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CLOSET, THE

In order to understand the “the closet” in relation to sexual orientation, it is necessary to first define the term. In general use, *the closet* refers to a space for hiding private objects from public view. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), a closet can be a “room for privacy,” an “inner chamber,” a “private repository of valuables,” or the “den or lair of a wild beast.” A person may also have a “skeleton in the closet”—a “private or concealed trouble in one's circumstances, ever present, and ever liable to come into view.”

These definitions of the closet make the act of “coming out of the closet” possible. To *come out* means to make hidden, private, and possibly valuable information public; to reveal one's “inner chamber” to others; to expose the living quarters of a “wild beast” or a concealed, troubling “skeleton”; and/or to “admit (something) openly, to cease to conceal” information, especially same-sex attraction (“homosexuality”). The person who does not disclose same-sex attraction may risk being considered a “closet queen” (a person who only comes out to other queer people yet avoids

frequent association with these people out of a fear of stigmatization) or a “closet case” (a slang term for “a homosexual who conceals or denies his or her sexuality”; see “closet” [OED]). While these definitions offer a sense of the closet and coming out, there are five additional characteristics of the closet and its relationship to same-sex attraction that are worth addressing.

First, the closet is applicable to, and coming out is necessary in, contexts in which a person's same-sex attraction is hidden and not known—heteronormative contexts that, by default, frame a person as heterosexual. In these contexts, a person must disclose her or his same-sex attraction or engage in a nonheterosexual act (e.g., being intimate with a person of the same sex) in order to disrupt ascriptions of heterosexuality. Persons who identify as bisexual or pansexual would experience this characteristic of the closet if they worry about revealing same-sex attraction or about revealing their bisexuality or pansexuality.

Second, the closet is a relational construct; it exists primarily in relation to other people, specifically what others do and do not know about a person's same-sex attraction. For example, a brother may not know about his sister's same-sex attraction, which may then make her “closeted” in relation to him. Or an employee may assume that his boss does not know about his same-sex attraction, and may thus feel closeted in relation to her. Or a woman may be out (of the closet) to her cousin, but not out to her mother; out to co-workers, but not out to the server at a restaurant; and out to her therapist but not to her dentist. In these situations, the closet exists based on (assumptions about) information that has not been revealed in particular relationships. The closet could also exist when other people deny or pretend not to know about a person's same-sex attraction, even though the person has told these others about her/his attraction numerous times.

Third, the relevance of same-sex attraction and the closet depends on whether this attraction is considered to be important information for a relationship. For example, a mother may ask her son if he finds a particular woman (intimately,

relationally) attractive. The mother may even try to get this son to marry this woman and encourage the (heterosexual) couple to (biologically) reproduce in order to, by way of patriarchal custom, “carry on the family name.” But if the son does not find women attractive or does not want to marry a woman, and instead finds men attractive and may even want to marry a man, then his private and concealed (closeted) same-sex attraction would be relevant information for his mother/their relationship. If the son could disclose (come out) to his mother, she might no longer have such expectations about her son and might not pressure him into a relationship that he does not find to be satisfying or important.

Fourth, coming out can be risky and dangerous, as a person might reveal information that others will condemn. There are many accounts of parents reacting negatively to their children’s coming out, and some colleges and employers can dismiss a student or employee for disclosing same-sex attraction. In some places (e.g., Russia, Uganda), a person can be fined, imprisoned, or even killed because of same-sex attraction. As such, a person who comes out can lose access to important resources and may experience emotional stress and physical harm; a person who stays closeted—that is, who does not come out—may maintain safety and protection, at least in relation to others. However, as many queer activists have argued, coming out is important for recognition, pride, and honesty; even though coming out may be risky and dangerous, not coming out—staying in the closet—can perpetuate the assumption that same-sex attraction is unimportant, inappropriate, and/or abnormal.

Fifth, for a person with same-sex attraction, the closet can be an enduring construct, as coming out can become a perpetual, lifelong process. If coming out means to reveal private or concealed information to others, then a person may be closeted when immersed in new (heteronormative) contexts with unfamiliar others. Every new work environment, every trip to the grocery store, every new venture into social life—the closet does not disappear with one act or utterance; new audiences make for new times to disclose.

While “the closet” and “coming out (of the closet)” are constructs often used to understand disclosures of same-sex attraction, these constructs can also be used to understand any disclosure that reveals hidden and possibly taboo information. For example, depending on context and audience, a person may need to come out as someone who struggles with gender identity or as transgender, as pregnant, as an undocumented citizen, as a military veteran, as a particular religious identity (e.g., Muslim, atheist, Jewish), or as having a (nonvisible) medical condition (e.g., cancer, diabetes, colorblindness). The need to and the importance of understanding the closet will thus exist as long as the revelation of hidden information to others is perceived to be an important yet dangerous act.

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See also Coming Out, Disclosure, and Passing; Cultural Dissemblance (of African Americans); Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and Public Opinion; Down Low; Gaydar; Heteronormativity; Homonormativity; Minority Stress; Queer Politics; Stealth (Transgender Passing); Strategic Disclosure

Further Readings

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