



Places of (in)visibility. LGB aging and the (im)possibilities of coming out to others



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ABSTRACT

Middle and older age are usually ignored in the studies of the processes of coming out. This paper analyses the opportunities, and also the barriers which aging brings to the possibility of articulating one's own sexual identity in relation to others. It presents the life-course perspective as a suitable analytical tool for the study of the impact of historical context and the changing social locations within the life-biography. Analysis presented in this paper is based on 19 in-depth interviews with LGB people aged fifty and older living in the Czech Republic. The paper focuses on the way they relate to the idea of coming out and how they reflect on their previous biography with respect to the possibilities to articulate their sexuality in various phases of their life. It analyses how aging creates possibilities as well as barriers to articulate sexual identity with respect to family and closed ones and points out the need to critically reflect the narratives of coming out as a linear process of leaving "the closet". Older age was by the participants depicted as an important context that disrupted some of the barriers preventing coming out to others. However, the vision of late old age linked with specific age-related contexts (such as life in residential care facilities) was associated with impossibility to express sexual identity.

Introduction

The concept of coming out has been established, within the framework of the development of psychology, as a series of stages which individuals undergo from the gradual realization of one's desires, through acceptance and integration, into the perception of one's own identity (e.g. Cass, 1979). Plummer (1995: 82) in his pioneer work associate "the most momentous act in life of any lesbian or gay person" with the proclamation of "their gayness - to self, to others, to community". He points out the various dimension of coming out; distinguishing between coming out personally to oneself, privately to family and/or close friend, publicly to the immediate environment so it became general knowledge and politically to stimulate broader social acceptance. Coming out to others (privately and/or publicly) is often associated with a (single) easily identifiable and fixed moment(s) when individual talks about their differences from the assumed heterosexual norm with others. In this respect, Ryan et al. (2015: 552) define coming out as "events surrounding one's initial disclosure of sexual orientation to one's primary social circle." However, as has been shown by empiric studies, coming out is more a process, rather than a clearly defined life transition (Rust, 1993). It does not have to be linear and is contextually redefined depending on the circumstances of an individual life and social context. The opposition of "out" and "in" assumes clearly delimited spaces. Nevertheless, most people may occupy both of these spaces at certain points in their lives (Fuss, 1991: 4–5). One's primary circle consist of various actors and is changing during the life-course.

Simultaneously, the conditions and implications of coming out to others is changing in different phases of life-biography and reflect particular historical and social context of individual life. Orne (2011) therefore propose to analyse coming out as identity management system that is negotiated on a daily basis based on the social context. The concept of strategic outness refers to the different motivations that people take into consideration while deciding to disclose their LGBT identity to others. Those motivations are closely tied to the particular social, historical and family context. Outness is strategic because coming out to others have (potentially problematic or even dangerous) consequences. The concept of strategic outness imply that motivations to talk about one's sexual identity may change during the life-course (also because the context, consequences, relationships to others and immediate environment is continuously changing).

This study analyses the narratives of coming out to others based on the approach of social constructivism, which approaches self-identity "as the result of the interpretation of personal experience in terms of available social constructs." (Rust, 1993: 68). Such an approach rejects the idea of a fixed essence of identity, which is discovered and named during the coming out process and focuses mainly on the reflection of historical and social context, which delimits the possibilities of how to relate to one's own experiences and desires. The development perspective presents "finished" coming out as a characteristic of adulthood, and sexual identity as a stable part of personality. Social constructivist perspective works with the variability of social location, which enables the articulation of one's own identity in various ways (Rust, 1993). It

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highlights the role of historical changes in discourses related to homosexuality and sexual categories that delimit the way people relate to their experience and sexual identity (e.g. Foucault, 1990; Katz, 2007).

Studies into the perception of coming out, family members' responses, and the responses of friends and other relatives, often focused on adolescence or young age (Baptist & Allen, 2008; Hunter, 2017). In this regard, middle and older age are not usually presented as periods that would significantly attest to the processes of disclosing LGB identity to others. This paper focuses on two specific dimensions of coming out as proposed by Plummer (1995) - on processes of coming out privately and publicly with relation to a particular cohort of LGB elderly people. Using the biographical narratives of elderly LGB people living in the Czech Republic, the paper analyses the opportunities, and also the barriers which aging brings to the possibility of articulating one's own sexual identity in relation to others. It presents the life-course perspective (Elder, 1994) as a suitable analytical tool for the study not only the impact of historical context but also of the changing social locations within the life-biography. The aim of the paper is to discuss how position within the life-course and the process of aging affects the process of decisions making to come out to others.

