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COMING OUT AS GAY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ABOUT ADOLESCENTS DISCLOSING THEIR HOMOSEXUALITY TO THEIR PARENTS

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Our aim was to gain an understanding of adolescents' experiences of disclosing their sexual orientation as lesbian or gay to their parents. In order to capture these experiences, we conducted interviews with 6 people who had told at least 1 parent of their sexual orientation as lesbian or gay. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis we identified 4 themes from the emotions described by the respondents when they disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents. These 4 themes were feelings of alienation, uneasiness and fear, self-acceptance and being comfortable with one's sexuality, and feeling whole. The conclusion we drew from the accounts of the people we interviewed is that disclosing one's sexual orientation to one's parents is liberating.

Keywords: homosexuality, adolescents, gay people, lesbian, parents, coming out, interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Sexual orientation is the term used to describe the attraction felt by one individual toward another. In addition to referring to emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction, the term also encompasses a person's sense of identity. Individuals' sexual orientation can be directed toward a person of the same gender, a person of the opposite gender, or toward people of both genders. According to the definition of the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights (RFSL; 2014), sexual orientation consists of three components: practice, identity, and preference. *Practice* refers to what individuals do, their experience, their relations with others, and with whom

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they have sexual relations. *Identity* comprises how individuals feel, what they call themselves, as well as their *preferences* regarding with whom they want to share their life and have an intimate relationship. This definition by the RFSL corresponds to the one provided by the American Psychological Association (2014), which, in addition, also lists forms of prejudice and discrimination related to a person's sexual orientation.

According to Heatherington and Lavner (2008), disclosing one's sexual orientation as gay or lesbian (*coming out*) to family members is a very important psychological decision and is perceived as an obstacle by the individual making the disclosure. Fear of negative consequences is one of the obstacles that those making the disclosure take into consideration. Willoughby, Malik, and Lindahl (2006) described the disclosure as a stressor because it challenges family values, expectations, and boundaries. In the review they compiled, Heatherington and Lavner (2008) found that reaction from parents varies from withdrawal of support to acceptance of their offspring's sexual orientation. Many scholars argue that coming out is an important part of the lesbian or gay adolescent's sexual identity (Corrigan & Matthew, 2003; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006).

Regardless of sexual orientation, it is generally during the period of adolescence that young people find their sexual identity. *Self-acceptance* refers to the experience of accepting oneself as one is. The identification process is crucial to accepting oneself, but in many cases this process becomes problematic when the individual's sexual orientation is homosexual (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008).

Jones and McEwen (2000) made the term identity more complex by focusing on the concept of *social identities* where identity is tied to race, ethnicity, gender, class, culture, and sexual orientation. Identity is, hence, based on multiple dimensions – each of which varies in importance. Consequently, rather than being a linear, step-by-step process, identity is a fluid and dynamic process. Jamil, Harper, and Fernandez (2009) described finding one's sexual identity as being comparable to searching for one's ethnic identity and saw it as a process undertaken in private and in solitude. Jamil et al. (2009) argued that sexual awareness is initially awakened when the individual experiences a sexual or romantic attraction to a person of the same gender. In previous theories it has been claimed that, although individuals whose sexual orientation is gay or lesbian have been aware of being different from their heterosexual friends, they were not aware of their attraction to the same gender; nor did they set their sexuality in relation to the term gay or lesbian and use it as the basis for their sexual identity (Cass, 1979). Chow and Cheng (2010) reported that lesbians often choose to tell their friends about their sexual orientation before telling their family. They observed that the shame and stigma associated with homosexuality are inhibiting,

and many lesbians suffer from mental distress and, thus, do not want to disclose their sexual orientation to their families. Even though there is greater acceptance and tolerance of, and more liberal views on, homosexuality in Sweden today than prior to 1977, Ohnstad (2010) found that lesbians and gay men still perceive their sexual orientation as shameful and deviant. According to Wasniowski (2007), all humans have a desire to be like everyone else, and the shame of deviating is common among persons who are lesbian or gay. Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) found that adolescents whose sexual orientation was homosexual feel compelled to lie and live a lie before coming out to their parents, and they feel relief after the disclosure.

Savin-Williams and Dubé (1998) developed a model in which their purpose was to describe the process that parents undergo in reaction to their offspring's disclosure of gay or lesbian sexual orientation. The process they describe progresses through shock, denial, anger, scolding, depression, and acceptance. Although the disclosure of their sexual orientation is described as difficult, it has been reported that the experience of a majority of lesbian and gay adolescents is that they are closer to their parents after coming out (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003).

