THE USE OF DEFENCE MECHANISMS AS PRECURSORS TO COMING OUT IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA: A GAY AND LESBIAN YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

Allister H. Butler, PhD

Canterbury Christ Church University, United Kingdom

Gaynor Astbury, DPhil

Cornwall, United Kingdom

Dr Allister Butler is currently Professional Lead and Principal Lecturer in Social Work at Canterbury Christ Church University, in the United Kingdom This study was completed in fulfilment of a Doctoral degree at the University of Port Elizabeth, Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Dr Allister Butler can be contacted at Social Work Department, Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Road, Canterbury, Kent, CT1 United Kingdom, or by e-mail: allister@abutler.net. Dr Gaynor Astbury is presently a research psychologist involved in community regeneration in Cornwall, United Kingdom.

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ABSTRACT

This paper comprises one facet of a larger, three year phenomenological study (1997-2000) of gay and lesbian youth coming out in post-Apartheid South Africa. A non-probability sample of eighteen young people, aged between 16 and 21 years, was interviewed. The resultant data was content analysed, and the trustworthiness of the information was ensured via member checking and utilising an independent coder. Results consistently revealed that gay and lesbian youth use defense mechanisms, such as denial, avoidance, compartmentalisation, suppression, compensation, sublimation, undoing, displacement, rationalisation and intellectualisation, in a conscious manner during their coming out process. The young people in this study demonstrated resilience despite the prejudice and inner turmoil that they had experienced. Practice guidelines are suggested in terms of how health and social care practitioners can support gay and lesbian youth in coping with their coming out process.

KEY WORDS

Gay and lesbian youth, South Africa, defense mechanisms, coping strategies, homophobia, health and social care

INTRODUCTION

The discriminatory policies of the South African National Party Government (1948 – 1994) are well documented as fraught with prejudice, hatred, intolerance and oppression. During the Apartheid era, 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 of their same-sex sexual orientation. One of the most significant moments in modern South African history was 9 February 1990, when Nelson Mandela was released. This was the inception of a new socio-political landscape, which became birthed in law in the first democratic elections of 1994. Historically disadvantaged communities began to embrace a climate of new possibilities, opportunities, and equality for all citizens and a collective endeavour towards truth and reconciliation. This included fresh thinking surrounding gay and lesbian rights, and a gradual shift towards the recognition of rights for these minority groups. This culminated in the most liberal constitutional reform in terms of equal homosexual rights. The adoption of the New South African Constitution (1996) became a critical watershed for homosexual rights, as it was the first country to protect and embrace gay and lesbian rights in terms of constitutional law.

However, although legislation has changed, habits and societal attitudes are somewhat harder to reorganise in favour of gay and lesbian rights. Little (2001) describes homophobia as "the last bastion of political incorrectness" (p. 100), 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, her comments are equally applicable to the South African context. Little research has been conducted on the coming out experiences of gay and lesbian youth in the South African context, particularly during the time of social transformation. In order to address this, a qualitative study was

conducted (1997 – 2000) which explored the coming out process of a sample of gay and lesbian youth coming out in post-Apartheid South Africa. The researchers felt it important to articulate and capture their personal narratives at a time of our nation's changing history. Although young gays and lesbians, especially those in the early stages of coming out, typically prove difficult to access (Taylor, 1999; Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz & Smith., 2001), it is important to allow for their expression of experiences and feelings. While all of the participants in the study had come out, one of the central themes emerging from their discourse was their use of defence mechanisms as a coping strategy during their coming out process. The current paper focuses on their experiences and rationales in this regard. The reader should keep in mind that this paper forms part of a larger study exploring the broader landscape of their coming out stories (see Butler, 2000; and Butler, Alpaslan, Strümpher & Astbury, 2003).

How the homosexual adolescent copes in a homophobic environment provides some insight into the developmental process of coming out. Much of the literature in the area describes the adolescent as maintaining a facade that eventually takes its toll on the youth (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Remafedi, 1990; Telljohann & Price, 1993). Maylon (1982) noted such identity confusion can induce lower self-esteem, depression, denial, suppression, and compartmentalisation in gay youth. Gay adolescents may cope with sexual identity issues by withdrawing from their families and society (Gonsiorek, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1989, 1994).