The life-course perspective

The paradigm of the life-course diverts us from an interest in formulating a model of the developmental stages of human life, or sequences, through which we live. On a generic level, it can be perceived as an analytical-methodological tool for capturing the mutual interaction between social structures, historical conditions, and human lives. Elder (1994) points out four crucial frameworks which should be taken into consideration when studying life events and transitions from the perspective of the paradigm of the life-course. The first of them represents an emphasis on the connection between historical time and human lives. People born in different time periods and different social contexts live their lives being exposed to different barriers and opportunities (Elder, 1994). Within different generations, the experience of coming out, one's own sexuality, the level of social acceptance and life strategies associated with (not only) partnership biography, are framed within different contexts of legal regulation and social discourse. According to Knauer (2013: 368), these transitions in perception of sexuality have "potential to produce differences among cohorts that are deeply ontological in nature and go to the core of an individual's understanding of his or her right to exist in the world. "During their lifetimes, the current generation of older LGBT people witnessed dramatic transformation of discourse associated with non-heterosexual practices. Coming out represents one of the symbols of emancipation and liberation from "the closet" and is a defining structure for gay oppression this century (Sedgwick, 1990: 71). However, as has been shown by studies on the experiences of the older generations of LGBT people, the conceptualization of coming out and social acceptance. In this regard, the situation in countries of the former Soviet Bloc was significantly different. While the second wave of the feminist movement and LGBT activism is culminating in the United States in the 1970s, 1980s and beyond, in Czechoslovakia after the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968 the process of "normalization" was just gaining momentum and bringing with it, among other things, a significant fundamental shift towards the traditional concept of family and gender relationships (Lišková, 2016).

In comparison with U.S. and western Europe, Czechoslovak society was characterized by a more ambivalent discourses of homosexuality and LGBT rights. On the one hand, the communist regime was relatively liberal with respect to legislation on the relationships of people of the same sex. In 1961, Czechoslovakia was among the first countries to decriminalize homosexuality. Only displays deemed a "public nuisance" were to be punished. However, up until 1990 there was a different legal age limit for sexual intercourse between persons of opposite sex (15 years) and same sex (18 years). Information about the sexual lives of citizens also became an important blackmail tool for the Czechoslovak Secret Police, which systematically made lists of LGBT people (Seidl, Wintz, & Nozar, 2012). On the other hand, as is pointed out by Sokolová (2012), the communist regime in Czechoslovakia never organized hate campaigns against homosexuality as such, and the repression focused on the LGBT community primarily as on citizens living in opposition to the socialist way of life (similarly to, for example, religious people). During that time, compared to western countries, communist legislation actually seems much more emancipated and progressive. The relatively liberal legal framework, was, however, not reflected in a higher visibility of LGB community or in the possibility to articulate the issues of LGBT rights in public space. (Sokolová, 2012). Up until the 1990s, discussion on the LGBT issues was (apart from a few exceptions) non-existent, and there was no LGBT rights movement.¹ In this regard, the year 1989 and the fall of the Iron Curtain are important milestones. In 1990, the Gay Initiative was formed as an organization unifying the LGBT community. LGBT activism in that time was framed by a representation of communist era (i.e. the time through which the current older LGBT community lived for more than half of their lives) as a period of suffocating silence, when people could not, were afraid or ashamed to talk about their sexuality. As is pointed out by Seidl et al. (2012: 339–342) in their historical analysis, the fight against the communist past, or rather against the mentality, which was perceived as a product of living in such a society, represented one of the crucial struggles of the early stages of the Czech LGBT emancipation movement. In 2006, after several unsuccessful attempts, the law on registered partnerships enabling the legal union of people of the same sex came into force. The participants interviewed during this research belongs to the cohort that was witness to the transition from the criminalization of relationships between people of the same gender and their medical pathologization, to public discourse on the rights of same-sex couples to adopt children.

The second principle of the paradigm of the life-course points out the significance of the timing of life-course events. In this context, Elder (1994: 6) emphasizes that the "personal impact of any change depends on where people are in their lives at the time of the change." For example, Floyd and Bakeman (2006) point out the differing impacts of disclosing LGBT identity to parents and/or others during early adolescence (a time when individuals are economically and otherwise closely dependent on their family of origin) and experiences of such coming out during older age. The principle of the timing of transitions highlights the importance of the positions within the life-course, which also brings with it specific limitations, opportunities, possible support, and various forms of interconnections with the people around us. Coming out in adolescence brings different challenges, is potentially aimed at different

¹ As showed by the historical analysis of Seidl et al. (20012), there were homosexual subcultures in the larger cities of Czechoslovakia even before the 1990. Mostly anonymous encounters took place in selected parks, saunas and public toilets. Those places were relatively well known among gay men in that time (e.g. Schindler, 2013; Seidl et al., 2012) and in some case were used also by lesbian women (Sokolová, 2012). There were few bars that were known as meeting places for homosexuals. Those places were, however, under constant control of Czechoslovak state security. The freedoms of assembly and expression were severely restricted till the 1990s. The totalitarian character of the regime in Czechoslovakia, therefore, did not enabled to form LGBT movement in terms of public emancipatory efforts.

significant others, and can have a different impact than during middle or older age. At the same time, specific locations within the life-course enable the very articulation of coming out in different ways. Rosenfeld, Ridge, Catalan, and Delpech (2016) in their study on decision regarding revealing of HIV diagnosis to parents and children in later life identify life course locations as important interpretative frames for decision-making regarding disclosure of potentially stigmatized status. The position in life course affect not only how the stigmatized status is perceived but also how its disclosure may affect its bearer and lives of his/her closed ones.

