



## Short Communication

# Opening the closet door: Openness to experience, masculinity, religiosity, and coming out among same-sex attracted men



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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary models of sexual identity emphasize variability in “coming out”. To date, little research has examined the potential role of personality and individual differences. In a Canadian community sample of same-sex attracted men ( $N = 257$ ), greater openness to experience (i.e., openness) and lower religiosity were associated with an earlier age of coming out. Further, openness was associated with an earlier age of coming out over and above childhood gender role, religiosity, and participant age. We also found a 3-way interaction, such that a particularly late age of coming out was found among highly masculine, highly religious men low in openness. Using a dichotomous measure, openness was also lower among those who had not come out (vs. those who were out). Our findings suggest potential barriers to coming out for same-sex attracted men with more conventional and traditional personality traits. Implications for understanding the coming out experience are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Early models of “coming out” (i.e., identifying as a sexual minority) proposed that sexual identity typically follows a sequential developmental process (e.g., Cass (1984); Coleman (1982); Troiden (1979)). Contemporary critiques of these stage-based models have emphasized variability in the coming out process, arguing that coming out varies considerably based on gender (Diamond, 2006, 2014; Rust, 1993), sexual minority group (e.g., homosexual vs. bisexual; Diamond (2006); Floyd and Stein (2002)), ethnicity (Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Parks, Hughes, & Matthews, 2004), culture (Shenkman & Shmotkin, 2013), and birth cohort (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). Building in these critiques, The Ecological Model of LGBTI Identity (Alderson, 2003, 2013) proposes that sexual identification varies as a function of internal (i.e., psychological) and external (i.e., social and environmental) factors. Although social and environmental factors have been examined in depth, the relevance of individual differences (e.g., personality traits) for the coming out process is presently understudied. Here, we propose that the timing of coming out (i.e., the age when one first comes out) varies as a function of openness to experience (i.e., openness), one of the Big Five factors of personality.

Many factors relate to age of coming out. Some research suggests that same-sex attracted men reach “coming out” milestones earlier than women (e.g., Floyd and Bakeman (2006); Grov, Bimbi, Nanín, and Parsons (2006); Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000)), which is largely attributed to greater variability in women’s coming out experiences (see Diamond (2014)). In addition, those with exclusive same-sex attractions (i.e., gay or lesbian) tend to come out earlier than those with non-exclusive (e.g., bisexual and pansexual) same-sex attractions (Floyd & Stein, 2002; McLean, 2007; Rust, 1993). In addition, as Western society has become more accepting of homosexuality (see Keleher and Smith (2012)), same-sex attracted individuals appear to be coming out earlier (Bogaert & Hafer, 2009; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Fox, 1995). Finally, Blacks and Latinos tend to come out to their family at a later age (Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Grov et al., 2006), which may be due to more traditional attitudes about gender (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993).

Although individual differences in coming out have been proposed, research in this area remains limited (Bogaert & Hafer, 2009; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000). Gender non-conforming sexual minority youth are more likely to express their sexual identity (Waldner-Haugrud & Magruder, 1996) and may therefore come out at an earlier age, perhaps because gender nonconformity serves as a “cue” that one is gay, or perhaps it restricts one’s ability to conceal one’s sexual attraction (i.e., they may be “outed” because of their gender nonconformity). Other research examining coming out among same-sex attracted men found no direct relation between childhood gender role and age of coming out. Rather, childhood gender role moderated the relation between

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belief in a just world and age of coming out, such that higher belief in a just world was more strongly related to an earlier age of coming out among same-sex attracted men with a more feminine childhood gender role (Bogaert & Hafer, 2009).

Though not previously examined, openness may facilitate coming out. High openness reflects an appreciation for novelty and unconventionality, whereas low openness reflects conventionality and valuing traditional morality (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Given that homosexuality is often stigmatized as non-traditional and/or deviant (Herek & McLemore, 2013) and openness is negatively correlated with anti-gay prejudice (Barron, Struckman-Johnson, Quevillon, & Banka, 2008), those higher in openness may be more open to interpreting cues of same-sex attraction (e.g., sexual arousal) as being a sexual minority member, and more likely to explore same-sex attractions. Moreover, openness is positively associated with risk-taking oriented toward completing personally relevant goals (Aluja, García, & García, 2003; de Vries, de Vries, & Fie, 2009), and thus, high openness may facilitate taking the risk of coming out. Indeed, coming out entails many risks (e.g., social rejection, bullying, and discrimination; Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers, and Bogaert (2008); Marsiglio (1993); Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995); Varjas et al. (2008)), but is also associated with many long-term benefits (e.g., increased well-being and positive mental health outcomes; Cole (2006); D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993); Halpin and Allen (2004)).

