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Coming Out Culture and LGBTQ+ Teachers

WGSS-350: Queer Theories

Dr. Kiki Kosnick

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Audre Lorde Writing Prize Submission

Long Analytical Essay

Coming Out Culture and LGBTQ+ Teachers

Though efforts have been made to restructure the ways in which gender and sexuality are regarded in schools, heteronormativity still has a firm grasp in many classrooms. Not only does this create challenges for students, but also for teachers. LGBTQ+ teachers face unique challenges in determining what aspects of their identity and experiences to share with students. These difficulties are often compounded by the pressures of “coming out culture.” This describes the expectations associated with performing queerness, which are fueled by neoliberal conceptions of proper queer identity and expression. Through this lens, the pressure placed upon teachers to come out is illuminated and the ways in which teachers uphold this system through coming out may be critiqued. On the other hand, many teachers are aware of the positive implications that being an “out” teacher may have on students. These conflicting ideas can be observed through queer teachers’ accounts of their experiences on TikTok. While this can impact any teacher whose experiences with gender or sexuality fall outside of the norm, this essay will specifically center non-binary teachers, as there is minimal research which encompasses their experiences. As demonstrated by TikTok user sureblockholmes, teachers face pressure to be out while avoiding harmful aspects of coming out culture, such as the essentialization of queerness, the assumption that coming out is freeing, and a focus on the individual. In some ways, sureblockholmes demonstrates these features of coming out culture through their two-part series on TikTok entitled “Coming Out as a Queer Teacher,” making it a valuable source to critique from a queer perspective. However, they also engage with ideas which counter critiques of coming out culture. Ultimately, queer teachers must balance these seemingly conflicting ideas, as

sureblockholmes demonstrates, in order to determine the best course of action for themselves and their students.

Critiques of coming out practices are often grounded in the work of Michel Foucault. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault explains how sexuality has shifted, in modern society, from being something that a person does to something that they are. He writes “homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). This specific passage hints at a few critiques of coming out that have been widely discussed by queer theorists. Foucault’s emphasis of the terms “vocabulary” and “categories” draws attention to the ways in which sexuality is often reduced to simple definitions. This works to uphold a rigid view of sexuality, further marginalizing those whose experiences with sexuality and gender are more complex. Critiques of an assimilationist view of sexuality are also highlighted in this passage. Foucault references the “naturalness” of homosexuality, drawing attention to the ways people attempt to justify queerness within heteronormative society by claiming normalcy.

Evidence has indicated that teachers often have a unique relationship to coming out. In their TikTok video, creator sureblockholmes provides advice for fellow queer, specifically non-binary, educators. They state, “If you can be reasonably assured that you are safe being out on your campus, then do it!” This creator obviously addresses the importance of safety, but it is clear that they feel being out to students is the best possible option for teachers. In their 2019 study, Llewellyn & Reynolds analyzed the perspectives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) teachers in the UK on coming out and being out in school. The participants’ responses seemed to

echo the sentiments in sureblockholmes' video. All participants emphasized the importance of being a role model for LGB students. For many of the participants, this idea of being a positive role model seemed linked to being out. Some of the participants even felt regretful for not being "brave enough" to be fully out at school (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2019). This shows how the pervasiveness of coming out culture may contribute to queer teachers' beliefs that being out in the classroom is better than not being out.

Influences of coming out culture are present in the narratives of many queer teachers' TikToks. One way that this is seen is through the essentialization of queerness (Clare, 2017), which is one of the central issues with coming out culture. Building upon Foucault's ideas, Clare (2017) writes "The ubiquity of coming out narratives, early queer theorists argued, consolidates a minoritizing and essentializing model of gay identity." Through this statement, Clare draws attention to the way that coming out narratives often attempt to simplify the complexities of experiences people have with gender and sexuality. While not necessarily intentional, this type of narrative is present in queer teachers' TikToks, including sureblockholmes' two-part series. For example, when describing the ways in which they make their classroom inclusive for LGBTQ+ students, sureblockholmes notes that their classroom is covered in rainbows and flags, as opposed to describing the ways in which they actually support LGBTQ+ students. While this visibility can be important, many problems faced by LGBTQ+ students—bullying or lack of comprehensive sex education, for example—need more direct action.

The influence of these neoliberal ideas of coming out is made even more obvious through sureblockholmes' statement toward the end of their video. Referencing students who get their pronouns wrong, they state: "I'm going to continue to gently correct 250 people every single day

because my identity is a critical part of who I am.” While it is obviously important to respect people’s pronouns, this statement also demonstrates the influence of coming out culture, specifically the essentialization of queerness. The creator refers vaguely to their identity, which is assumed to mean their identity as a non-binary person. The fact that they state “my identity,” when they really mean “gender identity” shows this essentialization of queerness, as other aspects of their identity are not mentioned. Even just describing gender and sexuality as an “identity” is, from a queer perspective, contributing to coming out culture. In addition to these more subtle cues, sureblockholmes also explicitly describes their identity as a “critical part” of who they are. Through this language, the creator is emphasizing the significance of being visibly queer, which ultimately reinforces neoliberal ideas about the importance of coming out.

