



“This is me”: The transition of coming-out for gay men through an occupational perspective

Michelle Lukas, Lon Forsyth, Katie Lee Bunting & Susan Forwell

To cite this article: Michelle Lukas, Lon Forsyth, Katie Lee Bunting & Susan Forwell (2023) “This is me”: The transition of coming-out for gay men through an occupational perspective, Journal of Occupational Science, 30:2, 291-303, DOI: [10.1080/14427591.2021.1981986](https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2021.1981986)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2021.1981986>



Published online: 19 Oct 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 692



View related articles [↗](#)




View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 3 View citing articles [↗](#)



“This is me”: The transition of coming-out for gay men through an occupational perspective

Michelle Lukas, Lon Forsyth, Katie Lee Bunting & Susan Forwell 

Faculty of Medicine, Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, University of British Columbia, Canada

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Transitions are universal, intricate experiences and have been well documented in the occupational literature. However, literature on gay men’s experiences of transitioning through the coming-out process from an occupational perspective is lacking. This study focuses on men who have chosen to make their sexuality known on their own terms. **Objective:** To explore the transition of coming-out for gay men through an occupational perspective. **Methods:** This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with a constructivist epistemology. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling methods. Unstructured interviews were used to obtain narrative data, providing contextualised, temporal understandings of the coming out transition. The closeness of two researchers to the gay community (one author is a gay man, another an identified ally of the 2SLGBTQIAP+^a community) provided valuable ‘insider’ perspectives. Data analysis was guided by an occupational perspective and queer theory. **Findings:** Four themes emerged: 1) You’re Different, 2) Finding a Safe Space, 3) The Disconnect Between Being Gay and the Stereotypical Enactment of Being Gay, 4) and Doing What I Want to Do. **Discussion:** Findings described the pervasiveness of heteronormative hegemony and emphasized the need for a safe space prior to the initiation of coming-out. Identity and occupational participation were iterative in nature and reinforced each other throughout the coming-out transition.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 January 2021
Revised 27 August 2021
Accepted 30 August 2021

KEYWORDS

Occupational science; Life transitions; Gay men; Coming out; Queer; Heteronormativity

A child attending their first kindergarten class, an individual obtaining a first job, or moving out of a parental home; life is full of transitions and each person’s experiences are unique. Unpredictable transitions are related to unexpected and at times traumatic situations. Conversely, predictable transitions are expected and allow time to prepare, as is examined in this study of openly gay men and their experience with the transition of

coming-out. In this study, a predictable transition is defined as when the individual had control over where, when, and with whom they chose to disclose their sexual orientation. Having clarity on this definition supports the overall purpose of this paper, which is to explore the relationship between coming-out, occupational participation, and personal identity and the environment in which this transition is performed.

CONTACT Michelle Lukas  michellerlukas@gmail.com

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Life Transitions from an Occupational Perspective

There are a number of life transition studies that used the lens of an occupational perspective (Asbjørnslett et al., 2015; Crider et al., 2015; Maley et al., 2016). Predictable life transitions, such as retirement, transitioning to secondary school, or smoking cessation, bring about a period of uncertainty and instability, yet can also be associated with positive experiences. When a transition is predictable, it allows for preparation, though may be accompanied by apprehension surrounding what to expect (Chapdelaine et al., 2017) and a stage of emotional readjustment (Pepin & Deutscher, 2011). Transitions involving the loss of an occupation (e.g., smoking cessation or retirement), can have an immense effect on all areas of the individual's life including a shift in their identity, sense of belonging, and their overall well-being (Luck & Beagan, 2015; Pepin & Deutscher, 2011). Occupational identity is shaped as altered occupational repertoires are explored throughout the lifespan (Taylor, 2017). Occupational identity can be reaffirmed through positive interactions with meaningful occupation whereas negative occupational interactions can act as a threat to competence and require the rebuilding of identity through occupational adaptation (Taylor, 2017). Luck and Beagan (2015) described it as “restructuring your whole life” (p. 183). Experiencing change which is outside the ‘norm’ of a typical life course, such as the transition to identifying as belonging to a marginalized group, such as a marginalized sexual orientation, can be particularly challenging as “dominant cultural narratives can be sources of constraint that hinder adaptation” (Taylor, 2017, p. 149).

Transition Experience of Coming-Out

Coming-out is described as an individual's self-disclosure of gay sexual orientation (Boxer et al., 1991). Typically, the coming-out transition was thought to occur post high school (Lewis, 2012), however, the journey is now known to be more complex. Individuals often ‘test out’ their sexuality in social contexts and encounter life circumstances, such as workplace environments,

which necessitate becoming ‘re-closeted’ (Lewis, 2012). In terms of interpersonal factors, Bogaert and Hafer (2009) showed that being younger, engaging in more exclusive same-sex behaviour, having higher perceived physical attractiveness, and greater belief in a just world impacted the timing of the coming-out transition.

