SOUTH AFRICAN GAY AND LESBIAN YOUTH COMING OUT TO THEIR FAMILIES: ANALYSING VARIOUS DECISION-MAKING PATHWAYS AND OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses specifically on the various decision-making pathways and outcomes for gay and lesbian youth coming out (disclosing their homosexuality) to their parents and other family members. It comprises one facet of a larger, three-year phenomenological study (1997-2000) focussing on the coming out process of gay and lesbian youth in post-Apartheid South Africa. A non-probability sample of eighteen young people, aged between 16 and 21 years, were interviewed regarding their coming out experiences. Their experiences are analysed with regards to achieving significant milestones in their homosexual identity formation and development. Six participants had decided to postpone their coming out to their parents until a later stage in their developmental process. They provided numerous reasons for this postponement, namely: to protect their parents, to maintain family equilibrium, fear of rejection, lack of independence, potential negative consequences, religion, parental homophobia and non-acceptance of alternative lifestyles. Implications for child and youth care workers are also considered.

KEY WORDS: gay and lesbian youth, South Africa, identity formation, family, coming out, decision-making, child and youth care.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is oftentimes a period of significant turmoil and conflict, heightened sexual and emotional development, as well as a time when important decisions regarding individuation and identity are formulated and negotiated. This developmental pathway is perhaps even more treacherous and potentially more burdensome for sexual minority youth. For gay and lesbian youth, this period of turmoil may be intensified by having to deal with the social and practical effects of having a socially stigmatized identity (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). Interestingly, although, to a certain extent, society seems to value and encourage the individuation process that adolescents undertake, society also delineates clear boundaries for what is considered "normal" and "acceptable" behaviour (Blumenfeld, 1992).

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This is perhaps even more salient when considering the life trajectories of gay and lesbian youth coming out in a constantly transforming, post-apartheid South Africa. Society often views homosexuality as a "lifestyle" outside of the boundaries of acceptability, which leaves many gay and lesbian youth feeling marginalized and with limited social support (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). Thus, although it may be developmentally crucial for adolescents to receive support from common or natural social networks such as family members, gay youth may experience the opposite: rejection by their parents and other close relatives (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hammelman, 1993; Remafedi, 1994; Armesto, 2001).

Given such a backdrop this paper will report on one aspect (gay and lesbian youth coming out to their parents and family members) of a qualitative study that was conducted in South Africa over a three-year period (1997 – 2000). The goal of the study was to explore the coming out process of a sample of South African gay and lesbian youth. Furthermore, it provided these adolescents with an opportunity to articulate their coming out narratives. The majority of available research regarding the coming out process of young people has relied on adult retrospectives. Therefore, although young gays and lesbians, especially those in the early stages of coming out, typically prove difficult to access, it is important to allow for their expression of experiences and feelings (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001). Further justification for this investigation is supported by Savin-Williams (1998) who recommends a need for further study in light of strong evidence linking parental rejection of sexual minority youth to higher prevalence of psychosocial and health risks and greater acting-out behaviour.

Kus (1985) defines coming out as "that process by which a gay or lesbian person identifies themselves as homosexual, changes any previously held negative notions of gays, lesbians or homosexuality in general, accepts being homosexual as a positive stage of being, and acts on the assumption that being gay or lesbian is a positive stage of being" (p. 2). Hetrick and Martin (1987) advise that, although some gay and lesbian youth are more effective than others in managing stress, all must be evaluated in their individual context. It is important to consider that the young South African people in this study have spent the majority of their lives under a repressive system which did not support their homosexual status.

The history of South Africa has been based on an unjust and inhumane apartheid system, which was fraught with prejudice, hatred, intolerance and oppression. Owing to these policies of the previous National Party Government, substantial majorities of the population were denied the opportunity to develop to their full potential. This is also true of gay and lesbian youth, many of whom were not only discriminated against because of their race but also discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. Today, South Africa has a new constitution which protects citizens from the policies of the past and guarantees rights and freedom

from discrimination, including discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation (The Constitution Act 108 of 1996; NCGLE Draft submission, 1997).

Other disadvantaged groups, such as black South Africans and women, have had their human rights upheld and legal discrimination against them removed. However, despite these changes, social, legal, and religious discrimination against homosexuals, adult and youth alike, still continues (NCGLE Draft submission, 1997). Therefore, the question of how gay and lesbian youth in South Africa cope with these contextual factors in negotiating the coming out process to their parents and other family members needs to be considered. The importance of being sufficiently sensitive to the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity formation occurs is well illustrated in the literature (Boxer & Cohler, 1989; Cox & Gallois; 1996; Eliason, 1996).

