

Experiences of Indian Gay and Lesbian Individuals

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“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter”.
(Martin Luther King Jr.)

ABSTRACT

Homosexuality has become a very topical issue in society today. Within a South African context, gay and lesbian rights have been acknowledged and enshrined in the constitution since 1996. This has led to an explosion of research on the experiences of gay and lesbian individuals. However, research that has been conducted on this topic has focused mainly on the White middle class male. This is due to the fact that homosexuality is regarded as a Western phenomenon. This study challenged that notion by investigating the experiences of nine Indian gay and lesbian individuals by conducting semi-structured interviews. Thereafter, a combination of narrative analysis was used to identify themes and to verify whether the Cass Homosexual Identity Formation model was applicable in South Africa. It was found that the model is applicable to a certain extent. Additionally the reactions to “coming out” were more accepting than initially anticipated. This study emphasized the importance of recognizing gay and lesbian individuals as members of society and not as deviants.

Keywords: Homosexuality, South Africa, gay and lesbian experiences, Indian, narrative analysis, Cass model, “coming out”.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Methodology	11
Analysis and discussion	15
Conclusion	28
Limitations and suggestions for future research	29
References	31
Appendix A	33
Appendix B	34
Appendix C	35

INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality has become a very topical issue in society today. The past 30 years have seen an explosion in research exploring the experiences and issues of gay and lesbian individuals, including models of how their homosexual identity develops (Adams & Phillips, 2009). In addition to this, the process of *coming out* as a homosexual in different cultures and settings has become more common and a key area of interest for academic research. The total proportion of gay men and lesbians in the general population does not vary dramatically but what varies is the extent of same-sex behaviour and social and cultural responses to such behavior (Bhugra, 2004). The implications of *coming out* vary depending on culture, society and political climate.

Indians are considered to be a minority group in South Africa. With regards to research done on homosexual individuals in South Africa, majority of the studies have focused on the White middle-class male. This has led to the belief that homosexuality is a Western phenomenon (Graziano, 2004). The research question is as follows: what are the factors that shape the experiences of Indian gay and lesbian individuals? A sub question is to what extent does the Cass model apply to these individuals?

South Africa is an example of one of many countries which have acknowledged homosexual rights and have protected these individuals by adding these rights to their constitution. However, in other countries, like Iran, the rights of homosexuals often go unrecognised or worse they are criminalized through laws which prohibit individuals from *coming out* to the public as homosexual; the ultimate punishment being the death penalty (Mwaba, 2009; Miresghhi & Matsumoto, 2008).

These contradictions demonstrate that despite the positive changes made in some countries, homosexuality is still not completely accepted. The stigma is still very high (Barbosa, Torres, Silva, & Khan, 2010). Most of the research done on homosexuality has been to capture the experiences of homosexual individuals as stigmatized members of society (Miresghhi & Matsumoto, 2008).

This study looked at the factors which shape the experiences of Indian gay and lesbian individuals and to shed a more positive light on those experiences. The challenges were investigated, and these were compared to the positive aspects which surfaced. This will serve to demonstrate the transition through which the participants have gone through from the time of

coming out to where they are now. In doing so, I looked at the Cass Homosexual Identity Formation model (Cass, 1984) and saw how it applies to Indian gay and lesbian individuals in South Africa. I shed light on the fact that there are Indian gay and lesbian individuals who can live their lives openly and positively, when in an area where same-sex relationships is very much accepted and embraced. This study is significant in that it was the first in obtaining descriptive experiences of the challenges and positive aspects faced by Indian gay and lesbian individuals, within a South African context.

“Coming Out As Gay or Lesbian”

Coming out is a developmental process through which gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals recognize their sexual orientation and tie this knowledge into their social and personal lives by disclosing their sexual orientation to others (Schubotz & McNamee, 2009). *Coming out* is something that is an ongoing process for any gay and lesbian person. Every time one meets someone new, moves to a new town or city, gets a new job, one has to make the decision as to whether to disclose his or her sexual orientation (Ford, 2003). *Coming out* or outness (Chow & Cheng, 2010) is an important aspect in the identity of gay and lesbian individuals. It is the main ingredient that promotes self-growth, personal empowerment and self-integration, which leads to a positive view of being gay or lesbian. *Coming out* is also deeply shaped by the specifics of local culture (Wang, Bih, & Brennan, 2009). It can also improve the psychological well being in terms of expressing one’s identity. Therefore, *coming out* is more than an intrapsychic process; it also influences interpersonal relationships (Ford, 2003). However, most of the research done on *coming out* has focused on the negative aspects, such as stigmatization, discrimination, guilt, shame, and even suicide in some cases. With regards to the Indian culture, all of the existing research focuses on the negativity and stigma attached to the consequences of *coming out*.

Positive aspects of *coming out*. *Coming out* is viewed to increase positive feelings of being gay or bisexual (Schubotz & McNamee, 2009). Identifying oneself with various homosexual groups and societies increases the positive feelings associated with being gay or lesbian. This is also related to homosexual identity, disclosure to others and a sense of comfort with one’s homosexual orientation. Gay individuals tend to report a reduction in psychological distress and a more coherent self-concept after *coming out* (Wong & Tang, 2004). *Coming out* is acknowledged as therapeutic, it reinforces self-esteem and alleviates isolation. Since keeping

secrets from others makes it difficult to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships and connections, *coming out* is thus relationship building (Wang, Bih, & Brennan, 2009; Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, & Strong, 2008). *Coming out* also serves to change society's view towards homosexuality and in this way it can be viewed as political. Social change and awareness is an aim of homosexual groups.

Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky and Strong (2008) investigated the positive aspects of being a gay man or lesbian. The results revealed three positive domains and 11 themes. The domains were disclosure and social support, insight into and empathy for self and others and freedom from societal norms. Although this was the first study to look at these positive aspects, it did not investigate the particular experiences of lesbian and gay men from racial and ethnic minorities, which could reveal different positive aspects. (Riggle et al., 2008). Therefore, this current study fills this gap in the literature.

