In, Out, and In Between:
Coming Out and the Wellbeing of Young Queer People in Halifax, Nova Scotia

by

Joseph Lahey

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Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki, the
ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.
We are all Treaty people.

Dedication

Throughout my time as a student researcher, I have been fortunate enough to be involved in projects that uncover the coming out experiences and lives of earlier generations of gay, lesbian, and queer people. I have had the privilege of interviewing and learning from the generations of queer people before mine.

I dedicate this thesis to everyone I spoke with in this capacity. Your stories inspire me. The way I, my generation, and the participants in this thesis speak about coming out and queerness would not be possible without the challenges you endured, the work you did, and the visibility and celebrations you ushered in.

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Abstract

In this thesis, I explore how young queer people in Halifax, Nova Scotia experience and characterize coming out, and how they see it as affecting their wellbeing. Twelve people who identify with a queer sexual identity, aged between 18 and 25 and residing in the Halifax region participated in the study. All took part in a semi-structured interview, and five of those interviewed submitted a journal entry afterwards. I use social constructionism, stigma theory, and minority stress theory, in tandem with affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing to unpack the complex nature of coming out. My findings demonstrate that, for participants, coming out is continuous, never-ending, strategically managed, and relatively casual. My findings also reveal that coming out can be beneficial, with positive effects — in terms of self-affirmation, and relationship and community building — as well as challenging, with negative effects — in terms of stressful or discomforting moments of anticipation, and relationship strain among family. This duality underscores the dynamic relationship between coming out and young queer people's wellbeing, and the variable unevenness that participants encounter as they decide whether or how to come out in their everyday lives.

List of Abbreviations

2SLGBTQ+	Two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and any other sexual/gender identity outside of heterosexual and cisgender.
LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Coming out is, in some ways, the quintessential queer experience. This is not to suggest that every queer person comes out, or that it is a *universal* queer experience, but rather, that coming out has been discussed in relation to, and depicted as a part of queer life since the late twentieth century, across academic literature and popular media (Saguy, 2020; Seidman et al., 1999). In the 1960s and 1970s, as the gay rights movement was reaching its peak, "coming out of the closet" was a politically charged, radically defiant act, with the United States' first openly gay politician, Harvey Milk (2013/1978), famously espousing, "we will not win our rights by staying quietly in our closets … We are coming out! We are coming out to fight the lies, the myths, the distortions! We are coming out to tell the truth about Gays!" (p. 218). Around that same time, scholars — mainly psychologists and sexologists — began conceptualizing coming out as a static linear process that queer people pass through once, ultimately becoming happier, healthier, and "fully out" (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982).

Since then, social scientists have responded to, critiqued, and built on these limiting conceptualizations of coming out, arguing the process is not linear, nor does it ever really end. Sociologists in particular agree that coming out is an ongoing endeavour that queer people experience and engage in on a day-to-day basis, as they decide whether or how to come out to those around them (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; Orne, 2011; Rust, 1993). Thus, queer people are rarely ever "fully out" — they disclose, reveal, and manage their queerness throughout their everyday lives (Adams, 2010; Davies, 1992; Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Orne, 2011, 2013).

Sociological research also demonstrates that the place of coming out in queer life is contested, or at least contextually and situationally complex. Some suggest that the significance of coming out is decreasing, that it is either less important, less political (Saguy, 2020; Seidman et al., 1999) or less of an intense experience (Dunlap, 2014; Grierson & Smith, 2005), whereas others point to the persistence of positive meanings queer people ascribe to it. Coming out can be self-affirming, allowing people to embrace their authentic selves, or support them in building community, by either sharing an important piece of who they are with family, friends, and others close to them (Guittar, 2013a), or finding and entering a queer community in which they feel a sense belonging (Rosenberg, 2018). Other studies highlight that coming out remains a challenging endeavour, especially in specific contexts or situations (Davies, 1992; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; McCormack et al., 2014; Orne, 2011; Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2021). So long as there are heteronormative assumptions and expectations — as well as overt homo/queerphobia — coming out can be a challenge, and may be a threat to queer people's relationships, and may impact feelings of happiness, security, safety, belonging, or wellbeing.

The sociological coming out literature is predominantly Western.[1] Moreover, my review focuses on studies set in the West, as the construction and practice of queerness varies across cultures and societies. We cannot assume the experience of coming out is universal. While most of the research is set in the West, there is comparatively less consideration for Canada and its queer population. The studies that do explore coming out in Canada are often limited to a specific space, setting, or subset of people. In a

[1] Here, and throughout this thesis, my use of the terms "West" and "Western" refers to North America, Europe, and Australia, based on where the studies I reviewed are set.

scoping review of the literature, spanning over 700 publications, Elisabeth Sandler (2022) identifies two works that explore coming out in Canada: one focusing on coming out within healthcare settings (Brotman et al., 2002, as cited in Sandler, 2022), and another on the coming out experiences of Canadian politicians (Everitt & Camp, 2014, as cited in Sandler, 2022). There is room to expand on coming out in Canada more broadly, either for an entire generation of queer people, or an entire generation of queer people within a certain geographic scope, be it a city, region, or province. Further, there is room to expand on coming out in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a city that, based on research and demographic statistics, has vibrant queer communities that hold stories, experiences, and characterizations worth sharing (Milmine, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2022). Also, as a city in Atlantic Canada, Halifax lies on the geographic periphery of dominant North American queer culture, and thus, requires attention.

With this thesis, I aim to add to this literature by exploring how contemporary young queer people, having grown up in an ostensibly more tolerant society, experience and characterize coming out, as well as how they see it as affecting their wellbeing. More specifically, I aim to add to this literature by exploring this in a comparatively neglected research context: Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. I approach wellbeing in a way that evades neoliberal co-optations that responsibilize the individual, instead using affectual, situational, and relational framings of the term, offered and nuanced by scholars who ground their work in affect theory (Atkinson, 2013, 2021) and queer theory (Ahmed, 2014). In short, I approach wellbeing as an effect that is shaped by, or dependent on our social surroundings (Atkinson, 2013), thus enabling a closer look at how external factors

inform it.[2] I also draw on a rich collection of theoretical approaches in the sociological literature on coming out that have proven useful, including social constructionism, stigma theory, and minority stress theory.

The research questions guiding me are as follows: *How do young queer people in Halifax, Nova Scotia experience and characterize coming out? Do young queer people in Halifax see coming out as affecting their wellbeing, and if so, how?* To answer them, I conducted interviews with and collected journal entries from twelve queer people between the ages of 18 and 25 living in the Halifax region. My findings are consistent with much of the sociological literature. Among participants, coming out is, indeed, a continuous endeavour that they manage across contexts and situations (for their protection, as well as to their benefit), and characterize as a relatively casual experience, suggesting a decreasing significance across generations, and over time. The findings also reveal that coming out can be beneficial, with positive effects — in terms of self-affirmation, and relationship and community building — as well as challenging, with negative effects — in terms of stressful, or discomforting moments of anticipation, and relationship strain among family and friends. This duality indicates that coming out is contextually or situationally complex, and that participants navigate spaces across which the intensity of heteronormativity, or homo/queerphobia, varies. While they spoke to the positive effects more emphatically, participants also described instances in which coming out is challenging, stressful, and has negative effects that persist. They manage the complexity of coming out reactions by continuously deciding whether or how to come out in their everyday lives.

[2] "Wellbeing" is defined in more depth in *Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Approaches*.

In this thesis, I focus on the experience of coming out with a queer sexual identity. This is distinct from coming out with a queer gender identity, which can involve unique components, such as sharing a new name. Also, the coming out experiences may differ given that much of the current anti-2SLGBTQ+ rhetoric and vitriol in Canada and elsewhere targets trans, nonbinary, and gender-diverse bodies (Aiello, 2023; Cuthbertson et al., 2023). That being said, sexual and gender identities are, in some ways, intertwined. For example, to engage in non-heterosexual love is to challenge and transgress traditional gender norms. Some participants discussed experiences of coming out with a sexual and gender identity relatedly, as on the same continuum or as one preceding the other. In these cases, coming out with a trans, nonbinary, or gender-diverse identity is included in the findings and discussion, as these participants themselves consider them to be similar, or related.

Positionality

There are several scholars in the sociological coming out literature whose work inspires me, and my approach to this thesis. One is Paula Rust (1995), whose contributions are often considered a turning point in this realm of inquiry. In *Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics: Sex, Loyalty, and Revolution*, Rust (1995) offers a compelling positionality statement: "I cannot help but superimpose my voice on [participants']. Simply by choosing which quotes to include and then by organizing this material, I place my stamp upon it. You should, therefore, know who I am" (p. 3). It is common practice among others who research coming out to disclose information about themselves, as well as their motivations for working in this realm (Adams, 2010; Guittar, 2011; Orne, 2011; Rosenberg, 2018). Inspired by Rust's (1995) statement, and the

practices modelled by others in the literature, I believe it is important that I locate myself in relation to my own research.

I identify as queer. At the time of writing this, I am 24 and live in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Coming out as a social phenomenon has fascinated me long before I began studying it sociologically in my undergraduate degree, in 2022. It is something my queer friends and I have discussed, and sometimes, lamented over at great lengths. I have had relatively easy coming out experiences. I never formally told my parents, but my queerness has been indirectly disclosed, or rather, revealed, and they were (and are) very supportive, like most people in my social circles. Yet there have still been instances in which speaking to my queerness proved difficult. My queer friends and I puzzled: why did we have to disclose our sexual identities in this way? It felt like an unnecessary categorization of our identities to soothe the wondering minds of others. Such lamentations often arrived at the same conclusion, that coming out is unfair. However, it is also what brought us together. Coming out, and discussing the shared experience, was how we bonded. Thus, my fascination with the process, and its place in queer life, was born. It was reignited when a friend of mine came out and had an exciting, yet tumultuous few months. They were exploring a more authentic version of themselves and celebrating this with friends, but at the same time, some people had adverse reactions, and some relationships fell apart. Motivated by this, I began to study coming out sociologically.

It is not lost on me that, at the time of conducting this research, and writing this thesis, I meet the eligibility criteria to participate. In this position, I am in effect conducting what some qualitative researchers, particularly anthropologists, call “insider

research" (Anderson, 2021; Berkovic et al., 2020). According to Danielle Berkovic et al. (2020), insider research is borne out of or relates to the lived experiences of the researcher. Berkovic et al. (2020) argue that this has the potential to enhance studies with a more nuanced and credible perspective, which I hope to have accomplished in the analysis discussed in later chapters. I also hope that, by conducting insider research, and locating myself in relation to this thesis, I have "equalized" the relationship (Berkovic et al., 2020) between myself and those who participated, to the extent that it is possible to do so in a researcher-led project.

Methods

To answer my research questions, I set out to interview and collect journal entries from people who identify with a queer sexual identity, between the ages of 18 and 25, living in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The age range was selected to unpack the experiences and characterizations of Halifax's emerging generation of queer people, who have grown up in what is presumably a more tolerant society. This age range also facilitates comparison with the sociological coming out literature, as many studies focus on similar age cohorts (Guittar, 2014; Orne, 2011, 2013; Rosenberg, 2018). In addition to spotlighting the context of Halifax, my geographic scope is logical for studying coming out, since queer experiences, communities, and politics vary geographically.

I recruited participants using a variety of approaches. I used in-person and digital mediums, postering in the Halifax region and sharing a digital poster via social media platforms. When physically postering, I prioritized high-traffic areas (e.g., coffee shops, including the queer-centric Glitter Bean Café, the Halifax Central Library, and university campuses, including Dalhousie and Saint Mary's Universities). Posters were hung with

permission from staff on site in spaces where that was required (i.e., Glitter Bean Café, Halifax Central Library, Saint Mary's University). I shared a digital poster on my personal social media accounts, encouraging those in my social circles to repost or share it with anyone they thought may be interested. Beyond postering and sharing on social media, I also sought and accepted support with dissemination from non-profit organizations with relevant community ties (e.g., the Community-Based Research Centre) and professors at Dalhousie University who were willing to share my poster with their students. Additionally, while I did not actively pursue this approach, I followed leads of snowball sampling when participants asked if they could refer people whom they thought may be interested in participating.

In the end, twelve individuals participated in the data collection activities. All of them sat down with me for an interview, and five of those interviewed submitted a journal entry afterwards. At the time of their participation, they identified as either lesbian, bisexual, queer, or asexual. They were between the ages of 18 and 25 and resided in the Halifax Regional Municipality. Though this information was not formally collected, multiple participants mentioned identifying with a trans, non-binary, or gender-diverse identity as well. One of the more glaring limitations of this thesis can be found in the diversity of participants. Again, though not formally collected, based on what participants shared, there was a lack of heterogeneity in terms of race, ethnicity, and class, among other social identities. The majority of participants were white, and all of them were either currently enrolled in university, or university-educated. This means that, for most part, their coming out experiences have not been complicated by other forms of

marginalization. Table 1 outlines the demographics and participation of the twelve participants.

Table 1

Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Pronouns	Sexual Identity	Participation
Adrien	23	She/Him	Asexual	Interview
Alexander	24	He/Him	Bisexual	Interview
Audrey	23	Any (She/Her)	Bisexual	Interview and Journal Entry
Clara	23	She/Her	Queer	Interview
Ella	23	She/They	Queer	Interview and Journal Entry
Fallon	21	She/They	Lesbian	Interview
Isla	20	She/Her	Bisexual	Interview
Luna	18	She/It	Lesbian	Interview and Journal Entry
Matthew	24	He/Him	Bisexual	Interview
Olive	25	She/They	Queer	Interview
Quinn	20	She/It	Queer	Interview and Journal Entry
Riley	23	She/They	Queer	Interview and Journal Entry

Interviews were conducted either virtually, via Microsoft Teams, or in person, in a quiet, comfortable location of the participant's choosing. They ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured in approach and nature, encouraging participants to discuss any aspects of their coming out experiences and characterizations they wanted to, and allowing further probing and follow-up questions on my end. The interview questions aimed to uncover participants' general coming out experiences and characterizations, as well as what they find beneficial, meaningful, challenging, and stressful regarding coming out, and the place of it in queer life more broadly (see Appendix A for the interview guide).

Participants were encouraged to submit a journal entry after their interview. I asked that they write about how they have come out or managed their sexual identity since the interview, if at all, and how it made them feel, as well as who they were with,

where they were, and any other details they felt were salient. They were also invited to write about and share anything they wanted to, treating their journal entry as an addendum to their interview. I suggested writing 100 to 500 words and submitting the journal entry within two weeks of their interview, though I did not enforce either guideline strictly and accepted all offerings. The five participants who submitted journal entries did so, via email, between two weeks and a month after their interview, and wrote between 173 and 893 words. When presenting interview quotes and journal entry excerpts, and referring to participants, I use pseudonyms.

I chose data collection activities (i.e., interviews and journal entries) based on what sociologists specializing in queer-focused research say about qualitative data, and in line with methodological trends in the sociological coming out literature. The value of qualitative data has been emphasized by several queer sociologists. For example, Mignon Moore (2018) notes that qualitative data uncovers everyday experiences, and the meanings ascribed to them, which includes important life events and social phenomena, such as coming out. Amin Ghaziani (2018) argues that quantitative methods are "abstracted from lived experiences" (p. 206). Additionally, the overwhelming majority of sociological studies on coming out adopt interviews as a method (Dunlap, 2014; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Grierson & Smith, 2005; Guittar, 2013a, Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; McCormack et al., 2014; McLean, 2007; Orne, 2013; Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2021; Rosenberg, 2018; Seidman et al., 1999).

The journal entries were largely inspired by the work of Jay Orne (2011) — a well-cited author in the sociological coming out literature — who collected written essays from their participants. Orne (2011) asserts that written data obtained directly from

participants supports “a participant-centered analysis” (2011, p. 686), as it prioritizes their perspectives, and how they themselves frame, structure, and understand their experiences. Explaining this further, and citing Bertram Cohler, Orne states that written data allows participants to be their own interviewers and provide data in which they narrate their stories on their terms (Cohler, 1994, as cited in Orne, 2011). While only five participants wrote and submitted journal entries, my aim was to offer them the opportunity to enhance the data I was collecting and tell a more complete story about their experiences that honours their perspectives.

Data (i.e., interview transcripts and journal entries) were analyzed using NVivo software. I conducted a qualitative thematic analysis, meaning I focused on identifying larger themes and motifs in the data (Guest et al., 2014). This supported me to locate and speak to overarching commonalities in the coming out experiences and characterizations of participants. I adopted a hybrid approach to data coding, using deductive and inductive coding. In coding the data deductively, I developed and used codes based on theory and literature, what some call “theory-driven” codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), and in coding the data inductively, I developed and used codes based on themes that emerged in the data as it was analyzed, what some call “data-driven” codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This hybrid approach was useful, as Jennifer Fereday and Eimear Muir-Cochrane (2006) note it allows for a rigorous, in-depth analysis. As the interview data was more robust than the journal entry data — there were twelve interview transcripts, and only five journal entries — the findings and discussion presented in later chapters are primarily based on what was said in the interviews, with journal entries providing supplementary and complementary evidence.

