

**Over the rainbow: recommendations for service provision as voiced by post  
Apartheid South African gay and lesbian youth.**

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**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. The gay liberation movement, the protection of sexual orientation granted in South Africa's new constitution (Act 108, of 1996), and the consequent reality that teenagers currently identify as gay or lesbian at an earlier age, have highlighted the needs of this disenfranchised youth population. Thus, a qualitative study (1997-2000) was conducted to phenomenologically and contextually explore and describe their coming out experiences. The aim of this study was to provide gay and lesbian youth with an opportunity to articulate their coming out stories, and to describe the meanings and associations they ascribe to the developmental task of disclosing their homosexuality. This paper will reflect upon the experiences of a non-probability sample of eighteen South African gay and lesbian youth, aged between 16 and 21 years. Furthermore, it will consider the practice guidelines proposed by gay and lesbian youth themselves, regarding how child and youth care workers, social workers and other related mental health practitioners should approach this group of young people, to accompany them in the process of coming out. These strategies include work around peer support, zero tolerance for homophobia, access to accurate literature and information, supportive curriculum development, training child and youth care practitioners, township education re: homosexuality, human rights education, commitment from traditional social welfare agencies, and lobbying efforts, family support, amongst others.

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## **Introduction**

The following paper will report on recommendations proposed by the participants in this three-year study. It is important to emphasise this point. These recommendations were not proposed by the researcher or any professionals in the field. They were put forward directly by the participants in the study, which further serves to not only enhance the trustworthiness of the study, but also reinforcing the researchers goal of ensuring that the integrity of the research participants stories are maintained, and in no way compromised. This study is an account of their stories, their lives, their coming out, and their recommendations for change. 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 the 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.

In order to elicit any recommendations the participants might have wanted to propose, the researcher asked each participant to “think about anything that may have made his/her coming out process easier.” Given the depth and volume of the following proposals, one can see that the participants had given considerable thought to this issue throughout their coming out. It was imperative for the researcher to conduct a thorough content analysis and synthesise all the proposals (approximately 90 in total) into a manageable presentation of research findings. Thus, their suggestions and recommendations will be reported and discussed within the framework of the following focal areas: community services; secondary education; tertiary education; family; religion; communities; social work and related helping professions; social education and legal/constitutional concerns.

## **Methodology**

The settings in which the study was conducted was the Eastern Cape of South Africa (the cities of Alice, Grahamstown and Port Elizabeth), Western Cape (Cape Town), Kwazulu Natal (Durban) and Gauteng (Johannesburg and Pretoria). Due to difficulties in accessing this youth cohort for purposes of participating in the study, the researcher utilised the non-probability sampling methods of purposive, convenience and snowball sampling. These methods are appropriate for this study as the predominant aim of qualitative research is not generalisability, but rather in-depth description of information-rich data. The qualitative paradigm centres on elucidating the human story from within a natural setting, with few controlling variables, and is therefore less concerned with generalisability (Poggenpoel, 1998).

The criteria for inclusion of gay and lesbian youth were as follows: (a) each participant self-identified him/herself as gay or lesbian, that is each participant had to acknowledge his/her homosexual orientation; (b) young people were aged between the ages of 16 – 21 years; and (c) the study included gay and lesbian youth who were currently engaged in secondary or tertiary educational pursuits, out-of-school youth, as well as youth who were presently employed. A variety of participants were accessed in an attempt to reflect the diverse cultures of South Africa. The age range was delimited to ensure that this data comprised the voices of young people, and did not rely on aged retrospectives. Initially, transcripts were obtained from eleven gay and lesbian participants. Following data analysis, 7 additional interviews were conducted, in order to ensure theoretical saturation, thus resulting in a total sample of 18 participants.

Semi-structured interviews were utilised, with the researcher basing interviews around the central issue of 'the coming out story'. In order to ensure a non-leading approach, interviews were audio-taped and verbatim transcripts were scrutinised reflexively by the interviewer and a colleague trained in qualitative methodology. Tesch's (1990) model of content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data emerging from the study. The data was segmented into various categories, which formed the basis of the meaning of coming out for South Africa's gay and lesbian youth. Both the researcher and an independent coder conducted data analysis, and accruing of participants only ceased

once consensus was reached regarding theoretical saturation. In order to facilitate bracketing in the qualitative process, a literature audit was conducted after the data analysis process had been completed. This enabled the researcher to compare information emerging from the participants with 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.

## **Results and discussion**

This sample of South African gay and lesbian youth proposed the following services as a means of facilitating an easier transition through their coming out process.

### **Community services**

Participants suggested that community-based, peer support programmes be provided in the form of social interaction with homosexual and heterosexual youth, as well as more informal gay and lesbian youth social events: *“I think getting together more. Interacting more, with homosexual and heterosexual youth. That would broaden people’s minds”*.

