



# THE CONFESSION OF COMING OUT

Can the theory discussed in ‘The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction’ written by Michel Foucault, also explain what is happening when people are coming out as gay, lesbian or bisexual?

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

Coming out, the process in which individuals recognize romantic and/or sexual feelings towards people with the same gender and share their lesbian, gay or bisexual identities with others in a heteronormative society, is never easy.<sup>1</sup> Heteronormativity assumes that heterosexuality is the only, self-evident sexual orientation in a society. Not only are lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals raised with different heterosexual identities, also relations with others change when they open up about being gay, lesbian or bisexual. Nowadays, the heteronormative society has become more accepting and tolerant towards homosexuality/bisexuality.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, coming out becomes easier, because it is more readily accepted and the marginalisation decreases. Coming out was different in earlier years when families rejected people because of their sexual preferences and homosexuality and bisexuality were still seen as a disease. Nonetheless, there are some famous people who came out as being gay, lesbian or bisexual. An example of this is the famous philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984). How would he have experienced coming out in the middle of the twentieth century in France?

Michel Foucault is a French philosopher, publishing his first book *Folie et Dérailson* (Madness and Civilization) in 1961.<sup>3</sup> While teaching at different universities in France and abroad, he also published more books, like *Surveiller et Punir* (Discipline and Punish) in 1975 and a four-volume study of sexuality *L'histoire de la Sexualité* (the History of Sexuality) starting in 1976. The fourth volume is published posthumously in 2018. The main idea behind his work is that a person is not a unity. For example, a criminal, is not his/her whole life a criminal. However, we tend to see him as a criminal in everything he/she does. A person, as a perceived unity, is formed through power and discipline. Often in his work, Foucault identifies how an object of power and/or knowledge is constituted,<sup>4</sup> looking for truth and its relationship with discourse. Foucault himself said that he was trying to locate three major types of problem. First, the problem of truth. Second, the problem of power. Third, the problem of individual conduct. Subjectivity, power and truth are thus important subjects in the work of Foucault. Those subjects also have a prominent place in the work of Foucault that is going to be discussed in this thesis, namely *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*.<sup>5</sup>

This 'Introduction', subtitled *the will to knowledge*, is the first book of the four-volume study of sexuality. Originally, Foucault was planning on writing six volumes.<sup>6</sup> The first volume is neither about history nor about sex, in any conventional sense of these terms.<sup>7</sup> Foucault is interested in techniques through which individuals form themselves and in the

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<sup>1</sup> Paula C. Rust, "Finding a Sexual Identity and Community: Therapeutic Implications and Cultural Assumptions in Scientific Models of Coming Out," in *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Experiences*, ed. Linda D. Garnets, and Douglas C. Kimmel (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 227-228.

<sup>2</sup> Lisette Kuyper, "Opvattingen over Seksuele en Genderdiversiteit in Nederland en Europa," *Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau*, May 17, 2018, [https://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle\\_publicaties/Publicaties\\_2018/Opvattingen\\_over\\_seksuele\\_en\\_genderdiversiteit\\_in\\_Nederland\\_en\\_Europa](https://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2018/Opvattingen_over_seksuele_en_genderdiversiteit_in_Nederland_en_Europa).

<sup>3</sup> J. de Wit, "Michel Foucault," in *De Denkers. Een Intellectuele Biografie van de Twintigste Eeuw*, ed. Hans Achterhuis, Jan Sperna Weiland, Sytske Teppema and Jacques de Visscher (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Contact, 1999), 524-525.

<sup>4</sup> T. J. Berard, "Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, and the Reformulation of Social Theory," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 29, no. 3 (September 1999): 203-209, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5914.00099>.

<sup>5</sup> The version of the book that is used in this thesis is: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, Inc., 1990).

<sup>6</sup> De Wit, "Michel Foucault", 531.

<sup>7</sup> Berard, "Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, and the Reformulation of Social Theory," 203.

techniques through which individuals relate to themselves as subjects of certain practices, discourses and rationalities. Discourse refers to the whole context of speech, where speech is used in the broadest sense of the word. In the case of *the will to knowledge*, techniques concern sex. Foucault here is fighting against the ‘repressive hypothesis’.<sup>8</sup> The hypothesis states that in the western society from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century sexuality is suppressed due to the rise of the bourgeoisie and due to the rise of capitalism. Foucault sees that more discourses are formed around sex from the eighteenth century onwards, even though it is generally claimed that sex in this period is increasingly being repressed. Pleasure and power get more and more intertwined. Sexuality is a product of this power, created by, among other things, confessions, an important part of discourse in this period.

