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# The Invisible Closet: Pressures and Difficulties of the 'Fringe-Queer' Community

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## **Abstract**

LGBT studies is generally focused on the members of the queer community who are/were at some point “in the closet.” That closet becomes a focal point of their identity, and the process of coming out of the closet is seen as an important and momentous occasion in that person's life. But there are some groups that fall under the wide umbrella of the queer community that live in an “invisible closet.” While their particular practices are not considered 'mainstream,' they are so tightly focused that sharing that identity with others is tantamount to involving others in their sexual practices. In particular, the fetish community lives in this invisible closet. If they tell anyone of their interests, they are literally sharing the details of their sexual activities, something that is often seen as “none of their business.” When a homosexual 'comes out' to friends and family, he is not providing details or involving these groups in their sexual activities. This 'coming out' instead allows him to express his identity freely, but maintain a modicum of privacy. When someone involved in the fetish, kink, or bdsm community 'comes out,' she expresses her identity, but by the nature of the beast, does NOT maintain that privacy. That said, the “invisible closet” is no less restrictive to those within it, and often times it is a worse place to be, because the people inside have conflicting desires: they want to maintain their privacy, but also be true to their own identity. This balancing act is all the more difficult to maintain because it is invisible. While those within invisible closets don't have to worry about the same discrimination faced by other members of the LGBT community, as they can easily 'pass' or 'hide,' this very capacity makes the pressure to break out of the closet even stronger. It is frequently driven home, both by society at large and by the members of the LGBT community who DO and CAN come out, that members of these other groups face a much more subtle, but no less intense, discrimination. By drawing attention to this closet, it can be seen how important it is to allow these subcultures to identify themselves without facing discrimination. There are no laws or even politically correct trends that support these groups, and while it is easy for them to hide, it is nonetheless incredibly hard ON them to do so.

## **Introduction: Coming out of the Closet**

Coming out of the closet can be seen as a sort of rite of passage for the queer community. And the closet is not limited to homosexuality. As Sedwig writes: “The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people” (p. 68); anyone who does not fit into the heteronormative definition of sexuality is potentially in a closet, and coming out of that closet is a significant moment. This moment where a young man informs his friends and family of the identity that he has hidden from them for so long can be cathartic, can be dangerous, and can be freeing. Sometimes it is met with anger. Sometimes it is met with misunderstanding, suggesting that maybe this is a phase, something that can be gotten

over. Some people come out of the closet to support and applause. Some come out only to find that no one was surprised in the slightest.

Whatever the reaction, the moment of coming out of the closet is a significant one. When a girl tells her parents that she is a lesbian, she is exposing her inner most self, raw to their criticism and desperate for their acceptance. But she is also doing it with the knowledge that things may end badly, with results ranging from ostracism to outright physical violence. Somehow, though, the possibility of acceptance has finally outweighed the fear of rejection. Maybe she wants to bring a girlfriend home for the holidays. Maybe her parents don't have the same authority they once did. She has finally come to terms with her identity, and is ready to present that identity, that true self, to those whose opinions truly matter to her.

A young friend of mine just recently came out as being transgendered. Though born male, she has always felt female, and has just gathered the courage to come out of her own closet. Gagne et al. say that "transgenderists, because of changes in gender or biological appearance, are often forced out of the closet, creating awkward or even dangerous situations" (p. 482); this decision to come out was somewhat forced by her decision to proceed with the pursuit of her identity, but it was not without its risks. Many people in similar situations are faced with horrific difficulties. This is why "Approximately one-third of transgendered individuals have attempted suicide" (Richmond et al., p.121): between ostracism by friends and family, threats or acts of violence, and the stress of trying to live a life that is not seen as 'normal,' coming out of the closet as being transgendered can be very difficult. I was honored to be one of the first she told. I was proud of her for doing it, and I was hopeful for her when she told her father. I celebrated with her when her father told her that he had always known, and that he didn't care; she was his child, and that's all that mattered. I congratulated her again when she came out to her friends, and was happy to see the overwhelming support she found. A shift of gender all but demands the abandoning of the closet, should the person decide to fully transition, as my young friend has decided. It is a terrifying step, and she was lucky enough to have the best possible outcome. So I continue to be very happy for her.

