

Anthony Comegna ([00:21](#)):

Intersectionality is a fairly straightforward idea. The innumerable aspects of a person's identity all overlap and interact in unique ways, posing unique challenges for each one of us. It's essentially the flip side of individualism. If individualism is a methodological concept that only individuals make choices, intersectionality helps describe and explain how individuals come to be what they are.

Anthony Comegna ([00:51](#)):

You can't really have one without the other, but for decades now politics has isolated intersectionality as the domain of the left. Well today we'll see why anyone who cares about individuals should consider their intersections. Sociologist Abigail Saguy joins us now. All right, professor Saguy welcome to the show. And I was wondering if you could start us off, just give us a broad overview of the book that we have here for discussion. *Come Out, Come Out, Whoever You Are*.

Abigail Saguy ([01:24](#)):

Sure. So the book *Come Out, Come Out, Whoever You Are* is about how and why people talk about coming out and what they accomplish by doing so. It begins with a brief history of coming out within LGBTQ community and social movements. And then it goes beyond that group to look at some other groups that might be surprising to some surprising to some of your listeners. So how do fat acceptance activists come out as fat?

Abigail Saguy ([01:56](#)):

That's the topic of chapter three of the book. Then the book looks at the undocumented immigrant youth movement and how they've used the concept and the politics around coming out to embolden undocumented immigrant youth to speak about their undocumented status and get involved in political activism around that. Then we look at another group that again might be surprising to hear this and there's the Mormon fundamentalist polygamists who surprisingly enough also talk about coming out as polygamist or coming out as members of plural marriage families. And that's kind of surprising because this is a conservative group that does not have social ties to LGBTQ organizing. So why are they using this and what are they hoping to accomplish? The last case is an examination of the Me Too movement and the politics of coming out and outing within that movement.

Anthony Comegna ([03:02](#)):

And there are multiple authors involved here. So what could you tell us about the different authors and the kinds of studies that they contributed?

Abigail Saguy ([03:11](#)):

Sure. So, this is a collaborative piece. So how this came about is I, first in the year 2000 was doing research at the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance. And I was asking people at this organization, how they became involved with the fat acceptance movement. And again and again, people would tell me, "Well, I first came out as fat on this day in this particular way." Or someone or they would say, "I used to be a closeted fat person, but I came out." And so I'm thinking, "Gosh, this is so interesting. Why are they using this specific language? What does it mean to come out as fat when this is something that is hyper-visible?" And so I kind of put the question aside for a little bit. And I worked on another project which became my second book project published in 2013 called *What's Wrong With Fat?*

Abigail Saguy ([04:12](#)):

And it's about the politics around body size, both in the public health arena. But also in terms of personal politics and discrimination, etc. But then I went back to it and I initially went back and wrote a piece with a former graduate student who was a graduate student in the women's studies department, now called gender studies department. And it was a paper looking at coming out as fat. So I published that with Anna Ward, I think in 2006. And then I kept talking to my colleagues and to my graduate students about this interesting phenomenon and they would come to me with other cases. So one of them was my graduate student, Nicole Idearaga who said to me, "I did a bunch of interviews for my senior thesis at Berkeley when I was an undergrad with Mormon fundamentalist polygamists. And they were all talking about coming out as well."

Abigail Saguy ([05:11](#)):

I thought, "Oh wow, that would be really interesting." And then another student, Michael Sembalis-Rustifer, who's now a professor in France, Nicole is a postdoc at the Max Planck Institute now, but Michael came and with Michael, we actually designed a paper to look at how coming out is different in France compared to the United States. And then he told me about another student, Laura Enricas who was studying the undocumented immigrant youth movement. And that within this movement too, Laura had said there was also a lot of talk about coming out as undocumented and unafraid. So I spoke to each of these students and for several years we got together and there was another student, and that part of the project didn't end up being part of the book, but Rebecca DeBernardo also participated in these groups meetings.