How the homosexual adolescent copes in a homophobic environment provides some insight into the developmental process of coming out. Much of the literature in the area describes the adolescent as maintaining a façade that eventually takes its toll on the youth (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Remafedi, 1990; Telljohann & Price; 1993). In spite of prejudice and stigmatisation, South African gay and lesbian youth have demonstrated tremendous resilience. This has been borne out in popular magazines focusing on gay and lesbian lifestyles, for example, *Exit, Outright,* and *Gay South Africa.* The following two examples serve to illustrate this point. An article in the *Outright* magazine by Rose (1996) focussed on members of the lesbian and gay community "who are strong enough to say their say" (p. 32). Rose referred to Ross Hopkins, aged 17, saying that he is "surely going to be one of the great leaders of tomorrow. He is a proud gay youth who is so sure of himself that he has acknowledged his homosexuality and come out to his entire circle of school friends and to his family" (p. 32). Ross (cited in Rose, 1996) expressed his resilience in these words: "Sure, there have been some tough times, especially with people my own age and in this small community, but nothing that cannot be overcome" (p. 32).

In an article in Outright magazine, Van der Walt (1997) focused on positive gay role models. He covered a feature on Bevan Veenendaal, aged 17, who has come out. Based on Bevan's coming out, Van der Walt (1997) writes:

> Each individual knows when it is time to tell their friends and family that they are gay and for this 17-year-old it came after he tried to kill himself. This may make him sound weak, and even unsuitable to feature in an article on teenage gay role models. Far from it. Today he is confident and comfortable with being gay, has no problem sharing his coming out story, and has some wise words for those who are yet to cross the Rubicon. (p. 17)

This paper acknowledges that the coming out process should not be viewed as a linear progression but rather a cyclical process. This view is supported by Weinberg (1984) who states that "stages are not necessarily experienced in ways researchers (and even their respondents) claim. They are not invariant; they have no clearly discernible beginning or end, and they are culture bound." (p.78).

This paper will endeavor to capture and articulate both their decision-making processes as well as their various pathways of coming out to their parents. This will hopefully enable child and youth care workers and related mental health practitioners to discover which factors enable these young people to demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity—and to disclose their homosexual orientation. It is important to note that the findings are drawn exclusively from interviews with South African gay and lesbian adolescents, and thus this paper only reflects their viewpoint, perceptions, and experiences within their family contexts.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling Procedures

Due to the marginalised and invisible nature of this youth cohort, participants were difficult to access. Therefore the non-probability sampling methods of purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling were used as they maximised opportunities for accessing a mostly-hidden population. A well-known limitation of non-probability sampling methods is that they limit generalisability. However, as the primary aim of qualitative research is not generalisability but rather in-depth description of results, these methods were deemed appropriate for this study.

The criteria for inclusion of gay and lesbian youth were as follows: (a) self-identification as gay or lesbian; (b) aged between 16 – 21 years; and (c) participants may be attending high school, engaged in tertiary education, employed or unemployed. These criteria were set as a means of enhancing the probability that the participants would be able to comment meaningfully on their coming out process. Specifically, the age criteria ensured that data would refer to relatively recent coming out experiences, and therefore not rely on aged retrospective commentaries. Although, as non-probability sampling methods were employed, the sample could not be considered random or truly reflective, the researchers, nonetheless, attempted to access a broad sample of participants in an attempt to reflect the diverse cultures and contexts of South African society. The sample characteristics are as follows.

Ethnicity: In this study, the ethnic distribution consisted of Black (n = 5), White (n = 9), Coloured (n = 2), and Indian (n = 2). This was not an attempt to gain a representative sample but rather to include gay and lesbian youth from the mosaic of racial groups that comprise South African society. The researchers wished to obtain participants from a variety of ethnic and cultural groups so as to allow for stereotypes and myths, idiosyncratic to varying groups, to emerge.

Age: All participants were aged between 16 and 21 years. The distribution was as follows: 16 –17 years (n = 2), 18 – 19 years (n = 8), and 20 – 21 years (n = 8).

Gender: As already mentioned, the participants were difficult to access. We would ideally have liked to ensure an equal number of male and female participants. Lesbian young people proved especially difficult to access, thus resulting in a disproportionate number of males (n = 14) as compared to females (n = 4). In conjunction with the gay and lesbian persons who served as gatekeepers, we made a concerted effort to try and include more females in the investigation.