In Western cultures, Valentine et al. (2003) showed that individuals often come-out to mothers before fathers, which tended to be safer, more positive experiences compared to coming-out to fathers, where responses ranged from “enthusiastic acceptance to physical violence” (Jadwin-Cakmak et al., 2015, p. 278). In an earlier study exploring lesbian experiences, Birkholtz and Blair (1999) found that coming-out was accompanied by a significant transition that resulted in loss of the family home, married status, financial security, and family support. Despite recent positive regional and societal shifts in support of gay rights and inclusion, lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth continue to report a lack of parental support and family connectedness compared to their heterosexual peers (Watson et al., 2019) and report no improvements in perceived safety in high school environments (Saewyc et al., 2011).

Coming-Out through an Occupational Perspective

While the impact on occupational participation within the context of the coming-out transition is important, it is less described in the literature of Western cultures. Devine and Nolan (2007) suggested that daily occupations remain largely unchanged, however, the meaning underpinning them is altered. Occupational engagement, particularly with regards to leisure and social pursuits, has been found to provide an avenue to explore and find support in identifying as a sexual minority (Devine & Nolan, 2007). Watching television shows and reading literature featuring gay characters (Birkholtz & Blair, 1999; Devine & Nolan, 2007) were identified as opportunities to gain information about how to do occupations differently, and in some cases facilitated self-acceptance (Devine & Nolan, 2007). The coming-out transition can be accompanied by strained and broken

relationships (Bergan-Gander & von Kurthy, 2006; Birkholtz & Blair, 1999; Devine & Nolan, 2007) that are replaced by gay-friendly social occupations within the gay scene (e.g., bars, clubs) that allow for a sense of community and an opportunity to meet other gay individuals (Devine & Nolan, 2007).

Beagan and Hattie (2015) found that occupational adaptation took three forms with regard to religion and religious practices including “reducing or ending engagement, changing the occupational meanings, or changing occupations” (p. 471), however, they were not able to determine a clear reason why one option occurred over the other. These studies offer important insights on how individual’s occupational repertoire changes throughout the coming-out transition. This study aimed to fill the gap in the coming-out literature on how occupational participation informs identity.

Guiding Frames

This study was informed by an occupational perspective and queer theory. The coming-out literature is currently dominated by psychological concepts of identity and sociological concepts of the social network and environmental features of safety. An occupational perspective of the coming-out transition has been scantily explored, which limits broader understandings necessary to appreciate how the coming-out process is enacted and experienced. An occupational perspective is “a way of looking at or thinking about human doing” (Njelesani et al., 2014, p. 233) through consideration of the dynamic transactions between persons (or communities), their occupations, and their environments (Law et al., 1996).

Queer theory is a “Western, academic field of inquiry that includes a set of theories and analyses predominantly dealing with questions of gender and sexuality” (Carr et al., 2017, p. 656). Queer theorists posit that gender and sexuality are social constructs that are rooted in heteronormative hegemony (Butler, 1988; Carr et al., 2017). Reproductive potential is at the centre of these binary constructs and norms are reaffirmed through performative acts within society (Butler, 1988; Sullivan, 2003). When individuals engage in acts (or

occupations) outside of these norms, they are seen as different and deviant (Butler, 1988; Carr et al., 2017). “Queer writers make visible the multiplicity of sexual acts, practices, and identities that make the binary between straight/gay identities nonsensical” (Carr et al., 2017, p. 656). Queer theory enriched the researchers’ ability to understand the lived experience, identity, and contextualized occupations of participants.

Research Purpose

There is a need to expand the dominant narrative of the coming-out transition for gay men beyond emotional, cognitive, and physical impacts and contextual issues to include an occupational perspective. The purpose of this research was to explore the relationship between coming-out, occupational participation, personal identity, and the environment in which this transition is performed by exploring the contributions, drawbacks, and nuances of the form, function, and meaning of the coming-out transition for gay men.

Methods

Design

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach which provided a “comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336). This low-inference approach allows researchers to “stay closer to their data and to the surface of words and events” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336). The use of a constructivist epistemology allowed the researchers to construct their findings based on the participants’ stories while being open to multiple realities rather than searching for one truth (Carpenter & Suto, 2008). It also allowed the researchers to position themselves as their “own research instrument” (Punch, 1994, p. 84) to enable use of their experiences in the interpretation of findings (Carpenter & Suto, 2008).

Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. The first two authors

recruited from their social networks by sending a flyer by way of email and social media posts. The flyer outlined the reason for the study, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and an email for correspondence. The authors then asked their social circles to share with others. Potential participants contacted the first two authors through email and were sent an information letter and consent form. They were given 48 hours to review materials, ask questions, and consider the study demands. Participants understood that they could discontinue their participation at any time without consequence. Measures to maintain confidentiality included anonymization of names using pseudonyms chosen by participants (or by researchers if participants did not choose one) and generalization of events and locations.

