

# “Coming In” to Queer Psychology: The Value of Blending Queer Theory and Psychology in Critical Autoethnography

by Alicia Wright, Phillip Joy, Conor Barker

**Abstract:** This commentary reflects upon an Honours thesis undertaken in 2024-2025 to analyze the subjective experience of coming out in adulthood through critical autoethnography. The method used, which blends autobiography with ethnographic observation, was rooted in psychological frameworks and drew upon queer theory—a scholarly perspective that challenges and attempts to disrupt heteronormative assumptions of gender and sexuality—to analyze the first author’s experience of changes in sexual orientation in her thirties. The authors discuss the challenges, and ultimate benefit, of interweaving psychology, which tends to be grounded in positivist and structured views, with queer theory, which promotes fluidity and resists established norms. Sharing their unique perspectives, each author contributed to this essay from their respective discipline, highlighting the possibilities that appear when holding two seemingly opposing theoretical tensions; not just in understanding experiences of diversity among sexual orientation identities, but also in questioning the traditional boundaries of research and the complexity of human experience. As researchers who are also part of the queer community, the authors found great value in queering psychology scholarship, supporting a need for diverse representation within academia.

**Keywords:** autoethnography; LGBTQ+; queer pedagogy; queer theory; psychology

**Résumé :** Ce commentaire porte sur une thèse honorifique rédigée en 2024-2025 qui analysait l’expérience subjective du dévoilement de l’orientation sexuelle à l’âge adulte, au moyen d’une autoethnographie critique. La méthode utilisée, qui allie l’autobiographie et l’observation ethnographique, s’appuyait sur des cadres psychologiques et sur la théorie queer – une approche scientifique qui remet en question et cherche à déconstruire les suppositions hétéro-normatives liées au genre et à la sexualité—pour analyser l’expérience de la première auteure quant aux changements de son orientation sexuelle survenus dans la trentaine. Les auteurs abordent les défis, ainsi que les avantages ultimes, d’associer la psychologie, qui a tendance à être fondée sur des points de vue positivistes et structurés, à la théorie queer, qui encourage la fluidité et remet en question les normes établies. En partageant leurs points de vue uniques, chaque auteur a contribué à cet essai selon sa discipline respective, mettant en lumière les possibilités qui émergent lorsque l’on tient compte de deux tensions théoriques apparemment opposées; non seulement pour mieux comprendre la diversité des expériences liées à l’orientation sexuelle, mais aussi pour remettre en question les limites traditionnelles de la recherche et la complexité de l’expérience humaine. En tant que chercheurs faisant eux-mêmes partie de la communauté queer, les auteurs reconnaissent la valeur qu’apporte l’intégration d’un point de vue queer dans les recherches en psychologie, soulignant ainsi la nécessité d’une représentation diversifiée au sein du milieu universitaire.

**Mots clés :** LGBTQ+; théorie queer; psychologie; autoethnographie; pédagogie queer

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This commentary reflects upon my (Alicia Wright) Honours thesis, undertaken in 2024-2025 to analyze the subjective experience of coming out in adulthood (Wright 2025). Guided by the mentorship of my co-supervisors (Phillip Joy and Conor Barker), whose research expertise respectively resides in the fields of queer health and psychology, I conducted a critical autoethnography, a method that blends autobiography and ethnographic observation while employing theoretical views to analyze lived experience (Poulos 2021), to explore this change in sexual orientation. Specifically, this essay considers the benefits and challenges of interweaving psychological frameworks with queer theory, a scholarly view that challenges and attempts to disrupt heteronormative assumptions of gender and sexuality. These perspectives do not always align easily: queer theory often prioritizes fluidity and anti-normativity, while psychological frameworks tend to emphasize diagnosis and structured models. Yet, these seemingly incompatible lenses were used together to more deeply examine the tensions, possibilities, and productive disruptions that emerge when personal narratives are situated at the intersection of identity, theory, and practice.

