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► **To cite this version:**

Elodie Charbonnier, Pierluigi Graziani. The stress associated with the coming out process in the young adult population. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 2016, 20 (4), pp.319 - 328. 10.1080/19359705.2016.1182957 . hal-01623574

HAL Id: hal-01623574

<https://hal.science/hal-01623574>

Submitted on 12 Jan 2018

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THE STRESS ASSOCIATED WITH THE COMING OUT PROCESS IN THE YOUNG
ADULT POPULATION

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This research was supported in part by a grant from the “Groupement d’Etude et de
Prévention du Suicide” and “Fondation Pfizer”.

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27 The stress associated with the coming out process in the young adult population.

28

29

Abstract

30 The aim of this study is to show the characteristics of stress during a highly stressful coming-
31 out, compared to other stress situations. Our sample comprises 400 lesbian, gay or bisexual
32 young adults aged 18 – 26. The results show high stress during the coming-out. Indeed,
33 almost all participants experienced at least one stressful coming out. According to the
34 transactional model of stress, the primary appraisal (risk assessment/threat) and the secondary
35 appraisals (resources) were examined. Two specificities are present during coming out: the
36 fear to hurt their close ones and the limited resources to cope. These data show the necessity
37 to better understand this specific stressor.

38

39 ***Key words:*** coming-out, stress, transactional model, LGB.

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42 The stress associated with the coming out process in the young adult population.

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Introduction

45 The present study was conducted with a group of 400 young adults, aged 18-26, self
46 identified as lesbians, gays or bisexuals (LGB). The purpose is to understand the stress of
47 LGB young adults during their coming out from the perspective of the “minority stress
48 model” (MSM) (Meyer, 2003; Meyer, Dietrich, & Schwartz, 2008; Meyer & Northridge,
49 2007) and the “transactional stress model” (Coyne & Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus
50 & Folkman, 1984).

51 The MSM distinguishes the excess stress to which persons from stigmatized social
52 categories are exposed as a result of their social position. According to the MSM, members of
53 stigmatized minority groups have specific stressors called “minority stress”, such as
54 experiences of prejudice events, rejection or discrimination, which add to those of the general
55 population (Meyer & Northridge, 2007; Meyer, 1995). Coming out is a “ minority stress ”
56 (D’Augelli, 2002; Floyd & Stein, 2002). It is characterized by two phases: the revelation to
57 oneself and the revelation to others (Riley, 2010). This research is focused on the second
58 revelation and the term “coming-out” will be used in this article only in reference to this
59 aspect of the coming-out process. Disclosure implies defining oneself as different, outside the
60 norm (Bonet, Wells, & Parsons, 2007), but also facing other people and their possible
61 judgment. The stress during this revelation is increased by the possibility of rejection
62 (D’Augelli, 2002; Meyer, 2003). Hence, a great number of LGB adolescents and young adults
63 do not reveal their sexual orientation, especially to their family, fearing that their relationship
64 might be altered (D’Augelli, Grossman, Starks, & Sinclair, 2010). The developmental theory
65 suggests that parental responses to their children’s coming out may partially predict their

66 social, emotional, and behavioral trajectories. Indeed, individuals' self-perceptions are based
67 on the ways they perceive their parents' perception of themselves (Rohner, 2004). When the
68 revelation leads to parental rejection it can induce instability, fear and anxiety (Julien, 2000).
69 Ryan et al. (2009) recruited a sample of 224 LGBs aged 21-25, and participants reporting
70 higher levels of parental rejection were six times more likely to report elevated levels of
71 depression and eight times more likely to have attempted suicide. In some studies, coming out
72 is positively associated with shame, guilt, and disrupted relationships (Pachankis, 2007) as
73 well as symptoms of depression and anxiety (Beals, Peplau, & Gable, 2009).