‘The History of Sexuality’ had a huge influence on feminism, Queer Theory, gender studies and the debate about homoeroticism, going against the ideas of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) and Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957).<sup>9</sup> The books of Foucault caused a thunderstorm of reaction and influenced a lot of views on sexuality and power. My question is whether the theory can also explain what is happening when people are coming out as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

In this thesis, an attempt is made to answer the following question: can the theory discussed in *the will to knowledge* written by Foucault, also explain what is happening when people are coming out as gay, lesbian or bisexual? With gay is meant: men who have sexual and/or romantic feelings towards other men. With lesbian, women who have sexual and/or romantic feelings towards other women. With bisexual, men and/or women who have sexual and/or romantic feelings towards other people, no matter their gender. Transgenders, asexual individuals, people who are intersex and other individuals belonging to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender community (LGBT-community) not explicitly mentioned, are excluded from this thesis, so as to make the subject less complex. The main focus, as mentioned, is *the will to knowledge* and the book will be introduced by giving an extensive summary in chapter 2, organised in the same way as the book is organised. In chapter 3, an elaboration on the concept of coming out is given. In chapter 4, a short elaboration is given on the repressive hypothesis and coming out. In chapter 5, coming out and confessions are linked. A recurring theme in the work of Foucault and in this thesis is power. For this reason, the relation between coming out and power will be discussed in chapter 6. The last chapter, chapter 7, is the conclusion, answering the research question stated above.

## Chapter 2. The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction

### Part one: We “Other Victorians”

In the first part of the book Foucault is introducing the analysis he is going to do in this work. He starts off by stating that we are influenced by a Victorian regime (3).<sup>10</sup> Society has the idea that the Victorian regime sees sex as something private and that the only use of sex is reproduction. This is the opposite of the seventeenth century, when sex was not a secret. After the seventeenth century, sex became repressed and was not openly discussed. A connection is made between the development of capitalism and the changing discourse about sex (5). Sex is downplayed in this discourse. In capitalism the main goal is production and sex is incompatible with the idea of production. Therefore, sex becomes a political issue created by

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<sup>8</sup> De Wit, “Michel Foucault,” 531-532.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Soble, “A History of Erotic Philosophy,” *Journal of Sex Research* 46, no. 2-3 (March 2009): 118, <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/00224490902747750>.

<sup>10</sup> If (number) is used in the text, it is referring to the page number of the book: Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*.

the bourgeoisie. Sex is repressed to benefit capitalism. There is a deliberate transgression when someone talks about sex. It goes against power. Still, people want to talk about sex, resulting in officials that are paid to listen to people talking about sex (7). Sex becomes our favourite subject to talk about, in a way equal to preaching, while people are still saying they are repressed. Talking about sex gives us a feeling of being transgressive, resulting in the feeling that we are modern. The sermon and the feeling of oppression that comes with it are reinforcing each other. The feeling of repression is characterising the relation between sex and power, resulting in the repressive hypothesis.

Foucault does not agree with this idea and he raises doubts (10):

1. The historical doubt: is there a regime of sexual repression, which is established in the seventeenth century?
2. The historical-theoretical doubt: is power necessarily repressive?
3. The historical-political doubt: is being critical about the power part of the exercise of power?

Foucault wants to put these doubts in the existing discourse about sex, thus transforming the discourse. He wants to know why we are talking about sexuality and how, with the focus on the Western world. The actual interest is not the repressive hypothesis, but the will to knowledge (12). According to Foucault, the will to knowledge is related to power and is not related to sexuality and/or the repressive hypothesis. People want knowledge about everything. For example, people want knowledge about themselves, so they know how to react and be classified in the disciplined society. The general will to knowledge is important in forming a personal identity. The identity is based on what you know and therefore, people are disciplined by knowledge.

## Part two: The Repressive Hypothesis

### The Incitement to Discourse

Foucault sees the seventeenth century as the starting point of controlling and repressing sex (17). This is done by controlling language, also known as censorship. Foucault looks back at those three centuries of change and states that there was a discursive explosion, even though the language was expurgated. Discourses concerning sex in the field of power exercise started to exist. One of the examples of this was found in the Catholic church. Confession became more important after the Middle Ages; it became a way of self-examination. Even desires were examined and turned into discourse (21). This is also seen in seventeenth century literature, that was often named “scandalous”. It even goes that far the power mechanisms made the discourse on sex essential. Sex should be analysed, classified, specified and so on (24).

Sex was thus also policed. It was regulated by public discourses, for example by seeing the population as an economic and political problem. The population and their sexuality became an object of analysis and interventions. Sex became a public issue. The same is at stake with children’s sex (27). It was a discourse of silence. On the other hand, more discourses were formed about the children’s sex. Discourses on sex were also produced in medicine, psychiatry, onanism, criminal justice and social control. Sex became a way of exercising power (32). We talk about sex more than anything else, it is present in multiple discourses in multiple institutions. There is thus a discursive growth in a complex network which connects all discourses on sex. By making sex something that should be confessed, we make sex into something that is always hiding (35). Thus, we are speaking endlessly about sex, but still see it as the secret.