Education: All of the participants had actively attended high school post-1996 (i.e., after the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation in South Africa). Each participant had attended a different high school (N = 18), and these were as diverse as the sample of gay and lesbian youth themselves. Schools included those delimited on racial criteria (e.g., "all black" and "all-white") as well as racially integrated schools. Contexts ranged across the major cities in South Africa, from urban to rural, and included young people from higher, middle, and lower socio-economic status. All of the participants were fluent in English, although for some, this was their second language. The reader should be aware of this as, when reading direct quotes recorded in the results, it is evident from sentence structure and language usage, that a number of participants were second language English speakers.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview approach was used, with the researcher basing interviews around the central issue of "the coming out story." The grand tour question consisted of, "Please share with me in as much detail as possible your experience of coming out." All interviews were taped and verbatim transcripts produced. These were scrutinised reflexively by both the interviewer and a colleague trained in counselling skills and qualitative methodology. This was undertaken to ensure that any interviews that were even remotely leading were not included in the central data set. This reflexivity was essential in order to ensure that the emergent data was true to the experiences of the participants.

Data analysis was undertaken by both the interviewer and a trained independent coder. Employing Tesch's (1990) eight-step model of content analysis, the data was systematically segmented into categories and sub-categories, which formed the basis of the meaning of coming out for South Africa's gay and lesbian youth. Content analysis is an iterative process that is typically ceased only when theoretical saturation has been reached. This investigation began with transcripts from 11 gay and lesbian participants. To ensure theoretical saturation, additional participants were systematically added, resulting in a total of 18 participants.

To facilitate bracketing in the qualitative process, a literature audit was conducted only after the data analysis process had been completed.

This means that information emerging from the participants was considered in the light of other research in the field in order to ascertain similarities and differences, and to identify any unique findings that may have emanated from the study data. Due to the extensive scope of the emergent data, it is not viable to discuss all the results in a single paper. The focus of the current paper is, therefore, on one sub-category (i.e., decision making processes of coming out to parents and family members) of one of the central themes (i.e., developing a stage theory of the coming out process).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the research participants' accounts of their coming out experience, it would seem that they decide to cross specific coming out hurdles before engaging in decision-making about disclosing their orientation to their parents. Isaacs and McKendrick (1992) refer to this phase as their fourth stage, *Beginning of Identity Achievement*. None of the participants in this study reported coming out to their parents as their first coming out experience. It would seem that they felt the need to gain prior experience in the nature and process (coming out to self, friends, partners, the lesbian and gay community) before they decided to venture into the more treacherous territory of coming out to parents. More specifically, twelve of the participants had come out to their parents and six had decided to withhold this part of their disclosure to a later stage. This phase of the coming out will therefore be discussed in two distinct sections: those participants who have, and those who have not, disclosed to their parents. The reason for this is that different dynamics, processes, experiences, and decision-making pathways were reported in each phase. For purposes of this discussion, note that gay participant refers to male participants and lesbian participant refers to female participants.

Those Who Have Come Out to Parents.

The 12 participants who have come out to their parents reported that disclosing their sexual orientation to their parents was the most painful and, at the same time, the most significant step in their coming out process. One male participant commented that: *"They made me suffer in every way that they can. And they still do it. Until I conform."* As MacDonald (1984) explains, for many gay and lesbian youths, the most difficult decision to make after recognising, and then accepting to some degree, their non-traditional sexual orientation is to reveal to their parents that they will not be fulfilling the heterosexual dreams of the parents.

On average, most of the participants in this study mentioned coming out to their parents during their middle to later adolescent years. They tended to wait until they were nearing the end of their high school careers and/or beginning to embark upon their university lives. The average range of coming out to parents was between 17 and 19 years. Therefore, one can deduce from the study that there is usually quite a considerable

length of time between first homosexual self-realisation (13.2 years), first sexual experience (14.1 years), coming out to a friend or partner (16-18 years) and deciding to come out to one's parents (17-19 years). Participants spoke about the need to feel a greater sense of independence (emotional, psychological, or financial) before they could contemplate disclosing to their parents.

This notion of independence needs to be placed in the unique context of contemporary South Africa. At the time of this study, the independent transition from high school to tertiary education was still, in part at least, the privilege of the white middle classes. Therefore, many of the black participants in the study did not have the same "luxury of independence" as their white peers, and, as a result they tended to remain within the family home and within the homophobic confines of their township communities. Due to the aforementioned community constraints, coupled with their disadvantaged financial status, in spite of being a "new South Africa", many black youths do not usually have this well-defined transition to independence. Thus, the difficulty in obtaining such independence for black gay and lesbian adolescents is oftentimes compounded by a fear of rejection by their parents and their strong kinship community. The result of this has a significant impact on which coming out pathway they tend to chose—to come out to their parents (and community) or to delay their coming out until a later stage in their developmental processes.