The principle of the timing of lives is also closely intertwined with the third important framework of the paradigm of the life-course – the principle of linked life. This principle emphasizes the fact that we live our lives in relation to other people (children, parents, other relatives, friends, etc.) and that transitions and events in their lives also impact one's own life experience and the shape of one's own biography (Elder, 1994). There are studies emphasizing the importance of family support (Elizur & Ziv, 2001; Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes, & Boehmer, 2012), or the presence of children from previous heterosexual relationships (Tornello & Patterson, 2015) in the experience and timing of coming out. The fourth crucial principle of the life-course emphasizes the role of the human agency. In this concept, people form the shape of their biography within the framework of a given historical and social context, with their own choices, compromises and decisions.

The paradigm of the life-course represents an analytical perspective which enables us to capture the dynamics of human biography with regard to the embeddedness of an individual in relationship with others and the socio-historical context of life. At the same time, it points out that significant life transitions and events must be analysed with regard to historical and social conditions, but also with an emphasis on their interconnectivity with other life-transitions and relationships. This perspective highlights the need to integrate the importance of the changing position in life-course into the analysis of (not only) coming out to others because impact of the disclosure of potentially stigmatized status may differ depending on the position within the life course. Simultaneously, age itself significantly influence the context of coming out in terms of resources that people have and may use to disclosure their LGB identity to others as well as in terms of age-specific environments where the public coming out is articulated (e.g. school environment, workplace, residential care facilities for older people). Developmental perspectives usually conceptualize coming out as a linear journey that starts with the recognition and acceptance of one's own sexual identity and continue with its disclosure to the closed ones

and later people outside of this intimate realm (e.g. Cass, 1979). However, the decision to disclosure sexual identity is closely interlinked with the social context and is embedded within social relationships (Orne, 2011) and both the social context and relationships are significantly shaped by the position within the life course (see also Rosenfeld et al., 2016). Disclosure of LGB identity is therefore an on-going process that does not necessarily have a linear character. This paper points out that for the the current cohort of LGB older people the life-transitions in later life and/or their higher age itself played important frames for the decision to come out to family and other closed ones. As showed in our analysis, older age was by the participants depicted as an important context that disrupted some of the barriers preventing coming out to others. However, the vision of late old age linked with specific age-related contexts (such as life in residential care facilities) was associated with impossibility to express sexual identity. Through this ambivalent character of the relationship between the process of aging and decision to come out to others we explore how both the position within the life course and the context of aging influence the way the current cohort of LGB older people manage their “strategic outness”.

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative research focused on experience of LGB older adult living in Czech Republic. As is pointed out by Sokolová (2013), the categories associated with the abbreviation LGBT came into public awareness after 1989 and do not necessarily resonate with self-conception in the generation of people who lived the larger part of their lives during a time when these labels had no significance in the public sphere. Most of the participants in our research referred to the terms “gay” or “lesbian”, but more often they used terms such as “queer” or “our person”. During the research, 19 semi-structured interviews were carried out.² Full details of participants are provided in Table 1. All the participants were older than fifty years old. The average age of those interviewed was 60 years (the oldest participant was 70 at the time of the interview and the youngest was 50). Apart from two exceptions, they were all living in larger cities (of over 90,000 inhabitants). However, more than one third of the participants were born and grow up in smaller towns and rural areas and then moved into larger cities during their studies, or for work.

Different recruitment strategies were deliberately chosen to capture the diversity of experience and life-trajectories of LGB older adults. We especially searched for participants, who were not only active in the Czech LGB movement, but also often chose life strategies associated with life within marriage, or a very limited articulation of coming out to the people around them. Some of the participants were approached through advertising on websites and Facebook pages aimed at the older members of LGBT community. Most of the participants were found using the snowball method, with flyers distributed at public lectures, and through gatekeepers from the LGB community. We have interviewed participants who have been actively engaged within the LGB community for their whole lives, as well as people who engaged into their first non-heterosexual relationships in older age.

The previous research on the experience of the current generation of

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of participants.

Pseudonym	Identify as	Age	Partnership status	children
Sylva	Lesbian	51	Single	0
Ludvik	Gay	50	Partnered	0
Luboš	Gay	70	Single	0
Jakub	Gay	53	Divorced, Single	2
Daniel	Gay	55	Registered partnership	0
Ilona	Lesbian	55	Single	0
Michal	Gay	70	Divorced, Registered partnership	2
Ivan	Gay	63	Single	0
Jiří	Gay	62	Married	2
Nora	Bisexual	65	Divorced, partnered	5
Bohdan	Gay	65	Partnered	0
Robert	Gay	60	Partnered	0
Leoš	Gay	63	Registered partnership	0
Radek	Gay	58	Widowed, Registered partnership	0
Oto	Bisexual	75	Divorced, Single	1
Ivo	Gay	60	Divorced, Single	0
Boris	Gay	57	Single	0
Kamil	Gay	57	Divorced, partnered	2
Adam	Gay	65	Registered partnership	0

² In case of one of the interview, two of the participants (Ivan and Jiří) were interviewed simultaneously. Jiří was the only participants who lived with his wife in the time of the interview. Although he told his wife and later his children about his relations with men a few years previously, they still acted as a couple in public and Jiří decided to not disclose his sexual identity to any other family members. Ivan was his close friend and was very well informed about his family situation. He invited him to our interview to share his story. We had no contact information in case of Jiří (not even his real name). He joined our interview after we finished interviewing Ivan and he perceived the presence of his friend as guarantee of confidentiality. Although this group interview had different dynamic, we decided to include it into our research.

