups with lesbians and gays that reveal the narratives of coming out to parents, including the time prior to coming out (planning and forming of coming out strategies), parental reactions to coming out and the formation of the so-called transparent closet, which remains the dominant form of family dynamics after coming out.

Key words: lesbians, gays, coming out, parents, transparent closet

Introduction: coming out to the family of origin at a time of late modern social changes

Coming out to the family of origin, especially to parents, is one of the key events for most gays and lesbians in the process of forming their sexual identity and also in their life course generally. It “importantly shapes family reality and relationships between family members” (Švab and Kuhar, 2014: 16) and “the importance of the relations of LGBT people with their families of origin for well-being, living conditions, identity, and life-style choices is generally recognized” (Bertone and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014: 2). The aim of the article is to present narratives concerning coming out to parents with the starting thesis that re-creating family relationships after coming out is always made a condition of the wider social and cultural contexts of heteronormativity¹ and homophobia (Švab and Kuhar, 2014). The data presented and discussed here come from the sociological study »Everyday life of gays

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¹ Heteronormativity has a twofold effect on the everyday life of homosexuals: it generates social exclusion (e.g. explicit and implicit stigmatization, homophobia and violence against gays and lesbians), and it puts pressure on gays and lesbians to adjust themselves to heterosexual social norms and heterosexual behavioural patterns” (Švab and Kuhar, 2005: 17).

and lesbians II« carried out in 2014 and 2015.² The research was a partial replication of a study from 2003 and 2004 that sought to research various aspects of the everyday life of gays and lesbians, such as coming out, experiences with violence in different social settings, intimate partnerships and family life etc. Both studies have shown that the everyday life of lesbians and gays is still strongly determined by heteronormativity, homophobia and often various forms of violence (Švab and Kuhar, 2005; Kuhar, 2014).

On the other hand, some authors speak of important social changes going on in the last few decades with greater possibilities for living openly as a lesbian or gay (Bell and Valentine, 1995), and more and more lesbians and gays, especially the young generations, are able to organise their everyday life beyond the closet (Seidman, 2002). Narratives about coming out to parents can be placed on a continuum with the majority of narratives lying somewhere between the completely negative or completely positive experiences, particularly if taking changes over time into account. Although narratives of acceptance are now more frequently reported, stories of negative reactions and rejection are still common and examples of complete acceptance and support remain rare (Švab and Kuhar, 2005; 2014; Kuhar, 2014). Moreover, “individual narratives of coming out to one’s family of origin are usually permeated by a mixture of negative and positive reactions pointing to the complexities of family relationships” (Švab and Kuhar, 2014: 16), and “even good case scenarios sometimes negatively impact immediate and extended family relationships” (Scherrer, 2012: 4).

Taking this into account, coming out is seen not as a mere event but as a *complex process*, which has a *relational character* as the “sexual identity of an individual who comes out no longer affects just him or her, but also the people to whom he or she came out, and their relationships” (Švab and Kuhar, 2014: 19). Coming out is a process, which does not have a linear path and cannot (always) be understood by developmental models as some scholars have suggested (see e.g. Savin-Williams and Dube, 1998). In this process, lesbians and gays as well as parents (also see Broad, 2011; Fields, 2001) reconstruct their perceptions of (their child’s) identity and their expectations about his or her future. Understanding coming out as a *relational* process enables us to see, “first, that the closet may exist only in relation to other individuals or society as such and, second, that the process of coming out cannot be understood solely as continuous sequences of numerous coming outs, but also as acts that are in certain social setting(s)

² The research was carried out within the project DIKE (Empowerment of LGBT Persons and NGOs for the Elimination of Systemic and Structural Discrimination of LGBT People, Enhancement of Active Citizenship, Rule of Law, Democracy and Social Justice, with financial support from EGP 2009–2014, coordinator DIC Legebitra, project leader Mitja Blažič. The authors of the research study are Roman Kuhar and Alenka Švab.

inevitably interrelated and have concrete implications not only for the subsequent coming outs but also for the relationships between the individuals involved” (Švab and Kuhar, 2014: 19) and coming out becomes a sort of contagion (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1993).

