Coming out – what next?!

A DJI research project into the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* adolescents and young adults

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With the assistance of Sebastian Müller
The German Youth Institute (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, DJI) is a central sociological research institute at federal level in Germany. It comprises the departments of ‘Children and Childcare’, ‘Youth and Youth Services’, ‘Family and Family Politics’ and ‘Social Monitoring and Methodology’, and its research focuses on ‘Transitions in Adolescence’. Alongside its own independent research, the DJI also conducts contract research projects. Funding for the DJI’s work is primarily provided by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, BMFSFJ) and by the federal states. Additional financial support is provided by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung), various charities and other institutions for the promotion of science.

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Foreword

Being lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans* is still not a matter of course in our society. People have to explain their feelings if they are not (exclusively) attracted to the opposite sex or if their gender identity is not the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. These challenges are even greater for young people, since the process of ‘coming out to oneself’ (i.e. becoming aware of and acknowledging one’s sexual orientation or gender identity) often takes place during adolescence or early adulthood.

In addition to the typical challenges faced by young people as they grow up, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* adolescents and young adults (LGBT*) also find themselves confronted with questions like: “Do I feel attracted to young people of the same or of the opposite sex?”, “Do I feel attracted to both?”, “Do I perhaps feel more like a ‘girl’, even though I’ve grown up as a ‘boy’ until now?”, “Do I perhaps feel more like a ‘boy’, even though I’ve grown up as a ‘girl’ until now?”, “Can I really say that my gender is clearly ‘male’ or ‘female’? Do I even want to identify as one or the other?”. After coming out to themselves, young LGBT* people have to decide whether, and if so, when and to whom they want to speak about their feelings – that is to say, whether they want to take the step of coming out to other people.

The DJI research project ‘Coming out – what next?!’ examines the coming out processes and discriminatory experiences of LGBT* adolescents and young adults in Germany. How do they experience and shape the process of coming out to themselves and to others? What are their experiences among friends, with their families and in places of study and work? Funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), this project is the first of its kind to collect data from across the whole of Germany on how young LGBT* people experience the process of growing up. More than 5,000 young people provided information about their feelings and experiences over the course of this project, which comprised both a quantitative online survey and qualitative interviews. The sheer number of participants serves as an indication of just how important young LGBT* people think it is that society learn more about their lives.

This brochure, which was funded by the Federal Foundation Magnus Hirschfeld (Bundesstiftung Magnus Hirschfeld), is intended for anyone who is interested in these questions, whether they be involved in politics, professional work, academia or simply out of general interest. It provides a concise summary of the project’s key research findings. These findings will be presented and discussed in greater depth and complexity in a German language book which is due to be published in 2017. The forthcoming book will also cover intersectional aspects of migration, social background or education in detail. We must therefore ask all those who are keen to read more to bear with us.

Before wishing you an interesting and enjoyable read, we would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude. Our heartfelt thanks go out first and foremost to the adolescents and young adults who made this project possible through their openness and engagement. Secondly, we would like to thank all those who contributed to the success of this project, be it in their capacity as member of the academic project advisory board, by posting links to the online survey or in any other way.

Best wishes,

Dr. Claudia Krell
Kerstin Oldemeier
Sebastian Müller
Young people just like all the others

Young lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* people\(^1\) are first and foremost young people whose lifestyles, desires and aspirations are typical for their age. They live in a range of different youth cultures, listen to the music of that culture, dress accordingly and engage in cultural practices. They belong to a religion or self-identify as nonreligious. They are members of different social ‘classes’ which shape their daily life and determine how likely it is that they will go to one type of school or the other. They get involved in youth organisations including political parties, volunteer fire departments, scouting groups and environmental protection associations. They have political and social convictions and values which shape their view of society. Depending on their background, they may identify as German citizens, as citizens of their country of origin or as young Europeans, to name but a small selection of the wide range of possible identifications. The key message here is that this stage of life, ‘youth’, is essentially characterised by a variety of senses of belonging, identities and orientations.

Young LGBT* people therefore face the same age-specific developmental tasks as all other young people. These tasks include the following development stages, as commonly identified by youth psychology and the sociology of youth: developing intellectual and social competencies; developing an internal conception of one’s own sexual identity; meeting the demands of school, vocational training or university studies; varying and maintaining friendships; trying out and starting to have romantic relationships; (re-)shaping family relationships and leaving the parental home; developing the necessary competence to use the consumer market effectively; and developing a stable system of values and norms as well as an ethical and political awareness (e.g. Hurrelmann, 2013; Oerter/Montada, 2002).

Young LGBT* people also share with all other young people the current social conditions which frame their growing-up process, as well as society’s often complex and occasionally contradictory demands. For example, as illustrated in Germany’s 14th Children and Youth Report (cf. BMFSFJ, 2013), society expects young people to have an excellent track record in education and training, since this should help them to enter the job market as smoothly as possible. The economy expects well-trained, ‘optimised’ young adults. The responsibility for meeting these demands is in large part delegated to the individual young people themselves. Considering the fact that many options and opportunities in education and training are socially selective, this is no easy feat for those young people who come from educationally less advantaged backgrounds.

This, then, is an outline of the life situation, developmental tasks and social demands which all young people share. At the same time – and this is worth emphasising – young LGBT* people are also subject to particular conditions which are shaped by society’s approach to sexual and gender diversity.

Social discourses about sexual and gender diversity: unavoidable and significant contexts for young LGBT* people

Attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* people have become increasingly liberal in recent decades, and society’s approach to non-heteronormative lifestyles is something which more and more people are talking about. There are, however, tensions in contemporary discourse. On the one hand, there are views and attitudes which are largely accepting of this diversity, suggesting that society is moving towards greater understanding and sympathy, and that sexual and gender diversity have become ‘normal’.

\(^1\) Whenever the term ‘young people’ is used in this text, this refers to adolescents and young adults aged 14 to 27 years.
On the other hand, conservative stances that hold fast to the heteronormative notion of a two-category gender system are gaining new traction. People whose gender identity or sexual orientation does not conform to this norm are still seen as ‘outsiders’, ‘other’ or ‘anomalous’, and are at greater risk of suffering social exclusion. The everyday perception of LGBT* lifestyles is still not entirely free of pathological associations, since a whole range of shortcomings and deficiencies continue to be attributed to LGBT* people, like having a ‘conspicuous’ lifestyle or being at increased risk of infection. The heterosexual cisgender is still seen as the ‘normal’ sexual orientation and gender identity, as sociological gender research has demonstrated time and time again (e.g. cf. Jäger, 2004). For young LGBT* people, then, even at this historical juncture at the beginning of the 21st century, the heteronormative binary gender system continues to be the most significant structural condition under which their gender and sexual identity develops. Young LGBT* people's sexual orientation or gender identity still falls outside of the social norm and they therefore find themselves in vulnerable positions in society.

Specific challenges facing young LGBT* people and the question of coming out

Young LGBT* people are confronted with the dual challenge of defining their own place in society given their sexual orientation or gender identity and of working towards a way of life which is in harmony with their feelings and experiences. They face all the developmental tasks which are typical for their age group, but do this against the backdrop of a transgender identity or a non-heterosexual orientation. The difficulties they have to deal with in day-to-day life may also include various forms of discrimination (e.g. at school or in public) and the issue of whether they need to or want to come out, and, if so, how they want to go about this (cf. Krell, 2013).

Coming out can be viewed as a two-stage process. In the phase of self-awareness and self-acknowledgement (coming out to oneself), key questions are: “How and when do I know whether I am lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans*?”; “How can I be ‘sure’ about my sexual orientation or my gender identity?” Following this internal debate, young people have to decide for themselves whether they want to tell other people about this, and if so, when and to whom (coming out to others or going public). Young trans* people must also decide whether they would like to pursue a transition or not. Do they want other people to address them with a new name and to refer to them with a pronoun of their own choice? Do they want to change their legal status? Do they want to undertake medical transition procedures?

While individuals are undergoing the process of coming out to themselves and to others, people who are close to them are very important. Are there confidants who can lend a sympathetic ear while they are starting to become aware of themselves? How will parents, siblings, friends, classmates or teachers react? Do they use the right pronoun and the right name in day-to-day interactions with young trans* people? Do friendships suffer as a result of coming out, or do they rather become safe spaces of support?

One frequently asked question is whether it is even necessary to come out to others (nowadays). Coming out makes it easier for young LGBT* people to lead open and autonomous lives. In this sense, coming out can be seen as an emancipatory step. Seen from a different angle, however, coming out may seem to be part of a normative pressure to reveal intimate details about one's identity. This dilemma of disclosing something that is deeply personal – one's sexual orientation or gender identity and corresponding way of life – is something which all young people have to work out for themselves. This is a huge challenge.