With the aim of understanding how sexual identity transformation happens in adulthood, I wrote reflexive narratives to evocatively depict three turning points in my experience of a sexual identity shift away from heterosexuality in my thirties, involving a deconstruction, recognition, and reconnection of identity. Rooted in psychology, these first-person stories were compared to psychological models of identity formation and were understood in intrapersonal and interpersonal terms, with the recognition of sexual identity being both socially constructed and guided by a sense of authenticity (Rust 1993). Queer theory was then drawn upon to remove the heteronormative lens from personal stories and review them through an acknowledgment of religious, patriarchal, and heterosexist influence that acted to obscure non-heterosexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. We argue that queer theory was integral for understanding the complexity of my experience of forging a sexual orientation identity against the resistance of dominant, insidious, and pervasive social systems.

Throughout the arc of this story, themes were revealed that captured aspects of embodiment, unlearning, being witnessed, grieving, belonging, and *coming in*—an introspective concept that honours the nuanced nature of sexual dis-

covery and self-acceptance (Rosenberg 2018). To better understand these phenomena on a personal level, queer theory concepts were used to understand not just *how* these experiences happened but *why* they were such an important part of change. Namely, Adrienne Rich's compulsory heterosexuality (1980), which views heteronormativity as an institution that subordinates women to men by promoting heterosexuality as the only standard by which to live, was drawn upon to illuminate barriers to my sexual diversity recognition and my sense of obligation to a heterosexual role. Similarly, Judith Butler's theory of the heterosexual matrix (2007), which describes how sexuality, gender, and sex are collectively socially performed and reciprocated, was used to support the understanding of my earlier life stages, where I tried so hard to embody a wife, woman, and mother in just the "right" way. This study concluded with an understanding that sexuality is fluid, and orientation can change across the lifespan through non-linear, non-sequential, and non-hierarchical stages—a claim that extends the understanding of popular developmental models of identity formation that see sexual identity as something that is stable and typically formed in early life.

The primary challenge of this research was using the boundaries and predictability of psychological theory alongside queer theory. Specifically, I aligned my sexual identity shift with social constructionist perspectives, noting the relational meaning-making aspects of my sexual orientation while also acknowledging an essential sense of authentic truth that felt as if it was being uncovered. The latter concept of an essential self runs counter to queer theory, which promotes an ever-evolving dynamic experience of identity that is sensitive to sociopolitical, cultural, and historic forces. However, when considering the idea of authenticity as something that is not absolute or stable, but rather a sense of congruence or incongruence with one's evolving values (Erickson 1995), it is fair to accept that queer people experience their sexuality as something that is stable and retrospectively make sense of their experiences as leading to an authentic sense of self (Rust 1993). To support a retrospective analysis of this process, from a feeling of incongruence with my heterosexual life to an experience of greater alignment with my lesbian identity and same-sex relationships, queer theory was helpful in addressing the social constructionist factors that both impaired a healthy expression of sexual diversity and enabled the adoption of a more aligned sexual orientation identity.

## **Mentorship and Methodology: A Queer Reflection (Interlude by Phillip Joy)**

As a queer health researcher and mentor, I approach scholarship from the understanding that knowledge is never neutral, and that some of the most meaningful insights arise in spaces of discomfort and contradiction. When Alicia proposed exploring the experience of coming out in adulthood, I was struck by both the vulnerability of the inquiry and the intellectual ambition of engaging with psychological and critical theoretical frameworks simultaneously.

Queer health research often requires navigating across epistemological boundaries, including clinical models that seek to diagnose, stabilize, or normalize, and queer theoretical approaches that emphasize fluidity, disruption, and resistance to categorization. Rather than resolving these differences, I encouraged Alicia to hold space for the tensions between them. In this project, the friction between psychological structure and queer fluidity is not a problem to be solved but a site of possibility.

My role as mentor was not to guide Alicia toward certainty but to support her engagement with uncertainty. I aimed to affirm that her lived experience holds value as a site of knowledge production, not in need of justification but worthy of exploration on its own terms. The choice of critical autoethnography as methodology allowed for a politically engaged and reflexive approach that foregrounds the embodied and affective dimensions of coming out. This aligns with my broader commitment to queering health scholarship and reimagining how we produce, value, and share knowledge within systems that are often hostile to difference. This project illustrates the generative capacity of working across disciplinary, theoretical, and identity-based borders. It also reflects how queer mentorship can serve as both method and ethic, grounded in collaboration, care, and the shared pursuit of more just and expansive ways of knowing.