The results of the first study on the everyday life of gays and lesbians (Švab and Kuhar, 2005) revealed that two distinct social situations are created within the family of origin after coming out that seem to be crucial for (re) building family relationships and gay/lesbian identity, namely the “transparent closet” and the “family closet” (see Kuhar, 2011; Švab and Kuhar, 2005; 2014). “After the first shock (often accompanied by psychological violence, such as emotional blackmailing), the consolidation phase follows when the disturbance caused by coming out is resolved through cloaking the child’s homosexuality in a transparent closet” (Švab and Kuhar, 2014: 19–20). The transparent closet is the most common social situation within the family after coming out (Kuhar, 2011; Švab and Kuhar, 2005; 2014; Kuhar, 2011) and “refers to those social situations where a child’s homosexual orientation is acknowledged within the family but is not further discussed. Parents (or other family members) refuse to accept and deal with the consequences and meanings of the new information” (Švab and Kuhar, 2014: 19). In this way, a person who has just come out of the closet is pushed back into the closet – a transparent one.

In this article, the focus is put on qualitative data (gathered through focus groups) from the mentioned replication study that reveal the narratives of coming out to parents, chiefly in the context of the initial coming out to parents and the characteristics of the family dynamics after coming out when the transparent closet is created. Both studies (2003–2004 and 2014–2015) are presented with a description of methodological procedures and socio-demographic data from qualitative studies, followed by an analysis of the main findings of the replication study, focusing on the time prior to coming out, parental reactions to coming out, and creation of the transparent closet. The primary findings from this research are then further discussed by comparing the data from both studies in the Discussion and conclusion section with an attempt to identify the key changes occurring in the period of one decade.

Description of the research

Since the data presented in this article come from a replication study and because we refer to data from the first study in the Discussion, here we present the course and the content of the research in the two studies.

The first sociological research on the everyday life of gays and lesbians in Slovenia was carried out from 2003 to 2004 (Švab and Kuhar, 2005) and was composed of two parts, quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus

groups). The aim of the research was to “build a model that would enable us to explain how (stigmatized) social identity intertwines with individual identity in a heteronormative context” (Švab and Kuhar, 2014: 20). The quantitative questionnaire-based survey³ was first conducted in order to collect basic data on characteristics and problems regarding different areas and aspects of the everyday life of gays and lesbians (identity, coming out, violence, intimate partnerships etc.) and also served as a basis for further more detailed qualitative research into the most burning issues. The qualitative part consisted of seven focus groups (4 male and 3 female) carried out with 36 participants in total, 53% male and 47% female, focusing on three topics: coming out, intimate partnerships and family life, and violence) (for more information on the research, see Švab and Kuhar, 2005).

Coming out to parents was one of the most important aspects researched in both the quantitative and qualitative parts. We were primarily interested in information on the process of coming out to parents and its consequences for further relationships within the family, e.g. when and to whom within the family respondents came out, how the coming out is planned, what are the first reactions to coming out within the family, experiences with any form of violence as a consequence of coming out, and how family members build relations after coming out (for more information on this topic, see Švab and Kuhar, 2014).

The second study (Everyday life of gays and lesbians II) was carried out as a replication of the first one between 2014 and 2015, again in two parts, quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus groups).⁴ The qualitative part of the study consisted of eight focus groups (4 male and 4 female) that were conducted with 36 participants (18 gays and 18 lesbians) from December 2014 to June 2015. The average age of participants was 26.1 years. The majority of women (67.0%) had an intimate partner at the time of the interview, compared with 44.4% of men. One-third of the participants lived in a rural area or a small town while growing up, whereas today the majority (80.6%) live in a bigger city (Ljubljana or Maribor). As far as completed education is concerned, 47.2% of participants had finished a secondary school programme (i.e. gymnasium), and a further 41.7% of participants had finished a university degree (or higher level of academic education). Half of the participants were students and 33.3% of them were employed. The topics covered were the same as in the first study with an additional set of questions about (knowledge on) legislation regarding LGBT issues.

³ The sample consisted of 443 self-identified gays and lesbians (66% of the sample was male, 34% female).

⁴ The survey was carried out from May to September 2014 using an online questionnaire intended for self-identified gays and lesbians. The sample consisted of 1,145 respondents, 727 men (63.5%) and 417 women (36.5%). For a preliminary research report, see Kuhar, 2014: <http://www.lgbtpravice.si/raziskava>

Results

Analysis of the results is structured in four main sections covering the key aspects and characteristics of coming out to parents. First, we focus on the period prior to coming out to parents, followed by the act of coming out, and parental reactions. The article also concentrates on the already described special situation that is created after coming out to parents, namely the transparent closet.