The working through of self-definition is usually a tumultuous personal process that is hidden from one's family and, later on, is supported by the gay/lesbian friendship network (Berzon, 1979; Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1981; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Minton & McDonald, 1983/1984; Troiden, 1989; Weinberg, 1978). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons consider their friends to be more frequent and important social support providers than their families (Kadushin, 1996; Kurdek, 1988). Gerstel, Feraios and Herdt (1989) confirm this finding in referring to the fact that adolescents are still dependent upon their parents for emotional and financial support. Fears of coming out to family reveal internal fears of emotional rejection, as well as external threats of being thrown out of the home, being forced into psychotherapy, or even being physically abused. Aside from these fears, though, many teenagers who feel that their parents would never harm them, struggle with guilt because they fear disappointing their parents' hopes and projected plans for them.

Eleven of the twelve participants disclosed first to their mothers in the process of coming out to their parents. In fact, only three participants reported disclosing to their fathers. This tendency is supported in the literature. In general, one is more likely to come out to the mother than to the father and other family members (Cramer, 1985; Remafedi, 1987). For example, in Remafedi's (1987) sample of 29 bisexual and gay teenagers, 62% were out to their mothers, but only 34% were out to fathers. The participants in this study offered various reasons to explain the notion of first coming out to their mothers, such as: they lived in single-parent households; they

expected that their mother's response would be more positive than their father's; they had a closer relationship with their mothers; and they perceived their mothers to be more open-minded. As one male participant simply stated: "*I loved my mother and wanted her to know the real me. I don't like fathers.*"

Process of coming out to parents. Based on the information gathered from the interviews, this sample of gay and lesbian youth delineated four different ways in which coming out to parents occurred.

1. *Face-to-Face*

Four participants reported coming out to their parents in a face-to-face interaction.

2. *Letter*

Two participants reported disclosure in the form of writing a letter to their parents as a precursor to face-to-face interaction. One male participant shared the letter written to his mother in the following words: "*I thought that the one person who would really understand is my mother. So then I decided it was time and it was the right time to tell my mother that I was gay. Whether she understand it or not. It was entirely up to her. But I thought because I was her son she would respond to it better than if it came from outside. It was something I was thinking about for a long time. So I wrote a letter to my mother. Normally, in the morning we travel together to school, and then she goes to work. And then I told my mom that I wanted to give her a letter to read and that I was not trying to play around or trying to hurt her. I wanted her to know how I feel in my heart. I asked her to please not be too negative about it.*"

3. *Telephone communication*

One participant mentioned coming out to his mother in a telephone conversation. After this, his father phoned him back (10 minutes later) and the coming out was repeated with his father.

4. Confrontation leading to face-to-face

Five of the participants reported that, in response to being constantly confronted by their parents (usually the mother) regarding their homosexuality, they decided to stop hiding and disclose their orientation to their parents. One lesbian participant described her experience in this regard as follows: *And then toward the end of my matric year my mother picked it up and said, 'Are you gay?' And I said 'Yes'.*" Thus it seems that the most common strategy adopted by the participants in coming out to parents appears to be face-to-face interaction, either in response to parental confrontation or as a prior decision.

Yet again these various decision making processes and pathways need to be considered from the perspective of gay and lesbian youth coming out in a country that is engaged in significant socio-political transformation.

South Africa is in a constant cycle of change and radical cultural trans-
formation, and inherent in this process is fear, uncertainty, and trepidation.
An adolescent cohort disclosing their homosexuality during times of such
uncertainty perhaps feels this even more acutely. Gay and lesbian youths,
in this transformative cultural milieu, are forced to make significant and
life-altering decisions within the context of two disparate post- Apartheid
South African narratives: on the one hand, they remember and celebrate
Nelson Mandela embracing sexual orientation as a civil liberty in his 1994
presidential inauguration; on the other, they live within a transitional
society whose social institutions still uphold homophobic principles and
policies. Thus, their decision to come out to their parents (and community)
is both complex and culturally variable.

Those Who Have Not Come Out to Parents

Six of the eighteen participants reported that they had decided not to
come out to their parents at this stage in their lives. In the absence of
disclosure, they remain isolated and deprived of their families' support,
while disclosure may bring about a negation of their feelings, estrangement,
and rejection (Ben-Ari, 1995; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). In fact,
disclosure of sexual orientation to families has been repeatedly found to
be a risk factor for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth (Savin-Williams,
1998b). While it was difficult to ascertain what differentiating experiences
were involved in deciding to come out, or not to come out, to parents in
this study, the participants put forward the following reasons for not disclosing
their sexual orientation to their parents.