Even though homosexuality is defined as a sexual orientation in Swedish law, there is still a social stigma associated with homosexuality in Sweden (Frost, 2011). Our aim in this study, conducted in Sweden, was to describe adolescents' experiences when telling their parents about their sexual orientation. The question we asked our participants was: How did they feel before and after they disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents?

Method

Because our purpose was to identify how individuals perceived a specific real-world phenomenon, we considered the qualitative approach appropriate (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In this study we focused on the feelings and thoughts that adolescents had before, during, and after having disclosed their gay or lesbian sexual orientation to their parents. The purpose of the phenomenological method is to reveal the psychological meaning of the phenomenon being examined and, thus, we considered this method suitable to achieve the aim of our study. In the stepwise process of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2008) implicit qualities that are experienced and lived and that are not always verbalized by the subject, or even something that he or she is not aware of, are lifted to the explicit level of meaning. Our reason for using IPA in this study was, to quote Smith and Osborn (2008, p. 51), "to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world."

Sample and Participants

For this study we interviewed six people, three men and three women. The participants were all born between 1983 and 1989; three of them were students and three were working in paid employment. Two of them were living with a partner of the same gender and the four others were living as singles. They were all living in urban areas with populations of between 15,000 and 500,000 inhabitants.

The sample size is as recommended by Smith and Osborn (2008), and we were also motivated by the time-consuming analysis process. The inclusion criteria for participation were that participants were certain of their sexual orientation and had disclosed it to at least one of their parents.

The main requirement for conducting a phenomenological study is that the selected participants have firsthand knowledge of the phenomenon in question (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In this study, the sample was purposive rather than random, and participants were recruited through friends and acquaintances who, in turn, asked their friends and acquaintances to take part.

Data Collection

We conducted qualitative interviews in accordance with guidelines for qualitative research interviewing set out by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). We designed a semistructured interview guide to have at hand in case we encountered difficulties during the interview, but, as it turned out, the opening question "How did you feel when you disclosed your homosexuality to your parents?" gave rise to such thorough answers that there was need only for questions to follow up, elaborate on, or exemplify answers already given. This meant that we did not ask each participant the questions in our guide in the same order but, rather asked questions in the context best befitting the participants' previous answers.

Procedure

We conducted the interviews after the six people had received written and verbal information about research ethics. All interviews were audio-recorded, and the interview setting was a quiet and neutral location. Interview time ranged between 45 and 90 minutes, and we transcribed all interviews verbatim.

Data Analysis

As the analysis was carried out using the IPA method this meant that the data were analyzed systematically and in stages (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The method is hermeneutic and interpretive and initially the focus is on the participants' perspective and the data are then processed at a more abstract level. The data processing begins with reading and rereading the text of the interviews and then making notes in the right-hand and left-hand margins of the transcription

document. At the next stage, the notes are transformed from being general observations of what is considered interesting or significant into condensed phrases that capture the essence of what was said. In stage three, data from the previous stage are compiled in the search for clusters of similar meaning. In the fourth stage, a table of the extracted themes is compiled in a coherent way. In the fifth stage, the content of the previous themes is transformed into a narrative account of the results of the analysis.

Reliability and Validity

In qualitative studies, the term reliability is used in relation to researchers' interview techniques, where it is important to be aware of leading questions. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) warned that leading questions should be used with caution in research interviews, but did not dismiss them categorically. Instead, they pointed out that what is important is to be aware that leading questions may distort the outcome.

In the social sciences, validity is related to the skills of the researcher (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This means that the researcher who is conducting a study plays a crucial role in determining the quality of the study. We endeavored to ensure the validity of our study by carrying out several surveys before the onset of the current study, and, in addition, as one of the authors of the current study also teaches qualitative research methods up to postgraduate level, we believed that this experience and knowledge would contribute to ensuring the validity of our research. Our aim in this study was to highlight the feelings and experiences of specific individuals and, consequently, to aim for theoretical generalization (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Ethical Considerations

We met the Swedish Research Council's (2002) ethical principles concerning information, consent, confidentiality, and utilization. Study participants received detailed information about the purpose of the study and their participation in it. They were assured that their participation was voluntary, and that they could terminate their participation at any time without explaining the reason for doing so.

