



Out

Exploring the Emotional Landscape of Teenage Sexuality

LESLIE H. SHERLIN, PhD

Artist Statement

In my role as a mental health provider, I've had the privilege of guiding numerous adolescents through the intricate journey of exploring their sexuality. This phase is rife with complexity and challenges, as societal pressures and stigmas often weigh heavily on their mental well-being.

This photography project, titled "Out: Exploring the Emotional Landscape of Teenage Sexuality," seeks to illuminate the emotional terrain that young individuals navigate while grappling with their own feelings, sharing them with others, and forging their identities. It draws inspiration from the candid stories of many young women I've had the honor of working with: stories marked by anxiety, depression, confusion, fear, courage, acceptance, and pride.

Through a lyrical documentary of photographs, I aim to chronicle the journey of a 14-year-old young woman, encapsulating her internal struggles and public triumphs. The project endeavors to convey the raw emotions and challenges inherent in this process, from initial confusion and anxiety to eventual acceptance and empowerment. It underscores the vital role of support and guidance from family and friends.

Above all, this project seeks to foster acceptance and inclusivity for all members of the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly young individuals embarking on this transformative phase. It advocates for a culture of non-judgment and empathy, envisioning a society that is more supportive and compassionate.

Witnessing the strength and resilience of these individuals has been profoundly rewarding. "Out: Exploring the Emotional Landscape of Teenage Sexuality" stands as a testament to the imperative of mental health support and the urgent need for broader acceptance and inclusivity within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Project Description

In my most heartfelt endeavor yet, "Out: Exploring the Emotional Landscape of Teenage Sexuality," I traverse the intimate and often unspoken paths of adolescent self-discovery, particularly within the LGBTQIA+ community. This body of work is a visual anthology that charts the poignant and sometimes harrowing emotional states of teenagers as they confront and embrace their sexual identities.

This project is the confluence of my life's two great passions: the intricate study of the human psyche and the evocative power of photography. The genre of fine art that best encapsulates my work is lyrical documentary portraiture, a fusion that allows for a narrative-driven exploration of the human condition through a compassionate lens. It's here, in the balance of light and shadow, expression and gesture, that I find the silent stories begging to be told.

The personal resonance of this project is profound. My two decades in the realm of psychology have afforded me the privilege of bearing witness to the complex emotional worlds of numerous adolescents. It's a journey that's not merely observed but intimately shared. I have sat with them, listened to their deepest fears, and celebrated their most personal victories. These experiences have not only shaped my professional life but have also sculpted the ethos with which I approach my photography.

Photographically, my involvement in this work extends far beyond the click of the shutter. I engage with these brave young souls, striving to create a space that is safe and respectful, where their stories can unfold naturally. The trust that is built allows for a deeper immersion into their experiences, enabling me to document not just the person before me, but the essence of their journey. Each photograph is a collaborative passage into their world, an attempt to capture the fleeting moments that together weave the fabric of their emerging identities.

Inspiration for "Out" has blossomed from a diverse garden of influences. The earnest vulnerability seen in the works of documentary greats such as Dorothea Lange, Stephen Shore, Andreas Gursky and Gordon Parks has long inspired me, while the psychological insights of Carl Jung and Viktor Frankl have deepened my understanding of the human experience. Yet, the most profound inspiration comes from the teenagers themselves: their resilience, their willingness to stand in their truth, and the transformative moments of self-acceptance they have shared with me.

The intended audience for "Out" spans beyond those directly represented in the images. I am speaking to every teenager who feels unseen, to the parents and guardians who may or may not understand the depths of their child's inner world, and to educators and policymakers who have the power to shape supportive environments. Additionally, my peers in the artistic and psychological communities are an audience, for whom the intersection of mental health and visual art can provoke thoughtful discourse and inspire change.

With each frame of "Out," I seek to impart an immersive narrative, one that's steeped in the raw and genuine experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth. These images are intended to function as both a mirror and a window: a mirror in which teenagers might see their own struggles and triumphs reflected, and a window through which others can gain insight into the lives of these courageous young individuals.

This project is my call to action. It is an invitation for all of us to partake in a collective leap towards a more inclusive and empathetic society. It is a reminder that while the journey towards self-acceptance can be fraught with challenges, the strength and resilience inherent in these young people are qualities that can inspire us all.

But "Out" is more than a photographic series; it is an ongoing conversation about the very fabric of our societal norms. Through this project, I hope to dismantle the stigmas surrounding teenage sexuality, particularly within the LGBTQIA+ community. Each photograph serves as an advocacy tool, fighting for a future where no young person feels ostracized for who they are or whom they love.

The visceral emotions captured in these images (the anxiety, the confusion, the tentative steps toward self-acknowledgement) are as multifaceted as they are universal. There's a universality to these experiences that transcends the specific struggles of LGBTQIA+ youth. In their faces, in their gestures, I see the echoes of every person's struggle to find and affirm their identity in a world that often seems indifferent or even hostile to their truth.

The title "Out" itself carries a dual meaning: it speaks to the act of coming out, a pivotal moment in many LGBTQIA+ youths' lives, and it also alludes to the broader concept of being outside: outside norms, outside acceptance, outside understanding. Through my lens, I strive to bring these outside stories to the center, to give them the prominence and dignity they so richly deserve.

My intention is for the audience to walk away with a heightened sense of empathy and a deeper understanding of the internal lives of these adolescents. I hope to provoke thought, to stir emotion, and to kindle a conversation that might lead to tangible, positive change in the way society perceives and supports its youth.

Through "Out," I invite viewers to join me on a transformative journey, a journey that urges us to reflect on the intricate threads that interweave our emotional landscapes with the broader human experience. Together, through the power of visual storytelling, we can foster a world where every young person's exploration of their identity is met with open arms and open hearts.

Images

1. Longing	03/19/23
2. Hiding	02/19/23
3. Hurting	03/05/23
4. Seeking	03/05/23
5. Cluttering	07/09/23
6. Confining	05/07/23
7. Searching	05/07/23
8. Contemplating	04/09/23
9. Confronting	04/09/23
10. Accepting	07/15/23
11. Embracing	05/07/23
12. Building	06/25/23
13. Embarking	04/23/23
14. Transforming	07/28/23
15. Discovering	07/15/23
16. Reconciling	07/28/23
17. Cleansing	07/29/23
18. Attaching	04/16/23
19. Advocating	06/25/23
20. Signifying	07/16/23



Longing

03/19/23



Hiding

02/19/23



Hurting

03/05/23



Seeking

03/05/23



Cluttering

07/09/23



Confining

05/07/23



Searching

05/07/23



Contemplating

04/09/23



Confronting

04/09/23



Accepting

07/15/23



Embracing

05/07/23



Building

06/25/23



Embarking

04/23/23



Transforming

07/28/23



Discovering

07/15/23



Reconciling

07/28/23



Cleansing

07/29/23



Attaching

04/16/23



Advocating

06/25/23



Signifying

07/16/23