

**'WHEN I CAME OUT': COMING OUT AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE  
NARRATIVES OF LGBTQ PERSONS IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR**

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**A thesis submitted to the  
School of Graduate Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Ph.D.**

**Department of Folklore  
Memorial University of Newfoundland**

**July 2017**

**St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador**

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines narratives that LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) persons in Newfoundland and Labrador tell, and looks at how these narratives fit into broader patterns of narratology, context, and performance. Within the discipline of folkloristics, it examines narratives collected from thirty-two participants to show what types of narratives are most important to LGBTQ persons, with a focus on the coming-out story as a core narrative to their repertoires. The coming-out story is a recognizable and traditional narrative among this folk group, and is compared to both the memorate and fabulate. The story itself is a personal experience narrative, and is performed with specific markers of teller ownership and group membership. Various themes are highlighted in its telling, and these themes speak to issues faced by LGBTQs while coming out. This corpus of narratives, highlighted using such concepts as legend, disclosure, and untellability, gives folklorists a new way of looking at traditional narratives by a contemporary folk group and allows scholars to examine how disclosure narratives of this sort are performed for various audience contexts and for various reasons. By looking at the stories that LGBTQs tell, readers can move toward a better understanding of LGBTQs in Newfoundland and Labrador and other regions, and how they narrate their lives.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the unwavering support of two people: my supervisor Dr. Philip Hiscock, and my partner, Debbie Hutchings. I cannot thank you enough for everything you have done for me, both academically and personally. I would also like to thank my family, James, Angela and Adam Moore, and Susan Wheeler, and friends Ann Graf, Melissa Long and Janice Tulk. Thanks for making me laugh when I wanted to cry, and for your supportive words, it means the world to me. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Cory Thorne and Dr. Holly Everett, your suggestions were invaluable. Thank you to Dr. Jillian Gould, Dr. Katherine Borland, and Dr. Diane Tye for your thesis examination questions and comments, which I incorporated into the final draft. Thank you to the late Joe Goodwin; your friendship is missed and your research led me toward thinking about LGBTQ Folklore. And finally, thank you to my kind informants who shared with me their stories: your words help tell the living story of LGBTQ persons in Newfoundland and Labrador.

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## Chapter One – Introduction and Methodology

“Coming out of the closet” (or making explicit one's sexual orientation and identity) is a necessary rite of passage for the majority of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer<sup>1</sup> persons (LGBTQs) in North America. This disclosure of sexual orientation as a form of personal identity is often expressed through personal experience narratives, and known as coming-out stories. Coming out is a common process to all LGBTQs who come out to themselves and others through a disclosure of their sexual orientation. This identity disclosure is often preceded by a period of self-reflection. Coming-out is in general deliberate and repetitive, a process which then enables them to eventually form a foundational coming-out narrative that can be performed as appropriate. The narrative that is told is often shaped by traditional form and delivery, influenced by having heard or read other coming-out stories.

Although the process of coming out has been widely studied in the fields of anthropology, sociology and psychology, in the field of folklore only preliminary research has been done. To better understand how coming out and telling coming-out stories are folkloric, and their study folkloristic, this thesis explores the coming-out story in various

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<sup>1</sup>“Queer” was once an insult to gays and lesbians, but, to a large extent, has now become a word that has been taken back by the community, therefore diminishing its demeaning power. The usage of the word is explained nicely by Katherine Gantz: “I will use ‘queer’ as relating to a wide-ranging spectrum of ‘non-normative’ sexual notions, including not only constructions of gayness and lesbianism, but also of transsexualism, transvestism, same-sex affinity, and other ambisexual behaviours and sensibilities... ‘queer’ does not stand in opposition to ‘heterosexual’ but instead to ‘straight,’ a term that by contrast, suggests all that is restrictive about ‘normative’ sexuality, a category that excludes what is deemed undesirable, deviant, dangerous, unnatural [and] unproductive” (Gantz 2000: 168).

forms, as told to me by thirty-two informants over the course of six years. The coming-out story is not a simple story, but complex, varied, and multi-dimensional.

This thesis examines the disclosure of sexual orientation and identities by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer persons through their coming-out narratives. For the purposes of this thesis, I use the acronym LGBTQ to indicate lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer persons, although I sometimes use a shortened form of “gay” or “gay and lesbian,” and “trans” for “transgender” for general description. While other acronyms are sometimes used to indicate the presence of transsexual, transitioning, intersex and questioning persons, the standard acronym currently used in academic literature is LGBTQ, and this is also appropriate for those I have interviewed. Regardless of sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer) or identity (the terms “transgender,”<sup>2</sup> and “intersex,” do not reflect sexual orientation), all non-heterosexual people have in common a process of coming out to themselves and others, a disclosure of identity often preceded by a period of self-reflection, which enables them to form a foundational narrative that has been shaped by and relies on historical and contextual form and delivery (Pullen 2010: 5). While this thesis focuses primarily on the coming-out stories of gays and lesbians, it is important to recognize that people who identify as bisexual, asexual,

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<sup>2</sup> Herek (1995) and Hunter (2007) make the distinction that “transgendered” does not denote a sexual orientation, in the way that lesbian, gay, and bisexual do, and therefore, use the acronym “LGB” accordingly. Hunter uses “transgendered” to include “anyone who resists gender stereotypes or who transgresses gender norms through sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons) and sex-gender” (Hunter 2007: 3). I use the term “transgender” instead of “transgendered” because it is the most commonly accepted terminology in 2016.

transsexual, transgender, or queer, often face a process of disclosure as well, and have coming-out stories of their own.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how LGBTQ persons tell stories relating to their (or others') coming out, to fill a gap in the folkloristic literature, and to reflect on how LGBTQs use recognizable storytelling tactics to structure their narratives. To narrow the scope of this topic, interviewees were chosen who were either born in Newfoundland and Labrador, or who have lived in the province for a significant period of time. This thesis explores content, context, function, and performance, and how these categories shape the narratives being told. Further, this thesis examines several questions. Is there a typical and atypical coming-out story? How do the narratives break down into recognizable or unfamiliar narrative constructs? How do these coming-out stories function? Why are LGBTQs telling coming-out stories? And finally, what features of the coming-out stories as told by Newfoundlanders are similar or different to coming-out stories as told by non-Newfoundlanders? These findings of these questions advance the study of minority group folklore in general, and expand the existing folkloristic work on LGBTQ persons.

Although I have been keenly interested in coming-out stories since my own coming out over a decade ago, the concept of this thesis came from a graduate paper I wrote for one of my doctoral courses, one on personal experience narrative, in which I examined the coming-out literature in various narratological fields including sociology, anthropology, psychology, literature, linguistics and women's studies. My personal

experience was one part of my interest in the topic, while interaction and observation of hearing others tell their coming-out stories at bars, parties, small get-togethers, LGBTQ clubs, university settings, and other social gatherings further piqued my interest.

### **Fieldwork and Methodology**

The stories that gays and lesbians tell about their coming out are told and heard in a variety of social contexts. The audiences of these stories are also variable; a story may be told one-on-one, or to a small group of people. In most cases, the audience member is well-known to the teller, as the story is often private, with personal details. The audience member can be a friend or a family member. The coming-out narrative can be told to someone else who is gay, or told as a part of a storytelling session among a group of people who are gay. It was my non-fieldwork related observation, participation and interaction in a coming-out storytelling session a few years ago which led me to want to examine the storymaking and act of storytelling by gays and lesbians.

The act of coming-out has been studied in depth in various academic disciplines such as psychology, sociology, history and education, but the telling of a coming-out narrative has not been examined in folkloristics to the extent I do in this thesis. Using a folkloristic framework to examine these narratives has allowed me to emphasize the humanistic view and give clarity to people's creative and artistic stories rather than to examine them for psychological, historical or sociological factors.

My main method for recruitment came by using a modification of the snowball

research strategy which sociologists Rowland Atkinson and John Flint from the University of Surrey define as the “identifying [of] respondents who are then used to refer the researcher on to other respondents” (Atkinson and Flint 2001: 1). The benefit of using a snowball strategy to gain participants was that it had the potential to attract populations which are more stigmatised, and vulnerable, such as LGBTQ people. It was my aim to ask gay friends that I knew if they would participate in my study, and then have those participants identify others that might be interested in my study. By getting names of potential interviewees who were thought of as “out of the closet” and who I believed would likely be interested in telling me their story, I would be following the standard snowball sampling strategy of using the social networks of identified respondents to further the word about my study and provide me with an ever-expanding set of contacts (Atkinson and Flint 2001: 1).

When my ethics approval request was reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) at Memorial University of Newfoundland, some issues were raised about the use of this snowball research strategy. The ICEHR was concerned that my methodology did not take into consideration certain privacy concerns, namely that if an “out” informant were to name another potential informant who is either not yet out or only out to a small number of people, this would be an invasion of privacy and potentially “quite stressful” for prospective participants. The ICEHR insisted that I only contact those people who are out to me personally, or who respond to the advertisements, and not to use “third parties” (ICEHR No. 2008/025-AR;

correspondence 11/17/2008).

This was problematic in several ways. Firstly, as a gay person myself, I did not anticipate having any difficulty in finding willing participants, as I was known to many people in the local LGBTQ community, and certainly, even if I did not know a potential interviewee, many people could verify my status and membership within the queer community. As discussion of who is part of the gay community is quite common among members, there was a possibility that this could come up in conversation, and participants might even suggest potential candidates for interviewing to me. The “outing” (the disclosure of someone’s sexual orientation as being LGBTQ without their direct permission) of a potential informant would be unlikely, however, as I was already asking friends whom I knew personally to be gay, and as a general rule of thumb, if one knows a gay person to be not “out of the closet,” they would not suggest that person to me. Another scenario is that they would assume a conspiratorial stance of community membership and secrecy with me, in confiding that someone that I did not know was gay. Furthermore, as a member of the LGBTQ community in Newfoundland, I would be cognizant of the fact that there are degrees of “outness” and that a potential informant may be out to some people and not to others. The “privacy compromise” over which the ICEHR was concerned was valid, but unlikely, as the understanding of “outing” is strong in minority communities such as that of the LGBTQ population and the ramifications of such a disclosure would generally be weighed heavily by the individual involved.

In 2009, I began my search for informants who would be interested in telling me

their coming-out stories. While my immediate strategy was to look to my immediate circle of friends and acquaintances in St. John's, my main method for recruitment came from this variant on the snowball technique (Atkinson and Flint 2001: 1), in which I asked the LGBTQ people I knew if they would spread the word about my study, and then have potential interviewees contact me if they were interested in participating. It was my aim to have potential recruits volunteer their stories instead of me specifically asking for them; in that way, I would be sure there was no undue influence or persuasion on my part to my LGBTQ friends, and it would satisfy the ICEHR board, who was concerned about ethical recruitment of participants and unintended coercion.<sup>3</sup>

I also advertised for participants via flyers and information cards in the university LGBTQ club, and at gay dances and bars in the city. I utilized social media by placing a call-for-participants on my Facebook profile, and asked my friends to share my request on their profiles also, therefore broadening my potential audience. By not being able to contact third parties directly, I was forced to be creative in my quest for finding informants that were outside of my social group. Some participants specifically promoted my study to LGBTQ friends of theirs who they felt would be potentially interested, which I found to be quite helpful in garnering participants, almost all of whom were interviewed between 2009 and 2014. I did some supplementary interviewing in 2015 and 2016.

My recruits came from my advertising either in the university or through virtual

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<sup>3</sup> The ICEHR did not impose such restrictions on other topics by folklore students; the stipulations placed on my research made it clear that my proposed research group still face what Goffman referred to as the "discreditable" stigma (Goffman 1969).

networks. Almost all participants contacted me directly through e-mail or by Facebook messaging, although some volunteered in person to tell their stories. When a potential informant would contact me, we would discuss how the interview would proceed and decide a potentially good time for both of us. I continued to use the method of contact that the informant used to contact me (email, Facebook, telephone), although this was sometimes unsatisfactory as it would depend on when the informants would check and respond to my e-mails or messages.

There were benefits and drawbacks to my methodology. The drawbacks, as mentioned below, seemed numerous, although through my process of interviewing I gained insight into the process of interviewing people on sometimes difficult subjects. One benefit was that as a member of the LGBTQ community in St. John's, I was known to some of my participants, and was likely deemed trustworthy and I gained informants as a result. Various researchers have noted that perceived or acknowledged commonalities between participants and the interviewer have significantly influenced the development of trust within the interview (Finch 1984; Dunne 1997), thereby influencing the types of narratives that are collected (Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan 1998). Some interviewees were eager to tell their stories, possibly because I had disclosed my own lesbian identity beforehand, therefore having proven my connection to the group I was studying and justified my interest in the topic.

By collecting these narratives from an insider's perspective (as a member of the group being studied), I was able to interact with my participants, and share parts of my

own story as well, making the interview more conversational than one-sided.

Furthermore, as a lesbian familiar with the process of coming out, and of the process of creating and telling these stories to both group members and non-group members, I was able to recognize markers of group membership, tellability (Lawless 2001; Norrick 2005), and performance (Bauman 1977) of coming-out narratives in all formats and contexts, as is in Chapter Four. As Michael LaSala discussed in his article “LGBT Faculty, Research, and Researchers: Risks and Rewards,” LGBTQ researchers who conduct research on LGBTQ persons have the benefit of in-group belonging, which allows them to access informants, articulate appropriate and sensitive questions, and overcome obstacles that other, non-homosexual researchers might face (LaSala 2008: 261).

Participation in my study had potential benefits for participants, some of which I outlined in the information sheet that I gave to each interviewee. Participants were informed about my thesis topic and how their stories would be a contribution to the documentation of the history of the LGBTQ community in St. John’s, as well as to the contribution to the folkloristic discussion of narrative. Other benefits included the opportunity to articulate ideas of coming out that the participant may not have realized or yet vocalized, and the possibility that by telling a coming-out story that participants may come to a self-actualization about their sexual identity. Finally, it was acknowledged both by me and several participants that the telling of coming-out stories benefited the LGBTQ community at large in that, by contributing to the documentation of how people come out, they may benefit others who have yet to come out or who are interested in the coming-out

process. As noted by Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan in their study “‘That’s Like My Life’: Researching Narratives of Non-Heterosexual Relationships,” rapport-building between researchers and participants was successful in part due to the perception of relevance of the research to their lives. The gay, lesbian and bisexual interviewees were, for the most part, eager to talk due to “a desire to make [LGBTQ] lives visible” (1998: 456). I found this common desire to be the case in my study as well, and was able to build rapport and trust with the majority of the participants in my study.

The connection that I have with my participants must not be overemphasized, however, as there are multiple identity markers that may not have been shared between the participants and myself, such as sexuality, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and age. While I endeavoured to find participants of various backgrounds, ages and identities, I recognize that factors such as these may influence the quality of the interview as Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan (1998); as well as Song and Parker (1995) have found. While I did my best to remain impartial when collecting these narratives, it is likely that my very presence as a researcher affected the participants’ performances and narratives. In particular the smaller minority groups within the LGBTQ umbrella (bisexual and transgender) may have felt that I did not share any commonality with them. Finally, due to the nature of my research, and how I explained what I was looking for, respondents may have felt some, albeit unintentional, pressure to tell a “good” story, which could have influenced the interview itself (Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan 1998: 456).

There were some drawbacks to my methodology. The stipulation by the ICEHR board that I not directly ask people to participate was problematic, making me create what I have called a modified snowball technique to find informants. This approach using social media allowed my interview request to be spread to as many arenas as possible, starting with my friends and own networks. However, this may have garnered me only participants who had heard of me, or who were encouraged by friends of mine. Furthermore, there are certainly LGBTQ persons who were not aware of my study because they did not socialize in the same arenas in which I advertised (both tangible and virtual), or because they were not more “out” and did not want to risk acknowledgment or association with a study about LGBTQ persons. One drawback to the snowball sampling technique is that by the nature of an extended social network, obviously there would be some isolated community members my advertisements could not or did not reach, as Atkinson and Flint found (2001: 1). Finally, there were a few participants who initially expressed interest in the study but who, for unknown reasons, ceased contact with me before we could set up an interview date and time. It is my suspicion that there were several perceived problems here: the idea of being recorded may have made some participants uncomfortable, and others may have shied away from meeting with me face-to-face. Some participants refused to let me telephone them, preferring instead to contact me only by e-mail. While I assured potential respondents of my flexibility in interview method and willingness to provide anonymity, some participants still did not

respond after their initial contact while a few agreed to participate but then changed their minds.

Another drawback to my request for participants was that I was only able to collect narratives from those over the age of nineteen, as per the definition of a human participant giving free and informed consent in an academic study (ICEHR 2012). To collect narratives of those who were underage would have meant obtaining parental permission, which of course, in a sensitive topic such as coming out, may have been unrealistic or even impossible. Therefore the collected narratives represent only those who were of legal age at the time of the interview, which precluded the participation of LGBTQ youth in my study. Not having coming-out narratives from young LGBTQ persons may slant my research by highlighting coming-out processes from some years ago instead of more recent coming-out events.

By limiting my scope of participants to those from or who had lived in Newfoundland, I may have limited the possibility of a variety of ethnic groups participating in my study. Newfoundland is primarily Anglo-European in ethnicity (Statistics Canada: 2012), and all of my informants were Caucasian. My sample included, for the most part, Newfoundland-born, urban, well-educated, interviewees between the ages of 20-60. While I did endeavour to get participants from a variety of social classes and backgrounds by distributing my study information widely, the majority of people who responded to my call for participants were university-educated and working professionals.

By having only a few respondents who were non-university educated, I acknowledge that my research may be biased in terms of the socio-economic groups represented by the sample.

Although all of my informants knew of my research topic and thus came prepared with information about their coming out, it was evident to me after a few interview sessions that I was collecting narratives, and not just data from LGBTQs about coming out. It can be assumed that I was told what the informant wanted me to know, and that certain coming-out stories were not told to me, for various reasons. Because of my position as an unfamiliar fieldworker (not a friend or trusted ally), I imagine that some narratives, or elements of them, were left out due to the tellers' unfamiliarity with me. On the other hand, some narratives may have been told to me for precisely that reason. Because I was not close to my informants they may have felt that I would not judge them, or that I was not bringing any pre-conceived notions about them to the interview. In the spirit of reciprocal ethnography (Lawless 1993; 2000), I would share a coming-out story of my own, usually the one in which I came out to my parents, and most times the interviews conducted would turn into a dialogue, in which I and the participant would have a conversation, each of us contributing information and narratives. This style of interviewing, I felt, would strengthen the bond between the informant and myself, and perhaps help the participant become more talkative about their own coming-out experiences.

In most cases, I did not have to prompt very much to hear coming-out experiences from my informants. As mentioned in Chapter Five, the narratives that I heard had several functions: they were educational, entertaining, evocative, inclusionary, and alienating. By far, the performative function that was most obvious was the educational function. My informants wanted me to know what life was like for them, when they came out, and they told their stories as if by telling them, they were educating the world about what it meant to be gay in the present time and location. Narratives were told with this specific purpose in mind, and particularly notable were my transgender informants who were eager to share their experiences of being trans “here on the island” – in Newfoundland. Of course, the educational performative context is often contingent on the audience asking the right questions. I tried my best to ask open-ended, non-directive questions (Sims and Stephens 2005: 95-97; Jackson 1987: 96) and allow the participants to speak freely without fear of being judged. The transgender informants may have been as informative and educational as they were because they were used to being misunderstood, or they may have assumed that I did not understand their gender and sexuality.

It is important to distinguish coming-out stories from other stories that LGBTQ persons tell. While the narratives in my corpus mainly deal with coming-out experiences, some deal with more implicit topics that may relate to coming out, or are brought on by coming out, but are not explicitly about coming out. Examples of this are both Donald

and Ritch whose coming out was greatly affected by their faith and the church they belonged to. Both informants discussed their faith at great length as a life factor that influenced their sexuality and coming out. Their faith could not only be considered a theme in their coming-out stories but also may be viewed as a separate narrative with its own subject. Because the interviews were conversational in style, I did little interjecting throughout them and allowed the respondent to speak freely without censure. It was important to me that the informant narrate their coming-out experiences as freely and naturally as possible, which led to other narratives that were not specifically about coming out.

I recorded coming-out stories from thirty-two individuals. Twenty-six of those were collected in a face-to-face formal interview setting, four were collected by telephone or email communication, and two were collected in an informal conversational setting. Additionally, I accessed three interviews which were conducted by students of mine, and two interviews that were available in the Memorial University Folklore and Language Archive. See Appendix A for a list of all interviews.

### **Chapter Outline**

This chapter, the introduction, introduces the topic of this thesis, and addresses problems that I encountered. Chapter Two outlines the nature of the coming-out story and examines the genre as a personal experience narrative as told by LGBTQ persons. The

personal experience narrative and its various forms may also be viewed as a part autobiography or life story, and the context in which these are told varies. The coming-out story is examined in terms of published literature and various coming-out models that have been theorized are highlighted. I examine the coming-out story as a means for LGBTQ persons to understand and use the narrative to disclose and perform their sexual orientation, and personal identity. I also introduce the term “disclosure narrative” as an all-encompassing term for coming-out stories as told by various people.

Chapter Three encompasses an analysis of the coming-out stories collected, and I examine how these elements can be viewed for thematic content, function, structure, and context. I examine how these elements combine to make a “master narrative” (Lawless 2001) of sorts, that employs specific characteristics in form, plot, and language. Some coming-out stories act very much like narratives about personal trauma (Lawless 2001, 2003; Shuman and Bohmer 2004), while others use esoteric language and understanding to relay comedic, reassuring or positive messages to in-group audience members (Bauman 1986; Goodwin 1993). Yet others (perhaps, most), display emotions and considerations of coming out that highlight something in between the polarized “good” or “bad” experience. The narration of these stories is examined as a marker of group membership and as a rite of passage (van Gennep 1960) for LGBTQ persons.

Chapter Four examines the genre of the coming-out story and how LGBTQ persons understand and use the narrative to disclose and perform their sexual orientation,

and personal identity. Further, the chapter considers the role of the coming-out story in the negotiation of a collective LGBTQ identity. The coming-out narrative (or disclosure narrative) often plays a large role in the construction of self, and as it is told and re-told, emphasizes group membership and collective identity. Yet other narratives resist a perceived specific LGBTQ identity, and are performed as “queer” or “other” to a perceived LGBTQ norm. Various coming-out discourses are highlighted depending on the narrator and their cultural understanding of what it means to be LGBTQ. By looking at these collected narratives I highlight various coming-out stories of LGBTQ tellers in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Chapter Five investigates the contexts of storytelling with regards to coming out, how some narratives may be performed as nuanced and perfected, and a deliberate construction of how the LGBTQ person presents themselves. This chapter demonstrates through detailed narratological analysis of the collected material that, by telling a coming-out story, LGBTQ persons are performing their narratives in ways that sometimes are spontaneous, or deliberate and intentional, while other told narratives are unintentional, and may be partial narratives (Kalçik 1975; Small 1975) that indicate a coming-out event but which do not relate a full narrative. This chapter considers narrative decision-making on the part of the narrator and how the performance changes according to variable factors such as audience and life stage of the narrator. The performative aspect of the coming-out story is further examined by showing that the

collected narratives contain aspects of resistance, empowerment, untellability and silence, and differences in perception of what it means to tell or perform a coming-out story.

Finally, Chapter Six, the conclusion, draws together these materials, analyses and conclusions and makes some suggestions for further folkloristic attention to coming-out (and similar) stories.

## **Chapter Two – Review of Literature and Introduction of Primary Concepts**

While the study of coming-out stories has been a cross-disciplinary venture, with analyses in literary and cultural theory, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and history, there has been no full-length study of coming-out stories in folkloristics. This chapter examines the act of, and cultural understanding of “coming out” and how coming out leads to the telling of a coming-out story. My aim has been to examine these narratives as a particular form of artistic communication, a performance that highlights and negotiates various parts of one’s identity.

### **Terminology**

The phrases to “come out,” “coming out,” and “to come out of the closet” are widely-used figures of speech that primarily indicate the disclosure of sexual orientation as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “to come out” to mean a public declaration or showing in some manner; a meaning that can be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (“come v.,” “to come out, v. 13” OED 2014). The usage of the term in the context of sexual orientation disclosure is under debate, however. Several sources cite that the term was popular among the gay community in the 1950s (Rodgers 1972: 54; Tamashiro 2004: 1), while psychologist Evelyn Hooker used the term in her groundbreaking work “Male Homosexuals and Their ‘Worlds’” (Hooker 1965: 99). “To come out” (as homosexual) is generally understood as a play on words, based on the

custom of a *débutante* being formally presented, or “coming out” to high-society in the early-20<sup>th</sup> century (Chauncey 1994:7; Darsey 2000: 209) and Hooker’s study specifically likened the coming out of homosexual men in gay bars to a “debut” (Hooker 1965: 99). While some believe that the phrase “to come out” did not become popular until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century riots in the post-Stonewall era (Weeks 2012), when there was a general belief that homosexuals should “come out” of oppression (Tamashiro 2004:1), George Chauncey theorized that a form of this phrase was used as early as the 1920s, when gay people “came into” homosexual society, an exact parallel to *débutantes* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Chauncey 1994: 7). He argued in *Gay New York* that in prewar years, gay people “did not speak of coming out of what we call the ‘gay closet’ but rather of coming into what they called ‘homosexual society’ or the ‘gay world,’ a world neither so small, nor so isolated, nor, often so hidden as the ‘closet’ implies” (1994: 7). Variations of the phrase including “to come out through,” “to come out to,” and “to come out into” have also been used in contemporary speech, and the verb, and all its forms, is arguably one of the most widely used terms by the LGBTQ population in North America (Whisman 1999: 186).

The general understanding of the term “the closet” is to indicate a secrecy that must be hidden away in a closet or “closeted.” The first reported use of the phrase “to come out of the closet” to mean the admittance of a secret has been attributed to Sylvia Plath in her poem, “The Applicant,” published in *London Magazine* in 1963 (“closet, n., 3d” OED 2014). However, it is likely that the phrase was used in vernacular speech much

earlier than the 1950s (Latimer 2004: 1; Rodgers 1972: 48). The well-known phrase “a skeleton in the closet” was in use in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the first published reference being by Hendry Stowell in 1816 in *The Eclectic Review*. Stowell’s sentence “The dread of being the cause of misery to posterity has prevailed over men to conceal the skeleton in the closet...” makes the unmistakable reference to a secret which must be concealed, in part because of the shame it would bring to the family should it be disclosed (Martin 2012: 1). The start of the vernacular use of the phrase “to come out of the closet” to refer specifically to homosexuality is unclear; Stowell’s published work refers to infectious or hereditary disease, and not to homosexuality.

In contemporary speech, “coming out of the closet” has many meanings and understandings. Primarily it acts as a metaphor that combines the concept of “coming out” into gay society with the phrase “a skeleton in the closet” (Martin 2012: 1). While “coming out of the closet” refers primarily to the deliberate disclosure of one’s homosexuality, it is also used by some to refer to a person’s first same-sex sexual experience, self-acceptance as LGBTQ, and participation in the gay community (Tamashiro 2004: 1). The metaphorical closet is often described as a mythical entity that encourages oppression, denial and internalized homophobia (Weeks 2011: 26), and marchers in gay pride parades, post-Stonewall era, encouraged people to come out with their slogans “Out of the closets, into the streets” and “Come out, come out wherever you are” (Weeks 2011: 26; Whisman 1999: 187), the latter a deliberate play on the children’s

game call.

“Coming out” and “coming out of the closet” led to other phrases denoting secrecy and disclosure. For instance, Paul Baker (2003) and William Leap (1996) have both written on *polari*, a language used by gay subcultures pre-1960 as a way to safely communicate one’s sexuality to other group members. It is generally thought that in the LGBTQ community, an “out” gay person does not feel the need to conceal their sexual attractions, orientation or gender identity, and to be “outed” refers to having one’s orientation publically declared without one’s consent. “Outing” is the deliberate disclosure of a gay person’s sexual orientation when it is presumed that the person does not want these characteristics disclosed (Tamashiro 2004: 1). In recent years, the phrase “coming out” has been used as an analogy for other characteristics or behaviours that may not be viewed as common or popular, such as “coming out as an alcoholic” or “coming out as a conservative.”

Coming out is a gradual process that first involves coming out to oneself, meaning the recognition and admittance to oneself that one is gay or lesbian (Liang 1997: 291). This often starts a process of soul searching or self-evaluation of thoughts, feelings and activities as one moves through feelings of denial, rejection and acceptance. By coming out to other individuals, the gay person ends that period of questioning and affirms their own beliefs. As Hunter argues in her book *Coming Out and Disclosures*, “coming out” indicates a process of “internal identity development” that has started but

may not go further, while “disclosure” indicates a revelation of one’s identity to others (Hunter 2007: 41).

There are three recognizable properties of the coming-out process, notes Liang in *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality*, although the author stresses that there is no central definition of coming out. At first there is the initial self-recognition and definition as lesbian or gay to the self; secondly there is a self-presentation as lesbian and gay to others; and finally the person begins a series of ongoing acts of self-definition and self-presentation as lesbian or gay (Liang 1997: 291).

### **LGBTQ Folklore**

As Blincoe and Forrest attest in the special issue of New York Folklore entitled *Prejudice and Pride: Lesbian and Gay Traditions in America*, LGBTQ folklore has arisen from the unique social condition of the gay community, a community that has historically been an oppressed minority in mainstream American society (1993: 1). This community has been marginalised in a multitude of ways, and members of the community have faced prejudice in the form of fear, hatred, systematic violence and the oppression of their identity, often at psychological cost. Because of the everyday forms of systematic abuse experienced in varying degrees by LGBTQ persons, folklore has played an enormous role in the survival of gays and lesbians who have depended upon traditional forms of communication and expression for their individual and collective survival (Blincoe and

Forrest 1993: 1; Goodwin 1989). Although it may seem unlikely that such a diverse group of people be grouped together into one community, initial folklore studies such as Dresser (1974), and Goodwin (1989, 1993), among others, are evidence to the commonalities of folk tradition, communication and process in gay and lesbian culture. While gay and lesbian traditions are quite diverse, they deserve to be highlighted and given due significance in a culture that has been slow to accept gay and lesbian members of society (Blincoe and Forrest 1993: 3).

### **The Personal Experience Narrative**

As folklorist Linda Dégh wrote forty-five years ago, “Narration is ageless. The impulse to tell a story and the need to listen to it have made narrative the natural companion of man throughout the history of civilization” (Dégh 1972: 53). Dégh’s description of stories still rings true today: they can adapt to any local or social climate, and they are “old and venerable, but they are also new and up to date [and] they contain persistent and yet continually reinterpreted ideas” (1972: 53). And the questions that folklore scholars are asking about folk narrative are still the same. What is the message of the story? “What are the forces that create, launch, disseminate, maintain, vary, corrupt, and reinforce them? What do they mean to their performers and audiences?” (1972: 54). Folklorist Barbro Klein addressed some of the same questions in her article “Telling, Doing, Experiencing: Folkloristic Perspectives on Narrative Analysis” (2006).

What is the relationship between narrating and experiencing (2006: 7)? I attempt to answer these questions with regard to coming-out stories, below.

A personal experience narrative is a first-person account of a cumulative or one-time experience in the teller's life, is usually narrated orally, although sometimes is related in other non-oral verbal forms such as the Internet in chat rooms, online community forums, or by other means, and is an identifiable, self-contained unit describing an experience, that may be performed in a variety of ways. This is akin to von Sydow's concept of the memorate as the raw explanation of one's experience (Dégh and Vazsonyi 1974: 226), and as the memorate becomes more nuanced with its telling, it becomes a fabulate (von Sydow 1948: 87). While there is some question as to whether the personal experience story was even considered folklore by some folklorists of the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century, because it cannot be corroborated in folklore indexes or other published texts, and it does not always include traditional belief content as does the memorate (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1974: 226), these opinions are much fewer or non-existent in number in recent scholarship (cf. Santino 1978, Lawless 2001, and Shuman 2005). The personal experience narrative is told by virtually all people and concerns a multiplicity of topics in an infinite number of social contexts. Although the contents of personal experience narratives are often perceived as "non-traditional" in terms of folklore and are not widely disseminated as an individual text, they reflect the experiences of the teller and her community, making it a widespread and familiar form of

communication that is popular and engaging (Stahl 1983: 269). It can be regarded as a text, a performance or an interactional event, may be studied comparatively or individually, and has innumerable natural contexts in which it may be heard or read (274).

The personal experience narrative is a prose narrative which typically describes a single event or experience of the teller and is told in the first person. As folklorist Sandra K. Dolby Stahl notes, the personal experience narrative functions to teach or entertain, but it also creates intimacy by “[forging] a subtle bond between the teller and the listener. The teller reveals something about himself, while the listener learns something about the storyteller” (1998: 1172). By the same token, the coming-out story may be conceived of as a new experience, created by the telling of the narrative by one person to another (Braid 1996). Stahl notes that while personal experience narratives have no known traditional motifs, the form, style and function of such narratives are consistent from one telling to the next. The narrative is not passed down through generations as other types of stories may be, but may be repeatedly told and polished by the narrator, entering into the teller’s formal repertoire of stories (Stahl 1998: 1172).

Stahl suggests that personal experience narrative has three typical functions: to entertain, provide a cautionary tale or illustrate behaviour and resulting consequences, or present an aspect of the teller’s self-identity or value system. In any given narrative these functions may overlap, and other functions (as explored in Chapter Four and Five) may exist (Stahl 1998:1170).

### **The Coming-Out Story**

As defined by McNaron on the online archive glbtq, a coming-out story includes some or all of the following characteristics: it recounts the teller's recognition of themselves as "different" emotionally or sexually; it often focuses on a "first time" erotic or sexual experience with someone of the same sex; it is an autobiographical narrative that is usually short, with a single focus; it involves "a crucial naming of the self as someone who loves a member of one's own sex" in an often homophobic world; it empowers the teller on many levels, not just on a sensual level; and it often defies the implicit and explicit demands of the dominant culture by virtue of the narrator refusing to hide or "pass" as a heterosexual (McNaron 2002:1). Chapter Three investigates these elements in the context of the oral and written narratives I have collected.

The coming-out story is particularly relevant to the LGBTQ community, as coming-out (or disclosing one's non-heterosexual identity) itself is almost a universal experience by LGBTQ persons, if not to straight, then certainly to other LGBTQ people. In theory, every person who has ever "come out of the closet" as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, has the makings of a story that relates their experiences. They may tell a story that is simple or complex, short or long, and may highlight a time that was funny, sad, angry, happy or any number of other emotions. The story may not be emotional at all. The story may mean something different to the teller each time it is told, just as it may have different meanings for those who are listening to or reading the story.

Furthermore, the audience members may react differently depending on their own story and their own experiences, sexual identity and sense of self. An LGBTQ listener may relate to the story, compare and differentiate it with their own experience, and may understand nuances and coded references meant only for those who have already experienced coming out in some form. While the queer experience is varied, diverse, and complex, the idea of disclosing one's sexual orientation is almost universal to the LGBTQ community. Therefore, the coming-out story, and all of its variants, is a popular and well-recognized narrative in the queer community, and the highlighted specific experience or experiences can build camaraderie by its recognized and expressed collective identity.

The coming-out story is a narrative that most gays and lesbians tell at some point, to someone, including to themselves, to other LGBTQ people, and straight people. It may be presented in a variety of ways depending on the audience, the situation, the time in one's life that it is being told, and in innumerable other contexts. Gays and lesbians may even have more than one coming-out story, as the coming-out process is viewed as continual during a lifetime of meeting new people and broadening one's social network. Therefore, gays and lesbians are coming out every day, in contexts that may or may not be intentional, constructed or predictable. As sociologist A. C. Liang argues, the coming-out narrative "reflects on the ongoing process and experience of coming out" and is a "form of cultural practice [in which] we can expect to find salient aspects of culture, including education inscribed within the narrative" (Liang 1997: 291 as quoted in Sauntson 2007:

142).

The coming-out story is a recognizable narrative construction utilized by gays and lesbians, and it has various functions, meanings, and interpretations as a personal experience narrative (Stahl 1983), a tool for empowerment (Lawless 2001) and a means for communication and identification in the gay and lesbian community (Goodwin 1989). Other studies have used coming-out stories for an examination of sexuality (Plummer 1995), queer theory (Gantz 2001; Jolly 2001) and as a recognition of the gay and lesbian community that is “beyond the closet” and “coming out” (Alderson 2000; Seidman 2002).

The coming-out narrative is a rich and complex aspect of gay and lesbian folklore. Many themes may emerge out of these narratives that depict a personal experience, or, according to Goodwin, the prevalent theme of gay folklore: belonging (1993: 21). Belonging is a crucial need for members of a marginalised culture who are oppressed and excluded from mainstream society, and folklore is a primary means for group cohesion, identity formation and the creation and maintenance of belonging. The coming-out story is an interactional narrative, both creating and sustaining gay and lesbian folklore while helping to create a significant sense of self for the individual (Goodwin 1993: 21; or, like other kinds of narrative, Small 1975: 16).

If using a strict interpretation of Stahl’s definition of the personal experience narrative, many of the coming-out stories in this short survey of the literature would not qualify because they had been composed and written down by the teller, therefore were

likely edited or polished. Only Goodwin (1989), Pugh (1998), and Sharp (2002) analyse the narratives they include in their works from a folkloristic perspective; other academics such as d'Augelli (2003), Hartman (1995), Masquesmay (2003), Plummer (1995), and Wood (1994) use linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology and various methods of ethnography for their analysis.

### **Coming-Out Stories as Traditional Content**

As later sections outlining the various themes and motifs highlighted in the narratives show, coming-out stories and other narratives that LGBTQ persons tell contain a great amount of traditional content. The thematic and motifal consistencies throughout my corpus highlight that coming-out stories can be considered a sub-genre of personal experience narrative, much like the stories by alcoholics at AA meetings (Baker 2008), or those told as religious testimony (Brown 1990: 258). Therefore, in the strictest sense of the definition of “personal experience narrative” by Stahl in *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative* (1989), coming-out stories only fit two of the attributes of Stahl’s definition that a personal experience narrative is a prose narrative relating a personal experience, usually told in the first person, and with non-traditional content (1989: 12). While the narrative content can be viewed as traditional, the other qualities of the genre that Stahl highlight are applicable: the coming-out story as personal experience narrative is a story that remains relatively stable in the repertoire of the narrator, and the primary

character “I” overlaps with the storyteller in one personality (1989: 12-13; 20; 23).