74 Although the coming-out process is generally considered a stressful event with
75 negative mental health outcomes, it can also sometimes be perceived as a positive experience
76 (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007). When the family accept the sexual orientation of their loved one,
77 they encourage the construction of a positive sexual identity (Julien, 2000), increased well-
78 being (Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999), better self-esteem and less anxiety and
79 distress (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001). Indeed, according to identity
80 development theory, coming out is an essential component of homosexual identity formation
81 (Cass, 1979). The Model of Cass is one of the foundational theories. It shows the complexity
82 of LG identity development ("identity confusion": a time of curiosity, confusion or anxiety of
83 this initial awareness, "identity comparison": the person begins to accept the possibility of
84 having a predominantly gay or lesbian orientation, "identity tolerance": acknowledgement of
85 being gay or lesbian, etc.). Many studies have shown the impact of stress during the coming
86 out but very few focused on the characteristics of this stressor.

87 To better understand the characteristics of the stress of coming out, we also looked
88 into the "transactional stress model" (Coyne & Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus &
89 Folkman, 1984), where stress is not seen as a stimulus or a response, but rather as a process :
90 "psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that

91 is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or
92 her well-being” (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 19). This relationship goes through two
93 important phases: cognitive appraisals and coping. This research is focused on the cognitive
94 appraisal. Cognitive appraisal is characterized by two cognitive mechanisms.

95 Primary appraisal refers to the stakes a person has in a certain encounter (Risk
96 assessment/threat). Secondary appraisal refers to perceived resources for coping with
97 demands (perceived control). Consequently, stress is present when the subject perceives the
98 situation as a threat and does not feel capable of coping with it. Our method is based on this
99 model.

100

101 **Method**

102 This research was conducted during a doctorate in France and under the supervision of
103 a Full Professor.

104

105 **Participants.**

106 Participants were recruited in 2010 on two French dating sites for LGBs (Gaypax:
107 www.gaypax.com, Gayvox: www.gayvox.fr). Private mails were sent to all profiles
108 describing the theme, the framework and the procedure. To those interested we sent a
109 confidential questionnaire after they had signed a consent form online. So, all data were
110 collected online. We recorded these data on a secure university computer and removed them
111 from our inboxes. Then, we contacted the individuals again (by mail or telephone) to answer
112 any questions they may have.

113 Our sample is comprised of 400 young adults self-identified as LGB, and aged 18-26,
114 because coming out to relatives often happens around that age (Savin-Williams & Ream,
115 2003). The mean age is 21.78 years (SD = 2,6), 145 women (36.25% of the sample) and 255

116 men (63.75% of the sample). We interviewed subjects from various French regions: 57.5% in
117 town centers (n = 230), 27.5% in rural areas (n = 110), 11.8% in bourgeois suburbs (n = 47)
118 and 3.2% in disadvantaged suburbs (n = 13).

119 The sample was sorted into three categories according to the instructions in the
120 questionnaires. In the group “imposed CO” (n = 200) the participants responded in reference
121 to their most stressful coming out (“*Consider your most stressful revelation of your sexual*
122 *orientation and answer the following questions*”). Two-hundred other subjects answered the
123 same questionnaire but in reference to the most stressful situation in their lives (“*Consider the*
124 *most stressful situation in your life and answer the following questions*”). Among them, 52
125 subjects chose their coming out (group “free CO”) and 148 subjects chose other situations and
126 were placed in the group “OS” (“Other Situations”). In the group “OS”, the situations varied a
127 lot: family problems (n = 36, i.e. 24.3%), emotional problems (n = 27, i.e. 18.24%) or health
128 problems (n = 17, i.e. 11.49%). Nine subjects mentioned their work (6.10%), seven their
129 studies, seven their leisure activities, seven others events in relation with public transport.
130 Several more situations were mentioned marginally (e.g. legal problems, rapes, etc).

131

132 **Measures**

133 **Characteristics of the situation.** Age at the moment of the stressful situation, level of
134 preparation and initiative (0 = “ not at all ” and 4 = “ totally ”), outcome (1 = “not solution
135 and the situation worsened” and 6 = “the situation is resolved as you like it”) and the persons
136 involved in the situation. We also asked participants how stressful their coming out was.