The participants supported the establishment of gay and lesbian community youth/drop-in centres, offering resources (e.g., easily accessible literature), support, as well as leisure and social activities: *“I support resource programmes at a community level.”*; *“... specific gay and lesbian resource centre ... that’s the difference.”*. In terms of catering to the needs and challenges of out-of-school gay and lesbian youth, participants suggested the implementation of social networking, which would be driven by the various lesbigay communities: *“... if they’re not working, you know, and like at home, me and my colleagues in the Coalition, we came up with a plan that we should develop ... networking”*.

The majority of participants spoke about the issue of providing effective, more supportive counselling services for gay and lesbian youth in high schools, as they felt this would have made their coming out experiences easier: *“You are going to need some form of support. If you don’t have that, my God, I tell you, you are going to kill yourself”*. Phone-line services, providing supportive, same-sex orientation counselling services for marginalised and isolated gay and lesbian youth, were supported by participants. They verbalised their need for the phone-line service as follows: *“... this counselling line helps*

*... something based on people who are gay /... that's the problem, you know. You find that it's hard to go to a clinic where you know you are not accommodated, you know".*

It was recommended that community services incorporate job skills training for out-of-school and/or unemployed sexual minority youth: *"I think there should be a programme to help them realise their potential. It is important to teach these youth job skills and stuff like that."* A further suggestion was to provide access to youth-oriented lesbian information (e.g., popular magazines such as EXIT or Outright): *"... if they could just get access to role models, access to information, access to other gay friends they would be ok."*

### **Secondary education**

. South African youth spend 5 years in high school (roughly from ages 12/13 – 17/18), during which their psychosexual development can easily become marginalised if they experience same-sex attraction: *"when you are young you are not usually very sure of who you are and it is quite difficult .../I think we have to increase publicity about gay people and making it more accessible to gay youth."*

Participants stressed the need for professional cognisance of their feelings. Of fundamental importance to these young people was that teachers, counsellors and youth workers maintain confidentiality and anonymity as a tenet of their practice. Mental health workers and school guidance counsellors have the opportunity to make a substantial positive impact on the lives of teens who are uncertain about their sexual orientation simply by conveying the reality that orientation goes beyond sexual impulse or behaviour. For example, a confused adolescent may believe that a single sexual contact of any sort defines sexual identity. Appropriate counselling encourages the young person to consider the meaning of daydreams, affectional patterns, unexpressed physical attractions, and emotional responses in sorting through issues of sexual orientation. Remafedi (1990) remarks that offering these services to predominantly silent and invisible sexual minority youth is an enormous challenge. School counsellors are in the best position to address this group as they have access to the entire student body, and could offer a more hospitable environment for coming out (e.g., easier access to lesbian literature; policy development).

The participants proposed that lesbian and gay organisations join their efforts to a coalition of established and reputable non-governmental organisations, and thus provide a more eclectic range of educational services to high schools: *“I would say the people that want to get involved in this is to rather try and join up or form coalitions with people that are ... teaching a broader base of stuff”*. Participants purported that educators should include curricula regarding gay and lesbian issues, and organise speakers on the topic in high schools, so as to nurture an awareness of lesbian and gay issues. A participant forwarded the metaphor of gay counsellors addressing the school body as *“growing a seed in the students’ head.”*

Considering the numerous experiences of homophobia from school teachers and counsellors as highlighted by the participants, their recommendations for teacher/counsellor training on homosexuality and its impact on teenagers lives cannot be emphasised enough. Further to formal training, teachers / counsellors could be equipped through ongoing professional development in this field. Participants spoke about the urgent need to educate (or re-educate) teachers and school counsellors about diversity issues, including homosexuality. They specifically suggested training related to changing teachers’ homophobic attitudes and stereotypical perceptions, and thus transforming their responsiveness from a point of fear to a place of acceptance and support: *“This sounds horrible I know but what is happening is the teachers are scaring the children. And when you get to the point where that isn’t happening any more then I think you can actually make a change.*” Counselors should be aware of the need for their own continuing education and for continuous involvement with the issues of adolescent homosexuality. If the counselor will accept the sexual preference of his or her client without a hidden agenda to change that preference, the counselor will then be able to work with the adolescent homosexual as effectively as with any other student. (Powell, 1987). Participants also proposed that the National Government should demonstrate its commitment by sponsoring these teacher/counselor-training programmes: *“The government is spending so much money. I am sure they can take a million rand and use it to train teachers”*.

One participant, as a strategic plan that required implementation, articulated the positive impact of a “trickle down effect” from training teachers to educating learners. He

said: *“I think if you changed the teachers’ attitude hopefully it will rub off on the students in a positive way”*.

