The Family Secret: Parents of Homosexual Sons and Daughters

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Introduction

In post-modernity important social changes are taking place: traditional patterns of everyday life, while trying to resist these changes, are giving way to new modes of living, new lifestyles and—maybe most importantly—new identities (Giddens 1991, 1992; Bauman 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1999). Giddens (1991) suggests that nowadays our identities are constantly in the process of formation and deconstruction in the presence of ever-changing potential identities. Everyday life of individuals and their biographies increasingly turn out to be their own responsibility rather than subject to societal influence—however, this is not to say that tradition no longer plays any role.

Plummer (1995) stresses that each new narrative we tell about ourselves, about our new lifestyles and our new identities, implies moral and political changes. Take the story of one young man I interviewed, who lived in a partnership with two other men. He came out to his parents during a Sunday lunch. He told them he was gay and in a relationship with *two* boyfriends. The fact that the story was "new" for his parents and implied change in their understanding of the world became obvious much later, when they asked him whether all gays live in *such* partnership arrangements.

However, "old stories" are not willingly giving way to new ones. It seems that every "new story" creates a platform, where counter-stories can be told. These are told by those who endeavour to preserve a morality, norms and ways of live that rest on traditional beliefs. In the process of new narratives encountering their opposite images in counter-narratives and counter-discourses post-modern society is crystallizing out.

It would be inaccurate to claim that coming out narratives about homosexual identities are new. According to Foucault homosexual identity was "discoursively constructed" at the end of the 19th century, when in a medicalised context the homosexual with his/her own unique sexual identity "became a personage, . . . in addition to being a type of life, a life

form" (Foucault [1976] 2000, 47). Since then the story of this "personage" has been told—between the lines or explicitly—in literature, letters, private conversations, media, and so on. The coming out narratives of gays and lesbians, the public (and private) "manifestations" of homosexual identities were and continue to be an important contribution to the social changes. Each coming out story of a single non-heterosexual person calls into question not only the heteronormative suppositions of people one comes out to, but also the heteronormativity of society and its institutions. The notorious example of homosexual marriage shows how these new narratives and lifestyles give rise to new institutions and in the process the existing institutions also undergo changes.

Scholars have tried to capture the process of coming out narratives and the construction of homosexual identity since the 1970s. Various ideal-type stage models of the formation of homosexual identity have been proposed to explain the trajectories of individuals dealing with feelings which do not match the societal expectations about heterosexual identity (Dank 1971; Cass 1979, 1984; Ponse 1978, 1998; Troiden 1988; Plummer 1996; Eliason 1996 and others). These developmental or stage models deal with individuals' considerations of their own same-sex orientation, the translation of these feelings into identity, and the adoption of that identity which then becomes an important point of reference in individual life (La Placa 2000). The models—some of which are based on predominantly essentialist understanding of sexuality, while others either combine essentialist and constructionist interpretations, or are based in social constructionist perceptions of sexual identities—suggest an understanding of coming out as the ultimate stage when internal conflicts are resolved by external declarations. These models presuppose linear transitions from one stage to the next, creating an impression that the formation and acceptance of homosexual identity progresses in simple steps from the initial stage to the final, fixed and unchangeable identity. Some authors, however, stress that this linear progression can be disturbed, stopped or even reversed. Critics of stage models, especially queer theorists, point out the problematic implicit suggestion that the endpoint of each stage is the only and the best outcome of identity formation. Additionally, other aspects of identity, such as ethnicity, gender, class, and culture, which might interact with or influence sexual identity and are therefore of key importance for the understanding of identity formation, are often neglected. As critics indicate, sexual identity is constructed within the system of power based on race, gender, class and other socially constructed categories. Gonsiorek (1995), for example, argues that the inclusion of ethnicity and gender into the developmental models

would shift the presented stage scheme considerably. They fail in explaining the fluid and dynamic nature of sexuality: "Sexuality does not exist in a vacuum but rather in a changeable societal context. Declaring one's sexuality to another creates new dimensions to relationship" (Mosher 2001, 164).