Troiden (1989) recognises the use of defense mechanisms as common strategies in the coming out process. Particular reference is made to denial, avoidance and 'repairing'. This reparation stance is an attempt to undo one's individual make-up by appearing heterosexual (i.e., straight acting and behaviour modification). Troiden asserts that young people may also adopt the strategy of accepting their sexual orientation. However, in the face of considerable social pressure, this option may be delayed until late adolescence / early adulthood. A shift to

acceptance typically runs parallel to a decrease in social isolation and an increase in gay/lesbian peer contact and support.

The incongruence between a burgeoning homosexual identity and what society and family appear to demand, can exert considerable pressure to conform on the young person. Morris (1996) refers to the fact that "there are times when we either cannot identify or cannot deal or cope directly with the sources of stress. In such situations, people are likely to turn to defense mechanisms as a way of coping" (p. 498). Hamachek (1992) contends "the use of defense mechanisms is a normal human reaction, unless they are used to such an extreme that they begin to interfere with our ability to cope realistically with problems" (p. 43). Furthermore, Hamachek (1992) is of the opinion that "defense mechanisms can be best understood in view of the objective they serve, which is to safeguard the integrity and worth of the self" (p. 43). According to Rivers and D'Augelli (2001), little is known about the coping strategies developed by GLB youth when faced with pervasive homophobia and personal challenges in the high school context. Lasser and Tharinger (2003) view the use of coping and monitoring strategies and identity development as "dynamic, systemic phenomena that interact with the environment" (p. 6).

Individuals employ defense mechanisms during times of stress or conflict as a means of preventing anxiety-arousing impulses and thoughts from becoming conscious and causing pain (Gross, McIlveen, Coolican, Clamp & Russel, 2000). Hamacheck (1992) contends that the role of defense mechanisms is to "safeguard the integrity and worth of the self" (p. 43) and that the use thereof is a "normal human reaction, unless they are used to such an extreme that they begin to interfere with our ability to cope realistically with problems" (p. 43). Although it is typically contended that this distortion of reality is unconscious (Morris, 1996; Gross et al., 2000), participants in the current study tended to employ defense mechanisms in various contexts as the *modus operandi* of coming out.

Hetrick and Martin (1987) advise that although some gay and lesbian youth are more effective than others in managing stress, all must be evaluated in their individual context. It 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. As mentioned earlier 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 same-sex 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 youth in South Africa cope with these contextual factors in negotiating their coming out needs to be considered.

The fact that South African gay and lesbian youth are able to succeed and excel in social development is a testimony to their resilience. This paper will endeavour to capture and articulate both their use of defense mechanisms and the contextual factors leading to the adoption of these measures.

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 consisted of 18 young people.

In this study, the ethnic distribution consisted of Black (5), White (9), Coloured[1] (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 during the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation in South Africa (post 1996). Each participant had attended a different high school, 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.

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[1] Under the Apartheid regime, people were classified as Black, White, Coloured or Indian/Asian on the basis of skin colour and physiological features. Although Apartheid has been abolished, there is still a tendency to group people along these racial lines.

A semi-structured interview approach was utilised, with the researcher basing interviews around the central issue of 'the coming out story'. The interviews were conducted in four major geographical areas in South Africa, namely: Port Elizabeth, Cape Town, Pretoria, Johannesburg and Durban. This was done as an attempt to minimise the possible bias of only recruiting a sample population from one geographical area in South Africa, and attempting to offer as diverse a range of coming out stories as possible. The interviewer was an M.A. level, male, clinical Social Worker with 15 years experience in adolescent and youth care, and extensive experience in qualitative interview techniques. 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 qualitative methodology and interviewing techniques. 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

In the current study, participants unanimously voiced their use of defense mechanisms in the coming out process. Their common experience was the need to hide, to conform, to deny, to closely monitor behaviour and to withdraw from contexts where these strategies were not feasible. While participants were not always aware of their defense mechanisms (i.e., their unconscious impulses emerging through their narratives), the more common experience was one of a conscientious and systematic approach to reduce stress through the deliberate employment of defense mechanisms. Their strategies will be discussed by reference to the defense mechanisms employed. Direct quotes from participants will be

presented in italics. For purposes of this discussion, [gay participant] refers to male participants, and [lesbian participant] refers to female participants.