While the coming-out story can be considered, for the most part, a personal experience story, it also can be described as other forms of narrative, including legend, life history, autobiography, and anecdote. In Stahl’s definition of personal-experience story (1998), she notes that while the story may be oft-performed and practiced, it is “not passed down through time and space and kept alive through variation from one teller to another” (1998: 1170). I argue that the coming-out story does function as a personal experience narrative, but that it does have instances of being passed down through time and space, and is kept alive through re-tellings, sometimes by people other than the person who experienced the event.

There are three ways in which these personal experience narratives are traditional in addition to the content of the story: the telling of the story, the form of the story (see the examination of this in Chapter Four) and finally the context and the competence of the narration, which leads to the function of the narrative. I argue against Stahl’s claim that these stories do not enter tradition (1998: 1170), and show that various re-tellings occur in small groups of LGBTQ persons, parallel to Santino’s “hero” stories (1978: 204). This will be examined later in Chapter Five.

### **The Life Story and Autobiography**

Answering the question “What is the story?” is one way in which narratives can

be told. Aristotle stated that at the core of a good tragedy was the pattern of a “beginning, middle, and end” (1932: 1450b). Literary theorist James Phelan establishes a more contemporary definition of a narrative as “Somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened” (Phelan 2005: 18 as quoted in Hyvärinen 2008: 448).

There have been various approaches to narrative analysis, but most start with William Labov’s famous framework which describes the “well-formed narrative” as having six parts: the abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result/resolution, and coda (Labov and Waletzky 1967; Labov 1972). Later in this thesis I develop this concept in more detail.

In *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to Critical Humanism*, sociologist Ken Plummer introduces the life story as a critical part of narrative, and that telling and understanding narrative is a way for humans to make meaning of their lives and the world around them (2001: 185). He goes on to explain the concept of narrative in various disciplines, including linguistics, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and the newer field of narratology. While the field of narratology is huge, with varying definitions of narrative and life story dependent on the scope of research, there are some main points that are important to delineate for the purposes of this study.

Simply put, narratives allow us to communicate with each other. By telling the who, what, when, where, and why of an event in an understandable verbal form, we allow

ourselves to be understood, and to ultimately, understand each other's lives. We create narratives to represent reality as we know it, and to produce meaning of that reality, as sociologist Robert Atkinson explains (2001: 1). Furthermore, story-making and the process of "narrativization," using the words of Ken Plummer, serve to provide "coherence to a life" (2001: 185). Thusly, a narrative can be conceived of in several ways: as a general means of explaining and examining a life, or as a focused entity that explains a specific event or chain of events. The latter is most akin to Labov's work, which asks and demands an answer to the question 'and then what happened?' (Labov 1972; Reissman 1993: 17 as quoted in Plummer 2001: 185).

The life story, like narrative, has multiple definitions. While most agree that the life story reminisces in articulating the past of the narrator, and reveals an understanding of who we are (Atkinson 2001: 1), folklorist Jeff Todd Titon's definition of the life story bears repeating verbatim:

A life story is, simply, a person's story of his or her life, or of what he or she thinks is a significant part of that life. It is therefore a personal narrative, a story of personal experience, and, as it emerges from conversation, its ontological status is the spoken word, even if the story is transcribed and edited for the printed page. The storyteller trusts the listener(s) and the listener respects the storyteller, not interrupting the train of thought until the story is finished (Titon 1980: 276).

He goes on to argue that the life story must be differentiated from its cousins biography, oral history and personal history. Titon ultimately explains that the life story

is not a historical description that “obeys historical laws” but is a fiction, a “making,” which drives toward enactment. The language that encompasses a story is “made” instead of “found out,” and the life story is made of language that is natural, and which has arisen from “deeply felt, personal experience” (Titon 1980: 278; see also Lovelace 1989). This is in contrast to the biography, oral history and personal history, which rely heavily on editing for chronological order and other scientific criteria by the historian. The life history is based on recollection, “in a state of vivid sensation, a critical moment in his life, and to a degree re-experiencing it by means of storytelling” (Titon 1980: 280).

The importance of storytelling cannot be overstated, notes Robert Atkinson in his book *The Life Story Interview*, in which he suggests that by telling a story from our own life, we are able to better understand ourselves and delve deeper into the meaning of our lives through our self-reflection and the oral expression of events, experiences and feelings that we have lived (1998: 1). Telling a life story, he concludes, is a way to “make our lives coherent, understandable, and meaningful” (1). He notes that the life story usually ends up as a short autobiography, in which the teller is narrating in their own words, guided only by the researcher through the interview format (2). While some life stories are heavily edited for publication or for the researcher’s own interests, folklorists (myself included) generally wish to preserve the interviewee’s words as clearly as possible, by emphasizing their own language, and therefore, their role as a tradition bearer. Therefore, I highlight the methods of narrating as accurately as possible, leaving

out only false starts, and superfluous words such as “like” that do not contribute to the narrative.

The format that I used to bring about the narratives that I collected was very much guided by my insider status, and my own experience of coming out. I started my interviews by asking the respondents how they first came out, which was usually enough to get them talking about coming-out or other memorable events in their lives. Once their initial narrative came to a natural ending, I would ask further questions such as “Do you have a particularly memorable coming out?” which would usually get the narrator to tell another narrative. Most of my interviews consisted of several narratives within the interview, with few interjections from me, other than to ask for clarification on something, or to get the narrator to elaborate on something they said. Therefore, my methodology was a lot like what Atkinson described in *Life History Interviews* (1998) and Titon described in “The Life Story” (1980).

Linguist Kathleen M. Wood’s study “Life Stories as Artifacts of a Culture: Lesbian Coming-Out Stories” (1994) notes that Labov’s structure is useful for studying lesbian life stories, and emphasizes that the resolution/coda sequence can be used to explore the time-frame of coming-out stories. She suggests that these endings are not intended to leave the listener/reader with a sense of closure, but that they can be conceived of as portraying coming-out as “the lifelong process that it is” (Wood 1994: 778).

Wood also noted in her study on life stories as coming-out stories that cross-disciplinary interest in the narrative as life-story genre has shown that these narratives exhibit a “there-is-more-but-I’ll-end-it-here” characteristic, and that narrators generally do not have “one fixed and rigid understanding of their lives” (1994: 777). She then emphasized what linguist Charlotte Linde discovered in her work *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (1993) that when people tell their personal experience narratives or life-stories, that they continually tell different versions of their experiences, thereby creating new meanings and understandings of their lives all the time (Linde 1993: 4 as reported in Wood 1994: 778).

Linde argues that the life story expresses our sense of self, and is “a means by which we communicate this sense of self and negotiate it with others” (1993: 3). Furthermore, these narratives are used by their tellers “to claim or negotiate group membership and to demonstrate that we are in fact worthy members of those groups” (1993:3). Finally, she notes that the study of life stories predicates the assumption that “a life story is something most people have, something they have created, and something that, for both personal and social comfort, must be created in a coherent fashion (Linde 1993: 3-4). Using this definition, it can be argued that the personal experience narratives that I collected could also be called “life stories.” Because Linde continues that life stories are discontinuous units, “told in separate pieces over a long period of time,” her definition does not work with my interview data, which was collected generally over one

session. Although coming-out stories are continuously told as life events pass and new people are told, thereby they could be considered life stories, especially when told to an interviewer over multiple sessions, and detailing various events. For the purposes of this thesis, however I retain the words “personal experience narrative” to describe the narratives I collected.

### **Personal Experience Narratives in LGBTQ Communities**

Because the personal experience narrative can be either informal or formal, unrehearsed or practiced, there are multiple varieties of told narratives within the gay and lesbian communities. There are some personal experience narratives that are not planned or practiced, and would not be considered part of a teller’s repertoire of told stories, and there are those that are well-rehearsed and told with a clear performative context, with possible didactic or illustrative functions (cf. Stahl 1983: 274). For the gay and lesbian community there are not only coming-out stories, but also narratives about sexual experiences, experiences with violence and gay bashing, and numerous other experiences relevant to gays and lesbians and which are shared by other communities (compare, for example, Lawless’s study on violence toward women [2001] and Radner and Lanser’s notion of coding in narrative [1993]).

Some personal experience narratives detail the effects of being “in the closet” or hiding their sexuality. As one lesbian noted:

There are all kinds of degrees of being in the closet. There are some people who are so in the closet that only they and their lovers know. All the rest of the world is dealing with a masquerade. And then, there are the kind of people I have known, the kind of life I have lived, where you have a circle of gay people that you move around with. And so, you have some social life with them, and then there is the rest of the world that you deal with during the week, during the daylight hours. (Ponse 1978: 59)

While coming-out stories may be either rehearsed or unrehearsed, the content of the story, the emotion of the teller and the mood of the narrative wholly depend on the context of the telling. There may be an “official text” told to acquaintances and other versions told to friends in more familiar contexts. While there is not one single episode of coming out, but rather multiple episodes, a teller may have numerous personal experience narratives about coming out involving different times and different people in his/her life. For this reason there is an infinite variety of coming-out stories and a rich category of narratives within this corpus to examine.

The coming-out story has a variety of functions. It may reinforce a particular ideal of the community, or represent an individual’s particular code of values and ethics. It may be emotional and highly personal or unemotional and detached, and often involves specific self-representation (Stahl 1983: 270). The subject matter involved in the narrative is generally familiar to both the audience and the teller of the story, even if they haven’t heard or told the narrative before. Because the coming-out story is so recognizable in the LGBTQ community, it is almost expected by other LGBTQ people

that once the person is identified as such, that they will have a story to tell about their own experiences.

### **Who Tells a Coming-Out Story?**

The coming-out story has a specific element of teller ownership that personal experience narratives often portray (Stahl 1983: 270). Not only is it told almost exclusively by the person who has had the experience, but it is specifically created to acknowledge the journey of self-examination and culmination of events that led to one's declaration of sexual identity. The teller generally is the creator of the coming-out story, and the main characters are gays and lesbians who brave family or public censure by revealing their innermost thoughts, desires and often painful, journey of self-awareness (Crawley and Broad 2004: 49).

The construction and telling of a coming-out story is dependent on the audience and the context of the telling, observe sociologists Crawley and Broad (2004: 54). Revealing one's sexuality by telling a coming-out story may be risky if the gay person is unsure of the likely reaction of the person being told. Telling such a personal narrative places the teller in a position of extreme vulnerability, and for this reason, their identity is most likely pre-established before one shares their coming-out story with their audience. As students of the legend discovered, the telling of a legend is often a negotiation of acceptable, accepted, and indeed tellable facts (Dégh 2001; G. Butler: 1990). The

sharing of a coming-out story indicates intimacy between the teller and the audience and, by telling a coming-out story, a bond may be created or strengthened (Dolby 1998: 1170; Goodwin 1989: 42). In fact, in order to function didactically, as Crawley and Broad outline in their study about coming out to undergraduate students, telling coming-out stories is often “dependent on the assumption of a prejudicial audience” (Crawley and Broad 2004: 59).

Coming-out stories are not always told by LGBTQ persons. Anybody can tell a coming-out story about someone else’s coming out, and in fact, this may happen more often than people realize. Parents may tell a trusted friend or another relative. A disclosure of someone’s sexual orientation or the story about their coming to the realization that they are gay could technically be re-told by anyone who has initially heard the story. This is often seen as “outing,” however, although this concept may not be familiar or even occur to some tellers. Some may tell the story by making certain details anonymous, such as identifying names and hometowns, or by employing the well-known and eponymous legend feature “a friend of a friend” (FOAFTale News: 2014). Certainly other LGBTQ people have confirmed the sexual orientation of another in gay circles by affirming one’s group belonging, often with esoteric language that indicates so, such as “She’s part of the choir” or “He’s a friend of Dorothy”<sup>4</sup> (Cox and Fay 1994; Dresser

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<sup>4</sup> William Leap has written extensively on gay and lesbian language, and his linguistic scholarship has done much for the understanding of language use and communication by LGBTQ persons. In terms of folkloristics, Joseph Goodwin addresses language use by gay men in the 1980s, as does Norine Dresser’s 1974 article; both of these sources are good for historical context, but outdated, and a new lexicon of LGBTQ language is sorely needed.

1974; Goodwin 1989; Leap 1996). The negotiation of who tells a coming-out story may be influenced by the strength of the relationship between the teller of the story and the person who experienced it. As suggested by Labov (1970) and Stahl (1977) perhaps only those with strongly connected experiences have the culturally-accepted right to tell/transform the event into a narrative of their own (Palmenfelt 2006: 111). Therefore, while a parent may feel they can tell their child's coming-out story, so too may a gay friend of the LGBTQ person also feel they can tell the story.

Because these coming-out stories can be told by people other than the person who has come out, they may be seen as not technically a "personal experience narrative." Folklorist Ulf Palmenfelt, in discussing the experiential domain of narratives, argues that the experience must be so strong or "the narrator must be close enough to the experienced event to have the right to include it into [their] own life history" (2006: 112). If at any point, the audience understands the story to have not been experienced by the teller, then it is understood by the audience that the narrator is telling a fabulate, or a legend (2006: 112). I was able to hear an example of a coming-out story told as legend by an acquaintance Cathy, who told the narrative of a young man who ended up at the local psychiatric hospital on Christmas Eve (076), as well as a legend of a father shunning his daughter on his death bed (075). These are explored, along with other types of coming-out stories, in Chapter Four.

There is no single coming-out story that can be considered typical. The stories may offer advice, support or counselling, or they may serve as a reinforcement of the

existence of positive outcomes. The story itself may also be part of the process of coming out, one that (most) gay people share (Goodwin 1989: 43). Since the process is potentially quite traumatic, it is often faced with fear and nervousness, regardless of the audience. LGBTQ persons hearing another's coming-out story may be reassuring because it can offer examples of how to act and not act, what to say and not say, and what to expect (Bascom 1954). Coming out is viewed as an accomplishment by gays and lesbians who have already come out of the closet and acknowledged their sexuality, and is considered by many in the community to be a necessary rite of passage (Davies 2014; Goodwin 1989: 43; Herdt 1992; van Gennep 1960).

### **How the Coming-Out Story is Performed**

The introductory textbook *Finding Out: An Introduction to LGBT Studies* by Meem, Gibson, and Alexander (2010) highlights the importance of LGBTQs telling and retelling their stories, and the connection that is then created between storyteller and listener, and between past and present (2010:1-2). Nowhere is this more obvious than in the LGBTQ community in which the process of telling each other stories has been critical for the gay community, for both community building and the understanding of diverse experiences through history that has been fraught with civil injustice and inequality. But the authors caution against the reader categorizing these stories together. They note that the complexities of stories told about same-sex desires and gender non-conformity may seem similar, but are different dependent on time and location, and the reader/listener

must not assume same-ness “even if the similarities tempt us to understand their stories as like our own” (2010: 2).

The audience’s familiarity with one’s coming-out story does not deter the teller from performing it again to a trusted audience. As Edmund White recognized in his partly autobiographical book, *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America*, a group telling personal experience narratives to each other were “all familiar with each other’s sagas, but were eager to hear every word again” (1980: 101; quoted in Goodwin 1989: 43). One of the reasons that the coming-out story is a frequently requested narrative among the gay community is that the listener is empathetic to the struggle of the teller, and wishes to hear how others dealt with the consequences of coming out. Elaine Lawless asserts in *Women Escaping Violence*, “we are all at different stages in the telling of our lives” (2001: 3), and it is no different for the gay community, which with its variety of people of all classes, races, ages, education and gender identification, among other identity characteristics, makes for an endless variation of coming-out stories of all different types.

While understanding that the LGBTQ experience is varied and complex, I have examined those very patterns in narrative structure and content that are typical in coming-out stories, as well as those aspects of the coming-out story that are non-typical. By using Toelken’s model of dynamism and conservatism (1979), I examine not only the stories themselves, but how they are told, the various contexts of telling and receiving, the constructs used by tellers to perform the stories, and finally, how these performances are situated in the context of narrating, doing and experiencing (Klein 2006).

### **Published Coming-Out Stories**

Gays and lesbians may be further influenced by the plethora of coming-out stories that were published in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the time of the Stonewall riots, in which gays and lesbians, as a whole, resisted arrest during police raids in New York City in 1969, an event that became a turning point for the fight for equal rights of gays and lesbians. As multiple anthologies of coming-out narratives were being produced by small, often independent publishing houses, it became clear that coming-out stories were changing according to the circumstances and involvement of the particular social and community culture involved. In an article on lesbian personal narratives, Bonnie Zimmerman identifies seven popular anthologies that were published between 1977 and 1982 that consisted exclusively or largely of lesbian first-person narratives<sup>5</sup> (1984: 663), including Margaret Cruikshank's *The Lesbian Path*, which called for more diversity of coming-out stories by lesbians: lesbians of colour, older lesbians, working class, lesbians with disabilities, and poor lesbians were either under-represented or not represented at all. In recent years, these coming-out narratives have appeared in print, providing a voice to groups that were doubly marginalised, such as lesbian nuns, lesbians with AIDS, and Asian-American lesbians. LGBTQ persons have shaped their culture and community from what they perceive to be characteristic and common experiences

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<sup>5</sup> These include *The New Lesbians* (Galana and Covina 1977); *We're Here: Conversations with Lesbian Women* (Steward-Park and Cassidy 1977); *The Coming Out Stories* (Stanley and Wolfe 1980); *The Lesbian Path* (Cruikshank 1980); *Lesbian Crossroads* (Baetz 1980); *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981), and *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (Beck 1982).

(Zimmerman 1984: 673) and their personal experience narratives reflect this. Love, sexuality, oppression, violence, hatred, relationships with parents, homophobia, heterosexism, and shared belief are all expressed through coming-out stories. As Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe indicate in their anthology, *The Coming Out Stories*,

the stories themselves become part of every woman's [sic] coming out process... many of the writers have since shared their coming out stories with wimmin who were involved in events in their past, and the letters move back and forth among them, a dialogue of each woman's understanding.... These coming out stories are the foundation of our lives as Lesbians, as real to ourselves; as such, our sharing of them defines us as participants in Lesbian culture, as members of a community. (1980: xxi)

Although society has slowly progressed in its acceptance of gays and lesbians in the past fifty years, older published sources indicate not only the difficulty in coming out to family members, friends, and colleagues but the inherent fear of loss – of family members, employment, friends. So deep was this fear that gays and lesbians often insisted on being anonymous or using pseudonyms when submitting their stories to small gay press magazines, circulars, and books. As Stanley and Wolfe's *The Coming Out Stories* acknowledged, not only were there those women who told their stories, but also “the growing community of wimmin [sic] whose names we don't always know and who we may never meet,” including one in California who wrote to us and said ‘I wish I could write my coming-out story for you, but I've only just now gotten up the courage to whisper the word Lesbian to myself in the mirror’”(1980: v). Sadly, many stories have

gone uncollected and untold, and as many lesbians and gays that were unafraid to tell their stories, there were likely ten times that amount who remained silent. I call these stories “the untold stories,” and I mourn those that lived their lives in secrecy or alone, because they felt it was unsafe to disclose their true sexual orientation or identity.

As more books and circulars were published and mailed out, to small towns and big cities, more gays and lesbians came out. As more coming-out stories were published, there came into being an understanding of the general recognition of the process of coming out. One of the most common experiences of gays and lesbians is the journey of self-discovery toward one’s sexuality. This is such a common theme in coming-out stories that it is not difficult to find a personal experience narrative that discusses that journey, either implicitly or explicitly. In a book-length account of a gay teenager’s life, Aaron Fricke tells his story:

When I entered high school I was completely isolated from the world. I had lost all concept of humanity; I had given up all hopes of ever finding love, warmth or tenderness in the world. I did not lie to myself, but I did keep other people from thinking I was a homosexual....

I retreated into my own world... The only goal left to me in life was to hide anything that could identify me as gay... [and] self-doubt set in. I thought that anything I did might somehow reveal my homosexuality, and my morale sank even deeper... I withdrew from everyone and slowly formed a shell around myself. Everyone could be a potential threat to me. I resembled a crustacean with no claws... This shell helped me protect my secret, but it could not protect my feelings from the prejudice I constantly encountered. (Fricke 1981: 31-3 as qtd. in Plummer 1995: 53)

An unidentified lesbian in Barbara Ponse’s *Identities in the Lesbian World*

remembers her first experience with a woman as beautiful and remarks that she was completely sure about her sexuality, even at a young age:

The fact is I never found men interesting. I feel neutral about them in general. Now women I always, since I was a little girl, found them to be attractive to me. I finally did try making it with a man; I was drunk at the time. Just to see what all the hooting and hollering was about. And it was OK as far as sex goes. I had an orgasm and all that. But it's simply not the same thing emotionally and all the other things that go along with a sexual experience as it is for me with women. The first sexual experience I had with a woman was when I was fifteen years old in a cornfield. It was so wonderful, so complete, there was never any question for me that I was a lesbian, even though at that time I didn't know the word. (1978: 176)

Other personal experience narratives focus not on coming out per se, but on the journey of self-discovery, the element of choice, or the constricting use of labels in the gay community. This is congruent with Stahl's statement that "the overall function of the personal narrative is to allow for the discovery of the teller's identity (especially in terms of values and character traits) and to maintain the stability of that identity for both the teller and listener" (1989: 21).

Stephen Hartman's Ph.D. dissertation "Narrative Style/Narrated Identity: Resistances to Categories of Gay Identity in the Coming Out Story" (1995) includes his own constructed coming-out story. While most coming-out narratives are serious, others are told in a humorous manner:

I decided to tell my parents that I was gay at a traffic light. I was home visiting for the weekend, and we were returning from our

annual Stephen's-in-town visit to the art museum. My father sneered at a woman standing in the crosswalk who he presumed to be lesbian. There was a frightening stubbornness in his voice as he recited a line or two about nature. I felt angry, confused and, oddly, exposed. I hadn't dated any men yet, but I was pretty sure I wanted to. My sister, soon to come out as lesbian herself, slumped so speechlessly into the back seat that I knew something was up. I was irritated and I felt responsible, so I told them. Just came out with it. I was so surprised by my outburst that I didn't notice their reaction. My sister had to fill me in years later. Of course my father decided it was a prank. Five or six years into my current relationship, my mother asked when I would come out to my father. I answered that I already had; she replied "he forgot." (Hartman 1995: 47-8)

Told in a light manner, Hartman's coming-out story reflects what the author admits is "a sometimes irreverent attitude and impulsive style," and he concedes that it was a "carefully composed" narrative, in contrast to the more often spontaneous telling of a coming-out story. Hartman then notes that coming-out stories as published in the literature on gay identity are often presented as a finished product, a final version that theorizes the coming-out process as "a done deal" (48). As I show in this thesis, in reality, coming out-stories grow and change multiple times, and reflect the changing and evolving identity of the teller, rather than a set narrative that articulates a definitive and static truth.

The risk of loss of employment and the general lack of job security once a gay or lesbian person comes out exemplify a predominant topic within the coming-out story in previous decades, evidenced by my own corpus of interviews. However, there are many other combinations of subject matter. According to Ken Plummer's fundamental work,

*Telling Sexual Stories*, the three dominant themes of the coming-out story in the 1970s and 1980s were unhappiness, a search for community, and the ultimate formation of gay or lesbian identity (Plummer 1995: 82-86). While gay and lesbian narratives may have started with these themes, contemporary coming-out stories as told in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have a different focus. Newer coming-out stories may focus less on the personal struggle of self-acceptance and the stigma of being gay, and focus more on identity as fluid, queer, and as one part of a whole in terms of personal identity (Savin-Williams 2005; Gray 2009).

Sociologist Ritch C. Savin-Williams makes the point that many LGBTQ persons, teenagers in particular, are redefining “gay” and coming-out processes, often refusing to label themselves in terms of their sexuality (2005: 1). This means that some LGBTQ youth do not feel that they have a story to tell, as they do not consider themselves as a particular label such as “gay” or “queer,” nor do they want to be limited to these labels (2005: 5), although I saw little evidence for a widespread existence of this state.

### **Academic Research on the Coming-Out Story**

Recent trends in narrative inquiry have examined gay and lesbian and queer narrative to explain what stories are being told, who they are being told by, and to whom are they telling their stories. Sara Crawley and K. L. Broad’s article “‘Be Your (Real Lesbian) Self’: Mobilizing Sexual Formula Stories through Personal (and Political)

Storytelling” focuses on the modern coming-out story as told to classroom audiences by graduate students and professors that identify as LGBTQ. Their main concern is how queer individuals “story themselves, as individual and real, in the process [of telling their story]” (2004: 45). Crawley and Broad’s work is partly autoethnographic<sup>6</sup>, using Crawley’s fieldwork and Broad’s experience as a speaker for special “coming out panels” given by LGBTQ persons on a variety of college campuses.

The Ph.D. dissertation by Christine Sharp (University of Western Sydney) in Psychology entitled “Lesbian Identity Narratives: Telling Tales of a Stigmatised Identity” (2002) is one study examining lesbian identity through the telling of what she terms “identity narratives.” According to Sharp, identity narratives are comprised of reflection of one or more aspects of lesbian identity, including lesbian sexual identity, the transition to lesbian identity, stigma management, lesbian relationships and lesbian community involvement. For Sharp, these narratives told to other lesbians function to demonstrate group membership, location within the group, worthiness and morality, identity-repair and identity-formation (2002: 1-3). Sharp’s study analyses the identity narratives of 64 lesbians as told to another lesbian, and she concludes that these narratives reflected common life events and expressions of identity that were constrained by stigma management mechanisms (iv). Sharp’s thesis attempts to understand why lesbians talk

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<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Ellis’ work on autoethnography has been influential to the field of ethnography. Crawley and Broad cite several of her articles including “Evocative Ethnography: Writing Emotionally About Our Lives.” (Ellis 1997: 115-139).

about being lesbian, and discusses the identity narratives as having value for both the narrator and her lesbian audience. I develop this further in Chapter Three.

The Ph.D. dissertation in Psychology by Stephen Hartman, referred to above, examines the resistance to categories of gay identity through the coming-out story. “Narrative Style/Narrated Identity” is a worthy study of the coming-out story by the examination of five coming-out stories of gay men with an emphasis on stylistic elements of narrative and non-narrative elements (1995). These elements were scored on a “Scale of Coming Out Experiences,” and coded for stylistic gestures and categories of gay identity. Hartman concludes that gay identity is best studied as a performative act of narration (1995: ii) and he examines the coming-out story as not simply a straightforward affair, with the narrator chronicling a linear progression from one sexual identity development to another, but a complex struggle with varying degrees of resistance and identity markers (1995:18). Hartman frames his work in a philosophical, sociological and linguistic discourse and, although he does examine performance theory, there is no acknowledgement of any folkloristic work done in this area.

Other studies of the gay and lesbian coming-out story are written in a sociological, linguistic or psychological framework. A. C. Liang’s article “Coherence in Coming Out Stories” is a valuable study for its analysis of the coming-out story as a method of disclosure to the self as well as to others. Liang’s study is framed linguistically, with heavy emphasis on structural analysis and the framework of the coming-out story centred around the narrative clause (Labov 1972). Liang compares

various coming-out stories of both Asian-Americans and European-Americans to study structure and coherence in narrative style (1997).

Ken Plummer's *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995) is an excellent study of what he identifies as modernist stories of "desire, danger, and recovery," and focuses on three main types of personal experience narrative: coming-out stories, rape stories and stories of recovery. Plummer's historical analysis of modernist stories is exceptional, and his chapter on coming-out stories is thoroughly researched and written from a sociological study of sexual diversity that the author started in 1978 and continued until the publication in 1995. While Plummer does not write from a folkloristic stance, his research does rely on interviews and historical writings that are important for examining the voice of gays and lesbians, among other stigmatised groups. He outlines one of the first modern accounts of coming out, told in 1951 by a pseudonymous writer:

Since my early adolescence, I have been aware of the homosexual problem...My first awakening was the bewildering attraction that I felt for a young man a few years my senior. I had never been taught that there are men who are attracted to other men; no one had attempted to seduce me or to tempt me. I knew that I felt a drive, of a vague and troublesome character, toward gratification with one other person. I wanted to be near him, to embrace him...

In the years of later adolescence and early manhood, I studied myself and those like me, delved into every volume of literature which might shed light, sought to understand why I could not be like others. I was deeply ashamed of being abnormal and was aware of the heavy price that must be paid if anyone were to discover my secret.

I struggled against my homosexuality, sought to discipline myself and to overcome it, punished myself for failures to resist sinful

temptations... Then, revolting against the struggle, I developed many friends in homosexual circles and alternately felt myself trapped by a human tragedy to which I could never adjust, or blessed as one of the elite of the world... (Plummer 1995: 53)

As part of the prologue to his book, and under the subtitle “The story of an everyday life,” Plummer begins with part of his own coming-out story, noting that “we could all tell our own”:

My loving parents were confused and upset: like most parents of that time, it was not only a “bad thing” but also beyond their comprehension. My father went to the family doctor, who arranged for me to see a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist asked me a few perfunctory questions. I told her bits of my story and she arranged for me to have a brain scan; luck had it that my brain waves were normal! She asked me if I could accept being gay, and I said that I could. In which case she said, it was no problem. I think I was lucky... (Plummer 1995: 7)

Plummer’s own narrative from the 1960s reflects much of the belief about gays and lesbians from that time. Newer coming-out stories reflect newer concerns, and some do not reflect concerns at all. As coming-out narratives evolve through socio-historical time periods, some have suggested that coming-out stories are becoming “tired” and superfluous, and that society is moving beyond simply coming out into a new era in which the concept of “the closet” is seen as redundant (Plummer 1995:32; Jolly 2001; Seidman 2003). Plummer notes that the sexual story, including the coming-out story, may be exhausted in terms of a neat plot, while Stein notes that “many a self-reflecting lesbian may well have started to ponder whether her life is quite as neat as her narrative

of it” (1993).

Seidman suggests that this is an era in which gays and lesbians are living “beyond the closet” and are out in their everyday lives (2002). This statement has been widely contested (Bell 2006: 157; Gray 2009: 4; Marks 2005: 175 for example), and in the narratives I collected, the concept of “the closet” is very present. Drawing on Sedgwick’s seminal work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), communications scholar Mary L. Gray strongly disagrees with Seidman’s concept, especially in terms of rural LGBTQ persons. She argues against “assuming that a politics of visibility can lead to what sociologist Steven Seidman characterizes as life ‘beyond the closet’ because, as scholar Eve Sedgwick among others notes, visibility operates as a binary: in order for someone to be visible, to come out, there must always be a closet someplace where others clamour or struggle to get out” (2009b: 4).

A more accurate consideration of coming-out and the closet is by Crawley and Broad, who state that coming-out stories are moving toward stories of difference and multiplicity, reflecting queer living on a more complex, diverse and global scale (Crawley and Broad 2004: 43). Many of the coming-out narratives that are readily available for consumption are published online, on the virtual landscape of the Internet (Strangelove 2010, Pullen 2010, Wood 1997).

As mentioned, personal experience narratives as told by gays and lesbians

encompass various subjects such as coding, “passing,”<sup>7</sup> gay bashing, experiences in the workforce, romantic experiences, “drag,” gay parenting, partner violence, experiences with the healthcare system and discrimination among other topics. The most common personal experience narrative documented in gay and lesbian communities by far seems to be the coming-out story. This is undoubtedly because of the high number of gays and lesbians who decide to declare their sexuality, thus “coming out of the closet” to another person. Sometimes coming-out stories act not only as a personal experience narrative but also as a “familiar script,” or communal narrative for those in the community who had “coming-out” experiences so terrible that they are virtually untellable. Elaine Lawless’s concept of the master narrative (2003) as well as her concept of “untellability” (2001) are examined in further detail in Chapter Four.

Gay and lesbian coming-out stories are a form of verbal folklore for the gay and lesbian community but more specifically they may also be considered parallel to occupational folklore, for instance to the verbal and textual parts of McCarl’s “canon of work technique” in which McCarl outlines the complex set of verbal and customary contextual understanding used on a daily basis by a specific folk group (1986: 71-2). Pugh’s “Tenure Stories of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Academics” (1998) would be a good example of this, marginalised community and solidarity folklore (Goodwin 1989),

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<sup>7</sup> “Passing” implies a gay person’s (successful) attempt to “pass” as a straight person, thus hiding their identity as LGBTQ.

jokes, and even contemporary legend (Bennett 2009; Bennett and Smith 2013; Goldstein 2004; Whatley and Henken 2000). Other personal experience narratives may encompass more folkloric genres in the gay and lesbian community.

The scope of field research, and hence analysis, of personal experience narratives by LGBTQ persons is limited by the ease in which one can gain access to members of a community who may not be “out” in all ways, or at all, or who are uncomfortable for reasons of personal safety, job security or the fear of discrimination. The personal experience narrative in the gay and lesbian community is often told to stress the teller’s establishment within the community. As Goodwin notes, “Someone with a stigmatized identity is much more likely to discuss his or her lifestyle with a person who shares that identity than with someone who does not” (1989: 73). Sharp emphasizes the coming-out story as an affirmative construct when told in an inclusionary manner, noting that the “in-group performance of [affirming lesbian identities by] the telling of identity narratives to other group members is thought to develop, affirm and reflect affirmative group identity” (2002: iv). While it can be concluded that the coming-out story is frequently told to other members of the LGBTQ community, it is not always the case. Family members, friends, acquaintances who are perceived to be a “safe” audience, accepting of gays and lesbians, can also hear a coming-out story told in a natural context. Furthermore, coming-out stories are told not only by LGBTQ people, but by their parents, families and friends, who may be grieving or confused about their loved one’s sexuality (Broad 2011) and who have to come out on their own, as a parent of a LGBTQ

child.

### **Heterosexism**

The concept of heterosexism is ever-present in the gay person's decision to disclose their sexual orientation to another person. Heterosexism, as defined by Herek, is "the ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship, or community" (1995: 321). This system is obvious to LGBTQ persons in many ways, and results in everyday dilemmas such as whether or not to hold a partner's hand in public, to what type of job is "safe" to be out at, to whether or not one should disclose sexual orientation at all. Heterosexism is the primary reason that LGBTQ persons have to "come out" and, in making that decision, have to carefully weigh the options of whether or not to disclose, and to whom. LGBTQ persons often have to make the decision to come out every day. This process can be annoying at best, or stressful and traumatic at worst. Heterosexism manifests itself in both individual and cultural levels, in which there is "the belief that the only acceptable affectional and sexual expression is between women and men" (Hunter 2007: 5). This is regularly reinforced by society's general culture, social customs and institutions, so much so, that it is barely even noticed (Herek 1995: 322).

Coming out and disclosing one's sexual orientation, whether via a narrative, a sentence, or a pronoun correction, is done in the context of heterosexism. It is always, if not in the foreground, then in the background of every LGBTQ person's mind, as the

decisions are made as to who needs to be told. LGBTQ persons still face discrimination, harassment, abuse and stigmatization due to their sexual orientation and identity management (Goffman 1963), therefore making the “coming-out process” still necessary for the majority of LGBTQ people.

As has been discussed in this chapter, coming out of the closet has many complexities and is not a straightforward process. Because the specific act of coming out is so often considered to be significant to the LGBTQ persons who have to come out so many times in their lives, there is no doubt that LGBTQ-specific folklore exists, including personal experience narratives about coming out. As is indicated in my corpus of interviews and the existing literature on coming out, these narratives can be viewed as both traditional and non-traditional, and detail one or more specific coming-out episodes. As a prose narrative, these stories can be viewed as personal experience narratives, life stories, autobiography and even legend. They may be performed in a variety of ways dependent on context, but are still recognized within the LGBTQ community as a traditional text with various functions. These functions will be examined further in Chapter Three.

### **Chapter Three – Coming Out and Negotiation of Identity**

Many LGBTQ persons understand and use the coming-out narrative to disclose and perform their sexual orientation and personal identity. By this I mean that LGBTQ persons recognize and perform their narratives in ways that are both intentional and spontaneous, and the performance is often dependent on audience and context. Common textual themes emerge in the coming-out story. This chapter considers narrative decision-making on the part of the narrator and how the performance changes according to variable factors such as audience. Also examined are the ways in which the coming-out story functions for both the teller and the audience member.

#### **Why Stories are Told/Function and Performativity**

There are various reasons why people tell coming-out stories. LGBTQ persons want to tell others how they came out, and when and why they came out. Because a coming-out story often recounts an event that is seen as important and sometimes life-changing to the teller, it is natural that the event itself becomes a topic for a story, told later to friends and others. Then again, the coming-out story may function as a means to come out in itself, as the performer of the story may not be out to the audience who is about to hear the story.

When examining minority group folklore, it is useful to look at how LGBTQ folklore can compare to women's folklore, especially in regards to telling narratives. Storytelling has been an important element to camaraderie building among women, and

there have been several folklorists who have examined how and why women tell stories (cf. Adams 1999; Bennett 1990; Locke, Vaughan and Greenhill 2009; Kalçık 1975; Lawless 2001; Radner and Lanser 1993b; Tye 2010). For example, storytelling has held a central position in women-centered liturgy (Lawless 1993, 2005; Northup 1996: 53). Northup highlights the function of storytelling amongst women in the creation of ritual as a conscious expressive act that is both “deliberate” and “meaningful” (1996: 53).

In discussing women’s ritualizing and narrative, feminist liturgiologist Mary Collins noted that narrative was an important part of women’s ritualizing, in part “[to affirm] women’s achievements, and stories of women’s suffering exacted as the price of maintaining patriarchal relationships” (Collins 1993: 11; as qtd in Northup 1996: 53). As women fought to be heard in various venues (Lawless 1993), one of the major ethnographic concerns of the 1970s was to construct women’s history by recording women’s autobiographical stories. Of particular concern was recording stories of the lives of ordinary women, not just those of heroines, or those stories that have been “subject to editorial revision and omission” (Northup 1996: 53). Gay and lesbian folklore of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have faced similar challenges, such as making their voices heard whilst dealing with a patriarchal and heterosexist society. Furthermore, the published literature about homosexuals did tend to focus on famous LGBTQ persons, such as authors and movie stars, and not on the ordinary North American gay or lesbian citizen (Seidman 2003).