Coming Out (to Parents)

This paper deals with the new dimensions, which emerge after one's declaration of his/her non-heterosexual identity, focusing mainly on the coming-out to parents. I draw on the findings of a two-year research project on the everyday life of gays and lesbians in Slovenia.[1] I suggest that despite the fact that coming out is mostly understood as a process rather than an act, this process is implicitly analyzed as a series of coming out *acts*. The *process* therefore refers to the fact that one has to come out continuously as one enters new social settings where heterosexual identity is unconditionally assumed. In the popular (media) discourse it is understood that once one comes out, one is out of the closet. This paper suggests a more fluid understanding of this process. According to our research findings, every coming out of the closet does not necessarily place one *outside* of the closet. This seems to be especially true within the immediate family setting.

Coming-out is, as Baetz (1984) states, a crossroads with different risks. An individual is faced not only by his/her own decision, but also with social and cultural obstacles. Similarly, Markowe (1996) claims that coming out is a process, which is affected not only by one's personal character but also by the cultural and societal context. Vincke and Bolton (1994) suggest another understanding of coming-out being a publicly visible portion of a fluid, evolving, and changeable identity. Plummer (1996) on the other hand, points to the political potential each coming-out narrative has: it is coming-out itself that creates room for a new identity, or a new community, and consequently, a new space to claim one's rights. It

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[1] Methodologically, the research was twofold. In the quantitative part of the research we conducted face-to-face surveys using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 97 questions. The filling out of the questionnaire ranged from 35 to 70 minutes. The snowball method was applied and the non-random sample consisted of 443 respondents; 292 of these were men and 151 were women (the population of Slovenia is 2 million). The majority of the respondents were between 21 and 40 years old, whereas the age of the respondents spans a continuum from 17 to 60 years. 91% of the respondents were out to their closest friends, 67% came out to their mothers and 46% to their fathers. The second, the qualitative part of the research, consisted of 7 focus groups. There were 36 participants interviewed—19 men and 17 women. The average age of the participants was 27. See more on this research in Švab and Kuhar (2005).

was exactly coming-out narratives that created gay and lesbian identity politics, just as the personal stories of raped, beaten, and disregarded women created a base for the feminist movement.

Each such personal narrative establishes a new form of living by reshaping the relation between the "narrator," the one who comes out, and the one(s) he/she comes out to. In analyzing the new relation that emerges between an out gay child and his/her parents, scholars have suggested—in accordance with the trajectory models of homosexual identity development—that parents progress through several stages. In the process they reconstruct their perceptions of their child's identity and their expectations about the child's future. Summarizing a variety of research into parental reactions to their children's coming out, Savin-Williams and Dubé (1998) outline six typical stages through which the new relation between the child and the parents is established. Shock is suggested to be the initial parental reaction to the disclosure, which may forever impair the parent-child relationship. Denial and isolation are characteristic of the second stage; it is the time when parents try to "gather" themselves by denying the new information or by rejecting discussion about it. This is then followed by anger, often accompanied by physical or verbal violence. Bargaining is the fourth stage, during which parents try to work out a "deal"; they either make some promises, if the child is ready to change "back to normal," or they try to initiate this change by seeking psychiatric or similar help. The next development stage—depression—corresponds with the time when the anger and guilt are turned inward. The positive outcome of this staged development is reached by acceptance, the last stage. Parents complete their "mourning" and accept the fact that they are the parents of a gay child (Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998, 7–8).

Narratives about coming-out to parents told by our respondents can easily be placed within the suggested stage model. In fact one of the criticisms of the stage model suggests that "individuals may have been conscripted into stages rather than the stages being produced to correspond to reality" (La Placa 2000, 22). Therefore one should not generalize the parental reactions as if each parent went through all the stages, neither should the reactions be understood to emerge in these exact turns. A more fluid interpretation of the reactions should be employed. Nevertheless, according to our research findings, there are two moments that can be said to describe the majority of the narratives about coming-out to parents and can be manifested (or not) in a variety of ways: the first (negative, not supporting, or indifferent) reactions, followed by the consolidation phase, when the disturbance, caused by coming-out, is resolved

through cloaking the child's homosexuality in secret. In this manner a *transparent closet*—i.e. silence about homosexuality—, is established. This is where the stage model approach ends for the majority of our respondents and no real (unconditional) acceptance is ever established. This is to suggest, as we shall see, that *coming out* of the closet in the family ends with *coming into* a transparent closet.