But at the same time, I was jealous. I wasn't jealous of her because she came out of the closet. I was jealous because she *could* come out of her closet, and I can't come out of mine. My closet is not one that you can see, and it's not one that I can escape. Like other members at the fringes of the queer community, my closet is invisible, and in many ways inescapable. There's no lock on the door, but I'm holding it closed. And it isn't easy to do that.

I mention the fringe of the queer community. Queer is a generic and wonderful term, sometimes used as "an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications" (Jagose, p 1). Most people see Queer as covering the LGBT spectrum. Lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered. But there are other groups that are not covered. Other groups that are still culturally marginal, that still have their own communities. Those who purposely escape the gender system, neither accepting a binary nor a spectrum, but who instead seek to avoid gender of any kind are rare, but they exist.

Call them androgynous, call them neuter, call them whatever they choose to call themselves, they are *not*trans. Yet they can come out of their closets; they can live their lives as whatever they call themselves, and don't have to hide anything.

However, there are some groups that cannot do that. Those who identify as practitioners of BDSM (Bondage, Dominance/Submission, and Sadism/Masochism) may be gay, may be straight, or may be bisexual. But however else they identify their sexuality, BDSM is part of it, not just "added flavor"; they are on the fringe of queer. There is nothing wrong with this desire, any more than there is anything wrong with other members of the LGBT community. As Richters et al. write, "BDSM is simply a sexual interest or subculture attractive to a minority, and that for most participants, BDSM activities are not a pathological symptom of past abuse or of difficulty with 'normal' sex" (p. 1667). So while many people assume that this interest stems from external sources, interest in BDSM is no more external than homosexuality. These people are, to paraphrase Lady Gaga, just born this way.

Those who consider themselves "kinky" but not interested in BDSM are even further on the fringe (as they are often "lumped in" with BDSM, even if there is no bondage, power exchange, or pain involved). And then there are those who are fetishists, who find sexual attraction and satisfaction in situations or objects that are not "traditionally" sexualized.

All of these groups are part of the queer community. And all of them live in the invisible closet. I am in one of those groups, and I can't tell you which. The reason I won't tell you is the same reason that I'm holding my closet door firmly closed: it's none of your damned business.

### **The Invisible Closet**

When my young friend announced that she was transgendered, she did so in order to find acceptance, to be able to make her transition and not have to constantly field questions as to why she is wearing women's clothing. Her life as a whole is changing, and she decided not to hide this change in herself. She decided not to cut all contact with everyone in her life, move states, and emerge as a new person, a cisgendered female as far as anyone knew. She came out of her closet, and now she can go about her life that way. She didn't invite anyone into her bedroom, nor did she explain the explicit activities she and her wife intend to engage in behind closed doors.

When I was in high school and a friend came out to me, the biggest shock (according to her) was how little it mattered to me. She was a lesbian, and that was fine. To my mind, her telling me she was a lesbian was tantamount to me telling her it was cold outside: just a fact. She didn't explain to me whether she prefers oral sex or to use strap-ons. She didn't have to, and I wouldn't have been comfortable if she had tried to.

Both of those closets, the ones homosexuals find themselves in and the ones the

transgendered find themselves in, can be opened and abandoned<sup>1</sup> without having to get too personal. The people can declare their identities and be who they want to be, and they can do it in polite society without involving people in their sex lives in anything but the most peripheral way. Telling someone that you are gay involves them in your sex life no more than telling someone you are straight would.

But telling someone that you have a fetish, or that you are kinky, or that you practice BDSM is a different story. If I tell someone that I am an asphyxiaphiliac, not only am I going to have to explain what that means (finding arousal in the intentional restriction of oxygen to the brain), but I have also told them what I do in the privacy of my bedroom, be it alone or with my partner. If I tell them that I have paraphilia (a shoe fetish) then not only am I, again, telling them what arouses me, but I am also quite possibly making them self-conscious of their foot wear any time we are near one another.