### **Reasons for telling a coming-out story**

Folklorist Joseph Goodwin highlighted how gay men and women functioned as a minority group and had their own distinct folklore in his works '*More Man Than You'll Ever Be*': *Gay Folklore and Acculturation in Middle America* (1989) and "Coming Out, Coming Home: Reclaiming a Place to Belong" (1993). In his work, he argued that gay folklore (storytelling, among other customs) aids in community building and cohesion, thereby creating a bond with others in the community. He noted that coming-out stories are used as a means of coping with conflict both within the gay community, and between gay and straight communities. Furthermore, he highlighted the cathartic emotional release that telling a coming-out story can provide, and that telling a story allowed the teller to (re) experience those emotions. Finally, he considered the coming-out story to be ultimately a means of communication and identification to the gay community (1989: xvi). Although Goodwin considered only gay males, I argue that his work is applicable to lesbians, bisexual and transgender persons as well, and that his concept of community can be used to describe communities in the larger LGBTQ population.

Based on a content analysis of my corpus, there are multiple reasons for telling a coming-out story. Besides for the obvious reason of disclosing to another person one's sexual orientation, some of the other reasons are: to contribute to LGBTQ community building; as a validation of self/solidification of self-identity; to make meaning of LGBTQ lives; to help audiences understand sexual diversity; to reflect on identity as part of a minority group; as a means of esoteric self-expression; to express a story as a means

of solidarity, thereby ensuring individual and collective survival of an identity; as a rite of passage; and to negotiate self/collective identity. For example, my informant Tucker noted in his interview that telling a coming-out story was often a rite of passage for the LGBTQ person, and that telling the story was often a part of a first date, while Bea noted that telling these stories were often a means of reflecting on one's identity as a minority group.

While coming-out stories may be told for disclosure purposes they are also told for other reasons, such as to contribute to community building (Goodwin 1993) and validation of self (Bascom 1954). They may be a means of situating the audience in a particular historical and geographical context. They may be seen as a way of understanding and making meaning of queer lives, and understanding sexual diversity. They may function as a form of reflection on identity as part of a minority group, a means of esoteric self-expression, or a means of solidarity and, as Loh Han Loong argues, by contributing to the collective social memory of the LGBTQ community (2012). They may also be seen as a rite of passage for LGBTQ persons (van Gennep 1960; Davies 2014). In this manner, the stories about coming out told amongst gay friends, to LGBTQ audiences in bars or at other social gatherings, function in a very different way than the obvious and deliberate disclosure of a secret to a non-homosexual. Bacon identifies these stories as “the sort of stories you share when you are not risking an identity crisis, but are solidifying a current moment of identity by highlighting its trajectory through time” (Bacon 1998: 251).

Some storytellers want to negotiate their individual and collective identity through narrative, and coming-out stories provide a means of doing that in a cultural context (Bacon 1998: 250). Linguists Morrish and Sauntson argue that the language used in telling a coming-out story highlights the narrators' engagement in constructing a specific and situated social identity rather than a simple reflection of sexual experiences and desires (2007: 53). Therefore, stories told about coming-out episodes may be read as deliberate performance to group members, and seen as community building, identity representation and presentation of self (Goffman 1959; Goodwin 1993). Finally by hearing others' stories, coming-out stories may function to demonstrate how others should behave in similar circumstances, as a means of maintaining social conformity (Bascom 1954: 343-346; Liang 1997: 289; Linde 1993: 113).

How the narrative functions to both the narrator and the audience is likewise relevant. In the case of coming-out stories and other narratives told by LGBTQ persons, there are many functions that could be explored, as indicated in earlier chapters. Many coming-out stories are educational or informative, with an emphasis on religion, and gay marriage, respectively (Krista's and Jordan's educated me on specific trans issues; John's and Sandy's gave me information about LGBTQ history and human rights specifically in Newfoundland; and Donald and Gina's included information about gay rights in Newfoundland). However, in order for a narrative to act as educational or informative is often contingent on having the right audience (one that is receptive and perhaps who asks the right questions). Some of the narratives that are educational in nature are specifically

requested, or sought out because they deal with issues that may be seen as taboo, or because they provide a first-person account of a point of view that is different from the norm.

One obvious function that telling a coming-out story has is that it can be told for entertainment purposes. Told in “safe” company, a coming-out story that was told in a serious tone to a heterosexual audience could be told as humorous or light-hearted to a gay audience. This ties in with the inclusionary function, in which telling a coming-out story to other LGBTQs (in-group members) using esoteric and emic knowledge is a way to indicate group membership and contribute to group folklore and a corpus of coming-out stories told by friends.

A coming-out story can function as a means to shock, or elicit an emotional response from the audience. Several stories I heard elicited shock from me, as to how a parent could be so cruel, for instance, to their children for being gay. As I collected narratives from participants, I experienced a gamut of emotions, from joy to sorrow, as my informants shared with me their deeply personal stories.

While coming-out stories are sometimes told to heterosexual audiences, this is not always the case. In fact, another LGBTQ person could be viewed as the most common audience for a coming-out story, and by telling these narratives “in group,” LGBTQs are maintaining this distinct folklore, and validating the folklore of this minority group. Thus, by telling coming-out stories to other gay people, LGBTQs are not only contributing to emic group folklore, but validating their culture, addressing the

social norm of coming out, and highlighting their conformity to the understanding of how one comes out to other people (cf. Bascom 1954).

Using William Bascom's "Four Functions of Folklore" (1954) as a preliminary guide to examine function, coming-out stories can function in all four of his categories. Firstly, a coming-out story may be told for amusement or entertainment purposes. A story about how one came out as gay could elicit laughter, or tears, as one recounts the events of a particular coming-out. As Bascom outlines, entertainment functions also as a means of escaping daily reality, and telling or hearing a coming-out story certainly qualifies as a performance that is different from everyday conversation. The validation of culture, Bascom's next function, is a particularly salient one for gays and lesbians. Both by coming out itself, and by telling a coming-out story, LGBTQs are participating in what are often seen as necessary rites of passage (Herdt 1992; Davies 2014), and certainly a performance of this kind reinforces group membership. Bascom's third function is to educate and, again, this is a fairly obvious function for tellers of coming-out stories. People tell coming-out stories often to simply enlighten someone who is unaware that the teller is gay, or even to present "a teachable moment," in a classroom or workplace. Finally, coming-out stories certainly function as a means of maintaining social conformity (Bascom 1954: 346). LGBTQs are often expected to have a story about their coming out, and it is expected to fit a perceived master narrative of a coming-out story (see Chapters Four and Five). While a coming-out story does not exercise control or modify behaviour in an explicit manner, the availability of thousands upon thousands of

coming-out stories online via the Internet and through published materials help to show a person how to come out, and by virtue of that, what an accepted coming-out story is.

### **When and Where are these Stories Being Told?**

Stories told about coming-out episodes may be read as deliberate performance, but are also heard in “natural,” spontaneous contexts (Goldstein 1967: 1). The setting for telling these stories can be virtually anywhere, as is evidenced in the interviews I collected: in the LGBTQ person’s home, at a friend’s house, in a café, in a vehicle, at school, at work, at church, and many other places. When a person tells a coming-out story is usually more particular. Many are planned re-disclosures, as was the advice of one university LGBTQ club, so that the person coming out would have options on what to do and where to go, should the coming-out event go badly (*The LGBT Guide to MUN*: 1998). Normally an outsider would not be privy to the initial disclosure of sexual orientation, but it would be a private, intimate affair between two or three people. As a gay person comes out, more and more frequently, to many people, a story may then be requested or given freely, depending on audience and familiarity with the story. In the case of the interviews I conducted with my informants, I tried to make the environment as comfortable and stress-free as possible, knowing, however, that an “induced natural context” (Ben-Amos 1994; Goldstein 1967) was all but impossible. It occurred to me that I could try to invite a few friends over to my place to try and mimic a previous, unrecorded storytelling session where we all shared our coming-out stories, but the

opportunity did not materialize for various reasons.<sup>8</sup>

### **Why Some Coming-Out Stories Aren't Being Told**

While this thesis examines the coming-out process as told in narrative form, there are other types of narratives that refer to coming out, but which are told in non-narrative form. There are those snippets of conversations (or kernel narratives, as Kalçik calls them (1975, see also Small 1975 who referenced them as “proverbs” and Greenhill 1994 who referred to them as “generalization narratives”) that indicate a bigger story or narrative through the utterance of one of two sentences, and those partial or indicated narratives which I call non-stories, deemed by the teller to be not interesting enough to talk about, as indicated by one of my informants, who categorized her coming-out as “boring” (personal correspondence, 10 Aug 2010), or another who denied my request for his story, saying that while he did, in fact, have a story, “you’re not getting it” (personal correspondence, 29 Nov 2010). These non-stories, or the stories that aren’t told, for whatever reason, are a form of esoteric folklore in LGBTQ communities, and this form of communication cannot be ignored, even if the stories are difficult to capture in interview format. It can be speculated that some of the motifs in the stories not being told may include same-sex domestic violence, sexual abuse as a child, pressure from

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<sup>8</sup> It seemed awkward to me to suggest a storytelling session with the group of friends that I had ten years ago, many of whom I am not as close with now. It is a project that I have not given up hope on, however, and one day I hope to replicate that spontaneous storytelling session with my current friends.

other LGBTQ persons to come out, reasons why the LGBTQ community may be disappointing or exclusionary, narratives about coming-out as a gay parent, and/or bisexual, asexual, transsexual, pansexual or other sexual orientations and gender identities not well-represented in my sample. Other coming-out stories may not be told for reasons of privacy, or because the person who has come out does not wish to relive the experience by telling a story about it.

Elaine Lawless examines the status of untellability of certain narratives (2001), and this too applies to experiences by LGBTQs, who may also have stories that are too painful, horrific, or shameful to tell. These types of stories were touched upon in the documentary film *Paragraph 175*, which outlines the lives of several gay men and one lesbian who were arrested, imprisoned and persecuted by the Nazis before and during WWII, for the crime of homosexuality (Müller, 2002). While the survivors in the film tell their experiences of extreme violence and persecution, it is the stories that are not told that speak volumes to the audience. The handful of interviews that Müller was able to obtain is minuscule in comparison to the over 100,000 arrested for acts of homosexuality, and the only 4,000 known gay survivors of the Nazi regime (Müller, 2002).

Stories that aren't being told about coming out, or other aspects of being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer, also have a function. The reason for the lack of coming-out stories by senior citizens in my data, for example, could be interpreted as a group within the LGBTQ minority group that is more reserved in discussing their

personal lives, especially in regards to sexuality and sexual orientation.

### **Folklore and Differential Identity**

In Richard Bauman's article "Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore" (1972b) he explains that while it is valuable to look at esoteric folklore, the folklore that is shared and understood by in-group members, it is also important to look at the identity of difference as a base of folklore performance. So, while it is easy to examine the folklore of groups (ethnicity, religion, region, occupation, age, and family), it is also important to consider the folklore of interaction between groups. The intergroup transmission of folklore can show us much about esoteric and exoteric perspectives, but also shows how folklore can transcend group boundaries. For example, a coming-out story may be told by a lesbian to a group of lesbians, in the context of a storytelling session, in which coming-out stories are casually shared. This in-group context is considered safe, and insider knowledge is utilized in terms of words, phrases, and actions.

The coming-out story must be distinguished from the act of coming out itself. Therefore, a coming-out story may not only be told to a straight person, but told *by* a straight person. For instance, a daughter comes out to her mother, and then the mother tells her best friend, who then tells her husband. A coming-out story by a gay person has then become a valued narrative that is shared by non-group members. Bauman was concerned that folklore was being viewed as a superorganic tradition, performed only by

in-group members, and performed collectively (1972: 34). Of course this is not the case; a “collective” experience by any particular folk group is largely impossible. While we can look at LGBTQ persons as having a corpus of folklore (including language, coming-out narratives) that is shared among various LGBTQ persons and groups, there is also the performance of this lore that may be differentially distributed, performed, perceived and understood. Folklore may be looked upon not just as a mechanism contributing to social solidarity (for example, the slogan “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it” as shouted at rallies), but may be used by the larger (heterosexual) group as an instrument of conflict and aggression. We have all heard insults and jokes about gay people; name-calling such as faggot, fairy, queer, butch and dyke, amongst others, were and still are directed at LGBTQ persons by members of the heterosexual society who were afraid, threatened by or just simply ignorant of homosexuality. While most of these terms have been re-appropriated, and used by LGBTQ persons themselves to refer to themselves, thereby taking away the insult (Dröschel 2007: 127), it is still clear that these words are being used by non-queer people to send an explicit message about what they think about them. While the examples I’ve highlighted show that gay and lesbian folklore is both esoteric and exoteric, being performed by multiple groups in multiple contexts, there is seemingly, at the very least a recognition of shared verbal communication between both in-group members and outsiders, and more likely, an understanding that while there are shared words, phrases, and narratives, there is a multiplicity of ways in which to perform and interpret them.

### **Narrative/Event Structure in Coming-Out Stories**

The primary way coming-out stories have been analysed in the past has been through a structural analysis of the events leading up to and including the coming-out event itself. However, the coming-out story would benefit from a verbal analysis as well. By using various models as highlighted below, the coming-out story can be analysed for language, and similarities and differences can be identified and connections made between them. Examining what individuals experience and how that speaks to and interacts with the experience of others gives us insight into the social atmosphere of living in 21<sup>st</sup> century Newfoundland and Labrador. To examine what a coming-out story is, we have to look at examples and counterexamples, that is, larger patterns of coming-out stories versus small examples that are not the norm. By examining these patterns and differences, I highlight the diversity of coming-out stories by Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

The structure of the coming-out story is largely based on recognizable aspects of the coming-out process. There have been multiple academic models developed that examine coming-out as a linear developmental process, conducted in sociological and psychological academic field of scholarship. There are various coming-out models, including those by Cass (1979), Coleman (1981), Dank (1971), Plummer (1975), and Troiden (1979) to name a few. Ski Hunter has an excellent discussion and critique of early and contemporary development models of coming out, in her book *Coming Out and Disclosures: LGBT Persons Across the Life Span* (2007).

Some of these models are helpful in seeing early research samples of lesbians and gay men; however, many of them have notable limitations (Hunter 2007: 61). As Hunter has pointed out, some of the studies had small samples that were not representative of a larger community (some were male-centric, others focused only on one age group), while others failed to acknowledge the bias of the white, middle-class, self-identified lesbian and gay respondent. Many of the models are today dated, and generalize their findings. Perhaps most importantly, says Hunter, most of these models highlight a step-by-step sequential process, culminating in a final maturation of the individual, ignoring any deviation from the progression highlighted (2007: 61). The linear model suggests a binary of progression/regression as to what is expected to happen during coming out, and therefore highlights a right and wrong way to come out. Finally, linear models suggest that by reaching the final stage, one has fully come out, and the process has ended. In reality, coming out is a continuous process that can take a lifetime (2007: 62-3), and the coming-out story reflects that, as it is reshaped over time.

Perhaps most well-known of the coming-out models is the “Sexual Identity Formation” model, as developed by V.C. Cass (1979, 1984) and published in the *Journal of Homosexuality*. The Sexual Identity Formation model (SIF) is perhaps the most comprehensive of the models developed, because of its “description of lesbian and gay identity development as it addresses changes at cognitive, emotional, and behavioural levels and integrates social and psychological factors” (Hunter 2007: 43). The SIF model includes interpersonal perceptions of one’s self and one’s behaviour, but also perceptions

of the responses of others (43). Hunter's explanation of Cass's model is worth directly quoting:

The model includes the following six stages: Identity Confusion ("Who am I?"), Identity Comparison ("I am different"), Identity Tolerance ("I am probably lesbian or gay"), Identity Acceptance ("I am lesbian or gay"), Identity Pride ("I am lesbian or gay!"), and Identity Synthesis ("My sexual orientation is a part of me"). At each stage, conflict will occur within or between perceptions. For example, at stage 1 (Confusion), self-perception of same sex-gender thoughts, feelings or behaviours conflict with earlier perceptions of a heterosexual orientation by one's self and others. Resolution of the conflict at each stage results in advancement to a new stage, resulting in increased congruency between perceptions of one's behavior, self-identity, and other's beliefs about one's self (Cass 1979, 1996). The goal is to integrate one's identity into one's overall perception of self. (Hunter 2007: 43-44)

The SIF model, albeit dated, is useful to folkloristics in examining coming-out narratives by LGBTQ persons. Many of the stages are addressed explicitly or implicitly in the narratives, often with specific reference to confusion, comparison, and acceptance. These examples will be explored further in the discussion of theme, in Chapter Four.

Cass's model provided the backbone for other academic fields to examine sexual orientation and the disclosure process. Linguist A.C. Liang describes the process as having three identifiable stages: first there is the initial self-recognition and definition as lesbian or gay to the self; secondly there is a self-presentation as lesbian and gay to others; and finally the person begins a series of ongoing acts of self-definition and self-presentation as lesbian or gay (Liang 1997: 291). Liang's examination highlights that the coming-out story includes some or all of the following characteristics:

1. it recounts the teller's recognition of themselves as "different" emotionally or sexually
  2. it often focuses on a "first time" erotic or sexual experience with someone of the same sex
  3. it is an autobiographical narrative that is usually short, with a single focus
  4. it involves "a crucial naming of the self as someone who loves a member of one's own sex" in an often homophobic world
  5. it empowers the teller on many levels, not just on a sensual level
  6. it often defies the implicit and explicit demands of the dominant culture by virtue of the narrator refusing to hide or "pass" as a heterosexual.
- (McNaron 2002:1)

Through the narratives I have analysed, it seems that the majority of coming-out stories follow the same trajectory as the event of coming out does itself, meaning that when telling the story, in general, the teller begins with an introductory statement, indicating a self-acknowledgment of difference, which then leads to further examination of the self. The teller usually narrates this examination as a series of events which began with an acceptance of that difference, and led to the journey taken to disclose their sexuality to others.

### **How the Coming-Out Story Changes**

As one's coming out changes, so too does the story. As Ken Plummer eloquently writes "Stories of my coming out then in the 1960s soon became embellished and changed. I [myself] have many versions of it" (Plummer 2009: viii).

Stories do not take a naturally linear form, nor do they develop in naturally linear ways. They bump you around and are contingent upon the events of everyday life. They change from place to place and from time to time.... They have historical roots, connect to wider patterns, cluster into structures and habits, and indeed

become (often much loved) habits...(Plummer 2009: viii)

Plummer's description of stories highlights the ever-changing, sometimes non-linear text of the narrative. When giving an account of his own coming out, he emphasizes that in telling the story, he could "expand those years into a book or contract them into the opening line" (Plummer 2009: viii). And as time passes, the narrator may rewrite the story of his/her life, numerous times. While this may have more to do with naming and identity than story-telling, he notes that even the most coherent lives are invariably plural in identity, and uses his own life as an example (Plummer 2009: viii):

As a child, I kept thinking – amongst many other things – that I was a sick queer boy. In my teen years – amongst many other things – I struggled with being a homosexual. After I came out (and for quite a while) I was unambiguously gay – though in a rather feminist, White, British, politicized, sociological, and male version! By my mid-40s, during the 1990s, I was often claiming more to be a "postmodern" gay, even truncating it to being "postgay." In the 2000s and approaching my old age, I have tried to give up calling myself anything in particular. Perhaps my central identity now is that of a partner (I have lived with the same partner for 30 years), and it is hard to imagine being without him. After childhood, I never wanted to call myself queer even as all around me did. To do that would have been to return to the pains of my childhood. (Plummer 2009: ix-x)

Although Plummer emphasizes the multiplicity and plurality of his identities as a gay man, he acknowledges that while the coming-out narrative has become archetypal, and its importance as a cultural indicator of sexual identity, generation, and even nationality cannot be overstated (2009: xii). Meanwhile, he then argues that the coming-out narrative must not be viewed as a universal experience, even though it

“hangs omnipresently and omnisciently over many gay lives” (2009: xii). Contemporary research indicates that coming-out narratives and experiences of LGBTQs transcend labelling and older concepts of stages, and are shifting and dynamic (Plummer 2009: xii; Plummer 1995: 59).

As I noted earlier, linguist William Labov’s concept of a fully-formed oral narrative (2011: 546-8) is a useful construct in which to examine the corpus of narratives I collected. His narrative structure is divided into seven sections: an abstract (what the story is about); an orientation (the characters and setting of the story); a complicating action (what happened then?); an evaluation (why the story is interesting); a resolution (why the story is interesting); and a coda (extra information about the story) as a guide for narrative structure. In general, the narratives in my corpus can be read for typical markers such as theme and motif as shown previously, and for narrative structural elements such as Labov’s schema.

Chapter Three has explored the reasons for telling a coming-out story and highlights some of the ways in which the coming-out narrative may function. I have explored when and where the stories are being told as well as what stories are not being told. The stories that are untold are notable because they speak to a silence or untellability regarding the subject matter or about the tellers, and therefore refer to a gap in the genre. The stories I collected were primarily told by LGBTQ persons to a gay audience, although there were some exceptions; therefore coming-out stories can be viewed as both esoteric and exoteric folklore, being performed by a variety of people in a

variety of contexts. Using models by Cass, Liang and Labov, I compare how coming-out models are viewed, and how a coming-out story can be conceptualized from a structural point of view. In Chapter Four I look at matters of identity and its negotiation and management.

## **Chapter Four – Data Analysis: The Negotiation of Identity through Storytelling**

In this thesis I examine how the coming-out story is told and re-told, and to whom, as well as contextual factors such as when and why they are told. I identify and examine prevalent themes in the narratives I have collected and compare various motifs that emerge frequently. Finally I examine how the coming-out story speaks to and interacts with the experience of others. This present chapter deals with my analysis of the corpus of narratives from my LGBTQ participants, and is divided into several sections. I examine the coming-out stories that I have collected by using four primary components: Thematic Content and Motifs, Performance Context, Narrative Texture and Narrative Structure. By using these categories to analyse the stories collected, similarities and differences can be highlighted whilst still acknowledging the individuality of each narrative.

### **Thematic Content**

Using *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* as a guideline, for the purposes of this thesis, I define theme as “any subject or issue that recurs in a narrative through implicit or explicit reference” (Abbott 2002: 196). I have highlighted typical themes discussed in the narratives that I collected from my participants. I have arranged these into broad categories entitled: Discovery/Self-Identification (Coming Out to Self); Struggle for Self-Acceptance/Rejection (Confusion/Comparison/Acceptance); Disclosure

(Coming Out to Others); Acceptance/Rejection by Others; Construction and Presentation of Self; Identification with the LGBTQ Community; Stigma/Discrimination; Religion; and Region/Place.

These themes, which are explained below, may be further broken down into what I have for convenience called “motifs” (in the style of, but certainly not the same as, Stith Thompson’s Motif Index of Folk-Literature [1955-58]). In this thesis, I define “motif” as a discrete phrase, word, image or thing that is repeated in the narrative, and which is significant to the teller. The motif recurs as a part of a larger theme (as listed above).

The motifs that appear most frequently within the themes are as follows and are explained further below: Parents and Family Members; Firsts (First kiss, first sexual experience); Friends and Allies; Lovers/Partners; Colleagues and the Workplace; Education (School Years/University); Coming of Age (Moving Out); Stereotypes; Being Outed; Media and Internet Influences; Concealment/Shame; Suicide Attempts/Self-Harm/Destructive Behaviour; and Coming-Out Publicly.

Some or most of these motifs are present in the themes that have been previously outlined. For instance, in the Self-Identification theme, motifs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 12 may be present. This is not an exhaustive list of motifs within a specific theme, but, instead, is representative of common or typical motifs that I have collected in coming-out stories. These themes and motifs will be analysed in further detail later in the chapter.

### **Coming Out: Context and Texture**

Morrish and Sauntson argue that the telling of coming-out stories is a specific “performative act,” in that “performing them changes the social world of the narrator and those around them in some way” (2007: 54; *cf.* Abrahams 1977: 112). While this statement is true (narrators who tell a coming-out story alter their social world the moment they tell the story), they then go on to state that “coming out can only take place through language – it is a linguistic event, or speech act or, perhaps more accurately, an ongoing series of linguistic events” (2007: 55), which to the non-linguist seems grossly inaccurate. By A.C. Liang’s definition, the term “coming out” is used to denote “the act of naming and accepting one’s same-sex emotions....and the act of disclosing to another one’s homosexuality (Liang 1997: 291). Coming out may happen in many ways, and using language to disclose one’s homosexuality is only one way to do it. If a person demonstrates an act of love or sexuality with someone of the same sex (while in public, or otherwise) they are effectively performing an act of coming out as well. One can even come out to one’s self without any verbal utterance, as is indicated by several of my informants who discussed their moment of self-realization, such as Emma, who knew she was gay at a very young age, “probably five years old I remember being interested in girls” [ER02, 25/09/09]. In this manner, there is much esoteric and exoteric folklore about homosexuality, and indicators of it, a lot of which is outlined in Goodwin’s work (1989; 1993; 2005).

Each of the coming-out stories has a contextual element that may or may not be

obvious to the listener upon first hearing it. Subsequent re-tellings of the story may offer clues to the performance, as well as getting contextual information from the teller about when and how the story is/has been told. Such story-telling performances fall into three categories: practiced, unpracticed, and audience-responsive. Practiced narratives are stories that have been polished by practice, and performed repeatedly. Unpracticed are stories that are unpolished, tentatively told, or indicated as a story that has not been told before (unlike von Sydow's notion of *fabulate* [1948: 261]). Audience-responsive are stories that are audience-based (performed and changed according to who is perceived to be in the audience: a straight audience, gay audience, friends, family, or other).

Like the narrative structural analysis, context-based analysis is multi-layered, and a coming-out story often includes multiple contextual performative elements. For this reason, coming-out stories may also be examined by texture.

### **Narrative Typology**

The coming-out stories I collected can also be categorized by primary structure of the narrative. There is some overlap as each example includes at least one of the factors, and sometimes multiple components. For ease of reading, I have identified this typology as follows:

Single Event - narratives that identify one specific coming-out episode, such as telling a parent, or the first time they verbally acknowledged their sexual orientation

Multiple Events - narratives that identify multiple moments of coming out (over

time, to several people).

First-Hand - stories told about one's own coming-out, in memorate style

Second-Hand - stories told about another's coming-out (such as a sibling, child or friend)

Metanarrative - the stories told about telling coming-out stories, and the elements within the performance of the stories that refer to the telling of the stories.

The stories I collected often have multiple structural layers and these types are not by any means conclusive. Some of the stories contain only one component, while others contain multiple components. As noted already, the inclusion of these types may be used to identify and name different kinds of coming-out stories. While it is impossible to compare every kind of coming-out story, a folkloristic examination of the structure of these stories can give us an insight into the coming-out stories that are most often told by LGBTQ persons, and which components are viewed as most meaningful and told most often by their narrators.

### **Transcription Notes on the Coming-out Stories I Collected**

Out of the thirty-two people that I personally interviewed or otherwise received narratives from, fourteen were male, thirteen were female, and six identified as transgender (some considered themselves female, some male, and some did not want to include themselves in a gender binary). In total, my interviewees' self-identified sexual

orientation is as follows: thirteen gay men, eleven lesbians, two bisexual women, and six transgender persons (who identified in a variety of ways: lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer).

The interviews, as excerpted here in this thesis, were transcribed for ease of reading, in that unnecessary false starts, partial words, and repetitions were taken out. Interjections such as laughter are placed in round brackets and italicized, and when the informant emphasized words, they are indicated in italics. Words left out but implied by the interviewee are placed in square brackets. When the interviewee trailed off, it is indicated in the text by an ellipsis (...). All interviewees' names have been changed into pseudonyms for consistency, because several informants requested it and, therefore, all place names have been changed for anonymity as well. Cities and small town names are changed for privacy, and denoted as such. Each interview is given a number, for example, AR001 stands for Audio-Recording 001, and is followed by the date of the interview. The list of interviews can be found in Appendix A.

Because I used the interview format in order to collect narratives, I used a few set questions to get my informants to start talking about the narratives that they tell about being LGBTQ and coming out. I asked open-ended questions as much as possible, and I stuck to a few set questions at the beginning. Most frequently I asked the questions "How did you know you were gay?" and "How did you come out?," because I believe those are the questions that would come up in a natural conversation with friends. Sometimes, in order to get an informant to tell me more about a particular narrative, I

would ask follow-up questions, which would then garner further elaboration on the initial narratives. Sometimes my prompting would be specific, like “Were you ever bullied in school?” or “What happened when you told [x person]?” I cannot say that I asked every question I could have asked, mostly because I was concerned about keeping the flow of the narrative within a conversational frame, and also because I did not want the informant to feel like they were in an inquisition. Nonetheless, this method worked well, and the interviews ended up being primarily conversational, and somewhat collaborative. I would contribute my own stories if there was a lull in the conversation, and this tactic was useful in that it not only helped to gain trust with my informant, but also showed my emic or socially esoteric knowledge of the interview topic.

One aspect of the interview/conversation that should be highlighted is that each informant knew from my information sheet and consent form that I was collecting “coming-out stories,” and therefore there was an understanding that this was the type of narrative I was interested in hearing. Because of the conversational preamble to the interviews, not only was there no doubt in my informants’ minds that I was looking for a specific type of narrative, but by virtue of their contacting me to give me their stories, they had the opportunity to “prepare” their stories, or at least to have them close to mind. This could have worked to my advantage when collecting the narratives, but also could have been a disadvantage, because what they may have considered a coming-out story could have been different from my definition. That is why keeping the interview conversational was the best tactic in my mind, because I tried to keep each conversation

relaxed and as natural as possible, while still keeping to the general topic of being LGBTQ in Newfoundland and Labrador.

### **Thematic Content**

Borrowing from the study of literature, I utilize the concept of “theme” (primarily as represented in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*), to mean any major subject or issue that recurs in a narrative either implicitly or explicitly, and which is usually an abstract concept that is suggested by various literary techniques including motifs (Abbott 2002: 196). I have highlighted typical themes discussed in the narratives that I collected from my participants and arranged these into broad categories as follows:

### **Common Themes**

- A1. Discovery/Self-Identification (Coming Out to Self)
- A2. Struggle for Self-Acceptance/Rejection (Confusion/Comparison/Acceptance)
- A3. Disclosure (Coming Out to Others)
- A4. Acceptance/Rejection by Others
- A5. Construction and Presentation of Self
- A6. Identification with the LGBTQ Community

A7. Stigma/Discrimination

A8. Religion

A9. Region/Place

For ease of reading, I have placed the themes in a chart that allows for a quick perusal of the frequency of occurrence of each theme. I have divided the charts by gender of informants: cisgender<sup>9</sup> male, cisgender female, and transgender.

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<sup>9</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines “cisgender” as “designating a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds to his or her sex at birth” (OED 2016).

### Examples of Thematic Content

#### Main themes in the Narratives (Cisgender Male Informants)

Informants	M 1	M 2	M 3	M 4	M 5	M 6	M 7	M 8	M 9	M 10	M 11	M 12	M 13
A1) Discovery	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A2) Struggle/ Acceptance of Self	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A3) Disclosure	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A4) Acceptance/ Rejection by Others	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A5) Construction/ Presentation of Self	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A6) Identification with Community	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓				
A7) Stigma/ Discrimination	✓	✓			✓		✓		✓				✓
A8) Religion	✓		✓		✓				✓	✓			
A9) Place		✓		✓				✓			✓	✓	✓

M1. Ron

M2. Nathan

M3. Timothy

M4. Jim

M5. Ritch

M6. John

M7. Matt

M8. Thomas

M9. Donald

M10. Chris

M11. Tucker

M12. Andrew

M13. Dan

## Main Themes in the Narratives (Cisgender Female Informants)

Informants	F 1	F 2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	F 9	F 1 0	F 1 1	F 1 2
A1) Discovery		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
A2 Struggle/ Acceptance of Self		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A3) Disclosure	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A4) Acceptance/ Rejection by Others	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A5) Construction/ Presentation of Self	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A6) Identification with Community		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓				
A7) Stigma/ Discrimination		✓			✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
A8) Religion		✓							✓			
A9) Place			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		

F1. Jane

F2. Gina

F3. Bea

F4. Lori

F5. Leah

F6. Karen

F7. Ada

F8. Cindy

F9. Sandy

F10. Betty

F11. Emma

F12. Nancy

F13. Pat

## Main themes in the Narratives (Transgender Informants)

Informants	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6
A1) Discovery	✓	✓	✓			✓
A2) Struggle/ Acceptance of Self	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A3) Disclosure	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A4) Acceptance/ Rejection by Others	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A5) Construction/ Presentation of Self	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A6) Identification with Community			✓	✓	✓	
A7) Stigma/ Discrimination			✓	✓	✓	
A8) Religion						
A9) Place				✓		

T1. Krista

T2. Jordan

T3. Tatum

T4. Aeon

T5. Jessie

T6. Paul

While this is not a comprehensive list, the themes that are most often presented in the narratives in my corpus are as listed above and the patterns that have been observed need to be read in the context of the sample. From the charts showing the breakdown of narrators by gender, the reader can see that Discovery, Struggle/Acceptance of Self, Disclosure, and Acceptance/Rejection by Others are by far the most cited themes. Yet the other themes, such as Identification with Community, Stigma and Discrimination, Religion, and Place, appeared frequently enough to be counted in the list of common themes. Therefore, the following analysis examines all the common themes as listed above. Note every text from my fieldwork has been numbered for ease of reading with numbers as 001, 002. This allows me to make reference to the same text within the thesis without having to repeat the text.

### **A1) Discovery**

The discovery theme is at the point in the narrative when the narrator states their discovery or acknowledgment that they are LGBTQ. This is one of the most prominent themes that I discuss, because it is present in many of the narratives that I collected, as can be seen from the charts above. Sometimes the discovery theme is an explicit acknowledgment of “discovering” one’s sexuality, while other times it is a more implicit acknowledgment of self-awareness that one is different from others. The discovery theme is important because not only is it an important moment of self-realization, but it is a

catalyst for the future disclosure of that realization.

Andrew's narrative is a typical example of the discovery theme. Within the first few minutes of his interview, after the introduction of the topic, he begins his narrative by acknowledging that he always knew that he was attracted to males. His self-realization/discovery of his sexual orientation happened at a very young age. This is important to note because it shows how early one can be aware of a same-sex orientation.

001. But, I've always been practising with the same sex. Always had romantic ideas. Even at five years old. Really. At five. From when I went to Kindergarten, my first days in Kindergarten, I remember one of the guys in class, that, wow, and I had a – I actually had a dream and I was just like, I don't understand this, but it feels good (*laughs*). [AR022, 14/11/12]

Andrew continued to discuss moments of discovery throughout various life stages, but then focused on his teenage years and university life. After mentioning how he "left the bay" (rural Newfoundland) to come to the city, so he could have his "other life," Andrew talks about experimenting as a young man with other males. "Um, teenage years, very nonchalant, I would call it, sexual liaisons, that's all. Just, uh (*chuckle*) hormonally-driven young males, that's all" [AR022, 14/11/12]. Andrew's moments of discovery are again, quite typical of the narratives in my corpus.

Tucker, on the other hand, was twelve years old before he knew that he was gay. In retrospect, Tucker explained that he always recognized that he was "different" [AR021, 30/10/12].

002. I didn't really know what to call it at first because it was kind of like I just knew that I was different. I played with Barbies growing up, and I played dress-up in girl's clothes and I used to do my mother's hair and makeup when I was like four years old, five years old. I continued to do those things. So for me it was normal. It was just me. There was nothing weird about that at all. My parents kind of just took that as I was different. I still played sports. I still played in the dirt, I still ate rocks like everyone else (*laughs*). [AR028, 2012]

Tucker, like Andrew, recognized that he was different, but did not have the vocabulary for what was different about him. While stating that he knew he was "different," he then proclaims that he was "normal" and that it "was just me" [AR028, 2012]. This is quite typical of the "discovery" theme, which could also be called the "Realization" or "Self-Identification" theme. This theme typically happens quite early in the narratives, usually within the first few minutes. Not all informants go back as early in childhood as Tucker and Andrew, as many people realize that they are LGBTQ later in life. Bea, Lori, Karen and Ritch have their self-realization as adults, for example, so their narratives do not discuss childhood, or they only touch on it only briefly. Others, like Sandy and Ron, came to the realization that they were gay when they were teenagers, therefore their narratives reflect that period of discovery.

Many of the narratives that I collected have the "discovery" theme in some form. While some interviewees really emphasized their self-realization as a prominent stage in their sexual identity development, others did not focus on it very long. Sometimes the

discovery was an explicit recognition that the narrator was “different” in some way, but sexual orientation was not mentioned at this point, for instance Tucker’s (002). Other narratives like Andrew’s (001), cited a specific recognition of same-sex desire, with little to no confusion about feeling different.

Discovery/self-realization is such an important part of eventual disclosure; it is not surprising that this theme appeared so frequently in my corpus of narratives. The discovery theme occurred 21 times out of 32 interviews in my corpus, which is a significant number of informants who included this theme in one or more of their narratives. This makes the discovery theme one of the most popular themes addressed in their coming-out stories.

## **A2) Struggle for Self-Acceptance/Rejection**

The internal struggle for self-acceptance and/or rejection is a theme that appears often in coming-out stories (see, for instance, Stanley and Wolfe 1980). As the LGBTQ person comes to a self-realization or discovery of their sexual orientation, there is then a period of transition in which the subject is sometimes conflicted about what to do and how to act with this new knowledge.

The struggle for self-acceptance and/or rejection is another theme that is in most of the narratives I collected for my corpus, and they were both implicitly and explicitly verbalized. While most of the informants I corresponded with were obviously

self-accepting of their LGBTQ identity, there were a few that felt they had not been able to accept their sexual orientation at a certain time in their lives. This self-acceptance/rejection often became a part of the informants' stories, as they negotiated their realization of their sexual orientation, and how they felt about it. Sometimes the struggle to accept their sexuality was not featured prominently in the narratives, while other times the acceptance/rejection of sexual orientation was a large part of the narrative.

For example, Ron's narrative is one of the most heartbreaking of the narratives I collected because he talks extensively about the struggle he had to come out to himself, and eventually to his parents and others. Ron had no one to talk to, and no gay role models, so he felt very much alone.