Prior to coming out: plans and strategies

For most lesbians and gays, a *fear of negative reactions* and rejection by parents importantly shapes their plans and strategies for coming out. That is why the majority of lesbians and gays initially come out to friends they trust the most and only after a while to their parents (Švab and Kuhar, 2005). As far as parents are concerned, one of the most common strategies is to defer coming out. Some hesitate telling their parents and wait until they find a partner, as Luka described: "Yes, of course, I was thinking (about coming out to my parents) ... At that time, I was more alone and I did not have the courage to tell. When I got a partner it was time, I won't hide it" (Luka, 25).⁵ There are probably several reasons for this. With a partner they have support, which is especially important in the case of negative parental reactions to coming out and this also lessens the fear before coming out; and second, when having a partner it becomes more difficult to hide one's sexual orientation from parents in everyday situations. Further, having a partner may lessen the fear because the partnership in itself is personally important. Finally, for some lesbians and gays having a partner is also a sign or confirmation of their identity. Namely, not having a partner at the time of coming out makes many parents not believe their children, claiming that their lesbian/gay identity is only a transitory thing. In this context, partnership is a sort of additional argument that is more persuasive. This and the supportive nature of the partner was explained by Neža when describing how she and her partner had made plans together for coming out:

We both made a decision to tell our parents, because we were old enough and it had burdened both of us for many years ... we both waited to find a serious partner first, so that they would not say that this is just a phase or something similar. ... We both prepared a list of things to say at home, and I just came to my parents with this list which I never read, because we all started to cry..." (Neža, 25).

⁵ All names are fictitious, the number represents the age of the participant.

There is a discrepancy between patterns of coming out to the mother and father. Usually lesbians and gays first come out to their mother and only later (if ever) to their father. Often the reason is that they have a closer relationship with the mother than with the father: "I didn't tell father immediately because he is ... deeply religious and it took some time, almost a month" (Iztok, 25). However, there are exceptions when a child trusts their father more than their mother, as in Marko's case: "I came out to father first. Somehow I expected that father would accept it better ... It seemed to me that he would think more rationally because mother is more emotional" (Marko, 29).

Acts of coming out can generally be divided into *planned* and *unplanned* ones. Some initially give various hints to their parents before explicitly coming out, which can be seen as a sort of planning strategy, as Maja described: "I started mentioning 'Well, maybe I'll also bring a girlfriend home' ... it was more in a general sense of supporting gays and lesbians; so I hinted from time to time" (Maja, 24).

Some lesbians and gays decide on more indirect ways to tell parents:

... I wrote a letter because I read that if you are not able to tell, then just write. And then I left the letter in a drawer for some time, and then one day I just left her (mother) the letter on a desk and went to Ljubljana because I have a job here. ... And one day I got her e-mail in reply" (Rok, 26).

On the other hand, some acts of coming out are unplanned and situational, usually arise out of shock or some other dramatic situation, conflict and so on:

I told him (the father) out of anger, intentionally; I just yelled at him that I'm a lesbian because I knew that he wouldn't accept it ... and I wanted to hurt him. And this was the ultimate end, he started to yell at me that this is not natural and I don't know what else" (Meta, 25).

Unplanned coming outs can be coincidental, as in Filip's case:

I had been an activist for a year at a LGBT NGO, and one day we went to a swimming pool and my mother and I waited for father to park the car and there was a car parked on which the name of this NGO was written, and I said 'I was there yesterday' and my mother replied 'And what were you doing there?' and I said 'I'm a volunteer there!', and then she asked 'Why?' and I answered 'Because I'm gay'" (Filip, 22).

Parents themselves might also initiate an unplanned coming out. For example, some parents, especially mothers, often suspect or even know about their child's sexual orientation prior to them coming out: "My mother practically asked me because at some point, I think I was reading a book or something like that, and then she came into my room and asked me. I was in shock, because I didn't plan it. I didn't want to tell her yet" (Sandra, 25).

Parental reactions to coming out

As mentioned, many lesbians and gays are afraid of their parents' negative reactions, although the actual reactions might be completely different from what was expected:

We sat in the kitchen for half an hour and I was saying 'I have to tell you something' ... And then I somehow said it and in fact the reaction was not what I had expected. She accepted it peacefully, we talked about it a little, cried a little, because it was difficult for both of us" (Boštjan, 23).

The prevailing first parental reaction – whether positive or negative – is usually shock and surprise, accompanied by a very emotional reaction: "She said that she was shocked ... and that she wouldn't have thought ... she said that she didn't imagine and that she hopes this is not the reason I left home" (Rok, 26).