Denial

Denial involves the individual "refusing to acknowledge certain aspects of reality" or "refusing to perceive something because it is painful, distressing or threatening" (Gross, et al., 2000, p. 102). Sixteen of the eighteen participants stated that they had denied their homosexual orientation to parents and peers. A common rationale expressed by these youth was the need to 'cover up' their sexuality, especially as a result of the guilt associated with the first realisations of their homosexuality. It appears from the participants' stories that, in these early stages of self-discovery, denial was an automatic response regarding their homosexuality. Uribe and Harbeck (1992) explain that, in this context, it is not surprising that many sexual minority youth opt for denial, and that families collude consciously or unconsciously with that adaptation. The following quotes capture the common adoption of denial, especially in the early stages of the coming out process*:*

> "*But I totally denied it … /… obviously my parents do know, but they don't want to know. We don't speak about it at all. It doesn't exist.*" [gay participant]
>
> "*I was 15 then. You see, I just denied it up until then.*" [gay participant]
>
> "*Although I always knew I was a lesbian, I had to deny it at first.*" [lesbian participant]
>
> "*I felt really attracted to other guys. I think the first part of it for me was trying to deny it. That was for about a year and a half.*" [gay participant]

Research supports the prevalent use of denial, in that it is a common defense mechanism adopted in coping with painful feelings (Gibson, 1989; Troiden, 1989).   These concealment strategies are emotionally and socially crippling, impacting negatively on broader psychosocial functioning (Uribe & Harbeck 1992; Jackson & Sullivan, 1994).

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Cultural factors need to be considered when contemplating the denial strategies of these young people. Within the traditional Xhosa culture, a young man is defined as a boy until he undergoes circumcision and is formally adopted by the community as a man. For the Xhosa gay adolescent, coming out involves more than simply family disapproval. It may result in isolation from the community at large, impacting on future functioning as an adult within that community. For those living in rural contexts, this is potentially more damaging. There are also economic implications. Within an extended family culture, marrying and having children ensures that you will be provided for in your old age. Therefore, not to marry or have children has long-term implications.

Avoidance and compartmentalisation

In order to reduce anxiety, exposure to situations and actions, which are considered unacceptable and uncomfortable, may be carefully managed. This is known as avoidance. Various strategies may be used in this regard, for example silence when faced with confrontation, physical withdrawal and emotional isolation.

The participants reported adopting silence in order to avoid possible recrimination and acts of homophobia. For example, a gay participant commented*: "I decided it would be best to keep my mouth shut"*. For some, this silence was difficult to integrate as a component of their homosexual development: *"I had to keep quiet when I saw something about gay people on TV. It was very difficult for me"* [gay participant]. Maylon (1982) confirms these feelings by saying that often a conspiracy of silence develops within the family, and the unspoken rule becomes 'no-one is permitted to talk about it'. This stance is summed up in the following quote from a gay participant: *"We don't speak about it at all. It doesn't exist"*. Not speaking about the issue is also adopted in school contexts: *"… there were rumours going around the school that I was bisexual. I never responded to any of it. I just ignored it."* [lesbian participant]

The adoption of silence is a legacy from the Apartheid era, when to speak out against injustice meant facing imprisonment, isolation and possibly death. As a group, these adolescents comprise a silent, invisible, sexual minority; often not disclosing their sexual orientation to others. They struggle in isolation and in fear of being discovered. The price of silence is high, as the emotional energy needed to maintain this facade weighs heavily on the gay or lesbian adolescent (Little, 2001). Fontaine and Hammond (1996) comment that the emotional isolation resulting from silence inhibits adolescent developmental tasks, as these are put on 'hold' until a safer time. However, the cost of speaking out may also be high within differing cultural frameworks. For example, in many Afrikaans families the church is cornerstone of family life. Within patriarchal Afrikaans church settings, homosexuality is strictly forbidden and is condemned from the pulpit as evil and 'of the devil'. Thus, if it became known that you were gay or lesbian, you would bring your family into disrepute, and unless you 'changed your mind' you would face ex-communication, potential corporal punishment and/or exorcism. Afrikaans young people in the current study spoke of their fear of their church leaders and fathers. Some had been of the opinion that they were going to hell for having gay or lesbian thoughts. Within this context silence had seemed the easier option.

Participants commonly reported a conscious decision to keep their distance from people or to avoid entering public settings for fear of having their homosexuality discovered: *"I would rather stay inside ..."* [gay participant]*; "I avoided going out"* [gay participant]; *"I was too scared to go out ..."* [gay participant]. This coping strategy often led to a sense of isolation and alienation for gay and lesbian youth: *"I just tried to keep myself away from other people. I just got more and more distant. I was pretty alone."* [lesbian participant]

Compartmentalisation refers to a cognitive delineation between aspects of self, in order to avoid the discomfort of incongruence. Maylon (1982) and Martin (1982) refer to this

compartmentalisation as a conceptual stance of: 'I mess around with boys / girls but that does not make me a faggot / dyke'.