003. And I had no one to talk to. So I collected these incidents in my head, and I would live alone with them and that caused me to live a very lonely life, because I stayed in my room, I was afraid to socialize with people, and yet, people were always attracted to me because I was, I had a lot of energy, I was drawing a lot, people really liked my talent, I sang, I was musical, so all that stuff was there, and it was like this dilemma, because people were interested in me but I felt I had, they did, never ever knew me, because there was this private stuff going on, and then when my mom found out, she put the fear on me, of that if Dad found out he would kick me out of the house. And I was at an age then, like I was nineteen, twenty, when I was trying to figure out my career, figure out what I was going to do, and I thought, oh you know, if he finds out I'm going to have to live alone and figure all this out, I'm not going to have the support of my family, and so, that's, so I'd say a lot of my coming out was shaped by fear. And fear kept me in a closet for a while, and fear made me continuously make choices about suppressing that part of my life, you know? [AR001, 02/02/09]

Ron concludes this part of his narrative by stating that “it’s taken a long time to understand,” referring to his awareness and recognition as a gay man. Before he met his partner at the time of my interview, he felt that he was “ready to shut that down completely,” referring to his desire for a same-sex relationship. Ron was very quiet and subdued during his interview, and it was my impression that he had reflected a lot on his journey of awareness. He was eloquent and his narrative was thoughtful and detailed.

While Ron’s narrative highlights a period in his life where he contemplated not telling his parents due to his fear of being rejected, he eventually came out to them and he ultimately accepted that he was gay. Unfortunately, his fears of telling his father were founded, and Ron was ultimately rejected by his father.

The Struggle for Self-Acceptance/Rejection theme appeared 29 times in my corpus of narratives, which makes it one of the most prominent themes brought out by the narrators I spoke to. It is notable that all but two gay men and one lesbian mentioned their struggle for acceptance. I can only speculate as to why those few informants did not mention a struggle for acceptance/rejection, but it is my opinion that they deemed that that part of their journey was too personal to share with a researcher.

### **A3) Disclosure**

The disclosure theme is the ultimate theme in the coming-out stories in my corpus, thus my naming them “disclosure narratives” as well. Primarily, disclosure

narratives disclose some information, in this case, the narrator's sexual orientation, and while the narrative may address other themes, the disclosure theme is generally the most prominent theme of the story. This seems also to be the case with published coming-out stories that I reviewed (Stanley and Wolfe 1980). Because the coming-out stories that I collected from my informants were primarily disclosure-based, each story focused on the event of telling one or more people about the narrator's sexual orientation. When informants were asked to tell their coming-out story, many of them told of the first time they disclosed their non-heterosexual orientation, often to a family member such as a parent. This occurred at various life stages amongst my informants; some told their parents or friends as teenagers, while others waited until adulthood to disclose their sexual orientation. Some told of times when they disclosed their homosexuality at work, or at church. Most emphasized their initial coming out as an influential part of their overall coming-out experience, and one that was either nerve-wracking or relieving. As all of my informants have at least one disclosure narrative in various forms, I have selected a sample of narratives that well-represent the theme of disclosure and the complexities that surround telling family and friends that one is LGBTQ.

Bea's narrative is a good example of the disclosure theme, as she began her narrative by generalizing her coming-out experience with a broad statement:

004. Well, it was, it was delightful, it was fun, it was exciting, it was uh, long-awaited, (*laughter*) cause I thought I was the only lesbian in Newfoundland, so. (*Laughter*). I was the only one!

[AR006, 17/06/09]

She then continued by discussing how she first knew she was a lesbian, to then acknowledging it to a friend, to finally, telling her parents in an argument.

005. And I said “Mom, I can’t believe you barged in the room last night when I was having a beer with Chris.” And she was, you know “rha rha” unreasonable, always unreasonable, anyway, her, one of her famous, her favourite saying was “You’re sick”, right? Or “Take a pill, there’s something wrong with you!” Right? Just the way she was. And she said “You’re sick.” And I just looked at the two of them and said “Apart from being a queer, there’s nothing wrong with me!” (*Laughter*). And my father turned white and left the room and Mom just shut up, right. And that’s how I came out to my parents. [AR006, 17/06/09]

Bea’s coming out in this manner was fairly atypical, as most narratives do not indicate coming out to parents in the spur of the moment, as she did. Coming out during an argument occurred in just one instance by my informants. Mostly, my informants narrate coming out in a deliberate, well-thought out disclosure which was planned for weeks, months, or even years. The disclosure of their sexual orientation was done primarily by the narrator themselves, although some, as in the case of Andrew (below), were outed by a friend or other family member.

While Andrew discussed the development of his sexual orientation through his growing years, he became specific when he later discussed how his mother found out about his sexual orientation, via his sister.

006. And when my sister told my mother, I was vicious with her.

(S: Ohh! You wanted to tell her?) No, I didn't want Mom to know, I thought there was no reason for her to know! I will continue on living a double life, for her sake, right? Cause I knew it would be very, very, uncomfortable for her, and I thought, very uncomfortable for Dad....

Yeah, she took it upon herself, when I moved into the apartment in the city. I decided I'm going to live with two other gay men, and see if this is really what I'm about. I really want to know if this is the life for me, and the lifestyle and all the rest of it. And the culture, and all this. And I moved in, and Mom came in to visit with my sister, and as soon as she walked in the door, I knew that she had found out. Cause she had asked my sister. "I don't understand, Andrew never got married. Andrew never moved out of the home to be with his girlfriend or anything. Why is Andrew living with these two other men, who aren't really like men?" (*Imitating mother's voice*) (*Laughs*). And Jane says to her, "Well, Mom, just think about it. Put it together. What do you think?" And Mom says "He's gay, isn't he?!" Like this, right? (*Laughs, gesturing*). And Jane said yes. And she confirmed it. [AR022, 14/11/12]

Both Bea and Andrew's narratives emphasized coming out to their parents, although neither of them meant to come out at the time. Deliberate disclosure to parents is a more likely occurrence in the coming-out narratives that I collected, although there were some instances of people being forced to come out by another person. The decision to come out is usually not taken lightly, and to disclose to one's parent often produced anxiety, fear and dread of the possible circumstances. Yet, despite the fear of rejection, LGBTQ people continue to come out deliberately. This is reflected in the narratives, as Ron illustrates:

007. And fear kept me in a closet for a while, and fear made me continuously make choices about suppressing that part of my life, you know?

I was courageous enough to go downstairs while he was reading a paper, and said, “Dad, I gotta let you know that I’ve been doing a lot of things that you’re not going to approve of, I’ve been having sex with guys and I’ve gotten into some trouble with it, and I want to change, but I don’t know what to do with it.” That’s how I approached it. He said, “Well as long as you’re not doing it, I’ll accept you.” And then over time, you know, when I left my marriage, for example, I was married to the girl who chased me down, for ten years, and when our marriage ended, I decided that I’m going to pursue being openly gay and I actually did. I mean, there were no ands, ifs or buts about it.

Well, he was supportive when I left my marriage, but when he found out what was going on after I left my wife, um, he cut off all financial help, he cut off conversations with me, and then I had a short-term relationship, I had some time away from that relationship, then I met someone else and stayed with that person for six years, and he never talked to me in six years. [AR001, 02/02/09]

Ron’s narrative illustrates the fear of telling a parent, especially when one is living under their roof and is financially dependent on them. Even though he was well into adulthood, the pressure to conform to societal pressure made it years before Ron felt comfortable enough to pursue his same-sex attraction.

Carla’s narrative is also reflective of a typical disclosure theme. She, like Ron, above, also reacted with trepidation when she finally came out to her parents. As she explained, although the process was “really scary, and no one talks about being gay in a

small place,” she felt she had to come out at that point in her life, after her cousin’s own coming out:

008. So when I was about fifteen years old, I met a girl and things were definitely different, so this time I thought it wasn’t just I want to be best friends it was more like I had a crush on her and I figured that out eventually. It took a long time because it was really scary and nobody really talks about being gay in such a small place like Little Bay. There’s probably like two whole lesbians in the whole town and they are older and it was kind of, you know, definitely not something that felt close to home. However, when I was around that age, 16, my older cousin Megan, was, announced to her family that she was a lesbian. And I remember sitting at the dinner table with my mom and dad; my mom said “Did you hear about Megan?” Like, “Such a shame, she is such a pretty girl.” And I remember being very defensive about that. Like “What are you talking about?” Like, what, “why would you say [that]?” Like, “What’s the difference?” You know what I mean? If she wants to be with a girl then she wants to be with the girl, so. That kind of sparked even more, I was like, “What if I was gay what would you do?” to my parents, and, it kind of caused a ruckus. [AR027, 2014]

Eventually Carla came out to her parents, and although her disclosure to her mother was deliberate, her coming-out to her father was not.

009. So one day I was getting ready for work and I worked at the bakery there, and I had my uniform on and everything, and my dad came to me and he said “I want to talk to you.” And I said “sure” (*clears throat*) and he’s like “I saw something on the computer that I want to ask you about” and I was like “okay” and it was a message from her, my girlfriend at the time, and it said something like I miss you and like a heart or something like that and my dad asked me if it was something he should know about it, if it was more than friends, and so immediately I started crying, because, like, the cat was out of the bag, and I couldn’t hide how I truly felt

so I confessed to him, that it was, she was, my girlfriend, and he just said like “Nothing changes here, we love you no matter what.” Um, he kind of speculated, so he kind of knew, but he was like “You are going to have to tell your mom.” [AR027, 2014]

Carla was hesitant to tell her mother, because, as she explained, her mother did not have a good record with being accepting of gay people. But because her father was not comfortable keeping the secret, he put pressure on Carla to tell her mother.

010. So a little bit of background [about] my mom and I, like my mom is not very much an emotional person, as you know so she’s kind of, she doesn’t really talk about emotions, she’s just more of a you know, day in, day out, talk to her about whatever, so that scared me the most because I had heard her say like negative comments about being gay in the past, so that was definitely the scariest for me.

[It was] definitely really hard, so eventually I sat down with my mom and my dad and I told her. Dad kind of helped me like just let her know what was happening because he wasn’t okay with just keeping it to himself so, I told my mom and her response was (pause), she said “You can’t be gay, that’s disgusting.” So that was probably the hardest thing I ever heard. [AR027, 2014]

It was only after some time was Carla’s mother able to come to terms with her daughter being gay and, even then, her acceptance was not discernable.

011. Um, but eventually I, well, I was very upset obviously, had a panic attack and all that good stuff. But eventually she came around and she apologized which has always been a kind of a big deal, because as I said my mom never really recognizes these kinds of things, so she apologized. So, to this day, my mom will say, refer to my partners as “my friend,” or she will talk about them but she won’t always say their name or she never tends to

get too involved. But she's definitely come a long, long, long way so that's good. [AR027, 2014]

Tucker's narrative also highlighted the disclosure theme. His coming out to his parents while he was still a teenager was equally stressful. When he was sixteen, he wrote a letter to his mother, and when he felt he was ready, called her into his bedroom and read her the letter. While his mother initially accepted Tucker's disclosure, she later asked him if he was going through a phase, which led to arguments. As he noted in an interview conducted by a student of mine in an introductory Folklore course,

012. At first it was kind of a shock for my parents. We had some arguments and that was mostly me thinking they weren't accepting me when really they were. I was getting used to the fact that I was openly gay at this point so any little thing that they said, like if it was something my parents wouldn't let me do, [to me] it was automatically because I was gay. When I came out it was hard for a little while mostly because of the fact that everybody was getting used to the fact that I was gay. My mom and dad were worried about me telling people because they didn't want the wrong people finding out. They didn't want to see me get hurt and I kind of took that as they didn't want me to tell people because they were ashamed of who I was. I took it really insulting and that created a huge conflict between my mother and I. We fought for a really long time, probably four months every night of arguing, bickering at each other. It was mentally and emotionally exhausting. I would just come home from school and go straight to my room and close the door in hopes that nobody would bother me. I was afraid of leaving my room because I was afraid my mother would say something to set me off and I didn't want to yell at her. I didn't want to shout at her. I didn't want the screaming. It just happened that every time we saw each other we would get into an argument. It finally got to the point where my mother and my father booked an appointment with a psychologist. [AR028, n.d]

While the above examples highlight how important the disclosure theme is to the coming-out story, several of my informants had to deal with coming-out and disclosure while living in a small town. Bea, Carla, Sandy and Nathan exemplified the feeling of aloneness from living in a small province, and often in a small community. Feeling like they were the only gay people in their whole town is a motif that comes up in the disclosure theme a couple of times. Bea laughed about her naïvete at the time, saying “I thought I was the only lesbian in Newfoundland! (*Laughter*). I was the only one!” She re-emphasized this point later in the narrative when she exclaimed about Toronto’s large gay community: “Wow, gay people got everything up here, in Toronto! Right? And I’m the only one in Newfoundland. Except for Bob who works with me” (*laughter*) [AR006, 17/06/09]. Carla’s fear of coming out was compounded by her feeling that there were “probably like two whole lesbians in the whole town and they are older and it was kind of, you know, definitely not something that felt close to home” [AR027, 2014]. Feeling like “the only one” seems to be a common feeling of isolation, as several of my informants indicated. This sense of common experience may be seen as a part of the common, familiar script of coming out, as is evidenced in the various repeated themes outlined here. Sandy’s narrative outlined her fear of being considered flamboyant, like the one out male in her community.

013. The only think I knew about homosexuality was that they were sick males that wanted to molest children and that was about my only image of a gay or homosexual. We also had a

homosexual in town, they called him Steve, and Steve was a little bit different and wore several watches and very flamboyant and I thought “oh my God” and it really got me down at about eleven, twelve years of age I got very depressed... [AR018, 30/09/10]

Betty was also concerned about coming out because of the small town she grew up in, and the mentality she perceived was there toward gay people.

014. Um, so, I thought that it would be hard to do so, especially living in a small community, not being able to be who you are, because it wasn't really accepted. And it wasn't really talked about. There were no openly gay people in my community except for um, what I heard through word of mouth was my gay uncle. And everybody made fun of him, because of that reason, so I didn't want to be the target of being made fun of. So essentially all of these years I was suppressing who I was. [AR023, 19/07/14]

As is shown in the above examples (001-014), the disclosure theme is generally explicit in the narratives in my collection, and each narrator spent time discussing specific disclosures that were memorable to them. The disclosure theme is really the core moment of the coming-out story, as the narrator discusses when they told another person that they were gay. Some stories in my corpus had multiple disclosures, for example, a narrator telling a sibling, parents, and then friends, so the disclosure theme may occur multiple times in one story. Furthermore, as the stories are being told, the disclosure theme may come and go, as the narrator discusses other parts of their story, and then returns to the disclosure theme later in the narrative. In my corpus it was typical to have the disclosure theme return after its initial appearance, as narrators revisited various comings-out with

their family, friends, co-workers and acquaintances.

#### **A4) Acceptance/Rejection by Others**

Acceptance and rejection by others (namely, family and friends) is a core part of disclosure, and therefore can be considered a theme in the coming-out stories that I collected. In general, how people react to the disclosure of one's sexual orientation is considered paramount by LGBTQ people, which is why it is often so nerve-wracking for someone to disclose their sexual orientation to another.

The Acceptance/Rejection theme is another theme, along with disclosure, that is specifically referenced by every narrator that I interviewed, likely because acceptance and/or rejection goes hand-in-hand with one's disclosure of sexual orientation. An example of the journey that some LGBTQ persons go through to be accepted is highlighted in Sandy's story of her difficulties in her own self-acceptance. Sandy knew she was different from a young age, but didn't have the words to express it.

015. Well I knew I was different at a very young age and I was adopted and, my mom and dad were wonderful and they allowed me to be different. Like I didn't like dolls and I wanted trucks and cars and my mom, fighting with her mother all the time over this issue, um, allowed me to be who I was. And I remember in Grade Four I had a crush on my teacher. As a child you had nowhere to put it. I knew I didn't like to be, I knew that when my relatives and my uncles and cousins used to say oh "Tommy and Sandy up in a tree" that used to bother me. And it bothered me a lot and I knew that I was so different that I thought by changing my name to Tommy when I was about six years of age I went through a

period where I said “no I’m not Sandy I’m Tommy.” And I think that in my little mind it was a way to get my relatives and friends to stop teasing me about [the fact that] I hung out with this boy named Tommy and of course in everyone’s eyes it was boyfriend/girlfriend and I had no words for it but I knew it bothered me and so I went through a period of about a year and a half, two years where I insisted on being called Tommy. My mother must have been out of her mind. “What am I raising here?” Right? And to the point that I wouldn’t – I would say “No Mom, I’m called Tommy.” And my mother would say “now you know your name is Sandy and I understand if you want to be [Tommy]” but... [AR018, 30/09/10]

When Sandy became an adult and pursued a relationship with a woman, she kept it a secret and continued to date men as a cover, even becoming engaged to a man (John) at one point. Her mother, whom Sandy described as “intuitive,” confronted her about spending time with one particular girl frequently, and not seeming that interested in John. It was then that Sandy admitted that she was a lesbian. Her mother was not surprised and expressed her support to Sandy:

016. And I said “well how do you feel about that?” And she said “Well, I love you” and she said “I want you to be happy.” She said “I’d love you to marry John and to be happy and have children,” she said, “I’d love to have some grandchildren” being an only kid [laughs] but she said “I, I want you to be happy, I really want you to be happy.” And that changed my whole life. [AR018, 09/30/10]

Some of my interviewees were not as fortunate as Sandy, and did not have supportive parents. Lori’s narrative is a prime example of the complexities of acceptance and rejection theme in a coming-out story. For example, while Lori was embraced by her

father when she came out to him, she was wholly rejected by her mother.

017. So, and I remember going for a walk with my mother and you know, we had an on-again, off-again.... We had a hard relation[ship]... we still, you know, have a hard relationship but I remember going for a walk with her to a park where we were living, and I said "I have something to tell you." And she said, "You're not going to say you're pregnant are you?" And I said, "Oh no." No, I'm saying to myself probably after this she'll probably wish I was pregnant. And she said "You're not sick." And I said, "No, not that I'm aware of." Uh, and then to my utter astonishment she said "Who is she?" And I thought, I thought I heard wrong. I thought, you know, there was a car going by, and it was honking, right? And I thought, did she just say she? And I was trying to react, cause she floored me, and I said "how did you know?" And she said, "I'm your mother, I just knew." And I thought, well, I'm batting a hundred. And then about two weeks later she stopped talking to me. And she didn't talk to me for seven years. [AR007, 17/06/09]

Other informants didn't tell their parents, choosing instead to let the subject of being gay go unaddressed for various reasons. Donald was warned by his sister not to tell his mother about his sexual orientation, because "it would kill her." Donald, however, did not listen to his sister, and instead chose to stop hiding the truth from his mother. The following narrative shows that Donald was surprised when he told his mother about his sexuality, and was even surprised that she knew the word "gay." Donald was then warned about coming out at work, by his mother, who worried that he would lose his job, and wondered what his other relatives would say about this?

018. And at that time I was seeing somebody. You know, we were seeing each other. Our relationship was basically hidden

from my family – My mother was still living and I have a sister and an aunt who lived with us as well. So, my aunt and my mother, I was very close to them – Anyway, so I, this person I was seeing at the time was more or less out to his family, pretty well. It wasn't discussed but they all knew and they all knew we were in a relationship and of course he was really confronting me at times that I should be out to my family and we had many arguments about it. And I was saying, you know my mother at this time was much older because she was in her 40s when I was born. I thought this is going to kill her. This would be really traumatic for her and I didn't want to have to, you know, why rock the boat? Anyway, but eventually I came out to my sister and she was very good. I remember it was a Friday night, she was very good about it but she said "For God's sake don't tell Mom it'll kill her." So the next morning at the breakfast table I came out to my mother and my aunt. And basically I said to her "What do you think is going on between myself and this other person?" And my mother said "You're gay." And the interesting thing about it was I didn't even think she knew the word gay. I didn't think that she had an inkling about that word. (SM: How old was she then?) She was in her 70s actually. And I said "Yes." Now obviously she knew it or she felt that it was so. And it was never, she never approached the topic to me. But when I came out to her you know, I guess the proverbial shit hit the fan. So it caused a lot of dissent for a period of time.

Of course, at that time my mother was saying "You're going to be fired. What about if everybody finds out, your aunts and your uncles?" and that sort of thing. You know, anyway, so that was it from that point on. Once I was out to my family I felt more comfortable about being out at work as well. [AR019, 15/09/10]

After Donald came out to his family (in the 1980s), he felt it was much easier to come out at work. This is again, typical of the acceptance/rejection theme. Once a LGBTQ person gets some validation (or even rejection) from a source, they often find it

easier to continue with the coming-out process and tell other people, whether it be friends or co-workers. From my own personal experience, it seems that once the initial disclosure has occurred, it becomes easier to tell the next person, and the next, and so on.

Dan's disclosure (in the late 1990s) was much more uncomfortable than Donald's, above, both for him and his social network. Unfortunately, as is explained in his narrative, he had several ugly encounters after the disclosure of his sexual orientation, both from a "friend" and his father. As he noted in an e-mail:

019. My official coming out was at my graduation, where I was betrayed by the date to my prom – her name was Megan. After asking her to be my date, she started showing extreme interest in me, and the day of my graduation, I decided to let her down softly. I told her that I was gay, and that I asked her to be my date, because I thought she was an awesome person. After I told her, she opened up to me, and told me that she was bisexual. I felt really relieved telling her – I had no idea that later that night, she'd be sticking a knife into my back.

After the graduation was over, we headed to my friend Deanne's house – she was the host of our grad party. A couple hours passed, and we were all a little intoxicated – when a guy from my class, accused me of being gay, in front of a large group of people. Of course, I denied. But then Megan stepped forward, just after my statement – and said something along these lines ... "Dan! You told me earlier today you were gay – nobody gives a shit, get over it." That statement started an outburst of aggression, and I ended up getting beat up. A friend came to my rescue, and drove me home.

When I finally got to Jamesville, I didn't come out of the closet, I blew the doors off it with a bazooka. I completely changed myself – into the ultimate big gay queen. My parents, and my sister soon figured out what was going on – and never actually had the

official word from myself. The joys of small town life. My father destroyed my bedroom in Burnley – tearing the door off the hinges, and literally smashing everything inside to bits. My sister stopped talking to me, and the only “family” I had left, was my mother. [E01, 14/09/09]

While a few of the narratives I collected discussed episodes of rejection or partial rejection, like Dan’s, the majority of them were positive and discussed times when the narrator was accepted by friends and family. This may be because my informants wanted to tell happy stories, or did not want to tell or remember episodes of rejection, or it could be simply that there were not that many episodes of rejection. As such the narratives that discuss rejection seem to stand out to me, perhaps in contrast to my own, largely positive disclosure.

#### **A5. Construction and Presentation of Self**

Most interviewees discussed how they presented themselves to the public as LGBTQ, either implicitly or explicitly. Borrowing from Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), there are many types of information expressed by a person who is interacting with or performing their self to another person. As Goffman notes, observers can “glean clues” from one’s conduct and appearance, even if unacquainted with an individual, and these clues “allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them, or more importantly,

to apply untested stereotypes to him” (1959: 1). By using cultural signifiers or markers like stereotypes, many LGBTQ persons show their group membership in varying ways. Some LGBTQs I interviewed showed typical queer signifiers in their living space, like Bea and Lori, who had a prominent rainbow flag hung at their residence. Others expressed their femininity or masculinity in non-traditional ways, which indicated the participation in non-binary gender stereotypes, or perhaps played into stereotypes about gays, lesbians and queer people (lesbians wear plaid shirts and comfortable shoes, gay men are stylish and fashionable).

Local stereotypes and various forms of stereotype is what John Widdowson and popularized by Archer Taylor, before him (1948) refer to as *blason populaire* (1981). *Blason populaire*, he explains, acknowledges in-group and external stereotyping, by presenting a stereotype of a particular group or region, in a favourable light (integrative) while at the same time, implying and intending a slight upon another group (non-integrative/divisive) (1981: 36). He continues that *blason populaire*, like the stereotypes sometimes found in my corpus of interviews, “have a part to play in the shaping of attitudes,” and that which are often designed to praise a given community, have considerable impact on patterns of local identity (1981: 42-44).

The function of *blason populaire* in my corpus fits Widdowson’s concept that both its integrative and non-integrative functions generate forms of verbal folklore like nicknames, sayings, legends and jokes, which “play an important part in the ethos and

persistence of local stereotypes essential to regional identity” (1981: 44). The narratives from my informants are peppered with references to gay culture, from references to tv shows with gay characters, to sayings that may be unique to local culture like “when I came out [of the closet] I blew the doors off” and “I thought I was the only lesbian in the whole town.”

As is obvious in most of the narratives I collected, coming out as LGBTQ was the primary point of the narrative, and thus presentation of self was a key concept in the narrative. By coming out as LGBTQ, the narrator presents their sexual orientation to the audience, usually pointedly, and then backs up their statements about their orientation with a narrative about how they knew they were gay, or the actions that took place because of their self-recognition. The narratives indicate, then, a presentation of self that is verbal, and not relying on outward signifiers like appearance, pitch of voice, or stereotypes. The words of the narrative themselves act as the signifier that one is LGBTQ.

There were many examples of the “presentation of self” theme in my corpus of narratives. Nowhere was this more obvious than the narratives in which the narrator specifically and explicitly discussed how they presented themselves to the public. For instance, some of my informants had to choose what gender to present (as transgender instead of cisgender, these informants were going through the process of changing their biological gender to another gender) and then make deliberate clothing and style choices that fit their new identity. Others spoke of implicit choices having to be made, about how

to come out to others, and how to present themselves as to be their authentic self.

While the majority of my informants are “out” as gay or lesbian, several of them came out as bisexual before coming out as gay, for various reasons, including it that it seemed easier, or that they believed themselves to be bisexual at that point in their lives. Sandy talked distinctly about presenting as “a tomboy,” (015) while Aeon (022, 025), Krista (023), and Jessie (026) discussed the particular difficulties and intricacies of presenting gender as trans persons.

Emma initially came out as bisexual in junior high school in the 1990s, because she wanted to leave her options open. As she explains,

020. Well I knew I was gay when I was very very young – probably five years old I remember being interested in girls. I remember my first “crush” was when I was on a family vacation when I was really young and I was soooo (sic) head over heels for my cousin’s friend Amy – I didn’t have a word for it, but I knew I was gay.

By grade seven I had labelled myself as bisexual – as not to rule out the possibility that there might be a boy that I’d consider dating, but I used to say I was “80% gay” – By Grade Nine I was full-on dating girls. [E02, 25/09/09]

Coming out as bisexual seems to be a common trend in younger informants, as a liminal state between being straight and being gay. At least three of my informants identified as bisexual before later coming to the conclusion that they were gay. At the time of interviews, only two of my informants actually identified as bisexual as a

concrete, unchanging identity.

Coming out as transgender is very different from coming out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, as the narratives from Aeon, Krista and Jessie indicate. Although the initial disclosure is similar, and includes all the nervousness, questioning, hesitation, and deliberation that accompanies an identity disclosure, coming out as being a new gender, or having the intent of becoming a new gender, is on a different plane of disclosure, separate from the level of coming out as homosexual. Says Aeon, my youngest informant, at age nineteen, when asked about her coming out: “I often find my personal coming-out story quite funny because I didn’t really have that initial coming out” [AR026, 28/07/14]. She continued by discussing her exploration of gender performance and performance of femininity, and explained that she used the gateway of the “bisexual” label because “that was the easier thing to do.”

021. At fourteen I started wearing a lot of makeup and wearing girls’ clothing, and I initially identified as bisexual cause that was the easier thing to do, so I’d tell my friends ‘Okay, I’m bisexual’ and they’d be like ‘Oh me too, like whatever!’ case I was in that group of friends who identified as emo or scene and that is what you did because it was fun to experiment and it was kind of forgivable. And I had a girlfriend. And I said to her, ‘Well, I’m bisexual.’ And she didn’t care, but I was kind of lying. [AR026, 28/07/14]

Aeon continued her narrative about coming out initially as bisexual, and then as a gay boy, but clarified that she did not have a coming-out story when identifying as gay.

“I still don’t have, when I identified as a gay boy, I never had a coming-out story, and I still don’t have a coming-out story with my family. It was always assumed, but we’ve never had that conversation” [AR026, 07/28/14]. She then moved on to discussing her trans identity by saying:

022. I don’t know what to think of it, because I’m not out [as trans] to like, my grandparents or aunts and uncles as trans, but I am to my parents, and I actually sat down and said well I am [word emphasized by informant] this because I felt like I had to validate my trans identity, whereas I, I felt like I didn’t with my homosexual identity. [AR026, 28/07/14]

Even though Aeon says she doesn’t have a coming-out story, portions of her narrative qualify as a coming-out story as outlined above. What Aeon is referring to as a coming-out story, is indeed, a literal coming out, to her parents and grandparents, which she avoided.

Several other informants had similar experiences to Aeon when coming out as trans. Krista also acknowledged that there were two stages in her coming out, although she noted that the first stage was “accepting something about yourself,” and the second stage as making “decisions through guiding whether or not and how to communicate that to whom [AR009, 24/09/09]. She remembered her first acknowledgment to herself that she was not like others in her school classroom:

023. Going back to as young as eight years old, I saw myself as not wanting to conform to or be a part of the stereotype of what an eight-year old boy is supposed to be, supposed to do, supposed to

feel. I guess others around me took notice of certain things like that, they didn't really know what to make of it; they didn't really see it as a problem. I guess when you're four, five, six, years old, we're all just children. Once you get seven, eight, nine, the differentiations among sexes and gender roles tend to play out. And I went from being, I guess, this fairly comfortable, confident, young child, to all of a sudden, someone who is uncomfortable in being a boy, and I guess, my reaction to that was to be shy, and to remove myself, to not want to participate in events that society felt I should participate in. I went from being the most popular, loved kid in the class to the shy outcast that didn't want to have anything to do with anyone. And no one really knew what to make of that. But there was never any, clear cut signs, that maybe this is a transgender person. So I was left to struggle on my own. [AR009, 24/09/09]

While Krista knew at an early age that she was different, she was in her thirties before she finally came to the realization that she was trans. "Here I was with clear signs pointing to me being a trans person, yet I had myself fooled for so long, that oh, there's no such thing as trans, it's just a crazy idea in your mind, or it's a fantasy, or a fetish" [AR009, 24/09/09]. She then questioned herself, and her sexual orientation. "Is this the issue? Am I really not attracted to females? Well, no, I am attracted to females, so it's not that. I think people [asked] 'Are you sure you're not gay?' It's like, you know, I wish it were that easy!" [AR009, 24/09/09].

Reiterating her "coming out," Krista said:

024. I guess I concluded that it's tough to really label myself, or compare myself specifically to other trans people but ultimately, I guess I kind of realized who I felt I was, and what I needed [to] happen with my life and, I guess, that would be my own coming

out to myself and it was a very, kind of traumatic experience, it's like, oh my goodness, I've – I basically felt that I had wasted and lost thirty-three years of my life. [AR009, 24/09/09]

Krista was hospitalized for a panic attack in a hospital which, in her words, knew “nothing about transsexualism” and felt that her experience there was not helpful, but in fact, traumatic. She spoke of feeling “betrayed by everybody in society” but later, after soul searching and much research on her part, was able to see the positives of being trans [AR009, 24/09/09].

Aeon discussed playing with gender roles and presentation, and then finally switching to a feminine gender representation:

025. For the past three years, I've been identifying as a woman, but I identified as a feminine boy for a very long time... uh, coming out to my friends was easier, I was pretty well known on the Internet, people knew me as Donny back then, and he was quite popular, and, but I never had these conversations with my family... I still don't have, when I identified as a gay boy, I never had a coming-out story, and I still don't have a coming-out story with my family. It was always assumed, but we've never had that conversation. Um, and my parents are so, accepting, and I'm so blessed to have them because they never said “You can't grow your hair, you can't dye your hair, you can't wear makeup, you can't do this.” They just let it happen naturally. And the same thing happened with my grandparents and my other relatives. [AR026, 28/07/14]

Aeon's physical changes brought upon assumptions from her friends and family that she was changing genders, although she never did have a conversation with most of

them about her being trans, preferring instead to let people make their own assumptions about her.

Jessie's construction of self started with asking their friends to call them "they" in contrast to using the pronouns "he" or "she." As Jessie explains:

026. I guess for coming out in general it's kind of been more of a process than a specific time. I mean, I came out as bisexual the first time that I came out, and that was kind of, I just kind of slipped that information in there. I started going to LBGTMUN<sup>10</sup> after I started MUN and then I kind of just mentioned to my family yeah, I've volunteering at this organization, and by the way (*laughs*), I'm bisexual, just so you know. And that was never really an issue. The tough one for me was definitely the process of coming out as trans, especially without being able to fall back on being one gender or the other. Um, just because it took a lot more to explain to people, so it was always something that gave me a lot of pause. I ended up just starting asking my friends to call me "they" without really explaining why. But eventually when I started looking at medical intervention, I had to explain to my mom why I was about to go through the process of taking hormones because it wouldn't take very long before she'd be able to notice stuff like my voice dropping, and you know, just my physiology changing slightly. So, I ended up just sending her a message on Facebook and piling her with links of stuff, with information (*laughing*) which I'm not sure really helped. But she was, (*pause*) she was pretty good about it, I don't think that she understood a lot of what I sent her and I think since then it's really been, the conversations that we've had around it after that that actually helped her understand, but at the time she was good about it. She had questions about what it would mean to be going on hormones more than about my identity so it was more like, "okay so what are you actually doing about this, and what will that, what effects will that have on you?" as opposed to "Why are you doing

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<sup>10</sup> LBGTMUN is the lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender student centre at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN).

this weird thing, like what is wrong with you?” So that was great. Like (*laughs*) she’s been excellent. [T01, 27/07/14]

Jessie’s approach to coming out as trans was deliberate and transparent, in contrast to Aeon’s, which Aeon did more implicitly and organically.

Being bisexual was one area in the LGBTQ spectrum of which I had few informants. However, several interviewees mentioned having conflicting feelings about bisexuality, and some even used it as a gateway between being straight and coming out as gay. One informant, Andrew, noted that while he has lived the majority of his life as a gay man, he is now rethinking his sexuality. When I asked him if he considered himself to be bisexual, he replied:

027. Sometimes. You know, given the right environment, or the right setting. I mean a couple of weeks ago I went dancing with a friend of mine at the, uh, local gay bar, and uh, anyway, his girlfriend came in, and quite the knockout, right? With the low cut dress on, cleavage everywhere, tanned to the nines, and I mean all very appealing to me – Cause I’m looking at these men who are my age, fifty plus, and I’m like, I don’t find them attractive at all, but I’m looking at this beautiful young thirty-year-old female, and I’m like huh?! Which way do I go now? Well, why lock yourself in a box? You know, and that’s a lot of my understanding is as I’ve gotten older that sexuality is not as defined as people think it is. [AR026, 14/11/12]

Andrew is the only informant I had who seemed unsure about his sexual orientation and so this narrative was important to include. The reflexive nature of the narrative also stood out to me, as he asked, “Why lock yourself in a box?” At the same

time, however, Andrew still calls himself gay and identifies primarily as a gay man.

The above examples all show how presentation of self is a theme that comes up for many LGBTQ persons in my corpus of narratives.

#### **A6. Identification with an LGBTQ Community**

One theme that came up multiple times was the narrator's relationship with a perceived community. As anthropologist Maria Swora found when she observed Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, AA members acquire and maintain a specific identity by story-listening, and then later, by telling their own stories based on shared emotion (2002: 363). Similar to Swora's observed group, many of my interviewees felt a kinship with a specific community, namely the LGBTQ community in general, and the LGBTQ community in Newfoundland, in specific. This was indicated in their narratives through the concept of belonging, or by discussing LGBTQ community events they took part in like women's (lesbian/bi/trans women) dances, PFLAG<sup>11</sup>, or events during Pride Week. Members of the LGBTQ local community participate in shared community events, and membership and belonging is reinforced through the performance of narratives, including disclosure narratives. By storytelling, LGBTQs create and incorporate themselves into the local community.

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<sup>11</sup> PFLAG Canada is a national non-profit organization which brings together family and friends of LGBTQ people in Canada <<http://www.pflagcanada.ca>> Last accessed 04 November 2016.

Participation in community events and the emphasis on belonging to a community can be seen in Lori's narrative about her father. Her narrative explains how, when she participated in the Pride March in Toronto, with her father, she was moved to tears:

028. But the process for my dad was really interesting, because after that, after he knew about me, he was, I mean, he was so supportive, and he very much became an activist, which was phenomenal. So, like, you know, it became a huge part of his life, of who he was, and he – got involved with a chapter of PFLAG, and he was the president at one point and oh God, we would walk in pride marches and he had a shirt, which I have, and it says “My daughter’s a lesbian and I love her.” And we would walk in this incredible march in Toronto, I don’t know if you’ve ever been to Pride in Toronto. It’s like my God, I mean, right now there’s a million people go ... but I remember this reaction, and all the PFLAG mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers would march with their gay and lesbian children. We’d march down Yonge Street, in Toronto, and we’d get a standing ovation through the entire [crowd], and people by the dozens would come up and hug my dad. You know, it was always very moving and, you know, you go by and you can tell that everyone has their stories because (*crying*) there was never a dry eye. [AR007, 17/06/09]

Bea remembers coming out and really feeling like a part of a bigger community when she went to a house party of just lesbians.

029. So here I am, having all these questioning, okay, if you’re gay, you can check it out now, because your husband just left you, you know, so. Anyhow, we go away and visit her cousin who happens to be a lesbian, who I’d met before with my ex-husband and anyway, we ended up at this big part– well, not party, it was between Christmas and New Year’s, or just after New Year’s, I don’t know, there was a big Anne Murray special, (laugh) so she

invited a whole bunch of women to her place to watch this Anne Murray special and –

[Her partner speaks] Not that we're saying Anne Murray is gay at all; no, no (*laughter*)

So I'm sitting there in this room, and I'm from Newfoundland, as is my sister-in-law, and I'm the straight one, married to Nancy's brother, kind of thing, and, but he just left me, and, so they're all sitting there, and this one woman pipes up and says "oh, I'm so glad she's one of us." And I looked at her like she had about ten heads. And I said "What do you mean?" She said, "that she's gay." And I said "Anne Murray's not gay." And they all just died laughing at me, and I felt like a fool, like can I disappear here now? And they said, "yeah." And I said, "No, honestly, she's married!" And so, yeah, I was told, in no uncertain terms, not to assume that married people are not gay, and then I was thinking, that's interesting because I'm normally really uncomfortable with a room full of strangers, and I just made a complete fool of myself in this room, room full of strangers, but I'm still comfortable. And, you know, I just couldn't wrap my head around it. So. So we ended up going downtown to this restaurant and, well it's a place that doesn't exist [now] – and we had a restaurant and a movie theatre, and a disco and everything all in one place, and I thought "Wow, gay people got everything up here, in Toronto! Right? And I'm the only one in Newfoundland. Except for Bob who works with me" (*laughter*). [AR006, 17/06/09]

Bea highlighted her feeling of comfort when being around other lesbians, even when she "made a complete fool of herself" around her belief that gay people wouldn't be in a heterosexual marriage. This type of esoteric knowledge (that singer Anne Murray is gay), language and behaviour could also be used as a type of coding, as Radner and Lanser define in their paper "Gay Talk in Straight Company" (1993a), in which "groups who are

at risk of sharing their membership publicly use codes to talk, to indicate membership and to share information” (Adams 1999: 179, drawing on Radner and Lanser 1993a). Other informants drew on esoteric knowledge throughout their interviews, indicating their group membership to me in implicit ways.