Gay and Lesbian Stigmatization

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed the diagnosis of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Dooley, 2009). This lessened stigma to a certain extent and raised awareness of this new sexual identity. It also helped to bring about a level of tolerance regarding homosexuality. Regardless of this, many organized societies and religions disregard these developments and continue to view same-sex relationships as deviant, sinful, indecent, unnatural and immoral (Barbosa et al., 2010; Dooley, 2009; Hill, 2009; Wong & Tang, 2004). The meaning of stigma is different for every gay and lesbian individual; it is experienced in various ways, which depend on aspects such as religion, society, family values, gay and lesbian movements, and the laws regarding sexuality in a country. Stigmatization is a process in which an individual is deemed inferior due to some personal characteristic and then labeled as somebody who is socially unacceptable. (Dooley, 2009).

There are numerous studies in which gay and lesbian individuals are exposed to high levels of stigmatization, involving verbal and even physical abuse. Schubotz and McNamee (2009) conducted a study in Northern Ireland, where homosexuality is viewed as wrong, based on the religious dominance of Catholicism and Protestantism. Because of the high levels of stigma, participants explained that they had to comply with social expectations, claiming that they had no choice. A similar situation exists in the Chinese culture, where homosexuality is seen as a challenge to the ying-yang harmony of heterosexual relationships, family integrity and

social order as prescribed by the traditional Confucian sexual philosophy. This principle states that sex is primarily viewed to procreate. Continuity of the paternal line is important (Wang et al., 2009). Thus, any sexual encounters outside of marriage that do not fulfill procreation purposes are disapproved of. In China, homosexuality was an act which was punishable by life imprisonment prior to 1991 (Chow & Cheng, 2010; Wang et al., 2009; Wong & Tang, 2004). An example of popular culture in Cuba is being macho. Same-sex relationships are thus seen as behavior which goes against the societal norms. The Schubotz and McNamee (2009) and Cuban study are examples of where specific areas of a country is more accepting to same-sex relationships and where one has the opportunity to live out this sexuality. In Northern Ireland homosexuality is accepted in the West part of the country and in Cuba Havana is the most accepting city of homosexuality. Homosexual individuals move to Havana for this reason. (Schubotz & McNamee, 2009; Træen, Martinussen, Vittersø, & Saini, 2009).

Indian Gay and Lesbian Experiences

Same-sex relationships are condemned in the Indian culture. Homosexuality is socially unacceptable and rarely expressed (Træen et al., 2009). In India for example, homosexuals face discrimination and intense harassment at work and may even lose their jobs, have no right to marry, adopt children or even protest against discrimination (Træen et al., 2009). They also have no right to be recognized as “normal” human beings.

Marriage is viewed as a vital part of life in Hinduism. Marriage in Hindu societies is generally desired to fulfill religious duties and progeny, mutual conjugal fidelity and affection. The family has always been the most significant aspect and integral part of the Indian culture, it is the cornerstone and foundation of the Indian society and community (Medora, 2007). In a study done by Bhugra (1997), the experiences of 28 gay men in India were investigated by means of a questionnaire. Several participants said they regretted being homosexual because they would not be able to have children and their own families.

Sex and sexuality is not openly discussed in Indian society, it is taboo to do so. This is where the silence of discussing sexuality comes in. This is also a reason why Indians have such difficulty in *coming out* to their societies and communities. It is therefore anticipated that individuals who have feelings towards the same sex will question their identity repeatedly (Medora, 2007). Participants in the Bhugra (1997) study said they would take a pill to change their sexual orientation, if such a pill existed. This was justified by saying it would make life

simpler, they would not have to cover up and would avoid a horrible life and society's discrimination and stigma. This study also highlighted the extremely high fears of being found out as a gay man in India and the large amount of stigma that is attached to this. Five of the participants had seen a psychiatrist or psychoanalyst and two were treated with electric shock treatment to "cure" them of their homosexuality (Bhugra, 1997).

Islam also condemns same-sex relations but the difference is that Islam has the story of Lut in the Qur'an. This is Muslims' justification for the rejection of homosexuality. This story has traditionally interpreted as the condemnation of their homosexual practices. However, this interpretation has been questioned because the Qur'an is not clear about the position on same-sex behavior (Minwalla, Rosser, Feldman, & Varga, 2005). One of the ways in which gay and lesbian Muslims deal with the immense stigma is to reconcile their religion with their sexual orientation, this is seen as a coping mechanism. An example of this is illustrated by a study done by Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010), which studied coping with potentially incompatible identities: the accounts of religious, ethnic, and sexual identities of 12 gay Muslim British Pakistani men. These men were interviewed and said that Allah loves them and knew that being gay is wrong in Islam. The men also said being gay in Britain was easier than being brought up in Pakistan, where they would have turned out straight because public homosexuality is not acknowledged there, let alone even talked about (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

There are various models of *coming out*, the most recognized one being that of Cass (1984). The Cass model consists of six stages, namely identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride and identity synthesis. Cass assumed that all individuals initially self-identify as heterosexual due to the socialization processes within a culture, regardless of one's sexual orientation. This assumes that all cultures are either heterosexist or homophobic (Adams & Phillips, 2009). This model is different in that it rejects the commonly held assumption that people perceive acquiring a homosexual identity in a negative light. It recognises that the *coming out* process eventually leads to a positive identity. (Cass, 1984).

The first stage, *identity confusion*, consists of feeling confused and realizing that one could be gay (Schubotz & McNamee, 2009). One of two possible paths can be taken, depending on whether homosexuality is perceived as correct or not and as desirable or not. These paths are:

1) the individual will either consider the possibility of a homosexual identity, positively or negatively, or 2) reject it entirely (Cass, 1984).

Identity comparison consists of slowly starting to accept the possibility that one could be gay. The individual is faced with feelings of alienation as the difference between him or herself and heterosexual others becomes clearer. This could involve accepting that one is gay, or but maintaining a heterosexual identity (Cass, 1984; Schubotz & McNamee, 2009).

