Social Dissonance as a Phase of the coming out process of South African gay and lesbian youth

Abstract

The experience of being young and gay or lesbian has been seriously neglected in multi-disciplinary adolescent research and service provision in South Africa. Thus, the researcher aimed to explore and describe the experience of coming out from the perspective of gay and lesbian youth. Following a pilot study with a grand tour question, a qualitative semi-structured interview approach was adopted. Due to the marginalised nature of the sample, a variety of non-purposive sampling techniques were utilised. The sample size consisted of 18 participants. The researcher followed Tesch's model of analysis, and included an independent coder, so as to ensure the trustworthiness of the obtained data. This paper provides insights into social dissonance as experienced by this minority youth group. Responses from participants resulted in the identification of various themes relating to social dissonance, namely: denigration, rejection and social isolation. The researcher was able to consider the impact of social dissonance on the coming out process for gay and lesbian youth, and its implications for social work practice.

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Social Dissonance as a Phase of the Coming Out Process for South African gay and lesbian youth

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Introduction

The experience of being young and gay has been seriously neglected in youth research, as well as in youth service provision in South Africa. The gay liberation movement and the protection for sexual orientation granted in the New South African Constitution (The Constitution Act 108 of 1996) has highlighted the acute needs of this disenfranchised sexual minority youth. In order to address this, a three year (1997-2000) study was conducted with a sample of South African gay and lesbian youth , aged 16 - 21 . The overall goal of the study was to phenomenologically explore and describe their coming out process, as well as contextualising it within a transforming and contemporary South Africa. Furthermore, the study aimed at providing gay and lesbian youth with an opportunity to articulate their coming out stories, and to describe the meanings and associations which they attribute to their developmental task of disclosing their homosexuality, or coming out.

Content analysis from the investigation revealed five central themes, namely: the emotions experienced by the participants and the subsequent coping strategies adopted in managing their emotions; a proposed theory of the stages of the coming out process; the support structures which facilitated this process; hindrance factors and multiple levels of homophobia; as well as recommendations suggested by the participants with regards to

strategies that would enable an easier transition through the developmental task of coming out. The focus of the current paper is therefore on one sub-category (i.e. feelings of social dissonance) of one of the central themes (i.e. emotions and metal health stressors experienced by gay and lesbian youth in their coming out process).

Within the analysis of internal dissonance, the participants' experiences of homophobia and internalised homophobia, will also be explored. Popularised by sociologist Weinberg (1972), homophobia originally meant "an irrational fear of homosexual persons" (p. 15). While the literature pertaining to the lives and experiences of gay and lesbian youth has reported on the emotions and coping strategies associated with the experience of being young and homosexual (Martin, 1982; Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Gonsiorek, 1988; Remafedi, 1986, 1988, 1990; Uribe & Harbeck, 1992; amongst others), there does not appear to be a systematic or organised presentation of these emotions. Thus, this paper explores the process undertaken in synthesising these emotions into a systematic taxonomy.

Festinger (1957) founded the theory of cognitive dissonance. The fundamental assumption of cognitive dissonance theory is that inconsistency among cognitive elements is unpleasant. In other words, when two cognitive elements have a dissonant relationship, negative psychological tension called cognitive dissonance is created. The greater the amount of cognitive dissonance one feels, the more motivated one is to get rid of the unpleasant inconsistency (Kahn, 1984). With this in mind, the process of developing a taxonomy of emotions for the gay and lesbian youth in this study was to view it from different levels, or layers, of dissonance experienced by the participants as they negotiate the various levels of coming out.

Herdt (1989) contends that the more sexually restrictive the culture, the later the age at which one will discover and accept one's own homosexuality. If the inverse of this hypothesis is used in a present day South African context, a tentative assumption can be made that this country's gay and lesbian youth are coming out at a far more frequent rate and at a younger age, given that local society has begun to transform itself into a more open, less restrictive, democratic, accepting culture which celebrates rather than negates individual diversity. In the light of these images of societal transformation, it is important to place this discussion within a framework of how, despite significant changes in contemporary South Africa, gay and lesbian youth are still faced with numerous challenges, affecting their everyday lives. It is also imperative that this discussion be placed within he context of human and civil rights, both internationally and specifically relating to South Africa.