Bea’s emphasis that “gay people got everything up here in Toronto” speaks to her surprise at the size of the gay community there, and the relatively small community back home in Newfoundland, as she felt that she (and Bob) were the only gay people there. The feeling of comfort at forming relationships with other gay people was a theme that was explored by a few of my informants. There is often a feeling of relief and fellowship among a minority group when they initially find a like-minded community of individuals, such as LGBTQ people (Swora 2002).

#### **A7. Stigma/Discrimination – Coming Out as LGBTQ**

Implicit in many lives of LGBTQ persons is the concept of stigma. While there have been many definitions of stigma in sociological theory, Goffman’s preeminent theory of stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting,” one that reduces the bearer “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (1963: 3) is perhaps the most cited. Goffman’s examination of the stigmatized includes those who have a physical stigma such as a deformity, those who are stigmatized because of race, nation and religion and those who have a “character stigma,” such as criminals, the mentally ill and homosexuals.

The stigmatized are believed to be deeply inferior and other undesirable qualities are often attached to them by those who are deemed acceptable or normal by society. Goffman calls these people “normals,” opposed to those who have “an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated” (1963: 5). In general, transgender people often feel stigmatized, even within the LGBTQ community (Gagné et al. 1997; Hunter 2007).

Sociologist Howard Becker’s examination of “outsiders” (written about the same time as Goffman’s) clearly groups homosexuals as deviant and thus part of a stigmatized community (1963). The majority of definitions regarding stigma, however, highlight an “us” and “them” dichotomy, those who are normal versus those who are not. Others propose that stigma is a characteristic of persons that is contrary to the actions of the norm, the “norm” being defined as a “shared belief that a person ought to behave in a certain way at a certain time” (Stafford and Scott 1986: 80). More recent examinations of stigma are more elaborate, explaining that “stigma exists when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separating, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows these processes to unfold” (Link and Phelan 2001: 382). Falk defines the words stigma and stigmatization as “an invisible sign of disapproval which permits ‘insiders’ to know who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ and allows the group to maintain its solidarity by demonstrating what happens to those who deviate from accepted norms of conduct” (2001: 17).

The concept of stigma goes hand in hand with the concept of deviance. Notes

Becker, “Deviant behaviour is behaviour that people label deviant. And for labelling to take place there have to be responses of other people who may apply negative sanctions of one kind or another” (1963: 7). Deviance implies an alleged breach of social norm in which there is an assumed widespread consensus in society about what is normal. There are various “Do’s and Don’ts” of society, and an infraction of the rules, whether it be how someone looks, or how someone acts, is often immediately recognized and labelled. We can, however, understand that deviance typically evokes negative sanctions from the widespread community, and that can be anything from gossip to ostracism to violence.

Being thought of or labelled as deviant has significant negative consequences for a person. Certainly one’s participation in society may be affected, as well as a person’s feeling of self-worth and self-esteem. When one is labelled as deviant, whatever the derogatory term used (queer, fairy, pothead, lunatic, criminal), the person in question has moved in status from one perceived to be “one of us” to one perceived to be one of “them.” Once labelled by society, he or she may then be treated differently.

The concept of stigma has been applied to a variety of circumstances, from individuals suffering from schizophrenia to non-Christians to LGBTQs. A large portion of the research on stigma has been contributed by social scientists to examine how societies construct categories and how those categories are then linked to stereotyped beliefs. These stereotyped beliefs often lead to action or conversely, the fear of action by a non-stigmatized individual to the stigmatized person. In various coming-out narratives,

stigma was either explicitly or implicitly mentioned. Some of the individuals faced an episode of violence, or silent treatment, while others were afraid of possible reactions of family and community members should they come out as lesbian or gay like when Lori told her mother that she was gay, and her mother indicated that she knew:

030. And she didn't talk to me for seven years... I think in many ways that made it more painful. Because, well, I think you know, if she had this like, reaction, to like "get out of the house," I would have expected that. [AR007, 17/06/09]

Later, Lori felt stigmatized when she visited a medical professional, as if being gay was a mental illness that needed to be cured:

031. You know years ago, when I was at a doctor's – this was like a long time ago – when I was at a doctor's appointment, and you know, for a sore throat, or something completely unrelated, he asked me, and this was my family doctor that I'd had since I was a kid, asked me if I was on birth control. Which I found kind of strange, in hindsight, like why, I'm there to get an antibiotic, and uh, I said "No" and he said, "What's the matter? You're not sexual?" And I said "Well, you know, not with men." And he didn't say anything, and when he turned around, he gave me a prescription for penicillin, and he gave me the number of a psychiatrist. [AR007, 17/06/09]

External stigma may be because of internalized homophobia or heterosexism, which is defined in an earlier chapter. Lori's stigmatization by ostracization and silent treatment was quite hard on her at the time, as it was on Gina, whose internal homophobia as a result of a strict Roman Catholic religious background and her fear of being outed

eventually led to a suicide attempt.

Gina was quite forthright in speaking about her suicide attempt and the events that preceded it. Her experience with conversion therapy pushed her over the edge to a place where she no longer felt like she wanted to live.

032. Now before I attempted suicide I had gone to a conversion therapist. Now she wasn't called a conversion therapist as such she was just a therapist like everyone else but when I tell her that this is what I was struggling with we went through different therapy where she gave me a lot of material on the reasons why she thought I was gay and that it was a premature sexuality and that eventually when I accepted why I was feeling this way that I would learn to become a heterosexual. So the material she gave me was very much like why I was having attractions for women of the same sex, was because people of the same sex was because there was something in them that I wanted to be like. So she gave me a lot of material, it was a very focused therapy, and about how I can change and there was a lot of religious elements as well to the therapy, and when I felt that the therapy didn't work I attempted suicide. [AR004, 08/06/09]

Many of my informants not only suffered from internalized homophobia but from external sources of homophobia as well. Betty's experience with a crush of hers shows this painful situation.

033. I was in Grade Seven and um, I went to one of my friends and I didn't really want to say that I was gay, so I told her I was bi, and her first question was "So, who do you have a crush on in our class?" And I was like "I don't like anyone in our class." And she was like "Oh, well how do you know?" And I was like "Well, I just know" and like, you know, maybe I'll have crushes on people on tv. And she was okay with it, I think, there wasn't really anything talked about it afterwards, but after that I always just

pretended like it wasn't true, cause I just made a really big move and didn't know if I was going to be accepted or not, I felt like so anxious, so sick to my stomach, I wanted to puke. And yeah, I don't know, I can't remember much of what happened after that but for a long time I tried to hide it, but me and another girl in high school, we like had a relationship, I guess I'd call it [laughs] we like, wrote love letters to each other, we said we were going to be girlfriends, and then one day she turned around and sent all of my emails to her to everybody in the class and that was really painful. [AR023, 07/19/14]

Betty's betrayal by her school girlfriend was an experience that hurt her deeply, besides outing her to the entire class. Clearly being gay was seen as a stigmatizing position to be in, as the "outing" indicates.

### **The stigma of being the "other" within a minority group**

Stigma not only faces gay and lesbians, but smaller groups in the LGBTQ community as well. Some bisexuals feel stigmatized and discriminated against by gays and lesbians for not being "truly gay" therefore different from the community norm of homosexuality. As noted above, Falk's explanation of stigma and stigmatization in modern usage states that stigma is "an invisible sign of disapproval which permits 'insiders' to know who is 'in' and who is 'out' and allows the group to maintain its solidarity by demonstrating what happens to those who deviate from accepted norms of conduct" (2001: 17). By deviating from the insider group of gay and lesbians, some bisexuals feel the stigma of discrimination, negative labelling, ostracism and exclusion

from gays and lesbians who themselves have faced stigma for being the “other.” From a conversation I had with one couple:

034. B: You know how many times have we heard, “Oh you know, they’re just sitting on the fence.”

S: Or they want the best of both worlds.

B: Or [they’re] hanging onto heterosexual privilege.

L: And it’s true, and there was a time where I, where I, did believe that.

B: I did too, and was told, in no uncertain terms, that I was as bad as any homophobe. And I thought about it, and I said, “You’re right. Who am I to tell you you’re a dyke?” [AR007, 17/06/09]

Not only are bisexuals stigmatized within the LGBTQ community, but so too are others who self-identify as trans or queer, or other identities that fall under the LGBTQ umbrella. Aeon and Jessie both came out as bisexual before they came out as trans, because they felt it would be easier.

### **Discrimination**

Discrimination against LGBTQ persons has been and still is a large concern for gay people and is part of the stigmatized experience. Because of the prevalence of discrimination toward LGBTQs, it is included as a major theme in my corpus of narratives. Cindy’s narrative details the discrimination she faced in her life. Cindy’s

experience in the military is a prime example of workplace discrimination of gays and lesbians, especially to those who “looked gay.”

035. So when I came out, I was still in the Reserves, in the military and it was still at a time when it wasn't legal to be gay or lesbian in the military: you could actually lose your job. So I came out in 1989, and then I went away that summer, 1990, to the military. I was completely out to everybody, I didn't care. At that point in time I was an officer, I was in charge of a lot of people in Ontario. I just came out, I came out to all my female officers, they knew I was with women, so everyone else who didn't know I was a lesbian at that point in time in the military. And I figured if they are going to fire me, I know I'm just a reserve, if they're going to fire me, then fire me, whatever, I can get another job. All of my friends in the rank force that were junior rank and rank force, they rounded them all up and fired them. You're lesbian, you're gay, you're out, and that was traumatizing to them all. I remember at the end of the summer saying to one of my senior officers, “Why not me? You guys all know that I would take the weekend to go to Northern Ontario to see my girlfriend at the time.” They knew I was with a woman, why wasn't something said about me... And he said, “Well, you don't look like a lesbian.” I'm like, “Oh, my, God.” In other words, I wasn't threatening anybody, I wasn't making a scene, because I looked like, in their eyes, a woman. That disturbed me so much. It was just brutal. [AR014, 27/10/09]

But for all those that did experience discrimination, there were other informants who noted that discrimination did not play a part in their life, which was surprising to them. When Donald spoke of his job, he reiterated this:

036. And anyway so I was certainly out while I was at University for the most part and I eventually went to work here in the city as a nurse... And I was still closeted at work but select staff that I worked with, some of whom were also gay or lesbian, we were all out to each other so that was fairly good. But I remember one

time talking to a nurse who was a friend of mine. The topic came up and she basically said “Donald we all know you are gay and there’s no problem with that, none of us have a problem with it.” And that certainly made me very comfortable. [AR019, 15/09/10]

The discrimination theme is prevalent in some narratives but not in others, which indicates to me that in part, the role that discrimination plays is largely individual, and dependent on the person’s workplace among other factors.

#### **A8. Religion**

A theme that came up many times in my corpus of interviews was the religious background of the informant. Seven of my informants brought up religion at some point in their interview, especially the older interviewees, so much that I consider it to be a relevant theme in coming-out stories. Seemingly, the informants who were older (born before 1980) were much more likely to bring up religion as a factor in their coming out than informants under the age of thirty-five. This may be due to the importance of religion to families in past decades.

Several of my informants’ comings-out were affected by their religion, and some experienced stigma due to their religious upbringing. Being LGBTQ is often seen as a negative personality trait, or even as a choice, by various organized religions, as was the case with Ron’s painful experience with his Pentecostal church:

037. [There was a] belief that this was wrong and so I, I kind of

was kind of aware of that through some of the messages preached, that you know, hellfire and brimstone, homosexuality is, means you're going to hell, all those kind of things, it wasn't a constant message, but there was enough of it, that you got that, sort of information, you knew, okay, these people, obviously if I disclose any kind of feeling I have, I'm going to be you know, pinpointed, and try to change to go through some sort of therapy whether it was through prayer, or you know, casting the devils out or those kinds of things. [AR001, 02/02/09]

Ritch (Anglican) noted that there was "even one member of our parish who claimed I needed to be exorcised, you know, to drive the evil spirits out, and that kind of thing" [AR010, 28/09/09].

Donald (Anglican) also felt stigmatized because of the disconnect between his religion and his sexuality. He explained:

038. I grew up in a very religious family. You know the church was always important to us and that was important to me. And so my earliest memories would involve my family and the church. And, I went to church more often than my other family members. It was very important to me when I was a child and still is even today. But certainly when I became a teenager I don't know if it was the religion that caused me so much of a pain or anguish as it was the society as a whole... But I felt I needed to change my sexual orientation because I thought that ah, this is what society wanted and probably I guess in the religion as well it was important. And they were, it never got spoken about a great deal but it was certainly the overtones about sexual orientation, you know people who are gay or lesbian it was very much frowned upon. And I thought that if I was involved in this church and I did everything that I was supposed to do you know, crossed all my T's and dotted all my I's God would change me you know I would become straight. And I felt as I got more involved in that church I became more closeted. And I felt I really had to hide this and it

was almost like my focus was to change my sexual orientation and that God was going to do this for me. [AR019, 15/09/10]

Gina (United Church) felt left out from her church in that she could not have her same-sex wedding in the actual church, but had to settle for having it performed in the vestibule of the church instead.

039. And you know, it's funny, I mentioned earlier in the interview that religion was very prominent in my life and I had at one point thought about becoming a nun when I was fifteen. I applied at various convents for when I graduated and decided after that I'm not really a sideline person and I really wanted to be a priest and be a part of that and [so] I decided not to join a convent and really my options were limited because I was gay, and I couldn't get married and my father was wrong, so I should just join a convent you know? It was more than that too, I did have a strong call, I felt a strong call within myself to join some sort of ministry and anyway eventually I did do religious studies in university, I stayed Roman Catholic for awhile but I really felt called to become a minister and I left the Catholic church and joined the United Church thinking that would be more open because nationally they have been pretty open about a lot of things. And so I told my Irish Roman Catholic grandmother that I was leaving the Catholic church to go over to the United. I feel like I had to come out twice first as a Ro – first as a lesbian, second as a Protestant and it was like she took me being a lesbian better than me being a Protestant. It was pretty funny in that way but she eventually accepted that too and she said, "Well, same God down there too, you know." [AR004, 06/08/09]

Gina's coming-out twice, first as gay and second as a Protestant, was told as a humorous narrative, as she suggested that her change in religious denomination was as important as her disclosure of being gay.

It is important to emphasize that religion played a large role in many families in Newfoundland and, up until the mid-1990s, schools in the province were segregated by religious denomination (Higgins 2011: np). Older informants (born before 1980) were more likely than younger informants to bring up a religious upbringing, which may be indicative of the time period of church-run schools in Newfoundland.

### **A9. Region/Place**

It was important for me to get informants from Newfoundland and Labrador (or who had lived in province for a period of time) because it is one of the smallest provinces in Canada in terms of population, with just over half a million people, and it therefore has a small LGBTQ population.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, being from or living in the province represented another aspect of belonging besides being LGBTQ. As social scientist Kath Weston has argued, the rural/urban dichotomy has played an important role in how lesbians and gays see themselves, especially in terms of the construction of gay subcultures and communities (Weston 1998 as qtd. in Sauntson 2007: 143). I believe that many LGBTQ people living in Newfoundland have a specific sense of belonging and community, and that this belonging to or being from the province is a part of local group

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<sup>12</sup> Statistics Canada (2014) reports that 1.7% of Canadians between the age of 18 and 59 self-identify as gay or lesbian, and 1.3% self-identify as bisexual. There were no statistics available on transgender persons, or statistics on LGBTQ persons by province. See <[http://www.statscan.gc.ca/eng/dai/smr08/2015/smr08\\_203\\_2015](http://www.statscan.gc.ca/eng/dai/smr08/2015/smr08_203_2015)> Last accessed 27 July 2016.

identity. Because this concept of place and space is so ingrained in the identity of so many Newfoundlanders, this identity piece is intertwined with other identity markers, such as being LGBTQ. Many of my informants made mention of what town they were from, without my having to ask, and sometimes they compared where they were from to the place where they came out. Some informants felt that their town was too small to come out in, and waited until they got to a city, with a larger gay population. And a few informants felt that Newfoundland itself was too small to come out in, and waited till they moved to a bigger city outside of the province. Some felt that once they came out in a bigger place, then they could tell people from “back home” that they were LGBTQ. The concept of place that was qualified as “too small” (rural), was further defined in various ways as either unsafe, small-minded, gossipy or too religious. This often has to do with LGBTQ people feeling safer and more accepted in places that have larger gay populations, therefore, tending to live and socialize in bigger, urban spaces rather than rural spaces (Adams 1999: 180). Weston agrees, noting that while rural spaces are often associated with isolation, in contrast, urban spaces are frequently associated with the concept of belonging, group membership and freedom (Weston 1998 as qtd. in Sauntson 2007: 143). The matter of coming out in rural spaces has been covered nicely in several works, including Kath Weston’s *Long Slow Burn* (1998), Michael Riordan’s *Out Our Way* (1996), and Mary L. Gray’s *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (2009).

Over a dozen of my informants discussed aspects of their hometowns, or regions of Newfoundland where they were born. While the majority of my interviewees live or lived in the three major cities in the province now, many of the interviewees were from small towns and rural communities originally. Some were explicit in their adamancy that they could not come out in a small town, while others were more implicit, noting that their coming out coincided with going to university in the city. Some, such as Jim, acknowledged that the small place they came from did not affect their coming out. Others, like Nathan, felt that living a small town subjected you to a small-town mentality, which he considered to be close-minded, reserved, and/or conservative, which was also Cindy and Ada's feelings.

Place was important to many of my participants who lived in or used to live in small communities. Those who lived in or grew up in more rural areas were much more likely to bring up place as an important factor in coming out, than those who lived in a city. Being from a small town in Newfoundland, Nathan spoke of the challenges of living in an outport community.

040. Well everyone knows everyone, and the gay community in amongst itself it is a small community and one of the biggest things that... it's small and in a way it's segregated. But if someone fucks someone everyone knows and everyone fucks them eventually, to put it bluntly. The gossip gets around very quickly too. So that small, small, community mentality is reality in an actual small community. If one person knows, they all kind of find out eventually.

S: Would that have altered your experiences? Would you have changed some of your actions because of that?

N: Well it was one of the reasons why I didn't socialize because I was afraid if they found out – because at that point if you held on to something with your pinkie stuck out, you were gay. The harassment I talked about in school wasn't just in school. It persisted right to the door of my home. I remember things being thrown at the house, and my Dad having to go and talk to the parents of some of the other people. My parents were so... they didn't know what to do and I didn't know what to do about it all and it was just a very hard situation on everyone. [AR002, 02/02/09]

Ada, however found that sometimes homophobia and violence could occur in any size town or city.

041. [In] Jamesville<sup>13</sup> [city] you could hold hands with a woman walking down the street if you wanted and not get things said to you as much as Petesville [smaller city]. However, I was walking down Main Street, I wasn't holding hands with Nadine or anything, I just had my leather jacket on, we were early for our dinner reservations so we decided to go for a walk. Someone, an uber-masculine guy in a done-up Honda Civic, with the lean on, the hat on sideways, pulled over and rolled down his windows and said, "You're an ugly fucking dyke." And rolled up his window and went on. Now that hurts. Of course it does. Because I tried purposely all day not to be an ugly dyke. And no one wants to be that. Because "dyke" in their context is not positive. It's [a] fat, unattainable, unattractive, man-hating piece of shit. And I knew, ok, this dude is just upset. He's obviously over-masculine. He's not a nerdy computer-playing kind of guy. He's clearly trying to show his status by his body language, by his car, by his clothes. So he's the "Establishment" we'll call it, and I'm walking down the road looking pretty fucking good in my leather jacket and I'm

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<sup>13</sup> Place names in Newfoundland have been changed for privacy reasons.

challenging his masculinity. That's his problem, not mine. However, if I made him that uncomfortable that he had to pull over and say that to me, that's really his problem. However, I cried. I'm very sensitive and that hurts, and I really just don't want those things said to me. And again, I live in Dry Gulch, which is just outside of Jamesville. But we're outsiders, because it's really an Irish-Catholic community, and [the] people there are very not nice to us. [AR013, 26/10/09]

That moment was not her only experience with homophobia in Newfoundland, and her frustration was evident.

042. Some days I'm very upset by that. Seeing how differently people get treated because they're straight. I gotta say that's really hurtful, it makes me contemplate. I mean, hey, sometimes I even say, "Hey, man, is gay wrong? Is it really wrong? Why do I feel like this? Why won't my partner's mother look at me? I'm actually really nice – Why won't they say hi to us? Or why did someone throw a rock through my windshield that was parked in my driveway?" [AR013, 26/10/09]

Then there was Cindy, who moved from small-town Newfoundland in the mid-1980s to a big city in another province, where she felt she could come out.

043. I came out in Halifax. But I moved away from Newfoundland to come out because there was just no support there, you know?

Well I think like most people I knew growing up that I was a lesbian, but there was just no words for it. I mean I've been out for twenty years. Back then in Newfoundland no one ever spoke about it, and if they did, if they knew people that were gay or lesbian they never spoke about it or just was silent in general if it was brought up. So I always knew that I was attracted to women but never had a frame of reference for it until I was a teenager. I

know I kind of got to know more people and moved with the military and I was in the reserves for a while, and for me, I don't know if I have a significant coming-out story, I couldn't do it in Jamestown, I knew that, and I knew I was a lesbian... I knew I couldn't come out in Jamestown because there is no atmosphere for it. I had been away for the reserves in Victoria and had the opportunity to go to Toronto and Vancouver and Halifax and the atmosphere was so much different. So for me, I kinda planned it out... Ok I'm a lesbian, I'm going to go away to school, I applied to go away to school in Halifax and then it still took me a good solid year. [AR014, 27/10/09]

As can be seen by the preceding themes, there are portions of each person's narrative that highlight various themes that are important, even crucial, to their disclosure. These themes: Discovery/Self-Identification (Coming Out to Self); Struggle for Self-Acceptance/Rejection (Confusion/Comparison/Acceptance); Disclosure (Coming Out to Others); Acceptance/Rejection by Others; Construction and Presentation of Self; Identification with the LGBTQ Community; Stigma; Religion; Discrimination; and Region/Place are all important in constructing the disclosure narrative, and patterns in the corpus can be found in the repetition of the themes as listed above.

### **Motif Analysis**

As noted earlier, each narrative that I collected included several topical elements that were common to many, if not all of the stories. Listed earlier in the chapter, I have called these elements motifs in the style of Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk-Literature* (1955-58), but they cannot be treated as the same, being of a different

time and place than the genre of folk literature that Thompson analysed. In this thesis, I use the word “motif” to mean any recurring element in the narrative which is meaningful to the teller. These motifal elements are usually concretely mentioned by the narrator, and recur as part of a larger theme, reinforcing it by showcasing specific aspects of the narrative that contribute to a theme. For example, a narrative may have several motifs that recur throughout the story such as first experiences, parents, education and concealment. These four motifs contribute to produce the larger, overarching themes of discovery, disclosure, and family. The motifal elements are listed as follows:

### **Common Motifs**

- B1. Parents and Family Members
- B2. Firsts (First kiss, first sexual experience, etc...)
- B3. Friends and Allies
- B4. Lovers/Partners
- B5. Colleagues and the Workplace
- B6. Education (School Years, University)
- B7. Coming of Age (Moving Out)
- B8. Stereotypes
- B9. Being Outed
- B10. Media and Internet Influences

B11. Concealment/Shame

B12. Suicide Attempts/Self-Harm/Destructive Behaviour

B13. Coming Out Publicly

To highlight these “motifs” I am including one or two examples of narratives that include each one, although most narratives include multiple motifs. For example, Bea, Andrew, Ron, Carla and Tucker’s narratives can all be considered disclosure narratives, but they all also address specifically coming out to parents, which I have labelled as the motif (B1) “Parents and Family Members.” As each of the narratives continue, they address their first same-sex experience (B2), telling their friends (B3), as well as addressing a significant relationship with a lover or partner (B4). Ron’s narrative features an extensive discussion of his school years/education (B6), concealment and shame (B10), and finally moving out (B7) while Carla’s narrative features motifs of her school years (B6), and media/Internet factors (B9).

### **B1. Parents and Family Members**

The “Parents and Family Members” motif is a common motif to most coming-out stories. Many, if not most, LGBTQs come out to their parents and/or family members, and some people choose to come out to them first. This motif is usually concretely mentioned, as in, “I came out to my mother first.” This motif is usually

directly tied to the disclosure theme, although sometimes a parent's behaviour toward and relationship with the narrator was also discussed.

Disclosure to one's parents is a common motif in my corpus of narratives, as most informants addressed coming out to at least one parent, and all narrators mentioned coming out to at least one family member such as a sibling. John's narrative is a good example of the "Parents" motif. The motif occurs early in the narrative, as he remembered how he came out to his mother when he was in high school. He recalled his coming-out experience as "ridiculously fortunate" because of the support systems he had in place, especially the close relationship he had with his mother.

044. I told my mother that I was bi when I was fifteen, sixteen-ish, and did that, that was the first, that was how it always was, when I first told anyone, for the most part, for the first six months. Mainly because it was just easier. And the reason I had done it with my mom was because I knew that the, that her reaction would be two-fold. It would be one of shock and concern for the higher chance or possibility of me contracting HIV, and the other side of the matter would be that she would immediately assume that she would never get grandchildren, and that would sink her. Like, that would have sunk her. So I told her I was bi, and that kind of lasted four to six months or so, but then everything just kind of came out in the wash, and she was told the difference.

I told her that I was bi, verbally, and will never forget that she was lying across a king-sized bed which later got handed down to me. We were living in a basement apartment in the east end of St. John's, at the time, a really small basement apartment... and she was just doing crossword puzzles which is what she often did in the evening to pass time and entertain... and eating a tuna sandwich on white bread. And I just walked in and I told her, and she looked up from her sandwich, and the crumb just kind of hit

the crossword book. And she just kind of looked at me and we talked through it. And the main thing was surely, as I had expected it was children, that was, the grandchildren aspect, that came up before anything else and I just kind of explained it to her, you know well “You know, I’m bi, so it’s all good, you still have that possibility, you still have the chance!” Kind of knowing full well and good in my head, the difference. And then, it was probably six months later before I told her the difference. That was done in a letter, and I had done it, I had approached it doing it in a letter because it gave me the space and the time that I needed to communicate to her, that even though I’m gay, that, grandchildren are still a possibility, because you know, we can adopt, or we can do this, and I was explaining all of it to her in the letter, and I’m sure she knew the difference but I did it anyway. [AR015, 20/02/10]

John’s attention to detail, remembering the tuna sandwich, and the king-sized bed, is typical of the narratives in establishing credibility or belief (Hufford 1989: 2), although it could also be that John was utilizing such details because he was familiar with telling this story, and wanted to establish narrative detail to make the story better.

Like John’s narrative, Nathan also disclosed his sexuality to his mother, thus highlighting the “Parents and Family Members” motif. His account of telling his mother not only shows the concern of telling a parent who may not be accepting, but also outlines the fear of possible violence some gay people face when they come out.

045. So I was going to come home and tell Mom and Dad. I knew Mom was home, so I’ll go for her first, gauge her reaction and then Dad came home from work around 4:30/5:00 and see how things went. So I came home. And I was like, “Mom, there’s something I want to talk to you about” and she was like, “Ok, what do you want to talk about?” So we sat down, and I was like, “Well Mom, you know I’m gay?” And she said, “Go way

b'y, no you're not. Don't be going on with that." And you know, I don't remember all of it, there are some things you want to block out. We kept talking, and I got upset, and she got upset, and she was like, "Don't tell your brother, don't tell your father, they'll kill you." That was the response. So, in short, it wasn't completely serious, it was more like they won't be able to deal with this and they won't know how to, they could get violent. [AR002, 02/02/09]

Nathan's fear turned out to be unfounded, as when his father and brother found out, neither of them became violent toward him. However, to many LGBTQ persons that I spoke to, the threat of violence was a concern. Most informants felt some trepidation in telling their parents, because as was highlighted previously, telling a parent or family member is considered to be one of the most crucial steps in the disclosure process.

Timothy recalls getting the courage to tell his mother by drinking alcohol.

046. I do distinctly remember during that time period deciding that I was going to tell my parents about this as well. I remember having a conversation initially with my mother and shortly after with my father. I don't know why I called my mother first. I think because we were very close and there was an intuitive relationship between the two that she sort of knew and figured out, and she did say that. But again in my situation, I had a few drinks before I told her. So it's funny when I come to talk about this because as I started to think about this topic, mostly today, I started to realize that for me, anyways, there was a lot of alcohol around because I don't drink at all now. I find it interesting when I go back and look at it that it's interesting the alcohol is tied up in that. I don't know if that's true for other people, I don't know if that's true today, with others perhaps it's drugs. But it was part of it, which made it both easy and difficult. It gave you false courage but at the same time created problems because you weren't able to be totally articulate and sensible and to read the cues properly as to what was occurring. So that added a complexity to it. [AR005,

10/06/09]

While Timothy distinctly remembers telling his mother and father, he did not include other specific comings-out in his narrative, astutely noting that the people to whom he was most close to already knew, and it was, for the most part, the people that he wasn't close to that he had to come out to. Timothy noted that he couldn't remember specific comings-out, and that they were a long time ago (he is now in his sixties, and came out in his twenties).

047. I don't remember, other than talking to my parents, I don't remember it as something that was really clear, as in "I have to tell this person, I have to tell this person." I did remember telling certain people and certain conversations. Funnily, the people I remember the most, other than my parents, aren't people that I'm close to or was particularly close to at the time. I guess the friends saw it and expressed to me that you didn't really have to tell me. So the ones you told were the ones you didn't know. [AR005, 10/06/09]

Thomas, also a gay male in his sixties, remembers telling his daughter that he was gay, only after his wife's death. While not my only informant to have children, Thomas was the only interviewee who highlighted coming out to a child, thus his narrative also features the "Parents and Family Members" motif.

048. My daughter decided to return home to help run the family business. We have always been close and I could not continue to go to men's group without either lying about where I was going or coming out to her. So before she actually moved home we sat down and had the talk. She was shocked but not rejecting. It was a lot to pile on her after her mother's death and she attended a few

PFLAG meetings to talk to someone else about her feelings. I think she felt she should go on Jerry Springer<sup>14</sup> but overall she handled things very well and we remain very honest with each other and very close. [E03, 09/29/09]

From the above examples, it is clear that the disclosure theme and the “Parents and Family Members” motif are often closely tied together. In fact, it stands out as unique when an informant does not mention disclosing to at least one parent or telling someone other than parents, such as a sibling, child, or partner.

## **B2. Firsts**

The “Firsts” motif is another motif that is very common in coming-out stories in general, and in my corpus of narratives in particular. This motif highlights the first time a LGBTQ person had same-sex feelings, attractions, or experiences. Many informants remembered their first attraction or experience, and this was reflected in the narratives. Andrew, for example, recalls feeling different and acting on his desires from an early age.

049. But, I’ve always been practicing with the same sex. Always had romantic ideas. Even at five years old – Really. At five. From when I went to Kindergarten, my first days in Kindergarten, I remember one of the guys in class, that, wow, and I had a – I actually had a dream and I was just like, I don’t understand this, but it feels good (*laughs*). As a child, right? [AR022, 14/11/12]

Yet other informants, such as Timothy, had their “firsts” much later in life.

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<sup>14</sup> A reference to a popular television talk show that featured over-the-top content and interviews.

Timothy remembers his first gay experience in university. As he told me:

050. At the end of my first degree, so when I was in fourth year, I did have a gay experience. It was like a one-night stand kind of thing. It was one night and I knew right from that one experience that this was a very powerful, physical, sexual, emotional experience. But I was scared of that. I did tell a couple of friends about that, but it was almost, “Oh well, that happened while you were drinking and that happened at a party.” So it wasn’t so much coming out as telling that experience to friends at a bar one night shortly after it happened. [AR005, 10/06/09]

Because many of my informants outlined their first feeling, attraction or experience with same-sex desire, it was no surprise to me that this was a motif that recurred throughout the narratives. Participants recalled that it was often their first experience that led directly to the process of disclosure. Often their first experience, like Timothy’s above (050) was powerful and affected them deeply. All of my informants mentioned either their first feelings, recognition, or experience, therefore it is important that this motif be included in the list of common motifs.

### **B3. Friends and Allies**

The “Friends and Allies” motif regularly occurs in coming-out stories, and this is no exception for the corpus of narratives that I collected. Also tied to the disclosure theme, the friends and allies motif highlights the importance of these social groups to the narrator, and is usually mentioned as one of the first, if not the first disclosure other than the self. For instance, one of the first people that John came out to was a friend in high

school, which he did by passing her a note in class.

051. Probably, one of the ones that I get a kick out of telling, is the process where, as I started to tell friends at school years ago, they, it was just kind of a knock them off, sort of a deal, they were lined up, they were all my friends, they were all lined up and it was just a matter of knocking them off and I knew it had to be done very quickly, because crap like that spreads like wildfire anyway. So I was in French class, I did French immersion all the way through junior high, high school, so we were in a French grammar, linguistics class, and there was me, and the few girls that I always hung around with. And we were just sitting in our normal cluster, well in our row. And the person who sat in front of me was Leah. And Leah was a really, really tight friend of mine and today was the day that I was going to tell her, and during that class was the time I was going to do it. So, I had decided to let it be known to her by writing it on a note and passing it forward. Which was somewhat cowardly, but somewhat safe. And she just took the note, and I just sat behind her, and listened to her unfolding it. And, there was this brief pause, of course the teacher was standing in front of the class lecturing the whole entire time, and she just, I heard her unfold it, and there was just this really awkward, silent pause for what felt like three or four seconds but it was probably only one, and she whipped around and slammed her hand on my desk and said “Fuck, that’s so cool, we have to go shopping now!” (*Laughter*). And that was probably one of the funniest and memorable reactions that I ever got from somebody. [AR015, 02/20/10]

Timothy recalls that going out with friends played a role in his coming out.

052. I think that’s when the coming-out process occurred because now it wasn’t just one incident or thoughts or slight incidents or passing incidents, it was a relationship, it was the start of an acceptance, an identification. Now, I think I was having problems with that because during that time period I was also drinking alcohol. Not an issue, [not] really heavily, but during that time period and [there were] a lot of people within that circle that were drinking heavily. So activity was at a lounge bar, so by the time

you got to a stage where it was time to go home, you were both quote, unquote “liquored up.” That was part of dealing with it, and acceptance of it, or not accepting it, obviously very problematic, but that’s how the activity occurred. What went with that was that you would talk about these feelings and such under the influence of alcohol. The conversations or revelations to friends, peer groups, I can distinctly remember on a couple of occasions being in bars with friends, and I wouldn’t describe myself as drunk but certainly with a few drinks in, and so the telling of stories was within that context. It would be late nights, the Galley Pub, which was a late night bar. So you’d go there late at night and things would get more open and more friendly; that was a gay bar. And of course sometimes straight people came with you, but once you got in the bar, you were very clearly gay. So bringing your straight friends or some of your straight friends to the bar... it was part of the coming-out phase. [AR005, 10/06/09]

Timothy’s experiences are not unusual for a younger LGBTQ person coming out. Friends are often crucial during times of disclosure, and this is one of the reasons it is included in my list of important, recurring motifal elements.

#### **B4. Lovers and Partners**

“Lovers and Partners” is a motif that occurs often in disclosure narratives, as a first girlfriend or boyfriend, first crush, or sexual experience makes its way into a coming-out story. In my corpus of interviews, the motif of “Lovers and Partners” occurs occasionally during the narratives, sometimes in reference to a current partner, and sometimes in regards to a partner that the narrator had during the time of disclosure. Those informants I had that were single did not mention partners as often, and some who

did have current partners did not mention them specifically during the narratives. If the narrator's partner played a role in their disclosure or self-acceptance, sometimes that was mentioned specifically. For example, Lori attributes being out of the closet and her relationship with her wife Bea, to her completeness as a person.

053. I just think in terms of the effect on my self-esteem, and my confidence, the feeling of being complete, probably would not have happened, had I not come out. And it's, I mean, I'm truly the happiest I've ever been in my life, for many different reasons, certainly being with Bea, and living here, and having a job that I love has all contributed to that, but I highly suspect that if I wasn't as comfortable with who I am, the quality of my life would be very different. And, you know, I'm glad, and I think, for me it was having those initial good reactions, and you know people like "It's no big deal," right, like "Good for you, you finally told me" that kind of experience, time and time again [I] thought, well there's nothing wrong with this, this is who I am, and you know we are all different, and that's to be celebrated. So, in terms of my own process, in being a complete person, this was very central. [AR007, 17/06/09]

Some informants whom I knew to have partners, did not mention them specifically, during their narratives. This may have been for several reasons, including that it did not naturally occur as a part of the conversation, but more likely, I think that life or sexual partners were not mentioned out of privacy for the other individual. Still, there was enough mention of lovers and partners to warrant it being included in the list of common motifal elements.

## **B5. Colleagues and the Workplace**

The topic of “Colleagues and the Workplace” sometimes comes up in the context of telling a coming-out story, especially if the person has to come out at work. This motif appeared several times in my corpus of narratives although while some interviewees discussed the workplace and telling colleagues in their narratives, surprisingly, this was not a regular occurrence. This may be partly because the narrators did not let their sexuality affect their work environment, or it may have been because the subject of the workplace did not occur naturally in the narratives. When the subject did occur, it was in the context of coming out at work. Some informants, such as Jim, disclosed their sexuality to a colleague, with mixed results.