Participants

The inclusion criteria were self-identifying as a gay man, English-speaking, having come-out by choice, and 18 years of age or older. The exclusion criteria were withholding the transition from anyone in their social circle and not being born biologically male. Given the paucity of literature on gay men coming-out in the occupational literature and the complexity of the intersection between sexuality and gender identity, the researchers chose to exclude transgender gay men, but want to acknowledge that transgender people are underrepresented in the occupational literature. Participants were recruited until data saturation was achieved. Saturation is considered “the point at which additional data does not lead to any new emergent themes” (Given, 2016, p. 135). Once the researchers believed saturation had been reached, two additional interviews were completed to ensure no new information was identified (Marshall et al., 2013). Eleven participants were interviewed (see Table 1).

Participants were aged between 24 and 38 years old and had come-out when 17-25 years old. All except one were white, and all were from urban centres with post-secondary education. Seven reported coming-out 10-15 years ago with one participant being less than 5 years ago. While not all were originally from Canada, they all came-out after 2006 when residing in Canada.

Data collection

An unstructured narrative interview was used to support participants to tell their story in their own words and own way (Elliott, 2005). All interviews started with, “Tell me your story, start wherever you would like”, inviting participants to go in whatever direction they wanted. Gay men are often marginalized from their own stories and this interview style aimed to mitigate the power differential between researchers and participants by giving the control to participants to choose how to tell their story.

Clarifying questions were used to obtain a greater understanding of how participant experiences fit into an occupational perspective. This interview approach also allowed for the continuity of participants’ stories, rather than segmenting them with a more structured ‘question and answer’ interview (Elliott, 2005). The initial two interviews were conducted with the first two authors present to ensure similar format and process were followed. Given the sensitive nature of the participants’ stories, the researchers did not interview their friends. This also mitigated the possibility of researchers imposing their own knowledge on a participant’s narrative.

All interviews were recorded using the ‘Voice Recorder and Audio Editor’ app with iCloud turned off for added security. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Ethics approval (# H18-03457) was granted for this study by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board of the University of British Columbia, Canada.

Data analysis

For each interview, line coding was completed directly onto the document. Themes were determined using inductive thematic analysis, otherwise known as a ‘bottom-up’ approach (Frith & Gleeson, 2004) to ensure themes are determined from the participants’ stories, rather than fitting the data into a pre-constructed model (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Participants’ words were often used within the naming of themes to strengthen connection to the data.

Trustworthiness

Investigator triangulation in data analysis (Carpenter & Suto, 2008) was used as follows: all

Table 1. Study Participants

Pseudonym	Current age	Age of coming out	Relationship status	Job title	Religion growing up	Parenting
Ted	30	20	Single	Health-care professional/ Grad student	Roman Catholic	2 parents/ divorced
Steven	28	21	Long-term relationship	Grad student/ Lifeguard	Anglican	2 parents/ divorced
Bryan	24	19	Single	Grad student	Catholic	2 parents/ divorced
Rob	35	22	Single	Marketing	Zoroastrian	2 parents/ together
Jordan	28	23	Single	Student/ Server	None	2 parents/ together
Ignacio	32	17	Single	Engineer	None	2 parents/ together
Diego	27	24	Long-term relationship	Health-care professional	Evangelical	2 parents/ together
Zach	30	17	Long-term relationship	Health-care professional	Catholic	2 parents/ together
Adrian	33	20	Long-term relationship	Manager	Christian/ Lutheran	2 parents/ together
Maxwell	29	17	Long-term relationship	Teacher	Christian	Single parent/ (mom)
Tony	38	25	Single	IT support	None	2 parents/ divorced

researchers independently coded the first two interviews, followed by rich discussions around coding, where differences and similarities were explored in-depth. This facilitated a nuanced analysis of the data. Further, transcripts were frequently revisited throughout the analysis ensuring congruence between the participants' stories and themes. Providing evidence to support interpretations was achieved by using the participants' words, rather than solely reporting the researchers' interpretations. (Carpenter & Suto, 2008). Lastly, the first two authors used reflexive journaling following each interview and reflexivity of the research team was enacted during regular research team discussions.

The researchers acknowledge their closeness to this research topic as the first author is an identified ally of the 2SLGBTQIAP+ community and the second author is an openly gay man. This contributed to the ease of recruitment, rapport building with participants, and a good sense of the typical challenges and questions to ask. This closeness may have led the researchers to miss exploration of topics with which they were unfamiliar. We are deeply grateful to the participants for entrusting their stories to us.

Findings

Four themes were identified, each with subthemes, which spoke directly to the relationship between coming-out, occupational

participation, identity, and environmental factors. Theme 1 focused on how the transition of coming-out informed identity, theme 2 provided perspective on occupational participation, and themes 3 and 4 foregrounded the influence of coming-out on occupational participation and identity.

You're different

Bullying

Bullying was present in many of the participants' stories from elementary school to present. Terrible things were done because participants were labelled as 'different'. Maxwell recalled, being "*called fairy and fag*". The pain experienced from bullying ran deep and had a particularly harmful effect during the younger and more vulnerable phases of life. "*I remember when I was in the depths of getting bullied aggressively where I did have thoughts of suicide. ... There were times when you think to yourself, would it be better if I was just not here?*" (Rob).