Identity tolerance is when an individual accepts the possibility of being gay or lesbian and identifies the social, emotional and sexual needs of their sexual orientation. He or she explores meeting other gay individuals and thus develops a sense of community and belonging, which has positive and negative aspects. Also, the quality of contact with other homosexual individuals becomes an important factor, which leads to various forms of behaviour. Disclosure to heterosexual others is very limited. The emphasis is placed on maintaining a public or acceptable image - heterosexual, and a private image - homosexual, which is only revealed in the presence of other homosexuals (Cass, 1984; Schubotz & McNamee, 2009).

During *identity acceptance*, one accepts, rather than tolerates his or her self-image of being homosexual. There is now increased contact with the gay culture. This encourages a more positive view of the new homosexual identity. Self-acceptance also increases. A passing strategy, i.e., pretending to be heterosexual at times, is adopted. This effectively prevents one from being faced with the possible negative reactions of others responses to homosexuality. Selective disclosure is made to others, mainly friends and family (Cass, 1984; Schubotz & McNamee, 2009).

Identity pride is when an individual is engaged in the gay and culture and may view the world as gay or not gay. There is a strong sense of pride towards one's homosexual identity and loyalty to homosexuals as a group. Homosexual "others" are seen as significant and credible, whereas heterosexuals become discredited and lose their value to the individual. Anger about society's stigma attached to homosexuality leads to disclosure and the confrontation with heterosexuals. The purpose of this is to promote the equality and recognition of homosexuals. However, where reactions are consistently negative, identity foreclosure takes place. When they are not, this is inconsistent with expectations and dissonance is created. Attempting to resolve this dissonance leads to progressing to the last stage (Cass, 1984; Schubotz & McNamee, 2009).

In the *identity synthesis stage*, the individual's gay or lesbian identity is incorporated with other aspects of his or her life. Homosexuality is no longer seen as the only factor which determines one's identity, but rather that there are many facets to one's character (Cass, 1984; Schubotz & McNamee, 2009).

The Cass model has been shown to have validity, but it does not take into consideration socio-cultural factors and it has shown to fit well in most Western societies. In a study conducted by Schubotz and McNamee (2009), gay men were interviewed and the researcher identified each participant with the various stages in the Cass model. The aim of the study was to determine to what extent this model of *coming out* applies to young people in Northern Ireland, considering the larger than average level of homophobia there. The results revealed that *coming out* in Northern Ireland does fit the Cass model, but to a certain extent. Because of the local specificities, young people delay *coming out* in Northern Ireland and experience long periods of isolation, loneliness and depression (Schubotz & McNamee, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

Design

A qualitative design was used for this study. This type of design offers many different types of methods to collect and analyse data. This means there is a lot of variability in the methods of collecting data. This allows researchers to be flexible in the methods which they choose and to ensure that he or she captures the experiences of participants using the most effective method/s (Willig, 2001).

Qualitative researchers aim to get an in-depth understanding of human behaviour and the reasons for this behaviour. Meanings which participants add to specific experiences are very important to qualitative researchers, this is their biggest concern. The researcher is interested in how participants make sense of the world and what their experiences are and how he or she experiences them. The aim of the researcher is to understand what it is like to experience particular situations and how participants manage these situations. From this we can see that qualitative research does not aim to generalize to the population as the experiences of individuals are subjective and therefore different. This is also why the aim of qualitative research is not to predict behavior (Willig, 2001; Willig, 2008).

Sampling

I was offered help by a friend who has a very well established network of friends and contacts who are gay and lesbian in Cape Town. I started out by sending an e-mail to people who she suggested and the sample became a snowball sample from there on. I was referred to people by participants and this is how I built up my nine participants. Four of the participants were from Johannesburg and the other five were from Cape Town. It worked out this was as the e-mails were sent all over the country.

The characteristics of participants is that he or she had to be of Indian descent or origin, i.e., one or both of the parents are Indian, and or grandparents are Indian. Each participant had to self-identify him or herself as gay or lesbian and must have *come out*. Participants' ages range from 24 to 48 years. In terms of religion, four participants were Muslim, three were Hindu and two were Christian. With regards to education, eight of the participants have a university degree, they are all professional individuals. Five of the participants are involved in research on gay and lesbian Indians, alternate sexualities and gender based research. I aimed to have a balance between male and females, but it was very difficult to find Indian lesbian individuals. Also, my sample is so small because it is an exploratory study and it was extremely difficult finding participants. With the time constraints, I do believe a sample of nine participants is enough. Of the nine participants three were lesbian and six were gay. I did not include bisexual, transgender and transsexual individuals in my study as it would have been very difficult to find such individuals.

Data Collection Method and Procedure

I conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and it lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. Three of the participants preferred me to meet them at their workplace, five of them picked a restaurant of their choice and I arranged the interview in the psychology department at the University of Cape Town for one participant. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder, with the consent of each participant (see Ethics section). Each participant was showed how the recorder worked and was free to turn it off at any time during the interview if he or she felt uncomfortable.

The semi-structured interview provided me with the opportunity to hear the participants talk about his or her experience as an Indian gay or lesbian individual. A semi-structured interview is also a good method to use because it allows each participant to say more than what

the researcher asks. This is a way of allowing each participant to share insight into how he or she experiences a particular phenomena. The questions asked by the researcher function as a trigger to encourage the participant to talk. This style can be described as non-directive, however it is important to acknowledge that it is the researcher's research question which drives the interview (Willig, 2008). I had a set of questions that I used as a guideline for the interview (see Appendix A).

The same term may not mean the same thing to all interviewees. The emphasis in a semi-structured interview is on meaning, i.e., the researcher needs to try to understand what the participant meant by what he or she said, irrespective of how he or she said it (Willig, 2008). This is where I took the opportunity where necessary to clarify what participants said. This opportunity for clarification is part of the reason why I chose the semi-structured interview.

Analysis

Narrative analysis was used to investigate the experiences of Indian gay and lesbian individuals. A narrative carries many meanings and is often called a "story". It is different from a random series of events in that the events are all connected and it is seen as a whole. The way in which the events are spoken about and the meanings attached to them are important (Riessman, 2008). In this study, the meanings attached to "*coming out*" and the term gay were specifically explored. Narrative analysis is a family of methods for interpreting texts that have a common storied form. Narratives analysis seeks to find complex patterns and descriptions of identity, which in this case is relevant because this study focused on sexual identity or preference (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004).