  1. They wanted to protect their parents from the emotional pain
  of knowing that their child was gay or lesbian. One lesbian par-
  ticipant said: *"You don't want to hurt your parents because you know
  maybe it is your fault, maybe it is their fault. You don't want them to be
  different towards you, because it is your parents."* There might also be
  anxiety that the news would hurt their parents (Cramer, 1985).

  2. The participants felt it was more important to maintain homeostasis
  within the family system, and that coming out to their parents
  could jeopardise this sense of family equilibrium. One male par-
  ticipant expressed it as follows: *"Very much so and I don't want to
  rock the boat at the moment because I have this equilibrium at the
  moment with both my folks."*

This sense of maintaining family homeostasis is reflected in broader
South African society. The conservative and, oftentimes, restrictive status
of our social institutions, such as religion and secondary education, coupled
with uncertainty in the post-apartheid era, has resulted in families main-
taining their homeostasis "at all costs". Black youth in this study refer-
enced the important role of kinship in their communities and the fact that
family and community are often so intrinsically interwoven. The two are
often viewed as a single social institution. Thus, their fear is further
entrenched by the fact that rejection by their parents carries the very real

consequence of being ostracized by the broader community. Thus, one can see that decision-making for historically disadvantaged gay and lesbian youth is oftentimes multi-layered and treacherous.

The participants expressed a very real fear of rejection by their family if they were to disclose their sexual orientation. While the participants did not explain exactly what form this parental rejection might take, the mere feeling of perceived rejection was sufficient to influence their decision not to disclose their orientation. As one lesbian participant remarked: *"Ja, you see my, my mother is very, she's very subtle but also very direct, very to the point, and uhm she has never really had anything against it, not that I can think of, she still dreams of me and you know of having a boyfriend you're gonna live here and your grandchild and blah de blah, she's got all these dreams."* The fear of rejection, the parents' sense of guilt, the parents' physical and mental pain, the child's sense of guilt, the fear of being forced to get "cured", protection of the family from crises, and not being certain about one's own sexual identity are the most frequently reported reasons why people do not to disclose their sexual preference to their parents (Ben-Ari, 1995). Mounting evidence indicates that parental rejection is a major health-risk factor for sexual minority youth (Hammelman, 1993; Hetrick, & Martin, 1987; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). In particular, studies report that gay and lesbian youth who are rejected by their parents experience an array of emotional, psychosocial, and health-related problems (see Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997).

Some participants said that they felt they had not received a high enough level of independence from their parents to risk the potential costs of coming out. This sense of lack of independence was tied in with an extreme form of rejection in which participants reported that their parents could potentially ban them from the family home or refuse financial assistance for education. Adolescents are still dependent for emotional and financial support upon their parents. Fears of coming out to family reveal internal fears of emotional rejection, as well as external threats of being thrown out of the home, being forced into psychotherapy, or even being physically abused. Aside from these fears, though, many teenagers, who feel that their parents would never harm them, struggle with guilt because they fear to disappoint their parents' hopes and projected plans for them. Some adolescents thus avoid coming out to the very people society regards as their main source of advice and comfort (Gerstel, Feraios, & Herdt, 1989).

This normative adolescent desire for independence is often undermined in black South African communities as it is seen as negating the cultural underpinning of *ubuntu* (which means communal and black cultural solidarity). The notion of ubuntu was the cornerstone of the anti-Apartheid movement, and still permeates black culture in post Apartheid democratic South Africa. Thus, young people who are black and also identify as gay or lesbian have to negotiate their independent discovery of a homosexual identity within the social context of a broader culture that reinforces community (ubuntu) and places a disincentive on individuality and

"standing outside of their cultural heritage". Therefore, black gay and lesbian youth often feel as if they are "letting their parents down by being homosexual" as well as "disrespecting their cultural values and social mores".

In terms of decision-making criteria, it appears that these participants (as with those participants who had come out to their parents) underwent a process of "checking out" the potential negative consequences versus the possible rewards in coming out to their parents. This notion of negative consequences and positive rewards is mentioned in the literature. For example, gains and losses must be balanced because parents have the capacity and power to ostracize, reject, isolate, an even inflict violence (Muchmore & Hanson, 1982). Families are evolving systems and they may shift from an initial stress-inducing position, change their internalised heterosexist belief system, and devise ways of fighting social stigma. Empirical support for this view is provided by studies that showed that, following the initial crisis of disclosure, family relationships may improve, in many cases to a more positive relational level than that prior to exposure (Ben-Ari, 1995; Cramer & Roach, 1988; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998).