Abigail Saguy ([06:09](#)):

So with Rebecca, we were exploring how people come out as having a parent who's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender. And so with this group of students, we got together and we met weekly. We designed an interview guide that we would then use to do interviews across these different groups. I got funding, the students went out and did these additional interviews. We came back and then I worked with each individual student over several years and published several articles related to those specific cases and then came back, sat down and looked at the whole thing and pulled together with some collaboration on specific chapters from the specific collaborators, the book *Come Out, Come Out, Whoever You Are*.

Anthony Comegna ([07:07](#)):

So that story answers my question about why choose these particular subjects. It seemed like everything just sort of fit with this general theme of coming out and what that experience is like. And you happen to be able to pull together researchers who had work on that subject. But I wonder maybe could you say a little bit about the actual research process involved in studies like this? Because I know you're a professor of sociology, but there are very few sociology students in the Institute for humane studies network, although we're always eager to get as many as we can. And for the most part we have economic students, we have people working in political philosophy and history and law. And I'm wondering if you could give us a little bit of insight, what exactly does this sort of research in sociology look like? What does it entail?

Abigail Saguy ([08:09](#)):

Yeah, so sociology is very eclectic in terms of the data and methods that it uses. And so there's lots of different ways that one could have approached this project and one could have designed many different

kinds of studies addressing similar questions. The way that I approached this with my collaborators was through in-depth interviews. And so with my collaborators that we conducted about 30 interviews for each case. And because we were thinking about this from the beginning as, I was thinking of it as a book and I wanted to be able to compare across cases. We did construct an interview guide that had some variation, it had to. You need to adapt for each case. Each case is different.

Abigail Saguy ([09:05](#)):

So that was reflected in the interview guide, but there were a lot of commonalities across the kinds of questions that we asked. And so those questions then provided a kind of scaffolding for the kinds of issues we could address in the analysis. So in-depth interviewing, you sit down with someone usually for about an hour and a half. You have a set of questions, we call this an interview guide. The word guide really gets at the fact that it's a kind of loose structure, it's a guide. So you can depart from it. You can follow up when they say something interesting. You can ask questions out of order, you can give the person you're speaking to some freedom to determine, set the terms of the discussion. But the guide helps you hit the same sorts of questions across different respondents. And that allows for you to make comparisons and see trends that emerge across the interviews.

Anthony Comegna ([10:14](#)):

Now let's dig into this concept of coming out a little bit. Because in a lot of ways, I think that your book here is a wonderful little case study of how to do intersectional research. And it's very interesting to me that we have these different studies and yet there are definite, not only similarities, but clear historical lineages to the way that we currently understand and practice coming out. So could you go ahead and give us an overview of what do these different experiences have in common and what does that have to tell us?

Abigail Saguy ([10:55](#)):

Right. So I want to just go back to you evoke this concept of intersectionality. And this is the idea that people's experiences are, we're experiencing not just singular identities but multiple identities. And not just identities but really structural location. And so I personally am a woman and that affects my experiences in the world, but I'm also white, I'm Jewish, I'm middle class. All of those together shapes my experience in the world. And so when we're thinking intersectionally, we're thinking about these, these multiple structural positions. So that is irrelevant for the book. One of the ways intersectionality really plays out interestingly in this story is that the people who in many cases were at the forefront of using this concept of coming out beyond LGBTQ social movement activism were people who had intersectional identities.

Abigail Saguy ([12:04](#)):

So for instance, within the fat acceptance movement, the first people to talk about coming out as fat were people who had also come out as lesbian or had come out as queer. So they were fat women who were both... And fat, I'm using this term in the way the fat acceptance movement uses it as a term that they're reclaiming, one that has been used to shame but that they're reclaiming as a neutral or positive term. And these women had experienced these two different forms of oppression, of silencing, of shaming. And they were able from their positionality to see a similarity and to see the commonalities. Similarly, in the undocumented immigrant youth movement, the first people to talk about coming out as undocumented were people who also identified as queer or gay, lesbian.

Abigail Saguy ([13:02](#)):

And so again, they could see the commonalities and they were involved in both of the movements. So they were ideally situated to serve as conduits from one to another. So getting back to your question of the story and how it evolved. After the introduction to the book, chapter two looks at the history of coming out within LGBTQ communities and shows that even there, the term was initially borrowed from another context.

