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Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, Abigail Saguy

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**How to Describe it?**  
**Why the Term “Coming Out” Means Different Things in the U.S. and France\***

Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer<sup>†</sup> and Abigail C. Saguy<sup>‡</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> UCLA Sociology 264 Haines Hall, 375 Portola Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095. Telephone: 310-825-1313 Email: [mstambolis@ucla.edu](mailto:mstambolis@ucla.edu).

<sup>‡</sup> UCLA Sociology 264 Haines Hall, 375 Portola Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095. Telephone: 310-794-4979. Email: [saguy@soc.ucla.edu](mailto:saguy@soc.ucla.edu)

**Abstract:** Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews with U.S. and French lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, we find important *similarities* in how U.S. and French respondents strategically managed the visibility of their sexual identities but *differences* in the vocabulary used to discuss those experiences. Specifically, all of the Americans used the expression *coming out* spontaneously while only five French respondents did so. Instead, French respondents typically rejected *coming out* in favor of other words or expressions. Rather than simple effects of speaking different languages, these differences stemmed from distinct connotations given to the *same* – widely diffused – expressions within each local context. Unlike their American peers, who saw the expression’s origin in their own history and used in everyday lives, most French respondents resisted what they perceived to be an American cultural object imported by the French media. We also find evidence that the meaning of *coming out* is changing in both contexts such that, in the future, the French and Americans may perceive and use it more similarly. This research contributes to our understanding of the intersection between language, meaning, and political context, within a cross-national setting.

**Key Words:** Cultural Diffusion, Meaning, Coming Out, Sexual Identity, France, United States

In an increasingly global world marked by U.S. economic and cultural domination, English has emerged as the new *lingua franca* shared by the educated across the globe. In this context, a team of French and German managers collaborating on a project in Spain is more likely to converse in English than in French, German or Spanish. Similarly, the travels of (privileged) gay tourists, the commodification of gay spaces, and the international circulation of gay press make English a *lingua franca* among (white middle-class, generally male) gay communities globally (Leap and Boellstorff 2004). Recent work, however, demonstrates that “gay English,” far from universal, is highly contested, modified, and “territorialized” in local contexts (Leap 2011). Terms and concepts that diffuse through global channels thus adopt distinctive forms and meanings as individuals interpret them in the context of their own particular political struggles around gender, race, ethnicity, class, and nationhood (Leap 2011).

The term *coming out*, for example, has circulated widely beyond its original historical and geographic origins. In popular American culture over the last forty years, *coming out* has come to signify the process by which people reveal their sexual identity; it even enjoys this definition in the Oxford English Dictionary: “To show oneself publicly (in some character or fashion); to declare oneself (in some way); ... Also spec. to acknowledge publicly one’s homosexuality” (OED 2012). Abroad, lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals also use this term – often in the original English or with local variations – to speak of this process. For instance, Heidi Minning (2004), found that *coming out* was the most commonly used English term in the German gay community. Lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in Berlin speak of “*sich outen*” (to out oneself) and “out *sein*” (being out) (Minning 2004), while in Montréal, they say that someone “*a fait son coming out*” (did her/his coming out) (Higgins 2004).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

A Lexis-Nexis search shows that *Le Monde*, France's newspaper of record, began publishing articles with the words "coming out" or "come out" – in English – in 1990. Journalists – likely unfamiliar with the term before then – rarely used it in the 1990s. The surge in occurrences between 2000 and 2003 corresponds with media focus on French sexual minorities sparked by the 1999 passage of France's civil partnerships law. Occurrences continued and then increased in 2012-2013, as parliament debated gay marriage (See Figure 1). Today, *coming out* appears regularly in French gay magazines like *Têtu* (Rony 2013), on television (Rahimipour 2013), and online (SOS Homophobie 2013). *Coming out* has thus apparently diffused to France, a country with a political and historical trajectory well removed from the term's original context. Given France's famous linguistic and cultural protectionism from English, it is noteworthy that *Le Monde* and other sources leave *coming out* untranslated.

Media presence, however, does not imply that people adopt the term in their everyday lives or use it in identical ways across cultures. Indeed, Denis Provencher (2007) has argued that the concept of publically revealing one's sexual identity does *not* resonate with French members of sexual minorities, as it does in the U.S., due to different national political models. Specifically, France's assimilation model produces policies that downplay differences between minorities and the majority (Brubaker 1992; Noiriel 1988). In contrast, a U.S. multicultural model assumes that minorities – including lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals – create distinct communities and fight for their rights as members of a group (Alexander 2001; Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Either model can be experienced as constraining. In France, members of sexual minorities may feel compelled to hide their sexuality to emphasize similarity, while in the U.S., they may feel forced to publicly label themselves (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013).

Due to these contrasting models, Provencher argues that, compared to their U.S.

counterparts, French lesbians, gays and bisexuals feel less isolated in terms of their difference and, in turn, less compelled to reveal their identities (see also Rosario 1993). They identify, first and foremost, as French, rather than as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and do not systematically distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens on the basis of sexuality. Provencher (2007: 115) argues that it is “impossible for the ‘closet’ to function within a French republican model that erases marginal sexualities and other signs of difference and that does not incite ‘strategies of resistance’ against ‘Frenchness’ per se.” As a result, he argues, they reject both the concept and language of “coming out” because of its associations with group-based differences.

While some argue that French sexual minorities have never been in the closet, recent research suggests that younger Americans may be moving beyond it (Seidman 2002). According to this line of work, at a time marked by greater rights for sexual minorities, the closet – defined as the all-encompassing imperative to pass fulltime as heterosexual – has lost salience. Moreover, the idea that U.S. lesbians, gays and bisexuals need to “announce” their sexuality has been, at least in some circles, replaced by the idea that they should be able to discuss their life (e.g., with whom they went on a date) in the same way that heterosexuals do. If so, French and U.S. members of sexual minorities may be becoming more similar in how they discuss their sexual identity, not because the French are coming to resemble Americans but vice versa. This does not necessarily imply a process of directional diffusion of ideas and practices from one context to another. Rather, the closet may be waning in salience in the United States as a result of growing normalization of same-sex desire there.

