

Seduction of the Innocent, New York, 1953].

Batman, appearing in 1939, featured the adventures of a playboy detective and his teenage ward, Robin. Although the relationship is portrayed as a simple mentor-protégé one, some teenage male readers were able to project something stronger into it. This aspect was certainly flirted with in the campy television offshoot beginning in 1966, though this series reflects a much changed cultural climate. In 1941 there appeared *Wonderwoman*, featuring an Amazon with special powers living on an all-woman island. This strip—contrary to the expressed wishes of its creators—served as a focus for lesbian aspirations. In the 1970s it was rediscovered by the women's movement as a proto-feminist statement.

In the late 1940s "Blade" drew several illustrated stories, including "The Barn" and "Truck Hiker," that can be considered predecessors of the gay comics. Circulated underground, they have been officially published only in recent years. Somewhat later the wordless strips of supermacho types created by Tom of Finland began to circulate in Europe.

It was the American **counterculture** of the 1960s, however, which first made possible the exploration of taboo subjects in a context of crumbling censorship restrictions. In 1964 a Philadelphia gay monthly, *Drum*, began serializing *Harry Chess* by Al Shapiro ("A. Jay"). Modeled on a popular television series, *Harry Chess* was both macho and campy, though explicit sex scenes were veiled. In the 1970s no-holds-barred examples appeared drawn by such artists as Bill Ward, Sean, and Stephen (*Meatman*).

Following the practice of mainstream magazines, the Los Angeles *Advocate* had a regular one-panel series by Joe Johnson named *Miss Thing*. The hero of this popular classic was an outrageous queen of a type that gay liberation was trying to make obsolete. Subsequently *Christopher Street* published a series of

New Yorker-style cartoons that capture, perhaps all too well, the sophistication of Manhattan's upper East Side.

In 1980 Howard Cruse, together with his publisher Dennis Kitchen, started a series of pulp books called *Gay Comix* that included work by both men and women. Out of this work evolved Cruse's gay-male couple, Wendell and Ollie, with whose more-or-less real-life problems many *Advocate* readers could identify.

European artists also developed strips. France's Hippolyte Romain's *Les Chéries* provides an acid portrait of older Parisian queens. In Spain Nazario's *Anarcoma*, featuring a macho transvestite, played fast-and-loose with gender categories. Probably Europe's most original contribution, however, is the work of Düsseldorf-based Ralf König. The often ludicrous situations of his homely characters highlight banal, yet touching aspects of everyday gay male life.

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COMING OUT

The cultural and psychological process by which persons relate to a particular model of homosexuality by internalizing a sense of **identity** as "homosexual" or "lesbian" in accordance with that model is called "coming out." As there are different (if any) identity models of homosexuality in different cultures, the coming out process also shows wide variation.

Conceptual Problems. In the industrialized countries of Northern Europe and North America, the process can be applied to anyone with a substantial erotic interest in others of the same gender, and its end result is identification as a "homosexual" or "lesbian." In much of the rest of the world, the process concerns primarily the sexually receptive male, not

the active-insertive one, and the end result may be identification as a quasi-female; it remains unclear to what extent a corresponding process exists for females. In other cultures and at other times, and in particular in areas where pederasty has been popular, the identity model is lacking and the question of "coming out" does not arise.

Research into "coming out" has generally been limited to areas where the northern-industrial model of homosexuality is dominant, and this must be kept in mind in evaluating any claims to universally valid findings. Another flaw in much of the research is its assumption that a homosexual identity is somehow innate and intrinsically valuable and needs only to be uncovered or unsuppressed in order to blossom; an alternative which posits the sense of homosexual identity as something learned from the (sub- and dominant) culture, and hence views "coming out" as a socialization process, has not been sufficiently explored. Most of the research assumes that "coming out" is a necessary and in the long run beneficial (if at times difficult) process leading to an identity which is assumed to be an objective good. Both of these assumptions are culture-bound and subject to question.

Even in the northern-industrialized societies, there is considerable dispute over the question of where "coming out" ends, with minimalists holding it to be a state of internal acceptance of a homosexual self-identity (which could be completely private), gay liberationists taking it to be a state in which one's homosexuality is made known to virtually anyone with whom one has significant contact, and various writers taking intermediate positions. The latter group seems to have divided "coming out" into a multifold process in which one "comes out" to oneself, one's family, one's friends, to people in a gay social setting, to one's boss, colleagues, and others in many combinations and sequences.

Age at Coming Out. In contem-

porary northern-industrial countries, with their wide media exposure of homosexuality and its subculture, coming out is primarily a matter for youth from puberty through the mid-20s. Before the taboos on public exposure of homosexuality were broken, however, the process was not uncommon at much older stages of life, prompted by a chance encounter.

The best time (psychologically and sociologically) to come out is an issue few have systematically addressed. Many in the gay community simply take the view that the earlier, the better: "Out of the closets and into the streets!" This position, however, needs to assess carefully the liabilities accompanying early identification as homosexual, when an early or even pre-teenager has few resources to help him cope with social homophobia, little chance of meaningful assistance from older homosexuals, and may prematurely be closing off routes of self-exploration which would otherwise lead to bisexuality or heterosexuality. Against these disadvantages may be placed the ability to discover earlier adult role-models with which the young homosexual may feel more comfortable, and the opportunities which youth affords for an active and enjoyable sexuality.