Ethical concerns were minimal; however, there was potential for discomfort among participants. Reflecting on and discussing coming out experiences may involve reflecting on and discussing difficult or traumatic events, such as adverse reactions from family and friends, or outright rejection. To account for this, participants were informed — via the consent form, as well as verbally before beginning the interview — that they were not required to answer *any* of the questions asked. They were also informed — again, via the consent form and verbally — that they could stop participating at any point (i.e., during the interview, or after the interview and before submitting their journal entry). Participants were also made aware that they could remove their data from the project up to one month after their participation was complete (i.e., up to one month after their interview, or after they submit their journal entry), if they decided they were no longer comfortable sharing their contributions. Lastly, after they participated in an interview, all participants were sent a list of phone lines, support services, and local queer organizations they could contact for either mental health support or a person with whom to talk.

Limitations

As with most research endeavours, this project has several limitations. The main limitation is the relatively small sample size, which gave way to other impediments. For example, stemming from the small sample size, there is a lack of diversity among those who participated. While the sample includes individuals who identify as lesbian, bisexual, queer, and asexual, providing a degree of diversity in terms of sexual identity, it does not encompass the full spectrum of sexual identities. Participants' experiences and characterizations cannot be generalized to those who identify with other sexual identities,

or those of broader queer communities (in Halifax, Nova Scotia, or beyond). Moreover, the sample could have been more diverse in terms of other social identities, such as race, ethnicity, and class. Based on what participants shared, most of them are white, and all of them are either currently enrolled in university, or university-educated. The latter is likely due to my recruitment efforts on university campuses and through university professors; however, recruiting in these spaces and networks was in response to time limitations. Given more time — and funding — a larger and more diverse, representative sample could have been recruited, providing a broader range of experiences and characterizations.

Organization

This thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 2 is a literature review that explores common ideas and theoretical approaches in the sociological coming out literature. Chapter 2 also establishes definitions for key terms, including coming out, queer, heteronormativity, and wellbeing, and presents a glimpse into the history, life, and experiences of queer communities in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to contextualize this thesis. Chapters 3 through 5 present and discuss findings from data collection activities and the subsequent analysis. Chapter 3 answers the first research question — *How do young queer people in Halifax, Nova Scotia experience and characterize coming out?* — and unpacks three themes related to participants' coming out experiences and characterizations: coming out as (1) continuous and unending, (2) strategically managed, and (3) relatively casual. Chapters 4 and 5 answer the second research question — *Do young queer people in Halifax see coming out as affecting their wellbeing, and if so, how?* — and consider instances in which, or ways that coming out affects participants'

wellbeing. Chapter 4 focuses on the positive effects and discusses how participants experience self-affirmation or relationship and community building through coming out, while Chapter 5 focuses on the negative effects and discusses how participants experience anticipation in the moments preceding coming out, or sometimes, relationship strain afterwards. Lastly, Chapter 6 offers concluding remarks, including the social implications of this thesis, and potential directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Approaches

Queer-focused research — of which coming out research is a subsection — has a rich history that spans several disciplines and includes a myriad of ideas and theoretical approaches. According to queer sociologist Ken Plummer (1992), the way scholars thought about homosexuality shifted in the 1950s and 60s, around the same time the gay rights movement was gaining momentum. While it was originally, and almost exclusively understood in medical or pathological terms, the subject was taken up by scholars interested in its social, cultural, and political components (Plummer, 1992). In the decades that followed, homosexuality — along with coming out, and queerness more broadly — was discussed across various disciplines, including psychology, sexology, and sociology (Plummer, 1992).

In this chapter, I provide an overview of common ideas and theoretical approaches in sociological coming out research. After establishing definitions for some key terms (i.e., coming out, queer, heteronormativity, and wellbeing), I begin with the constructionist turn in the literature, where sociologists responded to ideas stemming from disciplines like psychology and sexology, and demonstrated the value of using a social constructionist lens in this realm of inquiry. Then, I delve into more recent sociological works and the aspects of coming out they explore, including how queer people come out, the ways they manage it, the significance of the process, and the positive meanings they ascribe to it. I also discuss what these works reveal about how coming out may affect queer people's wellbeing, and some of the theories they use, including Erving Goffman's (1986) stigma theory, and Ilan Meyer's (1995, 2003) minority stress theory. To contextualize this thesis, I then present a snapshot of queer

history, life, and experiences in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where I conducted my research, using a combination of research accounts and studies, and news media. I conclude by explaining how this thesis contributes to the sociological coming out literature.

Queer Terminology

As noted by several sociologists, there is no singular, universally accepted definition of "coming out" (Davies, 1992; Guittar, 2013a; Orne, 2011). It originates from the phrase "coming out of the closet," which speaks to patterns of secrecy and disclosure that some consider (or considered) to be inherent qualities of queer life (Saguy, 2020; Seidman et al., 1999). Today, it is often used without reference to "the closet," and without definition, resulting in what Jay Orne (2011) calls, "conceptual inflation." According to Orne (2011), this means the phrase has accumulated several definitions, and is increasingly detached from historical and theoretical underpinnings. That being said, most sociologists use the phrase "coming out" to refer to a transformative exchange — or a series of transformative exchanges — in which a person discloses or reveals a non-heterosexual identity to those around them, including family, friends, and others in close social proximity (Guittar, 2013a). Communication and media scholars update and expand this definition, demonstrating that, in the age of social media, queer people not only come out to those in close social proximity, but also to "the world" (De Ridder & Dhaenens, 2019; Lovelock, 2019; Wei, 2023). In this thesis, I primarily use the term to refer to the disclosure or revelation of a non-heterosexual identity to others in close social proximity and beyond.

Similarly, precise definitions of "queer" vary, and have varied over time. Scholarship from before and into the twenty-first century tends to avoid the term, which

was then considered a slur. However, since it was reclaimed by political activists, scholarly works have embraced "queer" as an umbrella term for all sexual and/or gender identities outside of heterosexual and cisgender (Guittar, 2014; Orne, 2011, 2013; Rosenberg, 2018). Additionally, some scholars began using it politically, to challenge heteronormativity and/or cisnormativity, and to invoke nonconformity and "anti-identitarianism" (Wiegman & Wilson, 2015). In this thesis, I primarily use "queer" as an umbrella term for all sexual identities outside of heterosexual (and all gender identities outside of cisgender, when applicable).

To properly understand coming out, I must also define "heteronormativity," which refers to the societal positioning of heterosexuality as the normal and privileged sexual identity, and the consequent framing of non-heterosexuality as the exception (Guittar, 2014). There are many concepts stemming from queer theory and used across the queer literature that refer to heteronormativity or similar phenomena. For example, in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (2008), queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick speaks to heteronormativity through her conceptualization of the "homo/hetero distinction." Sedgwick (2008) explains that contemporary Western society is rigidly and inescapably organized around this distinction, and that it classifies and hierarchizes all aspects of life. Consider "compulsory heterosexuality" too, a concept first popularized by feminist Adrienne Rich (2003/1980). In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), queer theorist Sara Ahmed defines compulsory heterosexuality as "the accumulative effect of the repetition of the narrative of heterosexuality as an ideal coupling — shap[ing] what it is possible for bodies to do, even if it does not contain what it is possible to be" (p. 145). In a heteronormative society — or a society that abides by the homo/hetero distinction, or

compulsory heterosexuality — heterosexuality is assumed, and further, expected of everyone. Any other sexual identity must be disclosed or revealed through coming out. While Sedgwick's (2008) homo/hetero distinction is an invaluable contribution to the queer literature, in this thesis, I primarily use heteronormativity and Ahmed's (2014) definition of compulsory heterosexuality to refer to the societal positioning of heterosexuality as normal and privileged, despite social progress and the significant legal protections of Canadian queer people.

Wellbeing

"Wellbeing," another one of this thesis' key terms, is also used without definition and in varied ways, across queer-focused research and in other realms. Sarah Atkinson (2013, 2021) explains that many, including psychologists and policy researchers, use the term in vague and narrow ways that are consistent with neoliberal ideologies that responsibilize the individual. These groups often understand wellbeing as a condition that can be acquired and embodied through individual-level actions (Atkinson, 2013, 2021). Social scientists assert that such individualization positions poor wellbeing, or the absence of wellbeing, as a personal issue, and ignores social, cultural, and spatial factors (Atkinson, 2013, 2021; Cahill, 2015; Smith & Reid, 2018). In turn, individual choices and behaviours are blamed if a person experiences poor health, or what we may call "illbeing." As Atkinson (2021) argues, this approach "detracts political attention and intervention away from the deep-rooted structural inequalities and social determinants of wellbeing" (p. 3). Borrowing ideas from affect theories that prioritize a decentering of the individual, Atkinson (2013) frames wellbeing as an effect that is shaped by, or dependent on "situatedness" and "relationality." It is not static, or internal, but dynamic, and

external. It is "simultaneously unstable or able to be destabilized … as a set of effects produced in specific times and places" (Atkinson, 2013, p. 142). This framing highlights that our wellbeing is a matter of how we are situated within, relate to, and feel our social surroundings, and our social environment.

Sara Ahmed's work (2004a, 2004b, as cited in Atkinson, 2013; 2014) lends itself to this more affectual, situational, and relational framing of wellbeing, with the added utility of doing so through the lens of queer theory, and with direct applicability to queer people, and queer experiences. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), Ahmed posits that how we fit into our culture, norms, and those dominant narratives and scripts with which we contend every day shapes our feelings, lives, bodies, and possibilities of being. This fit (or lack of fit) informs how comfortable we are and whether we can feel at ease in a space. Thus, queer people's feelings, including comfort, are informed or constrained through everyday interactions with compulsory heterosexuality — *heteronormative* culture, norms, narratives, and scripts. Through interacting with compulsory heterosexuality, or what Ahmed (2014) sometimes refers to as "the 'comforts' of heterosexuality," queer people may feel discomforted, disoriented, or "out of place, awkward, [and] unsettled" (p. 148). She asserts that these feelings, among other negative effects, arise through repeatedly encountering and failing to reproduce heteronormative assumptions and expectations. Consider what Ahmed (2014) says about the process of coming out, and continuously asserting and concealing queerness:

> Queer subjects feel the tiredness of making corrections and departures; the pressure of this insistence, … this demand that asks either for a 'passing over' (a moment of passing, which is not always available) or for direct or indirect forms of self-revelation. … No matter how 'out' you may be, how (un)comfortably queer you may feel, those moments of interpellation get repeated over time, and

> can be experienced as bodily injury. … The everydayness of compulsory heterosexuality is also its affectiveness. (p. 147)

Conversely, Ahmed (2014) notes that queer people's comfort is informed or supported through frequenting or occupying spaces of queer joy and pleasure. In these spaces, queer people may feel comforted, or otherwise positively affected. They may be exposed to new possibilities — new ways of being, and communities previously unavailable to them due to the regulative nature of everyday manifestations of compulsory heterosexuality, or heteronormativity (Ahmed, 2014).

Scholars like Ahmed (2014) and Atkinson (2013, 2021) underscore that our wellbeing is not a condition we can achieve through individual agency alone. It is also an effect dependent on our social surroundings, and the culture, norms, narratives, and scripts we grapple with every day. Guided by these framings, in this thesis, I define and approach wellbeing along affectual, situational, and relational lines, as dynamically produced and reproduced via social, cultural, and spatial factors (Atkinson, 2013). In addition to defining wellbeing in a way that captures the external factors that shape it, these framings suggest meaningful interventions at communal and societal levels that avoid the neoliberal tendency to responsibilize the individual by (over)emphasizing the role of individual-level actions. As Atkinson (2013) explains, understanding wellbeing as affectual, situational, and relational helps us shift our focus "away from how to enhance the resources for wellbeing centered on individual acquisition and towards attending to the social, material, and spatially situated relationships through which individual and collective wellbeing are effected" (p. 142).

The Constructionist Turn

As previously stated, homosexuality — along with coming out as homosexual — was discussed across a variety of disciplines in the late twentieth century, including psychology, sexology, and sociology. Among psychologists and sexologists, a common approach was to conceptualize "homosexual identity formation," which involves coming out, using staged development models (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982). While many were proposed, notable models emerge in the works of psychologist Vivienne Cass (1979) and sexologist Eli Coleman (1982). Cass (1979) proposes a six-stage model — identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis — and Coleman (1982) proposes a five-stage model — pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationships, and integration. Both Cass (1979) and Coleman (1982) avoid concepts of illness, or other pathologizing language, and note that social circumstances influence how an individual experiences the stages of their models. However, they conceptualize homosexual identity formation and coming out in rigid and incomplete ways, mischaracterizing it as a static linear process that queer people pass through to become happier, healthier, and achieve psychological maturity (Rust, 1993). They frame coming out as a uniformly, or at least mostly positive experience that is necessary for health, wellbeing, and vitality. Put simply, these models are laden with essentialist ideas about sexual identity, and its disclosure or revelation.

Sociologists often identify the Cass (1979) and Coleman (1982) models as a starting point in the coming out literature and position their research as critiques of, or responses to them, while adopting and demonstrating the value of a social constructionist lens (Davies, 1992; Jenness, 1992; McLean, 2007; Rust, 1993). This reflects patterns in

the broader queer literature, where sociologists have historically contributed to the discourse using social constructionism, and are credited as escalating essentialist/constructionist debates (Plummer, 1992). As queer- and sexuality-focused research and theory proliferated in the late twentieth century, sociologists moved away from studying "the homosexual" as an individual, instead focusing on societal reactions to, and social constructions of homosexuality, and sexuality (Plummer,1992). Notable accounts of sexuality as historicized and embedded in social context arise in the works of Michel Foucault (1979, as cited in Plummer 1992) and later, David Halperin (1990, as cited in Plummer, 1992). Ken Plummer (1992) describes this turn to the social as sociology's "key achievement" (p. 8) in sexuality scholarship.

At the forefront of this turn in the coming out literature was Paula Rust (1993). Drawing on her quantitative analysis of survey responses from lesbian and bisexual women, she argues that coming out is not universally experienced, and cannot be conceptualized as a linear process that occurs in a series of neatly delineated stages, with a clear beginning and end. Rust (1993) conceptualizes coming out as being informed by social context, by sociopolitical structures that surround an individual, and by the social constructions (e.g., sexual identity labels) available to them.

Rust's (1993) social constructionist approach — which aligns with and is echoed in other sociological works (Davies, 1992; Jenness, 1992; McCormack et al., 2014; McLean, 2007; Orne, 2011; Seidman, 2015) — sheds light on nuances of the coming out process, including how it differs with social context. This approach understands sexual identities as being ascribed different meanings and being constructed in different ways across social contexts (Jenness, 1992; McLean, 2007; Rust, 1993; Seidman, 2015). Social

constructionism reveals that some individuals may find coming out more challenging in certain contexts, and/or may not come out until they enter a context in which queer sexual identities — or a specific queer sexual identity, be it gay, lesbian, bisexual, or another — are ascribed positive meanings, and constructed (or perhaps *reconstructed*) as desirable (Jenness, 1992; McLean, 2007; Rust, 1993; Seidman, 2015). For instance, consider the following scenario, presented in Steven Seidman's (2015) *The Social Construction of Sexuality*:

> A high school student hearing derogatory comments about 'fags' and 'dykes' may begin to associate homosexuality with a stigmatized identity. This same individual may eventually be exposed to a gay subculture that champions a view of homosexuality as natural and good. (p. 26)

Seidman (2015) highlights that coming out with a gay or queer sexual identity, may not be a viable option until it is constructed as natural and good, or perhaps desirable and congruent with an individual's lived experience. We can also turn to the work of Kirsten McLean (2007). Using a qualitative analysis of interview responses, she demonstrates that bisexuality is often constructed as a transitional or illegitimate sexual identity. In turn, coming out as bisexual can be difficult in unique ways, and many choose not to come out in certain social contexts.

Social constructionism, as articulated by several scholars (Rosenberg, 2018; Rust, 1993; Seidman, 2015), also speaks to the fluidity of sexual identities and the enduring nature of coming out. An individual may come out with one sexual identity in one social context, and another as they enter a new social context or encounter new constructions or reconstructions of queer sexual identities that resonate with them (Rosenberg, 2018; Rust, 1993). Identities can change, shift, and evolve with social context, and over the life course. As Seidman (2015) claims, sexual identities are, in a sense, learned — the

terminology and labels emerge through socialization and learning processes. Consider the following scenario, in which Rust (1993) describes a process of adopting and disclosing a new sexual identity in response to a new experience : “When [a lesbian woman] falls in love with a man, she may begin to call herself a bisexual in order to acknowledge this relationship” (p. 70).

