

Acts of 'coming out' and the development of resilience

Jude Noble

This article has come out of reflection on work practice. I work for the Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service (South Australian Department of Human Services). Community health focuses on both health promotion and prevention. This approach hinges on the identification of risk and protective factors, whether they are biological, psychological or social in nature, operating within an individual, family, community and cultural setting.

Risk and protective factors not only vary across individuals, but also across age, genders, and culture. Risk factors can include poverty, immigration, racism, and all kinds of discrimination including homophobia, and protective factors can include community belonging, spirituality, and family support.

The linking of acts of coming out to ideas of resilience arose initially from team-based discussions, and through my role as a co-facilitator in our all-of-staff training in *Challenging homophobia*. Our agency (approximately 120 persons) has made a conscious commitment to provide training to all staff in the areas of racism, homophobia, and feminism. Out of this has come a working party to address issues linked to heterocentrism.

One of the significant challenges in this work was finding useful metaphors that would assist workers to name the effects of homophobia in their own lives, and in society. With the agency's Aboriginal Health Team, we were able to name parallels with the effects of racism, and the loss of family through 'the stolen generation' of Aboriginal children taken from their parents by White authorities, and ongoing loss through interventions of the welfare system. In the agency's generic teams, we were able to use metaphors arising out of loss of family for other reasons, and the effect of secrecy on people's lives, which arise from living in an abusive family. While these parallels were useful, they all involved engagement from a deficit approach, since they were linked to losses.

I am more interested in a strength-based approach, and due to my eclectic background, I was more interested in the use of shared metaphors to facilitate a discussion. I began to link the use that different people were making of the notion of 'coming out' and the many acts we engage in with the development of resilience. Some of these ideas are informed by a narrative therapy discourse, but other aspects have been nurtured by a more functionalist approach. While that might alienate some, I have personally found a functionalist approach helpful, both in the exploration and deconstruction of the patterns of behaviours we engage in repetitively and which seem to have developed certain associations, possibly through a belief that they contain benefits for us, whether these perceived benefits are actually helpful or not. These patterns are part of the mechanisms of habit by which we maintain a notion of a 'stable' identity.

Coming out is more than a singular process of self-revelation about sexual orientation

Coming out may be considered a tired notion belonging to the heady days and politicization processes of the 1970s and 1980s; yet, it is a term that still has life, and is being colonized by others, including those who identify as heterosexual. This is largely due, I believe, to its symbolic ability to proclaim a particular sense of movement within self-understanding, and as a metaphor of self-proclamation stemming from inner awareness and compelling towards outward action, and the articulation of a position of liberation from a perceived entrapment. These days various people 'come out' through naming a sense of liberation from a position of alienation, which is usually linked to an alternate understanding of self, gender, or sexuality, but may also be in relation to other areas such as alternative beliefs or spirituality. It is perhaps an acknowledgment that there are many closed doors that separate us from aspects of ourselves and that there are, through the compartmentalization of our lives, many closets that entrap us in the enactment of who we are. It also demonstrates the resilience present in the acts of 'coming out' from these various entrapments, and which reveals the strength implicit in our claim on life, and in our movement towards greater congruity.

Initially the notion of 'coming out' celebrated in the early days of gay liberation posited the development of a sexual identity. This was usually constructed and enacted as a singular linear event through which an individual proclaimed personal liberation from another more restrictive identity construction. This model also contained within it a social construction that, when more individuals 'came out', there would be a resultant social change, which would increase access to benefits and freedoms for all. It was intoxicating in many ways, and many conversations still resonate with the stories of those first acts of 'coming out'.

In this postmodern period, external points of reference and their claims to authority have been displaced, and the authority of the self and individual experience has been given preference and increased status. Agency in social change is differently understood. It was assumed that individual self-referencing 'created a sort of democratic environment in which voices previously silenced could make themselves heard by claiming an authentic, autonomous selfhood'¹, and that these would be embraced in the public domain. It also assumed that the exclusive claims to selfhood thus far dominated by a heterosexual discourse, would be challenged and countered by coming out, and other acts of resistance.

The rhetoric announced that coming out publicly 'proclaimed' the release of the pathological influences of homophobia, and we claimed that through a period of sexual and social experimentation this would stabilize for us into an embodied notion of selfhood, and provide a voice, and an identity with which to dialog. In practice, its actioning proved more than an externalization of the authority of the self, and has been likened to an initiation, or even a birthing, and so the process has attained more of a *gestalt* than we initially gave it credit. As time soon demonstrated, life doesn't necessarily stabilize and the various exigent demands of life - such as decision to have children, and the resultant demands of child rearing, encounters with the pink glass ceiling, or the hiddenness of long-term suburban relationships that can result in the loss of individuality in some cases - meant that 'coming out' was more than a singular event.