The purpose of a narrative is to see how individuals impose order on the way in which their experiences flow to make sense of events in their lives (Riessman, 1993). Narratives also invite us to enter the perspective of the narrator. We ask the question of why was the story told in that way? (Riessman, 1993).

Narratives are useful for what they reveal about social life (Riessman, 1993). As this study looked at gay and lesbian experiences, it was already implicitly taking the approach that something is not normal, is deviant and has labels attached to it. This was important in how participants told their stories. The labels gay and lesbian were something which participants did not like and as they are comfortable with who they are, this idea of "normal" or deviant was

unwanted. How their families, friends and society reacted did come into play. The narratives were told in chronological order, starting from the moment of realizing that one is different.

Reflexivity

Qualitative research acknowledges that the researcher influences and therefore shapes the research process, both as a person and a thinker. Reflexivity is important in qualitative research because it encourages researchers to center and reflect upon the ways in which the researcher is implicated in the research and its findings. It is virtually impossible for the researcher to remain objective or neutral in qualitative research (Willig, 2008).

Reflexivity is also how the researcher acknowledges her role and the reasons for doing the research. My interpretation, opinions, beliefs, agenda, culture and personal experiences shaped the research process and its findings. This acknowledges my subjectivity and the impossibility of being “neutral” or objective (Willig, 2008). The way in which the data is reported at the end is filtered through me, my perspectives and interpretation. I think being an Indian myself might have impacted the way in which I present the data. A question I found that the participants asked me is why am I doing research on this topic and whether I am lesbian or not. I think this had an impact on how I present the data as well. In addition to this, I am accepting of homosexual behaviour in the Indian culture. I feel being a heterosexual gave me entry into the detailed experiences of my participants. The meaning of “*coming out*” and the irrelevancy of the term gay and lesbian was highlighted by all the participants. I feel I collected very unique data.

Trust is also something that I feel was very important in this study. Being gay and lesbian in the Indian culture is a very sensitive topic, yet all the participants were very open and honest with me. The fact that they shared such an intimate part of their lives with me made me feel very privileged and grateful to have them partake in my study. This trust that was immediately established made me feel very responsible as a researcher as my participants were sharing their personal, intimate thought, feelings and experiences with me.

Ethics

Participants were given consent forms (See Appendix B and C) to read and sign before the interview. This study adhered to the ethical guidelines for research with human subjects as specified by the University of Cape Town (UCT) Codes for Research. Ethical approval for this

study was granted by the Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee at the University of Cape Town.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Once the interviews were conducted, I listened to the recordings and then transcribed the data accordingly. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were given to each of the participants. The narratives started with when participants first realized they were gay or different, this was then followed by how they reacted to those feelings, how they understood what those feelings meant and whether they felt the need to “*come out*”. Those who came out explained the important people who they came out to, what their reactions were and how they became more accepting of who they are. Those who did not “*come out*” explained how they really had no problem or struggle with feelings towards people of the same sex. The narratives ended with participants saying whether they are proud to be gay or not.

Narratives

From the nine participants I came up with two types of narratives: one which signifies “*coming out*” and the other which does not. The “*coming out*” narratives had the tone of acceptance, regret, overcoming internal conflict and increased confidence and expressing oneself. The other narratives were not “*coming out*” stories in that the participants never felt the need to “*come out*”. These had tones of activism, implicit understanding, non-verbal acceptance and “going with it”. In addition to the narrative analysis and identifying social factors which shaped the participants experiences, I identified whether the participants went through the stages in the Cass model.

Being Different

This theme consists of the stages or ages when participants acknowledged or realized that they were gay or lesbian and how they reacted to those feelings.

Four of the participants, of which three were gay and one lesbian said they knew they were different between the ages of 12 & 17. Two of the participants, who were both gay said they were always different from as far back as they can remember. One gay participant said he was always a straight kind of person and decided in his 20s to have a relationship with a man. Two gay participants said they knew they were attracted to men at the early age of six years.

Karan: I first considered that I was gay when I was six. I use to watch the soapie Loving a lot and I had the biggest crush on a guy called Steve. And that was when I first realized I preferred guys. And I just imagined kissing him (laughs).

Punam: Okay, so how did you react to these feelings?

Karan: I actually enjoyed them, I use to spend a lot of my time daydreaming about Steve a lot so it wasn't um confusion. To me it was quite natural and that's how I think I accept who I am. So kissing a guy is something I considered to be quite natural.

This is an indication that the reactions to being different can be natural instead of confusing and disturbing, as indicated by research (Cass, 1984) from a very young age. Dinesh and Suresh too realized they were attracted to men while watching a television show, they “liked what they saw”. Karan and Seema’s narrative shared the tone of acceptance. They both learnt to accept themselves for who they are, this was a key point in their narratives and took years to achieve. Mohammed shared Karan’s experience of just being himself, being comfortable with his attraction to men. Neither of them pondered over why or what the feelings meant, nor did they seem to care what others thought of them, hence them both not going through the identity comparison stage.

Akshay on the other hand had a very different incident in realizing that he was different.

I was in an environment where I was with family all the time, it was a minor aspect of sexual abuse that also gave me this experience to know that I was different, that I was homosexual. From the age of six due to three or four sexual abuse encounters I knew that I preferred the male form rather than the female form so that's where it all started. The abuse was just experimentation and in all my honesty I did actually enjoy the experimentation. (Akshay)

Akshay used this incident as one of the main reasons to him being a homosexual now, it gave him an understanding of his attraction to men. After realizing that he actually was abused, this caused him to emotionally block off his feelings. In other words, his abuse lead him to

recognize his feelings towards men. He got engaged at the age of 20. The second stage, identity comparison, was evident at this juncture of the narrative.

She distracted me. In a way she did arouse me, I did not have to fantasize about men, it was interesting and in a way I factored her as reasons to why I actually became out as a homosexual. (Akshay)

He illustrates that he is maintaining a heterosexual identity while acknowledging his feelings towards men. On the other hand he does not have feelings of alienation. Instead he regrets the loss of that particular relationship (Cass, 1984). Imraan also used a woman as his reason for explaining why he pursued a relationship with a man.