In sum, social constructionism is an invaluable theoretical approach in coming out research. It unpacks the context-dependent nature of the process, and how coming out endures as people move through social contexts and encounter new constructions over time. Moreover, it challenges the idea that coming out is a simple linear process with a clear beginning and end, universally experienced, that supports queer people to become happier, healthier, and psychologically mature. Instead, social constructionism reveals how coming out is subjectively experienced, and suggests ways the process can affect an individual’s wellbeing depending on how they are situated within, relate to, and feel their social surroundings (Atkinson, 2013). For example, an individual who mainly interacts with other queer people or inhabits social circles where queer sexual identities are constructed with positive connotations may experience coming out as a positive effect — as easy and comforting. However, an individual who inhabits social circles where queer sexual identities are constructed with negative connotations may experience coming out as negative, challenging, or discomforting. Alternatively, they may not come out at all. Coming out, and whether or how it affects an individual’s wellbeing, is shaped by, and further, *depends* on social context. As Rust (1993) says, coming out “is the process of describing oneself in terms of [available] social constructs, rather than a process of discovering one’s essence” (p. 68).

Recent Sociological Works

Following the constructionist turn, throughout the 1990s and twenty-first century, social scientists have discussed several aspects of coming out. Two aspects are commonly discussed and relevant to this thesis: (1) how queer people come out, and how they manage their coming out endeavours (Adams, 2010; Davies, 1992; Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Orne, 2011, 2013), and (2) the significance of coming out (i.e., its importance to queer people, and in queer life), and the positive meanings queer people ascribe to it (Dunlap, 2014; Grierson & Smith, 2005; Guittar, 2013a; Rosenberg, 2018; Saguy, 2020; Seidman, 2003; Seidman et al., 1999). Sociologists who discuss these aspects allude to how coming out may affect an individual's wellbeing, negatively and positively.

Studies focused on how queer people come out, and the ways they manage their coming out endeavours build on Rust's (1993) arguments, agreeing that earlier staged models incorrectly assume coming out begins and ends (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; Orne, 2011). Nicholas Guittar and Rachel Rayburn (2016) provide a conceptualization of coming out that evades this assumption. They conceptualize the process as a "career." They explain that there is no end to coming out, nor is the process necessarily goal-oriented, as queer people will always have to disclose or reveal their sexual identities as they enter new social circles, and meet new people, due to the prevalence of heteronormative assumptions and expectations. Importantly, Guittar and Rayburn (2016) note that the unending nature of coming out is not only a matter of continuously disclosing a queer sexual identity, but also a matter of continuously *managing* a queer sexual identity. They assert that coming out "is a perpetually *managed* [emphasis added]

social endeavour that requires concurrent internal and external identity management" (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016, p. 352-353).

This idea is also taken up by Jay Orne (2011), who argues that coming out is an ongoing, *strategically* managed endeavour. While sociologists across the literature posit that queer people manage coming out (Adams, 2010; Davies, 1992; Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004), Orne's (2011) account is well-cited, perhaps due to their distinct characterization of this management as strategic. In a qualitative analysis of written essays from gay men, he finds that, in certain spaces, coming out can feel like the revelation of "explosive knowledge" — knowledge that, if revealed, will result in unwanted or dangerous outcomes. Thus, sometimes, instead of directly disclosing their sexual identity, gay men use subtle clues, or conceal it all together, depending on who they are with, and how they anticipate they will react to their coming out (Orne, 2011). Orne (2011) takes this further, asserting that coming out in its entirety is a process of identity *management*, rather than a process of identity *development*. They coin the term "strategic outness," which, like ideas articulated by Rust (1993) and Guittar and Rayburn (2016), avoids conceptualizing coming out as something that can be completed, and instead, speaks to "the contextual and continual management of identity in which people are never fully 'out' or 'closeted'" (Orne, 2011, p. 698). While Orne (2011) initially focuses on gay men, in later works, they use strategic outness to discuss the experiences of a broader sample of queer people (i.e., people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer), demonstrating the wider applicability of the concept (Orne, 2013). The utility and relevance of strategic outness is also evidenced in studies that cite or draw on it and analyze the experiences of people who identify with other queer sexual and/or gender

identities, including those that consider multiple LGBTQ identities (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2021) or focus on a specific identity, such as asexual (Mollet, 2023).

Nicholas Guittar (2013b, 2014) similarly explores the ways queer people manage their coming out endeavours, but with close attention to linguistic strategies. Through qualitatively analyzing interview responses from people who identify as gay, lesbian, pansexual, and queer, he finds that, sometimes, depending on where they are, queer people linguistically modify their coming out to make it more palatable either for those around them, or for themselves, to satisfy internalized heteronormativity or homo/queerphobia. For instance, they may come out with what they believe to be a more palatable sexual identity, such as "bisexual" instead of "gay" or "lesbian" (Guittar, 2013b), or with an affinity instead of any sexual identity, such as "I like girls" instead of "I am lesbian" (Guittar, 2014). Guittar (2014) also notes that coming out with an affinity can be a personal decision. He explains that, in contemporary Western society, where understandings of sexuality are increasingly less binary, queer youth may come out with affinities to avoid rigidly categorizing and typifying their sexual identities.

The works of sociologists like Guittar (2013b, 2014) and Orne (2011, 2013) capture how coming out can negatively affect queer people's wellbeing depending on how they are situated within, relate to, and feel their social surroundings (Atkinson, 2013), and more specifically, the people they interact with, and the spaces they frequent or occupy. Both Guittar (2013b, 2014) and Orne (2011, 2013) note that queer people manage coming out to make it more feasible, which implies that sometimes, in certain spaces, it may not feel totally feasible to begin with. The queer people in their studies use strategies in spaces where they anticipate negative, disapproving, or hostile reactions —

where they do not want to stray too far away from societal norms, or, as one of Guittar's (2014) participants says, where they want to "hold onto normality" (p. 399). In these spaces, where coming out feels less feasible, it may also feel challenging, discomforting, or threatening to the quality and strength of their relationships.

Orne (2011, 2013) and Guittar (2013b) — among many other sociologists in the coming out literature (Adams, 2010; Davies, 1992; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004) — approach their research through the lens of Erving Goffman's stigma theory. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (1986), Goffman organizes stigmatized identities into two groups: (1) identities that are "discredited," that cannot be hidden and are immediately known in any interaction, and (2) identities that are "discreditable," that *can* be hidden, and are *not* immediately known. According to Goffman (1986), those with discreditable stigmatized identities, or as he so aptly calls them, "the discreditable," consistently control information about their stigma, and decide "to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where" (p. 42). This theorizing resonates with the kind of strategic identity management that many queer people, whose sexual identities can be considered discreditable stigmatized identities, engage in by coming out, deciding not to, or deciding how to across the spaces they frequent or occupy in their everyday lives.[3] Thus, Goffman's (1986) theory is used by sociologists to unpack some of the complexities of coming out, namely the ways queer people contextually and strategically manage their coming out endeavours on an ongoing basis.

[3] Of course, queerness is not always "discreditable" (i.e., something that can be hidden). There are instances in which a person may be visibly interpreted as queer based on physical attributes, behaviour, or situation, whether they are "out" or not.

Other sociologists in the coming out literature focus on the significance of the process, or its importance to queer people, and in queer life. Notably, Steven Seidman, in both an article co-authored with Chet Meeks and Francie Traschen (1999) and in *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life* (2003), argues that, in contemporary Western society, the notion of "coming out of the closet" does not carry the significance it once did. In a qualitative analysis of interview responses from people who identify as either gay, lesbian, or bisexual, Seidman et al. (1999) find that coming out, and associated analogies of being "in" or "out" of "the closet," have become less representative of queer life over the past twenty or so years. They attribute this to advancements in the acceptance and visibility of queerness, as well as increased, yet incomplete "normalization" and "routinization" — queerness is more commonly understood as normal, and more consistently integrated into everyday life. Consequently, they argue, we are "beyond the closet," and coming out is less about shame, secrecy, and disclosing or revealing queerness, and more about navigating "a public life that integrates homosexuality [or queerness] while still making decisions about disclosure" (Seidman et al., 1999, p. 19).

Seidman et al. (1999) also note that, while coming out was once valued as a "supreme political act" (p. 10), this is no longer the case. This shift is evidenced across queer history. At the height of the gay rights movement, in the 1960s and 1970s, coming out "became political" (Saguy, 2020, p. 13). In 1978, gay and lesbian activists in the United States came out so they could mobilize and fight against Proposition 6 (also known as the Briggs Initiative), which would have prohibited their employment in public schools in California (Carter, 1992; Saguy, 2020). Then, throughout the AIDS epidemic,

in the 1980s and 1990s, coming out and declaring queerness against widespread ostracism was almost inherently political (Carter, 1992; Saguy, 2020). Radical groups that relied on outness, visibility, and "confrontational methods" emerged, such as *Queer Nation* in the United States, and *OutRage!* In Britain (Carter, 1992). There was also the *AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power* (ACT UP), an international group whose posters famously read "SILENCE = DEATH" (Saguy, 2020, p. 19). Today, however, the political implications of coming out (as queer) appear less potent. Like Seidman et al. (1999), Abigail Saguy (2020) asserts that coming out was once politically charged among queer people, but its significance has evolved. She explains that coming out is taking on new meanings, and becoming political in new ways, as other social movements adopt the phrase, including the fat acceptance movement, the undocumented immigrant movement, and the "Me Too" movement.

Comparably, intergenerational studies find that, while coming out was once characterized as a more intense, emotionally charged "rupture" from a past life, it is increasingly characterized as an easier, more gradual, affirming process (Grierson & Smith, 2005), which also speaks, or at least alludes to a decreasing significance. Jeffrey Grierson and Anthony Smith (2005), through qualitatively analyzing interview responses from three generations of gay men who came out before, during, and after the AIDS epidemic, find that, for those in the older generations, coming out was more of a crisis marked by a sense of necessity or inevitability. It revolved around a specific disclosure, or telling, which was typically to parents. In contrast, they find that for the youngest generation, "gay identity appears less often as a transitional crisis and more often as a developmental consolidation" (Grierson & Smith, 2005, p. 67). Andy Dunlap (2014)

offers similar findings but for a broader sample of queer people (i.e., individuals who identify as either gay, lesbian, or bisexual). In a mixed-method analysis of survey responses, he finds that younger generations of queer people feel "less of a need to break away from their old life" (Dunlap, 2014, p. 330) when coming out, and do not encounter the same feelings or components of "separation" and "reintegration" that older generations did.[4] Intergenerational studies also find that queer people are coming out for the first time at increasingly earlier ages, often as teenagers instead of adults (Dunlap, 2014; Grierson & Smith, 2005; Van Bergen et al., 2021).

However, this is not to suggest that coming out has lost all significance, or that it is no longer valued by queer people. It may not be the political act or intense rupture it once was, but coming out continues to be impactful in queer people's lives. For example, among the queer people he interviewed, Nicholas Guittar (2013a) finds that coming out is ascribed three meanings with positive connotations: (1) it is a personal journey of or to self-affirmation, (2) it is the sharing of an important piece of who they are with those close to them, particularly their parents, family, and friends, and (3) it serves as both self-affirmation *and* as sharing a piece of themselves with others; it is "full disclosure." Shoshana Rosenberg (2018) makes an argument that aligns with and builds on Guittar's (2013a) findings. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of interview responses from people who identify as either gay, bisexual, or queer, she argues that coming out involves achieving self-affirmation, and not simply sharing a piece of oneself with others, but

[4] Grierson and Smith (2005) and Dunlap's (2014) studies are fairly limited in terms of diversity. Grierson and Smith (2005) note that educational attainment is relatively high in their sample, while Dunlap (2014) notes that the majority of his participants are white. Neither study says much about cultural and/or religious backgrounds. Thus, it is likely that coming out may still be a rupture, crisis, or break away for queer people in other social locations.

further, sharing a piece of oneself and cultivating relationships with fellow queer people, and entering a queer community in which one feels a sense of belonging and mutual understanding. Rosenberg (2018) demonstrates that coming out is meaningful in queer people's lives as it can involve "stepping into a space where they [feel] at one with themselves" (p. 1804). She conceptualizes coming out as "coming in" — coming *into* a community, as well as coming *into* oneself.[5]

Coming out as a means of entering a community of queer people has been discussed across the queer literature, dating back to Kath Weston's (1991) *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. In this renowned text, Weston (1991) posits that, through coming out, queer people open themselves to the possibility of making an impactful transition from primarily *biological* families to more supportive *chosen* families. While Weston's (1991) account of coming out as a means of entering a community aligns more with earlier generations' characterizations of coming out as a "rupture" or break from a past life (Dunlap, 2014; Grierson & Smith, 2005), it demonstrates that coming out has served as an entry point into more nurturing communities historically, as well as into the present day. The meanings explored by scholars like Guittar (2013a) and Rosenberg (2018), as well as Weston (1991), indicate that, sometimes, coming out may positively affect queer people's wellbeing. It may feel self-affirming, grant an individual the opportunity to share something about themselves with those close to them, or support them in entering a community that is supportive and conducive to their authentic selves.

[5] The phrase "coming in" has been used by other scholars in similar ways. Alex Wilson (2015) uses it in relation to Two-Spirit identity, describing a process of affirming, and becoming "fully present" in onself.

Using social constructionism, we can deduce that these meanings are context dependent. Those who inhabit queer-friendly social circles may be more likely to experience coming out as a positive effect and ascribe one of these meanings to it. Conversely, those who inhabit social circles with hostile attitudes towards queerness may be more likely to experience coming out as a negative effect — challenging, discomforting, or threatening to the quality and strength of their relationships. Moreover, while we have seen advancements in terms of acceptance and visibility, as well as legal protections, heteronormativity and homo/queerphobia persist, and queer people today navigate a complex and "uneven" sociopolitical terrain, with spaces across which attitudes towards queerness vary (Keene et al., 2022; McCormack et al., 2014). Thus, they often engage in contextual, strategic identity management, as captured in Orne's (2011) strategic outness.

There is literature that suggests contending with disparity and unevenness, managing coming out endeavours, and degrees of outness across different spaces may negatively impact wellbeing. For example, some scholars refer to the constant identity management that queer people engage in as a strenuous, "unstable state of affairs" (Davies, 1992, p. 82), or as a "revolving door where one's degree of self-disclosure depends on the context," and further, an added "layer of complexity to everyday interactions that the nonstigmatized are less likely to encounter" (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004, p. 822). Recall Sara Ahmed's (2014) work too, in which she describes the ongoing, repetitive practice of asserting and concealing queerness as tiresome, and "experienced as bodily injury" (p. 147). Additionally, Rin Reczek and Emma Bosley-Smith (2021) demonstrate that this identity management can be particularly challenging or burdensome

when it is what they call “conflict work” — an effort to avoid disagreement to maintain important relationships, such as those shared with parents. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of interviews with queer youth, and supplementary interviews with some of their parents, Reczek and Bosley-Smith (2021) illustrate that identity management in the form of conflict work is not only strenuous, but also compromising of fundamental relationships, and thus, at the expense of personal needs.

Several studies demonstrate that the contextual complexity of coming out is exacerbated by other social identities. Steven Seidman (2003) notes that race and class, among other social identities, can impact whether an individual comes out to their family, because of the need preserve connections to racialized communities, or financial dependency. Research focused on how race and ethnicity intersect with queerness to mutually construct the coming out process offers further elaboration. Using their mixed-method analysis of survey and interview responses, Lisa Bowleg et al. (2009) highlight how, for Black lesbian and bisexual women, “the decision to come out to family members [is] often compounded by the need to maintain ties to African American communities” (p. 160). Similarly, Carlos Gerena and Stefanie Pilkay (2024) qualitatively analyze survey responses to show that, for Latino gay men, deciding whether to come out to family can be stressful due to the values upheld in their culture (e.g., traditional masculinity, religiosity), and the consequent fear of jeopardizing familial, as well as communal bonds.

Coming out and being out in queer spaces can also be more complicated for racialized people. Western queer culture and politics have been critiqued for centering, and being more representative of the white experience (Hutchinson, 2000; Logie &

Rwigema, 2014), with some equating coming out to "coming into whiteness" (Connell, 2010, as cited in Saguy, 2020, p. 24). Thus, racialized people contend with "multiple axes of identity and oppression" (Hutchinson, 2000, p. 1382), and may confront negative reactions, or rejection, from both racial and ethnic, as well as queer spaces and communities, through coming out.

LGBTQ Indigenous people also contend with multiple axes of oppression, and face negative reactions or rejection across multiple spaces. Alex Wilson (2008) explains that many Indigenous cultures once honoured sexual and gender diversity, but their "traditional teachings, ways of being, spirituality, and languages were disrupted and displaced through the processes of colonization, Christianization and assimilation" (p. 3). Consequently, today, some of their practices perpetuate the exclusion, violence, and homo/queerphobia that LGBTQ Indigenous people are subjected to in other spaces, and broader society (Wilson, 2008). That being said, Wilson (2008) notes that work is underway at the grassroots level to recover sovereignty over Indigenous bodies, sexual identities, and gender expressions, and to resist oppressive colonial, Christian, and assimilationist ideologies.