Abigail Saguy ([13:35](#)):

And so coming out was first used to talk about coming out into gay society and this is in the 20s and 30s and even maybe a little earlier. Coming out into gay society through things like what were called at the time, pansy balls, in which gay men would come out into gay society. And so it was a celebratory kind of thing. You weren't coming out of a closet, you were coming into a social world. And it was directly borrowed from debutante society, high society and the coming out of young women when they came of age and came out into high society.

Abigail Saguy ([14:19](#)):

So that's the original use. And then when we move into the 40s and 50s which is a very repressive age in us history in which there was the red scare and a lot of targeting of the term at the time, homosexuals, a lot of targeting. At that point coming out to kind of different meaning it meant to reveal to other people who were in the know, other people within the same community that you were part of the community. So you would say, "Oh, this is a friend of Mrs. King's." You'd use this kind of code language or "This person is family or this person is a friend of Dorothy's." And another term they used, which at the time was code that no one else would know what it meant was gay. "This person is gay."

Abigail Saguy ([15:12](#)):

Most people would think that just meant happy, cheerful. And it was in the late 60s that the gay rights movement outed this term gay by using it to describe their movement. And it's also in the late 60s, in the wake of the civil rights movement, the black power movement and marked by things like the Stonewall Rebellion, that coming out takes on a much more political meaning in terms of coming out, not just to others in the know, but to the society at large. As a way of casting off stigma but also as a way of educating people. Letting them know that LGBTQ people were more common than they realize that they actually had friends and family who were gay or lesbian. And this was a very effective strategy in combating efforts, for instance, that you know the Briggs initiative in the late 70s which would have banned lesbian and gay men from public school teaching. So the politics of coming out was really effective in combating these initiatives.

Anthony Comegna ([16:26](#)):

And a figure that looms pretty large in the historical portions of the book. Here is somebody who I certainly never read about in my textbooks, I can tell you that, not when I was in high school in the 1990s and early 2000s, Harvey Milk. What could you tell us about him and his role.

Abigail Saguy ([16:46](#)):

Yeah. Well some of your listeners may have seen the film, Milk and then they will have learned about Harvey Milk and if not, it's a film that I highly recommend. It's really well done and you'll learn a lot from that movie. But yes, Harvey Milk, this falls perfectly from my discussion of the Briggs initiative, because Milk organized this campaign to defeat the Briggs initiative, which again would have banned gay men

and lesbians from public teaching in the state of California. And he urged people, come out, come out to your friends. Only your friends come out to your neighbors. He said, "Come out to your neighbors, come out to your friends if indeed they are your friends." Come out to people who know you and who like you, basically was the idea. Come out for the youngsters who are scared.

Abigail Saguy ([17:41](#)):

I'm doing this by memory, but this is roughly what he said. And it was just a brilliant insight that when we don't know, when we don't know people, when people don't have a name, when they don't have a face, when they're anonymous, it's really easy to demonize, to dehumanize and to oppress people. But if they know you, if you come out and say, "Listen, this is me that we're talking about. All these horrible things people are saying, that's me. And you know me. We're friends, we're neighbors." And that kind of thing is just incredibly powerful. And Milk's effort to defeat the Briggs initiative was successful. And I think it was one of many moments in which we saw the power of coming out. And it's been so powerful.

Abigail Saguy ([18:39](#)):

I mean, if you look and see the achievements, the change in attitudes that we've seen since the 70s. I myself was born in 1970, so this is like my lifetime. The changes in attitudes is just phenomenal. The fact that we just had one of the leading candidates for the democratic presidential candidate in the primaries. Pete Buttigieg is a gay man. I mean, that would've been unthinkable, I think even five years ago. And I think the politics of coming out and the greater visibility that sexual minorities have had in not just on TV but also in people's every day experience is really a big part of how we've seen just more acceptance and understanding and appreciation for the LGBTQ community. So it's been-

Anthony Comegna ([19:46](#)):

Yeah-

Abigail Saguy ([19:46](#)):

Yeah. Sorry, go on.