137 **Primary appraisal of stress (risk assessment/threat).** According to the
138 “transactional stress model”, people evaluate the possible threat of a situation, that is, if it can
139 endanger their well-being. So, participants rated the importance of 13 general risks, on a scale

140 from 0 for “not at all” to 4 for “a lot” (eg. hurt a relative, lose your self-esteem, appear as a
141 person without ethics, diminish your financial resources, etc.) (Graziani, 2001).

142 **Secondary appraisal (resources).** During the secondary appraisal, the subjects
143 evaluate coping resources. The questionnaire includes four ways of coping: change the
144 situation or act on it, accept the situation, seek information before acting, or stick to the plan
145 and keep doing what you wanted to do (Folkman, 1984; Kessler, 1998).

146 The aim of this study is to show the specificities of the stress of coming-out, compared to
147 other stress situations. Therefore, we compared the averages of three groups (ANOVA) with
148 SPSS.

149

150 **Results**

151 **Characteristics of the situation.**

152 Almost all participants had experienced several stressful coming out events, two on
153 average. Only 10 had never had even one stressful revelation (Table 1). On average, all
154 participants experienced the chosen stressful situation at the age of 18. In groups “imposed
155 CO” and “free CO”, participants were more prepared and they had been more at the initiative
156 of the situation than in the group “OS”. Hence, coming out is a situation which is more
157 prepared and provoked by LGBs than other stressful situations. In the three groups, the
158 individuals mostly considered that the outcome of the situation was beneficial to them.

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164 *Table 1: Characteristics of the situation in the three groups (means, standard deviations and*
 165 *ANOVA).*

Variable	$F_{(2)}$	Group "imposed CO" n = 200		Group "OS" n = 148		Group "free CO" n = 52	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Number of stressful COs	3.53*	2.36	1.71	2.23	1.69	2.96	1.79
Age at time of situation	1.79	18.19	2.58	18.80	3.65	18.52	2.47
Degree of preparation	13.03***	1.88	1.56	1.23	1.4	2.33	1.53
Degree of initiative	16.78***	2.22	1.63	1.30	1.61	2.44	1.61
Outcome of situation	2.79	4.62	1.76	4.49	1.73	5.13	1.34

166 *Note.* * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

167

168 In the group "OS", the individuals reported quite different situations (Table 2). A large
 169 proportion mentioned complex configurations (like partners/parents, parents/teachers or
 170 included people who were not on the list of propositions). For the two other groups, the
 171 responses were more homogeneous. For the majority, coming out to family was the most
 172 stressful, particularly to parents.

173

174 *Table 2: Persons involved in the situation in the three groups (N values and percentages).*

Persons involved	Group "imposed CO" n = 200		Group "OS" n = 148		Group "free CO" n = 52	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Parents	131	65.50	31	20.90	26	50
Various family members	25	12.50	16	10.80	8	15.40
Partner	0	0	15	10.10	0	0
Friends	28	14	19	12.80	12	23
Family and friends	9	4.50	0	0	6	11.50
Work	3	1.50	8	5.40	0	0
Other	4	2	59	39.80	0	0

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179 **Primary appraisal of stress: risk assessment and threat.**

180 The subjects evaluated the intensity of 13 risks. Scores vary between the three groups
 181 (Table 3). LGB young adults who match based on their coming-out (groups imposed “CO”
 182 and “free CO”) were especially afraid of their relatives reaction and the possibility of hurting
 183 them or of losing their love (risks b, d, g, k). Participants in the “OS” group feared more for
 184 their own well-being, their health and their future, professional or financial (risks c, e, f, h and
 185 m). Nevertheless, even if the nature of the threat was different, it’s intensity (total risk score)
 186 was similar in the three groups. These results show a specificity of the coming out situation,
 187 in which the subjects fear more for their relatives than for themselves

188
 189 Table 3: *Primary appraisal of stress (risk assessment and threat) in the three groups (means,*
 190 *standard deviations and ANOVA).*