In post-apartheid South Africa homophobic behaviours and attitudes are anti-constitutional, with sexual orientation considered a basic human right. When the new Republic of South Africa ratified its constitution, it became the first nation to incorporate sexual orientation in its anti-discrimination doctrines. Wentzel (2001) comments on this process as follows: "Having experienced unending abuses, the framers and the people agreed that they wanted their new country to be a nation of rights" (p. 19).

As will become evident throughout this paper, simply having sexual orientation protected within a nation's constitution does not necessarily mean that it is implemented. There is a stark difference between the protection of homosexual rights within the new constitution of South Africa, and the reality of everyday life for sexual minority youth. However, it is worth noting that South Africa, despite its oppressive and discriminatory history, have achieved more in terms of constitutional rights than the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights (promulgated in 1948). It was the intention that a study of this

nature would not only place the lives of gay and lesbian youth within the larger youth at risk population of South Africa, but would also offer a knowledge base from which to build a scientifically motivated intervention model for social workers and related mental health professionals.

Methodology

The three year study (1997-2000) adopted a qualitative paradigm in order to phenomenologically and contextually explore and describe the coming out process of South African gay and lesbian youth by means of semi-structured interviews, aided by an interview schedule. From these descriptions, the researcher developed patterns and relationships of meaning regarding the specific issues that are pertinent to the coming out process for gay and lesbian youth in present day South Africa. As a measure of ensuring trustworthiness and grounding the study in the phenomenon under investigation, a pilot study was conducted with a sample of eleven gay and lesbian youth, ages ranging between 18 and 22 years. The pilot study enabled the researcher to critically assess the research process and procedures, and as a result of this assessment, specific modifications were made to the main investigation. Thereafter, a main investigation was conducted with a sample of seven sexual minority youth, ages ranging between 16 and 21.

The same methodological procedures were conducted in both the pilot study and the main investigation, namely: Sampling procedures utilised were purposive and convenience, as well as snowball/chain-referent due to the hidden and invisible nature of this population. Theoretical saturation was adopted to establish the point at which themes had become repetitive, and that no new information was emerging from the interviews.

As a result of adopting these techniques, the study was able to obtain a sample of gay and lesbian youth, which was relatively reflective of the diverse mosaic of South African society. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and the use of an interview guide. The grand tour question asked each participant to describe his or her coming out stories in as much detail as possible. Tesch's (1990) model of data analysis was employed, and as a result of this content analysis the aforementioned five themes emerged from the data. Various measures were employed to increase the trustworthiness of this study: triangulation, peer examination, authority of the researcher, literature control/audit, interviewing skills and techniques, independent coder, code-recode procedure, as well as providing a dense description of the coming out process, which included direct quotations from the qualitative interviews with sexual minority youth. The following discussion will focus on one of the emergent themes, namely: social dissonance.

Results and Discussion

The following discussion will refer specifically to three forms of social dissonance as experienced by the participants, namely: feelings of denigration, rejection and isolation.

a)   Denigration

For the purpose of this discussion, denigration will be contextualised in terms of how society belittles homosexuals, attempts to break down and attack their self-concepts, and perpetuates the notion of gay and lesbian youth invisibility. The participants described feeling various dimensions of denigration: being humiliated, despised, criticised,

ridiculed, scorned, teased, and subjected to physical abuse. Specific reference to each of these dimensions will now be discussed.