Minority Stress

Some sociologists use the concept of "minority stress," as theorized by epidemiologist Ilan Meyer (1995, 2003), to consider how coming out, and ongoing queer identity management can affect stress levels, as well as health and wellbeing (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Keene et al., 2022; McCormack et al., 2014). Minority stress theory — developed in reference to the experiences of gay men (1995), and later expanded to account for various queer sexual identities (2003) — posits that "minority stress" is the

unique or excess stress that queer people contend with due to their status as minoritized individuals. Meyer (1995, 2003) asserts that it is not only experiences of overt homo/queerphobia through which minority stress is produced, but also queer people's everyday experiences as minoritized individuals in heteronormative society. As he explains:

> Minority group members are exposed to negative life events related to their stigmatization and discrimination. However, minority stress arises not only from negative events, but from the totality of the minority person's experience in dominant society. At the centre of this experience is the incongruence between the minority person's culture, needs, and experience, and societal structure. (Meyer, 1995, p. 39)

Sociologists who use Meyer's (1995, 2003) theory show that coming out can serve as an everyday experience in which queer people feel the abovementioned incongruence, and through which minority stress can be produced (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Keene et al., 2022; McCormack et al., 2014). For example, in a qualitative analysis of interview responses from gay men, Paul Flowers and Katie Buston (2001) find that coming out and managing a gay identity against heteronormative assumptions and expectations can bring about feelings of difference, alienation, and isolation, as well as inner conflict, due to internalized heteronormativity or homophobia. Consequently, they argue that coming out, in a specific instance, and as an ongoing, managed endeavour, can be a conduit for minority stress.

While used to a lesser extent than theories like social constructionism or Goffman's (1986) stigma theory, minority stress theory is useful to consider when discussing coming out. It aligns with the affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing by which I am guided in this thesis. I approach wellbeing as an effect that is dependent on how we are situated within, relate to, and feel our social surroundings

(Atkinson, 2013), and for queer people, as an effect dependent on interacting with compulsory heterosexuality, or *heteronormative* culture, norms, narratives, and scripts (Ahmed, 2014). Similarly, minority stress theory speaks to stress that is a product of the incongruence between queer people and heteronormative society. Both theoretical approaches capture how feelings such as comfort and stress are influenced by, or dependent on external factors and our social environment.

Meyer (2003) urges researchers who use minority stress theory to avoid viewing queer people as "resilient actors," because, in doing so, they become responsibilized for their oppression, and how they handle it. This recalls how affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing avoid neoliberally responsibilizing the individual (Atkinson, 2013, 2021). Meyer (2003) explains that viewing queer people in this way risks "shifting [the] view of prejudice, seeing it as a subjective stressor — an adversity to cope with and overcome — rather than as an objective evil to be abolished" (p. 697). Thus, in addition to comparably underscoring the salience of our social surroundings in shaping how we feel, and our health and wellbeing, minority stress theory evades individual responsibilization, aligning with my affectual, situational, and relational approach to wellbeing, and supporting me in suggesting meaningful interventions at communal and societal levels.

It is noteworthy that, while originally theorized and tested in the 1990s and early 2000s, minority stress theory remains analytically relevant today, despite increased social acceptance and legal protections (Frost et al., 2022; Keene et al., 2022; McCormack et al., 2014). Through quantitatively analyzing survey responses, a more recent study by Meyer and others finds a negative association between minority stressors (e.g., felt

stigma, internalized stigma, concealment) and self-rated health and wellbeing across three age cohorts of people who identify with a queer sexual identity, with the youngest cohort having grown up in today's more accepting sociopolitical climate (Frost et al., 2022). Additionally, Mark McCormack et al. (2014), who draw on minority stress theory, note that, even when homo/queerphobia is less prevalent, difference or incongruence can be felt. These scholars show that, despite social progress, queer people today still contend with minority stress, and still experience feelings, or internalizations, of stigma, difference, and incongruence.

Queer Halifax

I conducted my research in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and it is important that I discuss queer history, life, and experiences in the city to contextualize the study and my results. While documentation of Halifax's queer history is limited, Rebecca Rose (2019) offers an insightful account of queer life in the city throughout most of the 1970s and into the mid-80s in *Before the Parade: A History of Halifax's Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Communities, 1972-1984*. Pieced together through archival research and conversations with gay, lesbian, and bisexual elders, Rose's (2019) account demonstrates that, during this time, and in tandem with communities across the country, the gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities of Halifax were finding each other, and "emerging from [a] collective closet" (p. 21). She identifies the community-ran groups, organizations, and hubs that created space for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people against a backdrop of hate, hostility, and prejudice, including the Gay Alliance for Equality, the Green Lantern and Turret buildings, and the Alternate Book Shop, as well as a slew of gay bars, including Club 777 and Thee Klub (Rose, 2019). Also illustrated in Rose's (2019) account is the

identity management that the gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of Halifax engaged in during this time. They often felt pressured to appear straight, and only fully embraced their identities on the dancefloor, in the abovementioned bars, or other spaces deemed safe. Rose shows that, while hate, hostility, and prejudice were widespread, Halifax had lively gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities that sought to create, maintain, and protect space for queer safety, joy, pleasure, and celebration.

Halifax's queer communities appear to remain vibrant today. While this thesis focuses on experiences of coming out with a queer sexual identity, some participants also identify as trans, nonbinary, or gender diverse, and spoke to their experiences coming out with these identities as well. Thus, it is worth noting that Halifax is the second most gender-diverse city in Canada — that is, it has the second largest proportion of trans and nonbinary people over the age of 15 — after Victoria, British Columbia (Statistics Canada, 2022). The vibrancy of Halifax's contemporary queer communities is also evidenced in the work of Lexie Milmine (2020), who qualitatively analyzes interview responses from operators (i.e., employees and volunteers) and patrons of queer "safe spaces" within the city. She finds that, in Halifax today, there are several spaces that are operated, frequented, cultivated, and protected by impassioned community members, and serve as "lively, joyful, dynamic sites of community and activity" (Milmine, 2020, p. 83). Milmine's (2020) work showcases the vibrancy of Halifax's queer communities, but it also demonstrates that these communities are able to thrive because of the work and dedication of their members. Without institutionalized support, queer people must relie on themselves, and each other, to ensure their needs are met.

This is not to suggest that today, Halifax is a queer paradise free of hate, hostility, and prejudice. After all, the safe spaces that Milmine (2020) discusses must be cultivated and protected against something (i.e., contemporary manifestations of homo/queerphobia). While Halifax is home to vibrant queer communities, news media shows that they increasingly face existential threats in the form of hate-fueled incidents, and anti-queer protests and rhetoric (Cooke, 2023; Cuthbertson et al., 2023; Moscovitch, 2023). This reflects what many, including federal lawmakers, are calling a "rising tide" of targeted, anti-2SLGBTQ+ hate and violence across the country (Aiello, 2023). In response, and in line with Milmine's (2020) findings, the queer communities of Halifax have mobilized, cultivating and protecting safe spaces, and engaging in counter-protests (Cooke, 2023; Cuthbertson et al., 2023; Moscovitch, 2023). In doing so, they mirror the activism, solidarity, and care demonstrated by Halifax's gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Rose, 2019).

This Study

In line with Paula Rust's (1993) ground-breaking work, many sociologists conceptualize coming out as context-dependent, and enduring, and demonstrate the value of a social constructionist lens in this realm of inquiry (Davies, 1992; Jenness, 1992; McCormack et al., 2014; McLean, 2007; Orne, 2011; Seidman, 2015). Some discuss the ways queer people continuously manage their coming out endeavours — often using Goffman's stigma theory (1986) — and demonstrate that sometimes, coming out can feel less feasible, challenging or discomforting, or as threatening to the quality and strength of their relationships (Adams, 2010; Davies, 1992; Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Orne, 2011, 2013).

Others discuss the significance of coming out, pointing to its potentially decreasing importance in queer life (Dunlap, 2014; Grierson & Smith, 2005; Saguy, 2020; Seidman, 2003; Seidman et al., 1999), or the positive meanings that queer people continue to ascribe to it, including self-affirmation, sharing an important piece of who they are with those close to them (Guittar, 2013a), or entering a space in which they feel a sense of belonging and mutual understanding (Rosenberg, 2018). Additionally, some sociologists suggest that the constant identity management involved in coming out can have a negative effect, and undermine wellbeing itself (Davies, 1992; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004), especially when it is at the expense of fundamental relationships, and thus, personal needs (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2021). Some studies employ Meyer's (1995, 2003) minority stress theory to explore the burden of this identity management, as well as coming out in general (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Keene et al., 2022; McCormack et al., 2014). Overall, scholars uncover many ways coming out may affect wellbeing; however, there is room to expand on this with a more explicit focus, and with a stronger, more affectual, situational, and relational defining of the term. Further, there is room to expand on this in Canada, and particularly in Atlantic Canada, which, geographically speaking, is on the fringes of dominant North American queer culture.

Thus, in answering my research questions — *How do young queer people in Halifax, Nova Scotia experience and characterize coming out? Do young queer people in Halifax see coming out as affecting their wellbeing, and if so, how?* — this study contributes to the sociological coming out literature. It contributes by drawing on relevant ideas and theoretical approaches used by scholars working within this realm of inquiry (i.e., social constructionism, Goffman's [1986] stigma theory and Ilan Meyer's [1995,

2003] minority stress theory) in tandem with affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing. Moreover, this study contributes by drawing on these ideas and theoretical approaches while considering the relationship between coming out and wellbeing within Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Chapter 3: Coming Out, Experienced and Characterized

As evidenced in the sociological literature, coming out is not a consistent experience. Knowing this, it is then logical that participants experienced and characterized it in many ways. For example, when I asked participants to describe coming out in one word, the responses varied from "transformative" (Luna) and "liberating" (Riley), to "informational" (Audrey) and "identifying" (Matthew), to "exhausting" (Ella) and "redundant" (Isla). That being said, three themes emerged prominently in the data analysis, and are present in the interview responses and journal entries of most participants: (1) coming out as a continuous, never-ending endeavour, that (2) involves strategic identity management, and (3) is relatively casual. In this chapter, I discuss these themes to unpack how participants experience and characterize coming out more generally, as well as how their experiences and characterizations compare to the sociological literature.

Continuously Coming Out

All twelve participants in my study characterized coming out as something they experience and engage in on an ongoing basis. This theme runs counter to notions in disciplines like psychology and sexology that frame coming out as a static, point-in-time event (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982), but aligns with sociological conceptualizations of coming out as continuous, and never-ending (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; Orne, 2011; Rust, 1993). Participants described coming out in ways that mirror Nicholas Guittar and Rachel Rayburn's (2016) conceptualization of coming out as a "career": they come out every time they enter a new social circle or meet new people. As Fallon explained, "anytime you meet someone new, it has to be, not necessarily a conversation, but it has to be

realized at some point."[6] Similarly, Matthew said, "you're always meeting new people, and getting closer with new people, and wanting to share that part of your life with them." Consider Alexander too, who stated, "the new people I meet, I tell. … [Coming out] continuously happens."

In the interviews, I asked participants how often they come out, or how often coming out "happens" for them. Their responses indicate that coming out does happen continuously, as well with varying frequency. Clara explained that, depending on the amount of social activity she is engaging in, coming out can happen "every two weeks," or "once a month." Matthew also noted that how often he comes out can vary, but said that, on average, it happens "every three months." Riley spoke to a higher frequency, stating that coming out happens, "on some level, on a weekly basis." She also cited some of the spaces she comes out in, and some of the people she comes out to:

> I'm a social worker. I work with a diverse population, and I believe in appropriate self-disclosure in the workplace and within a care setting. So, I come out to my clients. … And that's something that I do some weeks more than others, depending on who I meet. And [I come out] at the doctor's office, to my pharmacist, and even in casual social exchanges with strangers. (Riley)

Interestingly, Luna initially believed that, for her, the continuity and frequency of coming out had diminished. In her interview, she stated that coming out "has mostly tapered off now," suggesting that it once happened continuously, and frequently, but has subsided. Despite this, in her journal entry, written and submitted two weeks later, she revealed that "depending on how you define the term," she has "come out to at least several people" since her interview, pointing to how, for her, coming out can be a verbal disclosure, or accomplished through visible cues. Luna took this further, writing, "I am perpetually in a

[6] All direct quotes from interviews have been edited for clarity. Grammatical errors have been corrected, and irrelevant patterns or repetitions in speech (e.g., "like," "you know?") have been removed.

state of coming out as I meet and interact with new people in my everyday life." While the frequency may vary, it appears that the notion of coming out as continuous is, among participants, an immutable truth.

Like Guittar and Rayburn's (2016) conceptualization of coming out, as not only ongoing but also without an end, participants characterized coming out as continuous, *and* never-ending. They understand coming out as something they will perpetually experience and engage in due to the prevalence of heteronormative (and cisnormative) assumptions and expectations. For instance, Quinn remarked, "as long as there's the assumption that people are cis and straight, you'll have to come out in every new thing you engage with." Likewise, Olive stated:

> Queer people have to come out because we live in a cis, heteronormative society. … Queer people are going to have to keep coming out until the conventional heteronormative regime is no longer. … But it will always be there.

Some participants even used words like "never-ending" (Clara; Matthew), "unending" (Riley, interview) or "everlasting" (Riley, journal entry) when describing their coming out experiences. Additionally, Ella expressed that she feels as though she will never complete coming out: "I feel like I'll never truly be out, because I'm going to come out for the rest of my life." It is evident that, among participants, coming out continues, and always will, so long as we live in a heteronormative society that assumes and expects heterosexuality, and, in turn, views queer sexual identities as deviations.

Some participants described coming out as continuous and never-ending for a different reason: they adopt and disclose different identities over time as they have new experiences, and as their feelings evolve. This differs from the continuity of coming out that all participants described experiencing as they enter new spaces, and meet new people. It involves redefining oneself, and therefore coming out to the same people

multiple times. As Riley said, “I came out to everybody as gay a few years ago, and I’m in the process of confusing that identity with everybody in my life again.” While distinct, I argue that this is thematically related to the continuity of coming out that participants experience as they move through spaces because it demonstrates another way the process endures across the life course.

Riley shared, “[coming out]’s definitely been a continual process since my [sexual] identity has been quite fluid and has changed multiple times.” She explained this further, stating that her sexual identity has “changed” — and thus, coming out has endured — as she has met new romantic partners, and has had new relationships: “When I first came out, I identified as a lesbian, but then I dated a transmasculine person, so, I didn’t feel like that fit, and now, I’m dating a man. So, I guess the best word would be queer” (Riley). Similarly, Clara described coming out numerous times as she has explored new attractions:

> Originally, I thought that I might have been asexual. Then, I came out as bisexual. Then, I realized I was attracted to nonbinary people, so, I thought that [bisexual] was not a great word. Then, I started using pansexual, but I eventually fell on queer because I think it's just a great, all-encompassing word for anything that is outside of heterosexuality.

Participants like Clara and Riley demonstrate that coming out is socially constructed. Moreover, they reaffirm one of Paula Rust’s (1993) pioneering arguments: coming out endures because sexual identities are fluid and evolve as we are exposed to new experiences, people, and constructions, or *reconstructions* of sexual identities. Riley and Clara’s ongoing experience of adopting and disclosing different sexual identities as they meet new romantic partners or explore new attractions reflects an ever-evolving process of constructing and reconstructing queer sexual identities as desirable and congruent with their feelings. This shows that, as articulated by Rust (1993), coming out is not a matter

of discovering and disclosing an "essence," but describing yourself with the constructions that are available to you. Clara effectively summarized this phenomenon, stating, "every few years, I learn more about myself. I have new experiences, or I meet new people and hear about their experiences, and the way I feel shifts."

A few participants discussed adopting and disclosing different sexual *and* gender identities over time. They described these coming out experiences as related, as on the same continuum, or, as Quinn said, as "inseparable … because coming out as bi laid the groundwork for coming out as trans." In her journal entry, written and submitted two weeks after her interview, Quinn expanded on this: "I am 20 and I have been knowingly bisexual since 16 (although I realize there were signs of it when I was much younger), but in that time I collected labels." In both her interview and journal entry, Quinn expressed identifying as bisexual, lesbian, and queer — first iteratively, as she "collected labels," and now interchangeably — as well as trans. Comparably, Adrien, who currently identifies as asexual and genderqueer, but previously came out using terms like "gay" and "homosexual," emphasized that coming out endures due to the evolution of his feelings: "[Coming out]'s been a continually evolving process as I've learned more about myself. … It's an ongoing process." In addition to demonstrating another way coming out endures across the life course, participants' descriptions of continuously adopting and disclosing different identities over time reflect a separate finding put forth in sociological coming out research: sometimes, contemporary queer youth avoid categorizing and typifying their identities (Guittar, 2014).