This would further suggest that generalizations about a “U.S. model” of sexual identity may not adequately capture changes over time or differences *among* American lesbians, gays or bisexuals. It would also undermine the idea that cultural convergence – when cultural practices

in one location begin to resemble those from another – is always the product of diffusion or U.S. influence (see also Leap and Boellstorff 2004). Rather, contemporary sexual identities and practices in both countries may be the result of reinterpretations of and resistance to both local and global cultural influences (Altman 2001; Boellstorff 2003; Leap 2011; Robertson 1995).

This paper aims to explain how local context shapes the subjective meaning of globally diffused terms like *coming out*. To this end, it empirically compares the narratives of members of sexual minorities in the U.S. – where the term originated – and those in France – a contrasting case to which the term has diffused. We ask: 1) How do these two populations use *coming out*, if at all? 2) What does it mean to them? and 3) What explains similarities or differences across the two cases? The answers to these questions will shed light on how the meaning of specific terms – and of cultural objects more generally – may change as they travel across national contexts.

### **A Brief History of *Coming out* in the U.S.**

Queer communities initially borrowed the term *coming out* from elite debutante balls, in which young women “came out” into society. This rite of passage provided inspiration for “coming out” into gay society in, most notably, drag balls. Only later was *coming out* paired with the closet so that *coming out of the closet* implied casting off secrecy, shame and marginality by affirming one’s gay or lesbian identity (Chauncey 1994).

In the 1970s, American gay rights activists strategized coming out of the closet as a way to prevent opponents from revealing information about their sexuality in order to discredit or blackmail them. Making sexual orientation visible helped fight persecution and transform homosexuality into an empowering identity (Armstrong and Cragg 2006; D’Emilio 1998). In this same decade, American gay movements linked gay rights to multiculturalism and civil rights, arguing that sexual minorities form a distinct group akin to racial/ethnic minorities, and – like

these groups – have identities worthy of pride, celebration, and legal protection (Bernstein 2011; Bernstein 1997). *Coming out* has become a focus of news media reporting on public figures’ sexual orientation as well as a mainstay of many lesbian and gay Americans’ sexual narratives.

Recently, however, Seidman (2002) found in cross-generational interviews with members of sexual minorities that Americans have moved “beyond the closet.” Younger respondents reported not having ever felt compelled, as those who came of age in the 1970s and earlier did, to pass full time as heterosexual. Instead, growing legal equality, social tolerance, and institutional visibility have given many contemporary youth – at least for those in locations where such social changes have take place – a sense that revealing their sexual identity is normal. Moreover, as queer activism in the U.S. evolved, organizations have attempted to overcome perceived limitations of multiculturalism’s emphasis on group boundaries, cultural specificity, and static, one-dimensional identity categories. Specifically, critics have argued that, by emphasizing differences between groups and homogeneity inside them, gay organizations using the multicultural model had difficulty bridging differences within the movement or building coalitions beyond it (Ghaziani 2011, p. 117). To address this, some have called for constructing collective identity in terms of “us *and* them [homosexuals and other groups]” rather than “us *versus* them” (Ghaziani 2011, p. 117). Such organizations now recognize intersectional identities, on the basis of, say, race, class, and gender, thereby destabilizing the idea of a homogenous gay identity.

### **Diffusion and Local Adoption of *Coming Out* in France**

Inspired by U.S. organizations, 1970s radical French groups, such as the Front Homosexuel d’Action Révolutionnaire (Homosexual Revolutionary Action Front), founded by lesbian separatists of the homophile movement, used the revelation of sexual identity as a tool for political action (Idier 2013; Martel 1996). However, rejecting this approach, most established



homophile organizations, like Arcadie, did not specifically encourage public revelation of one's sexual identity (Jackson 2009). Arcadie used the expression "à visage découvert" (with one's face uncovered) for the few leaders who were not publically anonymous.

While the mechanism through which *coming out* traveled to France is unidentified (Chabot and Duyvendak 2002), the flow of people and ideas between these two countries likely facilitated this process. French gay activist Didier Lestrade traveled to New York in the late 1980s to observe Act Up and subsequently imported the organization's methods and language to create Act Up-Paris (Broqua 2005). However, our review of the French academic and activist literature suggests that *coming out* was used among academics well before then. The earliest use of the term we found is French sociologist Michael Pollak's (1982) article on male homosexuality. We cannot know whether he learned the expression from his informants or whether he used it exclusively within academic circles. Additional evidence of early popular incorporation of the term includes the subtitle of a session at a 1994 gay and lesbian conference organized by *Gai Pied Hebdo*: "Coming Out and Homosexual Visibility" (Dupuy 2013).

More recently, the gay intellectual Didier Eribon used the expression in his 1999 treatise on gay life, *Insults and the Making of the Gay Self* to describe revealing one's sexual minority status. The *Dictionary of Gay and Lesbian Cultures* (Eribon et al. 2003), compiled by French scholars and activists, explains the revelation process in the entry "Coming Out" (p.125). It states, "this expression designates the moment when an individual publically reveals his homosexuality. It is 'sortir du placard' ('to come out of the closet'). The English expression has imposed itself in French and one frequently says 'to do your *coming out*'" (p.125).

Although *coming out* appears in French academic discourse since at least the early 1980s, Provencher (2007) suggests that French members of sexual minorities may be unlikely to use it

to discuss interpersonal revelation of their sexuality because it emphasizes group difference, which runs counter to French political ideology about downplaying differences. Indeed, French members of sexual minorities describe feeling pressure to soften their sexual differences (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013) and face a stronger division between the public and private spheres (Caron 2001; Gunther; 2009; Martel 1996; Poulin-Deltour 2008; Provencher 2007) than do their American counterparts (D’Emilio 1998; Seidman 2002). Likewise, French institutions – including the law – emphasize sexual sameness among citizens (Fabre and Fassin 2003; Stychin 2001). France’s civil partnerships law, for instance, was intentionally drafted to include same-sex and different-sex couples to avoid a category specifically for homosexuals (McCaffrey 2005). Similarly, during the height of the AIDS crisis, the ideology of French republicanism made it challenging for organizations and the state to target gay men for prevention efforts because doing so would imply recognizing a distinct subnational group (Caron 2001; Broqua 2005).