- **Being humiliated**

The most commonly reported examples of humiliation were the use of derogatory name-calling, for example, *"moffie" or "faggot"*. It is interesting to note the impact that these incidents of humiliation had on gay and lesbian youth. Many of them reported avoiding situations or social contact in order to "*spare themselves the pain*", as one youth said. A disturbing finding was the number of or acts of humiliation committed by school teachers and school peers towards the participants.:*"And, okay, when I was like in Sub A, Sub B, normally you get the kids who are always picking on one child. Not one child, but usually the 'moffie' in the crowd. And normally they call you 'moffie', 'moffie,' because you don't want to play rugby."*

One male participant described how his teacher made gender inappropriate comments to him. He explained it as follows*: " Well we had this maths teacher and she was a real bitch. She would walk into the class in the morning and always pick on someone. And it was usually me. She would say, 'Good morning her Royal Highness.'"*

The prevalence of discrimination, humiliation and verbal abuse experienced by gay and lesbian teenagers is verified by Remafedi (1986), in a study with 29 gay youth, of whom 37% had been discriminated against in education, employment and housing. Furthermore, half of the assaults occurred on school property. In addition 55% reported regular verbal abuse from classmates. Gable (1997) refers to feelings of humiliation in that not only do homosexual youth experience discrimination and fear from home, church and the community; they are exposed to a subtler form of it at school.

- **Being despised**

The following experience described by a participant refers more to the anticipated rejection of being despised, than to the actual rejection itself. This perceived fear of being despised by his parents in response to coming out can be as emotionally draining to gay and lesbian youth as the act itself. *"Okay I do care very much about what they are going to say. That is why I am afraid of telling them, you know. It is not what I expect they are going to do, it is that I am afraid it may go the wrong way. That my mother won't understand. She will maybe despise me like that. I am still her son but you choose to be like that."*

- **Being ridiculed/scorned/teased**

In similar vein to being humiliated and despised, participants reported being ridiculed, scorned and teased in various settings. The most commonly cited context of this experience was high school settings, specifically the classroom. The following excerpts from the interviews with research participants will attest to this: *"That affected me a lot. It was becoming a big fat joke at school. Whenever I would pass by they would just laugh. And then whenever I walked into class they would look at me and start laughing. It was very terrible."* Another participant said*: "High school. Being criticised and mocked in school and that is really my downfall."*

Interestingly, one participant expressed how this constant feeling of being ridiculed can have a positive outcome. He explained that he no longer allowed people to ridicule him, and that has in turn facilitated his coming out. He explained*:

"I don't care now. I say what I want to say and act the way I want to. I come first and then people come after me. I do what I want to do. I create my own happiness

and now I don't allow people to ridicule me. People don't create my happiness. I

create my own happiness."

The prevalence of being ridiculed and teased is confirmed in the literature in statements that severely gender-atypical male children have been observed to experience a pervasive psychological disturbance (Coates and Person, 1985), and an abnormal amount of depression and social conflict resulting from peer rejection, isolation, and ridicule of their feminine behaviour. (Rosen et al., 1985)

- **Being criticised**

Participants also reported feelings of denigration in response to being criticised and called *"faggot"* in high school, for example: *"Well in high school I was in the closet and it was very hard. I was always criticised and always called "faggot."* The timid, secretive, suspicious, distrustful individual will hide any characteristic or quality that he feels will elicit criticism, derision, rejection, humiliation, and inferiority. (Gersham, 1983)

- **Physical abuse**

One participant volunteered information regarding experiencing denigration in the form of physical abuse in high school. Given that acts of violence, *per se*, were not the focus of this study, it is difficult to assess accurately if this was the only incident or simply the only reported incident of physical abuse. He shares his experience as follows:

"I remember in Standard Nine we were playing ... there was this Scripture Union

Team and we played touch rugby on the field and it was like play, play and then this

one guy came up and he actually tackled me. It was TOUCH rugby. And I couldn't

believe it. My jaw - I could just feel the ground ... And I was crying that whole

day."