054. I guess my biggest thing I guess in my own town I’ve never felt any ill effects because of my sexuality or any I’ve never felt marginalised, and I’m very thankful for that, but when I moved to Black Brook in northern Labrador to teach my first year there I remember coming out to my co-worker and his first response was to run to the principal. He said to the principal, “Do you know a member of our staff or, a new member of our staff practises an alternative lifestyle?” (*Laughing*). The principal told me! Cause when I was hired for the job when I spoke to the principal I let it be known, because at that point I don’t hide it so in case it was an issue I do disclose it. I said to the principal “I’m homosexual and I’m coming to a small town, just so you know, I’m not asking permission to come out.” [AR008, 21/09/09]

Luckily, Jim looked at being “told on” by his co-worker as a humorous situation and did not let it affect his work performance or relationship with the principal of the school (the incident occurred in the 1990s). Leah also had an experience with

homophobia in the workplace. She remembered a time when she worked at a part-time job in a restaurant and had an encounter with one of the chefs in the kitchen (in the early 2000s).

055. There was this one asshole I work with worked with – ok, this cook at this restaurant I waitressed at for a while. It was a week after another girl, another girl who was serving there had come out. And you know I was trying to be there, you know supportive – [and it] changed the statistics of the serving staff to two gay guys, two lesbians, and a straight chick. To which this particular cook responded “I’m sick of working with fucking queers.” (S: Oh lovely, to your face?) Yeah to my face. (S: So he knew?) Well no, it was more like you know I was serving and I was clearly in earshot. He’s in the kitchen and he says he’s not looking at me but I’m in the same room, “I’m sick of working with fucking queers.” Yeah that didn’t go over well – I was just like “You’re an asshole.” Like you don’t get to say that. [AR011, 09/30/09]

Homophobia by co-workers is a motif that ties in with the theme of discrimination. Sandy also discussed working with a particularly homophobic staff member, which shows the extent to which working in such conditions can deteriorate one’s mental health. I include it here in its entirety because I believe it is important to document the extreme distress and emotions LGBTQ persons can face when dealing with such a stressful situation.

056. Well the year I transferred to [high school] changed my life I can tell you, because I started to deal with an extremely, one of the most homophobic individuals I ever met in my life, Peter. So this guy Peter, wow, I thought okay, I’ve got to avoid him. So I was tending on a few people, Tommy Sexton was dying of AIDS. I was tending on a good friend of mine. I actually helped a

few guys get to the end of their line I guess, the end of their journey. And it was very difficult because, you know, a few of them I had known for probably ten or fifteen years and then all of a sudden they were losing, you know, and once the AIDS attacked the brain. So, I knew one guy, it was very difficult, it was the year I went to [high school] that I'd go in and ah, you know, he would be naked and you'd have to get him dressed and brush his [teeth], so it was very very difficult. So I went in one day and Peter was sitting at the table... So anyhow, I said to him, I'll never forget this as well, and we were all having lunch and he went on about the homosexuals and Tommy Sexton, about time he needs to die, and blah blah blah blah and actually it was the year Tommy died and you know, he's still spreading his germs to everyone and people shouldn't have to, and I said, I said "Hold it" I said. "I've just got to say that I've had enough. This is my staff room too." I was trying to be very diplomatic and very respectful. "This is my staff room too and I've got big issues with you." Well he basically "That's too fucking bad" he said, you know. And I said, "well a lot of my friends are gay men" and I got "Oh," he said, "you like the queers." And he went on blah blah blah about the queers. And I was just sitting there and thinking. I said "No, as a matter of a fact I'm a lesbian myself." Well with that, he jumped up out of his chair and ran up, it was amazing what he did. He jumped up he said "You're a queer too and you tend on, you tend on the faggots!" He was over by the wall with his back and butt against the wall and I was there in the staff room and I'm looking and I can imagine I was turning every colour of the rainbow thinking is this guy for real? Well I knew I was in for something very difficult so it became one thing after another to the point that he called me dyke a couple of times walking down the corridor. It became an issue, I started to document. I told him I didn't care what he thought of homosexuality I really didn't want to hear it around him. He said if I didn't want to hear it don't come in the fucking staff room, it was his staff room, he was there long before me and he had no time for the queers or homosexuals and if you are a lesbian go get some fucking help, and this is how he was speaking to me, go get some fucking help because you are a demented human being and on and on and on and on. So I thought ok, I need to get some help with this so I went to the principal who couldn't drive sheep out of a garden. Bart basically

said to me “I can’t help you, you know, you better avoid him.” I said “Avoid him?” I said. “I’m teaching five classes I need a break, teachers can’t hang out in their classrooms because students come by, I need somewhere to go, you know, will I come into your office?” I was getting desperate because this guy began to attack me every time he saw me. He made some comment about a queer guy, the day Tommy Sexton died. I remember going to work, going to work I used to get really anxious if I saw his car in the lot because I thought “Oh my God, I have to deal with him.” [AR018, 09/30/10]

Sandy’s narrative indicates the particularly rough time she had at her workplace in the 1990s, and she eventually had no choice but to ask for a transfer to a different school. Sandy’s experience shows the distress that one can face when dealing with heterosexism or homophobia, and while certainly the most extreme of the examples in the corpus, her experience of homophobia in the workplace is not unusual.

Those who brought up colleagues and the workplace generally brought it up in terms of homophobia and workplaces that were not accepting of non-heterosexuals. However, only five informants from my corpus narrated direct experiences with colleagues as a part of their coming-out stories. It was those who described experiences with homophobic or heterosexist colleagues that brought up the “Colleagues and Workplace” motif.

## **B6. School Years**

The “school years” motif occurs as a part of reminiscence of childhood

memories and experiences and is common in many coming-out stories, an in my corpus of narratives as well. Some informants described memories as a part of their narratives, while others related experiences that were closer to their adulthood. Because of its frequency, it is included here in my list of common motifs.

One informant, Andrew remembers his sexual encounters from his teenage years, but was told by his peers in no uncertain terms that homosexuality was just a phase.

057. Until you get older and you learn that there are certain rules, or maybe rules. So what else? Um, teenage – teenage years, very nonchalant, um, I would call it, sexual liaisons, that's all. Just, uh, uh, (*chuckle*) hormonally-driven young males, that's all, and exploratory, and everything, and most of the guys that I experimented with, I would say, they've all gone and got married, because of social pressure, and they used to tell me, go get myself my woman, and this is all well and fine, and you just go get your woman. Yeah, you go get your woman and we'll all grow up. You have to grow up, right? (*Cynical laugh*). [AR022, 14/11/12]

Donald also acknowledged his formative years and how he knew from a young age that he was different.

058. Well, as long as I can remember I felt different and I didn't feel like other boys my age when I was even a small child. Ah, I wasn't interested in the things that most boys were. I mean I played cars and trucks. I loved dolls too, I played dolls. You know, things like that but I wasn't interested in rough games or sports. You know, even music as a child, I certainly was not a child that was aggressive, I was probably a bit passive and shy and so on. But, very early, I mean I don't mean to delineate whether a person is gay or straight, you know, whether they're aggressive or not cause you can have both, you can have that in any orientation. Certainly I felt that there was something different about me more than that. And even from a very young age I remember, I was

probably only eight or nine years old when the Beatles were very popular in the early mid-sixties and I was very attracted to Paul McCartney, you know, of the Beatles... Which I thought this was unusual, you know even at that point as an eight year old or nine year old boy I thought this is strange. And certainly as I approached puberty, I had those feelings as well and during my junior high years I had girlfriends, you know all the other boys in the class had girlfriends and we all kind of, you have a girlfriend one week and the next week you have another girlfriend. A peck on the cheek and that sort of thing. Ah at that time, you know in the sixties I guess we weren't as sexually active the way kids are today. Or at least in the circles that we ran in. So, I think by the time I went to University I had a fairly good understanding that this was, this is my orientation because my fantasies, my dreams or whatever were always male focused, they were never female and I could never even, although I would try to, you know to change my focus or my orientation, obviously I wasn't successful. [AR019, 15/09/10]

Both Donald and Andrew are good examples of the “School Years” motif appearing in their disclosure narratives. The majority of my informants included this motif in some way, either directly reminiscing about growing up and going to school as a young LGBTQ person, or indirectly discussing their school years in another way.

### **B7. Coming of Age (Moving Out)**

The “Coming of Age” motif is also a reminiscent type of motif, which typically occurs in coming-out stories in general, and in my corpus, a number of informants' narratives specifically mentioned their coming of age. For the purposes of this thesis, coming of age is understood to be legal age of nineteen, or when the LGBTQ person

moved out from their family home. For instance, it wasn't until Betty moved to a city and began college that she was comfortable telling her mother.

059. The one that I really remember was the one where I first came out to my mother. I felt in order to come out and finally let the world know I was gay that I had to first tell my mother, and then everyone else could find out after that and then I could finally be who I was. So I was in college at this point in time, and I had this chat with my best friend at the time and she convinced me that I should do this. After thinking about it I was just like "I'm going to phone my mother, I'm gonna do it." Just out of the blue. And I phoned her and I said "Are you there by yourself? Like, who's there with you?" And she said that my brother and my father was home, and it was like "you're going to need to go in the room and I'm going to need to talk to you about something." And, she went in to her bedroom and she talked on the phone and I just broke down and was crying, and I was like "Mom, I'm gay." And she, the first question she asked me was like "Are you sure that, that you're gay?" And I was like "Yes, I'm sure." And what I remember is that she believed that people were born gay but that she also believed that people were um, influenced to be gay. But she still accepted me. But for a really long time after that, well, for not a long time, but for a while after she would ask me if I was sure that I knew that I was gay, and after a while she stopped asking me that, because she realized that, that I was. And during the phone call, like I said, "I'm going to come out to you, but the rest of the family, you can tell them." And she told them, and my sister emailed me, and she told me she loved me, she accepted who I was, and um, my brother and my father, they don't speak about a lot of things anyway, (*laughs*) they're like, very quiet people, but my mother told me that they were okay with it."  
[AR023, 19/07/14]

Because many informants waited until adulthood to come out, the "Coming of Age" motif was present in a number of narratives. As informants got older and became sure of their sexuality, they were more likely to disclose it to other people, such as family

and friends.

### **B8. Stereotypes**

Stereotypes and esoteric knowledge were present in the narratives of several of my interviewees, who brought up stereotypes they encountered throughout their lives, both from friends and strangers. Stereotypes took several forms, either through personal experience of group knowledge, or through rumour and gossip. Many of the stereotypes use in-group knowledge, as Chris's narrative pointedly describes:

060. I'm not going to say it's wrong to be stereotyped, I'm not going to say it's right to stereotype, but I've found the majority of them picturing gay men as effeminate people are not really right. Cause many gay men I know aren't at all the way that they do it, on media, or Hollywood, or tv. A lot of them I know are actually quite independent people, aren't at all submissive like they are portrayed. However, I will not deny that I do like dressing up in dapper things. I will not deny that I do like making myself look pretty to myself, I do not deny that I take small pleasures in spending money, like it is actually portrayed in the media. It's just something that I can't deny, it's something that I like. However, I know a lot of gay men who aren't like that. I know a lot of lesbian women who go against their own stereotypes or they are very effeminate, they are very feminine, they do like spending money galore on random jewelry and shoes and that kind of thing. And I also know lesbians who fit the stereotype very well, where they are more masculine type of thing, they like wearing more men's clothes, so I've been on both sides of the spectrum but I find that when I am stereotyped, it's usually in a joking way, by a friend. It's not, I've never actually met one where it's in a hostile way. [AR029, 2012]

While "Stereotypes" is a motif that is brought up in coming-out stories in

general a fair bit, it only occurred a few times in my corpus of narratives. I included it in my list of common motifs because while not explicit, many narrators did implicitly address stereotypes in their narratives (see my discussion of *blason populaire* in the motif section of this chapter).

### **B9. Being Outed**

The “Being Outed” motif is another element that is brought up in coming-out stories. A few interviews in my corpus mentioned instances of being outed, whether by a close friend, or an acquaintance. Being outed, or having one’s sexuality disclosed by another, is a real possibility when deciding to come out to another person. The fact that this behaviour occurs is reflected in several narratives. Ron, for example, was outed by a religious councillor in a homophobic and conservative church. The “outing” eventually made him have a conversation with his parents about his sexuality.

061. It was the summer of working at the restaurant, it was at the end of the summer because after I got to know everybody and I started pursuing the things I wanted, I realized that I really liked this, I liked the people I met, I was always intrigued by new people that came around, yeah, and I wanted it, you know, but I knew it was [at] a cost too, because I was keeping it a secret from my family and from my church and all that, and I knew eventually the cat might get out of the bag, but I continued to pursue it. Well, the cat got out of the bag because of a negative situation that happened. I got into a bit of cruising, and I started going with some guys I didn’t know, and one incident happened where I was raped. Yep. So, when that happened it, all of a sudden, it devastated me, to the point where I started to get a really, um, I saw the darker side of it, and I thought, I can’t keep doing this, if

this is the result. So then I started to close in on myself. And I started to stop the things I was doing, and at that time, my youth leader, from my church, I was opening up to her about it, because of what, the incident that happened and some of the other things, and I told her how scared I was of what I was seeing, and she said, “Eventually I might have to tell your mom.” And she said “I’m not going to, but I want you to know that if you’re going to put yourself in this position, right, to hurt yourself, or whatever, and if you need to talk to someone,” she said “I think your family should know.” So when this incident happened, there was a time passage, I don’t know how long, I have no idea at this point, but there was, once the incident happened, I became really depressed, and did really, like just, kind of, couldn’t handle things at home, I started getting really nervous about my dad, my relationship with him, so everything sort of came crashing down. And eventually my youth leader told her, told my mom. [AR001, 02/02/09]

Ron’s telling of the incident is very similar to the narratives of violence given in Elaine Lawless’s book *Women Escaping Violence* (2001), in which she explains the concept of untellability, explained later in this chapter. Ron’s narrative touches on a painful memory of being raped, but this part of the narrative could be considered “untellable” as he gives the information really quickly, without further explanation of the actual incident (Lawless 2001) preferring instead to talk about how the incident affected him afterward.

Other untellable narratives that were briefly touched on but which had implicit meaning in them are Betty’s narrative (033) whose girlfriend forwarded all her emails to the entire class, and Jim’s narrative (054) about the co-worker. Both of these narratives highlight a restricted language, in which there is a large amount of knowledge taken for

granted. The language that Ron, Betty, and Sandy use is rich with meaning, and points to a lot more information which is left unsaid, which can be viewed as Basil Bernstein's theory of restricted codes, which carry "a social message of inclusion, of implicitly acknowledging that the person addressed is 'one of us'" (Atherton 2013 drawing on Bernstein 1964).

### **B.10 Media and Internet Influences**

The "Media and the Internet" motif is a common motif for LGBTQs who came out during the age of the Internet. Thus, "Media and the Internet" played a factor in several of my informants' comings-out, and can be considered a motif in the corpus. The occurrence of these topics is directly related to the age of the informant, in that it was only the youngest informants who mentioned the influence of media and the Internet as a factor in their coming out. If an older (born before 1985) informant mentioned television programs or the Internet, it was to say that they didn't have that then when they were coming out.

Aeon, the youngest of my informants, (b. 1994) notes that the Internet was a big factor in her coming-out as trans. As mentioned earlier, Aeon played with her femininity by modelling herself after virtual chat groups and people she saw online.

062. When I was thirteen, I started getting really involved in androgynous internet culture. And I started following a lot of blogs where male-bodied individuals were performing femininity and playing with their gender performance and I wanted to do the

same.... I was pretty well known on the Internet, people knew me as Donny back then, and he was quite popular. [AR026, 28/07/14]

In contrast, Nathan commented that there were no online resources that he could have used when he came out, and that the only way to get resources was to go to the very public school library, where there was no privacy.

063. But I never talked to anyone at that point, we didn't have anything at that point, there was no Internet, so to speak like we have now... it's so weird to say that now... We didn't have resources in the library. I think it was Grade Eleven when I found a book there, but I couldn't take it out because they'd know, it's a small school and what do you say, right? [AR002, 02/02/09].

A few informants mentioned using the Internet to meet like-minded people, thus, either explicitly or implicitly, media was mentioned as playing a role in disclosures, and therefore can be considered a motif in my corpus. For instance, many LGBTQ persons use the Internet as a medium to meet new people, including Nathan, who met his then boyfriend, in an online chat room. The Internet is also used as a medium to come out, as participants in my questionnaire highlighted. Coming-out online, whether by e-mail, an online chat, or by video on YouTube, is often a preferred method of coming out among younger LGBTQs (Pullen and Cooper 2010; Alexander and Losh 2010; Strangelove 2011).

**B11. Concealment and/or Shame**

Concealment and shame is a motif that occurred a few times in my corpus of narratives. A few informants spoke of either staying in the closet, or concealing that they were gay and in a relationship for a period of time. Concealment and shame often have to do with the fear of disclosing one's sexual orientation to another. This concealment would often be to the detriment of the LGBTQs well-being and mental health. Jane explained that for most of her entire adult life, she stayed in the closet, even though she was in a long-term relationship with another woman.

064. Okay, well, I should say that I came out to other lesbians, but that was one on one, and the lesbians that I came out to, up until about eight years ago were not out themselves, so really I can't say that I was, per se, out, as such. Um, I had a couple of relationships before then, and they were uh, closed, if you wish, relationships. One a very long term, and one a very short term. [AR003, 24/03/09]

When asked why she didn't come out, she explained that her long-term partner was very much closeted, which made it imperative to keep the relationship a secret.

065. I had been in a, I had indicated that I had been in a long-term relationship for seventeen years, with one individual, and that was all hidden. We were "friends," we would vacation together, we didn't, we lived together, I think, for a couple of years, but that was just because we were in the same community or town, or city, and it was convenient to live together. But other than that we didn't live together because neither one of us, I guess, at the time, wanted to reveal who we were, or what we were, really to each other.

We both came from small communities, very close families, and I

guess for both of us it was awkward to really reveal who we were. As a matter of fact, probably about four or five years before, I actually came out, I guess, in a sense, we were both outed (this is in the former relationship). My partner at that time, I had visited with her family, and we were invited out for supper one night with her brother, and we were sitting in a restaurant and all of sudden, I guess we were at dessert, and her brother, said “Now, I want to talk to you guys about something, I’ve been appointed as the spokesperson for the family. And uh, we love Jane very much, we think of her as part of the family, and we are very much aware that the two of you are a couple, we’re very happy for you, and we want you to be comfortable about that and know that we are here for you and support you.” To be quite honest with you, I felt like a ton weight came right off my shoulders, I felt quite relieved. My partner didn’t say a word. And when I went to speak she told me to keep quiet, not to say anything, and after we, after we finished our meal, and we left the restaurant, and got into the car, she hardly spoke to me. For days after, she was furious, absolutely furious.

S: Why was she furious?

J: I think that she was, embarrassed, about the fact that she was quote unquote “found out” and I don’t think she was really prepared to deal with it. So you know. And I think that was the beginning of the end of our relationship. Because it got increasingly more difficult. Because she became more distant with me, in social events, didn’t even want to be seen with me, didn’t want to let people know she was travelling with me, and she would even have her parties at her house and wouldn’t invite me, and, yeah. So you know, it got really difficult for me. I couldn’t live like that. [AR003, 24/03/09]

Betty also hid her sexuality from her friends and family, although for not as long as Jane did. She explains:

066. For years I knew I was gay. It came out when I was about nineteen years old, and so I knew probably since I was twelve

years old that I was gay, so for all those years I hid it. I knew, some way or another that, well maybe not knew, but I had feelings that I would not be accepted, just because of homophobic remarks that people made, or just, like not towards me, but I internalized them. Sometimes they were directed towards me. So, I thought that it would be hard to do so, especially living in a small community, not being able to be who you are, because it wasn't really accepted. And it wasn't really talked about. There were no openly gay people in my community except for what I heard through word of mouth, was my gay uncle. And everybody made fun of him, because of that reason, so I didn't want to be the target of being made fun of. So essentially all of these years I was suppressing who I was. [AR023, 19/07/14]

With the fear of being ostracized like her uncle, Betty didn't want to take the risk of coming out in her small community, and waited until she got to university to come out. Betty and Jane's narratives are good examples of how "Concealment and/or Shame" is a motif that occurs in disclosure narratives.

## **B12. Suicide Attempts and Destructive Behaviour**

Sadly, the concept of being gay and coming out to people is one that seems so unacceptable or unmanageable that some people would rather escape reality by attempting suicide. This was a motif in several of my interviews; three of my informants disclosed that they had attempted suicide as a direct or indirect result of their sexual orientation. This, of course, does not mean that these were the only informants I spoke to that had attempted suicide, only that these three informants were comfortable enough to disclose that very private subject with me.

Sandy illustrated her painful history in this narrative:

067. I had a crush at about eleven years of age, a neighbour moved in next door and I had a big crush on her. And I always wanted to be around her but I had no words for it. Actually at that time I got very depressed because I had no words to describe my feelings. I knew I was attracted to females and in my world at the time, of course, that meant there was something wrong with me. The only thing I knew about homosexuality was that they were sick males that wanted to molest children and that was about my only image of a gay or homosexual. We also had a homosexual in town they called him Mike. And Mike was a little bit different and wore several watches and [was] very flamboyant and I thought “oh my God.”

And it really got me down at about eleven, twelve years of age I got very depressed, um, I withdrew, attempted suicide, ended up at the [hospital] for seven months and ah, I think that saved my life even though I never talked about homosexuality, I learned somewhere at the [hospital] that there was a way that I could access some information on homosexuality, I don't even remember how I did that but I know that everything was attributed to me being adopted.

But really it was me struggling with “I'm attracted to girls” and “Oh my God, I must be a horrible human being – and I'm thinking Oh my God, I really don't deserve to live. God got to take this from me, I need to die” and hence I think, you know, nine months after that or a year after that I began to slice myself up with a razor blade. Didn't want to die but knew something was going on that I felt, well, I hated myself, I hated myself as a human being. And ah so that was really difficult for my mom and dad. But um, so I went through a difficult time there and got through it, thank God. [AR018, 30/09/10]

Sandy's suicide attempts did not end with her childhood, unfortunately. As an adult, after a particularly difficult situation at work, which also involved her sexual

orientation, she also attempted to end her life. Her repeated use of the word “very” indicates her extreme gratefulness that she did not succeed.

068. I ended up in hospital, I went and, it was just before we went back to school. I was thinking, “Oh my God I can’t deal with it.” And I went and got a flask of Old Sam and two or three joints and I went down [to the rocks] and got drunk and stoned and climbed up on the, I did some rock climbing and fell in the ocean, and got to shore. I was very very very very very very lucky. I was very very very lucky. Very very very lucky that I did not die that day. And that day I ended up in hospital. My friends came to get me and I was so upset and I knew I couldn’t think, I couldn’t string a word together I was so, and I kept thinking that they want me gone. What kept going through my mind, I’m a good person, I gave my life to teaching, I loved teaching, I loved being an educator, I loved teaching. Teaching was a passion for me. And they want me gone, they don’t want me there. They feel I’m not good enough, I’m poison, I’m this or I’m that because why would they be doing this to me. And that’s what started to take over. I started to get warped. [AR018, 30/09/10]

Ada is another informant who tried to take her life, several times, both intentionally and unintentionally.

069. What made me overdose, I guess, what like I say, if I was going out with a straight girl and I really liked her. And I thought she was really into me, and it seemed that way. I was trying not to be naive, then she goes and starts having sex with some guy. It’s not so much the sexuality piece, the dishonesty, the betrayal, the abandonment. Hey look, I’m worthless, of course women do this to me and they go back to men, and why is it that men always get this? Hey, fuck this, I guess I am worthless. Why am I even bothering to be here? This much stuff can’t happen to one person. I gotta be the problem here. Sometimes it was an attempted suicide, sometimes it was just an escape, I took too many pills, basically. [AR013, 10/26/09]

Gina explains a time in her life when suicide seemed like the only option.

070. I grew up in a very Roman Catholic family, it's very strict and therefore church was very present in my life, my everyday life in fact. I was, like I said, raised Roman Catholic but I also went through the Roman Catholic school system and so the church was very prominent in my life at the time. So I grew up with feeling that I was different from a very early age. I knew that I had crushes on girls instead of boys. I didn't really know what to do with that everywhere I looked it seemed like something was wrong with me. And what I was taught in church made me feel like I was evil like I had a sickness that I needed to get cured. So I really felt I couldn't talk to anybody because there was a lot of shame there and I internalized a lot of my homophobia. So growing up as an adolescent I just found it very difficult very isolating I felt very alienated. I didn't know who to talk to or turn to there wasn't a lot of literature around at the time like the Internet wasn't really a lot around then as well. So there wasn't a lot of material available to me and people, resources that I could go to or look up. But anyway I eventually came to the point where I felt hopeless and during my senior year of high school I attempted suicide. Because I really felt there was no hope for me. That was back in 1994. Now before I attempted suicide I had gone to a conversion therapist. Now she wasn't called a conversion therapist as such she was just a therapist like everyone else but when I tell her that this is what I was struggling with we went through different therapy where she gave me a lot of material on the reasons why she thought I was gay and that it was a premature sexuality and that eventually when I accepted why I was feeling this way that I would learn to become a heterosexual. So the material she gave me was very much like why I was having attractions for women of the same sex, was because people of the same sex, there was something in them that I wanted to be like. So that's the reason why. So that was one of the main reasons. She gave me a lot of material it was a very focused therapy and about how I can change and there was a lot of religious elements as well to the therapy, and when I felt that the therapy didn't work I attempted suicide. And fortunately my friends got me to the hospital at a time where the doctors were able to revive me and I did have to stay in the hospital for quite a while after that because

of the toll it took on my body. [AR004, 06/08/09]

Sandy, Ada, and Gina's suicide attempts were discussed in the context of coming out because to them, it was a deliberate consequence of coming out. While Ada's suicide attempts were brought up as an aside, both Sandy and Gina's were deliberate acknowledgments of an extremely stressful period of their lives. As noted above, it would not be surprising if more than these three informants had attempted suicide or had practiced destructive behaviour in reaction to coming out to themselves, but that this was information that was not shared with me, for various reasons. Sandy, Ada, and Gina's narratives are examples of how the "Suicide and Destructive Behaviour" is a motif in disclosure narratives.

### **B13. Coming Out Publicly**

"Coming Out Publicly" is a motif that occurs sometimes in coming-out stories. This motif is an indication that the LGBTQ person has come out in a public venue. Several of my informants came out publicly, either by sharing their stories in print (books, newspapers, magazines) or on television. Ritch came out in a very public way, when a local reporter asked to do an interview with him at the provincial newspaper. An Anglican priest, Ritch made waves in the local community when he came out to his parish. He shared his story with me:

071. What happened after, I guess where [it] escalated was that it

became known so, a reporter with the [newspaper] phoned me and asked if he could do an interview. Now he was also, he used to do articles for [a religious magazine], so he asked if he could do kind of a human interest story which [he could publish]. So anyway, I phoned the [local head of the Church] again. (*Laughs*) And said, you know “What should I do?” And he said, “Well, it’s up to you.” You know, so anyway, I agreed to do the interview, and my understanding was that it would go in the [magazine] and the [newspaper] might put it in the religion page or something like that. Well, of course once the [newspaper] got it, they decided this was too good to put on the religion page, so it happened that Thanksgiving Sunday, five, six years ago, now in two weeks, or a week, they decided that they would put it on the front page, top cover of the [newspaper]. But, uh, you know, I just thought it was going to be on the religion page so a lot of people wouldn’t see it, and I just thought you know, but it became you know [well-known].

So that day after church, I got a phone call from [a radio station that] wanted to do an interview, all, all this kind of stuff, and people phoning saying “How could you do it” and other people saying “Thank you for doing it” and I got a call from my ex-wife, “How in the world could I do it,” and you know, cause I didn’t know, and I said “I didn’t realize they were going to do that, and all this kind of stuff, I figured it was just the middle of the paper. So there was some tension around all that. And of course, my two kids, well, the youngest was still in elementary school, but the other two were in high school at the time, so, they got a lot of difficult times at school teasing and all that kind of stuff. And so anyway, when it kind of broke open and then when we as a parish had to call the [local head of Church] in and decide where we were going [with it]. But the interesting thing was that that Thanksgiving Sunday was when they put it in the paper, the day before Saturday, whatever day that was, was National Coming Out Day (*laughter*). So it was kind of ironic, I guess, the day after that. [AR010, 09/28/09]

Ritch did not intentionally set out to come out to the entire province via a newspaper

article, as he thought it would be a small blurb in the religion section of the newspaper. He was very surprised when it ended up being a cover piece on the Thanksgiving weekend paper. Since he had already come out to his parish, he did not think a small blurb in the newspaper would attract attention. When I asked him what his ex-wife and children thought, he admitted that his wife was estranged at that point and that the children were teased at school due to their father's sexuality and that he did regret that that occurred.

Several of my other informants chose to come out publicly as well. Krista did an in-depth interview on being transgender with a local television station, while Gina has spoke in public at pride events. John, Gina and Sandy have published coming-out narratives in some form in various books (see Appendix A). These published narratives afforded me the chance to view how the narratives that my informants told me differed from those told or written for the public. Those published in books were more polished and sometimes written specifically for publication. Sandy's narrative told to Michael Riordan in *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country* (1996) was quite a bit different from the one she told me in 2009, giving different details to each of us. Krista's narrative to the television station was focused on the beginning of her transgender journey, back in 2008, and was edited to fit a four-part series on her journey (NTV News 2008). Gina told her story as part of two anthologies *Queer Monologues: Stories by LBGT Youth* (For the Love of Learning, 2013) and *Out Proud: Stories of Pride, Courage, and Social Justice* (Gosse 2014). John told a narrative as part of *Queer Monologues*

(2013), and adding a new perspective to the coming-out narrative he told me, John's mother told her version of his coming out in the *LGBT Guide to MUN* (2003). While the published narratives of John, Sandy and Gina add another layer of context to the interviews that I conducted, I treat the published narratives as a polished performance that differs from the interview narratives that I received from them. Regardless of whether these stories were published or they were featured on television, they are examples of the LGBTQ person coming out in a public way, and this is a motif in my corpus of narratives.

### **Traditional Content**

As folklorist Stith Thompson outlined in his classic work *The Folktale*, seventy years ago, perhaps one of the most enduring qualities of the folktale is its traditional nature, for instance, how the story is told in regard to traditional elements of the story. The same can be said for any traditional prose narrative that is handed down through word of mouth, on "good authority," and from which the art of the storyteller is revered (1946 rpt. 1977: 3-4). As has been examined earlier, narratives that LGBTQ persons tell can be considered personal narrative, but they can also be examined as a traditional prose narrative in particular as a legend.

As noted above, just what the defining aspects of both the legend and the personal narrative are has been moot, with notably Linda Dégh disagreeing with earlier writers who argued that the personal narrative has no "traditional content" with the rather

more structural or abstract notion that all experience is filtered through traditional lenses and thus is traditional (Dégh 2001).

Examining the corpus of stories that I have collected as narratives with traditional content that are preserving a tradition of coming out, we can see that many of the stories for the most part follow a basic format. While I have highlighted the various themes and motifs above that are typical to the coming-out stories that I collected, it cannot be denied that these stories preserve a storytelling tradition that has become apparent in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. By telling a coming-out story, LGBTQ narrators are participating in this tradition and adding their personal stories to the collective master narrative. As evident in the stories I collected from heterosexual storytellers, it is not just LGBTQ narrators who are familiar with the coming-out story as a genre of storytelling. In fact, when I tell people about my research, I almost never have to explain what a coming-out story is: it is understood without explanation.

In looking at the materials in my corpus I was struck by a theme that called to mind the term “master narrative.” This term however has been used in at least a few different ways by authors not just in other disciplines but also within the gambit of folklore studies. Elaine Lawless uses the term much in the sense of French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard’s concept of an overarching, collective and historical narrative (Lawless 2001: 63; Lyotard 1985: 7) that “everyone has come to know well, and one that is referenced... as the ‘typical narrative’” (2001: 12). In turn, Lyotard argues that the

master narrative acts invisibly, and that we are participants in its structuring and application, even by those who are oppressed by it (Lyotard 1985: 7 as cited in Lawless 2003: 61). Lawless explains that once a narrative is known and used as a dominant discourse to describe and standardize women's experiences, however, as in the case of abuse narratives, then the use of the "master narrative" is no longer accurate in describing individual experiences (2002: 12). It has in that context, to make her point a little differently, taken on a hegemonic relationship whereby the narrative is shaped by invisible power structures.

I do not have this sense of hegemonic structuring in the corpus of coming-out narratives I have worked with. Of course, using the term "master narrative" to refer to a generic, superorganic form of coming-out story presupposes an ideal type of coming out, in contrast to the sometimes very different and variable realities of human experience. Naturally there are coming-out experiences that act as counter-examples to or do not fit the familiar script. These narratives, whether they are told by those who do not feel they fit into the LGBTQ umbrella, or by those who feel that their coming-out stories are not typical coming-out stories, are equally important in understanding what it is to come out as non-heterosexual.

Thus, I think that while the term "master narrative" works well as an understanding of the general experience of coming-out to friends and family, the term "familiar script" that Ochs and Capps use (1996, as qtd in Shuman 2012: 126) is also

appropriate and that individual stories fit well into an understanding of what coming-out has meant, historically, in past recent decades.

To look at the coming-out story as a familiar script that LGBTQ persons tell, it is helpful to return to the very basic of definitions of the coming-out story. Helen Sauntson's sociolinguistic study on the coming-out narrative defines it as "a text which reports, reflects and evaluates upon the ongoing process and experience of coming out" (2007: 142). A. C. Liang furthers the definition by noting that coming out is not a "binary opposition" but more of a "matter of degree," she explains, in which some LGBTQ people are more out than others, dependent on context (Sauntson 2007: 142; Liang 1997: 291). Based on this definition, each LGBTQ person has coming-out events that could be turned into narratives, and likely more than one regardless of their degree of outness. Due to the sheer number of gay people who are potentially telling stories about coming out, at least in North America, it can be theorized that the coming-out story is the most told narrative amongst LGBTQ persons both to each other and to non-group members.

To consider the coming-out story to be a familiar script or master narrative of LGBTQ storytellers, there should be qualities of the story that are similar or the same across many of the performances. I have highlighted numerous examples of this type of coming-out story in earlier sections. Coming-out stories that were told before, sometimes numerous times, were polished in their performance, such as Gina's (032, 039, 070), Sandy's (056, 067, 068), Krista's (023, 024), and John's (44), for example, and could be

considered examples of the master narrative. The performances of these informants were nuanced, stylized and perfected through repeat performances and this was evident through the performance that I collected.

### **Narrative Typology**

The coming-out stories I collected can be divided into several categories based on the primary structure of the narrative. My typology is not a simple one into which each story is placed into one category. Instead, each narrative can be classified in several ways: as describing a single event, describing multiple events, as being told in the first person, and as being told in the third person.

Single Event – Narratives that identify one specific coming-out episode, such as telling a parent, or the first time they verbally acknowledged their sexual orientation.

Multiple Events – Narratives that identify multiple moments of coming out (over time, to several people).

First-Person – Stories told about one’s own coming-out, in fabulate style

Third- Person – Stories told about another’s coming-out (such as a sibling, child or friend).

The stories I collected often have multiple structural layers and these types are not by any means conclusive. Primarily, the narratives’ content can be classified into either “single event” or “multiple events.” An example of a single-event narrative would be a narrative that contains only one coming-out story about one particular event. While

I know that these stories exist, from having heard them in non-interview settings, I do not have an example of a single-event coming-out story from my informants. These could be told like Small's "proverbs" or Kalçik's "kernel narratives" (Small 1975; Kalçik 1975). Even those informants who emailed me, included several events in their narrative. A good example of someone telling a single event coming-out story would be when a gay person tells their most memorable coming-out event, or when they tell the story of their first coming-out. This would be appropriate when in a storytelling session in which multiple people were telling about instances when they came out. As mentioned earlier, I was privy to one of these sessions amongst a group of gay women, and while not everyone contributed a story (the setting was informal and spontaneous), the stories that were exchanged were ones that would be considered humorous or memorable in some way. Some stories were prompted by audience members who were clearly familiar with the stories, and others seemed to be told for the first time. The attention moved from one participant to another, as the women took turns narrating their experiences. This informal, spontaneous storytelling session, so much like the traditional storytelling sessions described by other folklorists (Bauman 1972a, M. Crocker 2002, Small 1972), had an impact on me, and led me, in part to this research.

By contrast, all of my informants related multiple-event coming-out stories. For clarification, a narrative containing multiple events relates more than one coming-out event, for instance, to a parent, and to friends or colleagues. Therefore each encompassing

narrative would include multiple sections that could be understood separately. A good example of this is the series by Tucker, who told the stories of when he knew first that he was gay, then of when he told his best friend, and finally of when he told his mother and father. These stories were told with very little interjection from me, as can be seen in the following narrative with several sections, which I indicated by paragraph breaks, for ease of reading. For instance, the first section is about when he knew he was gay, which is indicated by the first two paragraphs. His third “paragraph,” starting with the word “So” indicates a new section, of when he told his parents. The fourth “paragraph” shows when Tucker’s mother told his father, and the nature of the relationship he had with his parents once they knew about his sexuality.

072. I’ve known I was gay since, like the beginning of time. It was something that, I didn’t know what it meant at the time, but I knew that I was different. And different in a sense that it wasn’t, it was different from other people, but for me it was normal. So it was from, I’d say probably age four or five, that I knew I was different in that I played with dolls and I stayed around women all the time, I didn’t have relationships with, I didn’t really have guy friends when I was a child, I didn’t like hanging out with guys or anything like that, and the only time that, like, I loved my dad, I loved my brother, but those were the only two guys that I felt comfortable being around, besides my other male family members....