LGB older adults mostly reflect on the formation of LGB rights movements. Therefore, mostly the key figures who were part of this movement were interviewed asking for their experience (Kotišová & Vampolová, 2006; Seidl et al., 2012). In the study by Schindler (2013) older gay men were interviewed using the method of oral history to map the historical condition of lives of gay people in Czechoslovakia. The work of Sokolová (2012, 2013) represent the most comprehensive attempt to capture the establishment of non-heterosexual identities with regard to the context of a socialist society. All of the aforementioned studies focus mainly on the historical dimension and the social condition affecting lives of current generation of LGBT people in Czech Republic. This study is part of a wider project investigating intimate relationships in older age, which maps various partnership situations and their impacts on the experience of aging. Our project strives to examine how partnership history is integrated into the construction of the narrative of individual biography and how various partnership situations and transitions experienced during the life course may influence the experience of aging.

The interviews lasted for an average of 60 min and were recorded with the consent of the participants. Written informed consent was signed by each participant. The document included information concerning the purpose of the research, research procedure and statement describing how anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained during the whole research process. The first part of the interview focused on a biographical narrative of participant's own life, partnership experiences, relationships with family and close friends, and crucial moments of their former lives. The second part of the interview specifically aimed at their outlook and expectations for the future, attitudes towards old age, and attitudes to services for elderly people. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. Pseudonym was assigned to each participant. All names and potentially identifying information have been removed or changed in the transcription.

The interviews were analysed on an ongoing basis. In the first phase, the method of narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) was used to capture the context and interconnection of the whole biographical narrative. A detailed “map” of the key life transitions and events together with partnership and family history was drawn up for each participant based on his/her narrative. The aim of this part of the analysis was to identify crucial moments in the creation of the participant's life story. In the second stage, the data were coded using the principles of thematic analysis (Ezzy, 2002). Open coding based on detailed and repeated reading of the material was employed in the second part of the analysis. We paid specific attention to the topics that were relevant for our interest in family and partnership history and attitudes to aging. Codes “coming out to others”, “life-transition”, “family”, “barriers to coming out”, “attitudes to services” and “aging” were identified as the core codes relevant for the analysis presented in the paper. The following part of the study focuses on the way in which the participants related to the concept of coming out with regard to transforming social conditions and the various stages of their lives.

Aging and the new possibilities of coming out to others

All of the participants in the research experienced relationships and desires with people of the same sex during their adolescence; however, the moments of disclosure of their sexual identity to family members and other closed ones were mostly situated into later years. Only about a quarter of the participants mentioned that they felt part of the LGBT community during their youth. These were mostly men growing up in the capital city. With the exception of one participant (whose parents found out about the sexual experiences of their son from his correspondence, which they accidentally discovered), those interviewed associated their coming out to their family and friends who were not part of the LGBT community in the later stages of life. Coming out to the family often occurred several decades after their first intimate relationships. In the narratives, the 1990s often stood out as a

breakthrough point (especially in the case of participants who experienced marriage and did not actively associate their life with the LGBT community). In their memories, post-revolution times were associated with the boom of clubs and magazines aimed at the gay community, and the public visibility of not only sexual minorities, but also the need to ensure their rights. In this regard, the significance of the historical transition for the articulation of the questions associated with the position of the LGBT community in Czech society cannot be ignored; however, we argue that the understanding of the role of historical context brings only partial understanding of the conditions that influenced the opportunity of the participants to articulate their coming out to others.

The narratives of coming out in the interviews with participants points out not only the significance of historical and social conditions, but also the principle of interconnected lives and timed transitions (Elder, 1994). Life-course location played an important role as an interpretative frame for the decision-making regarding coming out to others (see also Rosenfeld et al., 2016). Two dimensions of this interpretative framework can be distinguished – their particular life course location which is connected with specific life transitions, events and social expectations and the specific life course location of their closed ones (especially their children) that represented important reference point for the timing of the decision regarding disclosure. Rosenfeld et al. (2016) use the concept of “lifecoursing” to capture the role of the age of others as a factor that significantly influence decision to disclose potentially stigmatized status (in the case of their research - the HIV diagnosis). People actively evaluate others' perceived needs and ability to handle such news with respect to their position within the life course and/or generational belonging. In this context, Jiří (age 62), for example, associated his decision to confide his sexual orientation to his wife with the period when he felt that their children were grown up. Hand in hand with the new visibility of LGBT community in the public discourses in the 1990s Jiří felt that he “neither needed to, nor had the strength” to suppress his desire for men. The change in social climate, along with the transition of his role of father in the family, when he felt that his children did not need him so much anymore, framed his opportunity to articulate his own desires in a new way.

In most of the interviews, the inability to publicly speak about their relationships and sexual identity was related to concerns about the response from their parents. These concerns were mostly not associated with a fear of prejudice or homophobia, but rather with a fear of not meeting the expectations of their parents. In the case of the memories of several men who spent the larger part of their lives in marriage, the death of their parents acted as a fundamental catalyst for the consideration of divorce.