This is a subtle point. When my friend told me he was gay, I didn't think that meant he wanted to sleep with me. And if he told me that he thought I was attractive, I would be flattered. But I would not feel like I had become privy to his sexual activities. If, on the other hand, he told me that he had a fetish for vests, and seeing me wear them always made him very horny, I would feel a bit uncomfortable. Now, he is not only telling me that he is attracted to me, but is specifically pointing out something that I can (but don't HAVE to) do to arouse him. Now, every time I wear a vest around him, does that mean I am teasing him? Am I leading him on? Perhaps, perhaps not; what matters is that now that I am privy to the information, I have become uncomfortable. I feel like I have been involved in his sexual activity, and without my consent.

This is a difficulty inherent in self-reporting. As Smith et al. write, "Self-disclosure - the act of revealing personal information about oneself - often involves unexpected information" (51). If I tell someone I am gay, I am revealing personal information, but only to a minor extent. If I tell someone I have a leather fetish, then I am revealing not only that personal information, but likely also some unexpected and unintended information and reactions. If I tell people that the smell of leather turns me on, will they feel uncomfortable every time they wear leather? Or worse, will they feel comfortable every time they are *around* leather and me at the same time? Will they be concerned about giving me a ride if their car has leather seats? Will they feel uncomfortable sitting on my leather couch?

Similarly, if I were to tell someone that I was a sexual sadist, that I gained sexual pleasure by seeing others in pain, would they feel uncomfortable watching an action movie with me?

This is the invisible closet. It's a closet that the practitioners of these fringe queer groups find themselves in, closets that they hold themselves inside of so as not to involve other people in their sexual activities.

There are situations, of course, when the closet can be left, temporarily. A leather fetishist can go to the right club at the right time and be surrounded by others of a similar

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<sup>1</sup>Though never completely separate from that closet (Sedwig, p. 81).

persuasion. There are conventions, online forums, dating sites, and a myriad of other ways to get in touch with others who are interested in the same things, regardless of what those things are. But this is not the same as coming out of the closet. This is just knowing that you are not the only one stuck in one.

### **Difficulty being in the closet**

An initial response to this may be a flippant one: so what? Who cares if you are stuck inside an invisible closet? You, at least, can go about your life without worrying about other people judging you on sight. You can live without fear of assault. There are many cases of people being assaulted for being gay or for being trans. Very rarely, if ever, are there reported cases of people being assaulted for being turned on by wearing a gag.

More to the point, I can walk down the street with my wife, hand in hand, and never get a second look. No one will sneer at us, no one will call us offensive things, and no one will make it a point to congratulate us on being ourselves so that *they* can feel more enlightened. We can walk down any street, and no one need ever know the things we do behind closed doors.

There is some truth in that. I have never had to worry about employment discrimination regarding my fringe queer status. I have never been attacked for the things that I like. I have never been forced to tell anyone these secrets, and no one has ever stumbled across them. I don't have to work hard to hide who I am; all I have to do is *not* tell people what I do behind closed doors.

But that is harder than it may seem. While it may sound as simple as just not saying one way or another, there is still a balancing act. For one thing, I feel guilty about hiding who I am, and as Paul Eckman writes, "It is not necessary to feel guilty about the content of a lie to feel guilty about lying" (p. 64). I don't feel guilty about the truth my lie hides, but rather for the fact that I am, on some level, lying about who I am. I can't talk about some of the things I am most interested in or most fascinated by. Even in my capacity as an academic, I have to be careful. I can't even reveal my proclivities here, in this article *specifically* written about the invisible closet, for fear of the reactions people will have. Already, I am concerned about the reaction that the article will have. Will people start to ask me what, if anything, I mentioned in this article is true? Will they guess and judge me accordingly? Will they think less of me? Will they discriminate against me? If we limit the possibilities to only consensual sexual activity<sup>2</sup> (and I would like to impose that limit), then the only laws relating to those fringe queer groups involve sodomy or professional sex work. There are not even laws against being a professional dominatrix (who does not engage in sexual activity with her clients, and is therefore not a

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<sup>2</sup>And therefore nothing involving animals of any kind or people under the age of consent or somehow lacking the mental capacity for consent. This also precludes activities that involve others without their consent, including public exhibitionism, frotterism (rubbing up against people nonconsensually), and voyeurism when those being watched are unaware.

prostitute). While there are no laws against these activities, there is also no protection for them.