Yeah, I really knew that I was gay at age twelve, mostly because my cousin had come out at that time, and we started talking, and he, he kind of helped me, like mentored me, and he’s like “Tucker I know you don’t really want to think about this, you’re like twelve years old, and your mother would kill me, if she like find out about this,” but I was kind of – like I asked him questions. So I knew, I knew anyways. But I asked him, I asked him questions,

that normal people, out of curiosity. So I asked him questions. So I knew when I was twelve but I didn't tell anybody until I was sixteen. I came out to my best friend at the time, I think it was three months before I came out to my parents. And I came out to my best friends, my cousins, my aunts, my uncles, and actually some of my teachers before I came out to my parents. [Wow.] And I came out to my parents, I think it was November. So I had come out to probably over seventy people before I actually came out to my parents. And it kind of just started, like on a regular basis. There was no reservation, when first— When I first came out to my best friend, she was like “I’ll never tell anybody.” Now she told people. She told her parents, and she told her boyfriend, at the time, he was her boyfriend at the time. I didn’t care that her parents knew, I mean her parents knew, it wasn’t difficult to tell, and it was also something that I wasn’t not okay with, I was, I loved her parents, they were fabulous individuals, so I was totally fine with her telling them. Her boyfriend, I had some problems with her telling, but he was okay with it, and he was one of my friends as well, so I wasn’t really, I got over that really quickly, and that was just where he was a guy, and I hadn’t told any guys yet.

So, when I told my parents, I wrote a letter and I called my mother into my room, and I read her out the letter, and we both started crying and it was right after this like craft fair and my cousins from town were out around the bay and they were still at the craft fair and I was like “I’m coming out to my mother, my parents today, and if I call you I need you to come get me.” So like I had a bag packed, I had a ride arranged, like everything. Um, I told my mother that and she started crying, and she was like “You think I would ever kick you out of my house?” And like “I love you. And we’re going to get through this, like everything’s fine.” Then she asked if it was, if I thought it was a phase, and I was like “No. It’s not a phase.” And when she, and the first bit it was all good, and what not. But she brought on the whole phase thing and there was a lot of tension in my house after, cause I essentially felt like she called me a phase. And it was there was probably four or five months of non-stop fighting. Constant fighting, constant anger, between me and my mom. My dad kind of, Dad just couldn’t deal with it.

My mother told him after I told her and he, like, Dad is Dad. Dad treats me like his son. Yes, I'm his gay son but I'm his son. So, like we still go out and paint the shed, and drink beer outdoors and we still do the same things that I would do with him, that I would do, like my brother. If he wants to go fishing, we'll go fishing... But yeah, it was difficult being in the house for a long time. And it was mostly me who was acting out, because I felt attacked by my mother at the time, and that was not her intention, that was not how it was worded. It was just I had just come out to her, and "Do you think it's a phase," that was the question that as in protecting me, as in like, do you want, as in are you sure?  
[AR021, 10/30/12]

An analysis of Tucker's narrative shows that there are three clear sections of coming out. Firstly, he comes out to himself, by asking questions to his cousin and really questioning what everything means. Secondly, after coming to terms with his sexuality, he tells his best friend, who, even though she promised not to tell, did tell her boyfriend and other friends. This outing in general didn't bother him, although he was more concerned about telling other males, than females. Thirdly, Tucker came out to his mother via a letter, which was after he had "come out to probably over seventy people" in school. This point is interesting in itself as Tucker's parents were teachers at the school he attended, yet he gave no indication that they might have already heard rumours or knew. With permission from Tucker, his mother then told his father. The tactic of one parent telling another is not unusual in my interviews, and came up several times. Tucker's three-event coming-out fits the "multiple event" category I have listed and he tells the story in first-person, as most of my informants did.

It is, of course, impossible to compare every kind of coming-out story, but it can be said that through a folkloristic examination of the structure of these stories, we have insight into which components of the coming-out stories are viewed as most meaningful and told most often by narrators. First-hand stories are the most popular of all coming-out stories, as coming-out stories are usually told by LGBTQ narrators about themselves. However, we must not dismiss second-hand stories, or true legends, which can be told by straight or gay friends, family members and even those not close to the narrator but who have heard the story in some way. These stories have merit because they are deemed worthy of telling, and have moved, in von Sydow's terms, from the memorate role to the fabulate role (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1974: 227).

### **Telling Others' Stories (Second-Hand Stories and Storytelling Rights)**

One reason storytelling is so compelling to both tellers and audiences is that it speaks to both everyday and extraordinary experiences. As Amy Shuman highlights in her book *Other People's Stories* (2005), "storytelling promises to make meaning out of raw experience" (2005: 1). The coming-out stories that I collected can be viewed both as extraordinary and as everyday experiences. While most of my informants would argue that disclosing one's sexual orientation for the first time to someone is an extraordinary storytelling experience, especially when coming out to parents and friends, others would argue that telling a coming-out story is also an everyday experience, because it is a

process that must occur over and over again to new people who assume heterosexuality.

Personal stories can be used to create empathy, and represent a collective experience (Shuman 2005: 3) by including audience members as characters in their stories, and by telling stories that detail similar or shared experiences. While all of the narratives in my corpus can stand on their own, they also contribute to the creation of a collective experience, of living in Newfoundland and Labrador in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These narratives, while specific to the tellers, also speak to coming-out experiences familiar to other LGBTQ persons in general.

Shuman asks important questions such as “Who has the right to tell a story?” and “Who is entitled to it?” (2005: 4) These are important questions to consider in terms of the narratives in my corpus. While the informants I spoke to were telling narratives of how they came out, one could look at their narratives as only one part of the full event. The person that they came out to, be it a parent or friend, would also have had that experience, and could have a story about the event. Thus, the “other” person could also have a coming-out story. In fact, several of my informants discussed with me at length what happened when the person they came out to, then told other people. One could only assume that being a part of the coming-out event themselves, they viewed it as an experience they were entitled to talk about. Shuman defines entitlement as an individual’s “first-hand knowledge that grants them a privileged position as [a] knower” (2005: 4) What complicates matters, however, is that sexual orientation is usually seen as

private, and telling someone about another's disclosure is considered "outing," especially when names are used. Because of this insider knowledge, there is an ideal that a person not "out" another person. So while there may be an entitlement claim because a parent or friend experienced a coming-out event, this is often negated by the overarching rule that one should not disclose someone's sexual orientation without permission from the LGBTQ person themselves.

The concept of disclosing with permission, however, leads to Shuman's concept of representation, which she defines as "the use of stories to represent not just an individual, but collective experience" (2005: 4). She questions whether a representation of a story is even an adequate, or appropriate rendering of that experience (2005: 3). As will be examined below, the coming-out story as told by non-LGBTQ tellers can function as a story that "others" tell, for various reasons.

The question of tellability or reportability was brought to the forefront by William Labov (1972), who explored why any narrative is felt to be reportable (1972: 330). A reportable event, he notes, is "one that itself justifies the delivery of the narrative and the claim on social attention needed to deliver it" (2014: 547). Others explored the reportability of an event by its newsworthiness (Sacks 1992: 773). Likewise, Neal R. Norrick examined tellability and its direct relation to context of the storytelling and the relationship of the narrator to the audience (2005). While some narratives might be tellable in some contexts, they may not be in others (Shuman 2012: 149). This leads to

the concept of untellability, which was briefly touched on, earlier. While Labov cites danger of death as a “most reportable event” in terms of content, Shuman notes that these narratives “could also be stigmatizing [and] traumatizing experiences to report, and thus the most untellable” (Shuman 2012: 149).

One of the instances of a subject being taboo and therefore untellable was when one of my informants told me that he suspected his older brother had problems with gay people because he had been the victim of sexual violence by his peers.

073. And I always kinda wondered over the years why he hated the other guys so much, like why there was always such a rivalry between them. Now I know it was because, well, they had sexually assaulted him. Unbelievable, I know [AR002, 02/02/09].

This kernel narrative was told to me under the strictest confidence, but is largely an untellable narrative due to the sensitivity of the topic and the promise of privacy for the individual involved. Only after the recording was switched off did my informant elaborate briefly on the subject.

As Shuman notes, the “worthiness” of a narrative is dependent on the topic and context, and on the relationships between the participants in attendance of a storytelling session, as well as the people described or involved in the narrative (2012: 149). Goffman points out that some narratives are especially noteworthy, and warrant repetition (1974: 508). This has been the case for several of my informants who have told their narratives more than once, and who recognize their stories to have a certain appeal to audiences. Shuman discusses the familiarity of available narratives in the mass media, or “in a

community repertoire of stories” as one means of making sense of traumatic events that disrupt everyday life. These same narratives, on the other hand, “may be rejected by individuals who regard the narratives as interfering with their understanding of what they experienced” (Shuman 2012: 127).

Shuman’s discussion of entitlement must be discussed here. The young man who experienced sexual violence in the story above was actually not one of my informants, but instead, the story was told by an informant of mine, who was a close relative of the protagonist. The question of who can tell stories about what, and to whom, is what Shuman calls “entitlement.” The reason the story was told to me was as a possible explanation as to why the relative was unaccepting of his gay brother. Issues of entitlement are important for coming-out stories, because of issues of privacy, and outing. Therefore, some stories are told as legend, with the familiar “friend of a friend” protagonist (Brunvand 2012: 154).

### **Non-Traditional Coming-Out Stories**

Two of my informants, Nancy and Pat, did outline non-traditional coming-out stories. I consider these narratives to be non-traditional because they did not focus on the themes presented earlier in the chapter, such as telling parents and friends, or the typical construction and presentation of self. Nancy, a lesbian in her late thirties, emphasized that her coming-out was easy, in that she suspected everyone already knew, and therefore she

didn't have to come out to them. Pat, a lesbian in her fifties at the time of the interview, was very private, and did not mention telling anyone directly at all. Rather, she discussed her coming out in broad concepts such as when she moved to a big city, and when she had a child. Being a lesbian was almost secondary to these themes. As she later clarified in an e-mail:

074. I will make it short. This is my first coming out! I always thought about it even when I was very young, but I had boyfriends when I was a teen and into my twenties. I always knew people who were gay, especially at MUN. I was attracted to a girl and started hanging out with her. I knew, for sure, I was, at that point. We moved away to Toronto for work. After 6 months we broke up and I came home. I went teaching in small communities and was basically in the closet, except with my friends in St John's. My family was always pretty good. Most of my friends were gay, or accepting. There was angst and doubt and all the rest of the trauma that goes with it. I read lots of books and saw every film about lesbians at the time. I could go on but generally speaking that was my first coming out in a nutshell! [E04, 04/08/16]

Pat's e-mail narrative does follow some of the themes that are outlined earlier in the chapter, however briefly. She mentions her first coming out, as well as her first relationship. She then mentions accessing popular media such as books and "films about lesbians," likely to affirm group membership and identify with popular media subjects that were LGBTQ. What Pat's narrative doesn't do, however, is cite any specific comings-out, for instance to a parent, sibling, or friend, or mention how her sexual orientation affected or did not affect or influence other aspects of her life. She does not mention religion, and discusses place only briefly in the context that she left and then

returned.

### **Coming-Out Stories: Rumour, Belief Story, and Contemporary Legend**

Some coming out stories can be classified as rumour, belief story, or legend.

One definition of rumour notes that as general talk, report, or hearsay, rumour is “considered to be a brief, speculative message that lacks a distinctly narrative element” which deals with “places and events of great importance and prominence” (Rosnow and Fine 1976, as cited in de Vos 1996: 21). Gillian Bennett uses the term “belief story” in the same vein as Otto Blehr, as a narrative that relies on, reflects, and is used to explore the cultural beliefs of the tellers and hearers (Bennett 1990: 209; Blehr 1967). I argue, like Gail de Vos, that there are fine lines among gossip, rumour and legend. According to de Vos, gossip is an unverified message about someone, and rumour is an unverified message about something. But while rumour and gossip are similar in length and type of narrative, contemporary legend tends to be “a fully developed story with details and dramatic action” (de Vos 1996: 21). All three types of communication are presented as true and told as a form of diversion, and present participants’ points-of-view and commonalities among the group (de Vos 1996: 22).

Folklorist Donald Bird notes that gossip, rumour and legend have other commonalities as well. As noted in Gail de Vos’ *Tales, Rumors, and Gossip*, all three types of communication:

1. Use concrete details and dialogue to enhance credibility, and strain for the appearance of authority;
2. Contain content about unusual experiences or events and are realistic genres that focus on events relevant to the teller and listener;
3. Are accounts that can be updated with contemporary facts and evidence, but which also draw upon traditional materials and popular beliefs;
4. Perform informational and pedantic functions, and ‘appraise events of the real world and seek to understand, verify and possibly explain its workings.’ (Bird 1979: 94-96; as qtd in de Vos 1996: 22)

Using these guidelines, the following coming-out stories may be classified as legend primarily, but also as gossip or rumour.

One story that has stood out to me from all of my tellers, is an informally told, conversational story told to me by a family member, when discussing my thesis topic. As the story goes, my own mother’s friend’s daughter’s partner (friend of a friend), Gwen, was called to her dying father’s bedside.

075. Gwen’s father was dying. When she went in to his bedside to see him, he told her that she had to change her (lesbian) ways, or else she was going to “go to hell.” Gwen was apparently disgusted with her father, and replied to him that she would “see him there.” [I03]

Gwen’s refusal to change for her father and her sardonic reply was told in a jubilant manner, with respect being given to the daughter for standing up to her father.

I’ve heard this story twice, both times told as a third-person experience story, or what could be classified as a contemporary legend, and while I have not yet heard this story from the woman who is said to have experienced it herself, its value as a story told

not as a first-hand experience, but as a third-person story is undeniable.<sup>15</sup> Stories such as these are told as true, and these legends have an expected trajectory, which Gwen's story follows. The main characters are introduced, the conflict is outlined, and finally there is a resolution of sorts, to the conflict. The legend ends on a stylized "punchline," which is one of the reasons the story is such a "good story," and worthy of retelling. Regardless of whether or not it is true, and whether the reply and the timing are the same, the story has the markings of a local contemporary legend, which functions as a tale of warning to those parents that inflict guilt or shame on their gay children. This short narrative is told in a "this happened to a friend of a friend" manner, fulfilling that contemporary legend aspect, and the story has travelled over at least three storytellers (Bennett 2009; Goldstein 1992; Smith 1984; 1989; Whatley and Henken 2000).

Gwen's story serves as entertainment for those who weren't there but who can imagine the father's response, and it is, of course, emotional and empathic because the audience is forced to imagine having a father who refuses to accept his daughter for who she is, right up to his dying days. Amy Shuman defines empathy in *Other People's Stories: Entitlement and the Critique of Empathy* as "the act of understanding others across time, space, or any difference in experience" (2005: 4). The story of Gwen's experience acts empathically but also as a collective representation (2005: 3) of those who

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<sup>15</sup> While I know of the person this story allegedly happened to, I do not intend to ask her about it, due to the sensitive nature of the story.

have come out to unsupportive parents, and thus may resonate with tellers and audiences alike.

Cathy's legend was told to me at a party, after I told her what my thesis topic was. She did not know the person involved in the story she told, but she had heard about it from a friend, which is typical of a legend. Her story, like Gwen's, also was a "sad" story, and thus its storyworthiness may have increased, due to its sensational ending. It meets the requirements for a rumour as well, because it is short, and does not have the extended and structured plot that a legend usually does. Because this story was told to me informally from an acquaintance, I did not get a recording of this legend. The following is paraphrased from our conversation.

076. That's like that guy who came out as gay on Christmas Eve. His parents kicked him out and he had nowhere to go so he checked himself into the psych ward of the hospital. Just heartbreaking. [I04]

Most people tell coming-out stories, not just as legend, but as their own personal experience. Some stories could be told by those who are relating their own experience to someone's coming out as LGBTQ. At a PFLAG meeting I attended in 2012, one mother told of her experience of having her daughter coming out as transgender, and what it was like for her as a parent. Her narrative was spontaneous and seemingly unpracticed and it was very much a disclosure narrative of the mother in question as she grappled with issues of gender identity and acceptance.

Telling other people's stories, like the mother in the example above, is not completely unusual. Upon telling people about my thesis topic, I have had several straight people share coming-out stories with me. One such story was told to me by Geri, who told me about the time that her gay friend chose to tell her about his sexuality. Geri was very touched that he trusted her enough to come out to her, and she remembers vividly the setting in which he came out to her. The following is paraphrased from an informal conversation we had:

077. We were snowmobiling, and stopped on a frozen lake in Labrador, and we stopped and had a few drinks. That was when he told me. Probably because he was comfortable, and we'd had a few drinks, so he became brave enough. Later, he started coming out to more people, and is now completely out. But I'll never forget that cold night under the stars, lying on the ice talking, when John came out to me. [I05]

In this chapter I have shown that the coming-out stories in my corpus are primarily traditional in content and nature, although there are some examples that have non-traditional content, or do not fit the master narrative in some ways. Various themes and motifs that are repeated show the traditional content that is often expected in these stories, by both tellers and audiences, and these themes and motifs make up a recognizable core of a master narrative.

## Chapter Five – Performance

This chapter examines the performances of coming-out stories and other personal experience narratives that I collected from my interviewees, and looks at the contextual aspect of performance for these stories. The action of coming out must be seen as different from the narration about coming out, although sometimes these two events (the event, and the narration about the event) may overlap. The story of coming out may be often repeated, rehearsed, stylized, reconstructed and changed over one's lifetime, but the coming-out events are factual episodic events that do not change. What changes are the choices that the narrator makes on what stories to tell, what information to include or omit, and to whom one would tell the story, among other factors.

### The Performance Event

As Richard Bauman argues in *Story, Performance, and Event* (1986), we must not only look at oral performance as a text, but examine the verbal art that is narrative to “view it contextually and ethnographically, in order to discover the individual, social, and cultural factors that give it shape and meaning in the conduct of social life” (2). Thus, the narratives in my corpus are here examined as a performance event (Bauman 1977) besides the textual analysis that has already been conducted in Chapter Four.

The situations in which such narratives are performed are multiple. Often a coming-out story is told informally and conversationally to friends and family. The

performance can be seen as spontaneous, or near spontaneous, and added to a conversation that is already occurring (Norrick 1998: 75). This addition is natural and unassuming, and is a means for one person to relate personally to another (Tannen 1984). Conversational comings-out are not usually practiced texts, although if a narrator has enough instances of them, their narrative may become practiced by virtue of its frequent telling.

The type of performance that I collected in my interviews is a completely different context from that of the informal, conversational narrative told to friends and family. The type of narrative that I collected from my informants was given in an interview setting, to a largely unfamiliar audience (myself), although the participants did know some details about me from when I introduced myself. In general, the interviews that I conducted were casual and conversational, but because they involved an initial contact and setting up, participants had time and opportunity to think about the topic of coming out, and coming-out stories. In this way, the narratives that I collected were not spontaneous, and could have been practiced and edited.

Telling a coming-out story or another type of narrative often implies that the event in question is logically antecedent to the narratives that recount them. Bauman outlines a view of narrative performance in which he argues that the narrative allows the teller “to give coherence to events in our understanding.” In turn this enables us to then construct through narration and interpretation “a coherent set of interrelationships that we

call an ‘event’” (Bauman 1986: 5). Therefore the act of narrating helps us to understand and make meaning of a set of actions that can then be seen as an event.

Bauman’s description of performance in *Story, Performance, and Event* (1986) is a primary concept. He explains that performance is:

a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill... . Performance thus calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of both the act of expression and the performer. (1986: 3)

He continues by noting that, in the ethnography of oral performance, the performance event has become “a fundamental unit of description and analysis, providing the most concretely empirical framework for the comprehension of oral literature as social action by directing attention to the actual conduct of artistic verbal performance in social life” (1986: 3). Highlighting the “performance-centered perspective” Bauman argues that the essence of oral literature is discovered not in folklore texts, as was generally conceived, but instead, in “lived performance” (1986: 8). By examining coming-out stories by how they are performed, we can learn how individuals take the custom of coming out and narrate it to be applicable to and have meaning in their own lives.

The structure of a performance event is a combination of various contextual factors, including: the participant’s identities and roles; the expression employed in the performance; the social norms and strategies for performance and criteria for its

interpretation; and the sequence of actions that make up the event (Bauman 1986: 4). Using these factors as a guide, we can highlight the performance event of a coming-out story as a highly individual but also traditional performance by both seasoned and new performers who narrate their story in order to identify with their audience and relate to other LGBTQ people, among other reasons. This can be viewed as parallel to Santino's "hero" stories, in which various re-tellings occur in small groups of people in a conversational setting (Santino 1978: 204).

### **Traditional Competence**

Communicative competence is a concept developed from the work of folklorist Dell Hymes (1974) who further defines Noam Chomsky's theory of linguistic competence (1968). Chomsky's theory relates that there is "a cognitive system, a system of knowledge and belief that develops in early childhood and that interacts with many other factors to determine the kinds of behaviour that we observe" (1968: 4). Hymes uses Chomsky's theory and applies it to sociolinguistics, noting that along with grammar, "a child acquires also a system of its use, regarding persons, places, purposes, other modes of communication, etc... – all the components of communicative events, together with attitudes and beliefs regarding them" (1974: 75 as quoted in Briggs 1988: 6). Folklorist Charles L. Briggs argues that Hymes's system provides a central focus for researchers to analyse a particular speech community, and to examine the said community for the

underlying performance processes in that community (1988: 6-7).

Drawing on the work of Labov, Hymes distinguishes between “the ability to interpret, report, or repeat a given speech act with the ability to perform it” (Briggs 1988: 7), and notes that performance is distinguished as a “cultural behaviour for which a person assumes responsibility to an audience” (Hymes 1975: 18). Hymes and other folklorists (Abrahams 1968; Bauman 1977, 1986; Ben-Amos 1971, 1977; Dundes 1964, 1980; Glassie 1982; and Goldstein 1964 for example) in this time period emphasized a “breakthrough” into performance, which enabled scholars to look at competence.

“Traditional competence” of the narrator (McDowell 1999: 60; G. Butler 1990: 6) is a factor that must be considered when examining the performance of these narratives. Folklorist John H. McDowell defines traditional competence as “when traditional items function primarily to guide innovative folkloric production” (1999: 60). He notes that “what persists through time and space, in these instances, is the capacity to formulate appropriate folkloric items, as much as the traditional items themselves” (1999: 60). McDowell uses the transmission of children’s folklore to examine the production and transmission of folkloric items, and “the capacity for new forms and items to emerge from traditional competencies” (1999: 61). For each form of traditional folklore that the children revealed, through their creativity they would also generate new folkloric materials. Therefore, of equal importance to those forms of folklore that persist over time and space, were the “innovative messages that are formulated as traditional items

and competencies are adapted” (1999: 61).

In “Narrative Competence: A Navajo Example of Peer Group Evaluation” (1980) folklorist Margaret K. Brady examined how peer groups of children recognize and evaluate narrative competence. In her data, children recognized both competent and incompetent narrative performances, and assumed the cultural responsibility of narration to their audience (1980: 158). This responsibility to the audience “entails both the knowledge and the ability to speak appropriately in a culturally defined and socially constituted world” (1980: 163; drawing on Hymes 1971: 18). As Hymes argues, this competence leads to the concept of performance as “grounded in the perpetuation and survival of communal knowledge” (Hymes 1971: 70 as quoted in Noy 2007: 12).

Using McDowell’s and Brady’s concept of traditional competence as a guideline, it is clear that performers telling coming-out stories in my corpus are using what they know of the coming-out story, in addition to their own unique experiences, to formulate their own, individual narrative that falls into the genre of coming-out stories in specific, and the category of personal experience narrative in general. Because there is cultural knowledge about what coming out is, and what a coming-out story is, narrators have that traditional competence, enabling them to narrate their experiences in a way that is culturally familiar to both narrator and audience.

One of the major performance aspects that must be considered is the question of the narrator: who is telling a coming-out story? Most obviously, these stories are told by

LGBTQ persons themselves, about coming-out events that they personally experienced. All of the people that I interviewed told me coming-out stories of this type. There are also those who tell second-hand stories as well. These stories are generally told by siblings, parents and friends, who relate a coming-out event that they experienced along with the LGBTQ person. For instance, when I came out to my mother, we each had an individual experience different from the other's. Therefore collectively we have two personal experience stories about the same event; while I can tell the story of when I told my mother I was gay, conversely, she can tell the story of when her daughter told her she was gay. Since there is a component of privacy and/or secrecy when one tells another about sexual orientation, due to the inherent "outing" of an LGBTQ person (see Chapters One and Two), these stories are likely not told as frequently, and I only collected a few examples of a second-hand story of this type (narratives # 075-077).

Sociologist Kai Erikson explains that experience can be collaboratively represented (1976), and this is made clear when two people co-narrate a story. This could happen in the previous example, as my mother and I could tell a story together, each of us relating our own experience. An example of this in my corpus is when I interviewed a couple, Bea and Lori. Bea and Lori each gave narratives about coming out, but toward the end of the interview, each contributed to create a conversational narrative between the three of us. One excerpt from the interview is as follows:

078. L: I thought, if somebody, as a result of what Bea and I, and that other couple did, in this province, if someone can watch t.v.

one night, and see that they can get married, maybe they will get that message that they are okay, and that they are better than okay. And you can come through this process, and come out the other side, and be fine with who you are, and in terms of my life, I mean, you know, currently I'm as out as you can be, and you know, I'm committed to, as much as time permits, at this point, training other health care professionals around LGBT issues and what our, what the issues are, what the barriers are in terms of accessing healthcare particularly in this province, this city, homophobia, heterosexism, so that's, that's starting, I've developed a workshop, and that's integrating my work as well, so that's basically...

B: Sure you're always coming out. It's a continuous process anyway.

S: Well every time you meet somebody new, then you've got to make that split-decision. (B: Yup.)

L: But in our case, we were so out there, a lot of people recognized us anyway. (S: True.) And it's interesting, the reaction to that was very positive, you know we would be walking down the street (B: Strangers talking to us). Someone would come across the street. (B: No negative responses) Well, I actually got one letter, it was some guy who just likes to write to people for the sake of writing, he put his address label on it, and I opened the letter, it was just my name at the Women's Centre, he knew I worked there, and it was like, I think it just said, "I'll see you in hell."<sup>16</sup> (SM: Oh!) And I was thinking, (S: That's nice) that was my reaction. And I was thinking, well, what did *he* do? (*Laughter.*)

S: Was that in Toronto?

L: Oh no, that was here.

S: That was the only thing that...

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<sup>16</sup> This phrase is similar to, and may be a motif from the story about Gwen and her father (075), as discussed in Chapter Four.

B: That was the only negative response.

L: But you know Bea is right, it always is, there, and to be honest, there is always a split-second when I wonder you know, what the reaction will be, you know, cause not everybody knows, and it's like there's that, it doesn't stop me from saying Bea's my wife, but sometimes I just kind of wonder what the reaction will be. It's never been negative, to my face, it's never, no one has ever said anything derogatory or you know, knock on wood, I've never been a victim of any violence or anything like that, so that's been very positive. [AR007, 17/06/09]

As is evident from this conversational narrative, Bea and Lori were remembering two events, when they got married and also when Lori was working at the Women's Centre. Bea and Lori discuss being recognized when they were walking down the street, and both contributed to the narrative.

Each of the narratives that were told to me can be classified as practiced or unpracticed. Practiced narratives, as mentioned earlier in the thesis, were those narratives that were polished performances that had been told previously, as was clear from performance style and texture. Gina, Krista, John and Sandy all had spoken previously either to journalists, authors, or had volunteered their stories for anthologies. These narratives, as given to me in an interview setting, flowed easily, had few false starts or other verbal stoppages, and were told as if in front of a larger audience. For example, Krista's narrative, which was very polished, having been told to a local television station in a four-part mini-series prior to my interviewing her. Krista is well-known in the local LGBTQ community and has told her story multiple times, including one I was present for

at a storytelling session organized during pride events one year. Thus I have had the opportunity to hear Krista's narrative at three different occasions, and all three had similarities, although the interview she gave to me was the most detailed of the three accounts.

Narratives that were given to me by e-mail could also, in a sense, be considered practiced, as they may have been edited (for brevity or clarity, for example) and obviously, I was not privy to any possible edits that the narratives underwent before they were sent to me. Pat's narrative (074), for example, was less than a page long, and was missing much contextual information, glossing over details that I would have prompted for in a face-to-face interview. Her narrative was so succinct and general, in fact, that it raised more questions than provided answers. Thomas's e-mail was different, in that he provided several coming-out events within his narrative. Although he recounted his decision to come out to other gay people, and then to his daughter, what struck me about his narrative was that he was in a heterosexual marriage for two decades. He noted:

079. I believe that my wife knew I was gay and may very well have been gay herself but it was not something that we discussed. Before we met she was deeply hurt when she discovered that her first husband had been having an affair with another man rather than another woman. While I was faithful to her I think this was her way of telling me that she knew.

Very shortly after my wife died I decided that I had hidden long enough. I had turned fifty and decided that a mid-life crisis was needed. I started to commute to a small city about an hour's drive from home to attend a support group for gay men. I was not having sex but starting to come out of the closet to other men. I

was always aware of my sexuality but it just didn't seem important enough to rock the many boats that were floating outside the closet.

My daughter decided to return home to help run the family business. We have always been close and I could not continue to go to the men's group without either lying about where I was going or coming out to her. So before she actually moved home we sat down and had the talk. She was shocked but not rejecting. It was a lot to pile on her after her mother's death and she attended a few PFLAG meetings to talk to someone else about her feelings. I think she felt she should go on Jerry Springer but overall she handled things very well and we remain very honest with each other and very close. [E03, 29/09/09]

While it is impossible to say whether these e-mails were edited and polished for my benefit, it is likely that they did undergo some editing and were not written on the spot. Further examples of polished narratives can be seen in the narratives published in the popular press, such as John's and Gina's in *Queer Monologues: Stories of LBGT Youth* (2013) or Sandy's in *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country* (1996) (084 and 085 and 086).

Gina's account included in *Queer Monologues: Stories of LBGT Youth* is quite similar, albeit more brief than the account she gave to me (071). The following is the beginning of her monologue.

080. In the fall of 1993, I attempted suicide. Afterwards, I was hospitalized in order to help me recover from the physical effects of the drug overdose. I came from an upper middle class family, was well liked at school, got good grades and was involved in many extracurricular activities, so those who knew me were shocked by what I tried to do. The reason I wanted to take my

own life? I'm gay.

After I came out to myself and others, I realized that all of my homophobia was internalized. My family and friends, even my teachers, were supportive, but I was one of the lucky ones. This is my story. (For the Love of Learning, 2013: iii)

Since I had the opportunity to interview both of these informants after reading their published accounts, I was able to compare their published, polished versions with the oral narratives (presumably somewhat more spontaneous ones) that they provided to me in person. It was of no surprise to me that the narratives I received in person were at the same time both similar and different than those published. Those narratives in the published versions included some details that were not told to me in the interview process, yet parts of their stories were quite similar to those I had heard. Interestingly, I did not find out about the published versions from the informants themselves, but through my own research of coming-out stories. Because both John and Sandy consider themselves to be as “out” as possible, it is possible that they were both used to telling their story, to journalists or writers, and did not think to mention it. John’s account, written for a play and then published in *Queer Monologues: Stories of LBGT Youth*, is also strikingly similar to the narrative he gave me, although again, more concise and edited for brevity from (044). Here is a portion of that monologue:

081. I was 15, trembling in front of my mother’s bedroom door, clasping a neatly folded piece of paper in my hand. The door was open slightly and I could see her lying on her bed, scribbling in a

crossword puzzle book. She heard me at the door, took one look at me and immediately knew that something was up. I entered her room and reluctantly handed her the now crumpled paper. As she read it my heart was pounding.

I'd written that I was bisexual, a calculated decision on my part for two reasons. One, I could back away from relationships with men if that wasn't the way I wanted to go (but I knew the difference deep down, whether I wanted to admit it then or not). And, two, the possibility of giving my mother a grandchild wasn't completely out of the question.

After waiting for what felt like an eternity, she looked up, smiled and told me that she loved me. We didn't talk about it again until a few months later. (For the Love of Learning, 2013: 40)

Tellings of narratives are not always pre-meditated, practiced or intentional.

Stories which are "unintentional" in their telling could also be referred to as spontaneous, and these narratives are suited to a conversational style of speaking in which the narrator is contributing a similar experience. In contrast to the practiced stories, the unpracticed narratives were the narratives that I received most frequently in my interview setting. These narratives were not practiced, were tentatively told, indicated as having not been told before, or told infrequently, and had performative clues that indicated a more spontaneous, less polished performance, such as false starts and frequent pauses. One of the indicators of the non-practiced narrative was the notable use of repeated words such as "and," "like," and "um" which sometimes have rhetorical meaning (Bennett 1990: 210).

## Metanarration

As examined by Barbara A. Babcock, metanarration refers to “any and all components of a story which function reflexively or self-critically” (1977:75) and to “those devices [which the narrator employs] that refer specifically or comment upon the narrator, the narrating, and the narrative both as message and code” (1977: 67). This crucial part of storytelling is found in many types of stories, including the personal experience narrative. The coming-out stories in my corpus were no exception in that metanarrative remarks or self-commentary, both explicit and implicit, were present. Babcock uses the external framework of “beginnings” and “endings” as an example of explicit metanarration (formulas like “Once upon a time” and “Happily ever after” in *Märchen*). She lists narrative repetition, naming, pronoun shifts, and parenthetical asides as linguistic devices that make an implicit metanarrational commentary (1977: 73).

As expected in personal experience narratives describing a true past event or events, there is no typical textual beginning and ending as simple as the formulas used in, say, the *Märchen*. However, since I often started my interviews by asking a question “How did you come out?”, often the participant would respond by repeating the question, or by phrasing their first sentence appropriately in answer format. Some of the typical beginnings of narratives I collected started like Timothy’s, who acknowledged his process of coming out after some reflection about the topic.

082. I’ve been thinking about this topic since we agreed to meet and what I’ll say at the beginning is that for me, I don’t think that

were was a one coming-out story. I think that for the time period that I would call the initial coming-out phase, for me, was in the early 1980s. At which time, I was 22, 23, 24, around that time period. It's more of a growing phase of self-acceptance, and perhaps not even self-acceptance at that stage as much as self-awareness or coming to grips with, perhaps of maturing. That doesn't happen overnight, or it certainly didn't for me. As part of that process if you start to reveal or accept your true feelings to yourself, then that means revealing it to other significant people in your life. So, I really think for me, it was more of a process and a series of steps and revelations to myself and to others. [AR005, 10/06/09]

Timothy switched pronouns in his narrative, from "I" to "you" (the general "you" rather than in reference to me), and then back to "I" as he explained his process of discovery. Leah also shifted pronouns, taking the listener from "I" language to "you" language within the first sentence, effectively moving the point of view from personal to general with the change in pronouns, an implicit metanarration device, according to Babcock (1977: 73).

083. Well, I guess my understanding of coming out is you know, there's sort of the initial stage where you sort of realize, you know you sort of come out to yourself, you know, you go "Holy shit! That's what's wrong!" I'm gay, I'm bi, I'm whatever. And then you sort of digest that and then you know, there's the second part, the second half of it, where you sort of come out to other people. [AR011, 30/09/09]

Chris also switched pronouns at the beginning of his narrative, showing that he was moving from general to specific in his narration:

084. I guess, it's kind of cliché, but I guess you always knew that

you didn't fit in. I played with my cousin Megan, I would play house or store with her. And then when I was in Grade Six, I always wanted to spend time with this one kid, his name was Chad, which I assume was my first crush, but I'm not sure, we were so young, I can't really tell, but I just liked spending a lot of time with him, and I just assumed it was best friends but now when you look back at it, hindsight, bias, maybe I was attracted to him. [AR020, 30/08/12]

Lori broke from telling her story into questioning whether this was the type of information I was looking for.

085. It never made sense really, until I got to a certain place in my life. When I finally came out, and you know, I don't know if you wanted me to sort of go into the whole [SM:Yeah!] sort of story now but you know, and I really related to Bea when she was saying you know around being boy crazy and I had from a very early age a feeling that I was different, and I didn't know what that was all about, why I felt that way, it was just, I had friends, girlfriends, and at a certain age they became boy crazy and I just thought, "I don't get it, I don't! I just don't understand it, am I missing something?!" (*Laughs*) And this was, this was like nine or ten. You know, eleven, around, when the hormones start, you know, turning on in people, and you know, I was just thinking, I don't, I don't understand. [AR007, 17/06/09]

These descriptive techniques used by the narrators not only connect the teller with me, their audience, but act in a reflexive manner in which the narrator places themselves in the present time ("It never made sense, really," and "I didn't know what all that was about") while at the same time describing the past ("I don't get it, I don't! I just don't understand it, am I missing something?!") (AR007, 17/06/09).

As Tucker indicated in an e-mail, there were multiple occasions in which he had

the opportunity to tell his coming-out story.

086. Over the past two years, I've had to tell my coming-out story quite a few times at school. I'm near completion of my studies at Randolph Academy and like my classmates at Sheridan, my classmates at Randolph were equally as interested in hearing how I came out to my parents. When they found out I was from a town of about 500 people in Newfoundland a lot of them were shocked that I am as confident as I am with my sexuality. I've told everyone in my term (about 68 people) my coming-out story at some point or another; albeit in class as an emotional connection exercise, for a creative project, or sitting on the lawn outside. I told everyone in my term my coming-out story because I wanted the people I was going to be spending about 12-14 hours a day, every day for two years something deeply personal about me. I felt it was necessary to tell them, I knew they all wanted to know, especially since they were all so interested in the fact that I was from Newfoundland. [T04, 08/06/16]

Tucker's email was quite helpful in his description of when he told coming-out stories to others. As he explained, he came out to classmates at school, but this was not the only time he told his coming-out story. Tucker noted that he has told his coming-out story on several dates he's been on:

087. I've also told my coming-out story on numerous dates I've been on. I feel like it's a rite of passage for some members in the LGBTQ community to discuss their coming out stories whilst on a date. At least for most of the men I've been on dates with the coming-out story conversation comes after the appetizer arrives. [T04, 08/06/16]

Tucker's comment that telling a coming-out story is like a rite of passage for some LGBTQs is insightful. Not only can coming out itself be considered a rite of

passage, but also the performance of the story too can be expected and then produced, especially when specifically asked for. A date setting could be one of several scenarios in which a coming-out story is requested, much like when one is together, swapping stories as friends. As Tucker continues:

088. I've heard a lot of my friends' coming-out stories. We've told each other our coming-out stories to get to know each other better. We all sat around in my apartment one night with wine and told each other how we came out to our parents. [T04, 08/06/16]

Tucker's statement that he has heard a lot of his friends' coming-out stories is important, because it acknowledges that this is a current performative tradition that is common, at least in his group of friends. Notwithstanding Tucker's information, however, most of the coming-out stories that I collected were lacking in metanarrational devices. My informants, when asked about when they told coming-out stories, generally did not elaborate on when they told these stories, but instead (at least some of them) reiterated the narratives that they gave me initially. I found it interesting that, when asked, most of my informants did not distinguish between the act of telling a coming-out story and telling me their actual stories. Only in a few cases, such as Tucker, below, did informants discuss when they told their stories. A study highlighting further metanarrational devices and how these stories are told would be a good area for future research.