Another perspective suggests that one might benefit by delaying the revelation of homosexual identity, if this has been internally adopted, until the environment is more positive and supportive (usually after secondary schooling is completed), or limiting it to a few "safe" persons who can give necessary social and psychological support while the teenager is learning crisis competence, self-respect and ego integrity and in various ways preparing to eventually face the reality of a homophobic society.

Some argue in favor of delaying "coming out" to a later stage, when economic independence and social status have already been secured and are not so easily jeopardized, or even later when family obligations have been met through mar-

riage and procreation, and when middle-aged ennui can be replaced with the adventure of exploring a whole new sexual terrain.

Going Back In? The argument might also be advanced that, in view of the lesser intensity of ageism in heterosexual society, the midlife period would be a good time for homosexuals to "come out" into heterosexuality. Very little is known about such "reverse coming out," however, since few if any researchers have gathered study groups of former homosexuals. Despite this absence, there are indications that such a reversal can take place, especially during the teenage years, and a study of the Kinsey data would also suggest a substantial "drop-out" population waiting to be studied.

Coming Out as a Developmental Process. A few gays and lesbians report no memory of a coming out process; they always considered themselves homosexual and were never "in the closet." Others have reported a sudden revelation of their own homosexuality which does not fit into any theory of stages but has brought them from apparently heterosexual to comfortably homosexual virtually overnight.

Theorists of the coming out process, however, have generally characterized it as a series of milestone events whereby a person moves from a point of almost complete concealment of homosexuality to one of self-recognition or external proclamation of a homosexual identity. Perhaps the most comprehensive statement of this process is by Gary J. McDonald: "As a developmental process through which gay persons become aware of their affectional and sexual preferences and choose to integrate this knowledge into their personal and social lives, coming out involves adopting a nontraditional identity, restructuring one's self-concept, reorganizing one's personal sense of history, and altering one's relations with others and with society . . . all of which reflects a complex series of cognitive and affective

transformations as well as changes in behavior."

Most coming out models propose a linear series of developmental stages based on a particular theoretical perspective (e.g., Erikson, Piaget, Goffman). Examples of such sequences include: pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationships, integration (Coleman); sensitization, signification-disorientation/dissociation, coming out, commitment (Plummer, Troiden); identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, identity synthesis (Cass).

Unresolved issues include the linearity of the process within the life of an individual (including backsliding and changes in the sequence of stages) and individual differences in the timing of the process, including absolute time in terms of age at reaching various set points and relative time in terms of how long the process takes.

There is some evidence that coming out is occurring earlier and that the process is becoming more compact with each new cohort of gays and lesbians, especially in urban, collegiate, and media-saturated communities. It is no longer rare for the coming out process to begin shortly after puberty and be essentially completed by the end of adolescence. This is attributable in large part to the recent visibility of gay and lesbian topics in many parts of the world.

Significant Milestones. The coming out milestones often have great significance to the individual. Many remember, and even celebrate, the anniversary of their coming out. Books devoted primarily to coming out stories document and highlight the pain, the indecision, and sometimes the violence, isolation and alienation that often accompany the coming out process. For many, however, the process is not particularly noteworthy or painful. Education, supportive friends and family, youth, gender atypicality, and a history of some homosexual but no

heterosexual experiences have been cited as "facilitating factors," but few if any of these have been systematically investigated.

The self-help literature for gay and lesbian youth is quite explicit in designating parents as the crucial factor in the youth's coming out process. Those who do not come out to their family, according to G. B. MacDonald, become "half-members of the family unit: afraid and alienated, unable ever to be totally open and spontaneous, to trust or be trusted. . . . This sad stunting of human potential breeds stress for gay people and their families alike—stress characterized by secrecy, ignorance, helplessness, and distance." The scientific literature, however, has largely ignored the role of parents, having centered on gay and lesbian adults.

Obstacles and Difficulties. Many defenses are used by individuals to check the seemingly inevitable process, including rationalization ("I was drunk"), relegation to insignificance ("I only did it as a favor for a friend"), compartmentalization ("I get turned on by boys but that doesn't make me a queer"), withdrawal to celibacy or asexuality ("I'm saving myself until I get married"), and denial ("I can't be lesbian because I date boys"). Repression of same-sex desires may lead to future feelings of panic or major disruptions of established coping strategies. It may be difficult for a person going through early phases to request assistance in coping with inner turmoil because consciously there is no problem, and the issues are so nebulous and intensely personal that they constitute an existential crisis. It is not easy to recognize that social standards of behavior, attitudes, and expectations for the future that normally accompany a heterosexual identity are not relevant to one's own life. Passing as heterosexual has its own costs: loss of personal authenticity, feelings of hypocrisy, constant fear of being discovered, and generalized anxiety.

A positive outcome may provide identity integration, a lessening of feelings of guilt and loneliness, a fusing of sexuality and emotionality (such as taking a lover), and a sense of support from the surrounding gay or lesbian community.

The existence of a coming out process is usually attributed to a homophobic environment in which one must take a stance against the perceived social consensus in order to assert one's own preferences, attractions, feelings and inclinations. In this view, full social acceptance of homosexuality as a natural and common variation on a sexual theme would end most of the emotional difficulties as well as the sense of fateful significance of what is otherwise described as coming out.

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COMMON LAW

Common law is the designation for a system of law that relies on long-established custom and the evolving pattern of precedent established by court decisions. The law common to the whole realm—so termed originally to distinguish it from local custom—began in medieval England, and spread overseas with British colonization. Today, with various national