The First Reactions

67% of our gay and lesbian respondents, who came out to their mother, described her first reaction as negative or indifferent. Similarly, 66% of those who came out to their father depicted his reaction as negative or indifferent. However, the majority of them believed that in the long run their coming-out did not affect or change their relationship with their parents dramatically; 12% of respondents reported their relationship with the mother to have become alienated after coming-out, while 11% of them claimed that their relationship with the father worsened after coming-out.

The narratives about coming-out to parents are diverse and in many ways depend on our respondents' previous relations with family members. The research shows, for example, that gays and lesbians have most reservations about coming-out to their fathers: While 67% of them came out to their mothers, only 46% came out to their fathers, and only 40% came out to both parents.

We assume that qualms about the disclosure of homosexual identity to the father can be attributed to weak, in some cases even non-existent communication between the child and the alienated father. It seems that the patriarchal order of family, if only at the symbolic level, is still at work to a certain degree and can manifest itself in the form of fear of the father as an authority. However, it should be stressed here that a growing shift away from the patriarchal family model can be observed in Slovenia (Švab 2001), characterised by the erosion of the father's authority. Therefore, it is possible to expect that the fear of the father would also be reduced in connection with coming-out. To a certain degree these changes could already be traced in the responses from the younger participants in the research; they do not only come out at an earlier age, but they, as a rule, also come out to both parents.

There were no statistically significant differences between the genders with respect to coming-out or not coming-out to fathers. The focus group participants who did not come out to their fathers most frequently explained that they did not do so because they did not have a good enough

relationship with their fathers. However, this is not to suggest that such non-existent or not good enough relationships with fathers can be found only in (or are typical of) the families of our respondents.

> The fact is that it would be horrible if I told him. I didn't explain it to my father because I have no relationship with him, and because I never talked to him about myself. In fact, he doesn't know a thing about me (Tara, 30).[2]

Based on the narratives from the focus group participants, there are several salient issues or questions parents are confronted with after their child's coming-out. "Why is my child homosexual?" is the most common initial question parents ask. According to our respondents, parents often blame themselves and attach responsibility for their child's homosexuality to themselves. This often leads them to attempts to "correct the mistake." In this context homosexuality is understood as changeable and correctable, for which professional psychiatric, psychological or medical help is needed.

> She [my mother] told me to go and cure myself. Funny, at that time one would do just about anything, only to erase all this. At that very moment, the illusion, the image about a child, which parents hold from his birth or even earlier, is dashed (Rok, 30).

The initial impulses of parents trying to change the child's sexual orientation can also give rise to the interpretation of homosexuality as being "just a phase," or as a transitory identity, being flippant and experimental, and therefore unacceptable. According to Sedgwick (1993) these types of reactions indicate the problematic character of the concept of homosexual identity and the intensity with which society resists it. On the other hand, the understanding of homosexuality as a "phase," or an identity, which cannot be taken seriously, shows how authority over the definition of that identity is removed from the subject, i.e. the gay or the lesbian person. These assertions are often interwoven with different forms of psychological violence, including emotional blackmail, ridicule or the breaking off of communication.

> My mum reacted like all other mums. Perhaps she was even worse, because she is cunning and manipulative enough to gamble with certain emotions. She staged a nervous breakdown which I later witnessed three more times. Exactly like before. It was so bad that at first I thought, gosh, I hope she's not going to do something to herself. And then you promise many things, that you'll change, that you'll think about it, that you'll do

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[2] All the names mentioned here are invented. The number next to the name denotes the age of the focus group respondent.

> I don't know what. . . . But eventually I told her that if she didn't want to see the truth, she shouldn't ask (Martin, 25).

However, not all respondents interpreted the first reactions of their parents as psychological violence. Some claimed that these reactions were a sign of powerlessness and distress and that parents—just like they themselves before that—needed time to get to terms with this new information.

Another salient set of issues parents had to deal with were their unconsciously extant heteronormative scenarios: coming-out threatens the "normalcy and stability" of the family, which is based on the binary sexual matrix and related heterosexual rituals, such as marriage, the birth of grandchildren and similar. These implicit heteronormative expectations of parents (and people around them, who reinforce these expectations) are dashed when the child comes out.