Ted recounted his experience of losing male friends because of what others had said: "*He's a fag, you can't be friends with him*". "*I associated being gay with something that was a con ... It all stemmed from that mentality of no one wants to be friends with you, people are going to reject you and leave you and you're going to be lonely*" (Ted). Even in seemingly harmless instances,

there were remarks from family and close friends that greatly impacted on the individual's coming-out transition as recollected by Tony, who stated, "*Me and my brother ... , we were calling each other gay in the backseat of the car and laughing and thinking it's hilarious. And then my mom says, 'Well, you better not be gay'.*"

Most of the participants came out after high school, and as a result, most of the bullying was experienced in this setting. Some participants mentioned derogatory remarks and name calling after coming out, but their confidence was more established, and they were not impacted in the same way.

That's not me

Participants described difficulty finding a gay "role model", because the occupations they were observing did not resonate with their emerging gay identity. Ted indicated, "*I didn't have anybody around me that I knew as an out gay person. I didn't really have somebody that I could look to say 'That's something that's accepted'.*" When describing where negative feelings of being gay may have stemmed from, Ignacio stated, "*I think that it's mostly because of the way that gay people are portrayed. ... You wouldn't want to be the gay people that you see on TV.*" A lack of non-stereotypic representation supported the stereotypical portrayal of a "gay lifestyle", which limited the occupational repertoire of gay men. Participants sought to piece together what being "out" looked like.

Those middle years were just getting a handle of what life could be. At first you go off all the stereotypes that you hear. You're just trying to create a picture of these little snippets of information that you hear, and you don't have enough information to really have a well-rounded picture of what it is. (Zach)

Maxwell stated, "*One other gay kid that we knew, and he was so flamboyant. And I wasn't. So, I think my parents didn't know what having a gay son even looked like.*"

Impact of religion

The impact of the presence of religion ranged from a turbulent internal battle with self-

identity to facilitating acceptance and support. Diego's account of the impact of religion after his parents discovered his internet search history was:

I immediately went to Christian counseling and I was so full of shame that I wasn't even able to say that I am gay to the counselor. I had to write it down. That was pretty much the only time that I said it or talked about it because language changed immediately. I wasn't gay, I was same sex attracted, I could still be a part of the community that I was in as long as I didn't perform, like, gay stereotypes.

His sense of belonging appeared to be tied to not naming "gay" or participating in occupations aligned with gay stereotypes. This allowed him to belong but did not allow him to do so authentically through enacting his identity or participating in occupations freely, particularly around his sexual curiosity. He indicated, "*Sexuality was defined as a struggle; as a burden to bear.*"

Maxwell described negative experiences with religion and believed the thoughts and dreams he had about men were, "*Satan tempting me.*" He shared, "*just for so long being like, this is the sin in your life, or this is the thing that's wrong with you.*" This dissonance between religious beliefs and sexuality caused an incredible internal struggle for Bryan who stated, "*I'm Catholic, but how do I be a gay Catholic?*" For these participants, religion inhibited the initiation of their coming-out transition.

Two participants had a positive involvement with the institution of religion. Rob, whose family has Zoroastrian beliefs, shared, "*my parents were just always so open to all religions and cultures.*" When he came out, Rob was met with acceptance from his mother, who stated "*You are my love and your dad's love for one another. You are a product of that. Who am I to judge you?*" Alternatively, Ted, who grew up practicing Roman Catholicism, realized that there was a "*dichotomy between what [he] was practicing [in terms of occupations] and what [he] was living.*" Therefore, he began looking for spiritual fulfilment from a different source.

I had the opportunity as an adult, to take a look at the options. I actually started going

to the United Church. The pastor there was married, he was gay, his husband ran the Sunday school. That was really the first time I thought, ‘What kind of messages am I receiving and what am I supporting?’

For Ted, this validation that one can be both gay and part of a religious institution, enacted through everyday occupations and employment, was a significant experience.

Finding a safe space

Accessing safe spaces

The major precursor to an individual initiating the coming-out process appeared to be a safe environment. Participants who did not actively seek a safe environment to come-out in eventually found themselves in a safe situation that facilitated this transition. Rob said, “*It was like ‘Oh, there is life outside of high school.’ ... I felt like it was a fresh start and I could really get out there and do what I wanted to do*”. It was when Rob moved to post-secondary education where he realized he was in a safe space, “*I’d become friends with a bunch of people in the program, and then slowly, I started getting more comfortable in my skin*”. This new environment is where he chose to come out.

The move away from high school to post-secondary is generally accompanied by a move to a more urban, and often more liberal and accepting, environment. Ted moved from a Christian high school, to a small-town university, and then to a liberal urban centre for grad-school. “*It was just a totally different experience. And it was such a different vibe and culture there that I feel like is so much more open-minded*”. This gave Ted the opportunity to shape his occupations in a way where he could start exploring his sexuality through participating in online dating and attending gay bars.

