

# **Family response to their gay and lesbian children coming out: Familial homophobia, stages of grief and acceptance, and recommendations for social work service provision**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on family responses to their child's' disclosing their homosexuality. 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 achieving significant milestones in their homosexual identity formation and development. Firstly the paper will report on the participants experiences of homophobia from their families: Homophobic attitude and verbal harassment, denied access to lesbigay peers and community, the context of coming out and homophobia from the extended family. Secondly, the paper will explore a process of grief and loss which parents experience as a result of their child's coming out process, in terms of: denial. Changing behaviour, silence moratorium, grief process, information gathering and gradual acceptance. Finally, implications for social work practise and future research endeavours are also considered.

## **Key Words:**

Gay and lesbian youth, South Africa, identity formation, family, coming out, grief and loss, homophobia, social work.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper will report on one aspect of a qualitative study that was conducted over a three-year period (1997 – 2000). The overall goal of the study was to phenomenologically and contextually explore the coming out process of a sample of South African gay and lesbian youth, and provide them with an opportunity to articulate their coming out narratives, and describe the meanings and associations which they ascribe to the task of disclosing their homosexuality. Although young gays and lesbians, especially those in the early stages of coming out, typically prove difficult to access (Rosario, et al., 2001), it is important to allow for their expression of experiences and feelings.

The focus of this paper will be one of the themes that emerged from this three-year study, namely: i.e. levels of homophobia which gay and lesbian youth experienced from within their family systems, and the subsequent grief reaction which their parents experienced as a result of their coming out. Kus (1985:2) 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." Furthermore, this paper will offer recommendations for child and youth care service provision in supporting teenagers and their families negotiating this process of adolescent sexual self-discovery.

It should be remembered, in the context of this study, that South Africa is now one of the most progressive countries in terms of recognition of gay and

lesbian rights. However, the background to the emergence of these rights has been one of patriarchal authoritarianism, overt religiosity that frowns on homosexuality, and the repression of human rights. Thus, although the legislation has changed, habits and societal attitudes are somewhat harder to reorganise in favour of gay and lesbian rights. Little (2001:100) describes homophobia as “the last bastion of political incorrectness,” and comments that whereas people no longer easily condone racism or sexism, attitudes towards sexual orientation still remain largely intolerant. Although she was referring to the Canadian context, however her comments are equally applicable to the South African context. Thus, it is important to consider that the young people in this study (and their families/parents) have spent the majority of their lives under a repressive system, which simply 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). Despite these guarantees, and while other disadvantaged

groups, such as black South Africans and women, have had their human rights upheld and legal discrimination against them removed, 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 in South Africa cope with these contextual factors in negotiating their coming out process needs to be considered.

It is imperative that South Africa makes a concerted effort in safeguarding and protection of all youth, and furthermore, gains a critical understanding of a previously hidden and neglected group of gay and lesbian youth. 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 (1996:32) focussed on members of the lesbigay community "who are strong enough to say their say". Rose referred to Ross Hopkins, aged 17, by 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." Ross (cited in Rose, 1996:32) 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." In an article in the 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 (1997:17) 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."

Taking cognizance of the history of imbalances, prejudices, victimisation and a lack of societal empathy on homosexual issues, it is necessary to pay special attention to issues facing gay and lesbian youth. The unprecedented growth of the gay and lesbian community in recent history, both in South Africa and internationally, has transformed both culture and consciousness, creating radically new possibilities for men and women to "come out" and live more openly as homosexuals.

In order to fully understand the reality for gay and lesbian coming out in post Apartheid South Africa it is important to look at the historical antecedents which impacted on this significant socio political transformation in South African society. The evolution of South Africa in 1994 into a fully-fledged democracy and the resulting modes of national transformation culminated in the adoption of the New Constitution in 1997. The Constitution Act 108 of 1996 legislates that: "the state may not unfairly discriminate against an individual, directly or indirectly, on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture or language." As the constitution captures the very essence of equality for all citizens, this must surely also signal a new legal recognition of the value and worth of South Africa's young gay and lesbian citizens.

