



# HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

*Arch Sex Behav.* Author manuscript; available in PMC 2024 July 01.

Published in final edited form as:

*Arch Sex Behav.* 2023 July ; 52(5): 1931–1935. doi:10.1007/s10508-023-02636-0.

## Future Research Directions on “The Closet” as Metaphor and Reality

John E. Pachankis<sup>1</sup>, Skyler D. Jackson<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Yale School of Public Health, 60 College Street, Suite 316, New Haven, CT 06510, USA

We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the five commentaries regarding our Target Article. The Target Article proposed a model summarizing accumulating research on the closet—the period during which one recognizes their sexual minority identity, but has not disclosed it to anyone significant in their life—and its varied and potentially farreaching after-effects across the lifespan, as influenced by the context of disclosure. We also proposed a series of testable hypotheses and several future, intervention-related research directions that, taken together, may shepherd in a new era of research on the lifespan-persistent mental health effects of the closet. In this reply, we respond to the five commentaries and their implications for future research and conceptualizations of the closet.

### The Closet as Metaphor vs. Reality

The commentaries raised a number of intriguing considerations germane to the scientific study of the closet. The contributions were consistent in noting the sheer nuance necessary for even sensibly talking about a construct with such potential for narrative and cultural hegemony as the closet. Together, the commentaries suggest that the closet cannot be discussed as a unifying experience of sexual minorities given that sexual minority individuals will experience it so differently depending on their developmental, relational, and intersectional contexts. We discuss the research implications of these qualifying conditions below. However, we begin our reply to the commentaries by noting that we were most struck by those who suggested that the closet only exists as a metaphor and one that should be outright retired (Abboud & Flores, 2023; Doyle & Barreto, 2022). We were motivated to write our paper on the closet because of the newly available opportunities to study those individuals who have never disclosed their sexual orientation, but also because of ubiquitous popular portrayals of the closet, including through language. Surely, nearly all sexual minority individuals and probably most heterosexual individuals in Western contexts are familiar with and have used the terms “the closet” and its corollary “coming out.” Yet, some of the commentaries suggest that to the extent that these terms are used only as a metaphor, we should be suspicious of their potential to serve as useful, or even legible, constructs worthy of study. Following these calls for suspicion, we ask with curiosity: “Why

<sup>✉</sup> John E. Pachankis john.pachankis@yale.edu.

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

**Ethical Approval/Informed Consent** There are no human subjects involved in this research, so ethical approval and informed consent is not applicable.

does this metaphor exist in the first place and endure?” (and accordingly, “Should, and how should, we study it?”).

The closet is obviously at least partly a linguistic and narrative device of an oppressive heterosexist world. The closet invokes a narrative of a dim, desolate existence devoid of self-determination and joy. Whether one has shut the closet door themselves or has had it shut on them by oppressive forces, one’s existence within is assumed bleak. Conversely, coming out is narrated as a courageous, possibly defiant, act that ushers in a world of bright freedom and pride. The narrative of the closet simultaneously serves to remind heterosexuals that sexuality runs deep through the psyche and that the specter of same-gender attraction could lie just beneath the surface of a heterosexual façade. As evidence of the social function of this narrative, 50% more Google searches in Mississippi contain the question “Is my husband gay?” than in Rhode Island (Stephens-Davidowitz, 2013). Still, the closet in its most objective sense and the sense most likely to be operationalized by researchers is not only a narrative device of oppressors. The length of time between awareness and first disclosure of one’s sexual minority identity, in fact, represents a measurable, variable reality (Bishop et al., 2020; Layland et al., 2023), with implications for adjustment and mental health (e.g., Katz-Wise et al., 2017).

We join others who argue that to the extent that the closet exists as a metaphor (Sedgwick, 1990), the sooner it is retired, the freer sexual minorities will be to narrate their own experience (Doyle & Barreto, 2022). Yet, to the extent that the closet exists as a measurable reality, we are inspired by suggestions from all of the commentaries in terms of how to measure it with appropriate nuance going forward. To start, however, future research could squarely ask sexual minority individuals if they have ever been or are currently “in the closet.” We would be intrigued to know how many people answer this question affirmatively and whether those who do so are more subject to oppressive conditions toward sexual minorities (e.g., Mississippi vs. Rhode Island). Perhaps all sexual minorities have spoken about “the closet.” How many apply the construct to their current or past selves, and how that self-label functions, would be fascinating to know and would inform future research.