### ***Coming Out in Stigma Resistance and Political Mobilization***

We conceptualize coming out narratives as both a strategy for overcoming everyday stigma and a tool in a political movement. In this sense, studying the use of the term *coming out* requires examination at both micro and macro levels. At the micro level, disclosure is a refusal to *pass* as straight (Goffman 1963; Yoshino 2006). Goffman conceptualized passing as a common strategy for managing what he called *discreditable* identities, in which *stigma* – or an unwanted difference in a specific social context – was not immediately observable (Goffman 1963). In cases where it can be easily concealed, homosexuality corresponds to this definition. People can attempt to *pass* as straight, as a way of shielding themselves against anti-gay sentiment. However, this strategy may reinforce a personal sense of shame, isolation or alienation. These perceived costs lead many to “come out” to family and friends (Orne 2013).

Goffman contrasts discreditable identity to *discredited identity*, which is plainly visible. One can *cover* a discredited identity by trying to prevent it from “looming large” (Goffman 1963). For instance, a blind person may direct her eyes towards her interlocutor to avoid drawing attention to this difference. In that the sexuality of those who are openly “out” is known, they may nonetheless cover by, say, not kissing their partners in public (Goffman 1963). Yoshino (2006) labels the refusal to cover as *flaunting*. Thus a gay man may *flaunt* by, say, bringing his romantic partner to office parties, kissing him in public, or discussing gay politics. While the term *flaunting* may have a pejorative connotation – as in acting stereotypically – we and Yoshino use it instead to distinguish between minimizing differences (covering) and refusing to do so (flaunting). What it means to flaunt depends on social expectations. For instance, in France where the very term *coming out* is associated with U.S. gay rights activism, merely uttering those words – rather than using an equivalent French expression – could conceivably itself constitute flaunting. This possibility highlights how micro-interactions are inextricably linked with larger processes and arrangements at the macro level.

When globalized cultural objects, such as civil-rights strategies or language, become part of a national cultural toolkit (Lamont and Thévenot 2000; Swidler 1986), they are necessarily interpreted locally (Parker 2010; Robertson 1995). Sexual identities and practices, like laws (Frank et al. 2009), spread unevenly and unequally across and within countries because of national and local political configurations (Altman 2001; Saguy 2003). Given local circumstances, when people use globalized expressions, like *coming out*, they “dub,” rather than simply copy or invent something entirely new, by holding “together two cultural logics without resolving them into a unitary whole” (Boellstorff 2003: 226). Thus the meaning of *coming out* in France may be shaped by its perceived U.S. origin and the circumstances of its diffusion within

the country. In this case, French respondents may use the term differently than Americans not because they are living profoundly different forms of sexual identity but that the term itself represents something different in the French context.

Specifically, over the last two centuries, French journalists, politicians, and public intellectuals have used the image of the U.S. as a negative example to contrast and highlight the virtues of the French model (Roger 2002). Recently, they have warned that the only way to prevent society from fracturing into warring identity groups – allegedly characteristic of American multiculturalism and identity politics – is to reinforce the republican principle of universality in law and policy (see for instance, Grossmann and Miclo 2002). By extension, only by treating homosexuality as a private affair – rather than a platform for demanding equal rights – can the Republic be saved. French republicanism has impacted political mobilization over a variety of issues, including the wearing of Muslim headscarves (Scott 2009), immigrant integration (Brubaker 1992), and parity for women in parliament (Lépinard 2007; Scott 2005).

In this context, a desire to demarcate France from the U.S. may lead some French actors to emphasize French specificity (Ezekiel 1995; Fassin 2005; Saguy 2003). For instance, after being accused of importing American “Puritanism” and “Battle of the Sexes” by advocating for a French sexual harassment law, French feminist politicians revised their bills to only condemn harassment involving abuse of professional hierarchical authority and emphasized that this reflected a specifically French sensibility (Saguy 2003). Facing similar accusations, organizers of La Gay Pride changed the name in the early 2000s to La Marche des Fiertés (the March of Pride) to create a linguistic – and political – distance from the U.S.. Likewise, when the Centre Gai et Lesbien de Paris (The Gay and Lesbian Center of Paris) opened in the 1990s, it initially modeled its language and methods on American centers (Poulin-Deltour 2004). When confronted with

skepticism, however, leaders tried to convince users that despite appearances, they rejected “U.S.” definitions of community that would lead to “ghettoization” (Poulin-Deltour 2004: 121).

Given the impact of French universalism and anti-Americanism on French politics in general and on French gay movements specifically, we would expect to see their influence on linguistic practices related to gay identity. In that certain English terms – like “coming out” but also “gay” – can evoke the U.S. and group based differences, they may take on different local meanings, even as they are adapted, in France.

### **Methods**

To assess the extent to which sexual minority status is experienced differently across national contexts and/or whether different vocabulary is used to describe similar experiences, we conducted thirty in-depth interviews with lesbians, gays and bisexuals, half in France and half in the U.S., during which we asked respondents how they understood their sexuality and decided to tell others. This inquiry grew out of the first author’s ongoing ethnographic observation since 2008 in France and the U.S. of lesbian and gay activism and identity work. In addition to field notes and over a hundred informal interviews, he conducted 23 life history interviews with members of sexual minorities in both countries during which several French and most U.S. respondents used the term *coming out* (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013). Meanwhile, the second author was independently examining how other groups were talking of “coming out” to reclaim various stigmatized identities and mobilize for social change (Saguy and Ward 2011).

A discussion of common research interests led to the current collaboration, for which the first author conducted an additional 30 interviews in 2010-11 with 15 French and 15 U.S. lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. The interviewee’s native tongue was used. We constructed a “theoretical” cross-national sample to test the extent to which identity narratives are nationally

specific (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Miles and Huberman 1984). Given evidence of important shifts over time, for instance in the salience of the closet in the U.S., respondents had to be compared using the same instrument at the same time point. Otherwise, we would have run the risk of essentializing national difference and missing important historical shifts.

To be included, individuals had to be adults, self identify as a member of a sexual minority and have lived the majority of their lives in France or the U.S.. Our recruitment flyer stated that we were interested in the experiences of “lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals,” which generated a sample of people who expressed varying degrees of attraction to members of the same sex. They referred to themselves as homosexual, lesbian, gay, attracted to men/women, or – in the U.S. only – bisexual (in one case) and queer/gay (in three cases).

To maximize variability, we recruited in online forums and social networks, campus resource centers, community organizations, and field-site contacts in both countries. We also used “respondent driven sampling” whereby interviewees recommended acquaintances matching our criteria (Heckathorn 2002). To limit homogeneity, we maximized chains of referral and independent recruitments. There were six chains in the French case, the longest being five respondents, and there were two in the U.S. case, the longest being three respondents. The remaining respondents (three in France and ten in the U.S.) were recruited independently.