This paper will focus not only on the impact on the young people themselves, but more importantly, on the impact coming out has on the entire family system. While all of the aforementioned changes have transformed many aspects of South African society, the family still serves as the central stabilising institution negotiating these rapid changes. The findings from these qualitative interviews will demonstrate that in spite of positive societal changes towards homosexuality, South African families still embrace many of the homophobic ideologies that permeated its Apartheid legacy. As part of the post Apartheid legacy, South African citizens embraced a truth and reconciliation process as an integral pathway in its nations healing and rebuilding. This involved a great deal of confronting grief and loss – at individual, community and societal levels. Thus, this paper will also refer to the sense of grief and loss which parents and other family members experienced as result of their adolescent children disclosing their homosexual status.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Due to the marginalised and often 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. Lesbian young people proved especially difficult to access, thus resulting in a disproportionate number of males as compared to females. The researchers would ideally have liked to ensure an equal number of male and female participants. Thus, in conjunction with the respective gay and lesbian persons who served as gatekeepers, the researchers made a concerted effort to try and include more females in the investigation.

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 could be attending high school, engaged in tertiary education, employed or unemployed. 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: The ethnic distribution consisted of Black (5), White (9), Coloured (2), and Indian (2). The age characteristics of the sample fell within the intended parameters of the study (i.e., 16-21 years). The distribution was as follows: 16 –17 years (2), 18 – 19 years (8) and 20 – 21 years (8). The gender distribution was males (14) and females (4).

In terms of education all of the participants had attended high school post during the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation in South Africa (post 1996). 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 school environments. 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. At the time of the interviews, 15 of the participants were engaged in tertiary education, 2 were attending high school, and 1 had completed school, but not yet gone into work or study.

A semi-structured interview approach was utilised, with the researcher basing interviews around the central issue of ‘the coming out story’. The grand tour question was “Share with me in as much detail as possible your experience of coming out”. All interviews were taped and verbatim transcripts produced. There were scrutinised reflexively by both the interviewer and a colleague trained in counseling skills and qualitative methodology. Tesch’s (1990) eight-step model of content analysis was employed. 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. In order to facilitate bracketing in the qualitative process, a literature audit was conducted after the data analysis process had been completed.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the 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. None of the participants 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, lesbian/gay community) before they decided to venture into the more treacherous territory of coming out to parents. (Butler and Astbury, 2005).

Numerous researchers have illuminated family processes that promote adolescents' identity development (Santrock, 1993; Hauser & Bowlds, 1990; Carlson, Casper & Hsu, 1990). They have found that parents who use enabling behaviours (explaining, accepting and giving empathy) facilitate adolescents' identity development more than parents who use constraining behaviours (judging and devaluing) do. Family interaction styles that give adolescents the right to question and to be different, within a context of support and mutuality, foster healthy patterns of identity development (Harter, 1990). Based on the numerous reports of homophobia within the families of the participants in this study, it would appear that their parents tended to exhibit behaviours that fell nearer the constraining spectrum of the aforementioned continuum.

This is perhaps described most accurately by a participant who offered the following explanation:

*"The fact that my mother doesn't want to hear it. Because I am trying to deal with who I am. And the people who are supposed to support you in that process are your parents, right? Your home environment is supposed to shape who you are. So if you don't have those structures how can you carry on with the rest of your life? So if you don't have that background, that is what I was thinking all along. How can I come out to other people if I cannot even come out to my own family? That was my biggest thing."*

The participants reported experiencing homophobia from their families, in the following situations.



- Homophobic attitude and verbal harassment
- Denied access to lesbian/gay peers and community
- Context of coming out
- Extended family

Each of these areas will be separately reported and discussed.

### ***Homophobic attitudes and verbal harassment***

The participants mentioned being made to suffer for their homosexual orientation, having financial allowances withheld or being disowned by members of their family as a result of disclosing their sexual orientation.