In line with Guittar and Rayburn's (2016) conceptualization of coming out as a "career," the continuity and perpetuity of coming out is not only a matter of continuously

and unendingly disclosing a queer identity — or different queer identities over time — but also a matter of continuously and unendingly *managing* queerness. Throughout the interviews, as well as in some of the journal entries, participants described a variety of ways they contextually, and strategically manage their coming out endeavours (Orne, 2011), or degree of outness. They come out, decide not to, how to, or modify their outness depending on who they are with, and where they are, for their protection, and sometimes, to their benefit.

Strategically Coming Out

The majority of participants demonstrate that coming out is something they contextually and strategically manage. However, the ways they manage coming out are diverse, and further, *more* diverse than the ways identity management is conceptualized in the literature by sociologists like Jay Orne (2011), among others (Adams, 2010; Davies, 1992; Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). Most participants spoke to managing coming out by either concealing or subduing their queerness, to protect themselves from negative, disapproving, or hostile reactions, but there were a few who also spoke to managing coming out by disclosing, revealing, or bringing their queerness to the forefront when it is advantageous for them to do so.

Both Clara and Matthew explained that they conceal their queerness around certain family members due to their religion. Clara said, "my grandmother is super Catholic, so, I don't think I would have that conversation with her. … I just don't think that would be good for either of us or our relationship." Similarly, Matthew explained:

> My dad's side of the family, there's nine people, nine aunts and uncles, and they were all raised Catholic. My grandmother is a devout Catholic. … That's not a space where I'd ever come out, with that side of the family.

Without citing religion as a determining factor, Isla also described concealment around certain family members. She stated that, due to their previous biphobic remarks, she avoids revealing her queerness around her mother, as well as other family members, as she expects negative reactions: “The only place I wouldn’t be out would be with my family. … I’ve chosen to not really bring it up, since then [biphobic remarks by family members]” (Isla). Some participants conceal their queerness beyond potentially negative familial settings. Alexander, who works as a manual labourer, said that he conceals his queerness at work: “There’s no acceptance there. So, I just keep it in my pocket.”

Other participants manage coming out, not by concealing their queerness, but by subduing it. Instead of deciding not to disclose or reveal their queerness, they modify how they present themsleves so it is less perceptible. For example, Riley said that sometimes, she does not “lead with” her queerness. She described modifying her physical appearance to make herself appear less queer or gender-transgressive: “When I go see my partner’s parents, I think, okay, I’m going to ‘femme it up.’ I’m going to wear something that’s more feminine and wouldn’t feed into the perception that I’m queer.” Comparably, Fallon described modifying her physical appearance when she visits her hometown, in rural Nova Scotia. She explained that she dresses in ways that she thinks subdues, or “tones down” her queerness: “I would probably gear more towards a sweatshirt and jeans, instead of wearing my goofy t-shirts. … I don’t necessarily hide [my queerness], but I tone it down.” Participants who described either concealing or subduing their queerness demonstrate that coming out involves strategic identity management and deciding whether or how to come out on an ongoing basis. This parallels how some scholars in the sociological literature conceptualize coming out (Adams, 2010; Davies, 1992; Guittar,

2013b, 2014; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004), especially Orne's (2011) conceptualization of "strategic outness," and aligns with the theory these scholars often use: Erving Goffman's (1986) stigma theory.

Recall how Orne (2011) conceptualizes coming out as strategic outness, as a continuously, contextually, and strategically managed endeavour in which queer people decide whether or how to come out as a means of protecting themselves. Also, recall how Orne (2011) — among other sociologists who posit that identity management is involved in coming out (Adams, 2010; Davies, 1992; Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004) — uses Goffman's (1986) stigma theory to conceptualize how queer people, as individuals with "discreditable" but not "discredited" stigmatized identities, consistently control information about their queer sexual identity by deciding whether to reveal it, and "to whom, how, when, and where" (p. 42). Participants rarely mentioned the specific linguistic strategies outlined by Nicholas Guittar (2013b, 2014) (i.e., coming out with what they believe to be a more palatable identity, or with an affinity instead of an identity).[7] However, they did describe regularly, contextually, and strategically managing information about their queerness. They conceal or subdue their queerness, depending on who they are with, where they are, and how they think their queerness will be received — whether they expect negative, disapproving, or hostile reactions, or whether they feel as though it will be what Orne (2011) may call a revelation of "explosive knowledge" that, if revealed, will result in unwanted or dangerous outcomes.

[7] One participant, Ella, explained that, while she identifies as queer, sometimes, she comes out as bisexual, because she believes it is a more palatable sexual identity: "Queer signals this, I don't want to say radical component, or collectivity, but I think it's a little more off-putting to someone who's homophobic."

A couple of participants underscored the contextual, strategic identity management involved in coming out in their journal entries. For instance, in her interview, Ella captured this management, explaining how she avoids disclosing potentially explosive knowledge about her sexual identity:

> I almost have a bank of answers that I can use when someone asks me, or approaches me, or when [my sexual identity] becomes relevant. So, if they ask me about my identity, I think about this person's politics, I think about whether this person's queer, or if this person has anyone who's queer close to them. It's almost like a tree. It's like, okay, if they say this, I'll go in this direction, and if they say this, then I'll go in this direction.

Then, in her journal entry, written and submitted about a month later, she spoke to the ongoing nature of this contextual, strategic identity management, offering an illustrative example:

> I knew that I came out (or withheld coming out) a lot … [ellipsis original] but since participating in the interview, it has come to my attention just how much I manage my identity. I found myself trying to find the "right" instance that I came out/managed my sexual identity to journal about. A repairman came to my house and asked if my partner and I were sisters, to which we nodded in unison and gave an enthusiastic "yes! How did you know?" almost like we had rehearsed it a thousand times. (Ella)

Consider Riley too. In her journal entry, also written and submitted about a month after her interview, she reflected on the omnipresence of identity management in queer life: "Sometimes even those of us who feel genuinely connected to their sense of self find themselves in states of uncertainty of how, and to whom they need to come out" (Riley). As evidenced in the interview responses and journal entries of participants, and as the works of Orne (2011) and Guittar (2013b, 2014) suggest, contextual, strategic identity management is a key component of the continuity and perpetuity of coming out, as sometimes it feels easier, safer, or more feasible to conform, or appear as conforming to societal norms.

However, as previously stated, a few participants spoke to strategically managing coming out, not only to protect themselves from hurtful reactions, but also to use their queerness to their advantage. Some of them described experiences in which they disclosed, revealed, or brought their queerness to the forefront, and received material benefits. Riley said, "sometimes, it's a privilege to identify as queer. Otherwise, I would have no place on an affirmative action policy." She expanded on this, thinking about her current job, and future opportunities:

> I'm pretty confident that the fact that I was queer impacted the chances of me being offered my position. … I think that's a really glaring example of me financially benefiting off my queer identity. And that continues to remain true when I think about going to graduate school, or applying for other jobs, and being able to use my queer identity to benefit me within this cruel capitalist world. My queerness in and of itself has been and can be monetized. (Riley)

Olive also mentioned material benefits, explaining that she has qualified for "scholarships and awards" because of her coming out and disclosing queerness. She mentioned other ways she uses her queerness to her advantage as well: "I can utilize my queerness and coming out … as tools for cultivating friendships and common ground" (Olive). Clara said something to a similar effect: "[I come out] to connect with people. It's a social identity that I can activate in certain settings, and have it be a unifier." While participants who strategically manage coming out in these ways make up a minority within the sample, their experiences are worth noting, as they may exemplify emerging forms of strategic identity management.

In the literature reviewed for this thesis, coming out as a form of identity management mainly refers to concealing queerness, and modifying identity disclosure, revelation, or presentation for protection — to shield oneself from certain reactions, or to conform to heteronormative assumptions and expectations when it feels easier, safer, or

more feasible (Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Orne, 2011). Perhaps today, where there is increased acceptance, visibility, and legal protections, coming out can be used to one's advantage depending on the situation. Perhaps in some situations, queerness can be strategically disclosed, revealed, or brought to the forefront for material or social gain. That being said, while some participants spoke to emerging forms of beneficial strategic identity management, they also discussed coming out in ways that are indicative of a decreasing significance. For them, it is not the event it once was. It is relatively casual.

Casually Coming Out

Most participants illustrate that coming out is, or should be, a relatively casual experience. They describe their coming out endeavours as casual, or express that they prefer it this way, that they resent when coming out is treated as an event, or, as Adrien said, a "production." This suggests a tension between two notions of coming out, one momentous, and the other casual. It also reflects findings presented, and arguments made in sociological research about how the significance of the process has evolved across generations, over time, and the place it holds among queer people in contemporary Western society (Dunlap, 2014; Grierson & Smith, 2005; Saguy, 2020; Seidman, 2003; Seidman et al., 1999).

One of the first questions I asked participants in the interviews was about their coming out experiences broadly. Though the phrase "coming out story" was not initially in the interview guide (Appendix A), I found myself asking participants if they had one, and if they could share it with me. Strikingly, multiple participants either had trouble answering or could not answer this question as they did not have a significant initial coming out that they consider to be their coming out story. For example, Clara

responded, “I don’t know. It’s hard. There’s not one. … There’s not one [coming out] I can pinpoint. … It’s not identifiable as a moment in time when other people around me were aware of it.” Fallon’s response was similar: “I don’t really do a lot of, ‘let’s sit down, let me tell you something.’ … Yeah, there’s not a lot of huge coming out moments, just a lot of casually saying, ‘by the way, I’m queer.’” Olive was not able to speak to a coming out story either. After a brief pause, she responded, “my coming out has been pretty insignificant” (Olive). For participants like Olive, Fallon, and Clara, coming out was simply something they started doing, casually, or, as Clara said, “offhandedly,” and in “nonchalant” ways.

Aside from not being able to speak to a coming out story, participants described their identity disclosure and revelation endeavours as relatively casual throughout the interviews, as something they do informally on a day-to-day basis. Expanding on her initial response regarding her coming out story, or lack thereof, Clara said:

> [Coming out]’s always been very lowkey for me. There's never been a discussion where I've gone into it being like, I'm going to come out to this person right now. If it comes up in conversation, then it does. And that's the same in all different social settings, with family, with acquaintances, with coworkers, and with friends.

Isla echoed this sentiment: “There’s been less formal times of me coming out than there’s been just throwing it into conversations.” Matthew, who *was* able to speak to a coming out story, but said it was “pretty casual,” explained that, over time, it has only become “more casual.” As Clara and Isla had reported, Matthew also comes out by mentioning his sexual identity in conversations if the opportunity presents itself. Matthew cites his largely queer social circles as contributing to this:

> A lot of women that I’m friends with are bisexual. There’ll be a conversation where one of them is talking about a woman that they’re dating, when I know they’ve previously dated a guy, and then we’re like, ‘oh, are you bisexual? I’m bisexual too.’

The casual experiences and characterizations of participants align with findings presented in studies that explore how coming out has evolved across generations, and over time (Dunlap, 2014; Grierson & Smith, 2005; Seidman, 2003; Seidman et al., 1999).

As Jeffrey Grierson and Anthony Smith (2005), and Andy Dunlap (2014) demonstrate in their respective intergenerational studies, coming out is experienced and characterized as less of a "rupture" or break among younger generations of queer people. Rather, they find that, for younger queer people, coming out reaffirms what they already know about themselves. It does not revolve around a specific telling, and it is not so much a "crisis," as it is a "consolidation" (Grierson & Smith, 2005). The experiences of participants resonate with this. Many of them do not have a significant coming out story that serves as a breaking point, and, for the most part, they do not experience or characterize coming out in intense or emotionally charged ways. Instead, they experience and characterize it as something they do if their sexual identity comes up in conversation, to affirm, reaffirm, or perhaps consolidate it. Consider the work of Steven Seidman et al. (1999) too, who argue that we are "beyond the closet" because the notion of coming out has become less representative of queer life today. Seemingly, participants' coming out experiences and characterizations are not organized around the notion of "the closet" — there is less shame, secrecy, and eventual disclosure or revelation of queerness, and more nonchalant, conversational integration of queerness in everyday life.

While discussing his more casual coming out experiences, Matthew succinctly and compellingly captured the lack of intensity: "[My sexual identity]'s not something I'm disclosing to them, it's more so something I'm sharing with them." I argue that, in choosing his words in this way, Matthew spoke to the fact that, for him, coming out does

not necessarily involve making a secret known or revealing something about himself that could bring about extreme change, but instead, letting someone know something about himself, another piece of who he is. This attitude, and the casual coming out experiences and characterizations of participants, may be related to what Steven Seidman et al. (1999) refer to as the increased, yet incomplete normalization and routinization of queerness. Perhaps today, when queerness is, for many, understood as normal and integrated into everyday life, there may be circumstances that allow some people to experience coming out not as a disclosure of their queerness, but as a casual sharing of it.

As previously stated, not only do participants characterize coming out as a relatively casual experience, but some prefer it this way and resent when it is treated as more of an event. This preference may also be interpreted as a desire to not be othered on the basis of sexual difference. Earlier, I noted that Adrien does not like when coming out is a "production." Taking this further, he explained, "I want it to be normal to say, 'I'm queer,' and people say, 'okay'" (Adrien). Denoting a comparable desire for coming out to be casual, Audrey said, "if [coming out], at any given moment, becomes something more than it needs to be, it starts being like, okay, let's move on. … I don't know why this needed to be anything at all." Building on this, Audrey expressed that she believes she should not have to come out to validate, or "prove" her sexual identity, and that instead, she should be able to casually share it like any other fact about herself: "It's frustrating where it feels like [my sexual identity]'s something I have to prove about myself, despite the fact that, it's just a fact."

Other participants echoed this sentiment, that sometimes, coming out feels like the validation or legitimization of their queerness, when really, it should be more of a

casual sharing of it. Matthew said, “when most people meet someone, they expect them [to come out if they’re queer]. It’s like, innocent until proven guilty … you’re straight until proven gay.” Likewise, Isla stated that queer people should not have to come out to “explain” their sexual identity, or queerness, and spoke to the increasing prevalence of more casual, conversational identity disclosures and revelations:

> You shouldn't have to sit down and explain any other piece of your identity, so, why should you have to sit down and explain [your queerness]? … I don't think coming out should be necessary. I don't think it's something that we should still be doing. I think we’re moving more toward that, too. Me and other people I know, [we’re] not really coming out, [we’re] just kind of bringing it up whenever.

Isla reiterated this later in her interview. When asked to describe coming out in one word, she chose “redundant.” I argue that she, along with other participants who see coming out as more casual, confirms and adds to the understanding of coming out in contemporary Western society put forth by Seidman et al. (1999), among others (Saguy, 2020).

It is true that, for participants, coming out, and more specifically, the notion of “coming out of the closet,” is less representative of their experiences (Seidman et al., 1999). They are not so much “coming out of the closet,” as they are casually sharing facts about themselves. However, participants take this further. In voicing their resentment towards notions of coming out as an event, or a validation of their queerness, they suggest that it can feel unfair when it is more than a casual sharing. It seems as though treating coming out as an event reinforces the idea that they are “coming out of the closet” and making a secret known, which conflicts with their experience of, and desire to casually share something about themselves, another piece of who they are. Thus, the notion of “coming out of the closet” is not only less representative of participants experiences, but also something they reject. Their responses are evocative of what may be a new political attitude, one that Seidman et al. (1999) do not speak to but is perhaps a

product of the more prevalent normalization and routinization they describe: queer people *should not have to* come out to make their sexual identity, or queerness, known. Whereas coming out was once a politically charged act (Saguy, 2020; Seidman et al., 1999), perhaps now that queerness is more normalized and routinized, as well as tolerated and and accepted, rejecting coming out — or the idea that queer people must "come out of the closet" to legitimize their queerness — is political.

Summarizing Coming Out

In this chapter, I identified three themes that emerged from the interviews and journal entries. First, all participants characterize coming out as a continuous, never-ending endeavour. All twelve of them experience coming out continuously, and unendingly, as they disclose or reveal their queerness whenever they enter new social circles, and meet new people, due to the prevalence of heteronormative (and cisnormative) assumptions and expectations. Additionally, for some of them, coming out endures through the adoption and disclosure of different identities over time as they construct, or reconstruct sexual (and gender) identities as congruent with their feelings. Second, most participants demonstrate that coming out involves strategic identity management. They contextually and strategically manage their coming out, or outness, by concealing or subduing their queerness, depending on the people they are with, the space they are in, and the reactions they expect. A few also strategically manage their coming out by disclosing, revealing, or bringing their queerness to the forefront when it could benefit them, be it materially or socially. Third, and last, multiple participants illustrate that coming out is a relatively casual experience, with some expressing that they prefer it this way. These participants described coming out as something they do rather

informally, by mentioning it in conversations without prior planning, and without feelings of intensity. Further, some of them resent when coming out is treated as an event, or a means of legitimizing their queerness. They believe that queer people should not have to "come out of the closet" in this way. Instead, they should be able to casually share their queerness as they desire, or when the opportunity to do so organically arises in their everyday lives.