Further research: there is much work to be done

The research project ‘Coming out – what next?!’ was set up with the aim of gaining a better understanding of how young LGBT* people deal with these challenges and of the areas which pose particular difficulties for them. Until now, there was almost no solid knowledge in Germany about the conditions under which young LGBT* people grow up. The few LGBT* youth research projects that have been carried out so far have tended to focus just on individual regions. In larger, nationwide studies about young people, young LGBT* people are hardly taken into account. The fact that society is still just starting to develop an awareness of young LGBT* people’s need for support makes this study indispensable.
The legal context

The lives and future opportunities available to young LGBT* people in Germany are framed by legal regulations. Legislation bearing on same-sex ways of life has seen three significant developments since the 1990s. In 1992, ‘homosexuality’ was removed from the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). In 1994, Germany’s so-called ‘Homosexuality Paragraph’ (§ 175 StGB), which criminalised sexual acts between cisgender men, was removed from the penal code, and in 2001, a new law (LPartG) was introduced in Germany, allowing the recognition of civil partnerships for same-sex couples. Until 2009, same-sex couples seeking a civil partnership had to hand in a statement to a public notary, but now they can register their partnership at a local registry office. The Federal Constitutional Court (Bundesverfassungsgericht) removed many of the disadvantages suffered by civil partners by according them most of the same rights as married couples enjoy, including inheritance rights and tax benefits. However, civil partners still do not have the same adoption rights as married couples since the law prevents them from adopting children as a couple. The only options available to them are stepchild adoption or adopting children in a two-stage process, one partner after the other.

For trans* people, the 1981 Transexuality Law (Transsexuellen-Gesetz, TSG) was a legal milestone. The TSG was the first piece of legislation in Germany which made it possible to change one’s legal status. This right was initially restricted to persons over the age of 25, but was extended to young people under 25 in 1982. Two independent psychological expert opinions must be provided as confirmation that the individual has wanted to live as the opposite sex for at least three years and that their wish to do so is highly unlikely to change. In 2011, a landmark ruling from the Federal Constitutional Court (Bundesverfassungsgericht) changed the procedure for changing one’s legal status by invalidating an older ruling. Previously, for the change to be recognised, it had to be accompanied by compulsory sex reassignment surgery which left the individual infertile. On the grounds that this medical procedure constituted an unnecessary ‘severe impairment of physical integrity’, this previously enforced practice was declared a ‘violation of human rights’.

Clarification of important terminology

The research project ‘Coming out – what next?!’ explores and describes the experiences of young lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* people. In order to make the research findings easier to understand, we shall first clarify a number of important concepts and their usage. We are conscious of the fact that this brief overview will necessarily curtail complex interdisciplinary discussions.

Sexual orientation and gender identity

**Sexual orientation** refers to an individual’s enduring personal preferences and interests with regard to the sex of potential partners. The sense of attraction can comprise elements of emotional, romantic and/or sexual appeal.

People with a **same-sex orientation** (those who are lesbian and gay) are emotionally and sexually attracted to people of the same sex. The term ‘homosexuality’, with its pathological connotations, is rarely used in Germany nowadays as it places too much emphasis on the sexual aspects of desire and because it is often exclusively associated with gay ways of life, thereby rendering lesbian women invisible.

**Bisexual** people feel attraction to people both of their own and of the opposite sex.

**Heterosexual** people feel exclusively or predominantly attracted to people of the opposite sex.

**Pansexual** people develop attraction and desire for people regardless of their sex.

The term **gender identity** refers to an individual's personal experience of their own gender as that of a woman, a man, something in between, both, or something else. The terms ‘gender’ and ‘gender identity’ refer primarily to social and psychological aspects, as opposed to ‘sex’, which is typically used to refer to physical aspects.

**Cisgender** people’s gender identity matches the sex to which they were assigned at birth.
Transsexual people's gender identity does not match the sex that they were assigned at birth: boys who are born with female physical sexual characteristics are known as trans* boys/men; girls who are born with male physical sexual characteristics are known as trans* girls/women. The spelling trans* is widely considered the most appropriate in Germany.

Transgender is the term used to describe people who feel that the sex they were assigned at birth does not adequately describe their gender identity and/or experience. Transgender is often used as an umbrella term which includes not only transsexual people but also people who do not feel that they fit in either of the two sex categories, who position themselves in between these two or who identify as a third gender.

In the German legal system, sexual identity is used as a collective term to refer to both gender identity and sexual orientation. This term is used in the General Equal Treatment Act (Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz, AGG) as well as in several state constitutions and in the Works Constitution Act (Betriebsverfassungsgesetz), which state that no-one may be given preferential treatment or discriminated against on the grounds of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Intersex people (inter*) are born with primary sex characteristics which do not accord with forms medically defined as ‘conventionally’ female or male. Infants and young children whose sexual anatomy is labelled ‘ambiguous’ often undergo surgical operations which are intended to render their sexual anatomy ‘unambiguous’ by adapting them to medical expectations. Following such operations, long-term hormone therapy is prescribed in order to encourage development towards the sex chosen by parents and doctors. Inter* people are highly critical of the fact that other people make decisions about their bodies and maintain that surgery is not medically necessary.

The term coming out describes an individual’s recognition and, where appropriate, public disclosure of their own sexual orientation or gender identity (more information can be found in the infobox on ‘Coming out’).

Social attitudes

Social norms and discourses play a decisive role, influencing the basic conditions, possibilities and restrictions of daily life for non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people.

Heteronormativity refers to the norms of the binary sex classification system and of opposite-sex attraction. These two norms are commonly regarded as ‘natural’ and remain (largely) unquestioned. It is important to distinguish between heterosexuality, which is a form of sexual practice between men and women, and heteronormativity, which privileges this way of life through institutions (e.g. marriage) and thought patterns (‘that’s normal’). Sexual and gender diversity departs from this norm.

Homo-/bi-/transphobia describes group-focused hostility (similar, for example, to racism or anti-Semitism) that is directed at lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* people.

Discrimination describes the various processes by which individual persons or groups of people are put at economic, cultural or social disadvantage on account of ascribed characteristics. A distinction is often made between personal discrimination (e.g. discriminatory statements, violence or social exclusion), and structural discrimination (e.g. when societal regulations, institutions, norms or language-use are the root cause of discrimination).

Language

Language both reflects and influences social attitudes towards non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people. It is therefore imperative to pay close attention to the terms we use and the way we use them.

The abbreviation LGBT* stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans*. In recent years the acronym has been variously extended and/or further differentiated. For example, using I* for ‘inter*’ and/or Q for ‘queer/questioning’. The term ‘queer’ is used by those who actively embrace lifestyles outside of heteronormative structures. It was (and in part remains) synonymous with ‘peculiar’, ‘different’ or ‘strange’ but, like the terms lesbian and gay, it has more recently been reclaimed and positively connoted and is now used affirmatively by many people as a way to describe themselves and their lifestyles.

What LGBT*I*Q people have in common is the fact that their sexual orientation or gender identity does not conform to the heteronormative two-gender system.
Coming out

The term ‘coming out’ literally means ‘coming out of the closet’ and is often associated with the so-called Stonewall Riots. In 1969, when trans*, lesbian and gay people in New York actively fought back against police brutality for the first time, there were growing calls for people to make their same-sex orientation publicly known (‘going public’) and to stop keeping it hidden from such areas of life as family, work or the local neighbourhood (‘being in the closet’). Over the course of the following decades, people whose sexual orientation or gender identity did not conform to heteronormative expectations fought for the acceptance and recognition of their ways of life in many different parts of the globe. Shifts in public attitudes resulting from these struggles have, in some countries, been reflected in amendments to legislation. The parades which take place annually all over the world (called Gay Pride, LGBT* Pride or Christopher Street Day) can be traced back to the events in New York’s Christopher Street.

In the current social context, despite increasingly liberal attitudes toward LGBT* ways of life, people who have non-heterosexual or non-cisgender experiences are still obliged to ‘come out’. Since society continues to presume that all people’s experiences of sexual orientation and gender identification are heterosexual and cisgender, anyone who wishes to ‘correct’ presuppositions made about them will inevitably have to come out. Coming out to others by telling them about one’s own sexual orientation or gender identity is preceded by the process of coming out to oneself, in which people become aware of and acknowledge their desires or identity. The process of coming out to oneself can start at any age and the amount of time it takes varies from person to person (in some cases several years or decades). While coming out to themselves, people gradually become aware of the fact that they are non-heterosexual or non-cisgender and begin to address and explore their feelings. The nature and duration of this internal exploration will vary on an individual basis. If and when someone decides to come out to others, this is generally not a one-time event but rather a lifelong process, since LGBT* people have to deal over and over again with the question of which areas of their life they want to come out in and which they would rather not. Do I, as a young girl in school, tell other people that I am in love if it’s a girl? Can I talk to my instructor, who knows me as a young man, about my educational background if I went to an all-girls school? Should I take up the invitation to bring a partner to a corporate summer party if I’m in a same-sex relationship? LGBT* people experience these and similar situations time and time again. This project views the process of coming out as one which people shape on an individual basis and which has no single final goal (in the sense of outing oneself completely in the most important areas of life). Rather, the outcomes of the coming out process can be as varied and unique as the process itself.
The aim of the project ‘Coming out – what next?!’ is to gain empirical knowledge about young LGBT* people’s coming out processes and about the positive and negative experiences they had in connection with coming out to their families, to friends and at places of education and work. The project serves to generate scientifically grounded knowledge about the conditions in which young LGBT* people grow up. The research findings allow us to identify and discuss areas in politics and education where action needs to be taken. The project employs two methodological approaches, encompassing both a nationwide, quantitative online questionnaire and 40 qualitative interviews.