The following examples are presented to illustrate the painful impact that parental homophobia had on the lives of the research participants:

*“About three years ago [I came out]. It’s just ... it’s the day he took away all of my perks. Finance, obviously clothing, allowances, car ... immediately ... They made me suffer in every way that they can. And they still do it. Until I conform.”*

*“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. I was really angry but then I turned around and said I just don’t care any more. If he thinks he is going to take my car away from me he has another think coming.”*

One participant referred to the consequence of his family’s homophobia in that he attempted suicide at the age of 15. He said:

*“Just trying to live, just trying to experience a lot of things you know. And ... I tried to commit suicide once because that was like hell with my family and everything in the afternoon ... I was fifteen. Everything was crashing down ... my marks, my school life. It was a whole lot of things. It was troubles at home. It was financial. It was feeling unloved. It was having to deal with this*

*on my own. Yes and having no-one to speak to. I couldn't be gay, you know. ... me being alone ... in a way I hated myself, you know, and I couldn't deal with that."*

Mallon (1992:81) expands upon youth feeling rejected and unloved and its possible outcomes as follows: "Fearing rejection, the young person will usually hide his or her sexual orientation as long as is possible. Sometimes this pressure becomes too great, and the young person may attempt suicide. Often, a conspiracy of silence develops within the family, and the unspoken rule becomes, "no one is permitted to talk about it." (Hunter & Schaecher, 1990:302).

A further finding in this study was the lack of emotional support from the families. In many cases, the participants reported that their families' emotional unavailability was a significant hindrance in their trying to come to terms with their sexuality.

As one participant explained:

*"One thing I have learnt from my family is you are independent. You are - I never got any kind of emotional support from my family. Therefore you are on your own basically. All the time."* This lack of emotional support may not be an intentional homophobic act by parents, but rather due to their inability to understand what it means for their child to be gay or lesbian.

In various socially oppressed ethnic and cultural groups, the family typically serves as a focus of validation and teaching about what it is like to be a member of an oppressed population. Such is not the case for gay and lesbian adolescents. Because most parents are heterosexual, they cannot teach their lesbian or gay adolescent what it is like to be a member of the gay and lesbian culture; they are unable to be role models of a positive gay or lesbian identity for their child.

Morrow (1991) stresses the fact that gay and lesbian adolescents witness the cruel comments, jokes and name-calling directed toward lesbian and gay

individuals as displayed in their peer relations, religious settings and families, as well as in the media. Morrow's (1993) statement is well supported by the results of this study, especially with regard to homophobic remarks passed by participants' family members. In most instances, participants reported being exposed to erosive and derogatory comments before they had disclosed their orientation to their parents. As one participant explained:

*"... about a gay ... this guy who goes and ... well he was a gay guy ... Anyway ... and my father said 'Ag, so disgusting' you know, and tried to change the channel. And I sat there thinking 'No, I'm watching this' you know, 'I hope you know this is wrong'."*

Gable (1997:2) further explores the impact these homophobic remarks have on the self-esteem of gay and lesbian teenagers. Sometimes what makes it so especially hard for gay teens is the very thing that protects them - their invisibility. What African-American parent would be making jokes about black people at the kitchen table? What Jewish family would sit around casually commenting on how God condemns Jews? But the lesbian, gay or bisexual teen, sitting there in the cloak of heterosexuality, laughs outwardly, or joins in expressing disgust, while yet another chink of his/her self-esteem has been chiseled away.

This is echoed by a participant who disclosed the pain she felt in response to her sister's disparaging remarks regarding her homosexuality:

*"My sister is very close to my mom. So I would write letters to my sister saying that mom is being a pain in the ass, and she has broken my heart. She (my sister) resented me for it. She resented me for having all the attention and for hurting my mother. She said 'You have been fucked up since you were born and you have always been the black sheep and you just had to put the cherry on the top by being gay.' It was very painful but I just dealt with it."*

Even after gay and lesbian youth have disclosed their orientation to their parents, homophobic comments appear to continue. A participant remarked:

*“And the other night I’ve got to go to a meeting. So she said ‘Oh the meeting of your people – those people again.’ And I was like ‘No mum.’ ‘Ja, the gays and lesbians.’ ‘Oh my mum. Are you going through that thing ...’.”*

### ***Denied access to gay and lesbian community and support***

As stated earlier, one of the most common consequences of disclosing to their parents was the parents’ decision that their gay or lesbian child should consult a mental health professional. In the context of this discussion, however, there were reports of incidents where parents would not allow their gay or lesbian child to seek counseling from a homosexual mental health counselor.