Diego’s journey towards finding a safe space started at 16 when he was forced to tell the Christian counselor he was gay. Attending a Christian university for his undergraduate degree meant he had to sign a “*covenant saying that [he] wouldn’t participate in gay activity*”. After graduating he was free to explore his sexuality, but he was not yet comfortable coming-out to his friends and family. He “*had [his]*

day to day life” and then engaged in new occupations such as “*chatting to people in the evening [on gay dating apps]*”. Diego was then hired at a Christian school where he was again forced to sign a contract. “*I would have to be celibate and alone, or I would have to lose my job*”. He was finally able to come out at the age of 25 when he was attending a health care program at an urban university where “*nobody had any problem or batted an eye when I told them that I was gay*”.

While most participants came out after high school, those who came out while they were still in high school found themselves in environments where people in power were actively dismantling heteronormative hegemony. Ignacio came out at 17, as his assessment of his high school was “*very, very queer friendly*”.

The reason for that is that in the 90s there had been two kids who had committed suicide at that school... they were in a relationship with each other and it was clear the reason they went through that was the bullying. So, the school were very vocally supportive of gay students.

Fluidity of safety

Safe spaces are fluid and never a guarantee. As participants moved through other life transitions (e.g., new jobs), they were faced anew with the decision of whether to disclose their sexuality. Ignacio described going back into the “*closet*” during engineering school as “*people would make homophobic and misogynistic comments out loud in class*”.

So, I would go to school, I would hang out with my school friends, we would go out on the weekend, and I would be functionally straight. I would hit on women even sometimes. And then if it wasn’t a night, I was hanging out with them, I would just be a normal gay man.

Bryan also found this while enrolled in a Masters’ program with a “*bro mentality*” culture. He chose to avoid disclosing his sexuality in this new environment.

Part of it is that it will change their perception of me and then they’ll just choose not

to hang around me or something like that ... Some of those types of guys might think like, 'Oh, does that mean you're attracted to me?'

I think it's going to get better

Many participants believed that coming-out was going to get easier for future generations and that the driving force was the increased presence of gay men in media. Rather than very few TV shows with only a stereotypical flamboyant male, there are now mainstream shows like *Queer Eye*, *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Grace and Frankie* in the mainstream media. These shows include a broad range of personalities who are out including drag queens, those in casual sneakers and a t-shirt, men who are in their 70's, to "*Jonathan Van Ness, who figure skates*" (Steven). This diverse and nuanced representation in the media suggests gay men will see themselves represented and as having innate value. Rob described that not only is there "*more exposure, you can see people that look like you. ... Even my dad knows who RuPaul is*". The hope is that there will come a time when gay individuals will not have to "*come-out*" in the same way that someone who is heterosexual does not need to. Bryan stated, "*I do feel like we're getting close*".

The disconnect between being gay and the stereotypical enactment of being gay

Who am I?

"*Because the world still doesn't accept it. The norm is still to be straight*" (Rob). With this statement, Rob is succinct in his view that the heteronormative hegemonic structure of Western society places gay men as deviant. To be gay is:

... a struggle, because just everything internally is telling you one thing but everything external is telling you otherwise. You walk into this world and you're seeing no one that really represents you. Or if they do, it's hidden and it's dark and it's in a little corner.

This subtheme is closely tied to the subtheme "that's not me". Ted described gay individuals

from his high school as "*very open and very flamboyant*". "*They kind of owned that identity but I never really identified with being a more flamboyant person. I never really identified with [being gay]*". Rob shared, "*I was like obviously everyone thinks I'm gay ... but I honestly don't think, at the time, I really had a measure of what that meant*". The disconnect between being gay and others' expectations what of being gay looked like put Rob in a liminal zone, as he saw no one like himself.

Bryan, from a heteronormative family, described his internal process as one where he "*would have a couple days where [I] would be like 'Yes, I'm gay, this is what I am'. But then [I] would have long stints where [I] would be like 'No, I'm not'*". Even after coming-out, Bryan continued to struggle with "labelling" himself as gay, thinking "*I'm attracted to men*", but not saying aloud "*I am gay*". Ignacio indicated a similar experience: "*It took me a while to kind of like associate a word or a label to it. And the label part of it was maybe the hardest part of that realization*". While many participants experienced a journey of discovery, Jordan speculated that "*I guess no one really knows how to be gay*".

Finding confidence through occupation in enacting gay identity

Another common theme across participants was a growing confidence in enacting occupations in keeping with their gay identity. Coming-out after high school meant that many participants felt inexperienced in the occupation of dating, having missed dating at the same time as their peers. Ted described how "*you can't go on [online] and be like 'This is my first kiss' because I was like, this is going to be pitiful and people are going to look down on me*". However, after Ted's first date he found a sense of confidence, "*I think that was the first experience that I had that I was like 'Okay, I'm not going to get rejected in this situation'*". Steven also revealed his confidence emerged from "*I guess, dating. Like knowing people want me*". Both Ted and Steven's experience acknowledges the importance of the occupation of dating in building confidence to enact their gay identity.

Rob indicated his confidence grew not only through dating men, but from connecting with

those in his social circle. *“I can be who I am and not have to suppress it or hide it or have dark thoughts about it. Like, people like me for who I am”*. Bryan, who had a difficult coming-out transition after his mother asked him to leave home, is still working on his confidence and suggested that the transition of coming-out itself contributed to building his confidence: *“Some days I have a lot of confidence and some days I just have low self-esteem. But I’m more confident now than I was before”*.

