

CHAPTER 9

Coming out of the closet: Negotiating social and physical spaces

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INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, as elsewhere, despite political, legal and educational reforms, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth (LGBTIQ+) continue to battle against homophobia in their daily lives (Butler & Astbury, 2005; Gedro, 2009; Naidoo & Mabaso, 2014; Chikovore & Naidoo, 2016). Sexual orientation prejudice contributes to stress and confusion as LGBTIQ+ people come to terms with their identities (Diaz et al., 2001; Reddy, 2001; Everett, 2015). When LGBTIQ+ people ultimately make a decision to acknowledge their sexual orientation and come out to others, it is often a difficult decision and a process with many possible routes and outcomes (Naidoo & Mabaso, 2014; Everett, 2015). 'Coming out' is a term used to describe the process of acknowledging, accepting and appreciating one's self-identification with a particular sexual orientation and disclosing this understanding to other people (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 2002; Ward & Winstanley, 2005; Shilo & Savaya, 2011). The complexity of the process of forming a gay identity is highlighted in the six-stage Cass Model, where firstly, identity confusion involves individuals beginning to question and experience confusion about their sexual orientation. This is followed by a process of comparing their thoughts and feelings about sexual orientation with those of others. The third stage involves presentation of oneself as being heterosexual in non-gay environments while establishing increased contact with the lesbian and gay community. The fourth phase occurs when one accepts their identity and begins to embrace positive attitudes. The fifth stage comes about when identity pride sets in, with the last stage being synthesis, where one is willing to disclose and is able to deal with various positive and negative reactions this may elicit (Cass, 1979; Gedro, 2009).

Coming out is frequently understood as coming out of a 'closet' (a private space) of oppression and repression to which many homosexuals retreat. Sedgwick (1990) and Seidman (2002) suggested that the concept of the 'closet' was a condition built on the psychosocial model, which ties into the heteronormative societal beliefs of social oppression, focusing on the way heterosexual domination is sustained by shaping the psychology of closeted individuals. Seidman (2002) realised that there is a need to show that the closet

means different things to people depending on their age, income, gender, sense of self, and the strength of their homo- and heterosexual feelings. Seidman (2002) mentioned that experience has shown that some closeted individuals fashion satisfying lives, while others suffer tragically. Seidman (2002) goes on to say from personal experience that he was also uncomfortable with the notion that coming out is liberating. It is believed that simply coming out does not rid the feeling of shame and guilt and that visibility alone does not threaten heterosexual privilege. However, he does acknowledge that coming out for individuals feels good and surely makes more choices possible (Seidman, 2002).

Coming out may be portrayed as a coming into identity by initially acknowledging one's sexual and gender identity to the self, followed by disclosure to friends and family (Henry & Stephens, 2013; Naidoo & Mabaso, 2014). It is understood as a progression that is fluid and dynamic and never fully complete, especially when one is trying to navigate one's social and physical space, and is a process that LGBTIQ+ individuals might experience to some degree throughout their lives (Rosenberg, 2018). Coming out often induces anxiety because one is never certain whether they will be rejected for their sexual orientation. However, coming to terms with one's sexuality does not always entail coming out. Many people post-transition make a conscious decision to go on stealth mode or submerge themselves, in other words, blend in and erase all identifying traces of past sexual history.

The process of coming out is a dynamic process that may consist of a series of stages. Briefly, this may involve pre-coming out (identity awareness and covering up), coming out (identity tolerance), exploration (identity acceptance), first relationships (identity pride), and synthesis (identity integration) (Cass, 1979). However, there is no one stage when the process begins and ends and some of the stages may overlap (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 2002; Ward & Winstanley, 2005). Individuals may initially come out to family, friends or co-workers, but if, for example, they move to a new job or to another city they might have to repeat the coming out process with their new friends and co-workers (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 2002; Ward & Winstanley, 2005; Seidman, 2002). As indicated, coming out is not a linear process but is a fluid one involving moving back and forth (Rosenberg, 2018). Seidman (2002) on the other hand had suggested that he considered his own experience to be different, where he did not come out of the closet but just lived his life. He mentions that as a gay man, his life is more or less like those of his straight friends and colleagues. He was part of a unique academic social world and a large university that is much more tolerant and respectful of social differences than the rest of society (Seidman, 2002).

This complex process can bring with it a myriad of positive and negative feelings for the individual, including fear, relief, anxiety, deep emotional distress, and a sense of being true to oneself (Diaz et al., 2001; Everett, 2015). Furthermore, the process is generally applicable to all people coming out but there are unique variations that may be experienced by people in different settings (Reddy, 2001; Ward & Winstanley, 2005; Seidman, 2002). While there is vast literature on this topic in South Africa, to our knowledge little is known about the coming out experiences of young gay men and lesbians in institutions of higher learning.