These themes show that, among participants, coming out is a highly complex endeavour, so complex that this section's heading, *Summarizing Coming Out*, almost feels antithetical, as it is difficult to capture in a matter of paragraphs. Albeit casually, participants come out, continuously and unendingly, and strategically and selectively, to negotiate heteronormative assumptions and expectations, and to contextually correct or conform to them, for their protection, and sometimes, to their benefit. Their experiences align with and build on how coming out is conceptualized by scholars in the sociological literature, including those who conceptualize it as lifelong (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; Rust, 1993), contextually, and strategically managed (Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Orne, 2011), and increasingly insignificant, and less intense, or disruptive (Dunlap, 2014; Grierson & Smith, 2005; Saguy, 2020; Seidman, 2003; Seidman et al., 1999). Also, their experiences can be understood through theories like social constructionism and Goffman's (1986) stigma theory, which are frequently used in the literature. In addition to the themes explored in this chapter, coming out is also complex in how it affects participants' wellbeing. In the following chapters, I turn my attention to this. Chapter 4 focuses on the positive effects of coming out, and how it can support wellbeing, while Chapter 5 focuses on its negative effects, and how it can undermine wellbeing.

Chapter 4: Coming Out, For the Better

After participants discussed how they experience and characterize coming out more generally, I asked them if they could tell me about a time it felt beneficial or meaningful, and a time it felt challenging or stressful. Interestingly, the majority were able to recall a time it felt more beneficial, *and* a time it felt more challenging. This suggests that coming out affects their wellbeing in both positive and negative ways. Overall, though, participants spoke to the benefits of coming out, and the process as supportive of their wellbeing, more emphatically. For example, when asked how they see coming out as affecting their wellbeing, all twelve participants included positive effects in their responses, while only some of them mentioned negative effects. It is also worth noting that, when asked to describe coming out in one word, many of them chose words with positive connotations, including "growth" (Adrien), "comforting" (Fallon), "transformative" (Luna), "authenticity" (Quinn), and "liberating" (Riley).

In this chapter, I focus on how coming out supports participants' wellbeing, unpacking the benefits, meanings, and positive effects they described, and organizing them into two themes that reflect ideas put forth in the sociological literature (Guittar, 2013a; Rosenberg, 2018): (1) coming out as involving self-affirmation, and (2) a means of building relationships and community. In addition to aligning with ideas from the literature, these themes can be further explored and better understood using affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing.

Self-Affirmation

For some participants, coming out is beneficial or meaningful because it involves self-affirmation. Through disclosing, revealing, or sharing their queer sexual identity, or

queerness, they realize and gain confidence in a truer, more authentic version of themselves. For instance, when asked if she could tell me about a time coming out was beneficial or meaningful, Luna said that there had been "a lot of really beneficial times," suggesting that, more often than not, when she comes out, it is a positive experience. Expanding on this, and responding to my follow-up question — asking how the benefits or meanings of coming out are felt in her everyday life — she explained that she gains confidence:

> The first thing that comes to mind is just more confidence. I'd say a big part of it, for me, at least, is you feel more genuine. You're not hiding yourself behind a façade … you can express yourself the way you want to express yourself, as opposed to the way that you think [you should], or that other people would assume that you express yourself. (Luna)

Luna underscores this in her journal entry, written and submitted two weeks later. She wrote that, even though she has been disclosing, revealing, or sharing her queerness for quite some time now, it remains affirming: "Though it has certainly become much easier, I still find the same euphoria in coming out as I did previously."

Other participants spoke to coming out as beneficial or meaningful in similar ways, indicating that there is an element of self-affirmation that has lasting, or reoccurring positive effects in their everyday lives. When asked whether and how the benefits or meanings of coming out are felt in his everyday life, Matthew said, "I think they're felt every time that I am open with someone about my authentic self. I just think that's a massive benefit to my life, to not feel like I'm holding anything back." Comparably, Quinn, who earlier in her interview, expressed that every time she comes out, she "celebrate[s] it," explained that coming out helps her feel, or be more authentic, and become a realer version of herself:

> I get to be authentic. I get to exist as me. … Every time I come out, I am closer to my real self, and I get to openly be closer to it. I don't have to hide anything, or be ashamed, or be nervous about it.

Riley shared something similar about how coming out has been beneficial and meaningful to her in solidifying her "personal identity":

> I think I feel [coming out] as overall beneficial and meaningful in a way that is affirming to me, and of who I am as a person, and those big questions that we ask ourselves. It's given me roots in my own personal identity.

Participants like Riley, Quinn, Matthew, and Luna demonstrate that, for them, coming out can positively affect their wellbeing by affirming their queerness, aligning with ideas put forth in the sociological literature (Guittar, 2013a; Rosenberg, 2018).

Nicholas Guittar (2013a) and Shoshana Rosenberg (2018) posit that coming out involves self-affirmation. Guittar (2013a) asserts that, for some queer people, coming out is a personal journey of or to self-affirmation. Rosenberg (2018) proposes a similar notion, reiterating Guittar's (2013a) assertion with her conceptualization of coming out as "coming in," highlighting that it involves coming *into* oneself (as well as coming *into* a community, which will be discussed in the latter half of this chapter). The experiences of the participants quoted above reflect this. It appears that they achieve self-affirmation through coming out. Through disclosing, revealing, or sharing their queerness, they express feeling more confident, genuine, authentic, "close to [their] real self" (Quinn), or grounded in their "personal identity" (Riley).

The self-affirmation that participants describe, and the ways it is beneficial, meaningful, and supportive of their wellbeing, can be further explored using affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing. I use these framings, offered and built in depth by scholars who base their work in affect theory (Atkinson, 2013, 2021) and queer theory (Ahmed, 2014), to guide how I define and approach wellbeing. This means that I

approach it as an effect of how we are situated within, relate to, and feel our social surroundings, and our social environment (Atkinson, 2013). Moreover, it means that I approach queer people's wellbeing as hinging on day-to-day interactions with compulsory heterosexuality — heteronormative culture, norms, narratives, and scripts — as well as whether they interact with queer people, frequent or occupy queer spaces, and have opportunities to expose themselves to alternative ways of being, and communities, that may otherwise be unavailable to them due to the regulatory nature of societal norms (Ahmed, 2014).

Notably, the participants who spoke to self-affirmation through coming out also described a sense of alignment with their social surroundings, to at least some degree. At the very least, they feel aligned with many of the people close to them — for some, this is family, and for others, it is friends, among other community members — and thus, have opportunities to expose themselves to alternative ways of being. In other words, within some of the social circles they inhabit, queerness is socially constructed with positive connotations. For example, Luna, previously quoted as experiencing self-affirmation through coming out, said, "I've been very lucky in having supportive people, especially in high school, when I was first coming out." Offering more specificity, she explained that her parents are supportive, and further, that her father identifies within the queer community and has a queer social network, and that this has had a significant impact on how she experiences coming out:

> My parents are very supportive, but my dad is actually bisexual, and he's been a long-time supporter of LGBTQ+ rights. So, even as I found myself exploring these things in my personal life, I was also being exposed to people that he knew that were LGBTQ+, that he was introducing to me … I was just seeing more LGBTQ+ representation in my everyday life. That was helping me to discover my own feelings. (Luna)

Similarly, Matthew, Quinn, and Riley — also quoted above as experiencing self-affirmation through coming out — spoke to supportive and/or queer social networks. Discussing his experience in Halifax and comparing it to other places he has lived in Canada, Matthew stated, "as a city, there's a lot more opportunities to be in an environment that feels welcoming." Quinn said that her coming out experiences are shaped by "knowing that [she] had a big support system, and a good one, and that [her] parents were part of it." Riley described being surrounded by queerness, and stated that this plays a role in how she experiences coming out:

> My next-door neighbour is trans. My boss is gay. Many of my coworkers are gay. Many of my clients are queer. I live in a queer area of the city. I'm extremely lucky to be within an environment where it feels like queerness is the status quo. … I think that's made [coming out] astronomically easier for me.

It appears that, for those who experience self-affirmation through coming out, there is a sense of alignment between them, their identities, and the attitudes towards queerness held by those close to them, or the identities of those close to them, making it possible for them to explore, identify with — and presumably, affirm and gain confidence in — alternative ways of being beyond what compulsory heterosexuality enforces as acceptable, or possible.

Community

While *some* participants described self-affirmation, *all* participants, to varying degrees, demonstrate that they can build relationships and community through coming out. In fact, this emerged as the most common theme in the data analysis. However, the ways they discussed it varied. For some, coming out strengthens and deepens the relationships they share with those close to them — solidifying the bonds within their existing community — whereas, for others, it facilitates the cultivation of relationships

with fellow queer people, and supports them in finding and entering a queer community. Regardless, all participants spoke to relationship and community building as beneficial or meaningful components of coming out.

In line with Nicholas Guittar's (2013a) assertion that coming out can be meaningful in that it involves sharing an important piece of oneself with those in close social proximity, some participants spoke about coming out as strengthening and deepening the relationships they share with those close to them. For instance, when asked to tell me about a time coming out was beneficial or meaningful, Audrey described coming out to her partner:

> [Coming out] opened possibilities to be more authentic, and moreover, [open] about what's on your mind. … It makes it a lot easier to just be best friends with someone, when you can talk about everything, and like, truly everything.

Similarly, Fallon explained that coming out "makes [her] closer to people":

> [My sexual identity or queerness] is one of those big factors of who I am. I don't think I could be as close with a lot of people if they didn't know, because it would just be like, you don't know this huge part of who I am, and that's very important in friendships, and relationships.

Matthew also expressed that coming out has a positive effect on his relationships, or, in his words, makes them "tighter," and places the emphasis on the honesty and openness it enables in the people he comes out to:

> I think people that I've shared [my sexual identity] with, that know that about me, feel that they can share anything that they have come up for them, with me. I think it makes all of those relationships tighter, to know that you know this whole person. I think that's been something that I feel.

Participants like Matthew, Fallon, and Audrey demonstrate that, for them, coming out positively affects their wellbeing as it strengthens and deepens the relationships between them and the people close to them, further solidifying the bonds within their existing

community. Through disclosing, revealing, or sharing their queerness, they foster increased honesty and openness with the people in their social circles.

That being said, recall how Shoshana Rosenberg (2018) adds to Guittar's (2013a) assertion, positing that coming out is not simply a matter of sharing an important piece of oneself with others, but further, sharing a piece of oneself and cultivating relationships with fellow queer people, and finding and entering a queer community in which one feels a sense of belonging and mutual understanding — coming *into* a community. Luna captures this distinction rather effectively, expressing that coming out helps her connect with people, but "especially, first and foremost, with other people who are queer." Similarly, Ella said that coming out is "a great point of connection if another person is queer." Expanding on this, she shared, "I feel like we have a deeper connection, or we see more eye-to-eye. It's almost like an unspoken trust" (Ella).

When asked to tell me about a time coming out was beneficial or meaningful, multiple participants described instances in which, through coming out, they cultivated relationships with fellow queer people. Riley explained that the relationship she shares with her (queer) best friend was borne out of, and has flourished, through coming out, and exploring and embracing their sexual and gender identities together:

> The birth of my bonding and love for my best friend, and my soulmate, was through us coming out at the same time, and exploring our gender at the same time, and now, confusing our identities at the same time, and both considering what moving forward in our queerness, in this non-defined, liberated way looks like for both of us. … That has been the most beautiful and impactful relationship of my life, and it's really underpinned by the coming out process.

While perhaps less intimate of an example, Olive shared that, through coming out, she has cultivated meaningful relationships with queer people, in which she feels a sense of belonging and mutual understanding, across several areas of her life: "With my

coworkers, there's camaraderie in it, and this sense of mutual understanding. In grad school, me and a couple of my classmates, being queer students, we were really bonded over that."

I found Isla's response to this question — asking her to tell me about a time coming out was beneficial or meaningful — a compelling example of cultivating relationships with fellow queer people, as she described an instance in which, through revealing her queerness, she supported another person's coming out. To set the scene, she explained, "I was hanging out with some of my close friends, and some of their friends. I was acquaintances with them. I've spent a little bit of time with them, but I didn't know them super, super well." Then, she said:

> I don't really remember how I worked it into the conversation, but I had made some comment or made it known that I was bisexual, and one of the girls that I didn't really know that well was like, 'oh, you're bisexual. I didn't know that.' … She started asking me some questions … and she came out to me. She was like, 'you know, I haven't really told anyone, and I'm not really comfortable telling this group of people because they're all straight, and that makes me nervous.' … I think that was a time when it was beneficial because I got to be that queer support network for her. (Isla)

A couple other participants made remarks denoting a similar sentiment. Ella expressed, "for me, coming out has been beneficial when it's helped someone else come out." Likewise, Adrien stated "every time I come out, it's an opportunity for someone else to say, 'oh, hi, I'm also that.'" For Adrien, Ella, and Isla, coming out can be beneficial or meaningful when it allows *other* people to come out, embrace their queerness, and find fellow queer people and queer community in them.

Beyond specific instances in which coming out facilitated the cultivation of relationships with fellow queer people, participants spoke to the disclosure, revelation, or sharing of their queerness as their entry point into a queer community more broadly.

Alexander explained that, through coming out, he has found and entered a community, or "space," where he can fully be himself: "I feel I understand who I am, and who I always was, and I'm in a space where I'm allowed to be myself, like, wholly be myself." Comparably, Clara said, "[coming out] has opened me up to a community, and a community that I can make connections through, and that I can share experiences with, and share a real understanding about how I live my day-to-day life." Consider Riley too, who explained:

> [Coming out] has given me this really broad community that I really didn't feel like I had before, and identifying with that community has subjected me to a lot of love and beautiful relationships that I don't think I would have had otherwise.

It is evident that, for many participants, coming out positively affects their wellbeing through facilitating the cultivation of relationships with fellow queer people, and finding and entering a queer community — a supportive community in which they feel a sense of belonging and mutual understanding, as well as love and compassion.

As with the self-affirmation discussed in the previous section, the relationship and community building that participants in my study described, and the ways it is beneficial, meaningful, and supportive of their wellbeing, can be further explored using affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing. I argue that this relationship and community building is a matter of what Sarah Atkinson (2013) may call "situatedness" or "relationality" — it is a product of how participants are situated within, relate to, and feel their social environment, or at least their immediate social surroundings and the people with whom they interact most. Put another way, it is a product of how queerness is socially constructed in some of the social circles they inhabit. Seeing as participants described being able to strengthen and deepen existing relationships through coming out, there is presumably a sense of alignment between them and the attitudes towards

queerness held by those close to them. Further, given that they described cultivating relationships with fellow queer people and finding and entering a queer community through coming out, there are presumably opportunities available to them to interact with people and access spaces where they are exposed to alternative ways of being, and communities, beyond those that may feel like the most viable, or only possible options due to "the everydayness of compulsory heterosexuality" (Ahmed, 2014 p. 147), or heteronormativity.

Supportive Surroundings

In the interviews, as well as some of the journal entries, participants spoke to multiple positive effects associated coming out, oftentimes with great enthusiasm. Some of them spoke to self-affirmation, demonstrating that coming out supports them in realizing and gaining confidence in a truer, more authentic version of themselves. All participants, to at least some degree, described building relationships and community through coming out — either strengthening and deepening relationships they share with those close to them, further solidifying their existing community, or cultivating relationships with fellow queer people, and finding and entering queer communities in which they feel a sense of belonging and mutual understanding.

These positive effects align with notions of coming out in the sociological literature (Guittar, 2013a; Rosenberg, 2018). Additionally, using affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing, they can be understood as a product of the attitudes held by the people close to participants, and the spaces they frequent or occupy. Participants who spoke to self-affirmation mentioned having supportive and/or queer social networks. Those who described building relationships and community through

coming out evidently occupy social circles in which there are accepting attitudes towards queerness, or have been able to access spaces in which they are exposed to alternative ways of being, and communities, outside of those that are assumed, expected, and enforced through the pervasiveness of compulsory heterosexuality, or heteronormativity (Ahmed, 2014).

The latter of the two themes — building relationships and community through coming out — reflects one of the beneficial forms of strategic identity management that was discussed in Chapter 3: strategically disclosing, revealing, or bringing queerness to the forefront for social gain, to "connect with people" (Clara). It is also worth noting that, as evidenced in Chapter 3, a few participants described strategically disclosing, revealing, or bringing their queerness to the forefront for material gain, be it employment opportunities or scholarships. With these forms of strategic identity management in mind, in addition to the themes explored in this chapter, it can be inferred that coming out positively affects participants' wellbeing in a myriad of ways. It can improve their situation materially (e.g., through access to employment opportunities and scholarships), or strengthen, deepen, and introduce them to relationships and community. It can also be inferred that, while coming out is a relatively casual endeavour among participants, and while queerness has perhaps been, to an extent, "normalized" and "routinized" (Seidman et al., 1999) — again, something evidenced in Chapter 3 — it still carries positive meaning, be it self-affirmation, or relationship and community building. This resonates with Guittar's (2013a) argument, that coming out continues to be meaningful among queer people today.