This is me: Self-acceptance

While the coming-out transition is never completely finished, as individuals continue to navigate new environments, many participants spoke of reaching a level of self-acceptance that eased the transition, creating greater assuredness in moving through it. Bryan described his reasoning for coming out as *“I just don’t want these physical symptoms of anxiety, more to, I’m just me. I want to be happy now”*. Maxwell, in parallel, declared *“For so long, being like, this is the sin in your life, or this is the thing that’s wrong with you ... then coming out and being like, no, this isn’t a problem. This is me”*. While Ted didn’t describe an internal struggle prior to coming out, he also experienced a defining moment of self-acceptance when a friend assumed he was gay. He thought, *“Okay, she’s called it what it is. I feel okay with that and I can accept that identity”*. Reaching the realization that they could be proud of who they are even though they are not who others expect them to be was a defining moment for many of the participants.

Steven talked about gaining a sense of clarity and change of perspective. *“I think since coming out I definitely think I’m more interested in queer issues [and] minority struggles in general”*. Throughout the participants’ transitions there was something gained, whether it was a true sense of self, a more contemporary point of view, freedom from destructive and disabling feelings, or even the feeling of being happy.

Doing what I want to do

Exploring sexuality

Participants explored their sexuality through occupations such as online dating, going to

the gym, and new nightlife activities and environments. Many participants felt their social environment restricted them from exploring their sexuality, and technology provided that outlet. The internet was a platform for exploring sexuality on their own terms. Tony recounted, *“I started exploring going online and meeting up with guys”*, while Zach was wanting to meet people and found *“this website called gay youth corner or something. ... people were talking about their own experiences and connecting and chatting”*. This changed his perspective as demonstrated when he described:

I think that helped me in just feeling more connected and more content with that part of who I was, because I had this safe place to explore it. [It] helped me to create a picture of what my life could be like or what being gay could involve.

Self-acceptance and image were prevalent among participants who were exploring their sexuality, especially with the newness of dating. Steven suggested, *“The going to the gym thing was maybe the biggest switch that happened right before and has continued since becoming gay”*. Bryan added, *“I go to more like the gay scenes that are party environments that I wouldn’t have gone to in the past. I think how much I go to the gym now is definitely tied to that”*.

Queering of occupations

Queering of occupations occurred as participants maintained meaningful occupations but changed elements to be more aligned with their gay identity. Finding an inclusive space to carry out their occupations was a large part of this. Almost all participants went to gay bars and participated in queer occupations as they became more comfortable with their gay identity. Tony mentioned that throughout the whole process, he didn’t acquire many new hobbies or interests: *“My friends and I just really kind of stuck to the same activities. The only thing different was we maybe started going to gay bars more regularly”*. He also added, *“I’ve joined gay sports leagues”* when he was asked if there was anything that had changed once he had come out. Zach pointed out that going to

a gay bar wasn't just because there were gay men, but "when I started going to different gay clubs and stuff like that, I think that it was just a really energizing and positive experience for me". Participating in the same occupations that he did before coming out, in a gay-friendly space, empowered him to be out.

Just like Tony and Zach, Diego focused on finding queer spaces that would be inclusive and accepting. He affirmed, "*most of the activities that I participate in are kind of like within a queer space or a queer focus. Like I joined a queer Ultimate team when I came out. ... My leisure activities changed to queer spaces*" and "*if I'm going to volunteer it's going to be with a queer organization*".

The type of media participants engaged with also changed or shifted throughout the coming out transition. Diego touched on how the music he listens to has evolved: "*There's definitely a bunch of songs from like queer artists as well that really spoke to my experience and gave me hope and justified my experience as well*". Steven also viewed different media since coming out, "*like getting more into gay culture itself too and like the TV I watch*".

Choosing for myself

As the participants told their stories, the recurring theme of making the choice for themselves and the impact of those choices appeared. Ignacio stated, "*The experience of being a gay man and living as an out gay man made me more focused on doing what I want and not doing what will make other people happy*".

Diego chose to change the language he used:

When I came out as gay proud, I just had this moment of realizing I couldn't change this part of me. It wasn't going away. I was attracted to men. I shouldn't be ashamed of that. ... I told my parents you know, 'I'm going to say I'm gay' because that makes the most sense to the society that I live in. It explains my relationships with women and men, so I think it's the best language to use. And it also frees me of the shame that I've been carrying.

Zach described a similar sense of being free: "*It was kind of liberating in the sense of there's no*

expectations for me ... If anything, [my parents] just now didn't have any expectations of what my life would be like". He noted, he could choose for himself, "*I can do whatever I want and meet amazing people and do different things*".