Some parental reactions, in most cases these are the mothers', are often very emotional involving crying, emotional blackmailing and permeated with psychological violence as in the cases of Tanja and Gregor:

When I told her, she reacted sadly, she cried, asking me if this is just a phase (Tanja, 29).

It was an extremely negative reaction, from recommendations for reparative therapy, exorcism and so on. ... The thing even escalated so far that I was not allowed to go to the bathroom because of AIDS..." (Gregor, 20).

After the initial shock, many parents try to find reasons for their child's sexual orientation and some even blame themselves:

I didn't feel some sort of negative energy or any doubts; it was more about asking oneself about the reasons for this, about the origins and similar... They hinted to me that they were asking themselves if their parenting had gone wrong" (Konstantin, 34).

Although there is great fear of the father's reaction to coming out, in some cases fathers (or stepfathers) react more supportively than mothers: "I never told father, she (the mother) told him, mother, and this weekend, when it happened, he hugged me and told me he loves me and that he would do anything for me" (Mojca, 23).

After coming out, parents' expectations regarding their child's life course (which are usually heteronormative) are dashed and must be reconsidered: "It was a shock for her, her mentality is more 'What about my grandchildren?' But now it is ok" (Andreja, 21). Some are worried about their child's future and are afraid they will be discriminated against: "She (mother) was worried about my future. That I would be continually rejected, that I would not have opportunities because of that" (Tim, 27).

Some parents are initially unable to accept the new situation and see their child's sexual orientation as something that will pass: "She was in denial at the beginning; she said that I'm in a sort of phase, which will be over, but then I had a girlfriend for two years and she found out that this is it" (Meta, 25).

Often parents go through various phases after their child comes out. Simona described how her mother went through the following ones:

She opened her mouth (saying) 'what's wrong with you? Didn't you have boys before? Well, it's just a phase; you'll get over it'. That was my mother's reaction. Then I left her alone for a week so she was able to think about it. Then she said like 'Well, it's ok, but don't tell anybody, so that people won't talk, you know, it's a small town and everybody knows each other'. Then she thought about it some more and told her partner and he started laughing at her, telling her that it's all right. And then she reconciled herself. Well, in the end she was explaining to the whole family what a nice daughter-in-law she has (Simona, 29).

In cases of positive and supportive reactions, the prevailing argument is that they love their child, no matter what: "They both (parents) told me immediately that they love me no matter who I am, and that they accept me" (Neža, 25).

Formation of the transparent closet

After passing through various phases of facing the reality and consolidation, the so-called transparent closet is usually formed. This is the most common situation within the family after coming out when some sort of silence is built around the issue of the child's sexual orientation: "She actually accepted it well. It's true that we don't talk about it a lot, only from time to time ... So she accepted it well but we don't talk about it" (Rok, 26).

The transparent closet may be interrupted with moments of emotional blackmailing, conflicts etc., as Marko explained: "There was a period of a few months of silence. Father actually did not talk about it, but mother had periodic outbursts of disappointment. ... I was under this growing emotional pressure" (Marko, 29).

The transparent closet can be created among all family members, meaning that nobody discusses the sexual orientation and the issues related with the child, or it can be partial. For example, Hana described her situation where the transparent closet is only created with her mother: "I have a wonderful relationship with my brother and sister ... While with my mother I don't talk about it; it's more indirect" (Hana, 23).

Sometimes a lot of effort on the part of lesbians and gays has to be put into building a relationship that would move beyond the transparent closet:

It was hard to break the ice again and again. At least twice I tried to talk about it. I wanted to create a sort of atmosphere so that we could talk in a relaxed, unburdened way. I still didn't succeed in this, but we have moved forward very much so that we can talk about it at home" (Tim, 27).

The transparent closet seems to be a sort of mechanism that prevents relationships among family members from being destroyed so that, after the coming out, everything appears normal and unchanged on the surface.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of the replication study have shown that, compared with the situation a decade ago, the narratives about coming out to parents remain largely the same. The fear of negative parental reactions still seems to be the guiding feeling that influences the strategies and narratives of coming out, which can primarily be seen in the fact that the individuals to whom gays and lesbians come out are usually their closest friends and only later their parents. Moreover, in both studies the participants considered coming out to their parents as important (if not the most important). Lesbians and gays are reluctant to come out to their parents and they usually prolong the decision to a time when they have a partner.