## The Perverse Implantation

The chapter starts with a possible objection to the view that the multiplication of discourses about sex reduced unproductive activities (36). Foucault disagrees and states that more forms of perversions, with corresponding legal sanctions, came into existence. The nineteenth century can even be seen as an age of multiplication, creating sexual heterogeneities. This did not lead to a conservative and economically useful sexuality. There were three major explicit codes about sexual practices, built around matrimonial relations between man and woman, in the eighteenth century: canonical law, the Christian pastoral, and the civil law. The discursive explosion took place due to two modifications. First, the move away from the norm, the heterosexual monogamy. Second, the scrutiny of the sexuality of children, mad men/women, and criminals. The scrutiny led to an “unnatural” dimension in the field of sexuality (39). Four operations were at hand when it comes to the forms of power, separated in the law of marriage and the order of desires:

1. Different power mechanisms play a role when it comes to the sexuality of children, including a medico-sexual regime in the family. Foucault calls it a barrier system.
2. Sexuality is an incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals, for example identifying someone as homosexual.
3. The scrutiny led to an intertwining of power and pleasure when it comes to sexuality.
4. The devices of sexual saturation are characteristic for social rituals and space. Sexuality is seen as a network of pleasures and power.

Foucault concludes that from the nineteenth century onwards, there was a multiplication of singular sexuality, because of the power that came into play (47). It did not set boundaries for sexuality. This contradicted the repressive hypothesis. There was a growth of perversion, due to an instrumental effect. This growth of perversion was created by power. The relation between power and pleasure was redefined and more centres of power were realised. Thus, there is not an increase in sexual repression in modern industrial societies (49).

## Part three: *Scientia Sexualis*

The discourse on sex has multiplied and an entire sexual mosaic is established (53). This growing discourse is not only defensive, but also a way of finding the truth. Sex became something scientific. It especially became something medical, something that could be a threat to the whole species. Thus, knowledge was needed. The discourses about human sexuality cannot be compared to the knowledge about animal and plant reproduction. The knowledge about reproduction and about the medical side of sex were something separate from each other. Sex became a question of truth (56).

Foucault observes two procedures for producing the truth about sexuality (57). There are societies, like China and Rome, that practice the *ars erotica*. This knowledge is about sensual pleasure and truth is drawn from that pleasure itself. Thus, most knowledge about sex remains a secret and only a master has this knowledge. This master can pass on this knowledge about pleasure. In the Western world, there is another kind of procedure relating to the truth about sexuality. This procedure is known as *scientia sexualis*. Foucault relates this procedure to confession (58). Confession is in the Western world seen as a way to produce the truth, resulting in a central role for confessions in the order of powers. A confessing society is created, where confessing is the key in justice, philosophy, literature, and so on. Confession has also become a way of self-examination. We have the idea that power is not pushing us to confess, but confession has become a way of finding truths. It is a way to liberate ourselves from taboos, from silence. We are subjects in both senses of the word. We confess because the power makes us confess, and we confess to see ourselves as thinking subjects. Sex is an important theme in confessions because it is something that is private or hidden (61). It even produced a discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement. In this

way, a power relation is created between the listener, also seen as the dominant, and the confessor, also seen as the constrained. The confession remains a way of producing a true discourse on sex and exploring new domains. It results in an archive about the pleasure of sex, resulting in a system of classification about the pleasure of the people. Two modes came into existence to produce the truth: confession and scientific discursivity. Thus, the *scientia sexualis* had the goal of producing true discourses on sex. It relates to confession and with science. Sexuality is in that way the correlative of the slowly developed discursive practice constituted by the *scientia sexualis*. It is about the discourse with the goal of producing the truth, not about sex per se. In the nineteenth century sex became an object of suspicion and secrecy (69). It resulted in two processes. First, we want to speak the truth about sex. Second, we want sex to tell us our truth, the truth about ourselves. In this way, a knowledge of the subject was created. This is a result of the powers at work in the discourse.

Foucault sees that, even though the Western world is focused on *scientia sexualis*, the *ars erotica* has not completely disappeared (70). There are methods that are in line with an erotic art. The *scientia sexualis* creates its own pleasure by the production of truth, a pleasure of analysis. Therefore, it can be seen as an *ars erotica* as well. Foucault concludes that the repressive hypothesis is inadequate. There is a network of discourses at work when it comes to sex. According to Foucault, we need a historical inquiry concerning the way a knowledge of sex is formed. The positive mechanisms, namely producing knowledge, discourses, pleasure and power, must be the starting point. Thus, we need to find out the strategies of power that are inherent in the will to knowledge (73).

#### Part four: The Deployment of Sexuality

In our society, sex is telling the truth about other people and about ourselves (77). Pleasure and knowledge are drawn for sex, a knowledge of pleasure, demanded by the truth-seeking of the Western world. A petition to know focuses on two things: the knowing how things are with sex and the knowing how things are with us. This resulted in a logic of sex, based on history, signification and discourse. Sex explains everything, but why do we place that much emphasis on sex and finding the truth?

#### Method

Foucault defines power as something that is everywhere, existing in every relation (92). Power is a process, a network. He gives five propositions concerning power (94). First, power is exercised from different points in relations. Second, power relations are immanent. Third, power is active at every level of society. Thus, power comes not only from above. Fourth, there are no subjects in power relations and power relations are intentional. Therefore, there is a logic behind those relations. Fifth and last, resistance is part of the relation of power. Resistance is present everywhere in the network of power, so there is a plurality of constantly changing resisting elements. Foucault concludes the chapter by stating that the conception of power should replace the law, so a strategic method and not one that is based on law (102).