All individuals who participated in the study were over 18 years of age. All were given written and verbal information about their rights, about the purpose of the study, how the data were to be handled, and about the requirements for participating in the study. We also provided them with contact information for the authors. The confidentiality requirement of the Swedish Research Council is that participants' identities must be concealed so that it is impossible to identify individuals. Hence, we omitted participants' names, information about where they grew up, and current place of residence from the transcripts of the

interviews. Furthermore, participants were also assured that the information they provided was to be used for scientific purposes only.

Results

When we analyzed the collected data, the following four themes emerged that summarized the six respondents' feelings about their experiences of disclosing their homosexuality to their parents: feelings of alienation, uneasiness and fear, self-acceptance and being comfortable with one's sexuality, and feeling whole. Together, these themes present a coherent picture of the respondents' experience of coming out, and offer a better understanding of what it feels like to disclose one's homosexuality to one's parents.

Feelings of Alienation

All participants described feeling that, in society in general and particularly in school, it was clearly expected of them to be heterosexual, which made them feel different and that they felt misplaced among peers in school, and sometimes even in their own families. When and where they grew up was also significant in this context. Participants who grew up in small communities explained that they did not know about, or had not heard much about, homosexuality, which, they claimed, had an impact on their sexual identification.

"There were no gay men or anything where I came from; it was too small! I'd never thought about whether I was gay or not because it didn't exist there."

Some respondents had moved to larger cities where they felt more accepted and where there was more openness about homosexuality. Furthermore, their feelings of alienation were embedded in their attempts to fit in and try to live up to heteronormative expectations from society. The participants described how they tried to be like everyone else by denying themselves and trying to become attracted to the opposite gender. They perceived that the hardest period was their adolescence – particularly the junior high school years. According to the participants, adolescence is when the sexual curiosity begins.

"Then you become a teenager and you want to be like everyone else. You should have a boyfriend, and try to find one, and pretend that you are interested. Say to your friends that 'He is good looking' and 'Isn't he cute,' and so on."

During the interviews, participants frequently highlighted the lack of discussion of, and knowledge and facts about, homosexuality in schools, the media, and society at large. Participants stated that they had wanted information on, and discussions about, homosexuality, but when they were growing up there had been a silence and a taboo surrounding homosexuality. They believed that the silence surrounding the subject created an uncertainty about themselves and their homosexuality.

"There was a silence that made it feel somewhat wrong. After all, it's some kind of deviant orientation because you'd never hear anything."

The participants also commented that prejudices in society about lesbians and gay men had affected them and created further uncertainty about their sexual orientation. Publicity about HIV and AIDS has caused fear that, together with ideas about homosexuality being a mental disorder or a genetic defect, created even more feelings of insecurity among the participants.

"There's a sense of shame in my family concerning lesbians and gay men because my uncle died of AIDS in the eighties. That may be why Dad avoided asking me if I'm gay."

The negative attitudes toward homosexuality that the participants experienced gave rise to feelings of insecurity and an internal questioning. They described how, during some periods in their lives they avoided thinking about, and reflecting on, their own sexual orientation. Another strategy used to avoid thinking about their homosexuality was to deny their orientation to themselves. Almost all of the participants in the study had been in a sexual relationship with a person of the opposite gender because they felt compelled by others to do so, or because they forced themselves to. The frightening feeling of being different and the shame of deviating from the norms of society are feelings that the participants said they experienced strongly – especially in their teens.

Uneasiness and Fear

When participants described their feelings prior to disclosing their homosexuality to their parents, they used words such as nervousness, insecurity, worry, suspense, shame, panic, discomfort, and anxiety. These all describe feelings that, in one way or another, affected the participants negatively, and it was these feelings that had the greatest impact on them before their disclosure. They experienced feelings of shame for deviating from what they perceived that their parents expected them to be.

"I tried not to think about it because I was so ashamed of being so weird."

The feelings the participants described took up a large part of their lives in terms of both time and energy. Most of the participants described themselves as mentally exhausted before they told their parents.

"It took so much energy; I didn't care about school, I played truant, and my behavior changed."

According to the participants, their fear stemmed from the uncertainty and anxiety they felt concerning how their parents' would react after the disclosure. The fear affected them greatly and gave rise to severe anxiety during their coming-out process because they could not control what their parents would think or say. Furthermore, the participants also revealed their own prejudices toward their parents by describing their belief that their parents would react negatively.