The participants spoke about the need to compartmentalise their lives in order to cope with their homosexuality. They explained that it was of critical importance to separate their homosexuality from the rest of their lives, often as a means to survive their adolescent turmoil. Participants offered the following comments: *"Almost like I isolated myself. I used to block myself off from areas of my life where I thought that it might show that I am gay."* [gay participant]; *"In order to survive I compartmentalised my whole life. I just put the gay thing aside, because being gay caused me to doubt myself and also to doubt the other functions of my reality."* [gay participant]; *"But it is still a bit weird. Being gay is a separate part of my life."* [gay participant]. Again, the cultural costs of exposure are expensive to the young person who is dependent on their family and community for safety and survival. In the context of the current study, all participants described their schools, families, churches and cultures as homophobic, with role models openly condemning gay and lesbian lifestyles (see Butler & Astbury, 2003). It needs to be borne in mind that when your family, church, school, community and culture tell you that being gay or lesbian is wrong, you stand to lose everything if you dare to come out – regardless of what is written in South African law. The psychosocial effects of an extended period of isolation are not easily eradicated by coming out, leaving gay and lesbian youth with residual memories of humiliation, rejection and aloneness (Cowie & Rivers, 2000). The impact of cultural constraints cannot be underestimated in the South African context. It is very different within a first world, nuclear family context, where the young person can eventually move away to another city and develop their own life if they so choose. For some participants in the current study who grew up in urban contexts, this became an eventual possibility. However, in an extended family context (e.g., a rural black township in the Eastern Cape), poverty, expectation, and the

repercussions of exposure are not easy to escape. This has meant that some participants have had to learn resilience and a different way of being within their own cultures in order to survive their coming out.

Suppression

A vague awareness of an 'unacceptable' thought or feelings can be counterbalanced by attempts to hide those unacceptable influences. This is known as suppression. Hamachek (1992) refers to the suppression of feelings as "an emotional insulation (putting up a wall of armour)" (p. 45), and suggests that it is usually the hurt or disappointed person who will adopt this strategy. A gay participant as articulates this stance: *"In order to protect myself, I built an isolation around myself to block everything out. It was like a wall I suppose."* [gay participant]. According to Sullivan (1984), prior to coming-out, gay and lesbian young people typically go through an initial stage of ignoring same-sex feelings followed by actively suppressing those feelings.

Participants mentioned that at times, it was easier to ignore their same-sex attractions than to confront them. Ignoring their own feelings, as well as others people's attitudes towards them, served the function of putting their homosexual self-disclosure 'on hold' until they felt better equipped to cope with their sexual orientation. Some of the participants' remarks illustrate the use of this coping strategy:

> *"... gay people were being interviewed on* [well-known South African TV show] */... I could relate to what I saw on TV. It was a bit more real for me. But I still ignored it."* [gay participant]

Participants commonly referred to their suppression of feelings as *"blocking out"*. They typically attributed this strategy to avoidance of pain and humiliation. However, for some participants in the current study, this resulted in isolation and depression:

> *"For as long as I can remember …* [I] *was always like trying to … block it out of*
>
> *my life. Trying to push it back because I did not want to deal with it at all.*
>
> *Because it was just too difficult and too painful …"* [gay participant]

Clark (1987) reports that depression is a common manifestation of dysfunction, and results from suppression of anger, denial of self and emotional fatigue. During the identify-confusion stage, homosexual feelings as well as other feelings are suppressed. Failure of suppression may produce profound guilt and depression, sometimes reflected in self-destructive behaviours (Schneider, 1991).

Perhaps the one of the most frequent coping strategies for gay and lesbian adolescents is learning to hide. Edwards (1996) describes the behaviours, engaged in by gay and lesbian youth while trying to hide their sexual orientation, as a form of self-preservation. Homosexual adolescents often develop an acute awareness of danger, and will not disclose sexual concerns unless they feel completely safe (Cwayna, Remafedi & Treadway, 1991; Mallon, 1994), usually hiding their sexual orientation for as long as possible (Hunter & Schaecher, 1990). In the current study, participants articulated the need to be secretive about their developing homosexual identity as a means of defending themselves: *"I felt I couldn't blow my cover"* [gay participant]; *"It has to be in secret"* [gay participant]. One participant poignantly expressed the dread of becoming alienated from his community as follows: *"Everything must be under cover for the rest of your life"* [gay participant].