We obtained some geographic diversity, with individuals from different areas of each country, as well as diversity across age and occupation, providing a plurality of perspectives (see Table 1). In addition to large cities with visible sexual minority populations like Paris and Washington (seven French and seven U.S. respondents), over half of the sample (eight French and eight U.S. respondents) grew up in smaller cities without such visibility such as Albi and Williamsburg, PA or more rural areas like Ariège and Dadeville, AL. We can thus speak to

experiences of those outside of major urban areas but not in isolated rural areas whom we were unable to interview. Because they may typically face even more homophobia and have less access to gay community organizations (Barton 2012; Preston and D'Augelli 2013; Vogel 2011), we are probably understating the experience of homophobia in both countries.

Our sample's lack of ethnic diversity limits the extent to which our findings can represent the experiences of non-white participants. Our sample includes one Latina and two Black respondents in the U.S. and one French respondent of Algerian descent. Our sample includes 10 women and 20 men. This overrepresentation of men may prevent us from accurately capturing experiences particular to women. We found gender differences consistent with the broader literature but unrelated to our central questions (Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000). For instance, in both countries, more men reported realizing that they were attracted to people of the same sex at a younger age than women. In both countries, compared to men, women were more likely to report waiting to be in a relationship before revealing their sexual orientation to others.

Our sample is diverse with regards to class, as measured by respondents' parents occupation, which is roughly split between working class/lower middle-class and middle-class in both countries. In both countries, however, respondents from working-class backgrounds were generally upwardly mobile, so that most respondents became or remained middle-class. Twenty-five, including 11 Americans and 14 French, finished college or graduate school. Most had moderately well paid jobs in the service sector, education, and the arts. Three U.S. respondents were unemployed and two U.S. women were highly-educated homemakers. This limits our ability to speak to the experiences of the less educated and those in working class occupations who are also likely to experience higher levels of homophobia (Huebner et al. 2004). Because our sample is relatively small and not nationally representative, we are cautious in generalizing

beyond our participants and do not conduct within group comparisons. Still, large differences between the two national cases are suggestive of trends. For this reason, we use some quantitative language (e.g. half, a third, three quarters) when describing our results.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

We drew on and modified the script Provencher (2007) used to interview twenty-nine French gay men and ten French lesbians about their decisions to reveal their sexuality and understandings of the *closet* or, its French equivalent, *placard* (interview guide available upon request). Unlike Provencher, we interviewed both U.S. and French respondents, with identical interview guides, allowing us to empirically examine – rather than infer – use of the terms “coming out” and “closet” in the U.S.. While he explicitly asked respondents if they would describe the announcing their homosexuality as “*faire son coming out*” or “*sortir du placard*,” (to come out of the closet), we did not use the terms “coming out” or “closet” in recruiting materials or the first half of the interview. This allowed us to test whether or not interviewees would use these expressions spontaneously in response to questions about telling friends, family, and co-workers – if at all – of their sexuality. At the end of the interview, we specifically asked if they knew the expression “to come out” and invited them to define it and explain how it came to be used in their respective countries and why they choose to use it or not.

The first author conducted seven interviews in the respondents’ home, his home, or a café, and the remainder over videoconference. All were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. We deductively coded transcripts using *HyperRESEARCH* to analyze respondents’ narratives of revelation processes paying particular attention to feelings, circumstances, and motivations for revealing their status. We then inductively coded to find commonalities and divergences. Finally, we noted each utterance of “coming out” and synonyms.



### **Similarities in narratives about the process of telling others**

Given the literature reviewed above, we expected to find national differences in how respondents understood their sexuality, the extent to which they revealed it, and how they talked about this process. To our surprise, we found important experiential *similarities* in how U.S. and French respondents strategically managed the visibility of their sexual identities but *differences* in the specific terms they used to discuss it. These differences were *not* due to the obvious fact that French and American respondents speak different languages. Rather, they reflected the fact that the term *coming out* triggered specific connotations in each local context, leading French and U.S. respondents to understand and use it differently.

Roughly a third of both groups reported no difference in their lives after telling others about their sexuality. They said that this did not mark a turning point, was a slow progression, or a statement of fact natural to share. As Julien, a Frenchman, put it, “there is no before and after. Everything is the sum of lots of mini-events, mini-declarations, and mini-conversations.”

Some said they did not live through a period of guilt, loneliness, or isolation before. Ethel, an American, claimed feeling unique, not guilty, before telling others. She explained: “I just thought I was very different from everyone else and I had some sort of um, special job to save the world...” Rod, another U.S. respondent, said, “I didn’t feel shame at all, but I think I felt, um...I mean, I just felt like I had a secret and I felt like ... I had something that actually made me special, or I had something that made me different.” These U.S. respondents express remarkably similar sentiments to Provencher’s (2007) French respondents and are consistent with the notion that “the closet” as source of shame may be losing sway (Seidman 2002).

Contrary to this minority, however, most respondents in *both* countries clearly demarcated the time when they kept their sexual identity to themselves from a period when they

began to tell others. They often characterized the period before as a time of challenge, confusion, and struggle. Surprisingly, given the literature's suggestions about sexual identity in France, nine of fifteen French respondents expressed these feelings. For instance, Maxime described the time in his life before he revealed his identity as "suffering, anguish. Concealment. Impersonality." Likewise Gabriel described it as "a period of doubt ... discomfort...not knowing, not daring." Telling others represented the start of a new phase in life, as Christian, explained: "But really there was this rupture, this liberation, to have nothing to hide, to be happy about what I was living. A moment of fullness and the desire to share too." Christian's excitement about being open to his family and friends about his attraction to men resembles what might be a classic "coming out story" (D'Emilio 1998; Yoshino 2006). Similarly, Clément said that he felt less isolated and more comfortable with "sharing, interaction, [and] a real exchange." Whereas before he felt excluded from some social interactions, now, while people-watching with his friends or mother, he freely points out men rather than remaining silent or feigning interest in women

American respondents also expressed feeling empowered and liberated after disclosure. In describing the period of telling no-one, William said that it was, "Oh my God! So lonely..." Kendall also said he was alone and unsure during that time: "...It was a very kind of isolating period in my life. I felt kind of..., marginalized. I definitely felt like I couldn't be who I was." Like their French counterparts, telling others represented a means to end these negative feelings. For instance, Joan said, "You know, I actually felt...I felt kind of free. I felt like I had found a key to the lock ... and just feeling like...like life had gone from black and white to color."