"Deep down I knew they wouldn't love me less, but I had that feeling anyway. I still feared that that could happen."

The majority of participants told a friend about their homosexuality before telling their parents. They described the difference between friends and parents by emphasizing that their friends had chosen them whereas their parents had not. The participants said that they valued the relationship with their parents and this, in turn, created fear about what their parents' reactions would be, because they did not want to ruin that relationship.

"It's not the same thing with friends, they've made a choice, they've chosen to be my friends because I am who I am. Mum hasn't."

The fear and concern that parents would be disappointed was a recurring theme among the participants. All saw their homosexuality as an important part of themselves; they themselves did not see it as a big issue, but as something quite natural to them.

"This is who I am; it's not a big deal, it's part of who I am."

Because participants saw their sexual orientation as a natural part of themselves, it was essential to them that their parents accepted their sexual orientation. Hence, participants stressed that they experienced strong fear at the time of the disclosure because, in their own minds, their sexual orientation was such a big part of who they were.

Self-acceptance and Being Comfortable With One's Sexuality

According to the participants, it is important to accept oneself and be comfortable and happy with oneself and one's sexual orientation before coming out.

"It isn't something you'd disclose the first week you discover that you're lesbian or gay. You want to be sure first. And it takes time before you're comfortable with your sexual orientation."

Self-acceptance and being comfortable with their sexuality were achieved in various ways. Some participants defied their insecurity in order to gain sexual experience with a same-gender partner, to prove to themselves who they were and to whom they were attracted. Other participants denied their homosexuality until it became clear to them that they could not do so any longer.

"I waited and hoped for it to pass, but now I've realized that I can't change it."

They saw self-acceptance as a processing phase – a phase that lasted longer for some than for others. Some participants reported that they realized early on that they were lesbian or gay, whereas other participants discovered it later.

"I realized it early on; I always hung out with girls and never wanted to play soccer like the other guys did. And then at night I dreamed of guys."

All participants mentioned that they had not felt completely satisfied, either mentally or sexually, in a sexual relationship with people of the opposite gender,

and that the experience with someone of the same gender had given them a deeper sense of satisfaction.

"It's about attraction. Some go for brunettes, others for blondes. I like women instead of men."

Feeling Whole

During the interviews, dishonesty was a recurring theme that many participants returned to several times using different terminology. They explained that they hid the truth, withheld a part of themselves, had a secret, and lied to their parents before coming out. Participants also admitted that they lied about, or concealed, other issues related to their sexual orientation, such as relationships, gender, and discussions with friends.

"I lied about where I was going. I didn't want to say where I was really going. It took a lot of energy and eventually became untenable."

In the interviews, all participants explained that, prior to coming out, they did not allow themselves to be who they really were; they felt inhibited and, hence, they were not honest with anyone. These feelings affected them greatly during the process of coming out to their parents. In addition, they all felt that the fear that their parents would not accept them took a lot of energy – just as the lies and the withholding did. Several of our study participants described finally no longer having the energy to lie, so that everything became untenable.

"I don't have to feel like I'm sneaking around all the time. You don't feel true to yourself – and not to them either. I want to be able to say that I'm going to my girlfriend's. I don't want to hide stuff."

Participants reported that they became whole and complete when they disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents; they felt that then they could live fully. But coming out once is not enough: It is a recurring process when encountering new people. However, the participants stated that it gets easier every time they disclose their homosexuality to new people – even if it is exhausting and energy-consuming when people wonder but dare not ask.

"I know that they're whispering about me, but they don't dare ask me. It makes me exhausted and takes a lot of my energy."

Parental reactions differed. Some parents accepted and supported their offspring with positive comments.

"Dad said that he loved me and was happy as long as I was happy, and said that my girlfriend was a nice person."

Other parents expressed disappointment.

"Mum started crying and said that that was what she had suspected. She was disappointed in me."

A third reaction was that parents had already realized that their adolescent's sexual orientation was homosexual, but, out of respect for their offspring, had decided not to ask.

For the participants, when they disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents there had been disappointment and denial, but also joy, relief, consideration, and affirmation. Hence, the participants had, to varying degrees, experienced respect and acceptance from their parents.

The participants themselves experienced similar feelings after having made their disclosure to their parents. They experienced relief, pride, a sense of freedom, and being able to live honestly. Even though some parents reacted negatively, all participants reported that they felt free, brave, and comfortable with their sexuality as a result of making the disclosure to their parents.