**The online questionnaire**

The standardised online questionnaire was aimed at young LGBT* people aged 14 to 27 and asked participants about:

- When and how they came out to themselves
- Concerns they had before coming out to others for the first time
- When, how and which people they first came out to
- Experiences of support and discrimination in connection with coming out to others, with a focus on the three contexts of family, friends and places of education and work
- Whether or not they took up the opportunity to get involved in leisure activities or to make use of counselling services for young people, and reasons doing so (or not).

Of the 280 websites contacted (including LGBT* youth centres, youth groups, advice centres, forums, online magazines, clubs and associations, and information, networking and advice portals), about half published the call for participation in the study. In the summer of 2014, well over 5,000 young people took part in the survey. In total, 5,037 fully completed questionnaires were submitted for data analysis. On the basis of this large sample, we are able to draw a detailed and nuanced picture of the experiences of young people in Germany whose sexual and gender experiences do not accord with heteronormative expectations. Figure 1 shows the distribution of participants. The ‘orientation*diverse’ group includes young people who did not wish to categorise their sexual orientation and those who chose a further self-identification (e.g. pansexual). The ‘gender*diverse’ group includes young people with alternative gender identifications as well as young people who did not wish to categorise their gender identity.

The average age of participants is 21 years and the age distribution is fairly balanced. Just under half of the young people live in big cities (48%), about a fifth in medium-size towns (21%) and just under a third in small towns or villages (31%). Most of the young people live in West Germany (81%), with about one in five in East Germany (incl. Berlin) (19%). A third of the participants are university students (33%), one in four is currently at school (25%), one fifth of the young people are already working (20%) and one in ten is currently undertaking vocational training (11%). About one in six of the participants comes from a migrant background (16%). Although the young people did not have to have come out to others already in order to take part in the study, nearly all of the young people (95%) had spoken to other people about their sexual orientation or gender identity in the past.

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2 Young inter* people are not addressed in this study due to the specificity of their living situation.

3 The graph illustrates the current self-designation of young people with regard to their sexual orientation (red bar) or their gender identity (green bar). Here it should be noted that lesbian, gay, bisexual and orientation*diverse young people can be cis or transgender and that trans* and gender*diverse young people can have different sexual orientations.
The qualitative interviews

In the project’s qualitative approach, 40 interviews were carried out nationwide with young lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* people. In the majority of cases, initial contact with interviewees was made via a call for interview participants at the end of the online questionnaire. In the interviews, the young people had the opportunity to narrate their experiences and describe their own perspectives. The qualitative interviews thus focus on the young people as actors with agency:

- What strategies do young people use in order to shape the process of coming out to themselves and to others, and to overcome problems and experiences of discrimination?
- What conditions make coming out easier and what conditions make it more difficult?

In the 30 interviews which focused on sexual orientation, ten lesbian and five bisexual young women and eleven gay and four bisexual young men reported on their experiences of coming out. They were aged between 16 and 27. Three trans*female, four trans*male and three transgender/genderqueer young people between the ages of 19 and 27 described their experiences of coming out in ten interviews which focused on gender identity.

Due to the young age of the participants and the personal and sensitive nature of the research topic in this project, questions of data protection and research ethics were of utmost importance. For example, the minimum age for participation in the interviews was set at 16 and the contact details of counselling services were displayed at the end of the online questionnaire. In order to ensure high standards of quality control for the project, an academic advisory board was convened and the research findings were discussed and validated in workshops with academics, education professionals and peer advisers from a coming-out counselling service.

Due to its dual qualitative and quantitative methodological approach and the numerical size and nationwide scope of its sample, the project ‘Coming out – what next?!’ is the first Germany-wide LGBT* youth study of its kind.

In the following chapters, the study’s central findings will be presented in concentrated form, after which, in the final section, their implications and corresponding recommendations for action will be discussed. Due to the small size of this brochure, it is not possible to present the findings here with the desired level of detail and differentiation. In the upcoming book, intersectional aspects and internal differentiations are discussed thoroughly.
An awareness of one’s actual gender identity or sexual orientation often begins to emerge relatively early. In many cases a feeling of ‘otherness’ takes root during primary schooling or at the beginning of puberty. This is apparent in the way that some young people describe not having wanted to play with the toys intended for them in familial or (pre-)school contexts, or having had little interest in the sorts of romantic crushes and puppy love typical for their age-group.

“Oh, it was actually really early on, so it was back in primary school when I realised that all the girls were, like, writing love notes for the boys and I always found that really stupid somehow, and I was always just mates with the boys because I also always played football with the boys. But I only really became aware of it when I was eleven, twelve, when I first thought that a woman, it was my German teacher, was really great.” (Denise, 18 y.o.)

For the majority of young lesbian, gay, bisexual and orientation-diverse people, the awareness process began between the ages of 13 and 16 (fig. 2). For young trans* or gender-diverse people, the starting age is more spread out. The beginning of the awareness process in this group varies between the age of 10 and 20, but it tends to take place somewhat earlier (fig. 3). In both groups, approximately a quarter of young people cannot name any specific point in time at which they became aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The proportion of young people who “always knew” is almost twice as high among young trans* people than among young lesbian, gay, bisexual and orientation-diverse people.
In some cases, young people report that they lacked the terminology and information to be able to understand and describe their non-heterosexual or non-cisgender feelings. Young people who are just starting to come out to themselves often feel uncertain because their sexual or gender experiences seem somehow not right. This uncertainty is a source of strain, hardship and fear (such as fear of never being able to have a happy relationship or a family of one’s own). Many young trans* people discuss having avoided sports activities because these are often organised in a way which places particular importance on a binary gender system. Furthermore, some young people withdrew from friendships in order to avoid gender-specific behaviour expectations. Accordingly, only a tenth (12%) of trans* and gender*-diverse young people described the time when they started to become aware of their sexual or gender identity as “easy”; among lesbian, gay and bisexual young people this figure rises to a quarter. All others found this period of their lives “moderately difficult” or “difficult”.

Many young people characteristically try to ignore their ‘true feelings’ for an extended period of time. During this prolonged suppression of their actual gender or sexual identity, some young people developed psychological or psychosomatic symptoms which called for therapy.

“And then, well it did actually go so far that I felt totally wrecked and depressed and then well, well then I started to self-harm and that kind of thing…” (Fiona, 21 y.o.)

The fear that parents, friends or peers will exclude them at school, call them “crazy” or reject them plays an important role. Three quarters of young people fear being rejected by friends (74%) while seven in ten are afraid of rejection from family members (69%). Two thirds fear hurtful comments or looks (66%) and well over half of young people assume that coming out will lead to problems in places of education and work (61%). More than a third of young people (37%) are afraid of sexual insults or harassment (fig. 4).

One of the first central findings of this study is that the process of becoming aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity plays a central role in young people’s lives. Only a few young people experience this process of internal tumult as one that is easy to deal with. During this time, the majority feel heavily burdened by the question of how they want to deal with their sexual and gender experiences in the future.
Media

For young people, the internet plays an important role in the process of coming out. It is the number one place to go for information. The internet offers young people who are in the process of confronting and questioning – often over the course of several years – their sexual orientation or gender identity the opportunity to look up information anonymously and in secret at a time when they cannot or do not want to talk to anyone else about “it”. Many young people describe how their research on the internet first helped them to find appropriate words for their feelings and gave them the sense that they were not “the only one like that”. In online forums, for example, they can read about the experiences and life situations of other young LGBT+ people, exchange stories and perspectives, and create a network of contacts. Here, their sexual orientation or gender identity is the main point of connection between them. They can be relatively sure that the people they meet in these “safe spaces” will be LGBT+ themselves and will not react in a hostile way to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Furthermore, the internet offers people opportunities to get involved and become active themselves (e.g. by uploading videos to YouTube, becoming a moderator in a forum, or blogging). Overall, young people use LGBT+-specific websites very often, and usage rates are especially high among those who come from rural areas or who have a low level of education.