Although both studies showed that the stories of coming out remain diverse and complex, some patterns are common. For example, the strategy and the act of coming out resemble relationships within the family in general, which is in accordance with other studies. Coming out is more likely when children and parents are emotionally close, have open conversations and do not have conflicts in general (Green, 2000: 261-262).

Mothers remain those to whom lesbians and gays alike come out prior to fathers. In the first study, 65% of respondents came out to their mothers in contrast to 42% of their fathers (Švab and Kuhar, 2005). In the replication study, the share of those who came out to their mothers rose to 68%, while the share of those who came out to their fathers increased to 47% (Kuhar, 2014: 30). The increase is not statistically significant, although it seems that these figures reveal minor changes in patterns of coming out to fathers. Nevertheless, the fear of negative fathers' reactions can be explained by the reported less intensive or even non-existent relationship and consequently the communication lesbians and gays have with their fathers (while usually having a close relationship with their mothers), which also reflects classic patriarchal relations (see Švab and Kuhar, 2005; 2014).

Qualitative data from the replication study also showed a change in coming out patterns in the sense that especially mothers more often suspect or learn about their child's sexual orientation prior to them coming out. One explanation might be that as there is increasingly more information and public talk about LGBT issues parents are today more informed and therefore more attentive, while lesbians and gays are at least to some extent more open, leaving more opportunities for parents to find out.

Some changes are also seen in parental reactions to coming out as revealed in focus groups from the replication study where there are evidently more cases of positive fathers' reactions compared to the first qualitative study. In some cases where mothers react negatively, fathers are those who react positively and supportively, although this might not always be the case. The parents' first reactions on coming out are rarely completely positive and supportive, although there are statistically significant changes in the increase in positive reactions of mothers and father also in the quantitative data of the replication study in comparison with the initial study (Kuhar, 2014).⁶

Nevertheless, as far as the first reactions to the coming out are concerned, both studies reveal the common pattern of shock and surprise. Especially mothers' reactions are emotionally negative and may be accompanied by various forms of psychological violence. After the shock, there is a sort of consolidation where the prevailing pattern of behaviour remains a transparent closet with a conditional acceptance (Švab and Kuhar, 2014), while parents at the same time avoid or even refuse any discussion about the child's sexual orientation. In this sense, coming out is "a constant struggle against

⁶ While the share of mothers whose reactions were (very) negative dropped from 26.4% to 21.1%, the share of those who reacted (very) positively rose from 21.4% to 30.3%, and the share of neutral reactions increased from 18.9% to 23.3%. The same goes for fathers with the following data: (very) negative reactions – a slight drop from 17.2% to 15.7%, (very) positive reactions – a slight rise from 14.4% to 17.0%, and a great increase in neutral reactions of fathers from 10.5% to 20.7% (Kuhar, 2014).

those who, on the one hand, accept the disclosure and then, on the other, refuse to accept its implications” (Davies, 1992: 80).

Silence is the main characteristic of the transparent closet and might be understood as a form of parental reaction to the situation in which they find themselves. This situation is characterised by “three dimensions that coincide: (1) they do not know how to react; (2) they lack information on homosexuality; and (3) they find themselves in the social vacuum of a family closet as a result of the homophobic society” (Švab and Kuhar, 2014: 27).

Narratives of coming out to parents therefore remain diverse and we can only talk of slight changes when comparing the two studies. In the first study, there were no narratives of a proactive affirmation or celebration of a child’s homosexual orientation. In the majority of cases, the narratives of acceptance rest on the idea ‘you are still my child’, which implies that homosexuality is nevertheless something negative (cf. Švab and Kuhar, 2014). This is in line with Fields’ (2001) argument that those parents who respond to a child’s homosexual orientation by destigmatising the identity nevertheless rely on a conventional understanding of gender, sexuality and parenting, and thereby paradoxically help perpetuate heteronormative conceptions of normalcy.

Still, it has to be stressed that several other factors were not included in the analysis in this article which must further be analysed in order to acquire a more comprehensive picture of potential changes in the narratives of coming out to parents. One of these is the formation of the family closet⁷, which was strongly present in the first study and might be losing its strength due to the more open public talk about LGBT issues in general.

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⁷ *The family closet is a situation created after first coming out within the family of origin where family members are put into the closet in relation to the broader kinship network, neighbours, friends and acquaintances, work colleagues, and other social and community contexts (Švab and Kuhar, 2014).*

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