Treadway and Yoakam (1992) contend that concealing their core identity from family, teachers and religious leaders, leads gay and lesbian youth to feel isolated and alienated from support that they need. Martin (1982) mentions that gay adolescents make one of three choices in dealing with their newly acknowledged sexual feelings: (1) try to change them; (2) continue to hide them; or (3) accept them. For some participants in the current study, the strain of constantly hiding, led to their coming out to parents and peers.

Their sense of relief and new-found liberation is evident in the following response from a gay participant: *"… I stopped pretending that I was straight. It felt good to wear something that I felt comfortable in, even if it was looking gay. And going to the Pride March, without feeling like I had to hide or run away from people."*

Unfortunately, most gay adolescents learn to hide their true self since the rewards for being gay are minimal and the rewards for being 'normal' are so great. Remafedi (1990) contends that, in the face of stigmatisation, many gay and lesbian youth temporarily deny, hide or otherwise retreat from gay and lesbian identification.

Participants reported lying to maintain secrecy, or to cover up true sexual identity. This is illustrated in the following quote: *"… she asked me if I had sex with another guy and I said no. I tried to hide it. So she asked me again. I denied it"* [gay participant]. Most of the participants reported that living a lie became too burdensome, and their eventual decision to come out followed. In response to the need to stop lying to his parents about his sexual orientation, a gay participant commented: *"I told them … I just needed to tell them"*. Similarly, in response to coming out to his fellow students, another participant commented: *"You see, I wanted to do it for a long time. I didn't want to lie to people"* [gay participant]. The experience of psychosocial strain, resulting from lying about sexual orientation, is supported in literature. According to Martin (1982), the most innocent and healthy social activities are continually tainted by the need to lie about them to parents. Furthermore, hidden sexual orientation creates an increasing sense of isolation as lives are based on living a lie (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). A gay participant articulated the overwhelming nature of this strain in that he directly attributed his experience of a *"nervous breakdown"* to *"trying to live a lie"*.

<u>Compensation</u>

Compensation is a defense mechanism that involves the psychological counterbalancing of perceived weaknesses by emphasising strength in other areas. For the gay and lesbian young person, this may involve a conceptual shift from victim to survivor. As voiced by participants*: "I have almost survived high school. Only a few months to go now."* [gay participant]; *"It is important to tell other younger people that you can survive and deal with the coming out experience."* [gay participant]*; "I can survive … there is no reason why I cannot survive."* [gay participant]

For numerous participants in this study, compensation was employed as a positive transition factor and, more significantly, served to create a critical sense of accomplishment. Participants discovered that, as they found themselves able to cope in homophobic situations, it gave them hope for surviving future, similar, situations*: "I know that the problems which I experience now, I don't experience as often. And when they arise I know how to deal with them"* [gay participant]. However, according to Remafedi (1987), lesbian and gay youth who survive adolescence without obvious signs of dysfunction may still have more subtle problems negotiating a healthy transition to adulthood.

According to Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995), self-identified gay or lesbian youth engage in a variety of behaviours aimed at protecting themselves from being identified by others as gay or lesbian. These behaviours include straight acting, avoidance of places or situations, avoidance of gay or lesbian people and developing knowledge of self-defense. Hamachek (1992) also recognises the use of role-playing as a compensatory mechanism.

 The participants in the current study spoke of similar strategies and referred to the constant need to play specific roles in various contexts, in order to conceal their sexuality. They reported using a variety of compensatory behaviours (e.g., pretending and straight-acting) to detract from other facets of their identity. Participants disclosed that the primary

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rationale for employing this defense mechanism was out of fear of rejection: *"… I feel that I would rather pretend that I am straight"* [gay participant]; *"… I have all straight friends and my one best friend he is very against homosexuality. So I am very straight toward him"* [gay participant]. This finding links with research by Kus (1985), who found that most often gays and lesbians pass as straight, while exploring what it means to be gay or lesbian. He contended that 'passing' is done out of fear – fear of rejection, fear of violence, fear of loss.

Participants disclosed that this facade was difficult to maintain: *"I tried to carry on with life as a straight person. It was very, very hard"* [gay participant]. Another gay participant offered a metaphor to explain what it is like to pretend/straight act by reference to wearing two gloves (one gay and one straight), depending on the context he found himself in: *"It was like I have always been wearing two gloves – a straight glove and a gay glove. In the straight world I act straight, in the gay world I act gay. Now that I am coming out the straight glove is getting too tight, it is uncomfortable"*.