#### Domain

Sexuality is a point, an instrument, in the different relations of power (103). Manifestations of sexuality are part of a network and cannot be explained by one strategy. Sexuality is a historical construct formed by a network (105). In premodern times, the relations of sex gave rise to a deployment of alliance which is all about kinship ties. In modern society, the deployment of alliance is replaced more and more by the deployment of sexuality. The deployment of sexuality is a constantly changing structure, giving rise to different areas and forms of control relating to sex. Family has an important role in both deployments; it is the

meeting point of sexuality and alliance (108). The deployment of alliance forbids sexuality within the family, meeting the deployment of sexuality. In the seventeenth century, the deployment of sexuality started, when the family became the focus of institutions with an awareness on their sexuality. 'Experts' regulated sexuality and solved conflict, together with confessions. It resulted in psychoanalysis when medicine became responsible for the problem-solving (112). The parents-children relation was the fundament for sexuality and the connection between the deployments. Laws formed around sexuality also formed the discourse. The idea of repression came in, due to the labour force and *Spätkapitalismus* in the nineteenth century (114). An idea we should move away from, according to Foucault.

### Periodization

A new technology of sex was formed at the end of the eighteenth century, becoming a concern of the state resulting in a social body (116). The medico-psychological domain of perversion was opened up and analysis of heredity came up, making sex biologically responsible. Perversion and heredity were linked by the theory of degenerescence, separating the medicine of sex and the medicine of body. The mechanisms of repression were loosened in the twentieth century (120). It was directed at the dominant classes, not the poorer classes, which are normally repressed first. Sex was problematized in the higher classes first, leading to a psychiatrization of sex.

Foucault has some doubts about the repressive cycle, as stated above (122). Sexual repression was something for the ruling class. It was a self-affirmation, not an enslavement of others. Sex became responsible for the health of the body and soul. The bourgeoisie wanted to create a 'class' body, for different reasons. Healthy sexuality became for the bourgeoisie, what bloodline was for the earlier aristocracy. It can be linked to the process of growth and establishment of this class. The proletariat, on the other hand, was not concerned with their body and sex.

The theory of repression came up when the deployment of sexuality spread. The idea that sexuality is defined by law spread at the end of the eighteenth century, but the repressive hypothesis would compensate this spread (128). Social differentiation was made by repression, by creating taboos. It was the fundament for psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis recognized the interrelatedness between desires and the law, but it also relieved the effects of the taboo. Desires could be expressed. Psychoanalysis supported the differentiating role of the deployment of sexuality because psychoanalysis was more for the higher classes. The repressive hypothesis is part of our history.

### Part five: Right and Death of Power over Life

In earlier times, the sovereign power had the right to decide on life and death (135). Nowadays, the power is focusing on improving, securing and extending life, not death. Biological existence became more important than the existence of the sovereignty. Even the use of the death penalty changed. It is only used when people are put in a biological danger. This transformation can be seen in two forms, starting in the seventeenth century (139). First, the discipline of the body. The body is seen as a machine integrated in different systems. Second, the regulation of the population. It focuses on the reproduction of the human species. Those two forms together are what Foucault calls 'bio-power'. Technologies, for example the deployment of sexuality, joined the two together. Life of the human species became political, an object of power and knowledge. Therefore, a new kind of relation between history and life was needed. Laws change, focusing more on life and less on death.

The disciplines of the body and the regulation of the population are the main forms for the development for the entire political technology of life leading to sex as a political issue (145). Sex is important for the life of the body and the life of the species. The four great lines



of attack (the sexualization of children, the hysterization of women, a socialization of procreative behaviour and the psychiatrization of perversions) combine the forms of bio-power. The first two lines deal with the discipline of the body, enforcing the regulation of the population. The last two lines deal with the regulation of the population by disciplining the body. Foucault also talks about the symbolic function of bloodlines that is now disappearing. There is a transition from the symbolic of blood to the analytic of sex, cause by, among others, psychoanalysis. Power gave meaning to sex (148).

Foucault asks himself if he is not forgetting sex itself in his talk, to prevent criticism on this (151). He sees sex as a social construct and not a something instinctive. Sex has a meaning in particular contexts and when we talk about sex, it is not about the biological part of sex. The idea of sex in itself cannot be accepted without examination. Again, Foucault mentions the four great lines of attack as example. Sex has several functions (154). First, sex can be seen as a unique signifier and as a universal signified. Second, sex is also linking knowledge of human sexuality and biological sciences of reproduction. Third, sex can explain the notion of power. The last function is less theoretical and more practical. Sex gives people access to their identity, their intelligibility and their body. In the end, the deployment of sex leads to the most essential internal operating principle, namely the desire for sex.

Foucault states that in the future, people will wonder why our civilization was focused on sex (158). The conclusion of Foucault is that the deployment of sexuality makes us believe in our liberation. He states that this is ironic.