Risk	F (2)	Group “imposed CO” n = 200		Group “OS” n = 148		Group “free CO” n = 52	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
a. Harm the physical well-being and health of your relatives	1.68	1.09	1.46	1.24	1.62	0.81	1.27
b. Hurt a relative	6.26**	2.76	1.39	2.32	1,71	3.10	1,32
c. Jeopardize your own physical health, your security or your well-being	17.92***	1.51	1.49	2.68	2,27	1.69	1.60
d. Disrupt the habits of a relative	13.72***	2.05	1.38	1.45	1.61	2.58	1.35
e. Not achieve a an important goal at work	21.82***	0.55	1.11	1.32	1.67	0.17	0.59
f. Diminish your financial resources	11.12***	0.48	1	0.91	1,42	0.13	0,49
g. Lose somebody’s affection who is important to you	29.90***	3.06	1.32	1.97	1.81	3.44	1.02
h. Lose your self esteem	6.92**	1.04	1.32	1.57	1.55	1	1.40
i. Appear as a careless person	0.82	0.86	1.17	1.03	1,48	0.85	1.27
j. Appear as person without ethics	0.27	1.03	1.35	1.01	1.46	1.17	1.40
k. Lose somebody’s approval or respect who is important to you	1.46***	2.81	1.41	1.90	1.67	2.94	1.32
l. Lose respect for someone else	2.76	1.19	1.50	0.94	1.44	1.48	1.69
m. Show yourself as incompetent	32.70***	0.47	1.02	1.46	1.62	0.25	0.71
Total	0.50	1.45	0.65	1.53	0.72	1.51	0.59

192 Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

193

194 **Secondary appraisals (resources).**

195 The participants also evaluated several ways of coping with the situation. In the three
 196 groups, they favoured acceptance (Table 4). On average, the subjects of the group “OS” have
 197 more resources to deal with the situation (such as change the situation or seek information
 198 before acting) than the other subjects. Therefore, the participants who announced their
 199 homosexuality seemed to have fewer resources to deal with their coming-out. In a very
 200 stressful coming out, LGBs believe they have little influence on the situation. This low sense
 201 of control is an important aspect in the comprehension of excessive coming out stress.

202

203 **Table 4 :** *Secondary appraisals (resources) in the three groups (means, standard deviations*
 204 *and ANOVA).*

Coping resources	<i>F</i> (2)	Group “imposed CO” n = 200		Group “OS” n = 148		Group “free CO” n = 52	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
a. Change the situation or act on it	10.43***	0.89	1.21	1.51	1.48	0.88	1.15
b. Accept the situation	1.95	2.98	1.25	2.82	1.43	3.23	1.16
c. Seek information before acting	7.68***	1.25	1.33	1.72	1.56	0.94	1.27
d. Stick to the plan and keep doing what you wanted to do	4.73**	1.23	1.45	1.74	1.65	1.33	1.54
Total	10.90***	1.59	0.67	1.95	0.83	1.60	0.69

205

206 **Discussion**

207 Our results show the high stress of LGB young adults when revealing their sexual
 208 orientation. Indeed, almost all participants experienced at least one stressful coming out.
 209 However, the intensity of the stress varied among the individuals, 148 subjects (group “OS”)
 210 did not consider their coming-out as the most stressful event in their lives. For most of them,
 211 coming out to the family, especially to the parents, was the most stressful one. Our data show
 212 that the revelation takes place on average at the age of 18, as in the study by Willoughby,
 213 Malik and Lindahl (2006). But questioning about sexual orientation can begin as early as the

214 age of 10 (Carver, Egan, & Perry, 2004; Floyd, & Stein, 2002). Some individuals delay this
215 revelation because they fear negative reactions from their parents. The results of Ryan et al.
216 (2009) show that for 43% of LGB young adults (21-25), parents reacted negatively to their
217 coming out. In comparison, only the parents of 11% of the participants accepted their
218 homosexuality. In France, in the “SOS Homophobie” (a non profit organization) report
219 published in 2015, 230 calls (10% of calls) concerned homophobic acts by relatives, mostly
220 parents (59%). After the age of 18, the need to reveal their homosexuality and the
221 opportunities of doing so appear to increase. As noted by Savin-Williams and Esterberg
222 (2000), in the younger population, the concerns are all the more significant since they live
223 with their parents or are financially dependent on them. But coming out is more of a lifelong
224 process and although disclosure may have occurred with parents and friends, every encounter
225 with a new person or a new environment requires a decision about whether or not to disclose
226 one’s sexual orientation (Ragins, 2008).