According to Rivers and D'Augelli (2001), trying to act straight serves to widen "the gap between private identity and public identity" (p. 200), and results in increasing social vigilance. According to Uribe and Harbeck (1992), "each time (gay youth) pretend to be straight, they reinforce the idea that it is bad or wrong to be gay, lesbian or bisexual" (p. 19), which can result in lowered self-esteem, alienation and isolation.

Role playing and straight acting are mechanisms for limiting visibility as a gay person in a straight context. Visibility management is not a simple process. It should be viewed as "a process involving a constellation of strategies" (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003, p.7). These strategies involve modification and monitoring of behaviours, speech, dress and humour. Both internal and external (environmental) pressures interact, causing tension in the gay or lesbian young person. As expressed by Lasser and Tharinger (2003), "participants who, for complex reasons, managed their visibility by pretending to be heterosexual and / or keeping

their sexual orientation to themselves often experienced a feeling of dissonance between self and presented self" (p. 10). Due to very real fears for personal safety, young people may be selective about who they disclose their sexual orientation to (e.g., a close friend but not a parent).

Prendergast, Dunne and Telford (2002) found that support for GLB youth often depended on "playing straight" in the school context and "returning to the closet" in the home environment (p. 58). This means that while young people may achieve some semblance of support in their adopted straight role, they are not receiving much needed support where they need it most. A means of attaining some form of social support is to sublimate needs into attaining recognition in other areas.

Sublimation

Another strategy for delimiting visibility as a gay or lesbian person is to highlight visibility in a more acceptable arena, for example developing an achievement motivation. This can be accomplished through sublimation. Smith (1998) defines achievement motivation as "a uniquely human drive, in striving to overcome challenges, attain excellence and accomplish more than others do" (p. 448). Participants appear to have adopted this coping strategy as a means of diverting attention, so as to ensure that their secret would not be uncovered.   Thus, gay and lesbian young people may become 'super-achievers' to divert attention from their sexual orientation. Their academic or extracurricular successes are regarded positively by parents and school professionals, and sometimes by peers. Achievement is rated highly in black communities in South Africa. After being kept from equitable education for so long, achievement of the individual is celebrated as the achievement of the community. Academic success therefore provides a key means of ensuring that the individual is valued within their community. Other gay and lesbian youth submerge themselves into the general school population. They deliberately wish to go

unnoticed so that peers, teachers, and parents will not suspect the 'secret' of their sexual orientation.

The following examples illustrate participants' use of this defense mechanism*: "At school I always tried to keep myself busy with working hard"* [gay participant]*; "I threw myself into everything, just to be better"* [lesbian participant]; *" I always had to ... be one step ahead of people. One step ahead, like not to say the wrong thing, or to do the wrong thing. I was so very aware of being gay..."* [gay participant].

Undoing

The mechanism of undoing involves trying to 'take back' or reverse behaviours or thoughts that are unacceptable by deliberately expressing thoughts or behaviours which are overly acceptable. In the context of being a gay or lesbian young person, this may derive from guilt about the perceived unacceptability of aspects of self (behaviours, speech, dress and mannerisms, inter alia). For a lesbian participant, a positive same-sex sexual encounter was followed by excessive feelings of guilt, resulting in the need to '*never do it again*':

> "So I thought this was wrong .../ And then I started feeling guilty. So I went back to the girl and said that no, I would rather stop this." [lesbian participant]

Furthermore, participants highlighted attempting to change or monitor behaviour. Hamachek (1992) refers to this specific defense mechanism as "undoing, or counteracting unacceptable desires or acts" (p. 55). Undoing involves behaviour that is designed to negate or atone for some disapproved act or thought. A poignant example of this philosophy was expressed by a gay person in an expressly homophobic high school, who felt that his hand expressions and body posture defined him as a *"teapot[2]"*. In order to counteract this, he adopted an overtly rigid body posture – straight shoulders, hands firmly fixed in his pockets for much of his high school career. Another example is the gay young person who, in

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[2] A reference to his stance of one hand on hip, the other extended with a "limp" wrist.

response to parental disapproval, 'decided' not to be gay anymore*: "My mother was very upset so I agreed not to be gay"*. This stance required a negation of every aspect of self, in thought, word, deed, dress and mannerisms. A lesbian participant tried to adapt her behaviour in the school environment, in an attempt to avoid being hurt by homophobic acts and comments*: "There was a stage when I first came out and I was much younger, that I thought to myself okay how do you know? What are you picking up that I can stop? I did this so if I changed my behaviour I would not get hurt. I still get hurt by people at school now though"*. This strategy of undoing speaks to the need of young people to be accepted within their social contexts.