### Chapter 3. Coming Out

Most societies in the world, the modern Western world included, are heteronormative societies. The information that is given in society via mass media, the institutions and customs, is all about the heterosexuality of individuals.<sup>11</sup> In public, a man and woman together are often seen as a heterosexual couple and traditions around the heterosexual couples are important events in the society, for example marriage and anniversaries. Individuals are often assumed to be heterosexual, without mentioning anything about their romantic and/or sexual identity. Nevertheless, a lot of heterosexuals still give information about their relationship status, by for example wearing a wedding ring. They are confirming their role in society and showing the behaviour society expects. Although the heterosexual role in society is not only about sexuality, this is still a great part of how the heterosexual relationship is conceived. Sex is accepted in society and when talking about heterosexuality it is not seen as inappropriate. Thus, having a heterosexual identity is unproblematic. But, what if an individual does not fit in this heterosexual identity? Homosexuality is seen as the opposite of heterosexuality. The not heterosexual individuals have to tell society that they are different, that they are not heterosexual. Those individuals need to come out of the closet.

Coming out is, as stated before, the process in which individuals recognize romantic and/or sexual feelings towards people with the same gender and share their lesbian/gay/bisexual identities with others in a heteronormative society.<sup>12</sup> Coming out is needed to prove that people are not heterosexual. The individual can be seen as different and abnormal, sometimes resulting in marginalization and rejection. Homosexuality was even seen as abnormal to such a degree that it was included in the 'Diagnostic and Statistical

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<sup>11</sup> Gregory M. Herek, "Why Tell If You're Not Asked? Self-Disclosure, Intergroup Contact, and Heterosexuals' Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men," in *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Experiences*, ed. Linda D. Garnets, and Douglas C. Kimmel (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 275-277.

<sup>12</sup> Rust, "Finding a Sexual Identity and Community: Therapeutic Implications and Cultural Assumptions in Scientific Models of Coming Out," 227-229.

Manual of Mental Disorders' (DSM) until 1972. Yet, once out, the discourse on the sexuality of those 'abnormal' individuals does not stop. The individuals still have to speak in different contexts and to different people about being gay, lesbian or bisexual. In this way, coming out is an ongoing process. Cultural differences also play a role in the process of coming out. Homosexuality and bisexuality are in some cultures perceived as a 'white' thing, something belonging to the Western world. But where do homosexuality and bisexuality come from?

A sexual preference for a certain gender, or more genders, is already present in childhood.<sup>13</sup> Sexual and/or romantic feelings towards a gender/more genders are present way before sexual and/or romantic experience. Thus, sexual orientation is not the result of positive and negative reinforcements in earlier sexual experiences. It is also not caused by more opportunities to learn about homosexuality, for example seduction by other people of the same gender. Still, a lot of homosexuals and lesbians have experienced sexual activities with someone of the opposite gender, but unpleasant experience with this is not a reason to become homosexual, lesbian or bisexual. Thus, it can be stated that sexual preference is innate. Still, in our society heterosexuality is preferred. This can make the non-heterosexuals vulnerable psychologically, because they do not fit in. To explain the not fitting in, a coming out is needed. Thus, those individuals have to explain why they do not fit in the norm. When coming out is stated like this, it has a lot in common with confessing. Confessing that the individual is different, confessing that they do not fit in with the norm of the heteronormative society. Not surprisingly, confession is one of the major themes in *the will to knowledge* by Foucault. Before diving in the concept of confessions, an elaboration about the repressive hypothesis is presented.

## Chapter 4. Coming Out and the Repressive Hypothesis

The repressive hypothesis, the hypothesis Foucault is arguing against, states that after the seventeenth century, sexuality moves into homes and its only function becomes reproduction.<sup>14</sup> This change in the discourse on sexuality and the idea of sexuality is caused by capitalism. When coming out is taken in account here, it already becomes clear why Foucault could be against the repressive hypothesis. If sex was only something for reproduction, no one would be gay, lesbian or bisexual. When people have sex with someone of the same gender, there is no reproduction whatsoever and this will not be in line with the idea of production in capitalism. This shows already that there is something wrong with the repressive hypothesis, because after the seventeenth century, especially after the twentieth century, homosexuality and bisexuality becomes more and more accepted. So, sex does not only have the function of reproduction. It is more than that.

It is also not silenced. Foucault is right when he states that there is a discursive explosion. Maybe the talking about sex nowadays is not that explicit anymore, but more and more conversations are about the sexuality of someone. People are talking about the sexual and/or romantic identity of others all the time, especially when they suspect someone is gay, lesbian or bisexual. It is not explicitly about sex, but it is about the sexual identity. It is not about the biological part of sex, but it is about the social construct of sex. So, I agree with Foucault that the repressive hypothesis is not true.

Not only is the repressive hypothesis not true, from the nineteenth century onwards more and more sexual heterogeneities came up.<sup>15</sup> The norm of the heterosexual couple disappeared somewhat. New specifications of subjectivity occurred. Some things that were seen as illegal or illegitimate earlier were now accepted. The sodomite disappeared, and the

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<sup>13</sup> Alan Paul Bell, *Sexual Preference: Its Development in Men and Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 98-113, 166-180.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, 3-5.