My dad died first, then mum died, and then it happened that that feeling of leaving the standard model of the family was much easier for me because I didn't have to deal with how my parents would react, because there weren't around, and I don't want to say that you should have to answer to anyone for who you are, but I didn't think about it, I didn't have that inner conflict because my parents weren't around anymore. (Kamil, age 57)

In case of participants who did not get married and did not have children, the aging and gradual moving away from the reproductive age created a space of “silent understanding”, where coming out remained publicly unarticulated but lived within family and friends to a significant extent. The reluctance to take away the (even potential) hope for grandchildren, and for their son/daughter (to create a traditional family, was stated as the essential barrier for participants to talk to their parents about their sexuality. In this regard, aging also meant moving away from the concept of a “expected” heterosexual biography. High marriage rate and early age of the newlyweds were one of the typical features of family behaviour in Czechoslovakia till the end of 1980s. Almost 97% of women and 95% of men entered marriage in that period. Age at first marriage was low - for men 24–25 and for women 21–22

(ČSÚ, 2006: 12). The timing and sequence order of life-transition were highly standardized in Czechoslovak society; starting with entering marriage at young age and the birth of the first child shortly after. This “standardization” of the life-course transitions, documented by previous empirical analysis (e.g. Štípková & Kreidl, 2012), constructed a normative framework of life-biography that situated marriage and reproduction as “expected” part of young adulthood (early twenties). The high number of people who entered marriage and low number of people who remained childlessness indicate that this norm was strong and that individuals who did not follow these patterns were rare (which could potentially lead to their status as someone whose life-decisions are unusual or “suspicious”). Some identities thus may become more visible (and conceivable) at certain stages of biography without the need for them to be explicitly labelled. Some of the participants express the feeling that their parents became gradually reconciled with the fact that there will be no grandchildren and that this feeling brought about new opportunities in how to disclose their sexual identity in relation to their closed ones. Many participants talked about a certain silent comprehension on the part of their parents to them being gay, without naming the situation in the family.

I only have my mother now and my way of life is kind of based on the fact that it's respected, not spoken about. Both my mother and my brother respect it fully, the same within the broader family, but we don't talk about it. I don't know if you know such a model... (Vít, age 55)

So, then there was the question, “Will I ever get grandchildren?”, you know. The kind of thing mothers say. So, I said to myself, if I told her, that would close the gate for her, that she would ever have them. So, I left her to it and I didn't find it important, or necessary, or suitable, or wise to tell her, “Yeah mum, you'll never live to see grandchildren, because...” (Luboš, age 70)

The participants often talked about the fact that their age (or rather the indisputable recession from the frame of a “expected” heterosexual biography) created the foundation for understanding, when the fact of stating that they were gay/lesbian became easier, as in Ilona's (age 55) narration:

So, about five to eight years ago, when I came back from abroad once for Christmas, I told them that I had one more special gift for them, so I told them, and I think that my sister, brother-in-law, and so on, they were expecting it and had suspected for all those years. That I didn't have a boyfriend or a husband, and that my mum also suspected, so it went quite okay.

In Ilona's narration, aging and the transitions associated with the different stages of the life-course represented significant milestones in relation to her coming out. At the age of 50 she came out about her sexual orientation to her closest family because she thought, “enough is enough, I am an adult,” and she felt that because she never got married and did not have children, everybody was “expecting it and suspected it for all those years”. With her “public” coming out to friends and neighbours, however, she decided to wait until she retired. She perceived her job as a teacher to be a fundamental limitation for her to present herself as a lesbian.

For example, I envy people who are on Facebook and have rainbow flags and such things all around it, I can't put them there. Probably most people suspect, but they don't know for sure, so while I'm teaching I'm not gonna be out for them in that small Czech village. (Ilona, age 55)

Similarly, Michal (age 70) associated his decision to enter registered partnership with the fact that he has retired. He described the registered partnership as a visible signal for the people around him, and also as a potential means of securing the (albeit limited) rights of partners in old age. At the same time, he expressed concerns about his significantly

younger partner still working and that the visibility of their status as registered partners could mean complications for his career. The narratives of the participants thus also reflect the importance of life transitions in older age, which bring the potential to open up (and, as will be shown later, also close) opportunities to articulate coming out in relation to others. In this regard, it is important to observe how the position in the life-course influence those ways of articulating and presenting one's own sexual identity.