Two of the participants experienced very strong negative reactions to their feelings of being different. Dinesh described his feelings thus:

What I felt was more of resistance to being gay, I didn't want to be gay, I was less worried about what my parents would say, it was more an internal conflict. I thought uh I'd like be left alone, I thought that no one would be friends with me, I thought I'd be completely ostracized. It made no sense to me at the time either 'cause I couldn't understand why it existed. You know as far as I knew and remember I was quite young, sex was for procreation. So I thought well there must be something wrong with me. I kind of became sexless, so I didn't show interest in anything or anyone you know, um as a way of hiding my sexuality. (Dinesh)

The above extract is a very good indication of the identity confusion stage (Cass, 1984; Schubotz & McNamee, 2009). The extract applies to Seema as well as she and Dinesh both took years to come to terms with the internal conflict they were struggling with. Dinesh becoming sexless is a very extreme way of him expressing his fear of being gay, he did not maintain a heterosexual identity but rather showed no interest in males, females and sex. In terms of narrative tone, this extract signifies an internal conflict. It can be said that both Dinesh and Seema considered the possibility of a homosexual identity, negatively, a clear indicator of

identity confusion. However their feelings of alienation are usually associated with identity comparison. It is likely that with Indian gay and lesbian individuals' feelings overlap between the stages in the model.

“Coming Out”

This theme consists of the “*coming out*” experiences of the participants, what it meant to them, the reactions of family and friends and how it changed them. For most of the participants they did not believe in the term “*coming out*”. It seems to be a non-term, or they did not find it necessary to “*come out*”.

For me there isn't a thing of coming out because by encouraging that kind of a mindset. You are then saying there's something wrong with you, there's something different with you. And therefore you've got to stand on a podium and tell the world that you are odd. And for me it's not about that. If you come home with a girl, for example, as man you don't go home and say, 'big deal, now I'm a man!'. It hasn't been that's been scary or fearful. It wasn't something that I needed to discuss with anybody because who I sleep with is not a public matter, it's a private matter. (Imraan)

This illustrates that “*coming out*” is an unnecessary term because by disclosing to others that you are gay means you are saying that there is something wrong with you, that you are deviant, and this leads to creating the stigma yourself. Tasneem shared this view of the non-existence of the term “*coming out*” and this is inconsistent with research (Chow & Cheng, 2010; Ford, 2003; Schubotz & McNamee, 2009; Wang et al., 2009). These studies state that “*coming out*” is a necessary and important process in contributing to an individual's identity, self-esteem, self-confidence and empowerment and thus leads to a positive view of being gay or lesbian. However, with regards to the irrelevancy to “*coming out*”, this shared view is consistent with research which says that individuals feel that being gay or lesbian matters little (Wang et al., 2009). This is also inconsistent with research as it illustrates that one can have a positive view of being gay without “*coming out*”.

When I tried to disclose to my friends and colleagues that I was gay they were like, “yes and?” ... I didn't have to say anything to anybody. Similarly I've never really felt the need

to have the conversation with my parents, there was a kind of implicit acceptance of it and I always knew that was the tension that we had to maintain. If it ever became a conversation it would become a problem and I was never really interested in making it a problem so I really have always just lived my life. (Mohammed)

Mohammed explains here that he never had to disclose his sexuality to his friends, as they all already knew he was gay. Also, this is an indication of an implicit understanding and acceptance by Mohammed's parents of him being gay. He did not ever feel the need to have a discussion with them about it. This seems to be a way of "coming out" on its own. Karan shared the same experience of "coming out" and this was done through sexual experimentation, instead of verbal disclosure to others, as various studies state (Cass, 1984, Chow & Cheng, 2010; Ford, 2003; Schubotz & McNamee, 2009; Wang et al., 2009).

It is possible that there is a connection between the identity tolerance stage of Cass's model and the process of "coming out".

I was wondering how easy it was going to be to get into that lifestyle, whatever the lifestyle was going to be. So, I don't think I was not accepting, I was just more wondering how my life was going to turn out as a gay man. I knew that my family was going to be okay with it because I knew them, we were a very close family despite being quite religious and so on, so I knew they weren't going to shut the door on me or anything like that. So I was accepting that that's who I am, but it was more just wondering what's gonna happen when I actually start seeing men and stuff. (Suresh)

This is an example of identity tolerance whereby thinking of a gay identity takes over. Suresh says how he was more interested in what his life would be like as a gay man and who he would date rather than what his parents would say, as this was not an issue for him. Priya and Akshay also identified with this stage as they both shared similar experiences with regards to meeting other gay people. This demonstrates their developed sense of community and belonging. This extract has a very positive feel compared to what previous research has found (Bhugra,

1997; Chow & Cheng, 2010; Schubotz and McNamee, 2009; Træen et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2009; Wong & Tang, 2004).

I told my sisters one by one. The first one I told when I was about 18 and she was actually completely fine with it. I did have a problem with my eldest sister who didn't wanna accept it, she said it was a phase that I was going through and that I'll grow out of it. I had already accepted who I was at the time so my response to her was that it's something that she's gonna have to get use to 'cause it's a phase that I'm gonna be living for the rest of my life... There were a handful of male friends like that yes, so I just cut them off. My reasoning behind this is that it's not something that happened overnight, it took me years and years to accept who I was and to be happy with who I was and to realize you know it's not a mistake and it's not wrong, um it's just the way that I am. So my opinion is that if you don't accept it, that's your problem not mine, deal with it yourself (Seema).

Seema's eldest sisters reaction is consistent with research which states that family members or friends think it is a phase which will be overcome (Sharpe, 2002). This reaction was similar to those of Priya, Akshay and Imraan's families. In addition to this, Seema expressed how her male friends' reactions did not bother her at all, she did not try to give them time to deal with it, but rather cut them out of her life because she did not want those unwanted, negative vibes. This is also a clear indication of the identity acceptance stage.