## **Family**

Participants voiced the central role played by families in the coming out process. More specifically, the participants put forward the following suggestions to support family members. Participants suggested that parents of homosexual teenagers should establish groups in which they could gain support and information from their shared experiences: *“I think mothers of gays and lesbians should be integrated and make support groups for themselves”*. Borhek (1988) comments that parents of gay and lesbian children can reinforce new knowledge and find peer role models in support groups such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Organisations such as PFLAG are presently non-existent in South Africa’s service provision matrix.

Participants recommended that parents (and other family members) receive supportive counselling regarding their child’s homosexuality. As one participant explained: *“Yes, it [counselling] should be focused on parents as well”*. A lot of trouble and pain can be avoided if parents are well informed about homosexuality. Kay (1997) has proposed the debunking of myths in assisting parents to gain a clearer understanding of their child’s homosexuality (e.g., alleviating guilt by acknowledging that sexual orientation is not dependent on parenting style, weak fathers, strong mothers, hormonal imbalances, etc.).

Participants also suggested the technique of written communication as a means of facilitating dialogue between themselves and their parents. They reported that written communication was most effective during the early stages of coming out to parents, especially when the family situation was often emotionally overburdened: *“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”*.

## **Communities**

Participants noted diverse ways in which various communities can become more involved in meeting the needs and challenges of gay and lesbian youth throughout their

coming out process. Participants felt that while the annual Gay Pride march was a positive factor in their coming out. However, they felt that the fact that it only occurred on an annual basis was an issue that should be addressed by the lesbigay community. It was suggested that similar social events be organised on a more consistent and regular basis for the sexual minority youth population, within the broader gay and lesbian community: *“There should be events that gay youth can go to every few months”*. Participants perceived the lesbigay community in South Africa as lacking integration, along both racial and gender lines. They proposed that the lesbigay community make concerted efforts to develop a culture of diversity and acceptance within their own communities, thus forming a more integrated culture of gays and lesbians in South Africa: *“ ... there are [sic] fairly good racial mix but definitely not representative, it’s definitely more white.”*; *“I think that gay people as a whole should try and be integrated as well”*. It was further suggested that gay and lesbian organisations and communities should become involved in addressing stereotypes and discrimination within the gay community, especially in historically disadvantaged communities. One black male participant described his experience of discrimination from in his own community, thus expressing the need for township (a term deriving from South Africa under apartheid. It refers to poor black community settings/dwellings) education about homosexuality. *“I think gay people themselves are disintegrated. / ...It is like in our black community there is discrimination./ ... I think we are still racially divided. / ...I have never been in a gay bar where I have met all people from different races”*. Participants also recommended that they gain exposure to adult gay and lesbian role models. *“More role models, more people standing out in the community, who weren’t ashamed”*.

### **Child and youth care workers (including social work / helping professions)**

The multiple experiences of homophobia in this study have highlighted the difficulties participants faced as they began to gain access to the social and health care arena. They reported experiences of service provision ineffectiveness, and the inability of counsellors to understand or respond to their unique needs. They offered the following suggestions for child and youth care workers, social workers and related mental health professionals to consider in addressing their needs and challenges. Participants noted that

traditional and existing social welfare agencies in South Africa lacked commitment in tackling the needs of gay and lesbian youth. They suggested that there was no excuse for existing social welfare agencies not providing this critical service: “... *have those services which are presently available take cognisance of the fact and be sympathetic towards and be accessible.*” As an approach to advocacy for lesbian and gay youth, the non-adversarial model could be highly effective. This model proposes joint efforts between heterosexual and lesbian and gay adults, on behalf of these youngsters, and could be used in many arenas such as mental health, youth advocacy and child welfare. Precisely because these efforts focus on the children’s actual needs rather than on activist agendas, the programmes developed could be less vulnerable to homophobic attacks. The inclusion of heterosexual as well as homosexual advocates also reduces the impact of attacks by opposing groups.

Participants reported on the ineffectiveness of the National Youth Commission (1997) in addressing the needs of South Africa’s gay and lesbian youth population. Participants stated that the National Youth Commission should ensure that sexual minority youth issues become a priority of their policy and programme implementation strategies. It is worth noting that while the National Youth Commission has consistently denied the existence of the at-risk category of gay and lesbian youth, the findings from this study will hopefully be able to demonstrate that not only do gay and lesbian youth exist in all our schools and in all our communities, but more importantly, that they are a youth population deserving of policy considerations and service provision. As participants explained: “*So the National Youth Commission is not appearing to be functioning very well...if it had functioned properly they could have already got to an agenda*”. They voiced strong opinions that lesbigay issues are not put forward as a priority youth issue, and that this stance needs to change.