Numerous studies on physical violence towards gay and lesbian youth have been cited in the literature. The following are just a few examples of such studies. Remafedi (1987) found that over half of his sample of gay male youths reported verbal abuse, and nearly one third had experienced physical attack. Nearly 40% of the male youths in a later study reported physical violence (Remafedi, Farrow, and Deisher, 1991). Physical attacks were reported by 41% of the lesbian and gay youth surveyed by Hunter (1990), with half of the attacks arising from a youth's homosexual orientation.

b) Rejection

Participants reported a strong sense of rejection, primarily from their peer networks and family systems. These feelings ranged from being distant and feeling like an outsider, to being made to feel unacceptable, avoided, excluded, ostracised and feeling disregarded by their peers.

- **Feeling distant**

The participants provided examples of feeling distant.

"I am so afraid that they know something about me. So I was like distancing myself from the whole family."

"And if I, if I would have been straight in my life my life would have been so much easier. Just blending in with every group. Not always been the outsider, not the outsider, but I was always in all the groups but there was always a touch of mine that was different from all the groups."

Plummer (1989) alludes to the experience of feeling distant in stating that gay youth have to grow up with all the negative imagery that surrounds homosexuality. For some

this initially means that the stereotype serves as a means of distancing oneself from being gay.

- **Feeling rejected**

One participant explained his experience of feeling rejected in terms of the possibility of his father disowning him if his homosexuality was disclosed. "*My mom. She also said that if your father ever finds out you know, he will disown you and stuff like that. That really annoyed me. It was like trying to scare me in a way I think. Like are you sure you are gay? If your father finds out he will take your car and allowance away from you. I am still dependent on my dad because he still supports me and my brother.*"

The literature refers to experiencing rejection by friends because knowledge of sexual orientation is a common source of stress. Remafedi (1987) found that 41% of a sample of gay male adolescents reported negative reactions from friends. D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993) reported that one third of their sample feared losing friends on disclosure, and 46% reported that they had in fact lost friends. Thus, those youths who are open about their sexual orientation must not only cope with difficult personal matters but also deal with the negative reactions of family and friends. According to Schneider (1991) the stressors experienced by lesbian and gay youth include aggression, rejection and alienation.

- **Feeling unaccepted**

Participants also expressed a feeling of unacceptability and noted the difficulty they experienced as a result of, for example, the churches' non-acceptance of homosexuality. One participant said*:*

"You are that way and it is difficult for people to accept that because they cannot accept that maybe the whole world is gay and now they are born straight. You know. It is like, for them, it is not a sin."

- **Feeling avoided / excluded / ostracised**

Participants reported feeling avoided, excluded and ostracised, and these experiences had a painful impact on their social interactions. Participants offered the following experiences to illustrate this feeling of being avoided or excluded.

"I felt that people were avoiding me and I could not understand why this was happening to me. Why are they avoiding me now all of a sudden? And then I realised that people are starting to suspect that I am gay."

"So I felt that if I told these people that I was gay that maybe I would be excluded from that process of growing up with them. They wouldn't want to play with me if I was gay. So I would have to mess up my whole life as a teenage boy. So I had to play with what society called masculine things and sports and things like that."

c) Isolation

Within this taxonomy of emotions participants experienced feelings of isolation and a lack of sense of belonging, which will now be discussed.

- **Feelings of isolation**

Erikson (in Santrock, 1993), states that the sixth developmental stage, intimacy versus isolation, which usually occurs from late teens to early 20's, is the stage in which individuals face the task of forming intimate relationships with others. Erikson (in Santrock, 1993) contends that if intimacy is not achieved isolation will result. A

participant in this study described difficulty in expressing and experiencing intimate friendships within their cultural construct during the initial stage of coming out because of the constant need to hide one's sexuality, as follows:

> *"Also it was a black school and black people are you know, still cannot believe that there is this thing being gay in our Black culture. I feel that white people are more open-minded people when it comes to being gay. They also discriminate but it is not like we discriminate in our culture, for Black people it is a very bad thing. They find it very hard. I know that if I came out in high school I would be isolated from everyone else. And I would also be expelled from school."*