Attempts to change sexual orientation or the make the feelings go away, involves a continuous process of self-monitoring (Anderson, 1987; Gonsiorek, 1988), which can lead to feelings of isolation (Gonsiorek, 1988). This sense of isolation was emphasised by participants in the current study*: "You see for a long time I felt so alone. I wanted to change it. But I couldn't. I felt like I can't live like this. I felt alone because I did tell not anyone else who was gay. I was so lonely."* [gay participant].

Gay and lesbian youth who hide their identity are experts at monitoring their conscious and automatic behaviour. The stress of watching how one talks, stands, carries books, holds one's hands, or dresses, can become unbearable (Mallon, 1994). Consequently, gay and lesbian youth may attempt to change their sexual orientation through heterosexual dating, psychotherapy or other means (Herdt, 1989). Many young people tend to hide their sexual orientation at first, eventually coming out selectively to friends and later to family (Elizur & Ziv, 2001). Prendergast, Dunne and Telford (2002), in their case study of a cohort of LesBiGay young people, noted "for a variety of reasons, far from being able to explore early feelings of difference, almost always these had to be kept hidden" (p. 57). They further reported that this need to be hidden resulted in young people feeling alienated and isolated in

both the home and school contexts. The majority of youth in the current study came, in time, to the realisation that their sexual orientation is not changeable and thus began their individual pathways of coming out.

Displacement

This mechanism commonly refers to redirecting thoughts, feelings and impulses from an object that gives rise to anxiety to a safer option. In the LGBT context, inability to express anger and frustration at not being able to come out, may be displaced into more generic anger and frustration. Confusion resulting from the negative reactions of parents, peers, social service workers, and teachers may result in increased isolation, insecurity and acting out behaviour (Vergara, 1984). The participants referred to acting out as a mechanism of coping with the stressors connected with coming out. More specifically, they referred to the fact that they were aggressive (*"I was very aggressive"* [gay participant]), rebellious *("I became totally rebellious against everything"* [gay participant]), and at times went to extremes *("I did not like thinking about it so I went to the other extreme. I developed a hatred for men. I had been so rejected by men when I was at school."* [lesbian participant]). Schneider (1989) reports the use of acting out in that the stressors experienced by lesbian and gay youth include aggression, rejection and alienation.

Rationalisation

Rationalisation involves a cognitive stance of reframing perceptions; that is, developing various explanations to justify a situation. For the gay and lesbian youth this would comprise trying to explain away aspects of a situation that are seen as scary or not acceptable (e.g., it is not that my church/parents/school are homophobic … they just want what is best for me).

The religious context, for example, provides multiple opportunities to rationalise attitudes and behaviours. A particularly hurtful reference to participants is the church

perspective that homosexuality is 'evil', and is a direct result of demonic influence. As a result gay and lesbian youth find themselves trying to suppress thoughts and actions, and rationalising this as getting rid of the devil. It is a stance of 'I am not gay … it is the devil'. As expressed by a participant: *"... I was a charismatic* [Christian]*, so it was demons or it was like uh I had to bind*[3] *those thoughts. / … completely. Like even to think them was bad. So I had to… completely suppress them and everything."* [gay participant]

Another form of rationalisation, as expressed by a participant, is the stance of justifying silence and isolation by believing that engaging with homophobic peers would be 'beneath' their intelligence: *"… whenever they would say 'Are you a faggot? I would think I can't talk to people of a lower intelligence level"* [gay participant]. Thus, the stance of silence and withdrawal is not admitted to self as fear of rejection, but is considered as an intellectual higher ground. A similar approach was adopted by a gay participant who rationalised his unhappiness and loneliness into a cognitive stance of needing no-one: "*People don't create my happiness … I create my own happiness.*"

The strategy of rationalisation can cause a questioning of faith and culture. Participants in the current study experienced this. Deeply entrenched beliefs such as 'African people are not gay/lesbian' or 'people of my faith are not gay/lesbian' can cause a deep crisis of faith and culture when the young person fully realises their same-sex sexual orientation. If the young person, for example, has rationalised their same-sex sexual orientation as 'just a phase', because I am black and therefore I cannot be gay; when they finally realise they are both black and gay a questioning of cultural values ensues. A similar questioning occurs for the young person who realises that they are both a Christian and gay/lesbian.