## The Closet as Relational, Cultural, and Intersectional

In terms of measuring the closet with nuance, we are particularly compelled by the argument of Doyle and Barreto (2023) that measuring the closet is complicated to the extent that authenticity is created through interaction. That is, to the extent that identities form and exist through their expression to others, then one’s true self cannot be known only to one’s self—rather, it has to be known by others to be authentic in the first place. We therefore suggest that future research directly ask sexual minority individuals to indicate the extent to which they feel true to their authentic self. Comparing this felt sense of authenticity between sexual minorities and heterosexuals also represents a promising future direction. We hypothesize that sexual minorities, by virtue of their experience forming and disclosing a concealable identity, likely have more experience thinking about authenticity, but whether they would report feeling more or less authentic than heterosexuals is harder to predict but nonetheless important to know given its implications for adjustment and mental health (e.g., Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001).

Perhaps the most consistent theme to arise from the commentaries is the strong notion that the closet is experienced in a relational context. Thus, even if the metaphor of the closet needs to be retired, study of associated phenomena (e.g., first disclosure, subsequent disclosures) should at least be contextualized within a relational sphere. Rosario (2023) argued that the closet is ultimately a developmental construct and that identity development, perhaps especially sexual identity development, exists in a relational context. Both Rosario (2023) and Doyle and Barreto (2022) suggested that since sexual identity development is a continuous, even lifelong, process, so too is coming out. Disclosing to one person will not be the same as disclosing to any other person and some people will disclose, and have the option to disclose, to many more people than others. Subsequent disclosures are shaped by prior disclosures and the subjective experience of the closet changes accordingly, so this argument goes. We agree that sexual identity concealment does not end when one comes out and that one's first disclosure of that identity can have numerous possible outcomes depending on the relational context of disclosure. Yet, lest we abandon the construct of the closet as a meaningful and measurable reality, we also note that although coming out is not necessarily a discrete event, leaving the closet is a singular event and a meaningful developmental point from whence new life paths emerge. We position the closet as a meaningful reality not because we believe that something singular or even special happens when one comes out, but because coming out allows for so many new relational possibilities beyond the closet. At the point of coming out for the first time, sexual minorities' experiences will veer in numerous directions, and our model highlighted these various pathways as a function of numerous moderating conditions of post-closet life. But even if post-closet life can be so variable that it becomes hard to theorize, this does not make the experience of the closet so.

Heeding the commentators' important call for developmental and relational nuance in the study of the closet, to our list of suggested future research questions we add asking sexual minority individuals across the lifespan to report their subjective experience of the closet now and in the past (e.g., "What does the closet mean to you at this time in your life?" "What did it mean to you earlier in life?") and as a function of their relationships ("How has your time in the closet shaped you and your relationships?" "How have you and your relationships shaped your time in the closet?"). Further, some sexual minority individuals (e.g., bisexual individuals, asexual individuals, individuals whose identity labels fluctuate over time) might be particularly likely to have distinct, and perhaps fewer, coming out experiences given others' more tenuous understandings of, and unpredictable reactions toward, such experiences (Alley, 2023; Feinstein & Renteria, 2023). Therefore, we also propose asking sexual minority individuals across the lifespan to report their experience of the closet as a function of their identities (e.g., "How have you experienced the closet as a bisexual/asexual/fluid person?").

From their research with Arab sexual minority immigrant men, Abboud and Flores (2023) provided additional compelling evidence that the closet is experienced as a relational phenomenon. Many of the closet-related experiences among their sample exemplify the predictions of the developmental model of the closet, including elements that we proposed as occurring in the "pre-closet" (e.g., early sense of difference, encountering prejudicial views of sexual minorities before one views oneself as a sexual minority) as well as in

the “post-closet” (e.g., hypervigilance, insecurity, isolation, overcompensation; Pachankis & Jackson, 2022). However, elements of their participants’ post-closet life with their families and White friends highlighted the intersectional relational influences on the closet. Their accounts showcase the ways that racial/ethnic and cultural stereotypes (e.g., about who is in and out of the closet) may shape one’s developmental experience of the closet. Indeed, just as Abboud and Flores (2023) provided accounts of Arab immigrant sexual minority men, whose White friends may overreact to their coming out (e.g., expressing astonishment, tokenizing their experience), research suggests that other sexual minorities of color face similar cultural scripts and expectations (e.g., Black gay and bisexual men report being disproportionately and erroneously assumed to be “on the down low”; Ford et al., 2007; Meyer, 2010). Further research in this area is needed. Whether sexual minority people of color navigate at least two distinct developmental processes (i.e., of their race/ethnicity and of their sexual orientation) or experience their identity development as a unitary experience represents an additional promising avenue for future research. For example, research already suggests that among some sexual minority subgroups (e.g., Black lesbian and bisexual women), the experience of coming out may be influenced by other salient identities (e.g., race, gender, religion) and collectivist priorities (e.g., maintaining familial relationships and community ties; Bowleg et al., 2008). Building upon such findings, we thus suggest another future research question for sexual minority samples: “How is your experience within the absolute sexual minority closet shaped by your other identities?”.