According to Anderson (1987) gay adolescents, whether they have come out or continue to hide, experience much of the heterosocial and explicitly or implicitly homophobic aspects of adolescent life as extremely isolating. Hetrick and Martin (1987) also contend that isolation is a critical problem for these adolescents. Being denied access to accurate information regarding their same-sex orientation, they have little opportunity to learn about what it means to be gay, lesbian or bisexual. Negative misconceptions of homosexuality are continually presented to them and their non-gay peers. Martin and Hetrick (1988), in one of the few studies on the types of problems presented by self-identified gay and lesbian youth, found that the major reason for seeking services was a sense of extensive isolation – from family, social networks and peers.

- **No sense of belonging**

Many of the participants spoke about experiencing feelings of not belonging. Maslow's (1954, in Morris, 1996) hierarchy of needs speaks of the importance of

individuals acquiring a sense of belonging as they progress through the satisfaction of different needs. This is a critical component for gay and lesbian youth to successfully engage in their coming out process, or as Maslow has expressed it, to reach a point of self-actualisation.

The following quotations from participants illustrate the efforts they engage in, in order to achieve this coherent sense of belonging and just "to fit" in with their friends and peers.

"Yes. Just wanting to be happy. Just wanting to belong somewhere."

"I cannot be alone because then I think about all this horrible shit. So I have to be around people to distract me, not to distract me, but, like calm myself down and I start thinking about the Christianity story again and maybe get another perspective about it. So at that time in my life, say standard 8, 9, was a very depressing time in life. Especially when I was home alone."

Lewis (1984). refers to these feelings of not belonging as becoming "integrated into a negative self-identity, causing these adolescents to isolate themselves" (p. 464).

Implications for Social Work Practice

There are specific implications that can be drawn from this study for social work practitioners and related mental health workers. The social work profession needs to take a more active role in generating knowledge around social dissonance which allows for sensitivity to, and understanding of the uniqueness of the life experiences and needs of gay and lesbian youth. It is only through knowledge generation that effective social policies can be promulgated in addressing the way in which our societal attitudes and

prejudice negatively impact upon gay and lesbian youth. Social workers should commit their efforts in developing policies at the interface of every institution that interacts and impacts upon gay and lesbian teenagers. This paper has highlighted the multiple layers of difficulties gay and lesbian youth encounter as they interact and interface with their social environments. Because of its mission to enhance the social functioning of people, social work is particularly concerned with knowledge of factors that contribute to developmental difficulties. Knowledge of these factors, which commonly involve inadequate emotional resources, is essential to planning and implementing services for gay and lesbian youth.

Homophobia and the discrimination it produces permeates not only South African society, but all communities around the globe.. Homophobia cripples all people in the same way that racism hurts whites as well as blacks, and the way that anti-semitism can paralyse an entire society (as in Germany in the 1930s), (DeCrescenzo, 1984). It is critically important to contextualise these discussions regarding the implications for social work practise within the framework of a transforming and contemporary South Africa. The last decade has been marked as the rebirth of a democratic nation, celebrating diversity and breaking from the shackles of prejudice, discrimination, and intolerance, and embracing principles of inclusivity, tolerance, and mutual understanding. There is perhaps no greater example of social workers promoting social justice than in the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa. Subsequent to our transition to a democracy in 1994, social workers have continued to spearhead the struggle against racism, sexism, classism, poverty and children's rights, amongst others. However, the voice of social

workers in promoting the social justice of young gay and lesbian people in South Africa has been very quiet, to say the least.