Our analysis points out that later life was by current cohort of LGB elderly people perceived as a life phase that brought about new impulses for the disclosure of their sexual identity to others. Those impulses referred to 1) specific life-transitions associated with later (such as retirement and loss of parent(s)) that have eliminated some of the perceived barriers of public coming out; 2) age and/or life phase of their closed ones who may have been affected by their coming out. This was especially significant for participants that were married and have children. The timing of the disclosure was in these cases strongly associated with the impression that their children are mature enough to handle such information and that they will not be negatively impacted by the divorce. 3) The last impulse referred to the higher age itself. At a certain moment of participants' biographies, the process of aging made the possibility of LGB subjectivity easily imaginable and articulable in relation to others, even without the necessity to explicitly name it. A departure from the social expectations associated with the course of “standard” heterosexual biography and retreat from the age associated with founding a family was reflected as an important context for creating a mutual understanding between the closest people, the feeling of which often led to the decision to come out publicly. In this context, the specific position within the life-course brought new opportunities to disclose one's own sexual identity in relation to others not only because the possible consequences of the coming out have changed but also because the means of articulation coming out altered in later phases of biography. As pointed by Orne (2011), although coming out is mainly associated with declarative statements, disclosure can occur also implicitly without expressing the words directly; using clues or just allow others to come to their own conclusions while not actively concealing one's sexual identity. The “silent comprehension” in the family depicted by some of the participants referred to those other forms of coming out. Their age together with the absence of expected frames of “heterosexual biography” associated with marriage and reproduction made this “comprehension” more possible. In this respect, some of the participants express beliefs that their non-heterosexual identity became more “visible” due to their higher age even before their coming out in terms of explicit (verbal) statements. This situation made it easier for them to articulate also a more direct forms of disclosure.

The emphasis on the perspective of the life-course does not in any way diminish the necessity to take the role of the social and historical context into consideration. The fact that people born in different time periods and to different social contexts live their lives facing different barriers and opportunities represents the basic pillar for the paradigm of the life-course (Elder, 1994). At the same time, however, the engagement of the perspective of the life-course also diverts attention towards considerations of how these conditions interconnect with the individual life-biography. This text points out the fact that the aging process itself, and especially the changing position within the life-course, represents an important level of understanding of the particular timing and attitudes to the public coming out in current cohort of LGB elderly adults.

Aging and the re-appearance of spaces of silence

While the current life period was by the participants often described as the most relaxed with respect to the opportunity to openly speak about their identity and act as members of the LGBT community, the topic of the future opened up questions about the necessity to cope with coming out and the inability to talk about their experience once again.

Many of the interviewees (mainly those who did not have a partner or their own children at the time of the interview) often answered the questions regarding the support in older age with concerns about life in institutions of care for the elderly.

Ivan: I think about the fact that I'll die in some kind of, as they used to say, poorhouse. I don't think my family will take care of me, and whether I'll have a boyfriend or not, I don't know yet.

And do you consider these institutions of elderly care as places where you can openly be gay?

Ivan: Probably not. The current occupants aren't ready for that (LGBT co-residents), because the people there are a whole generation older. I don't know any gays living there, maybe they depart a bit earlier than the normal population, I don't know (Ivan, age 62)

In many ways, Ivan's testimony illustrates the fundamental importance of the newly emerging places of silence, which some of the participants implicitly or explicitly associated with the vision of late old age. Ivan involuntarily came out to his parents at a very early age due to intimate correspondence which they discovered. At his parents' request he underwent sexuological treatment; the "diagnosis" of homosexuality became part of his medical documentation and also the reason for not being able to enter compulsory military service. Ivan talked about the fact that he never considered his sexual orientation as "something he should be ashamed of," and was actively engaged in the LGBT community from an early age. Ivan introduced another participant, Jiří (age 62), who was still living with his wife, and although he told her about his relations with men a few years previously, they still acted as a couple in public. The conversation between Ivan and Jiří, which was recorded during the research, carried a strong motif of the need for Jiří to defend his decision to get married and never come out to his close ones. He himself interpreted this decision as his weakness when he "strived for a normal life". He talked about the fact that he "does not live freely," and that he admires Ivan "that even in times of deep socialism, he chose to take his own path." During the conversation, Ivan criticized Jiří's decision several times, pointing out that living according to one's wishes (openly as gay) is, among other things, a manifestation of personal strength and a strong stance. Although the mutual conversation carried no sign of condemnation of the stance of Jiří, in mutual interaction they both reconstructed the opposition between coming out as an expression of freedom, and the decision to live with one's desires in hiding as an expression of weakness. At the same time, the strong individualizing undertone present in this opposition framed the individual positions as, to a significant extent, a matter of personal integrity. Jiří was limited in the position that he himself titled as "oppression of the soul", while for Ivan his coming out was a source of personal pride. In this context, the end of the interview, when Ivan associated his old age with life in an institution and, at the same time, he talked about the fact that he perceives these institutions as places where it is impossible to live openly as gay, appeared to be a crucial breaking point in relation to the narrative of the life story and personal self-conception which he built during the interview. In his mind, later old age becomes the real space of silence. This silence, however, is not silence that would accompany the aging process itself, which would make for example his identification as gay less important. The perceived vision of late old age, when there is no space to live openly as gay, is rather associated with life in an institution which is associated with dependence and constant presence of other people.

