



Exploring LGB persons' experience of self-compassion in their coming out narratives

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ABSTRACT: The process of coming out and living with a marginalized identity can be difficult for those who identify as LGB. This paper presents the ways in which lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons experienced the process of self-compassion during their personal coming out processes. Self-compassion can help offer nonjudgmental consideration to one's experience and help buffer the negative feelings that may arise from damaging mentalities, inadequacies, and suffering, as part of identifying as LGB. This qualitative study explored the LGB participants' coming-out narratives regarding their experience of self-compassion through the research question: How do gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons experience the process of self-compassion in their coming-out narratives? In seeking to explore, describe, and analyze meanings surrounding the individuals' lived experiences, a qualitative analysis was employed based on the five elements of the self-compassion process put forth by Germer (2009). Thus, this study used a theory-driven analysis of the data using the five elements of the self-compassion process (aversion, curiosity, tolerance, allowing, and friendship) as a foundation for analyzing the interview data. Sixteen participants shared the struggles, joys, and courage of their coming out narratives. The findings suggest that the self-compassion process and LGB identity development are mirrored processes. Additionally, this study suggests that mental health professionals would increase their efficacy in working with LGB persons through understanding the self-compassion process and how they can help provide services to persons feeling marginalized by negative heteronormative social attitudes.

Keywords: Self-Compassion, LGB persons, coming out, identity



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A well-developed identity provides a cohesive sense of a person's strengths, weaknesses, and individual uniqueness. As lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons come to understand their identity, the process may seem equally challenging and empowering. Some of the factors that can influence how and LGB person come to understand their identity is through things such as religion, spirituality, internalized and external homophobia, depression, anxiety, culture, race, social mentalities, personal and family expectations, issues of discrimination and oppression, and social stigma. Interestingly, the majority of these factors can have both a positive and/or negative effect on the development of the LGB person. Nonetheless, in processing any of these identity paths, an LGB person could go through periods of crisis and uncertainty. Part of the identity process for LGB persons in the coming out process. . Herek and Capitanio (1998) define coming-out as a

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form of self-disclosure and "the communication by one individual to another of information about himself or herself that otherwise is not directly observable" (p. 2). Liang (1997) purports that coming out is an act of speech, wherein disclosing one's sexual orientation is an altering of reality for both the self and others.

This study used Germer's (2009) five elements of the developmental process of self-compassion to explore the connection between the coming out and self-compassion processes. It is hypothesized that as one comes out, it may be helpful to include self-compassion as part of the process. Self-compassion "is an open-hearted way of relating to the negative aspects of oneself and one's experience that enables greater emotional resilience and psychological well-being" (Neff, 2004, p. 28). This study also examined how self-compassion might be noted in the coming out narratives for those who identify as LGB. There is little research on the connection between the process of developing self-compassion and the coming out process. Therefore, in looking to answer the question of how/do LGB persons experience the process of self-compassion in their coming out process, this study examined participants' coming out narratives through the lens of the self-compassion development process posited by Germer (2009).

Literature Review

Coming-Out

Coming-out can be described as a gradual, life-long process that includes gaining awareness and acknowledgment of one's same-sex desires, learning to navigate a heteronormative society, especially in social and workplace situations (Craig, Iacono, Pacey, Denato, & Boyle, 2017; Denato, Craig, Messinger, Lloyd, & McInroy, 2014; Smith, Aruguello, & Dentato, 2017). The coming-out process is a transitional and transformational process for many persons who identify as LGB (Denato et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2017). The coming-out process can shift an LGB person's sense of self as well as their worldview (Logie, Bogo, & Katz, 2015). Mezirow (1994) stated that a transformation like coming out "may involve a reassessment of one's self-concept...is threatening, emotionally charged, and extremely difficult"; as well as a "movement from alienation to agency," and a "movement from a lack of authenticity, being true to one's self, to authenticity" (p. 48).

LGB Identity Development and Coming Out

Identity derives from one's self as well as through interaction with others. For the LGB person, identity development takes on a different dimension from that of traditional

heteronormative identity development (Ali & Lambie, 2019; Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002). Identity formation is the process by which one becomes aware of one's burgeoning sexual orientation, questioning whether one may be LGB, and exploring that LGB identity by becoming involved in LGB social and/or sexual activities (Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Morris, 1997; Troiden, 1989). The goal for the LGB person is to experience a cohesive self as they move forward in coming to terms with who he/she is and his/her relationship to the world.