If my young friend were to lose his job for going through sexual reassignment, he would (in most states) have legal recourse, a strong case for a wrongful termination suit. Would I have the same protection? Sedwig does say that “there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them” (67-68), suggesting that even my friend is likely to remain somewhat in the closet even when she has finished transitioning, at least with certain groups. But where the transgendered, the gay, the lesbian, and the bisexual can move to a point where they are in the closet to only a few people, those in the Invisible Closet seem to be forced to stay in the closet with anyone other than those they are willing to explicitly involve in their sexual identities.

Those involved in the S/M scene (sadists and masochists) also have to worry about domestic violence laws. If they are consensually whipping, slapping, pinching, etc., but marks are left after the fact, then someone might report domestic violence. And the masochist partner likely won't be believed when claiming that it was consensual. Even if the case is eventually dropped, reputations can be destroyed. There are dangers to coming out of the invisible closet.

But there is also difficulty remaining inside it. When I accept the danger of coming out, and instead decide to stay in my invisible closet, I'm adding stress to myself. My concern for how I might be perceived pushes me deeper into my closet, and forces me to play both the role of the hider and the roll of the seeker; as Foucault would say, I have to become the force of my own subjugation (“Discipline and Punish” p. 203). Or, as Smith et al. would say, I am internalizing the discrimination, self-discriminating and pre-rejecting myself, which may very well cause me to “direct the negative social attitudes towards the self, leading to a devaluation of the self, resulting in internal conflicts and poor self-regard” (p. 52). In other words, hiding in this closet, even if no one is looking for it, results in a significant amount of pressure and stress caused just to ensure that no one *will* look for it.

I am making it a point of hiding who I am, hiding my interests and my proclivities. I am stopping people from getting to know me. In some cases, I may be preventing relationships from forming. Like anyone else in a closet, I might be making it a bigger issue than it is. Will my friends and family accept me as readily as my young friend's family and friends accepted her? Hiding who she was for so much of her life was extremely difficult. It led to depression, anxiety, and even a bit of paranoia, which is common among all socially marginalized groups (Smith et al., p. 52). I face these same issues, these same pressures. Everyone stuck in a closet deals with these issues. But my young friend was able to come out without having to explain her sexual activities. My friend in high school was able to tell me she was a lesbian without describing her preferences.

That is the major difference. I cannot come out of my closet without pointing it out to people. Without describing the shape of the closet, or what was inside it with me,

or what was hanging from the rafters, I cannot escape my closet. I cannot leave my closet because to leave it behind, I must take it with me and show it to everyone.

My friends who were married last year don't have to walk around and explain to everyone that they are gay. They can walk down the street hand in hand, and people will assume. Or not; it doesn't matter. The fact is that my friends aren't hiding who they are.

But once again, if I walk down the street with my wife, I *am* hiding. I have to. The only way not to hide is to explain to everyone what my interests are. My choices are either to remain in my invisible closet, or to show it to everyone I know. The easy choice, of course, is to hide.

Hiding brings with it a level of stress, though. Like anyone else still hiding in a closet, I am pressured not only by the fear of being discovered and "outed," but also by the tension I place on myself in order to keep myself hidden. I am denying a very important part of my identity.

When a teenage boy doesn't want his friends to know he is gay, he might find himself using the insinuation that someone is gay as an insult. In such a case, he is using the term that he sees as identifying *himself* as an insult. Sedwig writes that the "closet can license insult ('I'd never have said those things if I'd *known* you were gay!' – yeah, sure); it can also license far warmer relations, but (and) relations whose potential for exploitiveness is built into the optics of the asymmetrical, the specularized, and the inexplicit" (80). More than just licensing the insults of others, the desire to remain in the closet can force someone to engage in activity that is in direct opposition to his own identity. The young man may find himself tacitly placing his own definition of self into a category of the derogative, as a lesser thing, as an "other." While there may be a temptation to chalk this up to a "boys will be boys" attitude, doing so is a disservice to the community, and it explicitly condones bullying. The fact is that someone in the closet may find themselves forced to either deride his own identity or be forced out of the closet. In the case of most members of the LGBT community, the choice is obvious: leave the closet. But for the fringe-queer groups, that option just isn't there. Leaving an invisible closet is not practical.