With all this said, participants also mentioned challenges or stresses associated with coming out. While the intensity varied among them, with some finding the experiences they related more impactful or burdensome than others, all participants described instances in which, or ways that coming out is at least relatively challenging, stressful, and undermining of their wellbeing. In doing so, they suggest that, despite feeling a sense of alignment between them and some of the people close to them, or some of the spaces they frequent or occupy, compulsory heterosexuality, or heteronormativity, continues to surface in their lives in regulative ways, contextually or situationally. Participants depicted the challenges or stresses of coming out as manifesting in various areas of their lives, but for many of them, it is most intensely felt within their family relationships. I explore this in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Coming Out, for the Worse

While not discussed as emphatically as the benefits or meanings of coming out, the challenges or stresses associated with the process must not be understated. All twelve participants were able to recall a time when coming out was at least relatively challenging or stressful, indicating that it can negatively affect their wellbeing. Additionally, when asked to describe coming out in one word, a few participants chose words with negative connotations, including "exhausting" (Ella), "redundant" (Isla), and "annoying" (Olive). In this chapter, I focus on the ways coming out undermines participants' wellbeing and discuss two themes: (1) the anticipation that often precedes it, and (2) the relationship strain that can follow it. Notably, under both themes, the experiences described predominantly relate to coming out in family relationships. Similar to the benefits, meanings, and positive effects discussed in the previous chapter, the challenges, stresses, and negative effects that participants described align with ideas stemming from the sociological literature, and can be explored, and better understood using affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing. They can also be explored using Ilan Meyer's (1995, 2003) minority stress theory.

Anticipation

Most participants spoke to the anticipation that precedes coming out as a challenging or stressful component of the process. Some related it to a specific coming out experience, whereas others described it as something they contend with on an ongoing basis. Those who discussed it in relation to a specific coming out experience often recounted instances in which they came out to family and anticipated a change in how they would be perceived, or in the quality or strength of their relationship. For

example, when asked to tell me about a time coming out was challenging or stressful, Olive noted that, while she could not recall a time it was "particularly difficult," coming out to her parents was relatively stressful because she feared they would perceive her differently: "[Coming out] was stressful with my parents in the sense that … I didn't want them to think of me as strange. I didn't want them to think of it as unserious. I think that was my biggest fear."

Comparably, Alexander said that coming out to his brother was stressful because of how it could have changed their relationship:

> We've been close for so long. I just didn't want him to think of me any differently. We've had such a great relationship for the longest time. We've been friends since forever. So, telling him … yeah, that was difficult, I suppose. Stressful. I knew he would be okay. My biggest concern was that this was going to change our relationship, and I really didn't want that to happen.

Consider Matthew too, who explained that coming out to family was stressful for similar reasons:

> I think all the initial times I came out to my family were stressful just because I felt, not that they would disapprove, but that I was completely altering their perception of me, and that it would impact how they interacted with me, not necessarily in a negative way, but in a confused way, and not knowing how to approach me.

Matthew, Alexander, and Olive demonstrate that, for them, anticipation is situationally felt, surfacing before coming out in specific instances, especially among family, with whom they interact regularly or share important relationships.

Matthew also spoke to anticipation as something he feels on an ongoing basis. Building on what he said about coming out to family, and responding to my follow-up question — asking how the challenges or stresses of coming out are felt in his everyday life — Matthew explained that, despite surrounding himself with people who are accepting of queerness, "there's still a feeling":

> I like to think that I have a good read on people when I meet them, that I'm not getting close with someone who will cut me out of their life when they find that out about me, but it's always in the back of your head, a little bit of a concern. Just because you never know with people, they might hold bigotry that isn't apparent on their face when you meet them.

Other participants echoed this sentiment, expressing a constant, or reoccurring sense of anticipation in their everyday lives as they manage their queerness, and decide whether to disclose, reveal, or share it. Fallon stated, "you never know when someone's not going to be okay with [queerness]. So, there's always that background thought of like, 'okay, well, maybe today's the day.'" Likewise, Ella shared that, whenever she decides to come out, feelings of uncertainty and anticipation arise. She reflected:

> I don't know if there's ever been a time that I've come out, unless it was with a group of people that I already knew were queer, that I didn't have that thought in mind, where I was like, what if they're homophobic? (Ella)

Participants who discussed the anticipation that precedes coming out as challenging or stressful exemplify ways it can negatively affect their wellbeing. To unpack the negative impacts of coming out, and subtle differences in participant's experiences, I turn to affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing, and minority stress theory, as well as relevant ideas from the sociological literature on coming out.

Recall how the affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing I am guided by, enhanced and nuanced using the work of Sara Ahmed (2014), shed light on the intricacies of queer people's wellbeing. These framings show that queer people's wellbeing is informed by their interactions with compulsory heterosexuality, and the discomfort, or other negative effects, that may arise through repeatedly encountering and failing to reproduce heteronormative assumptions and expectations (Ahmed, 2014). I argue that, through their descriptions of anticipation, participants in my study depict how they fit into some of their social surroundings, or how queerness is socially constructed in

some of the social circles they inhabit (i.e., with negative connotations). It appears that sometimes, they worry their queerness will not align with or fit into their social surroundings — the people they interact with, the spaces they frequent or occupy, and more specifically, for some of them, within family relationships, or familial settings. They anticipate that sometimes, the sharing of their queerness may create friction, be it a shift in how they are perceived, a change in relationship dynamics, or an overtly queerphobic reaction. This anticipation, characterized by participants as at least relatively challenging or stressful, resonates with the work of Sara Ahmed (2014), in which she underscores the discomfort, disorientation and awkwardness of diverging from societal norms. Additionally, this anticipation aligns with what Jay Orne (2011) and Nicholas Guittar (2013b, 2014) suggest in their work on identity management: sometimes, straying from "normality" (Guittar, 2014) can feel unfeasible, and threatening to the quality or strength of one's relationships. Clara reported the discomfort of anticipation that preceded coming out to a co-worker: "My heart was beating before I [came out] … it was somebody that I had to interact with all the time. … What made it difficult was weighing the comfort versus the need to express [my queerness]."

Consider what Ilan Meyer's (1995, 2003) minority stress theory reveals too. Like affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing, this theory emphasizes the role of our social environment in shaping how we feel and our health and wellbeing, positing that queer people confront unique or excess stress due to their status as minoritized individuals, and the incongruence between them and heteronormative society (Meyer, 1995, 2003). Drawing on this theoretical approach, the anticipation that participants in my study describe can be understood as a felt sense of the incongruence

between them and the heteronormativity they encounter in certain contexts or situations. Further, participants' descriptions of anticipation reflect findings presented by Paul Flowers and Katie Buston (2001), who use minority stress theory and find that coming out and managing a queer identity against heteronormative assumptions and expectations can bring about feelings of difference, as well as alienation, isolation, and inner conflict. In sum, this anticipation can be considered a manifestation — or perhaps, an internalization — of the dissonance between participants and the regulative, compulsory heterosexuality they confront throughout their everyday lives, contextually or situationally.

It is noteworthy that, as previously stated, participants find the anticipation involved in coming out challenging or stressful to varying intensities. For some, it is particularly tumultuous. Adrien, who said that he "expect[s] a lot of negativity" whenever he decides to come out, explained that it is a "tremendous burden," or an "acute stressor":

> I feel a lot of weight. … Immediately leading up to a coming out event, when I know I'm going to do it, or when I suspect there's going to be an opportunity, I get extremely anxious. It goes from this non-issue, to suddenly a tremendous burden. … It's an acute stressor when it's on my mind.

Ella also feels the anticipation rather intensely. She expressed that anticipating, or "expecting" an opportunity to come out feels discomforting: "I surveil myself. … The 'uncomfortability' sits with me every single day, and the expecting to [come out] again." In her journal entry, written and submitted two weeks after her interview, Audrey emphasized the turmoil that is experienced through this anticipation, in the moments leading up to a coming out, explaining that, since we met, she and some queer people in her social circles had lamented over "how difficult it is to come out as bi when it's just going to be ignored or lead to unnecessary friction."

In contrast, for other participants, it is less burdensome. Both Matthew and Fallon, previously cited as feeling the anticipation ongoingly, stated that, while it is felt, it is not a significant source of stress. Matthew said, “I don’t have too much concern about it in my day-to-day life,” and Fallon said, “I haven’t found myself really worried about it.” Also of note is what exactly participants anticipate before coming out. Many of them did not use strong language that evoked extreme negativity or hostility. For example, consider the previously cited interview excerpts from Olive, Alexander, and Matthew. When describing what made coming out to her parents challenging or stressful, and what she anticipated beforehand, Olive included potential perceptions of her as “unserious.” Alexander explained that he knew his brother “would be okay” with his queer sexual identity, and that his concern was that coming out would “change [their] relationship.” Lastly, recall what Matthew said about what made coming out to family challenging or stressful: “I felt, not that they would disapprove, but that I was completely altering their perception of me, and that it would impact how they interacted with me, not necessarily in a negative way, but in a confused way.” Participants do not use language that indicates they anticipated extreme negative consequences or hostility, but rather, they mention subtle yet impactful changes. This may indicate how, in today’s more accepting society, where queerness is increasingly “normalized” and routinized” (Seidman et al., 1999), heteronormativity is still felt, and continues to contour queer lives, albeit with varying degrees of impact, and sometimes, more subtly.

For most participants in my study, coming out can be challenging or stressful due to the anticipation that precedes it. The extent to which they find this anticipation challenging or stressful varies, as does the extremity of what they anticipate. For some,

coming out is a burden, evoking anxiety or discomfort, while for others, while it remains palpable, it is not particularly stressful. Nevertheless, this anticipation may be a manifestation of the dissonance participants feel between them and some of the spaces they frequent or occupy, or some of the people with whom they interact regularly or share important relationships, such as their family. Further, participants demonstrate that it may be an *internalization* of this dissonance — while most of them anticipated, or continue to anticipate some level of change, negativity, or queerphobia, few recall encountering these issues after disclosing, revealing, or sharing their queerness. Overall, participants' descriptions of anticipation reflect the contextual, situational, sometimes intense, and sometimes subtle impact of compulsory heterosexuality or heteronormativity on their lives. As argued by Mark McCormack et al. (2014), and as evidenced in other scholarly works (Frost et al., 2022), even when homo/queerphobia is less prevalent, feelings of difference or incongruence can arise.

Relationship Strain

For those who find anticipation to be a challenging or stressful component of coming out, the difficulty lies in what precedes the disclosure, revelation, or sharing of their queer sexual identity, or queerness. Conversely, some participants spoke to experiences of relationship strain *after* coming out as a challenging or stressful component of the process. Although not reported as commonly as anticipation, participants who discussed relationship strain described coming out to the people close to them, primarily family, encountering adverse reactions, and, consequently, contending with relationship strain in that they can no longer be fully honest with, or seek support from those people. Moreover, they demonstrate that this is burdensome by damaging the

quality or strength of their relationships, and in the onus it places on them to change or *manage* how they interact with their family. Similar to the anticipation discussed in the previous section, how this is challenging, stressful, and undermining of participants' wellbeing can be explored using affectual, situational, and relational framings of the term, minority stress theory, and notions of coming out put forth in the sociological literature.

When asked to tell me about a time coming out was challenging or stressful, Isla said that it was difficult with her mother because her reaction was informed by stigmatizing understandings of bisexuality — "that it means that [she's] just gay," or that it is "a phase," among other stereotypes. Reflecting on how the challenges or stresses of coming out are felt in her everyday life, as well as how coming out affects her wellbeing, Isla stated that if she was heterosexual, she could share more with her mother, as well as some of her friends:

> I wouldn't feel different around my friends, or around my mom. I wouldn't feel like there's something that I couldn't tell them, or that I don't feel like sharing with them. It would be really nice because they know almost everything about me, but there's just that one part that they don't. So, that part of coming out, I guess, with relationships, that can kind of not be so great for my wellbeing.

Other participants spoke of similar experiences. Consider Audrey, who said her mother was "dismissive" of her coming out and describes losing important aspects of their relationship afterwards. She also explained that now, she interacts with her mother in a different, more "curated" way:

> I've always been the kid … who had the closest relationship to my mom, by a lot. But coming out … and losing that relationship, or at least, a big part of that relationship, because I still can engage, but it's a super curated engagement … it becomes, like, a persona of me. So, that's very difficult, to not have the support for myself, to not have the friendship and intimacy for myself, but also, it's very difficult in that it creates a demand for a lot of effort on my part to keep it going. So, I have to work harder for less. (Audrey)

Comparably, Ella mentioned that her parents reacted to her coming out poorly, and that this has had enduring effects: “That’s a forever strained relationship, and a forever strain on me.” In her journal entry, written and submitted about a month later, Ella expanded on this, writing about the time she has spent with her parents since we spoke:

> I recall telling Joseph that coming out was exhausting. Or laborious. I can’t remember. But there is really something specific about being “out” to someone — like my family — and still having to hide. It feels like sometimes the pressure is on coming out, but in this case, it was the management of my identity after I had already come out, years ago.

Ella, Audrey, and Isla reveal that coming out can negatively affect their wellbeing by damaging the quality, strength, or openness and honesty of important relationships, and necessitating careful management of what they share with family, and sometimes, friends.

Using affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing, we can deduce that the relationship strain described by some participants is challenging or stressful because of how they are situated within, relate to, and feel some of their social surroundings — people close to them, and spaces they occupy (Atkinson, 2013) — or because of how queerness is constructed with negative connotations in social circles they inhabit. The adverse reactions they encountered when coming out to family demonstrate that, in some instances, their queerness is considered an undesirable alternative to heterosexuality, and may also be rejected. This is felt in participants' relationships moving forward, as they manage what they share with their family. Their efforts have the effect of denying them a full relationship, and sometimes expend their mental and emotional resources. Sara Ahmed (2014) argues that, against compulsory heterosexuality, “queer subjects feel the tiredness of making corrections and *departures* [emphasis added],” and that “these moments of interpellation get repeated over time, and can be

experienced as bodily injury" (p. 147). It appears that participants who described relationship strain feel this tiredness, or perhaps experience this bodily injury. Consider how Audrey described the "curated" way she interacts with her mother as "a lot of effort," or how Ella described coming out, and the subsequent management of information and identity that she engages in around her parents as "exhausting" and "laborious."

Minority stress theory offers similar insights into participants' experiences of relationship strain. Using this theoretical approach, one may posit that the adverse reactions they encountered when coming out to family is a direct confrontation with the incongruence between them and heteronormative society (Meyer, 1995, 2003), or at least, heteronormativity as they encounter it among some of the people close to them. Further, based on comments from Audrey and Ella, one may posit that the management of information and identity they engage in afterwards is a unique stressor with which they contend as minoritized individuals (Meyer, 1995, 2003). It exhausts them in a way that is distinct to them as queer people.

Participants' experiences of relationship strain also reflect notions of coming out presented in the sociological literature. Some scholars refer to the constant identity management involved in coming out as strenuous and necessitating the maintenance of an "unstable state of affairs" (Davies, 1992, p. 82), or as an "added layer of complexity that the nonstigmatized are less likely to encounter" (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004, p. 822). Such notions resonate with how some participants manage what they share with family after they react to their coming out adversely.

However, the relationship strain described by participants most accurately maps onto Rin Reczek and Emma Bosley-Smith's (2021) conceptualization of "conflict work." As previously noted, Reczek and Bosley-Smith's (2021) research suggests that identity management can be particularly challenging or burdensome when it is "conflict work," meaning it is an effort to avoid disagreement and maintain important relationships, such as those shared with parents. They explain that, in addition to being strenuous, this form of identity management also compromises these relationships, and is at the expense of personal needs. This resonates with the relationship strain that participants experience among family, and more specifically, with their parents, after coming out and encountering adverse reactions.

In sum, the relationship strain that some participants experience after coming out can be considered a manifestation, or a more direct confrontation with the dissonance between them and the compulsory heterosexuality that permeates some of the spaces they occupy, especially familial settings. It is a confrontation that is felt afterwards, ongoingly — and sometimes, exhaustingly — as they share less with family, and as familial relationships become strained. As Audrey said, "bad coming out experiences are really detrimental to the intimacy of a relationship, and also the support that I can expect from that relationship. … I'll go to that person for support a lot less." Reiterating this sentiment, she stated, "it creates a lot of distance" (Audrey).