Several theorists have designed developmental models for understanding LGB identity development. Some theorists have developed identity development stages specifically focused on research with gay men (Cass, 1979; McDonald, 1982; Troiden, 1989), lesbians (Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Gramick, 1984; Ponse, 1978), and bisexuals (Brown, 2002; Bleiberg, Fertmann, Friedman, & Godino, 2005). Each developmental model is unique; however, a few overarching themes can be distilled regarding the LGB identity development process. These themes are resistance, awareness of being different, questioning/exploration of feelings, acceptance of being different, and integration of an LGB identity (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001; Yarhouse, 2001). Holistically, these models identified an identity formation process as individuals moved forward toward integration and a sense of congruence regarding their sexual orientation, behaviour, and identity.

Self-Compassion

Learning to be self-compassionate can be a positive tool for individuals working through their coming-out process (Crews & Crawford, 2015). Self-compassion can help alleviate the potential pain and suffering brought on by one's perceptions of failings, feelings of inadequacies, and experiences of suffering during the coming out transition process. This transformation into self-compassion is achieved through kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and being connected to others. Self-compassion works in an open-hearted way, similar to compassion for others, recognizing that suffering is a part of the shared human experience. In recognition of one's suffering and knowledge that others have similar suffering, one can, through self-compassion, actively respond to themselves with feelings of care and concern (Neff, 2003; 2011).

Self-compassion is composed of three major constructs: mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity (Neff, 2003). Like compassion, self-compassion involves offering nonjudgmental understanding to oneself when she or he perceives failure or does wrong. Self-compassion involves being moved by and open to one's suffering, not shunning or disconnecting

from the discomfort that may accompany suffering (Neff & Davidson, 2016; Yarnell & Neff, 2013). This non-avoiding stance with discomfort can generate the desire to lighten one's suffering and heal oneself with kindness (Neff, 2011; Neff & Dahm, 2014; Neff & Germer, 2013). Self-compassion can help offer nonjudgmental consideration to one's experience and help buffer the negative feelings that may arise from damaging mentalities, perceived inadequacies, and suffering so that one's experience is seen as part of the larger human experience (Greene & Britton, 2015; Neff, 2003; 2010; Neff & Germer, 2017). The goal of self-compassion is to help the person move from feelings of isolation, over-identification, and self-judgment to feelings of confidence and strength.

Germer (2009) outlines five constructs indicative of the self-compassion development process: aversion (where one may have to resist, avoid, or ruminate on an unwanted feelings/identity), curiosity (where one may begin to turn toward discomfort with interest), tolerance (where one might begin to safely take on the unwanted feeling/identity as part of themselves), allowing (where one might let the feeling/identity come and go naturally within themselves), and friendship (where one might begin to embrace, value, and connect to the original unwanted feeling/identity). Through this theory-driven process, this paper will answer the question of how/do LGB persons experience self-compassion in their coming out process.

Methods

Research Question/Purpose of Study

This qualitative study explored the LGB participants' coming-out narratives regarding their experience of self-compassion through the research question: How do gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons experience the process of self-compassion in their coming-out narratives? In seeking to explore, describe, and analyze meanings surrounding the individuals' lived experiences, a qualitative analysis was employed based on the five elements of the self-compassion process put forth by Germer (2009). Thus, this study used a theory-driven analysis of the data using the five elements of the self-compassion process (aversion, curiosity, tolerance, allowing, and friendship) as a foundation for analyzing the interview data.

This qualitative exploration was grounded in a five-fold process of self-compassion development (aversion, curiosity, tolerance, allowing, and friendship) (Germer, 2009). This process was used as a template for exploring how the LGB persons expressed self-compassion through their coming out narratives. This study focused on how participants processed, constructed, and produced their personal meanings, norms, beliefs, and attitudes associated with

self-compassion and their personal coming out and sexual identity development as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people. Thus, in grounding this study in these five elements of the self-compassion process, this research aims to increase knowledge of the possible intersectional relationship between self-compassion and coming out.

Sampling and Recruiting

This IRB-approved qualitative study employed purposive sampling (Singleton & Straits, 2004) and snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) to recruit study members who were over the age of 18 and self-identified as LGB individuals and were willing to talk about their coming-out process. No incentive was given for participation in this study. Participants were recruited through flyers and social media posting placed around a large Western city. Flyers and social media invitations, with a brief description of the eligibility criteria used for recruitment, were placed in specific areas where those identifying as LGB might see them. The local Pride center, bars, local coffee houses, some churches, and the local university all provided space for the flyers and social media announcements. All participants were informed they would be asked to share stories regarding their personal process of coming out. Potential participants were asked to contact the researchers via email or telephone.