The following two examples illustrate this form of familial homophobia:

*“No. I felt that I couldn’t develop a relationship with her. You see I had a part time psychologist at school and I knew that she was gay and I went to see her. And then my mother banned me from seeing her because she was gay and she would influence me. She was going to recruit me and she was going to sway me.”*

*“Yes, she went with but she, you could tell that she was not interested. On the way there she was telling me it is wrong what I have done, to make an appointment with a gay psychiatrist because that person would turn me gay. She said that there are lot of straight psychiatrists who can help you and make you normal and stuff like that.”*

These parents in maintaining the notion that gay counselors would recruit or influence their children to “adopt” homosexuality as their chosen lifestyle displayed one of the most pervasive forms of homophobia. Furthermore, participants reported that in order to minimise potential negative influences, parents asked participants to “stop being gay” or denied them access to gay and lesbian friends. One participant verbalised it as follows:

*“Ja. Now that I’ve got friends and places to go and people to meet, stuff like that. Ja. It meant no gay friends at all. She said I was too young to know*

*that I am gay.” Another said: “Ja. But then I think ... she asked me then if I could try to like stop what I’m doing.”*

### ***Coming out to parents***

This discussion refers specifically to familial homophobia within the context of coming out. Participants reported experiencing familial homophobia in two ways: homophobic responses to their self-disclosing their sexual orientation, and a reluctance to come out to their parents.

Firstly, those who had disclosed their sexual orientation reported homophobic reactions from their parents as follows:

*“It was worse because she didn’t believe me. How can this be? She still sort of doesn’t believe me. She just can’t believe that her son is gay. Well not really, sort of she can believe that I am gay. What about all the girls you have been with? But that makes it harder. If she would just accept it would be cool but she keeps on saying “I don’t believe” so it makes me doubt myself. Like is my mom right and stuff.”*

*“Yes. I know who I am now and I can carry on with the rest of my life. I am so happy and I am telling my mother the news and she says ‘No, you can not do that in this house. It is un-Christian and un-African etc. etc. etc.” That was hard and then it was also coming from my mother and my grandparents. ‘Have you found a girl yet?’ ‘No.’ And my mum said “Oh no. How could this be? How could this happen?’ And she said ‘You are gay’ and I said ‘Ja, but I can’t help it’.”*

Secondly, those participants who had not come out to their parents said that, for example, their parents’ religious ideologies produced entrenched homophobia and for this reason “they would never” come out to certain members of their family. One participant explained it as follows:

*“Well, I come from a, my father is Jewish, and my mother is not. My father converted to Christianity and my family are all born-again Christians. Which I find very interesting because I decided to become a born-again Christian too, in hopes that something would change. And obviously when I do come out to*

*her she will have it in her mind that it is not right, it is not right. Mostly I think she will respond in that way because of Biblical and religious reasons. My father and my sister are the two people in my family that I can say now with confidence that I will never come out to them."*

Anderson (1987) is of the opinion that throughout adolescence, gay teenagers typically evade questions regarding their sexuality, and often painfully and silently endure their parents' or other family members' making the most violent sorts of disparaging remarks about gay persons. Realising that if one's parents knew the truth, they would find one utterly contemptible is frightening to the adolescent. It is not surprising that most of these adolescents feared that they would be rejected, punished, perhaps physically assaulted, or expelled from the family.

One participant referred to familial homophobia in terms of feeling scared about going home in case his "secret" was revealed. He explained:

*"It is so difficult to go home, because you know inside yourself 'I am gay' you know, and my parents they don't know and maybe the telephone rings or something like that. Oh my God it is someone phoning to tell my mother that I am gay, you know."*

Many parents make disparaging remarks about same-sex oriented individuals, causing gay children to view their parents as non-supportive and to anticipate the probability that their parents would withdraw their love and economic support if the child's sexual orientation were known. Rather than confront their parents with their sexual identity, homosexual adolescents build a protective wall between themselves and their parents and friends (Clark, 1987). Separating their sexual orientation and identity from the rest of their personality requires them to self-monitor their actions and conversations in order to avoid disclosure (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992).

### ***Homophobia from within the extended family***

Extended family members have also been reported by the participants as being a hindrance in their coming out process. Whether homophobia within

the extended family is a reality or the perception of a negative response toward their homosexuality, the response is the same, namely:

*"I cannot tell my extended family because they are so homophobic."*

The following quotations refer to different ways in which the participants are expected to cope with homophobia from within their extended families.