### **Conclusion: What to do?**

The Invisible Closet is on the one hand easy to live in: no one even knows it's there but you. There is rarely if ever a risk of someone pulling you out of that closet when they don't even know it's there, and for the most part, people won't suspect that it is. You can stay in your closet and live what appears to be a normal life even while indulging in the desires that put you in the closet in the first place. A gay man who stays in his closet, marries a woman, and has children is living a lie in a very real way, with immense pressures put on him. When he comes out of that closet, he must either keep his activities very secret (and thus remain at least partially closeted) or accept that everyone will know that he is out. A leather fetishist can at least engage in the sexual activities that compliment his desires behind closed doors, but still keep that part of his identity a

secret. So by one way of looking at it, the Invisible Closet is far easier to deal with.

On the other hand, and Invisible Closet can't be opened. The only way to open that closet is to tell people, either directly or through visual representations of increasing obviousness (a shoe fetishist might be able to walk around in leather shoes, but a leather fetishist who focuses on masks will be far more explicit). As a member of a fringe queer community, I feel that I can't show everyone what my interests are. There may be some things that I can reveal, knowing that most people won't even recognize them; but that is no different from being in the closet. This severely limits my ability to be myself. As Ely and Padovich write, "Interaction and identity are tightly linked" (p. 1130). Being in the closet, hiding who I am, limiting my identity, therefore necessarily limits the interaction I have with others. If others don't know and don't understand the identity I am presenting, then I might as well be hidden. To avoid that, I have to be very clear. But if I am clear, am I involving them in my sexual activity without their consent?

When my gay friends tell me that they had sex, they are not involving me in the activity any more than when my straight friends tell me that they had sex. When a leather fetishist tells me that he spent the night licking the leather chaps of his partner, or whatever other activity he equates to sex, then there is a level of knowledge that might cross that line of consent. Since I am concerned with consent, I have to worry that coming out of my closet will cross that very line.

Sex itself is a nebulous concept. In heteronormative or even homonormative concepts, the term can be representational. The details don't need to be shared. Is the same true of fringe queer groups? Perhaps there is a term that can be all encompassing, that tells people what my queer status is without directly informing them of the activities that are, quite frankly, none of their damned business?

There are some possible terms. I could say that I'm kinky. However, that doesn't say anything other than that my sexual preferences are not what mainstream society would call "normal." Does kinky mean I am a masochist? Does it mean I am aroused by shibari (Japanese rope bondage)? It could mean that I engage in power exchange within my relationships. Or it could just mean that I like a certain style of clothing. So in the sense of being all encompassing, kinky is a viable option. But kinky is *not* excluding.

If I say that I am gay, I am saying not only that I prefer the sexual company of men, but also that I do *not* engage in sexual activity with women. If I engaged in sexual activity with both genders, I would be bisexual.

Saying that I am kinky does not say that I am into bondage but not pain, or pain but not bondage. It does not even say that I prefer sex that isn't "normal" to the exclusion of "normal" sex. It doesn't necessarily exclude anything, nor does it guarantee any constant in my sexual identity.

Claiming interest in BDSM doesn't work. Either I have to explain to someone what it stands for, in which case I may have said too much, or I have to explain which activities I am interested and which I am not. Again, it is not universal.

I could perhaps say that I have a fetish; but if I claim to be a fetishist, the natural question will be to ask what that fetish is. I would not need to answer that question, but if I kept silent at that point, the natural assumption might be that my fetish, whatever it is, must be a "bad" one. I can't just say that I have a fetish; that's like saying that I committed a crime. Maybe the crime was jay walking. Maybe it was murder. Most people are going to lean more towards the second than the first, if asked to guess. And if I explain the fetish, is that going too far? In the example earlier, if someone claims to be a leather fetishist, that is not the same as saying that he has a fetish for licking leather chaps. So in this way, claiming the fetish is not being explicit about the activity. But it *may* make people wonder if he is turned on by the leather seats of a car. Still, that may be the best possible option.

There may not be a perfect answer. There may not be a term beyond "queer," though that term has its own connotations. Maybe the only way to handle the Invisible Closet, aside from just staying in it and accepting the stresses, is to claim membership to the LGBT community, and just refuse to explain how.

After all, it's none of your damned business.

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