Participants

Sixteen persons (six gay men, six lesbian women, two bisexual men, and two bisexual women) agreed to participate in the study. Research participants had varied educational backgrounds. Three of the participants identified as university students, two stated that their maximum education was high school, and the remaining 11 participants reported holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Finally, the participants were employed in various occupations such as education, public service, politics, medical, skilled trade labour, and other service agencies. To preserve confidentiality, all participants were provided with a pseudonym.

Table 1: Participant Demographics (n=16)

Pseudonym	Age	Sex/Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race/Ethnicity	Years Out
Amanda	25	Female	Lesbian	Caucasian	3
Andrea	26	Female	Lesbian	Caucasian	3
Ben	24	Male	Bisexual	Caucasian	2
Daron	19	Male	Gay	Caucasian	4
Elizabeth	41	Female	Lesbian	Caucasian	20
Greg	22	Male	Gay	Latino/Native American	6
Jared	28	Male	Bisexual	Mixed(Caucasian/Latino)	3
Jeff	37	Male	Gay	Caucasian	15
Jill	25	Female	Lesbian	Asian American	4
Kyle	38	Male	Gay	Caucasian	21
Lisa	50	Female	Lesbian	Latina	9
Mike	24	Male	Gay	Caucasian	4
Sarah	33	Female	Bisexual	African American	11
Skye	28	Female	Bisexual	Caucasian	5
Stephanie	52	Female	Lesbian	Caucasian	30
Tony	26	Male	Gay	African American	1

Data Analysis and Interpretation

All interviews were face-to-face, lasted approximately one to two hours, and were conducted by the same interviewer. With participant permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed at a later time. The interviewer identified as a part of the LGB community and did disclose this to all participants.

Transcripts were de-identified with pseudonyms to protect the participant's confidentiality. As the qualitative analysis was based on the five elements of the self-compassion process as put forth by Germer (2009), the research team needed to understand each element's definition clearly. Three researchers analyzed each transcript. Step one of this process was to discuss and come to a consensus between the three readers on the definitions of the five elements of Germer's process of self-compassion. Step two was to have each reader highlight quotes that resonated with each element of the self-compassion process. Step three brought the readers together to discuss the quotes they discovered for each element. Each researcher presented the quotes for the element of the discussion. After discussing each, the team decided on the quotes that best fit each element of the self-compassion process. When there was a quote that was not found to be in consensus, it was put aside and not used in the analysis.

All of the data were collated around each element of the self-compassion process, though it is important to note that not every participant discussed all of the elements of the self-compassion process. Following this process with each interview, data were organized around the self-compassion elements. In order to provide for trustworthiness for the elements of self-

compassion found in the study, multiple tools for qualitative rigour such as peer-debriefing (researcher consensus building) and audit trail (researcher journaling) were used (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011). Member-checking was used with all participants to check the accuracy of the transcript, make any corrections, and as a platform to ask additional clarifying questions (Creswell, 2007).

Findings

Each of the five constructs of the self-compassion development process (aversion, curiosity, tolerance, allowing, and friendship) will be highlighted through the participants' narratives. It is important to note here that not all of the participants completed every element of the self-compassion process.

Aversion

The first element of the self-compassion process was aversion, whereby there was a feeling of disconnection to their feelings of opening up to identifying with an LGB identity (Germer, 2009). All participants discussed an unwanted event, thought, perception, or a specific fear they had before and during their coming-out process. Participants stated specific fears regarding their coming-out process and the development of their sexual identity/orientation. The participants stated fears such as "Getting fired," "Losing my family," and "Separation from my religion, which I still love." Participants also mentioned some of the fears associated with coming out to others ("I just hate when people automatically assume that you're a creeper or whatever because you are gay"), or in a few cases, not being sure if they wanted to come out due to the stigma surrounding a lesbian, gay, or bisexual orientation ("I did not want to be stereotyped as that quote-unquote gay." And "My biggest fear was being outed...and when that happened, I thought my life was over").

These fears hindered the participants' development in coming-out and feeling connected to their coming-out process. The participants also discussed internalized fears regarding coming out. Skye stated that "One of my fears is not becoming, I guess. It's the feeling of not having realized potential, whatever that means." Stephanie furthered this thought by stating:

I'm afraid of being alone. That scares me a lot. I have a personality that kind of tends to isolate me in a way. So it's just this weird thing like here I am trying to juggle, I guess, so that makes me feel like the aspect of loneliness is almost more realistic for me. Like it's looming around the corner. But I don't think that's the case; it's just something I'm really afraid of. That feeling of isolation or loneliness. But yet also feeling like there's kind of an

absence...that there's all these worlds that you could be in and are in but you're not really in.