> My father talked about grandchildren twenty-four seven. . . . Once I explained it to them [my parents]. . . . I said: "I won't have children just because you want me to have them. If I have them, I'll have them because of me, because it will suit me. But to live with a woman, because you want me to and to make the neighbours happy—I tell you this: you will still be alive for ten, twenty, maybe thirty years, while my whole life would be screwed forever." . . . Once I told them this, they started to change their minds (Gabrijel, 40).

The heteronormative expectations are so resistant that parents often find it hard to imagine "alternative ways." Several (male) respondents reported their parents, driven in desperation, wondering about how gay sex is practised and physically possible. While 61% of respondents said that their parents never discussed sexuality with them in their teenage years or they only briefly addressed the topic, the question of sexuality immediately arose after their coming-out. Some respondents were explicitly asked how they practised sex and whether they were HIV positive.

> Father asked me once how we do it with my boyfriend. I started to sweat. Then I explained it and he said: aha, aha. But then he—as usual—added: 'Are you sure you don't want to try it with a woman?' Recently he even suggested me to breed one child and he would take care of the child and provide financial means (Oskar, 24).

Parents often had to struggle with their apprehensions about the reactions of the social environment, too. They wondered how society would accept their child's homosexuality and how the child would fit into that society as a homosexual. These anxieties were also associated with par-

ents' own fears and uncertainties about how society would accept them as the parents of a homosexual child.

> Her reaction was hysterical. . . . What I resented most was that she was struggling with the question of what the neighbours might say. I thought: "What do you care what they say. Rather deal with your relationship with me, not with neighbours" (Barbara, 26).

Parents seemed to be pushed into the closet from where their child just came out. Since coming-out is always relational, the sexual identity of an individual who comes out no longer affects just him or her, but also the people to whom he/she came out, and their relationship. As a result, a child's coming-out also compels parents to confront the same homophobic society. However, according to our research findings, most parents were able to cope with heteronormative expectations only partially. 57% of the respondents reported that they knew, or presumed, that their parents did not talk about their homosexuality with any of their closest friends or relatives or anyone else.

> After all these years I noticed that my mother never came out to anyone. She didn't tell a single friend about me. I see that she even has problems saying that word (Ksenja, 30).

The tension which emerges after coming-out in the family is most often dealt with by conditional acceptance: parents consolidate, but demand that homosexuality remains a family secret. The new information is noted, but homosexuality is swept under the carpet. Thus there is a lack of understanding that coming-out is not only about the acceptance of a new piece of information, but rather "a constant struggle against those who, on the one hand, accept the disclosure and then, on the other, refuse to accept its implications" (Davies 1992, 80). In this way the transparent closet is established.

The Transparent Closet

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) argues that coming out can be understood as a contagion which thrusts those to whom one has come out into the closet dictated by the conservative society already confronted by the individual who came out. This, however, suggests that the "contagion" is simply transmitted from one person to another, while our research results show that the person who comes out is not necessarily "de-contaminated," especially not in the case of coming-out to parents. When parents are confined to the closet, established with the coming-out of

their child, they often expect that their child will remain in the same closet in order to ease the discomfort of the fact that they are now the parents of a homosexual child. The transparent closet thus refers to the situation, mostly in the family context, when coming-out to parents results in an annoying outcome of partial outing; parents know that their child is homosexual, but they are not willing to acknowledge it. The child steps out of the closet, but parental reactions and expectations push him/her back into the closet, which is now a transparent one as parents have noted the "new identity," but refuse to accept it. The non-transparent sides of the closet are now transparent ("we know that you're gay"), but the individual is still compelled to remain in the closet by the parents ("but we don't want to discuss it"). Thus discussions of the subject within the family are avoided, and the individual who has come out is expected to suppress any visible signs of his/her unacceptable identity. Any attempts to do the opposite are confronted with violent reactions. Stepping out of the closet therefore does not result in the expected outcomes, suggested by many development stage models. As indicated also by our respondents, homosexual identity cannot always be expressed (and lived) unrestrictedly in the family context:

> My girlfriend is now part of the family. We reached this point without any debates. In silence. But it took us five or six years for the issues to be settled. However, it is still not the way I want it. We don't talk about my [lesbian] partnership at home. We do talk about my brother's partnership (Barbara, 26).[3]

> Mom does say to me to invite colleagues and friends. But when I bring someone who is close to me, my boyfriend, she gets blocked. I can see how she can hardly breathe. . . . In our house my being gay is "pro forma" but nothing more than that. We don't talk about it. It is better if I don't mention it (Igor, 27).