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF COMING OUT

This chapter focuses on understanding the progression of coming out in terms of negotiating social and physical space, drawing from the experiences of 30 students from the University

All the participants described experiencing a feeling of being different to other people of the same sex. Experiences were explained as involving sadness, guilt and anger. Equally important is that all participants also experienced a feeling of release and comfort. A common factor in each narrative seems to be the acceptance of the self as gay, lesbian or bisexual: a form of self-identification where the respondents consciously decide on their orientation. Their narratives also revealed that their identities were sometimes split. In Respondent 1 and 7 shared the same experience: *'I am divided into many people.'* In

FEELING DIFFERENT AND ACCEPTANCE OF SELF

The narratives revealed that the most common and first group of people to whom disclosure was made were friends, based on friendship bond or closeness. The manner in which participants shared their experiences pointed to uncertainty, fear, sadness, then calm and contentment. Four major themes emerged: (i) feeling different and self-identification or acceptance of self, (ii) gendered dimension of same-sex orientation, (iii) socio-cultural and religious context, and (iv) expression of youth and freedom.

NEGOTIATING SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL SPACES

LGBTIQ+ identities. These observations and interactions to illuminate the political and politicised nature of interviews produced, thus being able to get more data. Finally, we draw conclusions from getting a particular person's feelings or opinions that may not correlate to what the group individual interviews took the form of 'in-depth' minimally interrupted conversations. The situations and emotional state of the interviewees while they related their stories. The less emphasis on the 'participant' role. We gathered data through individual interviews that method was utilised for research purposes. In so doing, we stress the 'observer' role and place highlighting significant aspects of their unfolding life histories. Participant observation narratives reveal the role the interviewees themselves played in this research process by experiences from people who have shared their stories of coming out. Importantly, these homosexuality. These issues are then teased out by focusing on the narratives of real-life Firstly, we discuss coming out by drawing on relevant debates and issues around relations between our culture, political landscape and a host of other important factors. The role of culture in our society seems to have much to do with the way around the complex into existence and the way they are shaped and constructed. Despite the very personal and actual, lived experience, coming out reveals much about how politicised our identities come coming out experience, but rather to illustrate how, despite commonalities in terms of the coming out. It is not our objective in this chapter to disclose essentialised 'truths' about the identities as gay, bisexual or lesbian in terms of negotiating social and physical spaces of common: they each have had to deal with their own process of coming out about their of KwaZulu-Natal, a university located in an urban setting in South Africa. The group was manageable in terms of the research project requirements and was selected because it fell within the capacity of the research project requirements and was

general, most respondents claimed: *'It isn't about putting up fronts/masks/defences.'* In their narratives all of the respondents agreed that to accept what they are as homosexuals and bisexuals, presupposes a realisation of that which one is 'truly' feeling, desiring, thinking and doing. This includes confronting self-deceptions of an appearing world which they take for granted as the supposedly 'true', 'right one'. The 'truth', also of the gay-self is not something that might be found or discovered, but something that must be created, and actively determined or conscious 'letting-be' which dares to be and live differently.

GENDERED DIMENSION OF SEX ORIENTATION

The narratives also pointed to the intersection of gender roles and sexual orientation and prejudice that contributes to stress and confusion as lesbian, gay, and bisexual people come to terms with their identities. Respondent one made a powerful statement in respect of gender roles, and this speaks to the kind of stereotypes that prevail: 'The narrow-minded representation of homosexuals as being of paedophile nature has led society to not just ostracise us, but fear us, and in turn leads us to fear ourselves.' Another viewed the inability to conform emotionally to the widely accepted norms of 'normal' life as an experience that leads to clashes with powerful feelings about the inner self ... such discord can lead to a psychological state of loneliness, destructive tension, energy-absorbing anxiety and self-doubt'. This shows that gender role expectations play a significant and complex role in prejudice against LGBTQ+ persons. The gendered dimensions of the coming out process are equally relevant and sexual orientation is intricately connected to this aspect.

What is striking about this view is the interviewee's use of the collective pronoun 'we'. Such use implies that the respondent identifies with a group and hints to political connotations which suggest further that the embedded meanings may vary from individual to individual. The act of coming out also seems to be political, where the political is about the crisis or conflict that arises in relation to the conflict between self and society. Public disclosure of one's sexual orientation serves to challenge the patriarchal and heterosexist dominant cultures we live in, as was suggested by several respondents. To this end, coming out is seen as a type of political activism in its own right. The very fact that these respondents have chosen to disclose their identities constitutes a political act, although many are not aware of the power of their disclosure in terms of challenging the heteronormative culture we come from.