Religion can be an important aspect of identity. As a result of this it is important to reconcile your sexual preferences with your religious beliefs. Part of Suresh's "coming out" process involved his pastor:

The second person that I came out to was the priest in the church because I met my partner at that stage and we were getting a bit more serious about our relationship so I told my pastor that I need to speak to him. Then we went aside and it took like I think 20 minutes or something for the words to come out that I was gay. Then he read our Romans chapter one, which said that you know it's unacceptable and it's just not allowed. So he

said I've got to start dating girls and I would eventually change and he would pray for me and he'll give me literature and things like that. So I was like ya but I'm coming to you first because I want to tell you that I want to tell my parents about this and he said don't tell your parents anything, just wait and I'll give you literature and I'll pray for you and you must start dating girls and stuff like that. So I waited about six months and then I didn't hear from him again. (Suresh)

Coming from a very religious family, Suresh sought advice from his pastor, who as expected went straight to the Bible and wanted Suresh to ignore his feelings towards men and date women instead, thinking that it would “go away” (Hammersmith & Weinburg, 1973). This is consistent with several studies which reject homosexuality from a religious point of view and believe that feelings will fade away with time by conforming to heterosexual norms (Barbosa et al., 2010; Gutzmore, 2004; Hammersmith & Weinburg, 1973; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Minwalla et al., 2005; Mwaba, 2009). When faced with a similar response to Suresh, Akshay and Imraan coped by interpreting Islam in a way that allowed them be homosexual.

Negative reactions were something which majority of the participants had to deal with. This had more to do with the fact that their families were not ready for the disclosure and were more concerned with what the community would say.

Um my parents weren't excited (laughs), but I think they were shocked, they didn't really say anything. And I sort of figured that they would have figured it out anyway – I think they were more shocked that I verbalized it, and that it was not something that they had to deal with... A good example is at one point my mother said: “You know if you were pregnant or a drug addict, I would know how to cope with it”. So it was more about them and them not being equipped than anything else. (Tasneem)

This is an example where Tasneem expresses how shocked her parents were, they were not expecting her to tell them she was in a relationship with a woman. Also this is an indication that she knew it was something her parents would get over with time. As illustrated earlier by an extract from Mohammed, it was more of an implicit, non-verbal acceptance, which seems to

have meaning attached to it. Dinesh, Akshay, Seema and Priya shared similar experiences, which suggest that the Indian family is more concerned with what society will have to say rather than the actual fact that their child is gay or lesbian.

For one participant, being immersed in the gay culture was not worth the loss of his family's respect:

I simply hate the concept of homosexuality and this whole kind of association with partying and drugs. It really ruined my life. I lost the respect of my family... I regret the bad company and I regret the fact that I actually came out... I think I would have been able to manage the impact and a little more better than doing it the way I have, reason being it's because social status played a very big role in everything and if I could go back I would definitely change what I did and what I said at those times because it would have definitely helped me now to not be in the situation that I am in emotionally. I find myself held back because of my state of mind. Maybe then I could say I want to be happy for myself as well, but at this stage I can't say that I'll ever be happy. (Akshay)

With regards to the stages in the Cass model, Akshay's extract is an example of the identity tolerance stage, with very negative feelings (Cass, 1984; Bhugra, 1997) towards the homosexual culture: taking drugs and partying. He did go through all the stages in the model, but his feelings were more negative and regretful, specifically to the way in which he came out. Akshay expresses how he would rather be a heterosexual (Hammersmith & Weinburg, 1973). Akshay's experience illustrates the different ways in which individuals can progress through the Cass model stages.

As opposed to Akshay, Dinesh, Seema and Suresh felt that "coming out" was a positive experience:

I think it made me realize that everything I think may not be true because my biggest fear was that I was completely terrified and that I would be completely alone. It made me realize it's worth speaking up, it's worth living your truth. People won't necessarily

respond as badly as you think, I had the opposite response, my friends all embraced me, not one of them rejected me, not one. (Dinesh)

Dinesh's extract above is consistent with studies which say that "coming out" is an important process in an individual's gay identity. It overcomes fear, increases self-acceptance, self-worth and alleviates isolation (Chow & Cheng, 2010; Ford, 2003; Riggle et al., 2008; Schubotz & McNamee, 2009). Dinesh overcame his fear that people won't accept him. Seema felt that coming out was a huge weight lifted off her shoulders; she could actually be who she was freely. Also, she wasn't hiding anything from the people closest to her anymore, so this was relationship building for her.

Identity

This theme consists of the word gay or lesbian as a label; what it means to participants, religion; how this ties in with homosexuality and how sexuality shapes an individual's identity.

Part of the stereotype of gay men is that they are feminine to a certain extent and this affects their perceptions of their masculinity. This illustrates that there are further subdivisions within the gay culture:

You know I don't like this very stereotypical gay scene. The negative aspects if you say you're gay is that you're immediately placed in a box and that box is often you know very feminine guys and you know you see these guys everywhere... they carry little handbags around, um they have this squeaky voice and things like that. I just feel if you say you're gay then you get put into that box, which I don't see it as something that's positive because if I think you gay you can still be yourself, you don't need to feel gay and feel feminine. (Suresh)

Akshay, Mohammed, Suresh and Imraan shared a similar view that being feminine constantly challenges and questions a man's masculinity and is therefore associated with being gay, however not all gay men are feminine (Sharpe, 2002). This is an assumption which society has incorporated into the gay stereotype.

From society's point of view, homosexuality is a complex and misunderstood lifestyle. It is seen as deviant and unnatural (Frost, 2011). Priya elaborates on this below:

But when things are not in the black and white form of way people think they struggle to embrace it let alone chat and unpack it. (Priya)

Priya expresses her opinions on society's thinking and views on something which she feels is very closed minded. All the participants felt strongly about this as they all feel that they are "normal" and themselves, whereas society sees them as "different". Priya further explained how role playing can really be exhausting and that it shouldn't even be necessary. All the participants felt strongly about themselves and living openly and honestly (Riggle et al., 2008).