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[3] 'Binding' is a term used in Charismatic Christianity, referring to exercising power over demons.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Participants in the current study had come out in the context of a changing South Africa. Their use of defense mechanisms in the early stages of realising their same-sex sexual orientation is reported on here as it raises important issues on the nature of coping within a unique societal context. Participants had experienced little support from important social institutions en route to their disclosure of same-sex sexual orientation. Non-heterosexist assessment and intervention models for sexual minority youth need to be developed in South Africa. It is of critical importance that those professional or voluntary practitioners who work with, and offer support to diverse populations of young people, do not assume that all young people in their care are heterosexual.

The findings from this study could be used by health and social care practitioners in a diverse range of contexts, in informing practice strategies for young people who either define themselves as gay or lesbian, as well those who are simply questioning their sexuality. The information regarding the experiences and coping strategies employed by this cohort could inform the development of effective, user focused and needs-led intervention strategies. This evidence could also be used to inform the development of practice models and effective practice guidelines (specific to each discipline, as well as multi-disciplinary modalities of intervention). The process of coming out should be viewed as a gradual and incremental process, enabling young people with the necessary life and communication skills to negotiate each step of this journey. Taylor (1999) maintains that having a "knowledge of coming out as a transitional process can help health care providers respond appropriately" (p. 523) to the issues and emotions faced by gay or lesbian clients. Helping professionals can play a key role in assisting gay and lesbian youth in the development of a positive identity (Cowie & Rivers, 2000).

Health and social care professions need to take a more active role in generating knowledge around coping strategies and defense mechanisms (and their impact) 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 societal attitudes and prejudice negatively impact upon gay and lesbian youth. This requires in-depth understanding and cultural sensitivity.

The coming out process is difficult, at any age. Societal attitudes and a lack of support from family, friends and helping professionals, combined with feelings of internalised homophobia and guilt, contribute towards an inordinate amount of psycho-social strain for gay and lesbian youth. As adolescents become aware of their sexual minority status and develop appropriate coping mechanisms, they will become capable of responding to the demands of their culture and society. A satisfaction with self can contribute to the development of respect for self and others, and eliminate the sense of isolation that minority status may produce.

Taylor (1999) comments that "there is a need to acknowledge the changing historical context as individuals 'coming out' in the 1990s will not necessarily experience the same level of isolation or discrimination" (p. 524) that other gays and lesbians have experienced in the past. Post-Apartheid South Africa has one of the most liberal constitutions in the world regarding gay and lesbian rights, and the coming out stories of participants need to be viewed against a backdrop of a society in transition from apartheid to democracy. It is essential that homophobic attitudes and acts of violence are continually challenged, so that gay and lesbian people, of all ages, will not be exposed to unnecessary risks during their coming out process. Archbishop Desmond Tutu (2003) reflects upon this challenge by saying that as a nation "we

need to advance the process of healing and reconciliation of our traumatised and wounded nation" (p. 2)

The researchers view this study as a starting point to further research. When this study was undertaken, there had been little research into the coming out process, as voiced by gay and lesbian youth, in the South African context. Participants in this study unanimously expressed the view that other gay and lesbian young people need to realise that they can *"survive"*, despite the fear, pain and humiliation they experience while coming to terms with who they are. It is hoped that the dissemination of these findings will contribute to further acknowledgement of the strength and resilience of these young people.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The researchers recognise that the sample size is small. However, the intention was to obtain detailed qualitative information and, as such, the sample size is appropriate for the methodology at hand. However, the researchers would have preferred to obtain a more equitable distribution of male and female participants. In the prevailing culture of silence at the time of this study, more lesbian participants were simply not forthcoming. Confronted with a choice of simply omitting the data generated by the four female participants, the researchers decided to include them as a means of allowing their stories to be heard.

The researchers acknowledge that due to the relatively small sample size (18), the data cannot be generalised to encompass the experiences of all South African gay and lesbian youth coming out experiences. This paper was intended to provide a "snapshot" of the experiences of this sample of sexual minority youth. Hopefully, this initial exploration will serve as a catalyst in developing a more rigorous investigation with a larger sample of gay and lesbian youth.

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