Respondents from both national contexts spoke in similar ways about what telling others represented to them. Our questions were meant to gauge whether they perceived revealing their sexuality as an issue of honesty and authenticity – as the American "modern gay identity" model

would imply – or if they considered its concealment as protecting one’s *private* life – which the French universalist model suggests. In fact, a majority of *both groups* said that telling others represented an act of truthfulness and that “lying” about one’s sexual identity, though certainly justifiable in particular circumstances, is ultimately a kind of deceit and self-hatred.

For instance, Delphine, a French respondent, said that telling someone about being gay was: “A moment of truth. It’s also a teaching opportunity because it’s not about shocking the person in front of you, you have to be able to make yourself understood, so that the other person is empathetic with you.” Telling someone was simply providing that person with information while being honest and truthful to one’s sense of self. An American respondent, Kendell, described the situation similarly: “I don’t think that you need to make a grand proclamation to the world... but I do think that it’s important to, to have someone that you can feel that you can share that part of your life with.” Like Delphine, for Kendell, revealing one’s identity did not have to be a public display; it was a way of sharing their sexuality that, as they described it, was an important part of who they are. For example, Claire, a U.S. respondent, said, “Now telling anybody that I’m gay [is] not a problem because there’s so many people in my life. And to me now it’s more a natural part of me.” Because her sexuality was an integral part of herself, she found it consequently easier to reveal.

Earlier work has argued that the French are different from Americans in their distrust of “performative statements or verbs with illocutionary force that could be understood as ‘I hereby declare that I am gay or lesbian’” (Chirrey 2003:29, cited in Provencher 2007: 145). Yet, our cross-national comparative interview data suggest that many contemporary American members of sexual minorities expressed similar concerns, consistent with arguments that they have moved “beyond the closet” (Seidman 2002). For instance, rather than say “I am gay” to reveal their

status, Garrett and Ace – both Americans – used similar strategies. When friends or colleagues discussed relationships or romantic partners, they spoke about their boyfriends thereby revealing their homosexuality without making a declaration.

### **Ubiquitous use of “coming out” among Americans but not the French**

Despite similar kinds of diversity in the sentiments they attribute to revealing their status, French and American respondents tended to use different vocabulary to describe them. Specifically, while every interviewee in both countries claimed familiarity with the term *coming out*, Americans were more likely to use it to describe their revelation processes.

In fact, *all* American respondents spontaneously used *coming out* at least once to describe how and in what context they revealed their sexuality to their family, friends, or coworkers. Moreover, when asked whether there is an expression that means, “to tell someone you are gay,” all but two American respondents answered to “come out.” Joan, for example, explained, “I think you come out when you tell someone you are gay.” The answer seemed so obvious to many of them that they often expressed a need to clarify whether they had properly understood the question. Kendell asked, puzzled, “Other than coming out?”

Although they had difficulty imagining alternative expressions when asked specifically, most U.S. respondents also used synonyms for *coming out* naturally during the interview, such as “I wanted to tell people,” “The more people I told the more empowered I felt,” or “I told my sister.” They thus used *coming out* in tandem with other common expressions about communicating ideas and information. Furthermore, all but four of the American respondents used the shorter term *coming out* rather than the longer expression *to come out of the closet*. As Rod explained, “I think usually people just say *coming out*,” and David stated, “It’s ‘to come out of the closet,’ but you don’t really hear that as often anymore.” Thus, consistent with Seidman’s

(2002) observations, many of our respondents saw the full expression *to coming out of the closet* as redundant or fading out of fashion. However, all but one of the U.S. respondents, but none of the French respondents, used the term *closeted* to describe a person who is not at all open and/or actively conceals his or her homosexuality. The French respondents used expressions like “refoulé [repressed/inhibited], honteux [shameful], or lâche [weak/cowardly]” to get at the same idea. This suggests that the metaphor of the closet is still alive and well in the U.S. case even if it is decoupled from personal experiences of coming out. As illustrative of this last point, only three of our respondents said they were in a “closet” before revealing their sexuality.

When asked if there was a word or expression that meant, “to tell someone you are gay/homosexual,” eight of the fifteen French respondents answered “coming out” but only three of those claimed they would want to use it. We put in bold the words that were said in English so this point comes through clearly. Adelin said: “it’s **coming out**.” Similarly, Raphaël explained, “Yes, to do your **coming out**. But once again, in English.” Note, when it was evoked, “coming out” was rarely translated into its French equivalent “*sortir*,” which literally means to go or come out. Our respondents said this verb was too common to be used on its own. Consistent with previous work (Provencher 2007) but also like our U.S. respondents, the French respondents avoided the full expression – to come out of the closet (*sortir du placard*) – on the grounds that the notion of the closet was too negative or old fashioned.

Even more strikingly, in comparison to American respondents, only five French respondents used *coming out* spontaneously, without our prompting, doing so *in English*. Consistent with previous work (Provencher 2007), most of our French respondents, used language like, in order of preference: “telling/*dire*,” “revealing/*révéler*,” “announcing/*annoncer*,” or “admitting your homosexuality/*avouer son homosexualité*.” Some also used more elaborate

expressions. For instance, Clément told us that the experience is “the moment when you pass from darkness to light,” while Edouard said “it’s when I accept you in my life.” Similarly, Julien explained: “I would say “acceptance” because there is the idea of self-acceptation and acceptance by the other. Gaining acceptance by others (*Se faire accepter par l’autre*) is also a way of accepting yourself, as someone normal.” Even the eight respondents who said *coming out* was the appropriate expression to signify revealing one’s homosexuality preferred alternatives.

The American respondents also spoke of “telling” about their sexuality and some used similarly expressive phrases to describe revealing their sexual identity. For instance, Evan said it was a “moment of self-actualization,” while Kendell said it was to “share that part of your life,” and Kyle said it was “to share your sexuality.” However, unlike the French respondents, the American respondents treated these other expressions as synonyms, rather than alternatives, to the dominant term *coming out*. For the Americans only, *coming out* was broad enough to accommodate varied and detailed narratives about revelation.