There are additional constructs of relevance, including ones that may potentially confound the relation between openness and age of coming out. Openness is negatively correlated with religiosity in Western cultures (Gebauer et al., 2014), and religiosity may hinder coming out due to religious beliefs that condemn homosexuality (see Wolff, Himes, Soares, and Miller Kwon (2016)). In addition, men with a more masculine gender role tend to be lower in openness and also express greater anti-gay prejudice (Barron et al., 2008), and a more feminine gender role may facilitate coming out (Waldner-Haugrud & Magruder, 1996). Therefore, we test religiosity and gender role as simultaneous predictors of age of coming out. Alderson's (2003, 2013) Ecological Model suggests that several intersecting factors can influence sexual minority identity formation. For instance, more feminine same-sex attracted men may be "outed" as gay, making individual differences less relevant. We therefore test for interactions among openness, gender role, and religiosity (see, for example Bogaert and Hafer (2009), for the moderating role of gender role). Finally, we also control for participant age because age is likely related to age of coming out given that older participants have a higher ceiling for their age of coming out, and younger (vs. older) cohorts may come out earlier due to society becoming more accepting (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006).

We predicted that greater openness would be associated with an earlier age of coming out. We also predicted that the relation between openness and coming out would be unique from potentially overlapping constructs, specifically male childhood gender role, religiosity, and participant age. Finally, we also examined possible interactions among openness, male childhood gender role, and religiosity in the prediction of the timing of coming out.

**Table 1**  
Bivariate correlations among variables.

	2.	3.	4.	5.	M	SD
1. Openness	–0.25***	–0.05	–0.12*	–0.18**	3.67	0.40
2. Gender role	–	0.00	0.14*	0.11†	3.53	0.60
3. Religiosity		–	0.26***	0.19**	–0.01	0.86
4. Age			–	0.44***	36.25	12.30
5. Age of coming out				–	27.65	16.61

Note. *N* = 257. Openness = openness to experience. Gender role = male childhood gender role.

† *p* = 0.074.

\* *p* < 0.05.

\*\* *p* < 0.01.

\*\*\* *p* < 0.001.

**Table 2**

Multiple regression predicting age of coming out from openness to experience, gender role, religiosity, and their interaction, controlling for participant age.

	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Openness	–0.12	–4.89	2.39	–2.04	0.042
Gender role	0.03	0.73	1.59	0.46	0.647
Religiosity	0.05	1.03	1.14	0.91	0.365
Openness × gender role	–0.12	–7.57	3.60	–2.10	0.036
Openness × religiosity	–0.03	–1.16	2.60	–0.45	0.657
Gender role × religiosity	0.02	0.65	1.78	0.37	0.715
Openness × gender role × religiosity	–0.16	–10.87	4.07	–2.67	0.008
Age	0.38	0.51	0.08	6.55	<0.001
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.25				

Note. Openness = openness to experience. Gender role = male childhood gender role.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

We analyzed an existing data set of same-sex attracted men from Ontario, Canada (*N* = 257, mean age = 36.25 [*SD* = 12.30, range = 15–78], 93% White, 73% with at least some college or university education). Advertisements were placed in local magazines and gay publications, requesting participation in a study on personality and sexuality. Questionnaires were mailed to all interested people, along with a pre-stamped envelope, and responses were returned by mail. A small proportion of the men also completed surveys on campus. This data set contained the measures of relevance (e.g., openness) to the existing study.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Demographics and sexual orientation

Participants indicated their age (in years), year of birth, race/ethnicity (open-ended), educational level (1 = less than grade 9, 8 = currently attending or completed Ph.D. or M.D.), and income (1 = under \$5000, 12 = \$100,000 or more). Participants also indicated their sexual attraction (1 = exclusively homosexual/gay, 7 = exclusively heterosexual/straight) and sexual behavior with men and women (1 = exclusively homosexual/gay, 7 = exclusively heterosexual/straight), following a "Kinsey Scale" measure of sexual attraction (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). Participants scoring ≤5 on the average of these two items (indicating homosexuality or bisexuality) were included in the analyses, following Bogaert and Hafer (2009).

#### 2.2.2. Openness to experience (openness)

Participants completed the openness to experience dimension of the NEO-PI-R (48-items on 1–5 scales,  $\alpha$  = 0.90, Costa & McCrae, 1992). Higher scores reflect greater openness.

#### 2.2.3. Childhood gender role

Participants completed The Recalled Childhood Gender Identity/Gender Role Questionnaire (Zucker, Mitchell, Bradley, Tkachuck, Cantor, & Allin, 2006), indicating childhood and early adolescent gender identity/role. The large first factor, labeled gender identity/gender role (18-items on 1–5 scales,  $\alpha$  = 0.92) is used in the present study (example item, "As a child, I felt ..." [1 = very feminine, 5 = very masculine]), with higher scores indicating a more masculine (vs. feminine) childhood gender role.

#### 2.2.4. Religiosity

Participants indicated how frequently they attend religious services (from 1 [less than once a year] to 8 [almost daily]), how important they find prayer and religious services (from 1 [not important] to 5 [very important]), and how much religion guides their life (from 1 [not at all] to 5 [very much]). Z-scores were calculated for all three items and were

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