*"Well. We have a huge extended family. My mother said that I couldn't tell her family because they are very homophobic you know. So there is no way I am ever coming out to them."*

*"Always. I've always had this phobia about them ... in finding out. If he knew my father would probably kill ... not the fact that he will disown me – I don't want anything – but the fact that he will make ... find his way to where I am and try and sort things out if I can put it like that. The fact that my mother will definitely want to pull me over her knee or whatever – but just that whole parent thing I've got a great ... you know, that I know that they know, that they should know by now but I fear the confrontation regarding my sexuality. ... and generally the rest of my family too ... my extended family."*

A mother of a gay teenager best highlights the pervasive reality of this form of homophobia. Sadly though, the reality of this mother's sentiment is based on her hope that if she had responded to her son's homosexuality, rather than denying it, she might have prevented his decision to take his own life.

A participant recaptured her mother's sentiments as follows:

*"She said that she wished she had handled the situation better. And I said to her that you cannot blame yourself because they were both insecure about themselves. And you cannot blame anything in yourself because it wasn't your fault. And she said, 'But what if I had realised it earlier?' I said to her: 'You probably knew it all your life.' And she said, 'Yes, I did.' Then she told me that she wished she could have done it another way. She was crying the whole night. And then she gave me the letter which he had written to her before his suicide. It said everything. About how he felt, and everything. How he felt inside and that he didn't want to hurt her. That was really terrible. That*

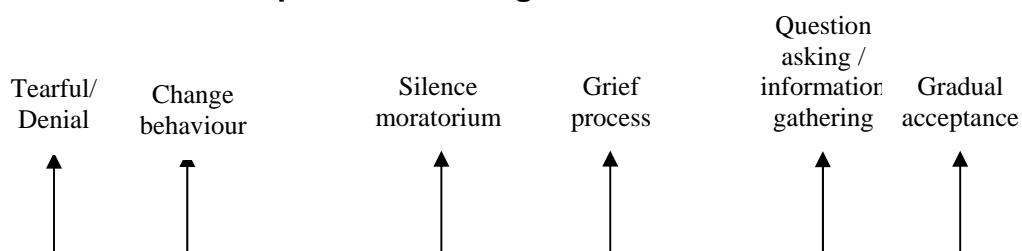
*showed me that you had to get a turn around in your life if you don't want to end up in the same boat."*

## **Grief and Gradual Acceptance**

Twelve of the eighteen participants had come out to their parents and six had decided to withhold this part of their disclosure to a later stage. The reason for this is that different dynamics, processes, experiences and decision-making pathways were reported in this study (See Butler and Astbury, 2005). The findings from this study indicate that parental response covers the full spectrum from negative to positive reactions to the fact that their child had disclosed his/her homosexual orientation.

These parental reactions will be diagrammatically presented on a continuum (Figure 1), and then each will be discussed.

**Figure 1: Parents' response to coming out**



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### **Narrative**

Negative

Positive

Eleven of the twelve participants reported the initial coming out to their parents as a negative experience, which caused a significant degree of turmoil and crisis. For example:

*"About three years ago. No. No, no, no, it's fine. It's just ... it's the day he took away all of my perks. Finance, obviously clothing, allowances, car and she was calm. She was like really calm and she was like ... she wasn't supportive though. She didn't want to accept it."*

Overall, the decision to come out to parents often provokes a family crisis of some sort (Fontaine & Hammond, 1996). Forty-two percent of the female and



30% of the male respondents indicated that their families responded in a negative manner (Telljohann & Price, 1993). Given the historical condemnation of homosexuality and the tendency for most parents to consider their children to be extensions of themselves, Weinberg (1972) observed that for many gay youth difficulties with parents are profoundly significant. Telling parents may be the final exit out of the closet. Fairchild and Hayward (1979); Bohrek, (1983); Clark, (1987); Silverstein, (1977); Woodman & Lenna (1980), suggest strategies for parents who need help in coping with the seemingly earth-shattering news of their child's homosexuality.

Numerous participants in this study reported that while they knew that their parents would respond with difficulty to their disclosure, they anticipated (or hoped) that the responses would have been more positive.