The emerging socio-cultural issue narratives are closely related to the respondents' sense of belonging and inclusion in a context where homophobia is prevalent. This relates to circumstances such as exclusion from the family; specific fears of exposure that could lead one to be thrown out of home. Respondent two described this: 'It is a difficult situation but somewhere down the line you have to call a truce between your sexual orientation and the environment in which you live in.' There were also insecurities that stem from religious principles, compelling many to repress their sexual orientation. Respondent eight said, 'My key reason for not coming out is social norms that are in truth dictated by the media and religious beliefs.' Respondent five added that: 'My dad is a pastor and I was raised in [a] highly Christian and restrictive environment. I was not allowed to go out, or have a girlfriend for that matter. I was highly involved in church and defined myself as born-again until I came to university. My struggle has been in church and with God.' While for most participants religion was seen as oppressive, for some it operated as a facilitator for coming

out. For example, on the other hand Respondent two said, 'I believe that I was created by God and he gave me this kind of sexual orientation for a reason.' This again verifies how unique and different the experiences are for people, and how each attempts to make sense of the socio-cultural and religious context in relation to their sexual identity. Other issues speak to the socio-cultural context. Also, within the insecurities that stem from religious principles, compelling many to repress their orientation, religion seems to operate as both oppressor and facilitator of their identity.

EXPRESSION OF YOUTH AND FREEDOM

Besides all the constraints and barriers, it appears that young people are 'coming out' of old and above, as opposed to 30 years old and above (Institute of Medicine Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health Issues and Research gaps and Opportunities, 2011), due in large part to the support systems developed for and by them over recent years. Respondent four said: '... but I would do it as a political thing if I thought it was going to be useful. Like if I was in a group and people were being anti-gay, then I would be like well, you know, I'm bisexual, you know, this is me.' Furthermore, she did not want to pressure people on forcing her sexuality onto them, 'I think that if they learn to be accepting it would be easier for other people to be comfortable with whom they are.' Reiterating the view of coming out as more or less political, Respondent six said that 'coming out as gay person is the basis for individual choice and is a very difficult process'. He went on to say that the more out the person is, the person should be prouder of who they are, though he acknowledged that it is more difficult for some people to come out. Many of the participants argued that coming out of the closet was good because 'straight' people who knew gay people would change their attitudes and learn to accept them. Some participants described it almost as being liberated through the process of finding one's self and to eventually be fully accepting. As Respondent 20 mentioned, 'it is like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders, I feel so liberated right now'. Not everyone thought that coming out as a political strategy was entirely good. Some people felt that there was too much pressure put on gay people. For example, Respondent 29 felt that although it was politically beneficial, she worried about people being bullied. However, a slight majority of the respondents shared the view that public disclosure of one's sexual orientation does challenge the patriarchal and heterosexist dominant cultures.

The act of coming out (as evidenced by the interviewees) is a dynamic process. All interviewees experienced the feeling of being different to other people of the same sex. They all explained their experiences in terms of their difficulties in the coming out process. Equally significant is that all respondents also experienced a feeling of release and comfort. From a psychosocial perspective, this is a positive development in terms of overcoming their initial neurosis in terms of the emotional burden that underpins the act of coming out. The common factor in each narrative seems to be the acceptance of the self as either gay, lesbian or bisexual: a form of self-identification where the respondents consciously decide on their orientation. Their narratives also reveal ideas that their identities are split. Interviewees one and seven explain their identities through the language of being divided into many people. Interviewee two claims, 'It isn't about putting up fronts/masks/defences.' This suggests that the coming out process is about the rediscovery of a person's

true identity, in this instance one which is closely connected to sexual orientation. The journey of coming out often begins with a general awareness of being different, through denial, tolerance, acceptance, and in many cases identifying integration. As the person tells others a 'coming to terms' process of their own.