Film and television are also significant. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or trans* people still make relatively rare appearances in film and television, although the figures have risen somewhat in recent years. Young people describe this visibility as something positive, especially while they are going through the process of coming out to themselves, even though the portrayals of LGBT+ people in the media are often far removed from their own experiences of reality. To some extent, films and television programmes can help young people find words for their sexual or gender experiences and can encourage them to address and reflect on their feelings. Examples worth mentioning in the German context include the media-staged coming out of footballer Thomas Hitzlsperger and the transgender identity of pole vaulter Balian Buschbaum. The public interest in such high-profile cases also helps to confront or sensitise people who had previously never had to deal directly with questions of sexual orientation and gender identity.

There are, however, a number of more problematic aspects to the world of the media. One difficulty arises from the sheer quantity of information coursing around the internet, where information that is not serious, out-of-date or inaccurate has to be filtered out. This can, for example, make it more difficult to look up LGBT+ leisure or counselling services or to find information about legal, financial and/or medical questions on the subject of trans* issues. Sexist or sexualised web content about lesbian sexuality or female bisexuality is also problematic. Aside from the content itself, the issue of remaining anonymous unsettles young people using the internet, especially if they do not have their own computer or internet access, or if other people are able to look into their browsing or search history against their will.
The timing and social contexts of going public

While struggling with their own feelings in connection with sexuality and gender, young LGBT* people often only have themselves to turn to. In order to make contact with other people and gain their support, these young people must be able to find a name for their sexual orientation or gender identity. They are unable to speak about their feelings (which they may find confusing, alarming or on the other hand pleasant) with the same confidence as heterosexual, cisgender young people, whose experiences are more widely understood, without their sexual orientation or gender identity becoming the subject of discussion. Many young people report experiencing an increase in psychological strain and feeling under a great amount of pressure to act, which ultimately leads to the first experience of coming out to others.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual or orientation-diverse young people were on average 16.9 years old when they first came out to others (lesbian and bisexual young women 16.6 y.o., gay and bisexual young men 17.0 y.o., orientation-diverse young people 18.1 y.o.) For those who did specify when they became aware of their sexual orientation, the average amount of time which passed between coming out to themselves and coming out to others was 1.7 years for lesbian and bisexual young women. For gay and bisexual young men, it was 2.9 years, and for orientation-diverse young people it was 1.4 years.

Trans* and gender*diverse young people were on average 18.3 years old when they first came out to others (young female trans* people 19.3 y.o., young male trans* people 16.9 y.o., young gender*diverse people 19.5 y.o.). Among those who could pinpoint a specific age when they became aware of their gender identity, rather than feeling that they had always known about it, 6.8 years passed on average for trans* girls/women between coming out to themselves and coming out to others. For trans* boys/men, it was 4.1 years and for gender*diverse young people it was 3.5 years.

For most young people, a period of several years passes between when they first become aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity and when they first come out to others. Considering the fears which many young people describe feeling during the process of coming out to themselves, it now becomes clear that a substantial part of their adolescence is shaped by this grappling with their non-heterosexual or non-cisgender identity. This burden is particularly evident for trans* and gender*diverse young people. For trans* girls/women, the time it takes to go from coming out to oneself to coming out to others is approximately 7 years. These are, however, only average values, and they disguise the fact that in some individual cases, young people waited for over ten years before they first came out to another person.
The motives and reasons behind coming out to others for the first time are shown in figure 5. Among the reasons young people gave for coming out, the most frequently cited was the need to discuss their feelings with other people and the desire not to have to disguise themselves any more. Some young people mention fear and uncertainty as having prevented them from coming out earlier. For young trans* people, the desire to transition also plays an important role.

The young people in this study rated the reactions they encountered when they first came out to other people (in most cases, these were friends) as being predominantly ‘very good’ or ‘good’. This finding stands in contrast with the tremendous fears and concerns which young people experience before coming out. Positive as other people’s reactions tend to be, they do not reduce the significance of the often long and difficult process young LGBT* people go through while coming out to themselves in the first place, nor the fears that accompanied this process. These were genuine fears, and positive reactions do not simply remove all trace of them. A small proportion of young people came out to others involuntarily. In these cases, the experience of coming out and the reactions young people receive are markedly more negative. Being able to plan and prepare in one’s own way increases the likelihood of having positive experiences of coming out.

Figure 5: Reasons for coming out to others for the first time (multiple answers were possible); source: DJI study on coming out, 2015

I wanted to talk to someone about my feelings
I didn’t want to pretend I was somebody else any more
It wasn’t planned – it just happened
I was too afraid before
I wasn’t sure enough before
I started a relationship
I was asked about it
I didn’t feel the need to out myself until then
I was outed
I wanted to start transitioning physically

Sexual and gender diversity

Binary categories of desire (homo- or heterosexual) and binary gender categories (female or male) are insufficient when it comes to describing individual experience. Just like on Facebook, where users can choose from over 60 different types of gender, the ways in which young people described themselves in this study was very diverse. 6% of young people oppose having to define their sexual orientation or gender identity and being assigned to a particular category on that basis. They chose the option “I do not wish to categorise myself”. Just under a quarter (24%) of young people described themselves in terms that do not follow a heterosexual, binary system. For example, they described themselves as bisexual, pansexual, transgender, queer, genderfluid, polysexual, asexual or non-binary. For these young people, the phase of discovery is usually longer and more complex, since both they and those around them are much less familiar with gender and sexual diversity than they are with forms of experience and desire which follow more clear-cut categories.

One way this shows itself is in the fact that these young people are, on average, older than all the others both when they come out to themselves and when they come out to others. They also report having been held back from coming out beforehand by a lack of certainty about their own sexual orientation or gender identity. Their sexual orientation or gender identity is often not taken into consideration by society, and these young people are pigeonholed by their environment using the framework of the familiar binary system. For example, a bisexual person is seen as being either heterosexual or homosexual depending on the sex of their partner, even if they themselves identify as bisexual. Gender*queer people are pigeonholed as being either ‘male’ or ‘female’, regardless of the fact that both or neither of these descriptions do justice to their gender experience. Because of a lack of knowledge or expectations of unambiguousness, they are often met with misunderstanding and rejection both in wider society and within in the LGBT* community.
17

4.1 Friends as confidants

The first person many young people choose to come out to is one of their friends. For two thirds of young lesbian, gay, bisexual or orientation*diverse people, this is a female best friend (34%), another female friend (17%) or a male best friend (16%). For young people whose coming out concerns their gender identity, a female best friend is also the first person they talk to (20%). The second most common person they speak to, before other female friends (16%) and a male best friend (10%), is their mother (18%). Sometimes, the coming out does not come as a surprise to the chosen confidants, as they had already suspected or expected this development.

By choosing to come out to a friend, young people are looking first and foremost for someone whom they can trust, often on the basis of a close friendship, and whose reaction they can gauge relatively well. They hope to receive understanding and support from that person. Another reason for choosing a friend is because people are more independent in this context: unlike family and school relationships, people can choose friendships themselves and can withdraw from them more easily if conflict arises. However, when we look at the fears which young people describe having experienced before coming out, it is clear that friendships are of great emotional significance. Three quarters (74%) of lesbian, gay, bisexual and orientation*diverse young people name being rejected by friends as the biggest worry before coming out. This fear is, for most young people, never realised.

“Yeah, in that sense, so with my friends and stuff, it was all, it was never, never, never an issue.” (Jana, 22 y.o.)

However, friendships are not always immune to discrimination. Indeed, four in ten young people (41%) encounter negative experiences here. Almost half of the young people find that their sexual orientation or gender identity is brought up excessively (48%) and about a third feel that they are not taken seriously (33%) or feel that their sexual orientation or gender identity is not taken into consideration (31%). Nearly three in ten young people are outing against their will among their friends (28%) and about every seventh young person (15%) is ostracised or excluded. For young trans* people, this poses the question of whether, and if so, when, they want to mention their story in the context of a newly developing friendship.

“[…] a friendship is only possible for me […] or only really becomes a friendship when people know about me in the sense of being a trans man. […] because otherwise, the contact between us can only be superficial.” (Artur, 25 y.o.)

On the whole, however, the majority of young people found that coming out to their friends was fairly unproblematic. The sorts of negative experiences mentioned above pose less of a burden in the context of friendships than they do in the context of the family or at places of education. Most young people find that their friendships, both online and offline, are a source of great support.