In five of these instances, participants stated that religion played a significant role in their decision-making process. They expressed sentiments that their parents would not be able to accept their homosexuality because of the the parents' particular religious beliefs and values. These participants felt that their parents' inability to reconcile homosexuality with religious tenets was in some part a reflection of the similar conflict they had themselves in attempting to reconcile these two systems. One male participant said: *"Mostly, I think she will respond in that way because of biblical and religious reasons. You see it is different for me now. The whole born again Christian piece, I am starting to now resent it. I resent what it represents and I resent what people say because of it."*

In this study, white Afrikaans-speaking participants also referenced the broader notion of community as influencing their coming out decision pathways. These processes are compounded by the powerful role of the church in the Afrikaans family. The paternalistic and homophobic doctrine of the NG Kerk (church), for example, places tremendous pressure on Afrikaans youth to maintain family homoeostasis by maintaining the silence of their "secret" and being forced to "stay in the closet". The parents of one of the participants, in response to their son's disclosure of his first same-sex partner, proclaimed, *"Hy is die seun van satan"* (which translates into "He is the son of Satan"). Thus, this Afrikaans gay teenager had to cope with his parents' view of his first meaningful gay sexual experience as being something evil and sick.

South Africa is still governed by a strong Christian, patriarchal ethos. Thus, familial rejection and the fear of being "kicked out of the family home" is a very real issue in decision-making. This fear is perhaps even more salient for gay and lesbian youth living in historically disadvantaged

communities in rural South Africa. Many black communities in South Africa still strongly uphold the belief that homosexuality is "un-African." Disclosure is more stressful in families with a strong emphasis on traditional values and who are usually perceived as being less accepting of same-gender orientation than less traditional families (Chan, 1989; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). Family salience is a factor that changes at different stages in the life cycle and in different social contexts. The saliency hypothesis is supported by the finding that the association between family relations and self-esteem is stronger among gay respondents who were raised in small towns (Savin-Williams, 1989a). Compared to urban centres, the familial and social environment in these places is more enmeshed, less accepting of same-gender orientation, and provides less alternative sources of social support (Elizur, 2001).

There are other factors that probably help to explain the nature of parents' reactions to having a homosexual child. For example, when parents find out that their child is homosexual, they are likely to judge their children's sexual orientation against cultural and personal standards of what is acceptable and unacceptable (Blumenfeld, 1992). Based on normative cultural beliefs about homosexuality, it is not surprising that gay and lesbian people are commonly judged negatively because their "lifestyle" defies moral "standards". As Hetrick and Martin (1987) eloquently stated, homosexuality is often viewed as a "sin" or a "crime against nature". (cited in Armesto, 2001).

This is even more prevalent in a South African society that is attempting to redefine its new national identity. Decades of oppression and abuse are not forgotten or erased from the national mindset. This cohort of sexual minority youth constantly had to negotiate coming out to their parents within their "communities in transition". The fact that homosexuality is embedded in the sexual orientation clause of the new South African constitution (1996) is a significant constitutional (and social) achievement. However, gay and lesbian youth coming out to their parents in post-apartheid South Africa is a very different reality. These teenagers have realised that there is a stark contrast between legal reformation and the reality of being a gay or lesbian teenager in this present socio-political climate and choosing to come out to family, friends, and communities. The reader is referred to Butler, Alpaslan, Strumpher, and Astbury (2003) who describe the multiple levels of homophobic gay and lesbian youth experience in South African secondary educational systems, in spite of the constitutional guarantees of equal protection.

Parental homophobia was another reason cited for not disclosing to parents. The participants reported that they were directly exposed to their parents making disparaging and homophobic statements, for example while watching television or in response to reading a newspaper article. One male participant said: *"And it's never felt comfortable for me to tell them ... I've always wanted to but recently the way my father acts and my mother acts. I will ... my mother's in denial, my father's just downright ... it's disgusting ...*

you know, my mother's like 'Ag, it's not there' you know, 'he's not gay' " The participants felt that these comments reinforced their decision to hide their sexuality and maintain their secret.

All six of the participants who had not come out to their parents expressed the belief that, although they had not made any formal disclosure, their parents in fact knew, or surmised, that they were gay or lesbian. One male participant explained: *"I told her I am gay, and then she says things like 'Are you just allergic to girls?' and she jokes with me nicely, so she knows. Yeah, but we don't even want to confront it. I don't think we want to actually say it, but she knows I'm gay."* In fact, a few participants reported that the next time their parents asked them: *"Are you gay/lesbian?"* they were going to respond in the affirmative. It would appear that, to some degree, these youth would deem it preferable if their parents "went first" in the dynamics of disclosure regarding their homosexuality. While numerous reasons were put forward by these six participants as to why they had decided not to come out to their families, they all stated that they had every intention of disclosing to their parents at some point in the future. They also said that coming out to their parents would be a significant milestone in their coming out process.