## **Mentorship and Methodology: A Psychological Reflection (Interlude by Conor Barker)**

As a queer faculty member in psychology and education whose research focuses on inclusion and the voices of those underserved by school psychology, supervising this thesis was a personal and professional challenge that evoked something deeper in me. When I joined the psychology department through a diversity cluster hire, I brought a qualitative orientation into a space traditionally dominated by positivist, quantitative approaches. Like many in psychology, I once imagined myself becoming a quantitative researcher. But the questions that emerged from my practice, as a clinician and as a queer person, demanded something different. They were questions grounded in lived experience, cultural complexity, professional competency, and identity. In short, they were qualitative in nature, necessitating a deep appreciation for theory as it applies to my research questions.

What became clear to me, early in my role as a supervisor, was how under-prepared psychology students often are for this kind of work. Psychology education tends to emphasize statistical significance and generalizability, privileging knowledge that conforms to the scientific method. But qualitative research invites us to step outside that framework and ask different questions. It calls on us to consider how we know what we know, and to recognize that rigorous research can emerge from reflection, emotion, and identity. This was especially true in supervising Alicia's thesis, where her process of *coming in* to her sexual identity pushed conventional undergraduate research to *come out*—to assert its place within psychology as both valid and necessary.

Before participation in this thesis, I would often say that I am a researcher who happens to be queer, not a queer researcher. That distinction once felt important, perhaps protective. But over time, and especially through this project, I have come to understand that my queerness informs my way of seeing the world and my way of doing research. Supporting Alicia's work and collaborating with Dr. Joy, helped me claim that identity more fully.

This work illuminated something important for me: that queer research is not just about queer topics or queer people, but about queering the research process itself. It is about disrupting linearity, embracing contradiction, and valuing stories that resist easy categorization. Queer theory gave Alicia a lens through which to reinterpret her life and not as a deviation from the norm, but as a narrative shaped by and resisting dominant structures and oppression. At the same time, the psychological frameworks she used grounded her story in developmental and relational processes, creating a powerful interplay between the destabilizing force of queer theory and the interpretive lens of psychology. There is a deep tension here, and it is productive. Psychology often seeks to explain, to categorize, to make stable what queer theory insists is fluid. Alicia's narrative helped us hold both truths: that there is a felt sense of authenticity that is meaningful, even as identity is understood to be constructed, shifting, and contingent. This isn't a contradiction in need of resolution, but a generative tension, one that encourages psychology students to reckon with the limits of our discipline and expand what is accepted and valued as knowledge.

As queer researchers and educators, we must create more space for this kind of work: research that is messy, embodied, intersectional, real. It is only through embracing these stories, stories that do not fit cleanly into variables or diagnostic criteria, that we begin to understand the full range of human experience. Through this process, I came to understand that queerness is not just part of who I am, but also how I think, question, and engage with research. And I now wear the label of queer researcher with pride.

## **Conclusion (by Alicia Wright)**

This thesis, and the opportunity to delve into deeply meaningful and complex critical analysis at the undergraduate level, would not have begun without the guidance of queer supervisors. Aside from their academic expertise, their identities as gay men allowed them to direct my work through their subjective understanding of my experiences, thereby implicitly guiding me through the appropriate lens and introducing me to theoretical perspectives that allowed me to see my own story in a new way. Moreover, my perspective as a late-in-life lesbian helped to expand our

collective concept of queer experience, sparking an acknowledged need for this type of vulnerable discourse in scholarly investigation. This process confirms the benefit of enacting a mission of equity, diversity, and inclusion in academia and the powerful possibilities of queer representation in research.

Regarding the outcome of this study, queer theory was ultimately critical in weaving a multidimensional experience of dynamic sexuality with the awareness of a reciprocal performance of expected social roles. This approach suggests that the use of queer theory can serve to enhance and extend psychological perspectives, which are traditionally rooted in heteronormative standards that see non-heterosexuality as something to be explained outside of a norm (Jones 2019; Minton 1997). Using queer theory to question psychology supports existing research that calls for a move away from the minoritization of groups and towards a resistance of hegemonic ideas of gender and sexuality that perpetuate the problems of patriarchy and heterosexism (Minton 1997). There is growing scholarly discussion around the ways in which queer theory helps with “queering” research, not simply through its ability to deconstruct hierarchical structure and binary-based thinking of gender and sexuality, but also by encouraging researchers to remain open to an ever-changing landscape of psychosocial experience (Lesutis 2023).

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