Entering into a transparent closet is often coupled with psychological or physical violence against the homosexual child, be it emotional blackmail, ridicule, breaking off of communication, beating, throwing the child out of the house and similar. Such violence remains hushed and unnoticed by society at large, since coming-out and sexual identity are understood to be private matters. The state often remains silent and

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[3] Another example of the transparent closet can be found in the division of domestic work. As Švab (2005) argues, maintaining relations with the family (as a form of domestic work) is an explicitly unilateral task in same-sex partnerships. In heterosexual families, this is typically a woman's task, while homosexual partnerships and families—due to the "requirements" of the transparent closet—are often not integrated in the wider network of the relatives of both partners. Therefore, each partner maintains relations only with his/her side of the family network. See more on this in Švab (2005).

uninterested, as in the case of other forms of domestic violence; it seems as if the parents had the ultimate right to change the child's sexual identity. Here the binary opposition between private and public spheres functions as a control over sexuality. The private sphere is, as Nancy Duncan (1996) points out, the space of the patriarchal and heterosexist exertion of power and regulatory practices. Homophobia, she claims, may be identified with the fear of going home, since the home is the space of heterosexist violence.

Conclusion: Living Beyond the Transparent Closet?

The transparent closet should not be understood as a fixed and unchangeable stage. Rather it should be seen as an experience of gays and lesbians, impeding their full (not-limited) expression of their sexual identity. It ranges from discomfort in the family when the topic of homosexuality is brought up, and the re-naming of the same-sex partners as just "friends" or "colleagues" rather than boyfriends or girlfriends and similar, to the more severe manifestations of the transparent closet such as physical or verbal violence.

According to our research findings, the average age of lesbians and gays in Slovenia at which they come out to their parents is 20 years. At that age they usually do not have sufficient economic resources for an independent life. Additionally, younger generations in Slovenia tend to stay at the parents' home longer than previous generations. They prolong their youth through an economic dependence or semi-dependence on parents, coinciding with social independence. This is caused by housing problems (shortage of affordable apartments), unemployment, prolonged studies, but also, as Rener (1996) suggests, by the fact that living at home is cheaper and that young generations, unlike their precursors, more often manage to establish good relations with their parents. While in the past the main motive that led young people to leave home and start independent life was the inter-generational conflict, young generations leave home later in life, because they are not faced with the patriarchal authority in the family. Rener (1996, 141) refers to this as "inter-generational harmony," which has replaced the inter-generational conflict. However, parents' protective attitudes towards their children may be

seriously challenged by the disclosure of homosexuality. Therefore, gays and lesbians may be split between prolonged youth and the material and emotional safety that it brings on the one hand, and the condemnation of their homosexuality by parents on the other. The latter may be

a strong motive to start an independent life. However, some can find a certain degree of comfort in "living apart together" arrangements: they create an illusion of a heterosexual identity at the parents' home (living together), while they live their homosexual life on-line in a virtual space, or in urban centres where they study or work during the week (living apart).

Although various different manifestations of the transparent closet seem to exist, at least according to our research findings, one form of the transparent closet is an experience of the majority of gays and lesbians who came out to their parents. However the narratives of the youngest respondents from our research show that different levels of acceptance of homosexual identity within the family context are employed more and more often. This usually includes an extra effort on the side of gays and lesbians themselves. While the predominant experience of the gays and lesbians who came out to their parents might be the entrance into the transparent closet, there is a new trend emerging: an increasing number of gays and lesbians and their same-sex partners manage to organize their lives outside the closet even within the family contexts. However, that does not mean that the "second coming out," the coming out of the transparent closet, is irreversible. The transparent closet persistently threatens to be re-established, if a new everyday life situation in which the family might find itself, happens to demand that.

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