227 Our results show that in a particularly stressful coming out, the LGB young adults mainly
228 fear to hurt their loved ones, to harm them. Conversely, in the other stressful situations, they
229 are more concerned about their welfare, their security, their future or their financial resources.
230 These differences in primary appraisal demonstrate one of the specificities of coming out
231 stress. The threat is associated with relatives rather than the individual. Indeed, the revelation
232 involves exposure to a possible rejection. This fear of rejection is one of the most prevalent
233 reasons for not coming out. Savin-Williams and Ream (2006) explored the disclosure process
234 to parents in 17–25-year-old LGBs (N = 164) and showed that the predominant reason for not
235 coming out to their mother is that it would damage the relationship. They expected negative
236 reactions from their mothers, they feared disappointing them or losing their support.

237 Nevertheless, despite the fear of hurting their loved ones, a large majority of the
238 participants estimated that their revelation had a positive outcome. Conversely, the literature

239 emphasizes the importance of negative reactions both in the USA (Savin-Williams & Ream,
240 2003; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006) and in France (Hefez, 2003; Beck, Firdion,
241 Legleye, & Schiltz, 2010; SOS Homophobie, 2015). This discrepancy can be partially
242 explained by our retrospective questionnaire. It could have led some participants to assess the
243 result of their coming-out positively now, while it would have been considered unsatisfactory
244 immediately after the event. These data suggest that the relatives' attitudes evolve positively
245 over time, which has been shown in other studies (Charbonnier & Graziani, 2011; D'Augelli
246 et al., 2010 ; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2006). The coming out of a child implies gradual
247 adjustment of the parents, it implies that they break down their stereotypes about
248 homosexuality and shake off guilt (Floyd et al., 1999). In addition to the significant threat of
249 their coming out, participants believe they have few coping resources, which can affect their
250 sense of control and thus the intensity of stress. Yet, our data show that LGB young adults are
251 more likely to prepare and provoke their coming-out than other stressful situations. These
252 results seem contradictory with weak perceived control. We are allowed to think they believe
253 they cannot influence the reactions of their relatives rather than the situation itself.

254

255 **Limitations.**

256 This research has several limitations. The online recruitment is more likely to contain
257 potential lies and errors than a questionnaire administered face-to-face. Yet, it is an efficient
258 recruitment in a particular population difficult to access (Fenner et al., 2012) like LGBs. Some
259 important French research organizations ("Institut national de la santé et de la recherche
260 médicale" (INSERM) and "institut de veille sanitaire" (IVS)) have resorted to online
261 recruiting (Pouchieu, Castetbon, Galan, Herberga, & Touvier, 2012) and questions about the
262 veracity of the responses arise as soon as individuals are asked to give their opinion.
263 Furthermore, our sample is composed only of people on dating sites which may be a lack of

264 diversity in our population. And, as previously mentioned, the retroactive character of our
265 questionnaire requires the examination of the results with particular attention.

266 **Conclusion**

267 Our results show two specificities of coming out: the fear to hurt relatives, to harm them
268 and the limited resources to cope with it. The combination of these two dimensions lead to
269 high stress in LGB young adults during their coming out. So, information campaigns and
270 discussion groups for adolescents or young adults (eg. information about sexual diversity,
271 specific stressors and places where they can talk about them) could reduce their isolation and
272 help them develop ways of handling their revelation. However, even if some disclosures are
273 stressful, the stress level depends on the individuals. When we ask their most stressful
274 situation in their lives three quarters of the participants evoke other situations. Finally, we
275 focused on the vision of LGB young adults, but coming out also involves other people. Our
276 data show that the coming-out to the family is frequently the most stressful of all.
277 Consequently, an information campaign targeting families seems essential, since knowing
278 about homosexuality enhances the adjustment process and parental acceptance (Ben-Ari,
279 1995).

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