“Actually, they tend to be people I met online, but they’re my best friends.” (Lennard, 22 y.o.)
The sexual orientation and gender identity of these friends is not paramount. Just under three quarters of the young people (72%) report that fewer than half or even none of their friends are also LGBT*. However, for some young people, it is very important to also have LGBT* among their friends as they often have a range of similar experiences. For others, this makes little difference. What really matters is simply being met with understanding. Yet others would like to have LGBT* people among their friends, but do not know where or how to meet them. Most young people find that coming out has very little impact on who they are friends with. Over time, some may become friends with other LGBT* people. Events such as going to university or moving to a city have a much stronger influence on the composition of their social circle. Young LGBT* people who interact with mainly heterosexual, cisgender young people in alternative communities brought together by a common interest (e.g. computers, manga, drama) report that these communities adopt a straightforward, calm approach to questions of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Leisure and counselling services

The few leisure activities and counselling services that specifically cater to young LGBT* people are generally found in large cities. Many of them are organised by volunteers and not supported by public funds, meaning that some youth groups are often short-lived. Nevertheless, most of the young people we interviewed are aware of LGBT*-specific facilities and opportunities. Nearly all are familiar with LGBT*-specific websites (97%) and with the Christopher-Street-Day (CSD) parade or similar street parties which take place every year (95%). Just under nine in ten (86%) know of cafés, bars and parties aimed at LGBT* customers. Three quarters know of LGBT* youth groups or youth centres (75%) and LGBT* advice centres (77%). The fact that so many of the young people are aware of these activities and opportunities is not because they are widely publicised and known about, but thanks to the young people’s own independent effort and research. Younger adolescents below the age of 17, young people from rural areas and those who have just a few LGBT* friends or even none at all are the least well informed about LGBT*-specific leisure activities and counselling services.

While the majority of young people are aware of these opportunities, the numbers of those who actually make use of them are noticeably lower. Just over half of the young people surveyed go to parties, bars and cafés for LGBT* people and attend Christopher-Street-Day (55% each), a quarter go to LGBT* youth groups or youth centres (25%) and roughly one in seven (15%) has sought out an LGBT* advice centre at least once. One of the young people makes the specific value of LGBT* opportunities clear:

“For me, it’s firstly just about actually getting to know people who I can instantly feel a little better around because there’s no question of whether they’ll accept my sexuality or not. And that in itself is a really nice feeling. But also, it’s about getting information about what’s going on in politics, what happened in the history of the LGBTIQ scene. And so we do sometimes get to hear lectures or get some other information. That’s something I also find really interesting about it all.” (Becca, 16 y.o.)

The majority of young people do not attend any youth groups or youth centres in their free time (whether LGBT*-orientated or not). More than a third (35%) report not taking up LGBT*-specific offers because they are unsure about what to expect there. Just under a third (30%) of young people are unable to make use of LGBT* facilities because there are none located within a manageable distance from where they live. Trans* and gender* diverse young people’s ambivalent stance towards ‘the LGBT* community’ is reflected in the fact that one in four (27%) of them have had negative experiences there. Young trans* people are also often concerned that going to youth groups and participating in certain activities could lead to their trans* status becoming apparent against their wishes. The Christopher-Street-Day Parade seems like a convenient space to broach the subject of LGBT* in a non-committal way and possibly in the company of heterosexual friends – without having to be ‘out’.
4.2 Family: always something special

Family, unlike friends, is not something which young people can choose, and for this reason, the family is a social sphere from which it is difficult to withdraw. Young people are highly dependent on their parents or guardians, particularly in emotion and financial terms, and those who are under the age of 18 are also legally dependent on them. The significance of the family is also reflected in the young people's fears prior to coming out: seven in ten young people (69%) mentioned potential rejection by family members as a concern. Compared with other contexts like friend groups and educational or working environments, coming out to one's family is seen as being the hardest of all.

In order to get a feeling for how their parents might react to their coming out, many young people spend time in advance observing how LGBT* issues are discussed in the family. In many cases, the topic of sexual orientation is more present than the topic of transgender identity. Because of this lack of visibility in everyday (family) life, trans* and gender*diverse young people try to use their family's approach to same-sex orientations or bisexuality as a compass to help them anticipate their parents' reactions to their own coming out. Most young people turn first to their mother, while other family members such as siblings or fathers are often only informed at a later point in time (or not at all). Some young people whose parents claim to have had no idea beforehand report that their initial reaction was one of shock, but that this is not connected with a fundamentally negative attitude:

“[...] because I'm completely aware that just like it was a process for me, it's the same for my parents, or it used to be, at least. Things are going quite smoothly now. And anyway, I can't expect them to take a couple of minutes or hours to accept something which took me several years.” (Manuel, 20 y.o.)

Parental reactions range from immediate and unreserved acceptance and support, to neutral and unmoved recognition, and even to unequivocal rejection and termination of the relationship. Young people tend to rate the experience of coming out to their parents for the first time more negatively than how they rate coming out to their friends. For some young lesbian, gay, bisexual or orientation*diverse people, coming out is the only time their sexual orientation is ever explicitly discussed in the family setting. Some of the young people questioned had made a conscious decision not to come out to their parents. They consider it inappropriate, impossible or unnecessary to talk to their parents about their sexual orientation. For trans* youth, respect and support from their immediate family for their desire to transition is particularly important. This includes, for example, using their desired name and corresponding pronoun. Many, but not all, young trans* and gender*diverse people received the level of support from their parents that they wanted and needed.

Outside of the immediate family, it can sometimes be difficult for lesbian, gay, bisexual or orientation*diverse young people to work out who is already aware of their sexual orientation. Unlike trans* or gender*diverse youth, young lesbian and gay people are generally spared having to come out to relatives with whom they are not particularly close. Coming out to grandparents can occasionally be complicated. On the one hand, these relationships are often very close and young people may want to speak openly with their grandparents.

On the other hand, their own parents may not want them to tell their grandparents. However, if young people do come out to their grandparents, the latter often lack knowledge about
the topic. They are nevertheless eager to understand their grandchildren and to continue to play an important role in their lives as people they can turn to.

While there are many examples of positive experiences, young people do also experience negative situations with members of their family. Almost every second young person (45%) reports having experienced discrimination in their immediate family on the grounds of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Most frequently of all, young people report that their sexual orientation or gender identity is not taken seriously, is ignored or is not taken into consideration (fig. 6).

Discriminatory experiences in the family cause the greatest amount of stress for young people, especially when compared with similar experiences among friends or at places of education and work. Young people from rural areas seem to plan their coming out even more carefully. They find it particularly important that their parents and siblings find out from them directly rather than from a third party. Some young people are concerned that their family might be marginalised or discriminated against within the local community on account of their sexual orientation and gender identity. They try to protect their family from such experiences, for example by disguising the fact they are in a relationship in order to prevent their sexual orientation from becoming public knowledge.

**Figure 6: Experiences of discrimination in the immediate family (parents, siblings) (N = 2,280) (multiple answers were possible); source: DJI study on coming out, 2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My gender identity/sexual orientation wasn’t taken seriously</td>
<td>63,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My gender identity/sexual orientation was deliberately ignored</td>
<td>47,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My gender identity/sexual orientation wasn’t taken into consideration</td>
<td>37,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My gender identity/sexual orientation was overemphasised</td>
<td>16,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was insulted, called names or mocked</td>
<td>16,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was outed against my will</td>
<td>15,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was ostracised or excluded</td>
<td>11,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was threatened with punishment</td>
<td>8,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was threatened with violence</td>
<td>4,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things were taken away from me or destroyed</td>
<td>3,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was physically attacked or beaten up</td>
<td>2,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone threatened to out me against my will</td>
<td>2,9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures in percent
4.3 School, education, university and work as places of ambivalence

School, places of training and work places are central areas of life for young people. It is difficult for them to avoid these places, as failure to complete education or job training can entail serious and long-term consequences. This makes it considerably more difficult for young people if conflicts arise in these areas. For many young LGBT* people, school, places of training and work places are problematic environments. People whose gender appearance does not conform to society's typical ‘male’ or ‘female’ models may experience bullying right from the beginning of their school career. Where possible, young LGBT* people often avoid coming out while at school because they are worried about being ostracised and bullied. If, however, they do come out at school (be it voluntarily or not), young people describe that they often have no control over how the information spreads and that they are directly exposed to the reactions of other pupils. The atmosphere at school, already difficult enough for many, is often made worse by the use of the word ‘gay’ as an insult or swearword.

“[…] so anyone who comes across as gay is called gay, because it’s sort of supposed to be an insult or a way of saying ‘that’s bad’ or I don’t know what. But yeah, other things too, like all kinds of things are also described ‘gay’, like, anything that’s just a bit shitty, bad or stupid.” (Emil, 17 y.o.)

Young LGBT* people’s experiences of how teachers react to derogatory behaviour at school differ widely. For example, just over half (57%) state that teachers made it clear that they would not tolerate ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ or ‘trans*’ as insults (fig. 7).

Apart from being used as insults, the topic of LGBT* is rarely addressed in schools. It is rarely mentioned or discussed in class, and positive examples in which non-heterosexual or non-cis-gender ways of life are presented in a neutral way are rare (e.g. male homosexuality not exclusively mentioned in relation to HIV/Aids).