Overall, Abboud and Flores (2023) compellingly argued for expanding the relational context of the closet to account for the cultural context in which relationships are formed. We are particularly motivated by the words of one of Abboud and Flores’ research participants who shared his belief that “coming out is a Western and white concept,” which inspires us join their call for future research into the experiences of concealment and disclosure in non-US contexts. To the extent that such research can document the ways in which sexual orientation and its identities might be privately and publicly expressed in ways distinct from Western and White notions of the closet, the field of sexual minority studies will come closer to knowing the full range of possibilities embedded in this diversity. We hope that future research can also document the consequences of the global exportation of hegemonic notions like “the closet” by studying how such notions are adopted or resisted across national and cultural contexts and how such adoption and resistance are associated with the mental health and thriving of global LGBT individuals and communities. Accordingly, we hypothesize that the closet will increase in size to the extent that Western notions of sexual minority identities and development continue to be exported globally. Consistent with Doyle and Barreto’s (2022) contention and that of others (English & Chen, 2007; Huang & Brouwer, 2018), culture might even shape the identities that can be imagined for oneself in the first place, the salience that any adopted identities hold for oneself, and the meaning of expressing one’s identity in way that matches community expectations versus one’s personal perspective. We hope that future research can further articulate whether the closet represents a hegemonization of the sexual minority experience both proximally (through constraining personal narratives) and globally (through erasing local ways of expressing and experiencing sexuality and forcing all to contend with Western ways of knowing and fearing same-sex sexuality; Massad, 2002).

## The Closet as Sensitive Period

Finally, Alley (2023) compellingly argued that, because it introduces a period of social restructuring and accompanying potential for high threat and low safety, the closet should be considered a sensitive period regardless of when in the lifespan it occurs. In this way, the closet joins other social transitions, such as divorce, job loss, moving cities, and starting college, in being accompanied by the uncertainty of relational threat or safety that makes these transitions stressful and potentially health impairing. The social signal transduction theory of depression (Slavich & Irwin, 2014) as recently applied to the experiences of sexual minority individuals (Diamond & Alley, 2022) offers a testable, falsifiable lens through which to conceptualize the relational aspects of the closet. This theory suggests that by virtue of their stigmatized status and the danger that such a status has represented evolutionarily and today, sexual minorities are more likely to be prepared for harm than the non-stigmatized. This preparedness includes social-cognitive processes (e.g., rejection schemas, hypervigilance) and biological processes (e.g., inflammation). Indeed, recent research, relying on population-based prospective cohort data, confirms several of the predictions of this theory (Bränström et al., 2023; Hollinsaid et al., 2022). We would now be curious to know how this biopsychosocial preparedness for high threat and low safety waxes and wanes across development, including as a function of the periods of the closet. Is the closet indeed a sensitive period marked by increased preparedness for high threat and low safety?

## Why Study the Closet Now?

Lest it be argued that the closet represents a construct harkening back to earlier times with declining relevance today, we offer a reminder that very little research has ever been conducted on the experiences of individuals who have not disclosed their sexual orientation to anyone, given the barriers to conducting such research. In fact, the typical participant in existing studies on sexual minority experiences tends to be quite open about their sexual orientation (Kuyper et al., 2016; Salway et al., 2019). However, most sexual minority individuals around the world are probably not “out” and, in fact, probably share their sexual orientation with very few, if any, other people (Pachankis & Bränström, 2019). This is an important reality that the field of sexual minority studies needs to address both to understand the experience of this sizeable population and because of the implications that this population poses to the interpretation of all research on sexual minority samples.