### ***Parents' tearful response***

The majority of the participants reported that an emotional outburst, usually in the form of crying, was a common response from their parents. This sense of emotionality was interwoven with a state of denial on the part of their parents – parents engaging in their own denying that their child was gay or lesbian. Participants described feeling rejected by their parents at this stage, which was experienced even more profoundly given that they had taken the bold and courageous step of coming out to their parents. One participant said:

*“She burst into tears and I thought she would have an absolute tantrum and not know what to do. After it happened, after I told her, what I thought would happen did actually happen. She had a tantrum and she cried for two weeks.”*

Family problems were the second most frequent area of concern cited by Hetrick and Martin (1987). Difficulties ranged from parental rejection to violence and expulsion from the home. Coming out to parents is perhaps one of the more serious issues in the coming out process.

### ***Need to change homosexual orientation***

Together with the participants' trying to change their homosexual orientation as a coping strategy, this study found that parents often adopted a similar strategy. Seven participants reported that one of the first strategies "*forced upon them*" after disclosing to their parents, was their parents' insistence that they attempt to change their homosexual orientation. This took the form of approaching a mental health professional with the goal of behaviour modification and "returning their child to a heterosexual orientation."

Mental health professionals who were approached were: psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and ministers of religion. One participant said that:

*"She made me go and see the psychologist. I said to the psychologist that I actually wasn't too sure. My mother was very upset so I agreed not to be gay."*

Anderson (1987) explains that this occurrence is a common strategy adopted by parents. It is during this period that parents most often coerce the child into treatment, demanding a change to a heterosexual orientation. Parents seeking treatment for their adolescent often refuse to accept a therapist unless the therapist shares their belief that homosexuality is pathological.

The adolescent is understandably unlikely to accept a therapist who holds such beliefs. Sometimes parents will take their child to a witchdoctor or a psychologist to fix whatever's "wrong" with them. These people are figures of authority and are respected, but if they are "straight" they often judge the homosexual child as "bad." (Kay, 1997)

According to Anderson (1987:15): "The same is true of Christian parents. They take the child to a priest, and if he thinks homosexuality is wrong the child is made to feel like an outcast." Participants in this study mentioned that the impact of seeking mental health counselling in order to change their sexual orientation was negative and detrimental to their general mental health. They explained that this made them to further doubt themselves and eroded the significant progress they had made in their coming out process. A

participant spoke about the negative response of his counseling as:

*"It was worse because she didn't believe me."*

### ***Silence moratorium***

Based on participants' accounts, it appeared that a common process (once it had been established that mental health professionals could not alter their child's homosexual orientation) was for the parents to enter into a phase that can be called "silence moratorium." Simply stated, parents tend to adopt a stance of "I know that you have said that you are gay, or lesbian, but I do not want to speak about it." This process of silence was explained by a participant as:

*"We don't speak about it at all. It doesn't exist. But after that we basically have not said anything about it at all. It feels worse now like if you are sitting in front of TV and a gay issue comes up."*

Some participants reported that their parents still adopted a silence moratorium towards them.

The impact on the participants at this juncture in their coming out can be profoundly hard to bear. Considering that they have endured years of adopting their own code of silence in denying and hiding their homosexuality, this is the time that they require open and honest communication with, and disclosure to, their parents. The silence moratorium serves only to perpetuate the youth's internal code of silence, and further reinforce feelings of discomfort and lack of confidence in their own sexuality. Fontaine and Hammond (1996) explain that even when parents are apparently supportive, they may have little patience for the long periods of identity uncertainty and exploration of many adolescents, and may cut off avenues for the heart-to-heart conversations that their lesbian and gay children need.

### ***Grief process***

In this study, parents appeared to adopt a grief process as an integral part of their response, and perhaps defense mechanism, to their child's disclosure of his/her homosexuality. The following quotations from the participants' coming out stories will highlight parents' grief process:

*“She could not believe it when I told her. She thought that we were just two heterosexual friends. She said: ‘There is no way that you and (boyfriend’s name) could be gay’”*

*“And then my mother started asking what went wrong, blah, blah, blah. She started crying. I mean what did she do wrong? She was like blaming her for me being gay, you know. She was expecting grandchildren.”*

*“She was ... she was angry. There was like a whole roller coaster of emotions. She was angry at first. She was like: ‘You are not going back to school’ and everything. She was ... I wasn’t ... I wasn’t allowed to ... I’m still not ... my phone calls at home are still screened to this day. My phone ... my phone calls are screened and she asks whoever is on the phone.”*

This response is well documented in the literature. Parents’ experiences after learning that their child is gay are often described as typical grief reactions. A common view is that parents of gay men and lesbians grieve the loss of an image they have had of their child, an image that they had built and socialised with over the years. Thus, writers specify a sequence of reactions such as shock, denial, guilt, anger, and acceptance (Silverstein, 1977; Robinson, Skeen, & Walters, 1989; and Ben-Ari, 1995).