“I noticed over and over again that it was never actually talked about in my school. We had Sex Education, and it was all just about men and women. In our Ethics class we had the topic of ‘love and partnership’, and it was all just about men and women. And it wasn’t until later that I realised that it had just been completely left out, that it was somehow never about women and women or men and men or even about being transgender, so somehow it was just completely absent at school.” (Henrike, 27 y.o.)

The young people identified two ways in which the subject of LGBT* should be incorporated into lessons: Firstly, LGBT* lives should be mentioned as a matter of course, for example by being included in questions set in maths and foreign language exercises, and secondly, they should be discussed in greater depth in subjects like Citizenship Studies, Biology, Social Studies and Law, which lend themselves to such discussions.
“Well, I think it is actually quite important, really, that in primary school, in maths questions for example, they don’t always just say ‘mum, dad and a child’ but maybe also say like ‘two mums and a child’ or ‘two dads’ or even a ‘single mum’, I mean it’s always the same, it’s just always really simple, just to say ‘mum, dad and a child’ and everything else beyond that is somehow weird.” (Nadine, 21 y.o.)

In the online questionnaire, more than half of the young people (61%) indicate that they are afraid that coming out will cause problems in their places of work or education. Among other things, they are worried that their classmates or co-workers may react negatively or not accept them, that their performance will be judged less favourably by teachers or superiors at work, that they may encounter difficulties in leadership positions, and that their sexual orientation or gender identity will be emphasised more than their professional achievements. The fact that four in ten young people (44%) report having experienced discrimination on account of their sexual orientation or gender identity in an educational or work environment in the past shows that these fears are not unfounded. Stress and strain resulting from discrimination at places of education are highest among young people between the ages of 14 and 17 and among young people with a lower level of education. People aged between 14 and 17 consider coming out in an educational environment to be more difficult than people a few years older do. Besides explicit abuse, young people in places of education or work primarily experienced inappropriate levels of interest in their LGBT* status and social exclusion.

Figure 8: Experiences of discrimination in places of work or education (N = 2,217) (multiple answers were possible); source: DJI study on coming out, 2015

- I was insulted, called names or mocked: 54.8%
- My gender identity/sexual orientation was overemphasised: 41%
- I was ostracised or excluded: 34.2%
- My gender identity/sexual orientation wasn’t taken into consideration: 32.3%
- My gender identity/sexual orientation wasn’t taken seriously: 29.1%
- I was outing against my will: 25.8%
- My gender identity/sexual orientation was deliberately ignored: 17.9%
- I was threatened with violence: 12.7%
- Things were taken away from me or destroyed: 12%
- I was physically attacked or beaten up: 9.6%
- Someone threatened to out me against my will: 4.7%
- I was threatened with punishment: 3.9%

Figures in percent
For young trans* people, discrimination also often occurs in everyday situations in which their transgender identity is not respected or even explicitly ignored:

“They refused to give me the keys for the female toilets. You see, the female toilets were locked, at the company I mean. Because there’d already been some cases of rape, I don’t know. [...] they didn’t let me get changed. They refused to give me a new uniform [...]” (Evelyn, 19 y.o.)

Young people often use a change in their school or professional career as a chance to live out their sexual orientation or gender identity for the first time. Since starting at university or job training often entails moving to a new place, young trans* people for example take this change as an opportunity to start living in the opposite sex without having to explain themselves. For lesbian, gay, bisexual and orientation*diverse young people, relocating opens up the possibility of working towards a life that suits their sexual orientation in the new setting.

Football and sport

One thing that emerges from the young people’s accounts is just how strongly football shapes and conveys expectations about particular gender roles. Young male people are mocked as being ‘unmanly’ and ‘gay’ if they do not play football, play it poorly, or take no interest in it. Conversely, young female people who do play football often find that their ‘femininity’ is disputed and that they are described as ‘tomboys’ or ‘lesbians’. This rigid, binary system of gender categorisation and the expectations and stereotypes that come with it determine which sports are ‘typically female’ or ‘typically male’. Failure to fulfil these expectations often leads to experiences of social discrimination. Young people find that it is almost impossible to escape from these body-related norms, particularly in school environments. The practice of differentiating between ‘boys’ sports and ‘girls’ sports at school, and the communal use of changing rooms, create challenging situations for young trans* and gender*diverse people in particular, obliging them to negotiate for themselves how best to proceed. Often, they choose to stop participating in certain sports (e.g. swimming) at an early age, since the significance of a gender identity with which they do not identify is often unpleasant and linked with feelings of shame.

“[…] that I just can’t go swimming. Or, for example, I always wanted to join a football club but I never signed up.” (Eric, 21 y.o.)
Young people who want to start the process of having their sex legally or medically reassigned face the initial challenge of gaining an overview of the various options they have and of the complex requirements associated with each of these options. The range of medical procedures for sex reassignment includes both hormone therapy and surgical intervention. In the case of hormone therapy, people can take hormones of the opposite sex and/or suppress their own body’s production of hormones simultaneously. If the body’s production of hormones is suppressed relatively early on during adolescence, the development of unwanted secondary sexual characteristics (like voice changes or the growth of bodily hair) can be minimised. Surgical sex reassignment procedures can be carried out both on the chest and in the genital region. Trans*men can have the female mammary glands and breasts removed and trans*women can have breast augmentation surgery. As for genital reassignment surgery, the pre-existing internal and external sex organs are removed and male or female sex organs reconstructed. In Germany, for this kind of surgery to be covered by medical insurance, one has to provide extensive medical reports and certificates, undergo compulsory psychotherapy and complete a so-called ‘real life test’ (publicly living in one’s true sex). Young people decide for themselves which steps they would like to take (Table 1).

Those wishing to transition must find a medical professional who is competent, works in their local area and is available for consultation. This can often be a difficult and time-consuming endeavour. Many young trans* people, especially teenagers, find that the first meeting with a doctor or therapist does not provide the help that they expected.

“And I thought, okay, if I tell him about this then I can somehow get it going. But then he just sort of said, ‘Okay, well, I don’t know what we’re going to do about this either’. And then he sort of... from the internet, then he literally, like, googled something while he was sitting there with me and printed something out for me about a self-help group that was really far away and which I couldn’t even get to.’ (Fiona, 21 y.o.)

Aside from the first meeting, three quarters of young people (73%) in the online questionnaire reported that the medical professional they spoke to was well informed about the topic of gender identity. However, one quarter of young trans* people (27%) found that the
people they spoke to were poorly informed or even not informed at all. Experiences in other areas, e.g. in court or public offices, are very similar. Finding a suitable medical professional is a significant help for young trans* people on the path to sex reassignment. As well as providing information and the necessary medical reports and certificates, it is important that doctors accept and support the transgender identity of their young clients.

Nearly half of the young trans* people (46%) describe the process of undergoing a psychological evaluation, which is legally required in Germany in order to have one’s sex reassignment legally recognised, as stressful. Some report that the assessment session was excessively long, nearly all found that some of the questions were too intimate and too probing, for example questions concerning their sexuality or possible experiences of abuse during childhood.

The complex and laborious steps involved in requesting medical procedures (e.g. sex reassignment surgery) do pose challenges. It can take a considerable amount of time to put together the full set of supporting documents which medical insurance providers require before they agree to cover the costs, since medical reports and certificates often have to be actively and persistently chased up.

“And when I actually submitted the request [for the costs to be covered by the medical insurance provider], I actually needed two assessments for that as well, which I didn’t know, I thought it was just one [...] Then I had to go to another one, to a psychiatrist, they wanted one to be from a psychologist and one from a psychiatrist. Not two psychologists, that doesn’t count [...] Then I only got the confirmation that they’d cover my costs five days before the surgery [...] So it was extremely close.” (Alexandra, 20 y.o.)

When young people have completed the path of medical and legal gender reassignment, one can often easily tell how relieved they feel about being able to lead a day-to-day life in the future that corresponds with their true gender experience.

“I call it the day I was born, I never really lived before, I just vegetated. [...] Yeah, that’s, it’s, the feelings are intense, it’s hard to describe them because it’s just such a mixture of relief, joy and achievement, because you just didn’t have the strength any more, and all of that builds up.” (Evelyn, 19 y.o.)
One of this project’s central questions was how young LGBT* people manage and organise their coming out. What individual strategies do they adopt in order to manage the way they come out to themselves and to others? How do they deal with problems and potential experiences of discrimination? It is important here to distinguish between strategies which inform and influence the way young people act (action strategies) and strategies which shape the way they interpret and explain things in their own mind (interpretative strategies). Another area of interest is to identify the kinds of conditions which encourage or hinder a ‘good’ coming out process from the young people’s perspective.