Fortunately, studying the closet and its potential harms has become increasingly feasible in recent years, due to the recent availability of methodologies and data opportunities that identify sexual minority individuals who have never disclosed their identity to another person. For instance, the scientific literature on sexual minorities now features probability-based studies of the sexual minority population and outness (Pachankis et al., 2015; van der Star et al., 2019), prospective cohort studies of youth with assessments of sexual orientation identities as they emerge (Irish et al., 2019; la Roi et al., 2016; Pachankis et al., 2022), and data collection efforts on the disclosure experience of sexual minorities across international, including non-Western, contexts (e.g., Beijing LGBT Center, 2014; Pachankis et al., 2021). Such investigations have made it more possible than ever to ascertain samples of sexual

minority individuals who are not “out” about their sexual orientation. For these reasons, we offered a developmental model of the closet (Pachankis & Jackson, 2022) to organize the research surely to emerge from these new methodological opportunities and appreciate the added depth offered by the commentaries on this model (Abboud & Flores, 2023; Alley, 2023; Rosario, 2023; Doyle & Barreto, 2022; Feinstein & Renteria, 2023).

## Conclusion

In sum, we believe that one of the gravest harms of stigma is its potential to constrain one’s narrative possibilities—the lives that one can imagine for oneself, grow into, and thrive within. When and where it exists, stigma serves to impose the narrative of the oppressor on the lives of the oppressed, thereby robbing the stigmatized of the very self-affirmation and self-expression required to attain equality. “The closet” as metaphor has served to symbolize the narrative constraints that stigma can impose. At the same time, the closet as objective, measurable reality offers a construct worthy of empirical study given its associations with mental health and thriving. Our Target Article outlined many ways in which such research can proceed and offered 13 testable hypotheses for future work. To that list, the five commentaries add additional helpful nuance for ensuring that the empirical study of the closet captures a construct legible to the full diversity of the sexual minority experience. In so doing, this research has the potential to help do away with the closet, both as colloquial metaphor and global reality.

## Acknowledgements

Preparation of the manuscript was funded in part by the David R. Kessler, MD ‘55 Fund for LGBTQ Mental Health Research at Yale. Skyler D. Jackson was also supported by a career development award from the National Institute of Mental Health (K01MH122316-01A1). The content contained herein is the authors’ own and does not necessarily represent the viewpoint of the funders. We thank Benjamin Eisenstadt for manuscript preparation assistance.

## References

- Abboud S, & Flores DD (2023). A developmental model of the sexual minority closet: Implications for Arab immigrant sexual minorities and parent-LGBTQ child sex communication [Commentary]. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. 10.1007/s10508-022-02522-1
- Alley J (2023). Considering evolutionary developmental theory in the developmental model of the sexual minority closet [Commentary]. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. 10.1007/s10508-022-02512-3
- Beijing LGBT Center. (2014). *Chinese LGBT Mental Health Survey Report*. Beijing, China: Beijing LGBT Center.
- Bishop MD, Fish JN, Hammack PL, & Russell ST (2020). Sexual identity development milestones in three generations of sexual minority people: A national probability sample. *Developmental Psychology*, 56(11), 2177–2193. [PubMed: 32833471]
- Bowleg L, Burkholder G, Teti M, & Craig ML (2008). The complexities of outness: Psychosocial predictors of coming out to others among Black lesbian and bisexual women. *Journal of LGBT Health Research*, 4(4), 153–166. [PubMed: 19928043]
- Bränström R, Hatzenbuehler ML, Lattanner MR, Hollinsaid NL, McDade TW, & Pachankis JE (2023). Threats to social safety and neuro-inflammatory mechanisms underlying sexual orientation differences in depression symptom severity: A prospective, population-based study of young adults. Unpublished manuscript. Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden.