### **Social Education and Legal/Constitutional Concerns**

The participants recommended various forms of social education, which would assist them in their coming out process. They often related the need for social education to constitutional and legal concerns for sexual minority youth. Participants stated that any form of social education should be presented from the standpoint of developing a culture

of zero tolerance for homophobia in contemporary South African culture: “... *it is similar to a race issue as well. If we can turn the tables and not discriminate, then obviously we can do it for sexuality as well*”. It was suggested that social education might be expedited through parliamentary discussions on homosexuality in general, and youth issues more specifically: “... *like for instance, if you watch the parliamentary broadcasts on ... on like TV...about being gay, they don't even mention things like that. And probably most of the members of parliament are from the old school ... so they wouldn't understand like gay youth issues and things like that*”.

Participants viewed the importance of establishing National Coalition of Gay and Lesbian Equality (1999) offices in all major cities around South Africa. At present NCGLE have offices only in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town: “...*Perhaps they should approach or work with other NGOs who have relationships with government and get onto those various NGOs' agendas and then promote it [on a] multi-lateral basis*”.

The participants in this study highlighted the issue of protection of legal and human rights. They referred to various instances of their constitutional rights being violated, or at least not being protected. The following comments illustrate this: “... *from a South African context there are the basic injustices, the fact that there are still laws in effect which have not been repealed.*”; “*It's the fact that heterosexual youth are protected, e.g. rape, but ... gays and lesbians ... they become very cloudy. Because there is no legislation in place*”. In reviewing the suggestions of participants in terms of constitutional issues, it would appear that linking gay and lesbian youth concerns to human rights issues and education, would be regarded as a positive decision by gay and lesbian youth: “*Educate them that in life there are people who are very different from you. And maybe try and change some of the attitudes that have already been built*”. The participants proposed that extensive lobbying efforts be conducted, at both provincial and national level, on behalf of sexual minority youth: “*With creating appropriate education, lobbying, advancing the cause of gay rights.. specifically gay and lesbian youth*”.

## Conclusion

It was the intention that this study will not only place the lives of gay and lesbian youth within the larger youth at risk population of South Africa, but will also offer a knowledge base from which to build a scientifically motivated intervention model for helping professionals. It is imperative that South African service providers make an honest commitment to the safeguarding and protection of all youth, and gain a critical understanding of a previously hidden and neglected group of gay and lesbian youth. The recommendations proposed by South African sexual minority youth in this paper will hopefully provide social workers, youth workers and mental health professionals with a knowledge base to render a wide range of services, such as, education, prevention and outreach, crisis intervention, and public advocacy campaigns. It could be argued that there has never been a greater need for an interdisciplinary accumulated body of knowledge and findings on adolescence in South Africa, as it would join public health, education, and social work efforts in beginning to address national youth concerns - youth of all races, gender, class, religion and sexual orientation.

The opportunity and responsibility of addressing the aforementioned needs and challenges often rests with child and youth care workers, as well as social workers. On one hand it is believed that these workers have a responsibility to create services and programmes that offer acceptance and sensitivity to all young people, including gay and lesbian youth (Whitlock, 1989). On the other hand they need to be provided with tools, skills and practice models in order to understand and work effectively with gay and lesbian youth (Bacon, 1989). It is the researcher's opinion that there is increasing evidence that a paradigm shift is required for all social and health care practitioners who interact with gay and lesbian youth. This shift would move from the medical model of viewing gay and lesbian youth in terms of weaknesses, categorising, labeling, helping and curing, toward a more ecological and developmental model which focuses on reframing problems into strengths, understanding and recognising ecological and support systems, competency building, and nurturing environments which empower gay and lesbian youth. (Hepworth and Larsen, 1993).

It is intended that this study into the lives of gay and lesbian youth will, and should, be able to inform policy makers at national, provincial and local levels of government regarding the development of a comprehensive youth policy which includes, not excludes, the rights and needs of gay and lesbian youth. Irrespective of whether social workers are performing the roles of clinical practitioners or policy makers, or involved in structures like the National Youth Commission and the Inter-ministerial Committee on the Transformation of the Child and Youth Care System, they need to view the process of developing a national youth policy that includes gay and lesbian youth as a major priority and responsibility. As the NCGLE (Draft policy November 1997:7) aptly reflects,

"We cannot reach this vision of a national youth policy if gay and lesbian youth continue to be ignored. How can gay and lesbian youth develop to be law-abiding citizens when they are subject to constant humiliation, prejudice and discrimination? What future is there for gay and lesbian youth if they remain a marginalised and victimized group?"

It is hoped that all professionals working with this population, as an integral part of their policy development and practice responsibilities, recognise and accept the place of gay and lesbian youth in South Africa's broader youth population, as well as giving priority to addressing their needs. Child and youth care workers, and other helping professionals need to remain cognisant of the challenge made by President Nelson Mandela during his inauguration speech, in which he said: "The youth of our county are a valued possession for our nation. Without them there is no future. Their needs are immense and urgent." (President Mandela, May 1994).

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