Anthony Comegna ([19:48](#)):

Oh, I was just going to say that it's this wonderful set of stories to me about not only, of course collective power but also just individuals using whatever influence and ability they might have to improve the world for themselves. And that builds up story by story, bit by bit, into some pretty serious and significant history shaping a change that it's really impressive and it's a powerful set of humane stories.

Abigail Saguy ([20:17](#)):

Thank you. Yes. And it's been an impressive and powerful political tactic, which I think explains why it's been taken up by other groups, because they see the power in that. And in each group, as I show in the book, it plays out differently. It doesn't mean the same thing to come out as fat as it means to come out as gay. It's a different kind of stigma. Issues of visibility are different. But there's also some commonalities and in both cases it's really powerful. Likewise for coming out as undocumented. So for each of these, I think what is powerful is that we see the commonalities. I mean, I do believe as human beings we have more in common than we have different. And we all struggle with wanting to be seen, wanting to be recognized, wanting to have dignity, these basic human drives. And I think it is a story of that as well as recognizing the specific kinds of stigmas and challenges that people face for different sorts of reasons.

Anthony Comegna ([21:26](#)):

Yeah. It also reminds me of the old Simpsons joke where there's a gay pride parade and some of the marchers are shouting, "We're here, we're queer, get used to it." And Lisa says, "You're here every year. We are used to it." People really made that happen through concerted and constant individual decisions to resist a culture that puts them down all the time. And I love it.

Anthony Comegna ([21:53](#)):

So I want to dig a little more into the different groups you have here and how they build on one another. Because I think a problem that people might often run in to in this world of research is that it is a bit of a contentious issue when one group of marginalized and exploited people borrows methods and tactics from another, and uses them for their own purposes and it's not seen as sort of generally helpful. You know what I mean? So for example, let's say gay men borrowing a lot of culture from black women and not giving recognition or significant credit for how black women have influenced queer culture. And I'm wondering how people navigate those fields? How does someone in the group of Mormon polygamous, for example, deal with the idea that they are lifting tactics and methods for social change from groups that their religious doctrine would marginalize further?

Abigail Saguy ([23:07](#)):

Right. Yeah. So it plays out differently for each of these groups due two very different kinds of relationships and connections with the LGBTQ community. So in some cases, like with the fat acceptance activists and the undocumented immigrant youth movement, people have overlapping membership. So the first people, as I said, the first people to talk about coming out were both fat and lesbian, right?

Abigail Saguy ([23:36](#)):

So it's not quite that they're using something from another group. The lesbian and fat experience is interwoven and inseparable. And this is intersectionality, right? And likewise with the undocumented immigrant youth movement. But you're right, that it does play out differently among the Mormon fundamentalist polygamists. And this is one of the reasons why I kind of liked, and there was some choice in terms of the cases, because there were many other cases that were proposed to me and that I could have explored. But these cases are really useful in terms of having certain things in common and having certain things that are different, which allows for theory building. So the Mormon fundamentalist polygamists, unlike the fat acceptance activists and the undocumented immigrant youth, have had really virtually no overlapping membership. This is not a story of intersectionality. You would be hard pressed to find people who identify both as Mormon fundamentalist polygamists and as lesbian or gay, right?

Anthony Comegna ([24:46](#)):

Maybe it's their devotion to the American constitutional system. Their Americanness is the identity branch that connects the three.

Abigail Saguy ([24:56](#)):

Certainly their Americanness is something that they do put forth. We're American and we deserve rights. And of course that does exclude some people, right? Like the undocumented. But that is an argument that they do use. So what's happened there is really other people, well including for instance the late justice Antonin Scalia. Scalia had made connections between marriage equality or same sex

marriage and polygamy. That Scalia says in his dissent, if we legalize same sex marriage, it's going to be a slippery slope to polygamy.

Abigail Saguy ([25:43](#)):

Well, these comments are not lost on people who support polygamy, who support plural marriage families. So there's a realization that these two things have been linked and that if we can move beyond marriage is between one man and one woman period, which we have now. That is going to be good for other kinds of families.