- Diamond LM, & Alley J (2022). Rethinking minority stress: A social safety perspective on the health effects of stigma in sexually-diverse and gender-diverse population. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 104720. [PubMed: 35662651]
- Doyle DM, & Barreto M (2022). Toward a more relational model of sexual minority identity concealment [Commentary]. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. 10.1007/s10508-022-02491-5
- English T, & Chen S (2007). Culture and self-concept stability: Consistency across and within contexts among Asian Americans and European Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93(3), 478–490. [PubMed: 17723061]
- Feinstein BA, & Rentería R (2023). Where is the line between being in versus out of the closet? [Commentary]. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. 10.1007/s10508-023-02570-1
- Ford CL, Whetten KD, Hall SA, Kaufman JS, & Thrasher AD (2007). Black sexuality, social construction, and research targeting ‘The Down Low’ (‘The DL’). *Annals of Epidemiology*, 17(3), 209–216. [PubMed: 17320787]
- Hollinsaid NL, Pachankis JE, Bränström R, & Hatzenbuehler ML (2022). Hypervigilance: An understudied mediator of the longitudinal relationship between stigma and internalizing psychopathology among sexual-minority young adults. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 21677026231159050.
- Huang S, & Brouwer DC (2018). Coming out, coming home, coming with: Models of queer sexuality in contemporary China. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 11(2), 97–116.
- Irish M, Solmi F, Mars B, King M, Lewis G, Pearson RM, Lewis G (2019). Depression and self-harm from adolescence to young adulthood in sexual minorities compared with heterosexuals in the UK: A population-based cohort study. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 3(2), 91–98. [PubMed: 30552054]
- Katz-Wise SL, Rosario M, Calzo JP, Scherer EA, Sarda V, & Austin SB (2017). Associations of timing of sexual orientation developmental milestones and other sexual minority stressors with internalizing mental health symptoms among sexual minority young adults. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 46, 1441–1452. [PubMed: 28271349]
- Kuyper L, Fernee H, & Keuzenkamp S (2016). A comparative analysis of a community and general sample of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45, 683–693. [PubMed: 25564037]
- la Roi C, Kretschmer T, Dijkstra JK, Veenstra R, & Oldehinkel AJ (2016). Disparities in depressive symptoms between heterosexual and lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth in a Dutch cohort: The TRAILS Study. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 45, 440–456. [PubMed: 26748920]
- Layland EK, Bränström R, Murchison GR, & Pachankis JE (2023). Kept in the closet: Structural stigma and the timing of sexual minority developmental milestones across 28 European countries. Unpublished manuscript. Yale University, New Haven, CT.
- Massad JA (2002). Re-orienting desire: The gay international and the Arab world. *Public Culture*, 14(2), 361–385.
- Meyer IH (2010). Identity, stress, and resilience in lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals of color. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 38(3), 442–454.
- Pachankis JE, & Bränström R (2019). How many sexual minorities are hidden? Projecting the size of the global closet with implications for policy and public health. *PLoS ONE*, 14(6), e0218084. [PubMed: 31194801]
- Pachankis JE, Clark KA, Klein DN, & Dougherty LR (2022). Early timing and determinants of the sexual orientation disparity in internalizing psychopathology: A prospective cohort study from ages 3 to 15. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 51(3), 458–470. [PubMed: 34731394]
- Pachankis JE, Cochran SD, & Mays VM (2015). The mental health of sexual minority adults in and out of the closet: A population-based study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 83(5), 890–901. [PubMed: 26280492]
- Pachankis JE, Hatzenbuehler ML, Bränström R, Schmidt AJ, Berg RC, Jonas K, Pito ák M, Baros S, & Weatherburn P (2021). Structural stigma and sexual minority men’s depression and suicidality: A multilevel examination of mechanisms and mobility across 48 countries. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 130(7), 713–726. [PubMed: 34780228]

- Pachankis JE, & Jackson SD (2022). A developmental model of the sexual minority closet: Structural sensitization, psychological adaptations, and post-closet growth. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. 10.1007/s10508-022-02381-w
- Rosario M (2023). Development of lesbian/gay, bisexual, and other sexual minority individuals: The closet and disclosure as a window into the issue [Commentary]. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. 10.1007/s10508-022-02516-z
- Salway TJ, Morgan J, Ferlatte O, Hawkins B, Lachowsky NJ, & Gilbert M (2019). A systematic review of characteristics of nonprobability community venue samples of sexual minority individuals and associated methods for assessing selection bias. *LGBT Health*, 6(5), 205–215. [PubMed: 31135260]
- Sedgwick E (1990). *The epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press.
- Sheldon KM, & Houser-Marko L (2001). Self-concordance, goal attainment, and the pursuit of happiness: Can there be an upward spiral? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(1), 152–165. [PubMed: 11195887]
- Slavich GM, & Irwin MR (2014). From stress to inflammation and major depressive disorder: A social signal transduction theory of depression. *Psychological Bulletin*, 140(3), 774–815. [PubMed: 24417575]
- Stephens-Davidowitz S (2013, December 7). How many American men are gay? *New York Times*.
- van der Star A, Pachankis JE, & Bränström R (2019). Sexual orientation openness and depression symptoms: A population-based study. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 6(3), 369–381.