### **How Perceived Origins Shape Meaning and Language Use**

One might assume that observed differences in vocabulary are merely a product of the simple fact that French and Americans speak different languages. Yet, as we have shown, the expression *coming out* has been integrated within the French lexicon and is commonly used there. Rather, we would argue the observed differences in usage stem from the different meaning this term has acquired in France, as both foreign and removed from personal experience.

When asked where *coming out* originates or how it came to be used in the United States, our American respondents were unsure how to answer, claimed they had no idea, or suggested that it came from the 1970s and perhaps from the famous Diana Ross song. William, for instance, told us, “I don’t really know how that got originated. I’m assuming probably some... I

mean, I don't know why, but I'm thinking like Harvey Milk or something like that." Even respondents who were activists in the 1970s, like Mariana, were unsure how the term became popular. She suggested jokingly that it started among gay men because "they would get in [their] mothers' closet and put their clothes on. [Laughs] And they ... would [say], 'I'm out of the closet with it.' That's what I assume. I really don't know." In other words, the origins of the term were unmarked, contributing to the impression that the expression was ordinary and neutral.

Eight American respondents mentioned that they had seen and heard *coming out* in the media like television, newspapers, and the gay press. Some pointed to specific media events including a now famous episode of the U.S. sitcom *Ellen* in which the primary character, played by Ellen Degenerus, revealed she was lesbian. As one of the first major events of its kind, the "coming out episode" was a source of inspiration and belonging for Rod and Kyle – both teenagers at the time the episode aired – who felt if *Ellen* could reveal her sexuality, so could they. Other media representations, like the widely publicized and institutionalized National Coming Out Day, were both a reminder of the term's visibility and a source of community building. For all of the American respondents, however, media representations complemented interpersonal discussions of revelations of sexual identity, discussed *as* "coming out" stories.

In contrast, French respondents speculated that *coming out* was imported into France from the U.S.. Fabienne said: "I think we borrowed, from what happened in San Francisco, a lot of things in Europe. Americans were pioneers for us. Still, a lot of terms used to talk about that are terms that come from America. **Gay Pride, pride, coming out.**" Fabienne, along with four other respondents expressed both a kind of admiration for the "pioneering" aspect of gay rights in the U.S. and frustration that French activists did not come up with their own terms.

Like U.S. respondents, most French respondents recounted having heard the term in the

mass media. For instance, Didier told us he could recall hearing the term increasingly in the late 1990s when the American movie *In and Out*, starring Kevin Klein as a man who reveals he is gay, was released in France under the title *Coming Out*. Similarly, Raphaël remembered that in the early 2000s there were several French public figures – including a participant on a reality TV program and the host of an evening talk show – who revealed they were gay, a process that was labeled as “coming out,” using the English terms. Raphaël stated that on the news and in discussions with friends, “it was something we often said: ‘Amélie Mauresmo [a former world Number 1 French tennis player] did her **coming out**.’” Another, though less common, cited origin for *coming out* was from the publicized “outings” when organizations like Act Up-Paris revealed the homosexuality of anti-gay politicians in the 1990s.

While American respondents and the minority of French respondents who used *coming out* claimed to hear friends also use the term and experienced media representations of *coming out* as empowering, most French respondents had *only* heard the term in the media or in reference to public figures and, as a result, it seemed inapplicable to them. Fabienne explained:

For me, it’s very televisual or media-centered... Amongst us gays we don’t say, “when did you do your *coming out*?” You’ll say, “When did you talk to your family or your friends?” I never heard gays say “when did you do your **coming out**.” For us, it’s really a term used by people in the media.

Many French respondents expressed distaste with the mediatized and public declaration, evoked by the term *coming out*. For instance, Didier said that the media’s use of this term sets “the declaration of homosexuality” apart from “other declarations” and “marginalizes homosexuality.” Fabienne said that *coming out* implies that “there is a big **scoop**; I’m not going to treat myself as a **scoop**.” Nina similarly said she would never speak of *coming out* because she



does not “want to make sensational declarations to liberate myself.”

Moreover, many French respondents who rejected the term *coming out* said it had an undesirable activist connotation. Manuel said it had “a vindictive side,” while Raphaël said that to discuss revealing his sexual identity as “coming out” would unduly emphasize that aspect of himself: “Sexuality, after all, that’s not what I’m looking to put forward.” In other words, for French respondents, the term *coming out* itself represented a kind of flaunting along the lines of Yoshino’s (2006) typology, connoting: 1) a refusal to adhere to French assimilationist ideals by emphasizing the specificity of sexual identity and 2) politicizing group identity.

Note that many U.S. respondents also criticized the idea that revealing one’s sexuality should constitute a spectacular event or that sexuality should be an important or politicized aspect of one’s identity. However, the term *coming out* did not automatically imply these meanings. This is because they were operating within a context in which *coming out* has become a common expression for affirming interpersonal revelation of a variety of identities.

The five French respondents who claimed to use *coming out* understood this term’s meaning in similar ways as the Americans. This third of the sample did not associate *coming out* with the United States, identity politics, or a hegemonic modern gay identity as the majority of our French respondents did. For Pitre, whose friends all use the term *coming out*, “there aren’t any other [ways to say ‘come out’]. Because *sortir du placard* (coming out of the closet) – the designated expression in French – is really, for me, super old-fashioned.” Like many American respondents who excise the concept of the closet from the term *to come out*, Pitre defined *coming out* as, “to come out of the shadows” (*sortir de l’ombre*). Delphine also preferred *coming out* to French alternatives that she felt implied a sense of shame:

“*Passer aux aveux*” (admitting it), that could mean wanting to reveal something that is

unmentionable and a little bit shameful. **Coming out**, that's different, that's: we're living something clandestinely, we don't want others to know about it because it's none of their business, because we're not required to say everything about our lives and then, sometimes, we're led to do it, not to admit a fault that doesn't exist, because there is no fault, but we're led to do it for reasons of transparency.

Like those American respondents who expressed no shame or guilt for being gay, Delphine said that *coming out* simply reflected being transparent when necessary.. Also like many of our American respondents, "coming out" has become uncoupled from "the closet" for Delphine.