Nowadays it is considered passé, in a world that claims postmodern status to express a construction of self in anything but the most fluid terms; yet the rhetoric is belied by the actual enactments, which for the most part keep us fairly stable in certain ways of being rather than the agents engaged expressions of fluidity that some of us long to be. Some of these positions are preferred, but others are very much learnt as an adaptation largely in response to the imposition of societal constraints. Yet, they are multiple positions rather than a unitary one. And it can be argued that the relativity we have within them can be claimed as a statement of power in itself, since when we undertake the construction of different identities, even in play, we counteract the power that is imposed upon us and its pressure to make us conform. Perhaps a focus that emphasized the possibility of holding multiple positions might open up different thinking for those who feel uncomfortable with the challenges of fluidity.

The general assumption of society is that we have one preferred mode of being. Yet, we all have different discourses of identity - and our identity is constantly shifting, as a temporary construction linked to our aging. The practices of identity are perhaps made more obvious under the metaphor of the 'masks' we put on at work, at home, on the scene, etc. These have the potential to place us in contradictory positions. The power we express that is associated with each enactment is not something we have implicitly - it is exercised variously according to our status within each of those social settings - a variable we all know too well! As a result of such masking there can be a loss of congruity which can even, in some cases lead to a sense that there needs to be an amputation of that part of ourselves. It can exact a considerable personal price, both mentally and emotionally, for invisibility within those domains, extracted both in the entrenchment of internalized homophobia and in the correlated mental health issues.

When we hear the pride in the voices of our confident youth who bluntly state: 'We're here - deal with it!' - it unfortunately merely suggests to us that there are now places where some of us feel safe and where visibility is possible. It is an urban myth that is not a universal experience. I don't think we can pretend that where there is a lack of safety that our enactment doesn't

correspondingly change, with a resultant impact on our mental health.

While the notion of an 'authentic self' or a core self is fraught in any therapeutic situation, the claiming, proclaiming and resultant pride associated with the notion of 'coming out' into the various areas in which we are engaged in our construction of a congruent self - no matter how fluid that might be - contain the possibility of claiming certain inner strengths and a resilience that can add to and enhance our mental health status.

'Coming out' is therefore an ongoing process that occurs at the various levels in our lives as we hopefully develop an increasing internal and external congruence in ourselves. Establishing congruence between the different enactments of our lives however does not lock us into a particular identity, but what it can encourage is the strength of our ability to challenge the impact of the patriarchal and heterosexist basis of our society, and the effect of its inherent inequality and control mentality on us.

Coming out requires a certain inner strength, which is why it became a metaphor for me that was linked to the idea of resilience. Resilience is often defined as 'the power or ability to return to an original form or position after being bent, compressed, or stretched; elasticity; ability to recover readily from illness, depression, adversity; or the like; buoyant (*Webster's Dictionary*). It includes not only the ability of the physical body to recover from illness, etc., and return to a previous condition of health, wellness or ease, which is the aspect encompassing equilibrium and balance, but it also refers to the ability to not only recover but to transcend circumstances in a way that will foster transformation and growth.²

While the initial part of this definition is somewhat useful, it comes from a medical discourse and picks up on a certain understanding of internal homeostatic mechanisms that our body and psyche utilize to maintain optimal internal conditions. By being understood as a 'natural' process it can obscure the complexity of influences by which resilience can be both developed and enhanced. I agree that there is a kind of process that can be interpreted as self-righting or balancing, but it is more than a mechanism that can be simplistically measured by a certain clustering of personality traits. Resilience is the outcome of a response to factors across several domains, including social, environmental, emotional, physical and spiritual. These arenas represent domains of power in our lives, and are arenas in which we 'come out' according to level of perceived power and internal safety.

To me resilience is broader than the understanding that seems to limit it to generalized statements about certain characteristic identified with developmental models that located it as a property of certain experiences or lack of them, during childhood. It is particularly named as being present or absent in the lives of children who are propelled too rapidly into the adult world. Their ability to develop the capacity for functional, pragmatic behaviour, and their use of certain strategies in order to survive, mark them as different from those who do not seem able to step out from behind the shield of childhood, and particularly those who are observed to exist in the adult world as impractical, unfocused individuals, whom we sarcastically liken to overgrown children.³

Resilience, which is the ability to bounce back from the effects of stress and adversity, is a faculty that can determine the degree to which we are able to successfully embrace the challenges of our queer life style. But it draws on, and is in response to, the complexity of our whole life experience, not aspects of it.