The search for emotional support, information and space for individual engagement

When asked what helped them when they first came out, young people say that being able to speak to someone about their feelings is crucial. Over three quarters of the young people (76%) consider this an essential form of support. Having contact with other young or adult LGBT* people is another important factor. Two thirds (64%) of young trans* and gender*diverse people, and four in ten (40%) of young lesbian, gay, bisexual and orientation*diverse people sought out LGBT* contacts. Access to information about LGBT* issues is also very important: This was confirmed by six in ten (58%) young trans* or gender*diverse people and four in ten (36%) young lesbian, gay, bisexual or orientation*diverse people. Some young people report that the experience of becoming active themselves, i.e. getting involved and making LGBT* topics visible in everyday situations on the internet (e.g. on blogs or in YouTube videos) or at school (e.g. special project days and presentations) also helps to give them a feeling of release and support.

Avoidance strategies

Avoiding or abstaining from dealing with certain social situations is a strategy which young people often pursue and which many therefore clearly find indispensable. Many young people avoid talking to other people about their feelings for long periods of time in the hope that this will prevent their fears, such as the fear of rejection by family members or friends, from coming true. They make do as best as they can with the gender or sexual role ascribed to them, fulfil the corresponding expectations, actively suppress their own experience and so abstain from acting in accordance with their true sexual or gender feelings. In this way, many young people avoid experiencing any form of discrimination at all. One example of this is not displaying their same-sex orientation or their actual gender identity in public.

“And my boyfriend just didn’t want us to walk down the street holding hands, for example, or kissing each other and that kind of thing. [...] So because of that, back then there weren’t any negative experiences. [...] But now I’ve been in a new relationship for about a month and we are very open about it [...] in terms of holding hands or kissing. And so now we’ve actually had four situations this past month alone which I would describe as negative. (Bjarne, 21 y.o.)
Strategically planning the coming out

The first time young people come out to others is often strategically planned. Young people gather information and appropriate arguments which could make it easier for them to explain certain things. They actively seek out support from and interaction with others, gradually reaching a point where they feel sufficiently secure to come out.

“Then I said, ‘Okay, I’ll try to get it sorted with my teacher now, with all the documents that I’ve got so far, I’ll try and sort things out so that I could maybe even get my next report with my real name on it’. And he was really tolerant and said, ‘Okay, I don’t need a court decision, everything’s here in your documents, and you’ve always been this way, so there’s no need to bother with all the official procedures, I’ll just sort everything out quickly here.’” (Evelyn, 19 y.o.)

Many young trans* and gender* diverse people report that they were actually very lucky with their coming out and say that “it could have been much worse”. They had heard of horror stories, often on online networks, and, taking these as a benchmark, rate their own experiences as (comparably) positive.

Many young people accept that parents need time to get used to the new situation after their children come out. Young trans* and gender* diverse people are tolerant at first when other people use the wrong pronoun, even though they may wish for a greater degree of sensitivity and attentiveness.

“Well, my parents are still pretty stubborn about sticking to ‘she’, but I think, well, my father is making some kind of effort to [...] change that. He writes both names when he sends me letters. [...] And then I said that they can have some time to, like, come to terms with it.” (Fredi, 21 y.o.)

Strategies for processing negative experiences

Young people develop various interpretative strategies (such as relativisation, idealisation or legitimisation) in order to process negative experiences and discrimination. In the interviews it became clear that many young people manage by and large to ‘set things straight’ again by going over everything thoroughly in their own mind. In this way, some of the young people find that ‘stupid’ comments, derogatory looks in public, or intimate questions from people they hardly know, are not really a problem (anymore). They choose to ignore such experiences, to stop thinking further about them, or they play them down. This strategy of relativisation helps to reduce the emotional stress which negative experiences can provoke. In many cases, young people have become used to such experiences and developed a ‘tough skin’.

“It does bother me, but it’s like, you just toughen up, you just toughen up. At least, it doesn’t irritate me so much anymore or make me feel really uncomfortable for hours on end. You correct other people [...] But otherwise you just mainly ignore it.“ (Kim, 18 y.o.)

What helps? Beneficial conditions for coming out

The strategies outlined above are developed in response to both favourable and adverse conditions which together shape the various possibilities open to young people. Those who rate their coming out experiences as mainly positive tend to have high levels of self-efficacy.

“At school as well, I like, I literally, I literally managed to do the whole thing totally by myself somehow.” (Dennis, 21 y.o.)
Many young people are able to overcome difficulties during the coming out process. The most important thing is that they can make sense of their sexual or gender experience for themselves and are therefore in a position to explain it to others as well. The ability to access information and to make contact or network with other people is therefore a crucial factor which can help to ensure that the coming out process goes well for young people. Many young people have the necessary skills to organise things they need (e.g. getting the medical insurance provider to cover their costs). They seek out active support and are able to process negative experiences. While doing so, they keep their own personal resources in mind, which often helps them to keep going and not fall down when confronted with set-backs.

“Well, I’d already outed myself to a classmate because I just need someone who’d have my back in an emergency, I thought she was good and I already hinted at things with her [...] Then at two in the morning I got a text message saying that everyone’s just full of praise for me.” (Evelyn, 19 y.o.)

Coming up against pre-existing, often clichéd or plainly false assumptions and ideas about the realities of LGBT* lifestyles or expectations about ‘typical’ gender roles is an example of a condition which can be a hindrance to a positive coming out experience.

“And she was like, her first reaction [note: to his coming out as gay] was, ‘Yeah, but you know right, be careful, cause of the diseases.’” (Bjarne, 21 y.o.)

Many young people have to explain things, set misinformation straight and tackle derogatory stereotypes in their social environment. If there is an enlightened, accepting and respectful atmosphere in key areas of their life such as family, places of education and work, this can help ensure that the coming out will go well for the young people.

“But overall, like now, when I think about it now, I think that if I’d, like, said that I was lesbian back then when I was at school, it wouldn’t actually have been a problem. I mean, there wasn’t any sort of, like, hostile atmosphere towards the whole thing.” (Carla, 25 y.o.)

If young people are uncertain about their ability to act and to assert themselves or have no support in areas of life which they consider important, then they tend to have more negative experiences of coming out.
Discrimination in public

“For me, discrimination is just like being injured, so inside it feels like, it just hurts somehow, it’s like a, like a stab in the heart, that’s how I’d put it, yeah.” (Emil, 17 y.o.)

For people who, for whatever reason, find themselves outside of so-called mainstream society, dealing with experiences of discrimination can be a significant aspect of their life. Altogether, eight in ten (82%) of the young people questioned report having experienced discrimination on the grounds of their sexual orientation or gender identity at least once. Trans* and gender* diverse young people are affected by discrimination even more frequently than lesbian, gay, bisexual or orientation* diverse young people. Discrimination takes place in different contexts such as in school/work, in the family, among friends, in public or in clubs and societies. The spectrum of discriminatory experiences ranges from looks and comments, ‘jokes’, traditional clichés and prejudices to insults, verbal abuse, exclusion from social contexts, legal and social disadvantages, and can go as far as threats or even actual damage to property and physical violence. What counts as discrimination depends first and foremost on the individual's own feelings and perceptions. There is a lot of variation in the way young people define discrimination and describe what it means for them.

“Discrimination’ is actually a question of individual feeling. I wouldn’t say that there’s a one-hundred-percent accurate definition that applies to everyone. It’s a bit like violence. It’s the victim who says what violence is, not the environment. And that means that everyone has to know for themselves what counts as discrimination and what doesn’t.” (Carla, 25 y.o.)

According to the young people’s accounts, the place where they most often experience discrimination is in public spaces (e.g. on the bus, in the train, on the street, in the swimming pool, at the supermarket). More than a third of lesbian, gay, bisexual and orientation* diverse young people (38%) claim to have experienced discrimination in these places. For trans* and gender* diverse young people, the figure rises to half of all participants (50%). Young people who live in big cities experience discrimination most often. Every third young person reports having been insulted or harassed in public because of their sexual orientation or gender identity – for young trans* female people the figure rises to one in two. More than a third of young people (36%) fear that coming out to others will lead to sexual insults or harassment. In the light of the above statistics, their fears are thoroughly justified. Furthermore, sexual orientation and gender identity are not the only grounds on which the young people have been victims of discrimination. Around half of the participants in this study report having experienced discrimination based on their gender expression, because they do not act in a ‘typically female’ or ‘typically male’ way. Additional grounds for discrimination reported by the young people include social background, ethnic or cultural identity, disability, religious identity, language and skin colour. They experienced discrimination both at the hands of people from their own social environment and from strangers in public spaces.
As these results show, young people whose sexual or gender experience does not develop in conformity with heteronormative expectations have mixed experiences during the coming out process. On the one hand, coming out is an important step forwards in the development of their autonomy and identity. On the other hand, it is often tied up with feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Many young people find the time when they became increasingly aware of their sexual or gender experience – a process which in some cases can last for a considerable while – very stressful indeed. The results of this study helped to identify key areas for action where change is needed so that these young people can feel supported, get involved, and benefit from equal opportunities while growing up.