Curiosity

The second element of the self-compassion process of the participants was curiosity. Curiosity involves turning toward the discomfort one feels about their identity with compassion (Germer, 2009). In this stage, it appeared the participants were seeking meaning regarding the previous unwanted feeling(s) discovered in the aversion stage of the process. The majority of the fears described took the form of a stereotype or stigma around identifying as part of the LGB community. The participants spoke of the difficulty they had in actually saying they identified their sexual orientation as LGB. Amanda recalled the following story regarding this uncertainty.

We were sitting watching a movie, and I remember sitting next to her, and our shoulders kinda rubbed ... I remember taking a breath and thinking to myself, what would I do if she kissed me. I think I might kiss her. And I remember after I had that thought, was attracted to her? I knew it was different, but I wasn't thinking, oh my gosh, I'm gonna end up with this girl. Like, I just knew there was something different about it, but I didn't know what.

The following quote from Kyle highlights how participants felt like their identity was shameful and by claiming an LGB identity might be seen as societally isolating.

So, that's when like people would call other people fags, and it was really when I linked together the ideas of liking, being attracted to a boy makes you gay, makes you a fag, makes you be made fun of, makes you a target, so realizing that, it made me feel like, holy shit, I don't want to be a part of that target. I need to be other, and not only does it make you a target, it makes you evil cuz that's how I was raised...It felt very isolating because while I realized that there were those connectors, in myself, I didn't identify as gay. I felt like... I felt like I was the only one of whatever I was.

The participants struggled with the experience of isolation and disconnection from others, as well as feeling disconnected from themselves. In terms of self-compassion, the participants were operating out of isolation. They were unwilling to share with others their struggle and confusion regarding coming out as LGB persons.

Tolerance

The third element of the self-compassion process was tolerance. In this, the participants can be seen as enduring with and into their identity safely. It appears there was still resistance to

the unwanted identity and feelings about that identity. One of the participants described this as a shift from "huh" to "okay." This theme illustrates how the participants became more comfortable with identifying as sexual minorities. Many of the participants stated that there was a "moment" when they came to see their coming-out and sexual orientation as something empowering in their lives. Sarah describes the phenomenon as follows:

And then it caused me to wake up and realize all the things that I'd already known but just hadn't uh, grasped on to, and so, and even after then, when I realized that, at that moment, and so I guess that was my, my moment of, okay, I am ready for this. It's like, what's holding me back, and um, and everything just started happening, and I was like yeah, K, and with like every new thing that happened, I was more and more okay with it. And now, as of pretty recently, I'm like proud of it. Like now like every single gay person I know are amazing people, like, just incredible, and I wish that people saw that instead of the label.

This process of tolerance is about the change of thought and emotion regarding taking in the identity of being LGB. The participants appeared to be more secure in being present and connected to their own selves. They also seemed to be living in a more balanced awareness of self-compassion's negative and positive aspects. There seemed to be a security in who they were becoming. Ben encapsulates many of the feelings in the narratives in experiencing uniqueness and pride as becoming descriptive words.

I feel good about it [being gay] in the sense that everyone likes to be unique. So, I feel I'm carving my own path to this gaydom, if you will. I like that idea of being unique and making my own path rather than doing what I think I need to do because I'm gay.

There was more of a desire to connect with others and to be able to feel that they were part of something bigger than themselves. Being a part of a community allowed people to try on new roles and see their lives from new perspectives in relative safety. Jared described this as:

I think for a lot of us, when you do feel different, meaning like gay in a very heterosexual world, it's kind of nice to be able to find a community that accepts you for yourself where you can kind of let all your barriers down and kind of be yourself.

Allowing

The fourth element of the self-compassion process was that of allowing. This allowing is seen as the participants begin letting go of their feelings of being afraid of being LGB. This is not to say all fear is gone; it is that they are beginning to feel more positive emotions and feelings as

they arise. This theme of allowing their LGB identity reflected how participants began to be more confident in their new role regarding their sexual orientation and how this role helped create a foundation for a new way of living and being in the world. Greg stated that:

There was a time from when I came out till a little bit later, that I was not necessarily internally homophobic, but I had very critical words for someone who was more flamboyant or obvious, but more so being critical of other people [than self], but a little bit of making choices, so I don't seem like that kind of gay.

Tony furthered this sentiment by saying:

Like for negatives, I saw the clubbing and party scene as negative. I saw um like, taking on really feminine characteristics, like calling your friends girl, that are males, those things were very negative and like who I wanted to be was pretty much a straight man who likes boys, who can openly date boys...Because...um, back then it was an important image because I wanted to blend. I wanted to be normal; I wanted to be not identifiable. The participants began to have a self-awareness of how they treated themselves before coming out and were able to articulate the fears and self-doubt that appeared to dominate their thoughts from an early age.