Society associates homosexuality with sex and promiscuity, while that is only one aspect of the lifestyle. What needs to precede this view is accepting and seeing homosexuals as people and not the acts associated with being gay or lesbian (Sharpe, 2002). Akshay explains:

You should see yourself as a person before you see yourself as whatever you do in bed. Sex, being gay, those two things are always associated, it's always about who you going to sleep with next, how good they were in bed. But there are so many other things that's all part of you as a person. For me sex is not even a priority, you need to elevate yourself beyond the point that sex is a necessity, it makes you feel good and whatever but you need to have your priorities straight. Sexuality does not define who I am and that's the biggest problem with the gay community. Sexuality is what they want to define themselves by. (Akshay)

This is an indication that being gay is only one part of who you are and that being gay or lesbian does not only have to do with sex, it can have an emotional aspect to it too. Promiscuity is often associated with homosexuality (Sharpe, 2002). Imraan agreed with Akshay and elaborated by saying that sexuality can be divorced from one's sexual orientation and your identity. Also, sex and sexuality are only small aspects in a person's life. Sex and sexuality in

Imraan's case was more about learning about the body parts as he had a very traditional upbringing.

As mentioned earlier, religion can be an important aspect of one's identity. However, it is not as important to question your sexuality in terms of religion because it is believed that God made you the way that you are for a reason and by hiding who you really are, you are not being true to yourself. Mohammed explains further:

I don't believe in a God that is um twisted or vengeful and I don't think he'd make people this way and want them to be another way for some unknown point. There are just too many people in the world who are like this. (Mohammed)

This is a very powerful point that religion and its scriptures are at the end of the day read by the human eye, what is said and how people interpret it will determine whether people struggle with their identities as gay or lesbian people. Akshay used a very useful term in his interview: "cafeteria faith", in which an individual picks and chooses off the menu to suit him or herself and that this should be allowed if everyone wants to be happy and go to sleep at night without a guilty conscience. Dinesh had a similar point of view. He decided after going to his pastor that he was going to tell his parents and did not take the pastor's advice, as he did not want to hide any longer.

Positive Aspects of Being Gay

This theme consists of the aspects which participants identified as being positive with regards to their sexuality.

Mainstream society mostly have negative feelings towards homosexuality because of the stigma that they have attached to it. However, for the homosexual individuals, there are negative as well as positive aspects of a gay lifestyle. One of these positive aspects is the ability to live one's life without the fear of being judged. Seema and Dinesh elaborate:

By coming out and being who I am and not hiding anything it has made me confident in the sense that I know who I am and I accept it and if people want to judge based on one

tiny aspect of your life then so be it, there's no room for those type of people in my life. (Seema)

It's made me a more caring and compassionate person. It's given me a very deep understanding of people, 'cause of everything I went through, I'm more accepting of other people. It's made me think about how we look at rules and society and how we accept norms and how we are free to actually reject norms at any time. It's taught me a lot about religion in how indoctrinating, dogmatic and unnecessary it is. It's also given me a lot of freedom, I'm not bound to a "normal" life. (Dinesh)

The two extracts above are consistent with the findings in the study done by Riggle et al. (2008) which found positive themes of developing empathy and compassion, living authentically and honestly, gaining personal insight and sense of self and freedom from gender-specific roles.

Perceptions on Indian Gay and Lesbian Individuals

The Indian culture and its people tend to struggle with things which are not in the black and white form which they are use to. They are too set in their ways and this has a lot to do with religious values and close-mindedness. Imraan, Seema and Akshay express their opinions on Indian gay and lesbian individuals in South Africa below:

The community does not understand it and I mean acceptance is what we're looking for but tolerance is not even a word. (Imraan)

I wish more Indians would actually take that step up and accept who they are rather than deny it or hide it by going out with and marrying people who they are not going to be happy with. In the same breath I wish Indian families were also more accepting 'cause it takes two to tango... I do think Indians are ignorant towards homosexuality. (Seema)

Indian homosexuals in South Africa are a close-knit community. They create their little circles that they're safe in which is the best way for them to live stable lives. I find that we tend not to overexert ourselves in public anymore like we use to, which is a good thing I think the queer Indians have learnt to actually keep it within the close-knit community

like normal Indians do. They tend not to try and over emphasize that they are gay. Some of them can if they're comfortable with a group of people who will accept them. But right now we don't see it as being a very important factor to let everybody know who you prefer in bed. I think in a way right in this moment in time ignorance plays a very positive role as to how homosexuals are being realized right now, education is going to be slow and but surely at some point it's going to become a general topic. (Akshay)

The extracts above are important and powerful in showing that the conservatism that is associated with Indians, especially with regards to sexuality is very important, it needs to be addressed and eventually fall away. Maintaining a heterosexual identity within the Indian culture has always been a priority, many Indians have hid their sexuality or were very scared of the repercussions of coming out because of the fear of what the community would say and how they would react. (Bhugra, 1997; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Medora, 2007; Minwalla et al., 2005; Træen et al, 2009).

Proud To Be Me (Not Gay)

This theme illustrated the importance of just being who you are and that your sexuality is not what defines you but is rather a small part of your identity. It also illustrates the term gay is a label which is not necessary as individuals do not actually associate with it:

I am just proud to be me because I've never known any other life accept being gay so I can't really compare but, I wonder if I am actually. I don't really define myself as being gay, but rather as being me. I don't like to be labeled, there are very different facets to who I am and being gay is just one of them and it's not on the top, neither is it down at the bottom, it's just who I am. (Karan)

I don't think that I should be specifically classified as a gay man and someone else as a straight man. Ideally it would be completely normal you know, it would be completely okay either way and that's how I want to live my life, I don't want to make a point of oh I'm gay, I'm loud, I'm out, I'm proud you know, I'm like no, I just want to live my life. Be human you know. So I don't live my life as a gay man, I live my life as Dinesh. (Dinesh)

These extracts are consistent with the identity synthesis stage in Cass's model (1984), which states that the individual's identity is incorporated with other aspects of his or her life (Schubotz & McNamee, 2009). As this is the last stage in the model, it shows how one progresses from thinking about homosexuality all the time to eventually seeing it as one aspect of one's life. All nine participants went through this last stage.