Julien said *coming out* is the best term to describe the process and claimed to always use it when talking to his friends. He said that all French gays and lesbians relate to the term explaining, "Not only does any homosexual know the definition, but it also always has a meaning for all homosexuals." In Julien's eyes, the term provides a way to create a sense of shared gay experience and meaning. Yet even as Julien said that *coming out* created a sense of shared gay community identity, he also cited reasons consistent with French assimilationism for using the term. He explained that, "nowadays, the term is used by all kinds of people, not only the media, to describe things that have nothing to do with homosexuality. [Like] when you learn that a friend voted for Sarkozy, it's like he's doing his **coming out** as a right wing guy." Because he believed the term refers to any stigmatized status, it did not highlight homosexuality exclusively. Julien was the only one who suggested *coming out* applied to other stigmas but, if he proves part of a trend, more French members of sexual minorities could adopt the term as it becomes more universal and loses power to single out sexuality.

In sum, we found evidence on *both* sides of the Atlantic that some members of sexual minorities reject "performances of coming-out that emphasize individuality and directly index

homosexual subjectivity if not an outright homosexual ‘identity’” (Provencher 2007: 145). Indeed, many Americans told us stories similar to French respondents, in our own study and those described in the literature, about how they did not have “classic coming out stories” where they sat their parents and friends down and broke the news. However, unlike our French respondents, our American respondents did not cite such reasons as a basis for rejecting *coming out* as a term; rather, they emphasized that there are many ways to “come out.” Indeed, *coming out* is simply “the language that [we] have,” as David told us, or “a universal expression,” according to William. For our American respondents, *coming out* may be so common and accepted as “the” term for describing the process of revealing one’s sexual identity that it is not the site of meaning making, resistance, or community building that it is for French respondents.

### **Conclusion**

Non-comparative studies of sexuality and activism in France have suggested that, compared to their U.S. counterparts, French members of sexual minorities experience their sexuality in a subtly different but significant way and use different language to discuss it (Caron 2001; Gunther; 2009; Martel 1996; Poulin-Deltour 2008; Provencher 2007). By extending this work through direct comparison, our findings suggest, in contrast, that they appear to understand and disclose their sexual identity with similar variations but, in line with this previous work, that they use different terms to describe that process. Specifically, while, in the United States, *coming out* has become the taken-for-granted term to discuss disclosure of minority sexual orientation, in France this term is highly contested. Thus, all of our American respondents spontaneously used the term *coming out* to talk about telling others. They also employed other terms, such as “to tell someone you’re gay,” but saw them as synonyms rather than alternatives to the primary term *coming out*. In contrast, while all French respondents claimed familiarity with this term, only one

third used it without prompting. Instead, French respondents who rejected *coming out*, employed a variety of *alternative* expressions to describe the same process.

In other words, we found that it is the term *coming out* – rather than the idea that revealing one’s minority sexual orientation is socially valuable or important – that is politically and culturally fraught in France. Most French respondents resisted using *coming out* to describe disclosure not because they were unfamiliar with the term but because it has taken on different meanings there, with which they did not identify, such as that of a highly mediatized and public process, multiculturalism, or activism. Those French respondents who did use the term did so, not unreflexively or because they lacked of alternatives, but because this terms carried local meanings of shared gay community or, in some cases, because they saw the term as universal. These respondents were more likely, than their counterparts who avoided the term, to have had seen it used to talk about personal – rather than mediatized – disclosure.

One reason why most French respondents did not gravitate to the term *coming out* seems to be related to the fact that, unlike U.S. respondents, they were only exposed to this term in the mass media, rather than in their social circle. As a result, most French respondents said it only applies to celebrities or public declarations in the mass media and said they would not use it to describe the revelation process in a more intimate setting. In contrast, U.S. respondents as a group said they heard friends and acquaintances use the term. This was also true for the minority of French respondents who embraced the term *coming out*, suggesting exposure to it in interpersonal settings – and not merely via the mass media – makes it more likely that a person will use it to describe their personal experiences. For this minority of French respondents, first-hand experience with the term *coming out* seems to have mitigated their feelings regarding its perceived foreign origin.

This suggests, more generally, that diffusion of a term in the mass media without an accompanying adoption in interpersonal exchanges may alter the term's meaning in the new context (Boellstorff 2003; Goebel 2011). By extension, as a range of different U.S. groups increasingly use the term *coming out* to speak of affirming different sorts of stigmatized status, there is a similar risk that, in these contexts, *coming out* will come to refer exclusively to very mediatized public announcements, rather than more intimate forms of disclosure. Indeed, research suggests that the undocumented student movement in the United States has begun using the term *coming out* in the media to garner attention for legislative action and that, in the context of undocumented status, this term has become associated with very public announcements in the mass media. In contrast, most undocumented students use expressions like “to tell” to discuss moments when they told select others of their undocumented status (Enriquez and Saguy 2013).

A skeptical reader might argue that we have not demonstrated anything interesting. After all, our respondents speak different languages so it might seem obvious that they would use different expressions. This critique misses the point. We find that most French respondents reject *coming out* not because it is simply not part of their language. Indeed, they recognize that the term is used widely in France. Rather, they reject it because of the specific meanings they attach to it, meanings that are strikingly different from those of American respondents. This rejection is akin to how people reject words from their own language when they see them as insults to their racial, gender, religious, or sexual identity. Moreover, we were also surprised to find that, despite differences in language, some French respondents do use *coming out*, because, unlike their peers, they heard it used in their everyday lives. This research is thus an illustration of how cultural objects change as individuals interpret them through the dynamics of their specific, cultural, historical, political, and personal situations.

Our findings run counter to Provencher's (2007) findings that French members of sexual minorities experience disclosure and concealment fundamentally differently than Americans. There are several possible explanations for this discrepancy, including our respective interview guides. Specifically, Provencher (2007) asked respondents:

In the US context, certain young gays and lesbians described the period of their lives before announcing their homosexuality in terms of a period in the desert or a deserted parking lot. Do these expressions mean anything to you? For example, did you feel isolated before admitting your homosexuality to yourself and others? Did you find that you were in a similar state? Explain.

The wording of this question may have prompted Provencher's respondents to contrast their experiences with those of Americans, in a way that our interview questions did not.

Second, the timeframes of our studies differ; Provencher conducted his interviews in 2001-2002, whereas we conducted our interviews in 2011-2012. There is evidence that, during the intervening decade, it has become more acceptable to explicitly affirm sexual minority status in France. For instance, television series with lesbian or gay characters and media coverage of same-sex couples raising children have increased (Garnier 2012) and increased social acceptance of homosexuality enabled a 2013 national law permitting same-sex marriage and adoption (2013-404 *Code Civil* [2013]). In this broader national context, French experiences with concealment and revelation of sexuality may be becoming more similar to those of Americans. Moreover, we found tentative evidence that the term *coming out* may be evolving in France so that it no longer refers exclusively to sexual minorities, just as, in the U.S. context, it is increasingly used by a wide range of groups to discuss disclosing or affirming a stigmatized identity (Saguy and Ward 2011). Julien suggested this when he described acquaintances *coming out* as rightwing voters.

