

Black South African MSM's Disclosure of Sexual Practices and Identity and Family's Responses

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KEY FINDINGS

- **Many Black South African MSM disclose their sexual identity to their family.**
- **Family responses are diverse and range from being supportive to unsupportive.**
- **Despite level of support, silence around the men's sexuality was prevalent within many families.**
- **Absence of negative response to one's sexual identity qualified for most men as positive acceptance.**
- **Despite the negative responses from family, many men showed strong resiliency.**

INTRODUCTION

- **South Africa: sexual orientation as a grounds for non-discrimination included in constitution.**
- **Culturally, homosexuality is, however, not accepted in South Africa.**
- **Lack of acceptance affects disclosure and coming out process.**

STUDY PURPOSE

- What affects whether Black South African MSM disclose or acknowledge their sexual practices and identity to their family?
- How do families respond?
- How does the family's response affect the men?

METHODS

- In-depth interviews with 81 purposively sampled Black MSM from four South African townships
 - 20 participants each from Atteridgeville, Mamelodi, and Soshanguve, and 21 from Hammanskraal
- Eligibility criteria:
 - Black
 - 20-44 years old
 - Reside in one of the four townships
 - Have had oral, anal, or masturbatory sex with at least one male in the preceding year

METHODS (CONT)

- Interview topics: sexual and gender identities, sexual practices, social networks, and familial relationships.
- Interview transcripts were analyzed with ATLAS.ti using a priori codes and inductive coding.
- This presentation is based on data from the following a priori codes
 - Openness about sexuality
 - Family
 - Perception and treatment of MSM
 - Social support

RESULTS

DISCLOSURE

■ Out of the 81 MSM

- **54** men had disclosed their sexual identity at least to someone in their family
- **18** men had not disclosed their status at all
- **9** men assumed their family knew but had never had a conversation with them about it

■ Methods of Disclosure

- Directly informed family
- Acknowledged their same-sex interests after
 - Family confronted the men with suspicion
 - Family found out from external sources

REASONS FOR DISCLOSING

- Willing to be open about their sexuality with their family
- Being in a situation that obliged disclosure

“Not a very good thing especially when you’ve got two phones in one house and one person decides to pick up the phone and make a call and hears Barry White on the other side of the line talking to the 18 year old child going, ‘baby I love you’.”

—Gay, masculine/feminine, 31 Yrs.

REASONS FOR NOT DISCLOSING

- **Fear family will disown them, or be disappointed or ashamed**

“They would feel disappointed, they don’t know anything, every time they see a woman walking in and everything, but me not telling them no, I'm like this and that, it will be a shame to myself and they would be disappointed.”

—*Non-gay identified, masculine, 19 Yrs.*

- **Did not not feel ready to disclose or did not identify a particular reason for not disclosing**

- **Embarrassed or ashamed of their sexuality**

“Sometimes I would want to kill myself, I didn't understand why I am like this or maybe it is a curse or what you know. I would have fun outside, I would like take my sisters clothes, wear them and pack them again and take them back. I would be free outside, but I needed to be accepted at home.”

—*Homosexual, straight girl, 26 Yrs.*

- **Many eventually wanted to disclose their sexuality to their family**

Family's reactions

Upon learning about the men's sexuality, families were

- Supportive
- Unsupportive/Negative
- Confused or didn't understand

SUPPORTIVE FAMILIES

- Encouraged men to research their sexual identity
- Linked men to sexuality-related resources
- Defended them against attacks

"The thing is my dad is overprotective since I told him that I am gay. I think he treats me like daddy's little girl. He does not want me around boys, like when we go clubbing."

—Gay, feminine/butch, 19 Yrs.

"My son is gay and take it or leave it."

—Gay, feminine, 25 Yrs.

"Okay my sisters at the moment, my little sister she does not have any problem and I can also discuss anything with her, sexually: how do I sleep with those men? She is so much interested in that."

—Feminine, 22 Yrs.

UNSUPPORTIVE FAMILIES

- Used violence towards the men
- Attempted to transform them
- Disowned them
- Insulted/taunted them

“My mom liked saying to me, ‘you like hanging out with girls, you are going to date guys.’ I thought she understood me and that was when I told them...it started to be something big...they told me to leave the house, I was sleeping at my friend’s place....I’ve been up and down going to the police, they were referring me to social workers but I couldn’t go. I remember I was from John’s place and when I got there it was a fight, a big one.”

—Gay, feminine, 32 Yrs.

- Many families expected the men to marry women and have children
- However, a few families expected the men to marry a man

CONFUSED FAMILIES

- Didn't understand the men's sexual identity
- Expected it to change or were in denial

“In the beginning they were not different. They were...confused about me, but they just said, ‘he’s like that we can’t change him.’ But they never discussed that with me.”

—Gay, feminine, 27 Yrs.

“Firstly they would be...confused, and all that. They thought maybe it is something that will pass...but you know I stood firm and I told them this is how it is, this is how it is going to be forever.”

—Gay, masculine, 22 Yrs.

ACCEPTANCE

- Many of the men felt accepted even though one or more family members was disapproving

"...My mother has accepted, both my parents have accepted, but I can't say they have accepted 100%, especially my father. My mother has accepted because she talks to my boyfriends at times. With my father, it is difficult because we do not have a relationship; the person I am close to is my mother. If there is anything I want I go to her."

—Gay, feminine, 22 Yrs.

- Acceptance meant not being disowned, attacked, or kicked out

SILENCE

- Silence around the men's sexuality was prevalent within many families
- Many said they did not know how their family felt about their sexuality because this topic was never openly discussed

"We never talk about it but they seem extremely comfortable when I'm with my partner around them"

—Gay, masculine, 30 Yrs.

Impact of family's responses

- Many of the men felt “happy”, “proud”, or “lucky”

"Yes, it makes me feel proud because even if like people say bad things about my sexuality, my family like stands up for me so that makes me feel very proud."

—Gay, masculine, 27 Yrs.

- Some men were depressed or sad

"I was depressed, I was like you know what, if me being me is going to affect people in this manner, so let me rather get back to the problem or just be Tsepo who dates closet, and just be Tshepo who dates chicks will kiss and do that and not have sex..."

—Bisexual, masculine, 23 Yrs.

Impact of family's responses (Cont)

- Others did not care what family members thought about them
- Disclosing their sexual identity was liberating

"No I haven't felt any change but...as time goes on, as long as I'm happy I don't care about the next person, what he or she says about me, as long as I'm happy, the first person that comes is me. I'm not going to please them for my life. I'm not going to live for them, I'm going to live for myself. No matter how to get their blessing or what, God is the one who will provide for me you know, but I'm okay I've got friends who supports me through all of this."

--Gay, feminine, 27 Yrs.

“I do not want to disrespect them”

- Talk of sexual identity and practices, or bringing partners around the family, was described as disrespectful

"It's not something we discuss over dinner, but I respect them in so many ways that I do not want to, I mean I wouldn't even kiss my own boyfriend when I had a boyfriend, but I wouldn't kiss him in front of my brother or sister."

—Gay, Masculine/feminine, 31 Yrs.

- Several men were quiet about their sexual identity and practices or felt guilty or embarrassed

CONCLUSIONS

- Many MSM in our study had told their family about their sexual identity/sexual practices.
- While some families were supportive of the men's same-sex sexuality, many families were critical, silent, or confused by it.
- The family's responses affected how the men perceived their sexuality and their mental health and self-confidence. Others were resilient despite a lack of support or acceptance by family.
- Given the violence and other pressures many of these men are subjected to, deeper understanding of underlying processes and ways to support Black South African MSM in their coming out are needed.

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