### ***Information gathering/question asking***

The participants remarked that at some stage towards the end of working through their personal grief, their parents began to engage in dialogue with them. This invariably took the form of parents asking a wide range of questions regarding homosexuality, with what appears to be the goal of gathering information about their child’s homosexual orientation and homosexuality in general. The participants stated that this was often the first significant step toward meaningful communication with their parents. This phase of asking questions in order to gain insight seemed to have a positive impact on these youths’ view of themselves, as well as serving to strengthen their relationships with their parents. One participant noted that a while after she came out to her mother, she started asking:

*“Mostly spiritual questions. Like what is going on in your head. And she wanted to see in some ways where I was coming from. My mom and I had had a very bad relationship up until that point anyway. And it just got worse and worse and worse until finally we made a pact. That I could ask her anything and she could ask me anything. And that is how we developed our relationship. We have a very good relationship now.”*

### **Gradual acceptance**

On a positive note, some of the participants in this sample declared that their parents were gradually moving toward a point of accepting their homosexuality. Although none of the participants reported that their parents had reached a point of total acceptance, they still felt that they had begun to move in this positive direction in partnership, rather than acting as opposing forces. For example, one participant said:

*“But then after a while she realised that this is still my son. He is still the same person. While she is cool with it now.”*

This gradual movement of parents toward accepting their children's homosexuality in this study, is echoed in the literature. Zere (1992) explains that some parents are able to process their feelings and accept the new information about their child. Cramer and Roach (1988) supported this view in their study of 93 gay males who had come out to their parents. They found that parents initially reacted negatively to the disclosure but became more accepting over time (Morrow, 1993). Spada (1979) found that 40% of gays who came out to their families reported an initial positive response from the family member told, while about 36% experienced negative reactions. Of the latter group, 11% reported a significant improvement in their relationship with the family member over time, following the initially negative reaction.

Coming out to parents is a significant event in both the life of the homosexual youth and the family life cycle. Findings from this study indicate that most relationships between participants and their parents were strained immediately following disclosure, and a period of turmoil usually ensued for

most families. However, over time the relationship with both their mother and occasionally their father tended to improve, and in many cases these relationships became better than they had been prior to disclosure.

## **FUTHER RESEARCH**

This paper illustrates the need for a continued commitment to Research in the area of young people in South Africa self identifying gay and lesbian youth . Furthermore, it could produce a body of information that will feed directly into policy formulation and direct practice.

While the authors recommend a triangulated approach to knowledge generation in this field, the following are suggestions for qualitative data collection and analysis:

- A longitudinal study of the coming out process of gay and lesbian youth.
- The mental needs of gay and lesbian youth with in the context of coming out.
- Focus group interviews with helping professionals (ministers of religion, social workers, child and youth care workers, policy makers, psychologists, nurses, teachers and counselors) regarding the role helping professionals, in addressing the needs of gay and lesbian youth.
- Focus groups with parents whose children have disclosed their homosexuality in order to assess which factors could facilitate a more positive negotiation of this process.
- Factors affecting positive family unity and reunification.

The following are suggestions for quantitative data collection and analysis:

- Statistical database regarding gay and lesbian youth who have decided to come out to their families and communities (age, race,

gender, income, education, employment, coming out milestones, and family composition etc.).

- Attitude and perception survey studies – victimisation, traumatisation, homophobia, amongst others.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTISE**

Given these discussions pertaining to the interplay between the specific needs and challenges of gay and lesbian youth and their families, and the evolution of a gay liberation movement in South Africa, it is important to describe how these factors relate to the social work profession and its response to these identified needs and challenges. The opportunity and responsibility of addressing these familial needs and challenges often rests with social workers and other helping professionals.