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, 36-44.

homosexual was accepted as a species, going against the norm of the heterosexual couple. By accepting homosexuality as a species, and not as a crime or disease, the need to come out also increased. Homosexuality, and in this sense also bisexuality, was not longer something that should stay hidden, out of fear of prosecution. People now have the possibility of coming out. However, the heterosexual couple is still existing as the norm, but the sexual heterogeneities do not make it look like a repression. It looks like more freedom of sexuality is allowed. Again, a proof that the repressive hypothesis is not right.

## Chapter 5. Coming Out and Confessions

After the nineteenth century, the norm was changing, and more sexual heterogeneities were allowed. Still, people needed to confess if they had a different sexual and/or romantic identity. This was done by coming out. Therefore, coming out can be compared to confessing. According to Foucault, Western man is a confessing animal.<sup>16</sup> Confessing is a way to find the truth. Not only find the truth in general, but also find a truth in ourselves. Confessing becomes a way of self-examination. This self-examination is also seen in coming out. By coming out, the true sexual and/or romantic identity is found and confessed to oneself and, finally, to the surrounding, the network around the individual. Therefore, the confession that a person is homosexual, lesbian or bisexual, frees, because the truth about oneself is found. The real identity, the identity of not being heterosexual, is found by this means of self-examination and thus by this means of confession.

Confession has an important relation with power.<sup>17</sup> The role of confessions is created by power to maintain power. In the case of coming out, people need to come out, because heteronormative society aims to stay in charge. Confessions always take place within a power relation. Homosexuals, lesbians or bisexuals have to confess that they are different, that they have a different identity, than the dominant heterosexual identity. However, the role of confession in our society is so deeply ingrained, that we do not feel like we have to confess because we are forced to do so by power. Lesbian, homosexual and bisexual individuals feel the need to explain that the identity the society has in mind for them, the heterosexual identity, does not suit them. They feel the need to explain they are different. Whether they are aware of the power mechanism at work is a question.

I do not totally agree with the statement that homosexual, lesbian and bisexual individuals do not feel pressured by power to confess. I think they are kind of conscious of the power mechanisms at work. At least, they are conscious of the heteronormative society they live in and that they are different. If they want to be open about being gay, lesbian and bisexual, they have to confess it first. They do not talk about their desires to find the truth, they talk about their desires to be accepted and to function in the society. Maybe, the gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals will not refer to it as a power mechanism, I think they are more aware of it than other people that do confessions. In the next chapter, the connection between power and coming out is discussed more deeply and apart from confession.

By confessing and also by coming out, people can be put in a system of classification.<sup>18</sup> In this way, it can become something scientific. Foucault calls this *scientia sexualis*. The Western world lives in a society that is characterised by this *scientia sexualis*. Behaviour can be examined, interpreted and medicalised by confessing. This is the opposite to *ars erotica*, the dominant view in the Eastern world, where the focus is more on the pleasure itself and the role it plays in sexual practices. Knowledge is kept secret in *ars erotica*, while the goal of the *scientia sexualis* is to find the knowledge, and explain

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, 59-60.

<sup>17</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, 58-62.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, 57-67.

abnormalities, for example not being heterosexual. Confession is turned into something scientific and this is done in five ways. Those five ways will be discussed below and related to coming out.

The first way is through a clinical codification of the inducement to speak. Confessions are being examined and, in this way, become the object of science. Having sexual and/or romantic feelings different from sexual and/or romantic feelings for someone of the opposite gender, thus coming out, is as stated before a confession and can be examined when someone comes out.

The second way is through the postulate of a general and diffuse causality. Being gay, lesbian or bisexual should have a cause and be the cause of something. Thus, there should be a causality. By coming out, this causality can be examined. Nowadays, there are still studies to see why someone becomes gay, lesbian or bisexual. Studies about genes, earlier sexual and/or romantic experiences and many more things are being examined to find the cause of not having a heterosexual identity.

The third way is through the principle of a latency intrinsic to sexuality. Sexuality is something that tries to stay hidden, a taboo. To make it the object of science, it has to be exacted by force. Confession was a way of doing this. The same is the case for coming out. Being gay, lesbian or bisexual is something that is a taboo, something that, especially in some societies and contexts, has to stay hidden. By coming out, it is exacted.

The fourth way is through the method of interpretation. Confessions are always done within a power relation. That relationship is necessary to produce the truth, to produce something scientific. Not only what the confessor is saying is important, also the interpretation of the one who listens matters. The listener is the master of the truth. When coming out, the relationship between the confessor and the listener is also important. The listener gives meaning to what is said and gives meaning to the new relationship that arises with someone who has a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity instead of a heterosexual identity. The listener gives true meaning to the coming out of the confessor.