In terms of the various decision-making pathways, there did not appear to be significant gender differences in the way that gay and lesbian participants negotiated these processes. As stated previously, the participants tended to come out to the first person between the ages of 16 and 18. The gay participants tended to do this at the younger end of the age continuum (16-17 years), whereas the lesbian participants tended to embark upon their first coming out experience at the latter end of the continuum (17-18 years). The gay participants tended to gain access and come out to the lesbigay community while still pursuing their high school careers, whereas the lesbian participants in this sample reported accessing their community only once they had entered their post-high school lives. There did not appear to be any significant gender differences in terms of deciding whether or not to come out to their parents.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to time and resource limitations, and the overall scope of the study, family members were not interviewed. It was only possible at this juncture to obtain information from gay and lesbian youth. It is encouraging to note, however, that as a result of the recommendations from this study, an investigation (via semi-structured interviews and focus groups with family members) is now being conducted through the University of Port Elizabeth (South Africa) into the experiences of family members with gay and lesbian children. The sample was gender-biased in terms of having more male participants. Significant efforts were made to establish a more equitable gender distribution in the sample.

The researchers acknowledge that, due to the relatively small sample size (18), the data cannot be generalised to encompass the experiences of

all South African gay and lesbian youth coming out (or not coming out) to their families. This paper was intended to provide a "snapshot" of the experiences of this sample of sexual minority youths. Hopefully, this initial exploration will serve as a catalyst in developing a more rigorous investigation with a larger sample of gay and lesbian youths.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD AND YOUTH CARE PRACTICE

The findings from this study pose significant challenges to child and youth care workers in South Africa. Given that child and youth care workers often work at the interface between teenagers and their families, knowledge about the various decision-making processes and pathways which gay and lesbian youth negotiate in coming out to their parents would be beneficial. Of greatest concern, in a purely South African context, is the lack of attention historically granted this population of adolescents by the child and youth care field. This has only served to undermine the value of gay and lesbian teenagers and to maintain their silence and secrecy. It is imperative that child and youth care workers take the lead in removing the shroud of silence and empower gay and lesbian youth to develop positive and integrated homosexual identities.

At the time of the study, there was a sparse level of service provision for this adolescent cohort. For example, the Rainbow Project (in Cape Town) was providing a level of support for gay and lesbian youth in the townships (disadvantaged rural black and coloured areas). However, it is important that this work does not fall only within the remit of gay and lesbian serving agencies. Child and youth care workers, from all youth provision agencies, need to be aware of the unique needs of gay and lesbian youth coming out in their schools, communities, and social groups. Furthermore, child and youth care workers can play a critical role in supporting young people as they embark upon their process of homosexual self-disclosure, and ensure that gay and lesbian youth have the necessary understanding of the potential consequences of coming out to their parents and extended family members. This would require child and youth care workers to honestly assess their own levels of homophobia and heterosexism, without simply making the assumption that all young people are self-defined as heterosexual. It is this authentic exploration of one's own bias and prejudice (personal and professional) that results in effective anti-oppressive practice and ensures that gay and lesbian youth in South Africa receive the quality of care which they rightly deserve. Child and youth care workers also have the opportunity of developing guidelines for effective practice in this field of adolescent care and developing a multi-agency response in their service provision.

Given the central role that families, especially parents, play in the psycho-social development of adolescents, it would seem self-evident that these participants offered proposals to assist family members in integrating their child's homosexuality in normative family life. When trying

to find strategies to assist gay and lesbian youth in this stage of their development, it is always important to go "directly to the source" for answers. More specifically, this sample of South African sexual minority youth proposed numerous suggestions to support them and their parents in the coming out process. Child and youth care workers in South Africa are well-placed to take up this work and provide the appropriate level of support and guidance as sexual minority teenagers embark upon this pathway.

Support Groups

As with support groups for themselves, participants suggested that parents of homosexual teenagers should establish groups in which they could gain support and information from their shared experiences. One participant suggested this by saying: *"I think mothers of gays and lesbians should be integrated and make support groups for themselves. And go out into the community into the townships and educate other mothers who don't understand what gay really means. So that if anything like that happens to them like one of their kids is gay, they will know how to cope with it."*

Borhek (1988) expands upon this as it relates to parents of gay and lesbian children in that parents can reinforce new knowledge and find peer role models in support groups such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). It is recommended that service providers focus on developing PFLAG support groups in both urban and rural communities around South Africa. At the time of the study, PFLAG programmers did not exist in South Africa. It is recommended that child and youth care workers play a leadership role in assessing the need for such programmes, and, where relevant, develop such programmes in both urban and rural centers in South Africa.