Further demonstrating this idea of the essentialization of queerness is the narrative of the “authentic teacher,” which can be seen in sureblockholmes’ TikToks. In his 2011 essay, Trevor G. Gates expresses the benefits of coming out in the classroom. He states: “Coming out in the classroom, while not without complications, models for students a sense of wholeness, authenticity, and integrity (Gates, 2011). sureblockholmes describes themselves as an “out and proud queer educator.” In part two of their series they explain how they want every student to know that they are proud of being queer. They demonstrate this idea of “wholeness” and “authenticity” by emphasizing their positive feelings toward being out as a teacher. To imply that coming out may be associated with “wholeness, authenticity, and integrity” is to imply that not coming out represents brokenness and deception. This narrative advances the assumption that being out in school is always a positive experience for teachers, while condemning teachers who may not be out in the classroom. This leaves little room for teachers to decide how they would

prefer to express their gender and sexuality in the classroom, based on their evaluation of the degree of safety in their environment, their personal comfort, and their values.

The ideas pushed through this authentic teacher narrative reflect the false idea that coming out is always liberating, another main issue with coming out culture according to Clare (2017). This misconception is especially limiting for people of color and other queer individuals with multiple marginalized identities. The essentialization of sexuality leads people to focus more on the process of coming out, without acknowledging the whole identity or experiences of the person coming out. In short, seeing queer people only as queer ignores other parts of them, such as race, ethnicity and disability. As a result, teachers with multiple marginalized identities may face even more barriers in determining how to present themselves in their schools, compared to those who do not experience this intersection of marginalized identities. Limitations faced by queer teachers with multiple marginalized identities are not mentioned in sureblockholmes' TikToks, which provides another example of the essentialization of queerness in their videos, as well as an endorsement of the idea that coming out is liberating. The content creator encourages all teachers to be out, with no mention of the consequences that this may have for teachers who come from backgrounds different from theirs.

While the pressures of coming out culture prompt queer teachers to feel a responsibility for being visibly queer, teachers belonging to certain cultural groups may feel disproportionately less comfortable with this visibility, or may find it entirely unnecessary. These teachers feeling greater discomfort associated with coming out does not necessarily mean that they are less comfortable with their queerness, they may just choose to negotiate their identities and values differently. This is demonstrated by Richard T. Rodríguez through his concept of “Queer

Familia.” He explains that while many white LGBTQ+ people may rely heavily on their “chosen families” as they explore their queerness, this trend does not apply to everyone. He writes, “For Chicana/o queers—as [Cherríe] Moraga has shown—disinheriting one’s biologically given family is a near impossible task considering how blood ties often prove invaluable” (Rodríguez, 2009). Though queer people are incredibly diverse, LGBTQ+ spaces are often still dominated by white gay men. For many queer people of color, maintaining these relationships with biological family members is the only way to feel connected to their culture, as well as to feel protected and seen. Asiel Adan Sanchez explains “coming out means something different in Latino culture because overt acknowledgement of sexuality is often met with intense disapproval.” They explain that many Latinx queer people may express their sexuality or gender through their actions, without acknowledging it verbally. This perspective reveals why some Latinx individuals may not wish to assert their queerness in the same way that many European-Americans do, ultimately providing insight into why some teachers may not wish to come out in the classroom.

These conflicting cultural expectations may create an internal conflict for queer teachers of color, as well as teachers with other marginalized identities, contributing to other issues faced by these teachers daily in their schools. In their 2015 study, Meyer, Taylor, & Peter found that teachers are more “sensitive to behaviors targeting vulnerable groups in their school” (p. 229) when they are part of a marginalized group, specifically if they are LGB, a person of color, or a woman. For example, teachers who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ) were more likely to personally commit themselves to advancing social justice issues in the classroom, compared to straight teachers. Despite the fact that teachers of these different backgrounds may

be better equipped to recognize and intervene in instances of discrimination in their schools, they may still be limited in their ability to stop it. Another finding of Meyer, Taylor & Peter indicated that these individuals were more likely to fear backlash for standing up against discrimination in their schools. It is reasonable to assume that individuals who fall under multiple of these categories may experience compounding pressures. For example, LGBTQ+ teachers teachers of color may experience even more backlash, in comparison to their white queer counterparts, for attempting to stand up against discrimination in their schools. This may lead some of these teachers to avoid intervening in such situations in the first place. Ultimately, these findings show how sureblockholmes' claims are not able to encompass the nuanced experiences of queer teachers of color, or those with other marginalized identities. The unfortunate reality is that teachers from certain backgrounds may be less safe and less comfortable expressing their queerness, compared to others.