Friendship

The fifth element of the self-compassion process was friendship. During this stage, one may begin to make friends with the emotional stress of coming out and any of the painful or unwanted feelings. Friendship with these painful and stressful emotions may lead to a space where one may discover the value of the coming out process and any negative emotions attached to the experience. The participants conveyed this as they came to a secure place regarding their sexual orientation. Lisa shared...

Like if people ask the magic pill question, if there was a magic pill to change you would you take it, and I wouldn't because I am, have embraced everything about it, then, I don't know, I don't know how to articulate that, but it's just, I guess my sexuality is important to me, but it's not, because it's not my master status, but it's important to me because sex and relationships are extremely human things, and that's all. I'm happy with mine, so I wouldn't change it.

This was further affirmed by Andrea, who said:

And then it caused me to wake up and realize all the things that I'd already known but just hadn't grasped on to, and even after then, when I realized that, at that moment, I guess

that was my moment of, okay, I am ready for this. It's like, what's holding me back and everything just started happening, and I was like yeah, okay. With every new thing that happened, I was more and more okay with it and who I am. And now, as of pretty recently, I'm like proud of it. Like now, I want that image to be of me as a lesbian who is a good strong person, who is like every single gay person I know, amazing people, just incredible, and I wish that people saw that we are amazing.

The Self-Compassion Process and Identity Development

The discussion of the self-compassion and coming out processes serves as an example of what social workers and other mental health professionals can look to as a template for understanding how the five elements of the self-compassion process might intersect with the coming out process for LGB identified persons. In this, one can understand the transitional process involved to help people cope with the challenges that come from identifying differently from the status quo of heteronormative behaviours. Identity can be blurred where one knows they are moving beyond what they were, yet are still unclear as to the expectations about what it is they need to be. This sentiment is something that all of the participants discussed. There was not a role model or a template for understanding who they were and what it would look like to grow into their identity as an LGB person.

Nonetheless, one can determine that as the participants moved through and into the coming out process, they were able to gain valuable knowledge and skills of self-compassion, resiliency, and courage. They built on these skills to move through their struggles and challenges to build a tolerance and affection for themselves. Finally, they were able to move out into the world as an LGB person who has been made stronger through the coming out process.

This study suggests that as a person works through their LGB identity, self-compassion appears to increase as well. However, there are so many additional factors in a person's life that impact how they live into self-compassion. Throughout the narratives, in the context of the five elements of the self-compassion process, all participants had some intensive retrospection about their lives. Each of the participants stated that they had to come to some kind of emotional balance, learn how to be kind to themselves, and how impactful other LGB people and allies had been to them. They were living the essence of self-compassion. Even though there was a movement toward a greater sense of self-compassion in the narrative, not all of the participants fully completed every element of the self-compassion process. Some of the participants were not fully out to all of the people in their lives, and some discussed how they were not ready to let

everyone know of their LGB identity. This is important to recognize as a mental health professional that all who come out do so in their time and to whom they choose. The connection of self-compassion and coming out might be seen as a mirrored development process. As one comes to accept and come out as LGB, the process of self-compassion might be occurring at the same time. As social workers and mental health professionals begin to see the coming out process as a mirrored process with the building self-compassion, a new paradigm of thinking about coming out, to share with those who are struggling to reconcile their LGB identity could be found in seeing the coming out process mirrored in the self-compassion process.

Research surrounding LGB persons and self-compassion posits that self-compassion may aid in strengthening the mental health of LGB persons by increasing well-being (Beard, Eames, & Withers, 2017), life satisfaction (Jennings & Tan, 2014) and psychological flexibility (Matos, Carvalho, Cunha, Galhardo, & Sepodes, 2017); by mediating the effects of internalized homophobia (Set, Simsek, & Altinok, 2016); and by increasing resilience to the impact of LGB stigma (Vigna, Poehlmann-Tynan, & Koenig, 2017). Self-compassion helps to provide the emotional protection needed to see the self without fear of self-condemnation, allowing the individual in the coming-out process to more accurately perceive and resolve patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Neff, 2003; 2008; 2009). For most LGB people, this is the time when they accept and acknowledge who they are and where they are in mind, body, and spirit (Neff, 2011; Neff & Costigan, 2014). As a person stops judging and criticizing him/herself and begins to experience some degree of self-acceptance, the negative impact of the experience will be lessened, making it easier to sustain a balanced awareness of one's thoughts and emotions to neither run away from nor run away with one's feelings (Crews & Crawford, 2015; Neff, 2003).

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