Developing digital media as a resource

The internet is the primary source of information for young people. In order for young people to reach reliable information quickly and easily, especially when they are just becoming aware of their sexual or gender experience, there needs to be a strong internet presence which pools up-to-date information about counselling services and leisure activities currently available in local areas for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and queer5 young people and also provides general, legal and medical information. Furthermore, in addition to counselling services available in their local area, young people need points of contact on the internet which can be accessed easily and anonymously, are relevant to the reality of their day-to-day life, and where they can address their questions (e.g. counselling via e-mail or chat).

Developing, extending and supporting leisure facilities and counselling services

Leisure facilities and counselling services which cater specifically to young lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and queer people are not always accessible to everyone who wants to use them, for example because they live too far away. It is therefore important that facilities open to the general public also open themselves up to sexual and gender diversity, that their employees be sensitised and undergo further training, and that these facilities adapt the services they offer so that all young people can access them regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. In this way, competent support and/or advice can be provided on-site, even if the facility does not offer any specifically LGBT* orientated services. In the case of leisure centres, this also means that the organisation must demonstrate its open-mindedness and ensure that visitors adopt similarly accepting attitudes (e.g. by showing the institution’s open attitude or by carrying out projects on the subject). Services which specifically cater to young people whose sexual or gender identity does not conform to heteronormative expectations should be able to continue providing safe spaces where these young people can address their individual needs and/or issues. Making it easy for people to access and contact relevant services (e.g. by holding open days and trial sessions, or by allowing people to bring heterosexual friends with them) is another way of offering additional support. Combined with LGBT* counselling services for young people (and, where appropriate, for family members too) and communal leisure activities and engagement, this can help to create a framework in which visitors feel empowered.

5 Both the orientation*diverse and gender*diverse groups are included here.
Making realistic role models visible

As the data show, coming out to oneself is a process which is often rife with uncertainties. One reason for this is that young people grow up in a heteronormative environment in which they are rarely able to develop realistic ideas, if any at all, about lifestyles that do not conform to these norms. While they are developing an awareness of their sexual or gender identity, the young people’s principle means of orientation is to establish what they are not and how they do not want to be. This lack of knowledge is problematic for young people who are non-cisgender or non-heterosexual. In addition to concerns about how their environment will react when they come out, they themselves have little idea of what the future might have ‘in store’ for them. One important way of redressing the situation is to increase the public visibility of the great diversity of lifestyles and life projects that exist in society and which go beyond the narrow scope of media portrayals, clichés and society’s own preconceptions of how lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* and queer people live. Young people benefit from seeing realistic models and experiences which are not restricted to ‘ideal type’ coming out processes and which focus on the individuality and free will of individuals.

Abolishing discrimination and encouraging diversity at school, in job training, at university and at work

It has been shown that LGBT* ways of life are rarely discussed in educational institutions and work places, and that young people experience discrimination there on the grounds of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Taking sexual and gender diversity into consideration in teaching materials, on special project days or during awareness-raising projects makes these topics more visible and encourages engagement with them. With further training programmes for teachers, in which both content-based and pedagogical questions about sexual and gender diversity and associated discrimination are addressed, schools and training institutions can become more pleasant places for young lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and queer people.

Training professionals

Professionals who work with young people (e.g. preschool and school teachers, doctors, therapists, career advisers, job training supervisors, social education workers, administrators, sports coaches) always also work with young lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* or queer people – many are simply not aware that they do. Whether implicitly or explicitly, these professionals frequently orientate their work and activities to the needs and realities of heterosexual, cisgender young people. In order to increase sensitivity and knowledge about sexual and gender diversity, more training courses should be offered in relevant fields of work, and compulsory modules included in degree courses (e.g. education and teaching, psychology, medicine, social work) and job training programmes (e.g. preschool education, child care work, midwifery, nursing). These requirements are particularly important for those employed in youth services.
Informing society and a call to arms

Just like the young people themselves, society as a whole stands to benefit from adequate information about the many different ways in which non-heteronormative lives are lived. Educating people about sexual and gender diversity and increasing the visibility of alternative lifestyles helps to address resentment and to relativise clichés. Providing relevant information (e.g. through campaigns, realistic portrayals in the media, or via antidiscrimination work) helps to raise awareness and sensitise the public at all levels of society. In an open social climate, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and queer people can become more visible in everyday life. This in turn helps to break down anxieties and prejudices, removing drama and taboos from the public perception of LGBT* ways of life and thereby ultimately helping to establish them as an indisputable part of everyday life.

Making lesbian, gay and trans* ways of life equal in the eyes of the law

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and queer young people have the same aspirations as other people of their age, and strive to have the same opportunities and rights to realise their aspirations. They want to take on responsibility for one another in relationships, to be able to start a family, to be able to enjoy their leisure time without fear of discrimination and to experience their school as a comfortable place to live and to learn. In order to guarantee this, legal inequalities pertaining to people's sexual orientation or gender identity need to be dismantled. In the German legal context, this means specifically: according the same adoption rights to civil partners as are currently enjoyed by married couples; opening marriage to same-sex couples; putting an end to the pathologising of ‘transsexuality and homosexuality’. Access to medical insurance coverage for transitioning should be possible via a diagnosis that does not imply disease but is instead considered to be an aspect of health care.

Including diversity in youth research in the social sciences

If the scientific community wishes to take the diversity of young people's lives seriously, then they will need to develop and implement sufficiently differentiated methods of data collection and evaluation. The majority of existing research concepts proceed from a perspective which assumes a heteronormative binary gender system. The gender categories one can choose between in surveys are almost exclusively limited to ‘female’ and ‘male’, and heteronormative lifestyles are almost always assumed in the way survey questions are formulated. Consequently, sociological knowledge about the conditions under which young non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people grow up and about how they live their lives is extremely limited. The present study is able to close part of this research gap. However, this study is just a snapshot: knowledge about the mid-term and long-term life courses of young lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and queer young people is still not available in the same depth as it is for cisgender and heterosexual people. The diversity of living situations represented among the more than 5,000 young people who took part in the DJI project ‘Coming out – what next?!’ clearly shows how important it is to adopt a diversity-sensitive perspective when drawing up sociological studies of young people (Gaupp, 2015).
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Figure 9: Wordcloud composed of more than 650 comments from participants in the on-line questionnaire

Coming-out

Schule

Probleme

Mensch

Outing

Eltern

Beginn

Danke

Umfrage

Gesellschaft

Gut

Sexuell

Erfahrungen

Lehrer

Leute

Sexuell

Orientierung

Umfrage

Gute Umfrage

Interessiert

Vielen Dank

Sexuelle Orientierung

Gute Erfahrungen

Lehrer

Schwule

Lesbisch

Wünsche

Akzeptieren

Outen

Outing

Outen

Eltern

Angst

Schwul

Schade

Deutschland

Ersten

Schön

Vergessen

Beziehung

Diskriminierung

Person

Gefühle

Situation

Zeit

Probleme

Umfeld

Studie

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More than 5,000 lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* adolescents and young adults between the ages of 14 and 27 took part in the national research project ‘Coming out – what next?!’. In both a quantitative online questionnaire and 40 qualitative interviews, LGBT* adolescents and young adults gave detailed accounts of their lives. This publication summarises the study’s central findings regarding the process of coming out and positive and negative experiences associated with coming out in significant areas of life. The results will be discussed in greater detail in a book due to be published in 2017.

For adolescents and young adults whose sexual orientation or gender identity does not conform to the heterosexual binary gender norm, the period of time during which they came out (which can take up to several years) has an ambivalent character. On the one hand, it is an important step in the development of their autonomy and identity, but on the other hand, this period is often rife with uncertainty and anxiety.

LGBT* adolescents and young adults often find that the process of becoming aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity (coming out to oneself) is complicated and stressful: Many try to ignore their ‘true feelings’ for a prolonged period of time because they are afraid of unpleasant reactions from their social environment. Those who tell other people about their sexual orientation or gender identity (coming out to others) are often met with support, but also come up against restrictions. Altogether, eight in ten of the adolescents and young people questioned have experienced discrimination on the grounds of their sexual orientation or gender identity. They are, by and large, able to process these negative experiences in a constructive manner. Support from friends, family members and/or leisure facilities and counselling services for LGBT* adolescents and young adults is an important resource which helps them to manage these experiences.

The broad range of sexual and gender identities represented among the adolescents and young adults who took part in this study demonstrates clearly how important it is for politics, professional work and (social) science to be sensitive to diversity if their respective endeavours are to count for all adolescents and young adults.