Thus, an important focus area would be to explore and identify social work practitioners attitudes toward homosexuality, as well as exploring their own homophobia. It is important for social workers to honestly assess their own homophobic attitudes and heterosexist bias, and how this could impinge upon their service provision. Studies have assessed the attitudes and feelings of people in the helping professions toward homosexuality and homosexual persons (Casas, Brady & Poterotto, 1983; Davison & Wilson, 1973; DeCrescenzo, 1983/84; Garfinkle & Morin, 1978; Gartrell, Kraemer & Rodie, 1974; Wisniewiski & Toomey, 1987, amongst others). These studies have found a heterosexual bias in these persons' professional attitudes and homophobia in their personal feelings (Sears, 1992).

A follow up to exploring one's own homophobia, and developing a response to the social dissonance experienced by gay and lesbian youth, would be for social workers and educators to broaden this exploration to include examining social oppression, homophobia and discrimination inherent in various South African institutions, namely: religion, education, social welfare, health, and related governmental agencies. Furthermore, sensitivity and diversity training sessions could also be used as vehicle in discussing and exploring practitioners attitudes toward homosexuality in general, and more specifically, how their attitudes impact upon service rendering to their youth population consumer base. Sensitivity and diversity training has taken on greater

significance in Post-Apartheid South Africa, especially in terms of creating greater awareness and sensitivity towards issues of race and gender. Thus, this study advocates that these training methods would be effective in exploring the attitudes of practitioners toward sexual minority youth. This may well include a "train the trainer model." Thus, an additional benefit of education and training would be the fact that social workers could train other professionals by providing them with accurate and adequate information about homosexual adolescent issues. Thus social work practitioners could assist other mental health professionals in considering homosexual adolescent issues as a priority, as well as helping them to view homosexuality from a non-judgmental, non-pejorative perspective.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the prevalence and intensity of feelings associated with a sense of social dissonance as experienced by South African gay and lesbian youth in their coming out process. A systemic depiction of these processes is presented in Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The # demarcations refer to the compounding and dissonant relationship between each of these three social systems and how they impact negatively on the gay and lesbian youth's sense of self.

This paper has attempted to explore how social dissonance further impacts on the internal turmoil and conflict that these youth have to endure. The psychological tension is

compounded by the systematic and consistent denigration, rejection and isolation that gay and lesbian youth report being subjected to in their coming out.

Given that the participants experience significant levels of internal dissonance, the additional anxiety of being ridiculed, humiliated, and exposed to physical abuse and constant verbal harassment, results in a more pronounced form of what Martin and Hetrick (1988, p. 164) refer to as "ego-dystonic reactions", such as self-hate, and self-fulfilling negativism. The compounded association of being rejected, avoided, ignored, excluded, and ostracised serves to reinforce their feelings of dissonance and differentness. Furthermore, the fact that these youth feel that they have no sense of belonging and are viewed as unacceptable citizens of our society, results in a feeling of isolation and extends their social dissonance to the point of experiencing a sense of "My world finds me unacceptable, they reject and denigrate my sexuality, how can I possibly accept myself."

Owing to the conflict caused by the constant collision of these two psychological forces (internal and social dissonance) participants reported the employment of a variety of coping strategies and defence mechanisms in order to, in their own words, "survive their coming out." These coping management strategies will be the focus of future papers.

In conclusion this paper emphasises the fact that knowledge surrounding teenagers questioning their sexuality and coming out and disclosing a homosexual orientation is critical, and should serve as on *a priori modus operandi* in planning any strategic intervention with sexual minority youth. Dismissive responses from social workers, for

example, "you are too young to know that you are gay/lesbian", or "you are only going though a phase" or "you are just confused at the moment," will only serve to negate homosexual teenagers' authentic feelings of developing a homosexual orientation. It is hoped that this study will be able to provide social work and related helping professionals with a foundation knowledge base in order to gain deeper insight as to how gay and lesbian youth interact with their social environment. More specifically, the experiences of social dissonance (denigration, rejection, and isolation) of the coming out process as articulated in this study could provide practitioners with knowledge regarding the challenges and resources required by gay and lesbian youth at each stage of the disclosure process.

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Figure 1

<u>**Impact of social dissonance on sense of self**</u>