It is worth noting that, although not a common theme across what participants shared with me in the interviews and journal entries, one of them mentioned relationship *dissolution*. When asked to tell me about a time coming out was challenging or stressful, Riley said, "the one major, difficult coming out experience I had was with my childhood,

and high school, and at that point, university best friend, who was like family to me. Our friendship completely fell apart when I came out." I draw attention to this to show that, while rarely discussed by participants, relationships still break down as a result of disclosing, revealing, or sharing queerness, and this can have negative effects. Later in the interview, when reflecting on how coming out affects her wellbeing, Riley explained that now, "it mostly impacts [her] wellbeing positively," but this was not always the case: "I'm not going to say it wasn't a stressful experience, and that it didn't impact me. I had the most anxious and depressed year of my life following coming out, and I know those two are related."

Felt Difference

Most participants in my study find coming out challenging or stressful due to the anticipation that often precedes it, indicating that, contextually or situationally, the process can bring on feelings of anxiety, discomfort, or varying degrees of uneasiness. To a lesser extent, some participants find coming out challenging or stressful due to the relationship strain that can follow it, indicating that there can be a loss of quality, strength, or openness and honesty in fundamental relationships, and further, an onus on them to manage what they share. Using affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing, minority stress theory, and the sociological coming out literature, I have argued that, at the centre of both experiences is a felt sense of difference, incongruence, or dissonance between participants and some of their social surroundings, and more specifically, some of the people close to them. Moreover, I have highlighted that, for most of them, the people in question are their family. Compulsory heterosexuality, or heteronormativity, while perhaps less overt in contemporary Western society, appears to

inform or control how participants experience coming out to varying extents, depending on the context or situation, and especially in familial settings.

Notable tensions emerge between the themes explored here, and those outlined in Chapters 3 and 4. In Chapter 3, I demonstrated that participants experience and characterize coming out as continuous, never-ending, strategically managed, and relatively casual, suggesting a a lack of significance, or impact. In Chapter 4, I explored the benefits and meanings that participants ascribe to, and experience through coming out, highlighting that it has positive impact, or positive effects, and supports their wellbeing. However, in this chapter, I showed that, when asked, they were able to recall instances in which, or ways that coming out is challenging or stressful, revealing that some level of negative impact remains.

For example, those who discussed anticipation as a challenging or stressful component of coming out show that, sometimes, coming out feels less manageable or negotiable, and more necessary, particularly around parents, family, and other people they interact with regularly. Additionally, those who discussed relationship strain show that the Goffmanian, strategic identity management involved in the process — which, as evidenced in Chapter 3, is often used for protection, as well as personal benefit — can sometimes be burdensome, exhausting, and detrimental to the quality, strength, or openness and honesty of an important relationship (i.e., it can become what Reczek and Bosley-Smith [2021] may call "conflict work"). Moreover, those who mentioned either anticipation or relationship strain demonstrate that, sometimes, coming out can feel less casual, and more intense, especially around family members with whom they share important relationships that they aspire to maintain. Although participants generally

characterize coming out as less of a "rupture" or break from a past life (Dunlap, 2014; Grierson & Smith, 2005) and ascribe benefits and positive meanings to the process, it seems that feelings of intensity and varying levels of negative impact or effect can surface contextually or situationally. In some situations, coming out can induce anxiety or other difficult feelings, and in certain relationships, it can affect the quality and strength of the bond, as well as the effort that is required to maintain it. This chapter also shows that, while participants in my study did not frame their coming out endeavours as revolving around a specific telling, as earlier generations did (Grierson & Smith, 2005), there is still significance attached to disclosing, revealing, or sharing their queerness to their parents, among other family members.

A couple of participants captured the contextually or situationally complex nature of coming out quite effectively. Audrey explained, "[coming out] does affect me negatively, substantially, but *situationally* [emphasis added], because I don't surround myself with people that coming out went bad[ly]." Olive described her feelings towards coming out, and its place in her life, as involving "ambivalence." When attempting to weigh the benefits, meanings, challenges, and stresses of coming out, then deciding which affects her more in her everyday life, Olive paused, seemingly reflecting before stating, "catch me on a different day and I'll say something different."

It is important to acknowledge that other social identities can exacerbate the contextual complexity and negative effects of coming out. As previously stated (in Chapter 1), my study's sample is limited in terms of diversity, and thus, can only offer minimal evidence of this. One participant, Audrey, expressed that coming out is not a particularly fruitful or worthwhile experience in a sweat lodge she visits:

> When I'm home, I regularly go to a sweat lodge … and it is Mi'kmaq, and Mi'kmaq spirituality as they understand it, but they're also quite old, the demographic is fairly old and fairly non-diverse. ... There are no words within the culture or the spirituality to talk about [queerness], which makes it kind of weird, where, if I have question, like, "hey, what does it mean to be this?" and I want to ask someone, I would like to receive their teachings, they don't really have anything to say, which makes the coming out experience just feel in limbo … I don't get anything out of it. It's not a well I can take from anymore.

Audrey's experience aligns with Alex Wilson's (2008) account of queer acceptance, and the lack thereof, in some Indigenous spaces. As mentioned earlier, Wilson (2008) explains that some Indigenous spaces perpetuate exclusion and homo/queerphobia due to colonization, Christianization, and suppression of their teachings, spirituality, and languages.

A few participants touched on how their privileged social identities make coming out easier for them. Matthew noted that, because he is a "cisgender white guy," coming out is "probably an easier experience" for him. Expanding on this, he said, "I'm a very presentable person for coming out, which is unfair." Likewise, Ella stated, "my whiteness makes my coming out a lot more palatable." These sentiments resonate with the wealth of literature that critiques Western queer culture and politics for centering the white experience (Hutchinson, 2000; Logie & Rwigema, 2014), and the equating of coming out to "coming into whiteness" (Connell, 2010, as cited in Saguy, 2020, p. 24).

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Among participants, coming out is a complex, multifaceted endeavour. Moreover, it is a *contextually* and *situationally* complex endeavour. Throughout this thesis, I have unpacked the coming out experiences and characterizations of twelve queer people between the ages of 18 and 25, living in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, including how they experience and characterize coming out in broader strokes, as well as specific instances of, or feelings related to identity disclosure, revelation, or sharing. In turn, I have revealed that coming out is a continuous, unending, strategically managed, and relatively casual endeavour, that can have both positive and negative effects, depending on the context or situation. This underscores the varying degrees of unevenness or imbalance that participants in my study encounter as they decide whether to come out, or how to do so, throughout their everyday lives.

In Chapter 3, I focused on my first of two research questions: *How do young queer people in Halifax, Nova Scotia experience and characterize coming out?* Participants in my study spoke to coming out as a continuous and never-ending endeavour. All of them described coming out every time they enter a new social circle, and meet new people, due to the prevelance of heteronormative (and cisnormative) assumptions and expectations. Some of them also discussed continuously coming out as they adopt and disclose different identities over time, as they have new experiences, and as their feelings evolve. Most participants spoke to coming out as a strategically managed endeavour, as they decide whether or how to come out on an ongoing basis. They described regularly concealing or subduing their queerness, depending on whom they are with, where they are, and how they expect their coming out to be received. Most times,

they depicted the management of coming out as protecting themselves from hurtful reactions and negative outcomes, but sometimes, they mentioned using their queerness for material or social gain. Lastly, most participants depicted coming out as a relatively casual endeavour. Multiple participants were not able to recall a "coming out story," and others described disclosing, revealing, or *sharing* their queerness nonchalantly and conversationally throughout their everyday lives. Additionally, some of them expressed a resentment towards more eventful disclosures or revelations of sexual identities, or when coming out is a means of legitimizing queerness.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I focused on my second research question: *Do young queer people in Halifax see coming out as affecting their wellbeing, and if so, how?* Recall how I approach wellbeing — using affectual, situational, and relational framings of the term grounded in affect theory (Atkinson, 2013, 2021) and queer theory (Ahmed, 2014) to emphasize that it is not simply a matter of individual agency, but also an effect dependent on external factors, and our social surroundings. Drawing on these framings, in Chapters 4 and 5, I showed how, despite characterizing coming out as a relatively casual endeavour, participants could speak to instances in which, or ways that it remains impactful, and can be beneficial, meaningful, challenging, or stressful, depending on the context or situation.

Chapter 4 focused on the benefits and meanings of coming out, underscoring how it affects participants' wellbeing positively. For some of them, coming out involves self-affirmation — realizing and gaining confidence in a truer, more authentic version of themselves — whereas for all participants, to some extent, it involves strengthening, deepening, and cultivating relationships, and fostering, or finding and entering a

supportive community. Chapter 5 presented ways that coming out is challenging and stressful, demonstrating how it can negatively affect wellbeing. Most of the participants in my study mentioned feeling anticipation before coming out, either in a specific instance (e.g., coming out to family) or ongoingly, as opportunities to come out arise in their everyday lives. Less common across the sample, some participants reported relationship strain between themselves and their parents after coming out. This relationship strain was described as damaging to the quality or strength of the relationships, as well as placing an onus on the participants to manage what they share, and how they interact with their parents moving forward.

These findings reflect the sociological coming out literature in that participants spoke about coming out in conflicting, or contextually and situationally complex ways. My findings align with conceptualizations of coming out as an ongoing endeavour that queer people experience and engage in on a day-to-day basis (Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; Orne, 2011, 2013; Rust, 1993), in which they are never "fully out," but rather, disclosing, revealing, and managing queerness across contexts and situations (Adams, 2010; Davies, 1992; Guittar, 2013b, 2014; Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Orne, 2011, 2013; Rust, 1993). My findings also resonate with some scholars' suggestions of a decreasing significance of coming out (Dunlap, 2014; Grierson & Smith, 2005; Saguy, 2020; Seidman, 2003; Seidman et al., 1999), as well as with the persistent positive meanings of coming out (i.e., self-affirmation, sharing a piece of onself with others, and entering a queer community) discussed by others (Guittar, 2013a; Rosenberg, 2018). Additionally, my findings mirror the challenges of coming out that many scholars focus on or to which they allude (Davies, 1992; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Guittar, 2013b, 2014;

Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; McCormack et al., 2014; Orne, 2011, 2013), particularly in family relationships or familial settings (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2021).

The findings of my study temporally and geographically expand the literature by demonstrating the continuing validity of common ideas and theoretical approaches among today's emerging generation of queer people in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Also, my findings indicate that, as evidenced in research and demographic statistics (Milmine, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2022), the city is home to vibrant queer communities. Participants reported being able to cultivate relationships with fellow queer people, and find and enter queer communities through coming out. This echoes the liveliness of Halifax's lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities in the 1970s and 1980s (Rose, 2019), and further, may be attributable to their activism and organizing.

Among participants, the ongoing experience of coming out involves a certain ambivalence. While it continues, unendingly, and can be managed for their protection as well as to their benefit, coming out is increasingly casual. At the same time, it can be both beneficial or meaningful, and challenging or stressful, depending on the context or situation. This shows that participants' lives are marked by varying degrees of outness and feelings of happiness, security, safety, and belonging in the spaces they frequent or occupy, including their social circles, neighbourhoods, and workplaces. Much of the stress of coming out emanates from fundamental relationships in familial settings. For some, this unevenness is simply felt, or noticed, whereas for others, it carries significant weight. Regardless of how it is experienced, it demonstrates that compulsory heterosexuality, or heteronormativity — and relationships, spaces, or opportunities to explore ways of being, and communities outside of them — play a salient role in how

participants experience the disclosure, revelation, sharing, and management of their sexual identity, or queerness.

It is worth reiterating that, while my sample of participants is small, and their experiences cannot be generalized to those of broader queer communities, they are youth living in Halifax. Thus, these findings are most relevant for this age group, and for this context. Understanding the coming out experiences of queer youth, and identifying how best to support them as they come out, is paramount. Queer youth today are growing up and coming of age in a complex sociopolitical climate. There is purportedly more tolerance, but they still face heteronormative assumptions and expectations, as well as overt homo/queerphobia. Exploring coming out experiences in Halifax is also important, as the city has proportionally large queer communities (Statistics Canada, 2022). With this in mind, in closing, I consider the social implications of the findings of this thesis, as well as potential directions for future research.

Social Implications

As mentioned in Chapter 2, some of the theoretical approaches I employed in this thesis — affectual, situational, and relational framings of wellbeing, and Ilan Meyer's (1995, 2003) minority stress theory — are useful in that they draw attention to the external factors that shape queer people's wellbeing, and point to meaningful interventions at communal and societal levels that avoid neoliberally centering and responsibilizing the individual. The main implication of this thesis is that space must be created and taken up for queer people to experience coming out as they would like, be it a more casual sharing, a process of self-affirmation, or a means of fostering or finding and entering a community.

Queerness must be visible, and there must be opportunities, perhaps in the form of "safe spaces" (Milmine, 2020), for people to safely explore alternative ways of being, and of being in community, free of the everyday "affectiveness" of compulsory heterosexuality (Ahmed, 2014). This is not to suggest that all queer people must come out to achieve such visibility, or that they are responsible for ensuring it is achieved. Rather, it means that queer people *and their allies* must create, maintain, and protect safe spaces to enhance visibility and make the abovementioned opportunities more accessible. For example, the situation calls for public policy, including funding, to support the formation of such spaces. Tentatively, my findings suggest that Halifax may be a city where these spaces are more readily available than once was the case. Therefore, more explicit support for their formation and operation could make a significant difference in the wellbeing of the city's queer communities. Other than funding, forming, and operating safe spaces, another way these opportunities could become more accessible is through the inclusion of queer curriculum in public schooling, to increase youth's access to vocabulary that facilitates self-exploration and -expression.[8]

In Chapter 3, I stated that, while it was once political to come out, perhaps now that queerness is more normalized and routinized (Seidman et al., 1999), rejecting the idea that queer people must "come out of the closet" to legitimize their queerness is political. To expand on this, perhaps today, it is political for us, as a community, to create space and opportunities for people to explore queerness, and come out if they want to, or as they desire to.

[8] Though beyond the scope of this thesis, I acknowledge that these implications contribute to debates over the queering of spaces and the state, and whether this counters the nonconformity and antinormativity that some view as inherent to queerness, or productively radical and resistant (Edelman, 1994, as cited in Wiegman & Wilson, 2015).

Future Research

Given that the participant sample of my study is relatively small (twelve participants), and limited in terms of diversity (most of them are white, and all of them are either currently enrolled in university, or university-educated), there is ample room to expand on the findings with larger and more diverse, representative samples. This can be done in Halifax, to build on these findings, or in other Canadian regions, to shrink the knowledge gap between coming out experiences in Canada, and in other Western contexts. Another potential direction for future research is to center the experience of coming out with a trans or nonbinary identity. Much of today's anti-2SLGBTQ+ rhetoric, vitriol, and policies — which are being introduced, discussed, and passed in provinces across Canada — are targeting gender-diverse bodies (Aiello, 2023; Cuthbertson et al., 2023). This makes the experience of coming out with a trans or nonbinary identity a significant, current issue to address and consider in more depth.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

General

1. Tell me your sexual identity.
2. What does this sexual identity mean to you? How do you define it?

Coming Out Experiences

3. Tell me about your experiences with the coming out process.
4. What does coming out mean to you? What does it mean to be "out"?
5. Where are you "out", or where have you come out?
    a. Where haven't you come out?
    b. What situations or places are not good for being "out", or coming out?
6. How often does coming out happen for you?
    a. If it happens often, how does continuously having to come out (or perhaps, continuously deciding whether to come out) affect or weigh on you?
7. Do you consider yourself to be "visibly queer", and if so, how does this affect your coming out experiences or how you engage in coming out?
8. What other identities (e.g., gender, ethnic, racial, religious, etc.) are significant in relation to coming out for you? How does that identity shape or impact your coming out?
9. What other factors shape/impact your coming out (e.g., geographic location, life events, community, social bubble/circle, family, friends, etc.)?

Coming Out Challenges

10. Tell me about a time coming out was difficult, challenging, or stressful. What made it so?
    a. How do these difficulties, challenges, or stresses affect you in your everyday life? How are they felt?
11. How do you cope with the difficulties, challenges, or stresses of coming out?

Coming Out Benefits

12. Tell me about a time coming out was beneficial, meaningful, or felt particularly important to you. What made it so?
    a. How do these benefits or meanings affect you in your everyday life? How are they felt?

Weighing the Challenges and Benefits of Coming Out, and Considering Wellbeing

13. Which do you feel more in your everyday life, the challenges of coming out, the benefits of coming out or neither (e.g., coming out is neither challenging/stressful or beneficial/meaningful in everyday life)?
14. Do you see coming out as affecting your wellbeing, and if so, how?
15. In your previous answer, how are you understanding or defining wellbeing? What does that term mean to you?

Thoughts on Coming Out in Queer Life

16. How do you think coming out is valued or important to queer people today, if at all?
17. In your opinion, is coming out a necessary or crucial part of queer life, and why or why not?
18. Have you noticed or witnessed any shifts in the value or importance (either in queer communities or among the public at large) of coming out (over time, throughout your life, in general)?
19. How would you describe the coming out process in one word?

Closing Remarks

20. Is there anything else you'd like to share or discuss that we have not covered?