In the Czech Republic, 80% of care for the elderly people is provided by family members (mainly partners and children) (Nešporová, Svobodová, & Vidovičová, 2008). As is shown by mostly empiric research, compared to the majority of population, LGBT elderly people have twice the probability of living alone, and up to four times less probability of having children (SAGE, 2010). That, of course, does not mean that they do not have sources for help in old age; its character is, however, more related to a network of friends and the so called "chosen

family" (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010; Heaphy, 2007; Weston, 1997). This fact is also illustrated by the narratives of the participants. In cases of those who did not have a stable partner or children from previous relationships, however, the vision of life in old age in institutions of long-term care became a visible part of considerations for their future. In the Czech Republic, around 50 thousand seniors live in long-term facilities of elderly care (ČSÚ, 2014). A recent qualitative study showed that LGBT elderly people living in the Czech Republic do not see these institutions as places in which they would be able to openly articulate their sexual orientation, and often chose to act in accordance with the anticipated heterosexual norm (Novotná, Špatenková, Olecká, & Hasmanová Marhánková, 2016). Similarly, other empiric studies point out the difficult position of the LGBT community entering institutional elder care. These people often express concerns about discrimination from the staff and other clients (Heaphy, Yip, & Thompson, 2004; Stein, Beckerman, & Sherman, 2010), and about the fact that their partners will not be given proper status and a role in decision making about the care provided (Burke Sharek, McCann, Sheerin, Glacken, & Higgins, 2014; Furlotte, Gladstone, Cosby, & Fitzgerald, 2016).

The fear of discrimination pointed out in some of the above-mentioned studies, however, did not appear in interviews with the participants very often. In their eyes, these institutions did not represent places in which their sexuality would play a significant role in relationships with the caregivers or the quality of care provided.³ At the same time, however, these institutions acted as an environment that places specific demands on LGBT persons. In their narratives, they mostly acted as heteronormative spaces with no place or opportunity to talk about or display other sexual subjectivities (and other previous life experiences that could reflect it). Their late old age, which was in their narratives in many cases at least potentially associated with life in these institutions, therefore also acted as a time in which it is necessary to silence this part of their lives. This silence appeared in the interviews in relation to two interconnected motives. The first of them referred to concerns about the response from other clients in these institutions. Similarly to Ivan (age 62), many other participants expressed concerns about the occupants of homes for the elderly people. It is not easy to choose the people that surround you in the institutional setting, while their presence often becomes an importunate part of the everyday regime. In this context, Jakub (age 53) talked about the burden of endlessly coming out, which is tiring and has many risks.

It needs a constant kind of bravery. Or simply being assertive all the time. That in that environment you are forever coming out, that you, once again, get a new roommate, so you tell him again somehow what the situation is, that you didn't have a wife, but a husband, you know, a man. And doing that again with every different person, somehow asserting it. (Jakub, age 53)

Concerns about the reactions of others to this part of their life experience were often associated with generation-specific attitudes. As was mentioned by Ivan (age 62), the current generation of the occupants of these institutions is not yet "ready" to accept the presence of

³ We explicitly asked about their attitudes towards formal caregivers and medical staff. All of the participants expressed beliefs that people working in social and health care services are "professionals" and that they do not anticipate any form of discrimination in those areas. Similar results can be found in previous research by Novotná et al. (2016). The relative absence of the fear of inadequate treatment or discrimination for being LGB (transgender people may represent a specifically vulnerable group) expressed by the participants, that in many ways contrast with the results from another countries (e.g. SAGE, 2010; Stein et al., 2010), should be interpreted also in the context of low level of religiosity and highly secularized nature of social and healthcare services in the Czech Republic. As showed for example Simpson, Almack, and Walthery (2018), there is a significant correlation between strong religious beliefs and reluctance to accept sexual and transgender difference among care home staff.

LGBT clients. The strategy of accepting the heteronormative rules of life in such an institution was therefore framed as something that other generations of LGBT people will solve differently (compare also Novotná et al., 2016). At the same time, this level of silence about sexual identity merged with the second level of silence, which comes along with life in such an institution. In this context, Radek (age 58) mentioned:

The worst is that situation, that invisibility, what do you do with them (LGBT elderly people)? They're lost, no-one needs them in a facility for old people. If they don't say it there, they can't say it there, they're afraid after all...they go back to childhood again, "I can't tell them at home that I like boys." They say to the nurse, "Don't ask me about kids, I don't have any. Don't tell me how the lady over there looks at me nicely, because I like that old man next to her. Or more likely his grandson." ((laughs)) So I can imagine, how they (LGBT people) "like" it in some elderly care institutions.

In this description, Mr. Radek refers to institutionalized heteronormativity, which is an unspoken part of the daily running of these services, and which problematizes the very idea of some of the clients being LGBT. Simultaneously, he points out another significant level of silencing the experience of the LGBT elderly people through the inability to talk about their own life experiences and often also their needs. These concerns are, therefore, rather concerns about not having anything to talk about with others, because their biography has different features and typical themes for conversation (mostly grandchildren) are missing.