On one hand it is believed that social 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 social workers need to be provided with tools, skills and practice models in order to understand and work effectively with gay and lesbian youth (Bacon, 1989). This paper provides support that there is increasing evidence that a paradigm shift is required for South African social workers (administrators, policy makers, practitioners, and researchers) to 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, labelling, 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). The creation of a strengths based approach to direct social work engagement with gay and lesbian youth would hopefully enable parents viewing their child's homosexuality from a similar vantage point: seeing their gay or lesbian child as normal, capable, competent, and courageous in disclosing their true self.

Historically, South African Health and Social Welfare Services have ignored, suppressed or denied the needs of gay and lesbian youth. It is imperative that social workers commit themselves to the inclusion of non-judgmental practice models, which caters for the needs of gay and lesbian youth. From a more macro-level perspective the needs of gay and lesbian youth and their families have to be included in the programmes formulated and implemented by the Departments of Health and Social Welfare. This issue is even more pertinent when considering that gay and lesbian youth are often evicted from their homes because of coming out regarding their sexual orientation (Remafedi, 1987).

Although many social work agencies provide specialised services to young people with histories of abuse and neglect, few attempt to address the harm of homophobic indifference and hostility experienced by gay and lesbian youth. Too often the emotional difficulties and acting out behaviour of sexual minority youth are attributed solely to their sexual orientation. Social workers may treat them as gay youth who ARE problems - not young people who HAVE problems (Whitlock, 1989). Many social workers and helping professionals are entrusted to help children and youth, but it should not only apply to those who self-identify as heterosexual.

This paper has attempted to provide evidence supporting the fact not only do gay and lesbian youth experience significant emotional upheaval as they embark upon their coming out process – but equally, their parents experience varying levels of grief and loss as they begin to come to terms with their child's homosexual status. Social workers are in a position to provide support as they enable the young person and their parents negotiate this oftentimes treacherous and emotionally turbulent pathway. Support in the form of individual, couple or family counseling could be a positive catalyst in this process. When deemed appropriate social workers may well link parents with other parents who have experienced similar anxiety and grief around their child's disclosure. South African social workers may consider developing PFLAG programmes (Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays group), which have proven successful support systems in North America.



Furthermore, it is imperative that South African social workers avoid the mistake of developing a generic “one size fits all” approach to support service provision for gay and lesbian youth and their families. Intrinsically, South Africa is a complex society, with a mosaic of diverse populations and cultural histories. Hence the need to be culturally sensitive cannot be sufficiently overstated. Providing support services to a black family living in a rural, historically disadvantaged community may be significantly different to providing the same service to a white family living in a middle class urban neighborhood. BY the same token, the similarities in terms of grief and loss and familial homophobia may outweigh their differences. This is the challenge for South African social workers working in support of gay and lesbian youth and their families – safeguard against assumptions and cultural stereotypes, and ensure that their practice is evidence based, person centered and client driven.

As stated previously, these issues further magnify the need to embark on adolescent homosexuality research in order to 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. It is hoped that this present 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 and the needs of their families.

## **CONCLUSION**

The African National Congress (the political party which has left South Africa in its post Apartheid transition) has acknowledged that a new culture has emerged. Its swift and steady development in the late twentieth century arises

from the cherished expressive individualism that is at the core of the new South Africa. Young peoples disclosure of their homosexuality has begun in all societies, and yet there is good reason to believe that far more change lies on the horizon (Herdt and Boxer, 1994). It is encouraging to note that the gay liberation movement has since used the impetus provided by post-apartheid transformation and in so doing, begun to ensure a rightful place for the emerging cohort of gay and lesbian youth.

This study hopes to contribute by capturing the experiences of this culture in South Africa in that it focuses on the coming out process of a pioneering group of teenagers who identify themselves as gay or lesbian. They challenge a hundred years of oppression, secrecy, and silence on the rights of those who desire same-sex relationships, when they come out, and courageously reveal themselves to their peers, families and teachers. 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 National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality in South Africa (Draft policy November 1997:7) aptly reflects,

"We cannot reach this vision of a national youth policy if gay and lesbian youth [and their families] 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 social workers, 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 and the needs of their families. . Social workers and other helping professionals need to remain cognizant 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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