I did have one outlier from the nine participants who had the following response:

I'm definitely not proud to be a homosexual. A gay Indian Muslim homosexual, no!... Being called gay is a form of labeling and it's to identify the deviations in society, that's it. (Akshay)

Akshay's case was very unique in that he identified with all six stages of the Cass model, but said that he regrets coming out and that he is not proud to be a homosexual. Akshay's tone throughout his narrative was one of regret. He regretted the way in which he came out, he wishes he could go back and do things differently.

CONCLUSION

This study looked at the factors which shaped the experiences of Indian gay and lesbian individuals. The factors identified had to do with individuals mindsets and feelings towards themselves and their identities, their upbringing, religious values, community's beliefs and reactions, the Indian culture and the conservatism that goes with it and how society has blown the labels gay and lesbian out of proportion. This study has highlighted the urgent need for society to stop using the word "normal" and coming up with labels because we all need to be treated as human beings, not as deviants on the basis of our sexual orientations. In addition to this, the general feeling from all the narratives were positive, no one was kicked out or ostracized, as previous studies have found. Indian gay and lesbian individuals are fairly discreet about their sexual orientation as indicated by several participants who rely on non-verbal acceptance by family and society. This on its own has meaning attached to it, it is a way of coping and living in a manner which is understood and accepted. With regards to "coming out",

this was evident in most of the participants, even though some said they did not believe in it, this can serve as a way of “*coming out*” on its own.

The Cass model was found to be relevant and every participant, except two identified with at least three of the stages. The two who identified with less than three of the stages personally did not believe in the notion of “*coming out*” and they did not have an internal struggle with regards to their sexuality. They seemed to skip straight to the last stage of the model, identity synthesis. Cass tested her model in 1984 by using a questionnaire with 172 participants. 103 males and 69 females identified themselves with at least one of the stages in the model. In comparison to other studies (Cass, 1984, Schubotz & McNamee, 2009) done using the Cass model, the majority of the participants in this study did not identify with the identity pride stage, which can be an explanation for Indian individuals with the sample obtained for this study. This is consistent with results from a study done by Adams and Phillips (2009) which found that Two-Spirit, lesbian and gay native Americans also did not go through stage four of the model. This can be explained by the fact that participants did not seem to identify much with the gay and lesbian culture, most of them seemed to dislike the term gay and lesbian and said that being attracted to someone of the same sex doesn’t mean that one’s tastes and interests are guided by this culture.

In general, the model seemed to have worked. Also, participants seemed to dislike and reject the stereotypes that are typically associated with the gay and lesbian culture, for e.g., being feminine and partying and taking drugs equates to being gay. Something which was highlighted several times by participants was that promiscuity and sleeping around is associated with being gay or lesbian and this really is not the case, according to their experiences. Participants were very adamant in pointing out that gay and lesbian individuals need to be seen as people and not as deviants in society.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is limited in that it looked at only gay and lesbian Indian individuals and did not include bisexual, transgender and intersex. Future research could look at other cultural groups in South Africa and then compare the results to see whether the Cass model fits across all cultures within a South African context. The example of Akshay’s very unique story highlights

the importance of using case studies as a way of understanding unique experiences like his, so future research done on LGBTI individuals should consider using case studies.

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APPENDIX A

(After the researcher has looked at the “river of life” of each participant, she will ask the following question, as a conversation starter):

- Can you explain to me what you have drawn in your “river of life?”

(The researcher will listen to the participant’s response and clarify or ask the participant to elaborate if she is not sure of something)

Other possible questions during the interview are:

1. When did you consider that you might be gay or lesbian?
2. How did you react to or deal with these feelings? Did culture play any role in the way you reacted to these feelings?
3. What were your family views on same-sex relations?
4. Growing up was sexuality discussed in your home?
5. Who did you first *come out* to?
6. What made you decide to *come out*?
7. How did *coming out* change you?
8. What were the reactions of the people you came out to?
9. What in your experience are the positive aspects of being a gay or lesbian individual?
10. How has being gay or lesbian shaped your individual identity?
11. Do you feel living in the “gay friendly” city of Cape Town has impacted on your life as a gay/lesbian?
12. What are your perceptions or opinions of gay Indians in South Africa?
13. Are you proud to be gay?

APPENDIX B

You are invited to participate in a research project which will be looking at the experiences of Indian gay and lesbian individuals in South Africa. I am interested in your experience/s of *coming out* and how this has shaped your gay or lesbian identity.

I will be asking you a series of questions in a face-to-face interview, which will last approximately one and a half hour.

Participation in the study:

- Participation is voluntary
- The interview will be recorded with a digital recording device and you will have full control over it, i.e., you may turn it off at any time during the interview
- All information collected during the interview will be kept confidential and will only be used for the purpose of the research project
- Your name will not be revealed in the study
- You may withdraw at any time during the study and there is no penalty for doing so
- You will not be paid for your participation

By signing below, you agree to participation and to allow the researcher to record the interview:

Signature

Date

There are no foreseeable risks involved in the participation of this research, however, due to the sensitivity of this topic, if you feel participation has psychologically affected you, you can call this number for counselling, 021 712 6699. The helpline's operational hours are from 13:00-21:00. This is an organisation called Triangle Project and it offers support and services for LGBTI individuals.

Feel free to contact me on 072 601 8881 at any time if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you.

Appendix C

You are invited to participate in a research project which will be looking at the experiences of Indian gay and lesbian individuals in South Africa. I am interested in your experience/s of *coming out* and how this has shaped your gay or lesbian identity.

I will be asking you a series of questions in a face-to-face interview, which will last approximately one and a half hour.

Participation in the study:

- Participation is voluntary
- The interview will be recorded with a digital recording device and you will have full control over it, i.e., you may turn it off at any time during the interview
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- Your name will not be revealed in the study
- You may withdraw at any time during the study and there is no penalty for doing so
- You will not be paid for your participation

By signing below, you agree to participation and to allow the researcher to record the interview:

Signature

Date

There are no foreseeable risks involved in the participation of this research, however, due to the sensitivity of this topic, if you feel participation has psychologically affected you, you can call this number for counselling, 011 728 1347. The helpline is operational 24 hours. This is an organisation called LifeLine and it offers counselling at no cost.

Feel free to contact me on 072 601 8881 at any time if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you.