Abigail Saguy ([26:11](#)):

Other kinds of families where it's not just one man and one woman. And so that has been increasingly a legal tactic within this community. And in terms of decriminalizing polygamy and who knows, maybe in the future actually legalizing it, we'll see. So it's been a strategic, both legal and political thing to do. The people that Nicole Idearaga interviewed for this book, some of them openly said, "Listen, I don't like homosexuality. I don't like this. I think it's a sin. But I think that the work that the LGBTQ movement is doing, and particularly the same sex marriage or marriage equality movement is doing, it will really help us out."

Abigail Saguy ([27:11](#)):

And so for that, they expressed support for same sex marriage and marriage equality. And even some, not all of them because many of them remain homophobic, but some of them expressed broader support for some of the things including for same sex marriage but also some of the other issues that people in the LGBTQ rights movement are advocating for. So seeing that you have something in common, you have some common cause, who knows, maybe to some extent can also create more empathy and bring down barriers.

Anthony Comegna ([27:57](#)):

It also strikes me, I'm a historian of a Jacksonian America and I have interest in utopian reform movements and all the little communes and intentional communities and stuff that sprang up in that period. And it makes me think that each one of these movements also has a little bit of utopianism running through it. And the LGBTQ community wants sexual freedom and autonomy for individuals. The fat acceptance community wants the autonomy of having whatever sort of body that you want, sort of transhumanist in a way too. That there's not a single type of human being that we should all try to emulate. And having many different types of bodies is fine. The undocumented movement, the ideal utopia there I think is a world without borders and whatever that might mean for governments, I don't know, but the right thing is, is to not clam people up into one part of the globe just because they were born there.

Anthony Comegna ([29:08](#)):

The Mormon polygamists want the same sorts of things that they wanted back in the 1840s and 50s, right? And I think the Me Too movement again, it's about sort of radical self security and the ability to live without all the historical harms of patriarchy. And boy, that's a tall order of utopian thinking too, running throughout all of these. And I think that there's so much to these, I'm very curious to know what were the other potential topics? What other groups do you think have their own coming out stories and what progress do you feel like you've made on coming to a general theory of the point or purpose or generation of a coming out experience?

Abigail Saguy ([30:00](#)):

Right. I mean there's just so many, and I think your listeners probably have their own experiences. Goffman, in his classic book *Stigma* talks about the fact that none of us are free from stigma. We all have some kind of stigma that we manage in different ways. And so I think coming out is really refusing to apologize, refusing to hide, but acknowledging something about yourself that is stigmatized. I think what's different, one of the things that the cases in the book have in common that is different than some other cases we might think of, is that they're a part of a social movement. So that doesn't always happen. So some of the other cases that people, a friend of mine commented about being atheist-

Anthony Comegna ([31:05](#)):

Yes. That-

Abigail Saguy ([31:06](#)):

Maybe 30%, I mean that's a big proportion of the US population is atheist. And yet this is stigmatized right? In a nation that puts a lot of emphasis on religion. So, how do people come out as atheist? I think in this particular political climate that has become so polarized coming out as Republican, if your friends are all Democrat or vice versa is probably a difficult thing to navigate, navigating that difference.

Abigail Saguy ([31:44](#)):

One of the instances that I'm interested and that I discuss a bit in the conclusion, which is a negative case of coming out, a situation when people are not coming out and I think it's had really important implications and can even sort of serve as the inverse to what we've been seeing with the LGBTQ community is people coming out as having had an abortion. This is a very common experience. One in four women, I think by the age of 49 had or will have an abortion, and yet people never talk about it. It remains hidden, shameful, something that people do not discuss. And coincidentally, I think not our attitudes about abortion have really not budged since the 1970s. So when people aren't talking about their experiences, then that's a missed opportunity for greater understanding of those experiences.

Anthony Comegna ([32:54](#)):

Well, there you have it folks. Another powerful methodological tool in our kit and a wide open field for new research agendas. Intersectionality and individualism are two sides of the same social science coin, and there's no reason we should give up on one to focus entirely on the other. They're really one in the same. And so we offer a huge *Ideas in Progress* thank you to professor Saguy, and our best to all of you out there working on topics like this, keep the progress coming.