### **The Act of Narration**

As Bauman points out, narrative is attached to human events, and is “keyed both to the events in which they are told and to the events that they recount, toward narrative events and narrated events” (1986: 2, drawing on Jakobson 1971). Therefore, the narratives that I collected that detailed coming-out stories were also coming-out events themselves. The event in which the storytelling took place or the performance of the story is just as important as the story itself. The context in which the storytelling took place, the interview setting, is telling in that it is, according to Goldstein, an unnatural context (1964b), yet I was still able to record conversational narratives that highlighted both the performer and the act of performing (Bauman 1986: 3).

In “Personal Experience Stories, Autobiography, and Ideology,” Mary Ellen Brown notes that the act of narration itself is a means for the narrator to create and interpret themselves (1990: 258-9). While some informants are telling their stories as history, as humour, or as life story, they are also telling their stories as a means to create and make meaning of their own lives. The very telling of a narrative as important as a coming-out story shows that the narrator is self-aware, and is narrating a part of their life that they deem to be important, reportable, and relevant (Labov 2011: 547).

When the narrator is reflexively aware that they are telling a story/performing a narrative, their performance could be considered “intentional” in that they are narrating a part of their life that they deem to be important and storyworthy. This evaluation of their

narrative has been explored by Robert A. Georges, who outlines the rights and responsibilities of the listener and teller in storytelling events, and who notes that one of the rights of the listener is that the story be relevant (1969). Richard Bauman outlines a similar concept, arguing that a story must be “yarnworthy” (1972), as does Neal R. Norrick (2005) who discusses the concept of reportability of events in the same way as linguist William Labov, and how it is relative to the situation and the relationship of the narrator to the audience (Labov 2011: 546). Regardless of terminology, whether relevant, reportable, yarnworthy, or storyworthy, there is an understanding by both the teller and the audience that the story is not only worth telling, but worth listening to, and that the story will have some impact on the audience.

One factor that must be examined when analysing these narratives is the audience. Who hears these narratives, regardless of the context in which they are heard? Obviously the narratives will change dependent on who is present in the audience. I was presumably told what the participant wanted me to hear, and that by virtue of the interviewer/interviewee relationship, the interview and subsequent narratives were controlled, to a point, by the interviewee. I made it a point to interject only when absolutely necessary, thereby lessening any perceived interruptions, yet our meetings were still likely perceived *as interviews*, and the participants were free to include or leave out as much information in their stories as they pleased. Some narratives were likely shared with me because of my position as a fieldworker, and not as a trusted friend or

ally. Because I was not close to my informants, they may or may not have felt that I would not judge them, or that I was not bringing any pre-conceived notions about them to the interview.

An aspect that mustn't be overlooked is the sexual orientation of the audience member. During my fieldwork interviews, I was careful always to disclose my sexual orientation to my informants. It was important to me that they know that I too was gay, and that I could relate to any story they told me. This, I felt, would not only show my group membership, but promote bonding between myself and the participants and possibly emulate a story-telling session in which esoteric knowledge and experience is shared amongst group members (Goldstein 1964: 1-6). Stories told to LGBTQ audiences are likely different from those told to heterosexual audiences, because of the implied shared experience of coming-out as LGBTQ. Certainly when I tell a coming-out story, depending on the audience, I include more detail to a gay audience member who would understand the finer nuances of coming out, than I would to a straight audience member, who does not have that experience of coming out.

One consideration that must be made about coming-out stories and other narratives that LGBTQ persons tell is that these narratives change according to other contextual factors such as when, where and why the narrative is being told. For instance, I might tell the story exactly as I remember it to one friend but, in another context, I might leave out some details that I deem too personal, or irrelevant to the conversation.

To whom, when, where, and why these narratives are performed is highly variable, and the resulting narratives that develop because of these factors reflect the diversity of situations in which one might tell a coming-out story.

The decisions that are made about how to tell a disclosure narrative are important for evaluating the stylization aspect of a coming-out story, including making the story more storyworthy or tellable, in terms of performance. LGBTQ persons tell their stories because they are congruent with other stories being told, because they fit a mould of coming-out stories that the teller has heard or read before. This fits into Lyotard's concept of the "master narrative," although I recognize that each LGBTQ person's life experiences are different and do not necessarily fit into an pre-existing definition or concept. The term as Lawless uses it, is useful, however, for highlighting the vocabulary that LGBTQ persons often use to tell their stories, as members of a minority group.

Narratives can be told as "familiar scripts," recognized out of awareness of a group folklore and shared experience (Ochs and Capps 1996, as qtd in Shuman 2012: 126). As Shuman explains, narrative is often used as a way to make sense of a traumatic event, of which a coming-out event would certainly qualify as, to some people. Telling a personal experience narrative is one way in which a performer can gain order from chaos, such as the case with earthquake stories, argues Regina Bendix in her article "Reflections on Earthquake Narratives" (1990: 334). Personal experience narratives as told by

LGBTQ persons in general, and coming-out stories in particular, show that sharing one's story is a way to "bring the extraordinary a step closer to the normal" (1990: 334).

### **Narrative decision-making**

As Frank de Caro points out, "the oral stories that come to us, in conversation and special recountings, whether in passing or specially recalled, by friends and family – have considerable power to convey knowledge and meaning" (2013: x). How do LGBTQ informants perform their coming-out stories, that is what is the performance context of these narratives? Most narratives that I collected were informal and casual, with the recognition that their audience member (me) was also LGBTQ. This ties in directly with the concepts of esoteric knowledge, group membership and shared experiences. When a teller knows that the audience member is also LGBTQ, there is not only a special recognition of group membership, but a desire to contribute one's own coming-out story to a well-recognized corpus of narratives. A coming-out story might be told because it tells of a significant and specially marked event, one that is important to the teller, and perhaps even the audience.

While coming-out is a continual process, as has been mentioned in earlier chapters, so too is the telling and performance of coming-out stories. Stories may be told at any time in the narrator's life to any number of audience members, including friends, family, and acquaintances. When people tell a coming-out story, one of the reasons they

share their experience is because they recognize that a significant or special event occurred, and that it is, in fact storyworthy. The coming-out stories in my corpus were told on a primarily one-on-one context, although there were two interviews in which a second person was present. This mirrors the typical context of a coming-out story: deliberately making the decision to tell a close friend or family member in person, in a one-on-one setting. This context may be preferred for various reasons. For instance, like coming out to one person, telling a coming-out story one-on-one is more manageable in terms of gauging the audience's reception and contributing to a conversation about a related theme.

Contributing to a conversation is a typical way that LGBTQs relate their coming-out stories. For instance, if one person is discussing how they came out to a co-worker, then that instance could potentially be a time when another person could relate the story of when they also came out to a co-worker. As non-binary trans person Jordan mentioned, they often use the setting of coming home from work to de-stress or brief their roommates and partner about their day. In those conversations, Jordan is able to share coming-out stories to their queer friends, especially in the wake of a new job and having to come out to co-workers on a fairly regularly basis. They noted that they were particularly proud of a recent telling – a staff meeting at work – because “coming home I was proud that I didn't let this chance of talking to everyone slip away” [T03, 16/05/16]. Jordan was happy to tell the household of their success.

Telling a group of friends, roommates or another small group is not an unusual setting for performing a coming-out story. In fact, some of the times I have told a coming-out story myself is when I'm with my partner and friends, and we are relating times that we have come out to others, with varied results. From my own experience, being with friends and telling a coming-out story is a likely situation for performance. It is, for many, a way of contributing to a common experience and a means for the narrator to bond with others. When Nancy related one of her experiences to myself and another friend, her performance reminded me of times when I had performed a narrative in the same manner.

As in the narratives in my corpus, telling a coming-out story could also happen in the context of an interview or fieldwork setting. Certainly, the majority of my informants were pleased to talk with me and to tell me their stories, even though it was in a "formal interview" setting, and the majority of them did not know me very well. As was mentioned earlier, some had practice in being interviewed (Sandy, Krista, and John all told their stories to journalists or authors prior to speaking to me), even though these performances were obviously different from the ones I collected from them.

Two my informants took part in a performance piece at the LSPU Hall in St. John's, in which they performed aspects of their sexual orientation in dramatic story form, as a part of a highlight on LGBTQ youth. The performance piece was called "Queer Monologues: Stories of LGBT Youth" and allowed both Jordan and Betty to

come out as LGBTQ to a public audience that was present and largely unknown to them. Four of my informants (two teachers and two students) used the classroom as a venue for the performance of a coming-out story. Both Sandy and Jim came out to students in the high school setting, while Betty used the setting of a university class to come out and narrate her experience of coming out through a presentation to her classmates.

### **Narrative Function**

What is the impact of telling a coming-out story or similar narrative on the LGBTQ narrator? As mentioned in an earlier chapter, a narrator may tell the story for a variety of reasons, and the narrative may elicit various emotions in not only the audience but the teller as well, from sadness and anger, to happiness or contentment, and a multitude of reactions in between. Telling an emotional story acts as a way for the teller to reconcile his/her emotions about the event, re-live the past, or can be a way for the teller to evaluate the event from a distance. Dependent on the mood of the narrator, the audience, the venue and other variable contexts, the narrative about the event, or the performance of it, may change.

Some stories highlighted the narrator's exclusion from the community, as Ritch's did (072). Ritch's narrative focused on his job as a clergy member and how his sexuality threatened his position within the church. Absent from his narrative was any mention of telling friends or coming out to family members, or of belonging to or

reaching out to the gay community. His subsequent alienation from his congregation, and his eventual move to another congregation spoke to the emotional and psychological toll that coming out can take on a person. Krista's narrative (023, 024) was similar in that she felt alienation from the gay community because she was transgender, and she felt that trans people faced different issues than those faced by lesbian and gay people. This was a sentiment also echoed by Jordan, who was adamant that non-binary gender queer persons do not really fit under the T of the umbrella term LGBTQ. Other stories I collected also highlight non-conformity to group identity. Karen was one of only a few of my informants who self-identified as queer, and Ada felt that she did not fit in with other lesbians, or the lesbian community. What is notable about this category is that several of my informants felt they did not fit a particular categorization, whether it be part of the LGBTQ community, or under specific terminology. So while much is to be said for group membership, it is necessary to remember that not everyone fits, or wants to fit, in a particular category.

As noted by The Personal Narratives Group, there are "counter-narratives" that emerge from personal accounts, in which self-image and experiences are contrasted with dominant ideologies and cultural models (1989: 11). I use the term "counter-narrative" slightly differently, to mean literally a narrative that is counter to the norm. In my corpus there were a few examples of counter-narratives, narratives that did not fit in with the rest of my corpus of coming-out stories. For instance, Ada's narrative (AR013, 26/10/09)

was sexually explicit in that she described her arousal at being with another woman, the only one of thirty-two participants to reference sex in such an unequivocal manner.

While I was taken aback by Ada's frankness, I recognized that her narrative was in contrast to the other narratives I collected and would be a good example of a counter-narrative.

Krista's narrative about her journey into becoming transgender could also be read as a counter-narrative. In the entire two-hour interview, not once did she mention any relationship, or desire to date a particular sexual orientation or gender. So while she answered my call about "coming-out stories," she did not disclose her own sexual orientation or any of that part of her journey. She clearly states that her own coming-out was about being trans:

089. You can conceal your sexual orientation from people you don't want to know that, but to pursue a transition is impossible to really keep that closeted. It's all about, just not gender identity, but gender expression, and the minute you walk out the door, dressed as I do, you're sending a message to society. (SM: Visibility). Exactly. So I guess, research, I did a lot of reading on topics, and maybe I was trying to label myself, okay, something's different here, I don't, is it right, is there something wrong with me, that's kind of a controversial question, if so, what is it? Is it a mental disorder, is it a physical birth defect, there's a million theories about this, and I guess I concluded that it's tough to really label myself, or compare myself specifically to other trans people but ultimately, I guess I kind of realized who I felt I was, and what I felt needed [to] happen with my life and, I guess, that would be my own coming-out to myself and it was a very, kind of traumatic experience, it's like, oh my goodness, I've, I basically felt that I had wasted and lost thirty-three years of my life. [AR009, 24/09/09]

Karen's narrative was unique in that she was the only one of my informants who stated outright that she didn't believe in coming out for herself. As she explained:

090. It was a pretty organic kind of thing. I guess... I sort of don't believe in coming out for myself in a certain way, in that I don't believe anyone should have to come out. I don't think anyone should assume that you're straight. Straight people don't have to come out. A part of it was that for a long time, I identified as straight anyways, in my teens, so then it was like a really gradual thing, that actually realizing that wasn't the case. Then finding the words for it myself as I never identified as lesbian or bisexual exactly. It wasn't until I was in a women's studies course in my first year and I did some research on queer theory, and then I actually felt like this is something that describes me and that I don't feel like I'm lying when I say it about myself, so that's great. So yeah, I self-identify as queer. [AR012, 04/10/09]

These counter-narratives are especially important to consider because they give depth to the understanding of what a coming-out story is. Another counter-example of the narratives I collected are the narratives, which, for whatever reason, were not told to me. These are not so clear as to be obvious to the audience, but for a researcher like myself, I was able to "hear" narratives that weren't being told. These included those coming-out stories that featured or included sexual abuse, or other "untellable" aspects of narrative (Lawless 2001). As Lawless shows in *Women Escaping Violence*, sometimes it is the silences or breaks in the narratives that speak the loudest. Indeed, I was quite surprised when Ron mentioned that he was raped, although not surprised that he did not elaborate for more than two sentences.

091. I got into a bit of cruising, and I started going with some guys I didn't know, and one incident happened where I was raped. Yep. So, when that happened it, all of a sudden, it devastated me, to the point where I started to get a really, um, I saw the darker side of it, and I thought, I can't keep doing this, if this is the result. [AR001, 02/02/09]

One informant, Ada, implied that she had been abused, and wondered if that was why she was gay, but she did not elaborate on the abuse.

092. I guess, things were never really dealt with. And I struggled through things. Am I gay because I was abused? Am I gay because I was born gay? I don't know if I bought the biological argument, either, maybe it's a learned experience. And to a degree I still struggle with that. [AR013, 26/10/09]

The perhaps ineffable, unspoken parts of the narrative, which is what is left out, or glossed over is an interesting part of what constitutes a narrative and must not be ignored. Ada's question "Am I gay because I was abused?" and Ron's statement "... and one incident happened where I was raped" both speak to traumatic events of the past, without specifically explaining them or going into further detail. This begs the question as to why these statements were included in the narrative. They could have easily been left out of their coming-out stories, as deeply personal and emotional facts, but both narrators obviously considered their stories of self-realization and resilience to be important, and it is notable that an underlying theme of resilience runs through many of the narratives in my corpus. As has been mentioned previously, because participants were aware of the purpose of my study, i.e. to collect coming-out stories, it can be

assumed that these were facts that were intentionally brought into the narratives by the tellers. Conversely, it could be that these details indeed would normally be elided but were spontaneously shared with me because the participants felt comfortable with me, and I was subconsciously perceived to be a “safe” audience with whom they could share such a private detail.

One constant in the broad LGBTQ community since the activism of the 1970s has been the concept that gay people should not hide, that they should be “out and proud” and not ashamed of who they are (Plummer 1995; Pullen 2009; Weeks 2012). Recent and past prominent figures in gay culture have urged disclosure of sexual orientation, because it may help suicidal teens accept themselves more, or be able to identify with them (Mercer 2011: n.p.). It is in this context that there is a culture of disclosure, of empowerment and resistance, of being who you are without shame or fear, and this also may have also been a factor in my informants telling their coming-out stories in general, and in Ron and Ada’s disclosure of their sexual abuse in particular.

Narrative decision-making, deciding what to include and what to leave out, may be especially important for sensitive topics such as the disclosure of sexual orientation. The teller is making themselves vulnerable by telling a personal story, and as mentioned earlier, the story being told is usually tailored for the audience. Like Amy Shuman’s stories in *Other People’s Stories*, the stories that I explore are highly contextualized and they draw on a shared understanding and relationship between the teller and the audience

(2005: 8). As Shuman explains, there is a point of reference between what Katharine Young calls the storyrealm (the situation of telling the narrative) and the taleworld (the events in the narrative) that must be negotiated when telling a narrative (2005: 8; Young 1987). Sometimes these realms overlap, and sometimes they are distinct. Regardless of whether there are mutual references or recognizable points of similarity between the characters in the story and those listening to or telling the story, or whether these realms are completely distinct, Shuman notes, the relationship between the teller and audience is significant and important (2005: 9). Even though I did not previously know the majority of my informants, and we did not have an existing relationship outside of the fieldworker/informant relationship, I was able to collect these narratives because ultimately the tellers wanted to share their stories with me, and were comfortable in doing so. Because there was a mutual respect between my informants and myself, I was made privy to some of their most intimate stories.

In this chapter I have shown how aspects of performance such as context are key for telling a coming-out story. There are many reasons for disclosing one's sexual orientation, and many LGBTQs disclose their identity by telling a coming-out story, using various performative arenas such as venue, competence, text, construction and self-expression as storytelling techniques. Why a specific narrative is performed at any given moment is dependent on a number of factors such as audience, mood and context. There were not any remarkable differences between cisgender male, and cisgender female

narrators' storytelling, although transgender male and female's storytelling did emphasize the importance of defining one's sexual identity even more than did the cisgender narrators. This is an important observation for future work in studying narratives as told by transgender people. Ultimately, the study of the performative act of telling a coming-out story is fundamental for understanding the genre within personal experience narrative and local LGBTQ storytelling.

## Chapter Six – Conclusion

This thesis has explored how LGBTQ people use narrative to disclose their sexual orientation, in other words, to come out of the closet, and subsequently, especially in the company of other “out” people, for other purposes. These coming-out stories, or disclosure narratives as I also call them, are pivotal to LGBTQs who create and form this narrative while relying on a recognizable form and delivery (Pullen 2010: 5). The process of and storytelling about coming out had not been previously studied in the field of folkloristics in any detail, thus the purposes of this thesis are to better understand how LGBTQs narrate their lives, with a particular emphasis on stories relating to their coming out, in order to fill a gap in the folkloristic literature, while reflecting on how LGBTQs use recognizable storytelling tactics to structure their narratives. Thus while contributing to an understanding of LGBTQ culture it also contributes to folkloristic narratology.

Examined in this thesis are content, context, function, and performance, and how these categories shape the narratives being told. Some of the questions examined within is whether there is a typical or atypical coming-out story and how the narratives break down into recognizable or unfamiliar narrative constructs. The thesis further explores how the coming-out story functions for tellers of the narrative (LGBTQ and straight) and what features of the coming-out story are deemed important or relevant by LGBTQs in Newfoundland and Labrador. These questions are answered throughout the text and both advance the study of minority folklore in general and expand the existing

folkloristic work on LGBTQ persons in particular.

Chapter Two examines the cultural understanding of coming out as well as the act itself, and explores how coming out leads to the telling of a coming-out story. By examining the existing literature on coming out in gay and lesbian studies in juxtaposition with popular literature on the coming-out stories and studies in folkloristics on the personal experience narrative, this chapter highlighted the narrative as a form of artistic communication that negotiates various parts of one's identity. The terminology used in coming-out narratives, including "to come out" and "coming out of the closet," are figures of speech indicating the disclosure of a secret in general, and the disclosure of one's LGBTQ sexual orientation in particular. Thus, I have tended to use the rather more general term "disclosure narrative" when appropriate.

Continuing with the examination of "coming out," Chapter Two outlined various definitions for coming out, including one by A. C. Liang (1997) that highlights the three recognizable properties of disclosure: one's initial self-recognition and definition; one's self-presentation as LGBTQ to others; and finally, one's ongoing acts of self-definition and presentation. Like Liang, I found that these three stages are typical stages of disclosure and are often reflected in the narratives that LGBTQ people tell. Liang points out that coming out is a matter of degree, rather than a binary opposition: some people are more out than others, and LGBTQs can be more or less out in different contexts (1997: 291). In my corpus, I found that "coming out" is better understood as a

process that is ongoing and continual, rather than a single episodic event.

Much LGBTQ folklore has arisen from the unique social situation of the gay community, which has historically been an oppressed minority to mainstream North American society. Gays and lesbians have long depended upon traditional forms of communication and expression for their individual and collective survival, and their telling of disclosure stories is just one way in which the LGBTQ population have marked their group membership and highlighted some of their diverse language and traditions. The significance of the coming-out story must not be underestimated: most LGBTQ persons have at least one version of it, and it is widely recognized by gay people as an in-group tradition within the context of widespread heterosexism.

Finally, in Chapter Two I considered the folkloristic examination of the personal experience narrative, and delved into how the coming-out story can be considered a personal experience narrative. Using the work of scholars such as Sandra Stahl, Jeff Todd Titon and Charlotte Linde, I highlighted the importance of the prose narratives such as the personal experience narrative, life history, and autobiography to the genre of coming-out stories. These narratives can be viewed as both traditional and non-traditional, and detail one or more specific coming-out episodes. Although they may be performed in a variety of ways dependent on context, they are still recognized within the LGBTQ community as traditional texts with various functions.

In Chapter Three I considered the reasons for telling a coming-out story and the

narrative decision-making on the part of the teller. There are numerous reasons for telling a coming-out story: some of the more prevalent reasons are for disclosure purposes, as a validation of self, or solidification of self-identity, and to make meaning of LGBTQ lives. These reasons are sometimes made obvious by the teller but sometimes they are more implicit. Reasons for telling a coming-out story are often tied to how a coming-out story functions situationally. Using William Bascom's functions of folklore (1954) as a guide, I explored how coming-out stories function as a form of entertainment, as a validation of culture, as a means of educating the listener, and a way of maintaining social conformity (1954: 346). But these are broad categories, and not exhaustive. Telling a coming-out narrative may also act as a rite of passage, as a part of camaraderie building among a minority group, or as an aid for community building.

I also investigated when and where coming-out stories are being told, why some stories aren't being told, and thus, the theory of untellability. The stories that aren't being told about coming out are notable and also have a function in that they speak to gaps in the genre. The stories that I collected were primarily told by a gay person to a gay person, however, there were a few instances of heterosexual performers telling me coming-out stories that they had heard themselves, or like legends, from a friend of a friend. In this way, a coming-out story and the language used within it can be viewed as both esoteric and exoteric folklore, being performed by multiple groups of people in varying contexts.

Also presented in Chapter Three is a framework for the narrative structure of the coming-out story. Using multiple academic models in various disciplines, I highlighted that these models are mostly linear, suggesting a definitive end point for coming out, as opposed to a non-linear, process-based model. V. C. Cass's "Sexual Identity Formation" model (1979), however, is a comprehensive guide to coming out and, although it is dated, is helpful to folkloristics in examining LGBTQs coming-out narratives. A. C. Liang's model of the coming-out story (1997) is useful for comparing to the narratives in my corpus, and its six components can be seen in many of the narratives that I collected, often with specific reference to the stages of confusion, comparison, and acceptance. Finally, I examined the structure of the coming-out story using Labov's concept of the fully-formed oral narrative (1972).

Chapter Four highlights the narratives in my corpus, and analysed the coming-out story in its numerous forms. Using examples of the coming-out story as told by thirty-two informants, I compared how the story was told and looked at common themes and motifs as presented in the narratives. Using the categories of Thematic Content and Motifs, Performance Context, and Narrative Structure, I highlighted similarities and differences in the corpus, although it is important to acknowledge the individuality of each narrative.

Following Abbott and defining theme as "any subject or issue that recurs in a narrative through implicit or explicit reference" (2002: 196), I highlighted typical themes

identified in my corpus as Discovery/Self-Identification; Struggle for Self-Acceptance/Rejection; Disclosure; Acceptance/Rejection by Others; Construction and Presentation of Self; Identification with the LGBTQ Community; Stigma; Religion; Discrimination; and Region/Place. I also analysed the narratives according to common motif, which I defined as a discrete phrase, word, image or thing that is repeated in the narrative, and which is significant to the teller. The motif recurs as a part of a larger theme. Common motifs in my corpus are: Parents and Family members; Firsts; Friends and Allies; Lovers/Partners; Colleagues and the Workplace; Education; Coming of Age; Stereotypes; Being Outed; Media and Internet Influences; Concealment/Shame; Suicide Attempts/Self-Harm/ Destructive Behaviour; and Coming Out Publicly. These motifs appeared throughout various themes in my corpus, thus a motif like “Parents” may be part of the overarching themes of “Disclosure” and “Acceptance/Rejection by Others.” Narratives in my corpus often presented multiple motifs in a number of themes.

Chapter Four concludes with a discussion about how these stories are performed. The coming-out stories I collected can also be categorized by primary structure of the narrative. There is some overlap, but in general, I have identified the typology of narrative as single event, multiple event, first-hand, second-hand, or metanarrative. As noted previously the inclusion of these types may be used to identify and name different kinds of coming-out stories. While it is impossible to compare every kind of coming-out story, a folkloristic examination of the structure of these narratives

gives us insight about what stories are being told most often and viewed as most meaningful by LGBTQ narrators.

Chapter Five is an examination of the performance of coming-out stories and the contextual aspects that are attached to them. Looking at these performance events we can see that disclosure narratives are told in many situations: public and private, formal and informal. In this way, narratives may become practiced and therefore stylized, although the narratives in my corpus were generally casual and conversational.

Why are these stories being told? Even though the stories I collected were prompted by interview-style questioning, the hearing of a coming-out story is often not in that context. When sharing such a personal story, the teller may want to relate to group members in the audience, or perhaps to share a similar experience. Some may tell their experiences in coming out in order to come out again, that is as a new coming-out event.

Telling a narrative allows the teller to make meaning of a set of actions or an event, and telling a coming-out story enables the narrator to identify with social norms for performance (the sequence of actions that make up the event) and assume a responsibility to an audience for the performance. The narratives in my corpus follow a recognizable format and performers use that format in order to identify with their audience and contribute to shared experience and history, and group folklore of LGBTQ people. By performing this specific speech act, the coming-out story, narrators display a traditional competence and are contributing to a type of folklore that persists over time and space.

Performers are telling coming-out stories by using their own experiences as well as a cultural understanding of what coming out is and what it involves.

The coming-out experience can be represented in narrative in various ways. The story can be told in a one-on-one setting, to a friend, or interviewer, for example. It may be told in a group setting, or collaboratively represented in conversational style. The narrative may be practiced or unpracticed, polished and edited for a specific audience or told unfettered. Some narratives are told in public venues, like a play, or for a mass media market. Most, however, are told for small audiences like a friend or group of friends. The majority of coming-out stories in my corpus were told to me as a coming-out event – in which case the act of narration was the coming out, and the event of storytelling was just as important as the words being spoken. The act of narration is a way for the teller to narrate a part of their life that they deem to be a reportable event, relevant and storyworthy. Because there is usually a relationship between the teller and the listener, there is an understanding that the story is worth telling and listening to.

Coming-out stories are an important part of LGBTQ folklore and, as shown in this thesis, contribute greatly to LGBTQ s disclosure of their sexual orientation. As Dégh shows about belief and legends, when telling another about their journey of self-discovery, storytellers must gauge whether the audience is receptive to the story and, dependent on various factors, will change the story accordingly, by either shortening it, telling only a portion of it, or telling only the parts that they deem relevant. They may tell

about only one coming-out event, or only a couple of events; it is unlikely that all comings-out are always storyworthy or that you could even tell the story of some coming-out events. How the audience reacts or starts to react to a story (especially if the audience is heterosexual) will certainly affect the telling of the story. Reactions to these performances are varied, and complex. What coming-out stories are likely to be told? In my corpus, the most likely told stories were those about one's first coming-out event: coming out to parents or another family member; coming out to a specific friend or group of friends; a memorable coming out; or a particularly emotional coming out. The fact that these types of stories were the ones most frequently told to me suggests that these are the most memorable coming-out events to the LGBTQ people I spoke to.

Coming out is a continual process, and therefore it is impossible to even have a completed coming-out process. There are then infinite possibilities for comings-out, and coming-out stories. While some LGBTQs may say that they are fully "out," they may actually mean they are fully comfortable with coming out in every imaginable situation, although they may not have personally told everyone they know. Thus, there could be stories about a person's coming out that are not told by the LGBTQ person themselves, but told by someone who was an audience member to a coming-out.

The analysis of coming out and coming-out stories in this thesis brings to light some of the complexities of coming out, and is an important step to understanding storytelling by LGBTQs. This thesis, therefore, is a contribution not only to folkloristics,

but to other study areas interested in LGBTQ lives, such as psychology, anthropology, social work and applied scholarship.

I have examined various coming-out stories to show, in part, how LGBTQs in Newfoundland and Labrador come out, and the importance they place on the coming-out event. The 32 informants who made up my corpus of interviews were interested in making sure that the coming-out tradition was documented, and that their stories were collected for posterity. Most were very enthusiastic about contributing to the project and some even imagined possible future directions that this research could take, such as helping LGBTQ youth, or becoming a guideline for coming out for people of all ages. Although I wasn't able to include every narrative that was told to me, I did include a large proportion of coming-out stories that were representative of the sample and which were highlighted by their tellers as especially important to their individual comings-out. In this way, I have shown that coming-out events are not only important to their tellers, but crucial to their being understood as LGBTQ persons.

This thesis considers how coming-out stories function in folkloristic terms as personal experience narrative, as life story, and as legend, rumour, and gossip, and provides the reader with important insight into the lives of LGBTQ Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. Future research could look at how the shared communal experience of coming out amongst LGBTQ persons acts as a form of *communitas* (Turner 2005), and examine the possibility of LGBTQs telling narratives in an organized, group setting as a form of customary folklore. With future research comes further possibilities of understanding LGBTQ lives and the folklore that we perform.

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## **Appendix A – List of Recordings and Interviews**

### **Recordings conducted by me**

AR001 = “Ron.” Interview conducted 02/02/09  
 AR002 = “Nathan.” Interview conducted 02/02/09  
 AR003 = “Jane.” Interview conducted 24/03/09  
 AR004 = “Gina.” Interview conducted 08/06/09  
 AR005 = “Timothy.” Interview conducted 10/06/09  
 AR006 = “Bea.” Interview conducted 17/06/09  
 AR007 = “Lori.” Interview conducted 17/06/09  
 AR008 = “Jim.” Interview conducted 21/09/09  
 AR009 = “Krista.” Interview conducted 24/09/09  
 AR010 = “Ritch.” Interview conducted 28/09/09  
 AR011 = “Leah.” Interview conducted 30/09/09  
 AR012 = “Karen.” Interview conducted 04/10/09  
 AR013 = “Ada.” Interview conducted 26/10/09  
 AR014 = “Cindy.” Interview conducted 27/10/09  
 AR015 = “John.” Interview conducted 20/02/10  
 AR016 = “Matt.” Interview conducted 25/02/10  
 AR017 = “Thomas.” Interview conducted 14/09/10  
 AR018 = “Sandy.” Interview conducted 30/09/10  
 AR019 = “Donald.” Interview conducted 15/09/10  
 AR020 = “Chris.” Interview conducted 30/08/12  
 AR021 = “Tucker.” Interview conducted 30/10/12  
 AR022 = “Andrew.” Interview conducted 14/11/12  
 AR023 = “Betty.” Interview conducted 19/07/14  
 AR024 = “Jordan.” Interview conducted 23/07/14  
 AR025 = “Tatum.” Interview conducted 27/07/14  
 AR026 = “Aeon.” Interview conducted 28/07/14

### **Recordings done by others**

AR027 = “Carla.” Interview conducted by Angelina Hoven for Folk 2100, 2014.  
 AR028 = “Tucker.” Interview conducted by Bernadine Noonan for Folk 2100, 2012.  
 AR029 = “Chris.” Interview conducted by Amy Park for Folk 2100, 2012.  
 AR030 = “Vince.” Interview conducted by Georgina Reardon. MUNFLA #79-500, 1979.  
 AR031 = “Tony.” Interview conducted by Georgina Reardon. MUNFLA #79-500, 1979.

### **Non-Recorded Interviews conducted via Internet chat (Transcripts)**

T01 = “Jessie.” Interview conducted 27/07/14  
 T02 = “Paul.” Interview conducted 05/08/14  
 T03 = “Jordan.” Interview conducted 16/05/16  
 T04 = “Tucker.” Interview conducted 08/06/16

**Non-Recorded Interviews/Conversations in Person (Informal)**

I01= “Nancy”

I02 = “Pat”

I03 = “Ann”

I04 = “Cathy”

I05= “Geri”

**Narratives provided via E-mail**

E01 = “Dan.” 14/09/09

E02 = “Emma.” 25/09/09

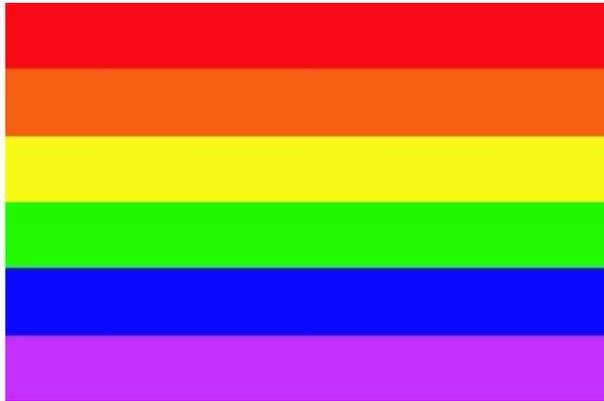
E03 = “Thomas” 29/09/09 (same Thomas that was interviewed by myself)

E04 = “Pat” 08/04/16 (same Pat that was interviewed by myself)

**Published Narratives provided in other text and media**N01 = “Sandy” *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country*, 1996 (same as above, interviewed by myself)N02 = “Gina” *Queer Monologues: Stories of LBGT Youth*, 2013 (same as above, interviewed by myself)N03 = “Gina” *Out Proud: Stories of Pride, Courage, and Social Justice*, 2014 (same as above, interviewed by myself)N04 = “Krista” *NTV News*, 2008 (same as above, interviewed by myself)N05 = “John” *Queer Monologues: Stories of LBGT Youth*, 2013 (same as above, interviewed by myself)N06 = “John’s Mother” *The LBGT Guide to MUN*, 2003

**Appendix B – Promotional Poster**

**Are you an LGBTQ Person?  
Do you have a coming-out story?**



I want to hear from you!

I am looking to interview LGBTQ persons about coming-out, and any stories that you tell about your experiences.

Contact Me:

Sarah Moore

Ph. D. Candidate

Dept. of Folklore

Memorial University of Newfoundland

[sarahmoore1@hotmail.com](mailto:sarahmoore1@hotmail.com)

(709)743-5889

## Appendix C – Consent Form and Information Sheet

### CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant), hereby allow **Sarah Moore, Ph.D. Candidate, Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador** to use this voluntarily recorded interview for research toward the completion of her Doctoral Dissertation on “Personal Experience Narratives told by LBGT Persons in Newfoundland.”

I understand that the purpose of this research may include conference presentations or papers, and/or publication in an academic journal or book. I give permission for Sarah Moore, Ph.D. Candidate, Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, to use these materials at her discretion for all academic purposes with the following exceptions:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I give permission for Sarah Moore to use my name in the communication of this research:

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

I wish to remain anonymous and all identifying details (such as town, date of birth) anonymized in the final dissertation.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

I understand that as a consultant, I am free to withdraw at any time, and that I will be given the choice to have the material destroyed should I request it.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

I give permission for Sarah Moore to deposit these materials in an archives:

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

I wish to have the materials involving me (audio recording and transcripts) retained by the researcher or restricted in an archives until a date of my choice.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

I wish to have a copy of the audio recording for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

I understand that the supervising committee will have access to the data for the purpose of analysis, interpretation and writing of the final dissertation.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

I understand that I may withdraw my participation in this research at any time by contacting Sarah Moore at the address at the bottom of this page, and that any ethical concerns I have regarding this research may be addressed by Dr. Philip Hiscock (Thesis Supervisor) or the Head of the Department of Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland, (709) 737-8778.

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**Signature of Student Researcher**

**Date**

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**Signature of Consultant**

**Date**

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**Participant Address, E-mail and Telephone Number**

Questions or comments may be directed to:

Sarah Moore, Ph. D. Candidate, Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador,  
(709) 743-5889 [sjmoore@mun.ca](mailto:sjmoore@mun.ca).

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!**

## INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

### Personal Experience Narratives by LBGT Persons in Newfoundland and Labrador

Hello!

My name is Sarah Moore and I am pursuing a doctoral degree in Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland. My thesis focuses on the stories that LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) persons tell about their experiences in “coming out”, and how “coming out” stories may change at various times in their life. I will ask you to tell me your story or stories about when you “came out” and how it has affected your life. I may then ask you to relate details and the circumstances which led to your “coming out”, and when you started telling others about your sexuality and your personal experiences. I may contact you again in the future to ask some follow-up questions about your experiences.

If anything during the interview process causes you distress or discomfort in any way, and you feel the need for professional help, please contact the Health and Community Services Newfoundland Mental Crisis Centre at 1-888-737-4668 (24 hours).

**If you have any questions or concerns about this research**, please contact Sarah Moore at the Department of Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, St. John's, NL, Canada, A1B 3X8. Tel: (709) 743-5889; fax: (709) 737-4718; e-mail: [sjmoore@mun.ca](mailto:sjmoore@mun.ca)

If you have any concerns about this research that cannot be resolved by Sarah Moore, please contact Dr. Philip Hiscock (thesis supervisor) at the Department of Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, address as above. Tel: (709) 737-8778; fax: (709) 737-4718; e-mail [philip@mun.ca](mailto:philip@mun.ca).

I thank you sincerely for your participation in this research.

Sarah Moore

### **Appendix D - Hometowns and Cities**

Newfoundland place names have been changed for the privacy of the participants. However, the cities and towns represented, in no particular order are:

St. John's  
Mount Pearl  
Corner Brook  
Port-de-Grave  
Harbour Grace  
Happy Valley-Goose Bay  
Conception Bay South  
Spaniard's Bay  
Bay de Verde  
Trinity Bay  
Cartwright