Family Counseling

In relation to gaining access to counseling services for their personal needs, the participants also recommended that parents (and other family members) receive supportive counseling regarding their child's homosexuality. As one lesbian participant explained: *"Yes, it should be focused on parents as well."* A lot of trouble and pain can be avoided if parents are well-informed about homosexuality. The National Child and Youth Care Association of South Africa has embarked, over the last decade, on enhancing the professional identity of its field of practice. This has included a significant focus on continuing professional development for its workforce. Thus, child and youth care workers are now far better equipped and skilled to provide a more specialised level of services such as, for example, individual, group, and family counseling and support. The findings from this study demonstrate the critical need for child and youth care workers to provide knowledge and skills to both young people and their parents as they conjointly negotiate their children's coming out process.

Facilitating Dialogue and Communication

Participants also mentioned the importance of open communication as a means of facilitating dialogue between themselves and their parents. They reported, for example, that written communication was most effective during the early stages of coming out to parents, especially when the family situation was often emotionally overburdened. One lesbian participant explained: *"Yes. I wrote a lot to my mom during the first year of coming out and she would write to me. Like when it got too painful to talk about certain things we would write to each other. Like I would write things like 'What you said to me. You really hurt me and this is the way what you said made me feel.' I think there is one thing I would tell the youth and parents. Parents have to realise that as much as they are hurting that their gay kids are hurting just as much inside. I never realised how much pain my mother was in."* This is yet another area wherein child and youth care workers can play a role. Simply "being there" for both parents and the adolescent, while remaining impartial and unbiased, and providing a safe space for exploration of how both parties feel about the young person's self-disclosure, can be a critical first step in the healing process. Child and youth care workers can serve as effective conduits of open and effective communication between parents and their children and, rather than a constant "barrage of blaming", enable them to develop effective communication strategies that focus on resolution and movement.

It is imperative that South African child and youth care workers make a concerted effort in safeguarding the protection of all youth and, furthermore, gain a critical understanding of a previously hidden and neglected group of gay and lesbian youth (and the experiences of their families). The working through of gay identity appears to be a multi-process and multi-level venture that is linked to psychological adjustment. Since this link has also been found in previous research studies, there is solid support for the expectation that child and youth care practitioners should acquire a good understanding of these developmental trajectories and the cultural factors that affect them. This conclusion is underlined by the fact that many of the heterosexual providers who are working with gay and lesbian youth are not familiar with these issues and do not feel competent working with this clientele (Green, 2000; Hancock, 1995).

CONCLUSION

This sample of gay and lesbian youth has expressed various decision-making pathways in disclosing their homosexuality (or deciding not to come out) to their parents. The majority of this adolescent cohort have chosen to come out to their parents and have successfully negotiated this significant milestone in their homosexual formation and development. At the same time, numerous young people offered a diverse range of reasons that influenced their decision to postpone their disclosure to their family

members (protect their parents, maintain family homeostasis, fear of rejection, lack of independence, potential negative consequences, religion, parental homophobia, and non-acceptance of alternative lifestyles). Irrespective of which decision-making pathway South African gay and lesbian youth may choose, it is a road that needs to be considered carefully, with full knowledge of the potential outcomes, consequences, and risks.

These young people are coming of age in a new post-apartheid South Africa, amidst radical socio-political transformation, and embedded in the growing spirit of an "African Renaissance". While these changes are positive and constructive, careful thought needs to be given to South African sexual minority youth coming out in a family context that is in a state of flux and uncertainty. South African families are undergoing a process of reconfiguration and redefinition, and this could have a significant impact on the support (or lack thereof) that families may be able to give their adolescent children's coming out. Savin-Williams (1998a) suggests that, with indications of a changing social climate toward same-gender orientation, family support and/or acceptance may come to play a more substantial role in the future with respect to both identity formation and psychological adjustment.

Child and youth care practitioners working in the field of adolescent care in South Africa need to ensure that they support gay and lesbian youth in disclosing their homosexual status to family members. Intervention strategies should be developed alongside each young person, and within each unique family context. Those who are working at this crucial juncture need to consider the real life costs and benefits of disclosure within their clients' unique environmental niche. Clients who decide to go ahead with this process can be helped to shape an appropriate disclosure strategy (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Ben-Ari, 1995; Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). This cohort of South African youth needs to be equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge, and risk-assessment abilities before deciding to embark upon this pivotal part of their psycho-sexual-social development. Furthermore, child and youth care practitioners need to approach their work from two perspectives— support and enable both youth and their parents in negotiating during this time of uncertainty and familial redefinition. Finally, when gay and lesbian youths' perceived fears have been realised as a consequence of coming out to their parents, child and youth care and community workers need to provide the appropriate range of services to cope with this occurrence.

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