In focusing on our ability to respond in creative ways to adversity to the challenges that have arisen through our growing sexual awareness, it does not eliminate distress factors, but it does promote our ability to derive future benefits from engaging and contending with them. Its site, if you will, is the ordinary, the everyday events that cumulatively affect our well-being, rather than those intense moments of conflict.

Frequently, coming out is a protest against certain social expectations that are built on alienation and limitation. The tools of social critique such as feminism have enabled an analysis

of power and the dynamics of gendered sex roles, and other postmodern methodologies such as queer and post-colonial have opened up other vistas concerning tactics of enforced subservience and infantilization of colonized groups.

Coming out as a process of congruence

It is simplistic to say that it is a breaking away from the 'shoulds' and 'oughts' that limit and confine as we revalue ourselves as we push out of the closet - out of the constraints of whatever boxes us in, including all the prescriptions about selfhood. If we box ourselves, let it be through our own choice of enactments, used knowingly, and with deliberateness, but let us not closet ourselves or compartmentalize ourselves back into the straightjacketed constraints.

The constraints are subtle. The social structures that encompass us are so nebulous at times that they seem to envelop us, and it is as if we are like fish swimming in water oblivious to the fact that we are even immersed in water. It all seems so 'natural', so 'given'. It can also be so 'sameing', neutralizing any sense of difference as we are subtly conformed into the dominant dualistic heterosexist way of being. This finds a sad echo in the apparent ennui that I hear when people complain at the tedium of having to name the diversity and breadth of the community through the use of 'gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and intersex', preferring the simplistic, reductionist term of queer.

The fact that we are living within a situation and currently still alive suggests that we carry within us the seeds, or even a well-developed range of understanding that we have reframed, for survival. I suggest that even the most risk taking behaviour contains within it remarkable efforts to develop and maintain the conditions for survival. We, with varying degrees of success, develop the ability to read another person to a degree to maintain personal safety, and to seize opportunities from which we might be able to personally benefit enables us to variously reassess our own power. It might be called 'enhancing endurance' or even 'mental fitness training', but it is the skills in determination, obstinacy, persistence, and the ability to overcome setbacks and failure, that enable us to survive.

Counseling intervention is sometimes sought to help eliminate or moderate the effect of certain experiences or change behaviours that are perceived as unhelpful or even harmful. The focus is often on the removal from, or the elimination of, the cause of the disturbance. Yet, often that very disturbance contains within it the seeds or the tools that will be necessary for survival. When this is explored through re-framing, the alternate understanding or story that emerges can sometimes contain information about what we have understood about ourselves by responding to the situation in a way that focuses on our strengths and promotes resilience.

Resilience is a process of responding to hardship - I do not associate it with endpoints. It is the accumulation of many small successes that occur side by side with setback, disappointments, and mistakes. In the honouring of effort, and in celebrating the expression of personal respect, we develop a pride - a well-deserved feeling of accomplishment. This is a very different approach to focusing on pathologies and attempts to 'fix' things through problem solving. The claiming and re-claiming of strength is usually a mixture of pain and triumph, and there is no notion of 'completion' and 'finality' in this process since that is not the way of life.

'Coming out', at whatever degree of personal exposure, requires a significant level of resilience. It also represents the 'coming out' from certain privileged or preferred enactments into a more flexible, alternate construction - it includes letting go of the assumption of passing and its inherent heterosexist privilege. In a circular manner, our cultivation of resilience will impact on our willingness and our ability to self-disclose.

I suggest that the realm of resilience contains choice, attitude, understanding, acceptance, inner decision, and meaning - the realms of interpretation, of the internal and individual. As such, it is definitely part of a strength-based approach, and it acknowledges those enactments that reinforce our inner strength.

Endnotes

1. Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and lesbian theologies: repetitions with critical difference*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2002, p.19.
2. Reggie Marra, 'Transformation or stagnation: the resilience dilemma', *Journal of Pastoral Counselling*, vol.33, 1998, p.23.
3. Jonathon Shatil, *The mental immunity phenomenon: constructive difficulties in the child's world*, University Press of America, New York, 1998, p.69.

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Jude Noble is a community health worker working in the GLBTI area in northern metropolitan Adelaide. Her interests include gender and sexuality issues, particularly as they impact on spirituality and the construction of identity.

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