Similarly, some respondents in recent interview studies of French gays and lesbians use *coming out* to speak of their own experiences (Chetcuti 2010; Courduriès 2011).

Just as France has changed over the last decade, so has the US.. Our interviews with Americans may have picked up recent local changes that the secondary literature on which Provencher (2007) relied could not have captured. Specifically, sexual minorities have increasingly entered the American mainstream. A growing number of states recognize same-sex marriage (Eckholm 2013). Professional athletes are revealing that they are gay or actively working to combat homophobia and bullying (Witz 2013). And, significantly, in his 2013 Inaugural Address, President Obama included the Stonewall riots – along with Selma and Seneca Falls – as an emblem of U.S. civil rights history (Harwood 2013). This formal and discursive inclusion has contributed to the normalization – at least in some areas – of homosexuality.

In this context, the metaphor of the closet – and what that implies about the unyielding imperative to pass at all times – may no longer resonate for many Americans who are living openly gay lives in urban centers, although they still invoke it to discuss people who engage in same-sex sexual behavior but pass as heterosexual. Instead, these sorts of Americans may be increasingly inclined to emphasize their similarities to – and minimize differences from – heterosexuals. In this sense, they may be becoming more similar to their French counterparts.

Just as the meaning of *coming out* has changed in the United States, we may expect it to change in France. For instance, if people come to use *coming out* more often in their everyday lives in France, its association with the mass media may wane. Alternatively, or in addition, if the connotations associated with the U.S. in France shift in a more positive direction, so might those associated with English terms, including *coming out*.

More generally, this paper demonstrates the methodological importance of conducting

direct comparisons. Because U.S. scholarship is so hegemonic in the field of sexualities studies, the United States is often an implicit comparison group in studies of sexual minorities elsewhere. Yet such implicit comparisons run the risk of reifying the experiences of sexual minorities in the United States. This paper underscores the importance of using the same interview guide to conduct comparative interviews in more than one national context so as to avoid this risk.

Future research should further explore within-nation variation in how this term is used by, say, people of different races, ethnicities, social class, gender, and generation, as well as involvement in political activism. Depending on their membership in these social categories, people may perceive the political meaning and consequences of *coming out* differently. For example, in the U.S., the term *coming out* might not be taken for granted among, say, people whose first language is not English and for whom using the term could create a wedge between their ethnic community and sexual identity (see Decena 2011). A specific focus on gender is especially necessary given the chronic erasure of women's experiences in the current literature and its relevance for theory. For instance, a French lesbian of color may feel less pressure to conform to the imperatives of universality than a gay white Frenchman, who stands to lose more by asserting the one difference – his sexuality – that separates him from the dominant social group. Future work could also systematically compare use of the term *coming out* by French activists to non-activists. Activists might embrace some of the more radical meanings associated with this term or, alternatively, their political goals may lead them to be more politic in their choice of terms. Such work would further elucidate how people use language as a resource for mobilization and collective identity – within a specific political and historical context – and how, in so doing, they ultimately transform the meaning of the original language.



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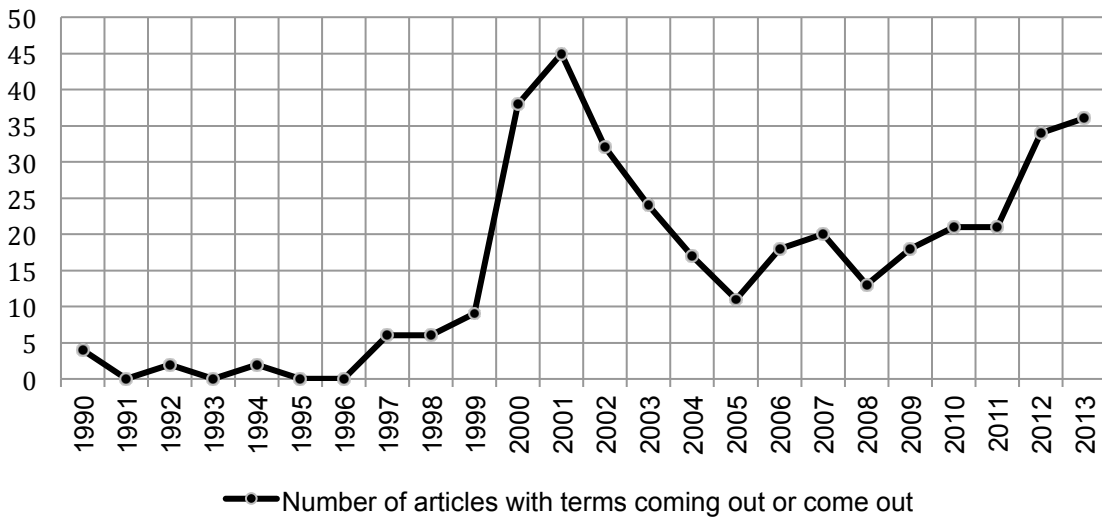
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**Figure 1: Occurrences of "Coming Out" in *Le Monde* from 1990 to 2013**





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**Table 1: Sample Characteristics (n=30)**

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	American (n=15)	French (n=15)
Men	9	11
Women	6	4
Mean age	34.6	35.33
Class Background	Working class/Lower middle class (7), Middle class (8)	Working class/Lower middle class (6), Middle class (8), Upper class (1)
Education	High School (1), Some College (3), College (9), Graduate (2)	High School (1), College (3), Graduate (11)
Current Occupation	Education (1), Homemaking (2), Foodservice (1), Nonprofit services (3), Professional (1), Retail (1), Secretarial (1), Self-employment (1), Student (1), Unemployed (3)	Arts (3), Business Services (5), Education (3), Self Employment(1), Government (2), Professional (1)
Race	White (12), Black (2), Latino (1)	White (14), Algerian descent (1)
Regions	Alabama, California, Florida, Maryland, New York, Washington D.C.	Aquitaine, Basse-Normandie, Languedoc-Roussillon, Limousin, Midi-Pyrénées, Paris, Rhône-Alpes

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