Discussion

Pervasiveness of heteronormativity tells gay men that they are not 'normal'. Many participants struggled with truly knowing who they are, which was exacerbated by a lack of role models and stereotypic representations in the media. This uncertainty in their identity was worsened by the bullying they experienced and feelings of rejection within certain families and church communities, and explains why access to a safe space can be an ongoing challenge. Contrary to previous studies of transitions with a clear beginning, middle, and end (e.g., moving to a new country) (Hon et al., 2011), this study found that the coming-out transition is not a one-time occurrence, as individuals move through new environments and life circumstances in which their sexual orientation is not yet known to others and they have to navigate whether it is safe to be out. This finding is in keeping with Lewis (2012), who described how individuals may encounter life circumstances which may necessitate becoming re-closeted.

The move through new environments was most often the result of shifting through life stages (e.g., moving for university, starting a new job). New occupations reported during the coming-out transition were rare and were explained by transitions associated with maturation into adulthood. Previous life transition literature has shown that occupations are either adopted, ceased, or maintained throughout transitions (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Hon et al., 2011). Yet, in agreeance with Devine and Nolan's (2007) study of coming-out, there was not a significant shift in the participation of new or adopted occupations and daily occupational participation remained largely unchanged. The only occupation that reportedly ceased was the attendance of organized religious services. Occupations were most often maintained; however, the way certain occupations

were performed became modified or, more specifically, were queered.

Participation in queered occupations became a means of exploring and strengthening their gay identity (e.g., through online dating or going to gay bars) and this strengthened gay identity in turn reinforced queer occupational participation (e.g., playing on queer sports teams or becoming involved in queer advocacy and queer culture). The relationship between identity and occupational participation was iterative and mutually dependent throughout the coming-out transition. Social and physical environments underline this narrative by impacting whether the individual feels safe to enact their gay identity and/or to engage in their queered occupations. A strengthened sense of identity supported their resolve and was maintained even while transitioning through oppressive environments. Previous studies (Beagan & Hattie, 2015; Birkholtz & Blair, 1999; Devine & Nolan, 2007; Lewis, 2012) have described the important role that occupational participation plays when exploring one's sexual orientation. However, our understanding of the interplay between identity and occupational participation and the underlining role of environment during the coming-out transition is, to the best of our knowledge, new to this literature.

Of note, this study was completed in a liberal, urban centre in Canada where gay marriage has been legalized since 2005 (Pierceson, 2014). The authors recognize these findings cannot be generalized to other areas of the world where 'negative environment' has a much more severe or potentially life-threatening reality. While some participants were not met with immediate acceptance, no participants in this study were met with violence or abuse, which is inconsistent with many studies in the coming-out literature (Fournier et al., 2018; Jadwin-Cakmak et al., 2015).

Future Considerations

Participants were recruited through the social circles of the first two authors who are both white, in their early 30s, have higher level education, and live in a liberal urban centre. This narrowed the diversity of recruitment. Studying a rather homogenous group gave voice to a particular experience, allowing for a deeper

understanding. This lays down the foundation for future research across diverse populations in the occupational literature. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that all participants voluntarily expressed interest in the study after having viewed the recruitment poster. Thus, this study only included participants willing and able to share their story, potentially omitting those who might have had more challenging and traumatic experiences.

Suggestions for future research include expanding populations to other geographic areas, older or younger individuals, disabled people, other races and ethnicities, and others in the 2SLGBTQPIA+ community. Additionally, exploring individuals who are experiencing concurrent transitions such as the coming-out transition in addition to gender transition would contribute greatly to the literature.

Conclusion

This study explored the transition of coming-out for gay men in situations where the transition was predictable and voluntary. It highlighted the importance of environment and the vital role it played in allowing them to confidently and safely enact gay identity through occupational participation. Occupational participation allows for exploration of identity, and identity, in turn, strengthens occupational participation. Many of the participants spoke to breaking down barriers and the potential for this transition to be easier for gay men in the near future. More research is needed to understand the coming-out transition across a diversity of gay men, and other people from the 2SLGBTQIAP+ community. An intersectional approach to this research is critical for an inclusive understanding of coming-out.

Endnote

2SLGBTQIAP+ refers to Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (or Questioning), Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, and more.

Acknowledgement

We hold deep gratitude and honour the lives, work, traditions, stewardship, and inseparable relationship to

land and community of x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam) Nation, on whose traditional, unceded and ancestral lands the University of British Columbia Point Grey campus resides. This acknowledgement also serves to highlight Canada's colonial history and the ongoing violent effects of colonialism in Canada. We commit to doing the work to dismantle white supremacy and colonialism in Canada.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