The fifth and final way is through the medicalization of the effects of confession. A confession can be turned into something medical. A division between normal and abnormal sexuality was made, due to this medicalization. Homosexuality and bisexuality are seen as the abnormal. Being a heterosexual is the norm in our heteronormative society. In the earlier days, and nowadays still in some contexts, for example some churches, not having a heterosexual identity was seen as so abnormal, that even interventions were made, like treatments to become a heterosexual. The confession, in this case the coming out, leads to this treatment, this medicalized therapeutic operation. However, the Western society becomes more tolerating and accepting towards homosexuality and bisexuality. There are less such therapeutic interventions than before. Still, coming out makes a person psychologically vulnerable. There are psychologists that can help people through this psychological vulnerability. In this way, it is still medicalised, and the confessions create a class of experts who make a profit out of the coming out process. Again, a result of capitalism.

Thus, the making confession into something scientific, can also be used in making coming out into something scientific. Individuals can be classified by this, not as heterosexual, but as different, abnormal, as gay, lesbian or bisexual. This can influence their position in relationships and in society.

The focus so far is comparing coming out to confession, but not just being different has to be confessed in a discourse. Heterosexual individuals are also constantly confessing that they are heterosexual, but in a totally different discourse.<sup>19</sup> Heterosexuals are constantly confessing that they are heterosexual. They are doing this by giving information about their

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<sup>19</sup> Herek, "Why Tell If You're Not Asked? Self-Disclosure, Intergroup Contact, and Heterosexuals' Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men," 275-276.

heterosexual identity and making statements about it. Think for example about wearing a wedding ring, often suggesting that you are married to someone of the opposite gender. It is a way of showing that you live according to the norm and that you cannot be identified as abnormal. This constant confirming that you are heterosexual shows the sex is also taken into account, due to the power relations that are at work in the society.<sup>20</sup> So, not only the abnormalities are made into a discourse.

## Chapter 6. Coming out and Power

One of the concepts that is constantly popping up in this thesis and in *the will to knowledge* is power, or power relations. Earlier in this thesis, power was already discussed in combination with confessions and it is one of the fundamental concepts in the repressive hypothesis. However, power is important for Foucault. That is the reason I devote a separate chapter to power and the relation power has with coming out.

Foucault defines power as the multiplicity of force relations that are immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization.<sup>21</sup> Power is a process, a system, in which force relations are present and active. Power is the strategies in which these take effect. It is embodied in the state apparatus, in law and in the various social hegemonies. Power is omnipresent, power is everywhere and embraces everything. Thus, power is the complex strategical situation in a particular society. After making clear what he means by power, Foucault presents five propositions about power.

First, power is exercised from different points in relations. This shows the network in which power operates. It is the same network which makes it necessary, and also possible, for people with a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity to come out. Second, power relations are immanent. Thus, power relations are existing within itself. Power relations give form to the power relation they cover. They are productive. Power relations make it necessary for people to come out. This comes from within the power relation, not from above. Third, power is active at every level of society. Thus, power comes not only from above. Coming out is also necessary for the people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual, not only for the heteronormative society and the law. So, also the power relations within the LGBT-community make it necessary for people to come out, otherwise they will not be included in this community. They are striving for acceptance, but still need to prove, by coming out, that they belong to that society. This is all due to power relations. Thus, the process of coming out is at every level of the society.

Fourth, there are no subjects in power relations and power relations are intentional. Therefore, there is a logic behind those relations. The goal of power is always coming from somewhere, it is not appearing at random. Why people have to come out is thus coming from somewhere. It is probably coming from the idea that sex needs to reproduce, as mentioned earlier in chapter 4. The ideas of the Western world are also, at least for a huge part, based on Christianity. Christianity and homosexuality have had a problematic relation for a long time, that still is continuing now.<sup>22</sup> It is possible that this has resulted in seeing homosexuality and bisexuality as abnormal. This shows the intention of the power relations behind coming out and shows that it is not something that came into existence at random. Fifth and last, resistance is part of the relation of power. Resistance is present everywhere in the network of power, so there is a plurality of constantly changing resisting elements. This is also seen in the acceptance of coming out. The resistance against homosexuality and bisexuality is constantly

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<sup>20</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, 23-24.

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, 92-97.

<sup>22</sup> Mark D. Chapman and Dominic Janes, "Introduction: Same-Sex Love and Desire – A Time for New Approaches," in *New Approaches in History and Theology to Same-Sex Love and Desire*, ed. Mark D. Chapman, and Dominic Janes (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1-2.

changing and there are all kinds of different discourses involved. People often state that they accept homosexuality and bisexuality, but they do not accept if they see two males are kissing on the street or holding hands. Thus, there are different kinds of resistance. There is also resistance from the person that needs to come out against himself. He/she first needs to acceptance that the heterosexual identity he/she is raised with is not the right identity for him or herself. This can also lead to resistance. Just like the social network around that person do or do not accept their new identity. In this, resistance is always present. At least, there will always be a resistance to the change of identity. This can change over time, but when something is new, people always have to get used to it. Maybe the resistance is not conscious, just like power relations are not conscious, but modifying behaviour and discourse always take time. It takes time to see a person differently. This can be seen as a form of resistance against their coming out. So, coming out is accompanied by several forms of resistance, which can all be part of different discourses. Not only against the coming out there is resistance, the LGBT-community also has resistance against the power, the heteronormative society in this case. They are striving for full acceptance, so resisting the norms of the heteronormative society. The power and the resistance thus works in different directions.