This chapter explored the process and experiences of the coming out process among gay and lesbian youth in a contemporary South Africa in terms of negotiating their social and physical spaces during this process. The shared interview accounts reconfirmed that the coming out process is a complex, individualised, and a private matter that is related to the development of the self in relation to its environment. From a psycho-social perspective, this is a positive development in terms of overcoming their initial anxiety in terms of the emotional burden that underpins the act of coming out (Diaz et al., 2001; Seidman, 2002; Naidoo & Mabaso, 2014). But not everyone thought that coming out as a political strategy was entirely good. Some people mentioned the pressure put on gay people. Although respondents thought it was politically beneficial, they worried about people being bullied. All of the interviewees agreed that to become what they are as homosexuals and bisexuals, presupposes a realisation of that which one is 'truly' feeling, desiring, thinking and doing. This includes facing self-deceptions of an appearing world that is taken for granted as the supposedly the 'true', right one. The 'truth' also of the gay-self is not something that might be found or discovered, but something that must be created: an actively determined or conscious 'letting-be' which dares to be and live differently.

Returning to the four key themes that shaped this process and life experience, namely: (i) feeling different and acceptance of self, (ii) socio-cultural and religious context, (iii) gendered dimensions, and (iv) youth and freedom. Feeling different and self-acceptance suggests that the coming out process is about the rediscovery of a person's true identity, and in this case one that is closely connected to sexual orientation. According to (Gedro, 2009; Naidoo & Mabaso, 2014) socio-cultural and religious context is about the crisis or conflict that arises concerning the conflict between self and society. As mentioned earlier, socio-cultural and religious perspectives can be viewed as a socially constructed sexual identity in which gay or lesbian individuals interlace with prevailing social forces, including the intersection with heterosexual norms (Sedgwick, 1990; Seidman, 2002; Everett, 2015). Depending on the environment, this can manifest in negatively destructive, or positively supportive ways.

The gendered dimension of sexuality as expressed by intersection of the gender role and sexual orientation, especially against gays and lesbians. These are based on the gender belief system and role in prejudice against gays and lesbians. These are based on the gender belief system and inversion theory, which underlies the stereotype, suggesting that masculine and feminine gender roles are distinct, stable, and tied to biological sex (Chikovre & Naidoo, 2016). The LGBTQ+ community are said to be 'inverted' because they do not conform to the expectation of opposite sex attraction (Rees-Tuyn et al., 2008). This is more relevant given the patriarchal nature of South African society, in which men are seen as dominant and aggressive, and gay men who do not conform to traditional gender roles are seen as a threat to these norms (Reddy, 2001; Chikovre & Naidoo, 2016). Hence, a greater understanding of the role that gender expectations may play in homophobia/sexual prejudice, could lead to more effective educational programmes in support of gender and sexual diversity.

The expression 'youth and freedom' came about as a way of dealing with prejudice and barriers against gays and lesbians and most participants viewed coming out as a type of political activism in its own right that arises as a result of a crisis or conflict between self and society (Reddy, 2001; Naidoo & Mabaso, 2014). However, few participants felt that coming out should be a purely personal decision and not political. At the same time, several respondents discussed the political value of choosing to do so. People have a right to freedom insofar as they do not infringe on the rights of others. However, gay and lesbian youth have to overcome enormous obstacles that impinge upon their right to self-determination (Butler & Astbury, 2005). The emphasis in the community should shift from treating those who have a different sexual orientation to that of the conforming norm, to supporting their rights, including their rights to be different. Nevertheless, based on the purpose of this chapter, the gratitude for the complexity of the coming out process is reflected in all of the identified emerging themes. Besides the narrative expression of uncertainty, fear, and sadness, there was also a feeling of calmness and contentment with their sexual orientation. Family values and norms played an important role in the process of coming out. The dissonance between cultural norms, religious beliefs and sexual identity was noted. However, each step taken in revealing their sexual orientation was dictated by the strength of the relationships and the desire for intimacy.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The interviews found that both homosexual and bisexual people have experienced the effects of conditioning which forces them to be what they are not. To be at odds with mostly heterosexual (and heteronormative) emotional responses of life causes emotional conflicts and a continuous crisis of identity. Facing an upbringing within an environment that is frequently uncomprehending, unsupportive and grossly insensitive to their needs, is an unjust burden to have to bear. Participants differed both in how much they disclose their sexual orientation and in the narrated experiences that follow from disclosure. Despite the very personal and private nature of coming out, sexual identities invariably seem to centre around the complex relations between sexual expression, social, cultural, religious, and political context and a host of other mediating factors. Choosing not to come out can create stress that results from keeping one's sexual orientation hidden. Likewise, coming out may have positive implications for mental health and self-esteem, but disclosure can also have negative consequences for LGBTQ+ youth in increasing the risk of victimisation and abuse. Furthermore, the chapter did not attempt to address gender differences in coming out. It would be logical for future studies to explore gender differences and similarities based on socio-cultural and religious values in the South African context. Therefore, more in-depth-qualitative studies are needed to determine societal perceptions on coming out among the different communities in South Africa.

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