Despite their strong assertion that being out in the classroom is best, sureblockholmes presents a more nuanced understanding of the politics surrounding coming out in some ways. One of the most positive aspects of their videos is their assertion that queer teachers should not come out if they do not feel it is safe. Though this discussion could have been a bit more comprehensive, they still acknowledged this important point. They explain, "You are living authentically as yourself with or without other people's knowledge of who you are." This small comment briefly decenters the importance of coming out which, through coming out culture, is placed on the individual. This highlights another one of the problems that Clare identified with coming out culture: coming out is seen as a problem with the self, instead of as a problem with society (Clare, 2017). Instead of equating authenticity with visibility—as the authentic teacher

narrative, and coming out culture as a whole, encourage— they assert the fact that living authentically can include not disclosing aspects of identity or experiences. This is important because it takes the responsibility off of queer people to completely accept and be proud of their identity, which can be difficult in a society that does not encourage this. Additionally, this perspective is valuable as it leads to greater self-awareness on a societal level. When this responsibility is removed from queer individuals, those with problematic or hateful views of queer people are made responsible for transforming those views, and each member of society is more inclined to work toward creating a world with less oppression.

Though it is clear that queer teachers can—often unintentionally—conform to coming out culture, the extent to which this is a negative thing is debatable. Through sureblockholmes' example, it becomes clear that queer teachers can simultaneously endorse conflicting perspectives about coming out. This specific example represents a larger issue with queer criticisms of coming out culture, which parallels a common critique of Foucault's work. Despite the valid critiques of coming out culture, Foucault and scholars with similar ideas often do not acknowledge the real lived experiences of queer people in modern society. Further evidence of this is seen through debate about identity labels. While Foucault and other queer theorists argue that identity labels are limiting and harmful, words remain an important way for people to understand and explain their experiences. The extent to which identity labels are insignificant or harmful can be debated in great detail, but ultimately many people will still value the identity labels that they have chosen for themselves. Similarly, even though there are many issues with coming out culture, it is difficult to imagine how it could drastically shift any time in the near future.

Whether or not sureblockholmes, or other queer TikTok content creators, are aware of these queer critiques of coming out, it may be difficult for them to completely reject the influences of coming out culture. Through their advice about coming out, sureblockholmes provides insight into some of the reasons why teachers may wish to be out in the classroom. While gender and sexuality do not represent the entirety of a person's identity, it may feel like a large part. This could be especially true for young students, many of whom are just beginning to think about their own gender and sexuality. sureblockholmes describes how being an out role model for students can help them feel understood and accepted. They explain, "For some students, just the knowledge that a queer adult exists within their world is hugely impactful." While this statement contributes to the false idea that visibility can solve all problems faced by queer people, it is not necessarily untrue. sureblockholmes mentions that visibility leads to students feeling safer, more accepted, and more at home. While some straight, cisgender teachers may be just as accepting, helpful, and understanding as queer teachers, they may not be able to connect with queer students in the same way.

Furthermore, while queer critiques argue that coming out is an unnecessary, often harmful social practice, acknowledging this fact does not immediately remove the social significance of coming out. All students, queer or not, will likely encounter some sort of coming out experience in their life. Drawing from this knowledge, sureblockholmes describes a more practical reason for coming out to students: so students know how to respond when someone comes out to them. They talk about how they have often used National Coming Out Day as an opportunity to teach students what to say when someone comes out to them. They would then further this conversation into a discussion about empathy, connection, and trust. It is important to

acknowledge the harm caused by coming out culture, but—admittedly on a much smaller scale—harm may also be caused by poor reactions to coming out. Even though these actions and attitudes may reinforce coming out culture, they help students to navigate topics relating to gender and sexuality in the current social climate.

After critiquing the ways in which teachers may perpetuate coming out culture, while also creating space to understand teachers' reasons for coming out, the question becomes: how can teachers integrate these two perspectives? In addition to some of the nuanced conversations presented by sureblockholmes, some of the strategies employed by other queer educators were revealed in different videos on TikTok. When asked whether their students understood that they are non-binary, creator desmondfambrini responded "Umm do they need to?" Later they emphasize that "the key is for them [the students] to learn the subject I'm teaching." Similar ideas were displayed in Llewellyn and Reynolds' study, particularly through a participant referred to as 'Melissa.' Melissa was the only teacher in the study who was fully out to her students. She found that being honest about her experiences, without making a big deal out of her sexuality, was the best option for her. Through this approach she was able to resist "both the ideal of the heteronormative teacher and the confessional aspect of coming out" (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2019). This means that she felt as if she could disrupt heteronormativity in subtle ways, while still avoiding the expectations of coming out culture. While this exact approach may not work for everyone, it seems that many queer teachers fall somewhere in this "in-between."

Despite the clearly valid critiques of the culture surrounding coming out, Foucault's ideas leave little to work with in some ways. While it may be possible to gradually shift the expectations and norms surrounding coming out, queer teachers must still live and work with

what they can in this moment. This is demonstrated through the example provided by TikTok creator sureblockholmes. Ultimately, sureblockholmes' TikToks could benefit from alternative perspectives, but they still provide a starting point for queer teachers to understand how to navigate coming out (or not coming out) in the classroom. While some of these teachers' TikToks may be critiqued for upholding neoliberal expectations of queerness, it is important to also analyze the reasons why queer teachers may feel a desire to be out in their classrooms. Ultimately, with this knowledge, teachers can be better equipped to make decisions about how to talk about gender and sexuality in their classrooms, leading to greater discussion of such important topics without passing judgment on teachers for their personal decisions related to coming out.

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