Foucault follows four rules when it comes to expanding the production of discourse on sex and the power involved.<sup>23</sup> Those four rules will be discussed below and related to coming out.

The first rule is the rule of immanence. It states that knowledge and power are connected. Both are also influenced by power relations. There are local centres of power-knowledge. People who are seen as abnormal, or in this case gay, lesbian or bisexual, are examined – they themselves, as well as their surroundings. Knowledge is formed about them, to explain why they are different, after they came out. The power of a heteronormative society, of not deviating from the norm, makes people who do not have a heterosexual identity, study objects, object to talk about, objects to judge. In the earlier times, when homosexuality and bisexuality was still seen as a disease, the local centre of power-knowledge was more clear than it is nowadays. Still, by making people come out, by getting knowledge about their romantic and/or sexual identity, power and knowledge are related.

The second rule is the rule of continual variations. Power implies a pattern of modifications. Therefore, power relations are not static. This is also seen in the acceptance of homosexuality and bisexuality. At first, it was seen as a disease, people were sent to treatment, put in jail, or executed. The sovereign had the right of death and power over life. Nowadays, at least in most of the Western world, being gay, lesbian or bisexual is accepted. It is not a criminal offense, nor is treatment obligatory anymore. The power is not so obviously present anymore.

The third rule is the rule of double conditioning. All centres of power are part of a larger strategy and those larger strategies depend on those centres of power. The centre of power, where the coming out comes from, is part of the larger strategy of the heteronormative society, which is part of the larger strategy of the Christian fundament our society is built on, etcetera. Thus, coming out is also influenced by other power centres, which are larger than the power centre of coming out.

The fourth and last rule is the rule of the tactical polyvalence of discourses. Discourse joins power and knowledge. Discourses are networks without a dominant relation producing power. They operate in the field of power relations; they play a role in the production of power and its transmission. Homosexuality and bisexuality were first seen as a sin. They were punishable, but people also remained silent about them, tolerating what others did. Later, homosexuality and bisexuality were something that should be controlled, by administering

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<sup>23</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, 98-102.

treatments, sending gays, lesbians and bisexuals to therapists, changing the discourse and changing the power relations surrounding the discourse. Homosexuality and bisexuality got more and more a voice, putting forward that they are not ill, that they are normal. By not making homosexuality and bisexuality criminal anymore, people can be more open about their sexual and/or romantic identity, resulting in a discourse of coming out. A totally new discourse arises, going against the prevailing discourse. It again changes the power relations. The discourses will constantly change, also in relation to each other, just like power and knowledge are changing constantly. Discourse is thus an important element in the knowledge-power relation, and thus influencing the process of coming out.

Thus, power as thematized in the work of Foucault plays a major role in (the discourse of) coming out. It explains why individuals with non-heterosexual identities need to come out how the discourse around this is formed.

## Chapter 7. Conclusion

In this thesis, the book *the will to knowledge* written by famous French philosopher Michel Foucault is discussed. Some of the theories that are represented in the book are related to the process of coming out, a process in which individuals recognize their homosexual or bisexual identity and sharing this identity with their surroundings. In the introduction of this thesis, the following question was stated: can the theory discussed in *the will to knowledge* written by Foucault, also explain what is happening when people are coming out as gay, lesbian or bisexual? This question is answered by giving a summary of the book, elaborating on coming out and relating coming out to the repressive hypothesis, confessions and power. Those three concepts are major concepts in the work of Foucault.

The answer to the question stated above is that the book of Foucault can partly explain what is happening when people are coming out. Foucault is right in stating that the repressive hypothesis is not true. The time that was seen as the time of repression, even led to the need of coming out, due to the discursive explosion and the rise of sexual heterogeneities. Moreover, coming out can be compared to confession, explained in part three of 'The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction.' Coming out is confessing that you are abnormal, and it is also a way of self-examination. The coming out is always done within a power relation, mostly the power of heteronormativity. Gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals are mostly aware of the heteronormative society they live in. Thus, they are aware of the power that comes into play. This makes me disagree with Foucault on the part that people are unaware of power relations. Furthermore, coming out is a way of classifying people, of making it the object of scientific discourse. Five ways are mentioned how this is done. At the end of chapter 5 of this thesis, a little bit of attention is given to the confessions of heterosexual individuals, who are constantly showing that they live according to the norm and their heterosexual identity. Additionally, coming out and power is related. The characteristics of power are discussed and how this can be turned into discourse. Power is one big network of all kind of relations and power centres. One of the power centres is coming out. The power resulted in more discourse on homosexuality and bisexuality, finally resulting in a discourse on coming out.

*The will to knowledge* can be used to explain the process of coming out of gay, lesbian and bisexual people. It was more than 40 years ago that Foucault wrote the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* books, but it is still applicable to 'hot topics' in our current society. Readers should keep in mind that the concept of coming out is constantly changing and it depends on the context and culture how this concept is perceived. It is possible that in the future, the work of Foucault will be obsolete, just like the concept of coming out could have disappeared. The future will show how the discourse on coming out turns out.

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