I think it must be hard for our people in there ... most conversations are about children, grandchildren, and what are our people supposed to say, when they don't have the family? (Boris, age 57)

In their study, Stein et al. (2010) point out the feelings of loneliness and tension that the elderly LGBT people experience in institutions in relation to the impossibility of openly speaking about their lives (including trauma caused by the death of a partner who, however, is not recognized as such). However, in this context the interviewed participants, rather than concern, mentioned the reluctance to hold forth on questions that are a common part of conversations between people who do not know each other, but are forced to live together, and which include themes unfamiliar for them and to which they have nothing to offer. At the same time, they did not perceive these conversations as space where they could talk about experiences from their own lives. In this context, Luboš (age 70) mentioned a preference for an institution which would (at least partially) specialize in gay men, not so much because he would be concerned about discrimination in other institution, but because the surrounding of such clientele would provide him with space for sharing life experiences and, at the same time, would free him from those questions which are often asked about his "different" biography:

I would rather be with this group of (LGBT) people and talk about different experiences, and you'd also be able to avoid all the, "and what about you, don't you have any grandchildren? And why don't you have any? When you're so handsome. Could you have had them?" I did experience such things, these questions happen, you know. So, it's kind of unpleasant, you just get through it. Some men not so much, they just wave it off, that's your business, I don't care. But some women, they dig into it, they need to know the truth, how it was. And then we have to talk about girlfriends or such like. That's unpleasant, understandably, you know. (Luboš, age 70)

The theme of silence did appear in the description of difficult situations of LGBT people in institutions of elderly care once again; however, not in relation to the impossibility of public coming out, but as the impossibility of connecting with others and of talking about one's own experience within banal conversations which often focus on topics they can't or are not willing to participate at.

Conclusion

Current analyses of the experience of coming out unanimously point out the necessity to perceive coming out not as a separate act, but rather as a process (Plummer, 1995; Rust, 1993). In society, where heterosexuality becomes the anticipated framework of everyday existence, a difference from this norm needs to be constantly established by a series of coming outs. As is pointed out by Fuss (1991: 4), the word "out" in connection with coming out has two interconnected meanings – "on the one hand, it conjures up the exteriority of the negative – the devaluated or outlawed term in the hetero/homo Binary. On the other hand, it suggests the process of coming out – a movement into a metaphysics of presence, speech and cultural visibility [...] be out is really to be in – inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible." However, the problem with of rhetoric, which mobilizes the inside/outside binary without deeper reflexion is, besides others, hiding the fact that most people at some moment in their life stand in both of these spaces (ibid: 5). The narratives of the interviewed participants present this fluidity. Five of the interviewed men, who identified themselves as gay at the time of the interviews, have experienced divorce. Jiří (age 62) confided to his wife after fifteen years of marriage that he feels gay, but they decided to continue sharing a home and act as partners in public. Some participants began to actively participate in the LGBT community during their lives. Most of them, however, never spoke about their sexual identity with their parents or their colleagues. Stories about publicly coming out to those closest to them (family, former partners, children, friends outside the LGBT community) were often associated with middle age. In this context, Hunter (2005: 13–14) points out that the current elderly LGBT community represents the last generation that spent their youth and adolescence hiding, and for whom the opportunity to publicly articulate their sexual identity opened up in late adulthood.

Previous studies focusing on the attitudes towards coming out in the current elderly LGBT generation interpret their life strategies with particular focus on open homophobia, law restrictions, and a low level of social acceptance that represented context a large part of their biography (e.g. Knauer, 2013; Schindler, 2013). In the case of Central and Eastern European countries, a significant role is also played by the lack of discourse and representation of LGBT subjectivity in the public sphere up until the 1990s (Sokolová, 2013). Nevertheless, the data analysed in this study, as well as previous research involved in the experience of the LGBT community during socialism (e.g. Kulpa & Mizielnińska, 2011; Sokolová, 2013), point to the fact that the invisibility of LGBT themes and the absence of an LGBT movement did not mean that people would not express, live, or actively establish non-heterosexual subjectivities.

The opportunity to articulate one's sexual identity and making it a visible part of relationships with others transforms not only along with changing societal conditions, but also with the events of an individual life biography. This text focuses on the process of aging and related changing positions within the framework of the life-course as an important level of understanding (Kulpa & Mizielnińska, 2011) the process of coming out (not only) in the current cohort of LGBT elderly people. It points out the need to critically reflect the narratives of coming out as a linear process of leaving "the closet". On the one hand, the narratives of those interviewed point to the potential of aging to open up spaces to articulate their desires and relationships with others. In the stories of the participants who did not get married, the departure from a reproductive age and the related release from expectations to get married and establish a family became an important axis framing the opportunity to articulate their sexual identity within the family, often without the explicit need to label their position as being gay or lesbian. At the same time, life transitions in older age (such as retirement, children becoming independent, and the death of parents) disrupted some of the perceived barriers preventing public coming out. However, narratives on the impact of the changing position within the life-course on the

opportunity to articulate a public coming out are not necessary stories with a linear course. The vision of late old age, which in the narratives was often associated with the likelihood of living in an institution of elderly care in some cases brought with it the need to re-think the opportunities and risks of publicly coming out. Some of those interviewed explicitly associated the visions of their own old age with the impossibility of expressing not only their sexual identity but also their previous life-experiences.

This paper has pointed out the importance of the perspective of the life-course as an analytic tool for studying (not only) the process of coming out. The principles defined as crucial pillars of the paradigm of the life-course by Elder (1994) in his study represent significant frameworks through which the narratives and relationships between the changing position within the life-course and the opportunities to publicly articulate one's own sexuality can be understood. The spaces which opened up or closed for the participants in this context were the result of intersections of historical time and human lives, the timing of life-course event, relationships with others, and one's own agency.

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