ORCID

Susan Forwell

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7827-5934>

References

- Asbjørnslett, M., Engelsrud, G. H., & Helseth, S. (2015). How children with disabilities engage in occupations during a transitional phase. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 22(3), 320–333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2014.952365>
- Began, B., & Hattie, B. (2015). LGBTQ experiences with religion and spirituality: Occupational transition and adaptation. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 22(4), 459–476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2014.953670>
- Bergan-Gander, R., & von Kurthy, H. (2006). Sexual orientation and occupation: Gay men and women's lived experiences of occupational participation. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 69(9), 402–408. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030802260606900903>
- Birkholtz, M., & Blair, S. E. E. (1999). 'Coming out' and its impact on women's occupational behaviour: A discussion paper. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 6(2), 68–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.1999.9686453>
- Bogaert, A. F., & Hafer, C. L. (2009). Predicting the timing of coming out in gay and bisexual men from world beliefs, physical attractiveness, and childhood gender identity/role. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 39(8), 1991–2019. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2009.00513.x>
- Boxer, A. M., Cook, J. A., & Herdt, G. (1991). Double jeopardy: Identity transitions and parent-child relations among gay and lesbian youth. In K. Pillemer & K. McCartney (Eds.), *Parent-child relations throughout life* (pp. 59–62). Erlbaum.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519–531. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>
- Carr, B. B., Ben Hagai, E., & Zurbruggen, E. L. (2017). Queering Bem: Theoretical intersections between Sandra Bem's scholarship and queer theory. *Sex Roles*, 76(11–12), 655–668. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-015-0546-1>
- Carpenter, C. M., & Suto, M. (2008). *Qualitative research for occupational and physical therapists: A practical guide*. Wiley.
- Chapdelaine, S., Shields, H., & Forwell, S. (2017). How mothers experience their adolescents' first year in high school. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 24(3), 338–350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2016.1254675>
- Crider, C., Calder, C. R., Bunting, K. L., & Forwell, S. (2015). An integrative review of occupational science and theoretical literature exploring transition. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 22(3), 304–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2014.922913>
- Devine, R., & Nolan, C. (2007). Sexual identity & human occupation: A qualitative exploration. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 14(3), 154–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2007.9686596>
- Elliott, J. (2005). *Using narrative in social research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sage.
- Fournier, C., Hamelin Brabant, L., Dupéré, S., & Chamberland, L. (2018). Lesbian and gay immigrants' post-migration experiences: An integrative literature review. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16(3), 331–350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2017.1299269>
- Frith, H., & Gleeson, K. (2004). Clothing and embodiment: Men managing body image and appearance. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 5(1), 40–48. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1524-9220.5.1.40>
- Given, L. M. (2016). *100 questions (and answers) about qualitative research*. Sage.
- Hon, C., Sun, P., Suto, M., & Forwell, S. J. (2011). Moving from China to Canada: Occupational transitions of immigrant mothers of children with special needs. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 18(3), 223–236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2011.581627>
- Jadwin-Cakmak, L. A., Pingel, E. S., Harper, G. W., & Bauermeister, J. A. (2015). Coming out to dad: Young gay and bisexual men's experiences disclosing same-sex attraction to their fathers. *American Journal of Men's Health*, 9(4), 274–288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988314539993>
- Law, M., Cooper, B., Strong, S., Steward, D., Rigby, P., & Letts, L. (1996). The Person-Environment-Occupational Model: A transactive approach to occupational performance. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 63(1), 9–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000841749606300103>
- Lewis, N. M. (2012). Remapping disclosure: Gay men's segmented journeys of moving out and coming out.

- Social & Cultural Geography*, 13(3), 211–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2012.677469>
- Luck, K., & Beagan, B. (2015). Occupational transition of smoking cessation in women: “You’re restructuring your whole life”. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 22(2), 183–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2014.887418>
- Maley, C., Pagana, N., Velenger, C., & Humbert, T. (2016). Dealing with major life events and transitions. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 70(4), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2016.015537>
- Marshall, B., Cardon, P., Poddar, A., & Fontenot, R. (2013). Does sample size matter in qualitative research? A review of qualitative interviews in IS research. *Journal of Computer Information Systems*, 54(1), 11–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08874417.2013.11645667>
- Njelesani, J., Tang, A., Jonsson, H., & Polatajko, H. (2014). Articulating an occupational perspective. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 21(2), 226–235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2012.717500>
- Pepin, G., & Deutscher, B. (2011). The lived experience of Australian retirees: ‘I’m retired, what do I do now?’ *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 74(9), 419–426. <https://doi.org/10.4276/030802211X13153015305556>
- Punch, M. (1994). Politics and ethics in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 83–97). Sage.
- Pierceson, J. (2014). Same-sex marriage in Canada and the United States: The role of political and legal culture. *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 44(3), 321–333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02722011.2014.939421>
- Saewyc, E., Konishi, C., Poon, C., & Smith, A. (2011). Is it safer to be gay in high school today? Trends in sexual orientation identity and harassment in Canada. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 48(2), S8–S9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.11.024>
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 23(4), 334–340. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X\(200008\)23:4<AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X(200008)23:4<AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G)
- Sullivan, N. (2003). *A critical introduction to queer theory*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Taylor, R. R. (2017). *Kielhofner’s model of human occupation: Theory and application* (5th ed.). Wolters Kluwer.
- Valentine, G., Skelton, T., & Butler, R. (2003). Coming out and outcomes: Negotiating lesbian and gay identities with, and in, the family. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 21(4), 479–499. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d277t>
- Watson, R. J., Rose, H. A., Doull, M., Adjei, J., & Saewyc, E. (2019). Worsening perceptions of family connectedness and parent support for lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28(11), 3121–3131. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01489-3>