"It was a relief to be able to be who you are to the fullest. It had hindered me so much. To be able to stand up for who I am. That I too can show my love for another person openly. That I can have a girlfriend and get to feel whole. And feel that I too had a place in the life I led."

The participants reported that, in the end, the reactions of their parents did not matter as much as they had thought they would. Instead, what was most important was that the parents knew about the participants' homosexuality, so that the participants could feel more honest and could be freed from the big secret that they had carried around.

Discussion

Our aim in this study was to describe the reactions and feelings that adolescents experience when they disclose their lesbian or gay sexual orientation to their parents. Participants used the words "to expose oneself" to describe how they felt when they disclosed their homosexuality. In the *National Encyclopedia* (2014), the verb expose is defined as to make oneself unprotected against inspection. Hence, when coming out, the respondents perceived that they stood unprotected before their parents.

The first theme of alienation reflects how the prevailing norms and social values influenced the participants' feelings and thoughts. They described the unspoken rule about behaving in a certain way and being attracted to the opposite gender. This theme is in line with Ambjörnsson's (2004) account of a heteronormative society in which people are constantly surrounded by invisible ideals to which they often unconsciously adapt. Wasshede (2010) argued along the same lines and described how society assesses and evaluates people from a heteronormative perspective. Weeks (1977) stressed the importance of belonging and not deviating in any way. The study participants revealed that they were ashamed, or that they had been ashamed, of their sexual orientation. They also stated that, in their teens, they experienced feelings of not fitting in and of being different. Ohnstad (2010) found that lesbians and gay men frequently experience feelings of guilt and shame. In our study the descriptions of their feelings given

by the participants show that they had denied who they were – and their sexual identity – by pretending to be someone else in order to get approval from friends and family. In addition, the participants also described trying to withhold the truth from themselves by denying their sexual orientation or pushing it aside; some even felt compelled to have a sexual relationship with a person of the opposite gender.

The participants also told of being familiar with lies and the withholding of truth. They perceived that they had not been comfortable with themselves before they had fully accepted themselves and their sexual identity, and disclosing one's sexual identity to one's parents is part of the self-acceptance process.

Before the study participants told their parents about their sexual orientation, they experienced strong fear of their parents' reactions and response. Chow and Cheng (2010) found that lesbian adolescents in China and Hong Kong chose to disclose their sexual orientation to their friends first and to their family next. Similarly, most participants in the present study reported that they too came out to their friends before coming out to their family. The fear that the participants described stemmed from their insecurity resulting from their feeling that they could not predict their parents' reactions.

It is very difficult to bear the fear of not being accepted for who one is. Findings reported in previous research have shown that parental reactions to their sons' and daughters' disclosure of gay or lesbian sexual orientation can differ depending on how parents raise their children and the kind of relationship they have with their offspring. In families with cohesion, adaptability, and authoritative parental styles disclosure is met with less negative reactions than in those characterized by disconnection, rigidity, and authoritarian styles (Willoughby et al., 2006). Savin-Williams and Dubé (1998) constructed a developmental model of parental reactions to their offspring's disclosure of their homosexuality. The model has not been applied in this study because our purpose was not to analyze parental reactions. Nonetheless, the participants' narratives show a connection to this model in which parental reactions are classified into different phases progressing from shock through denial, anger, scolding, depression, and acceptance. In the present study, however, we found that the parental reactions were not as important to the participants as their feeling of relief after coming out.

Coming out as lesbian or gay is an important step for the individual in establishing his or her homosexual identity (Cass, 1979) and this process is facilitated by the response from parents and friends. Positive reactions are preferred because they lead to a positive identity. After close friends, parents are usually the last to find out about their offspring's sexual orientation.

Study participants claimed that disclosing their sexual orientation to their parents played a major role in forming their sexual identity, self-acceptance, and confidence. In their narratives they told us of how they identified themselves

with people around them, to whom they were attracted sexually, and who they perceived they were. Their narratives are consistent with the conclusion of Jamil et al. (2009) that sexual awareness is initially awakened when the individual experiences a sexual or romantic attraction to a person of the same gender.

According to the participants, they had to achieve self-acceptance to be able to disclose their sexual orientation. This can also be related to the argument of Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2004), that self-acceptance is part of the identification process as well as part of the coming out process.

Our participants described how they lied and concealed parts of the truth prior to coming out, and commented on how they felt relief and liberation after coming out. This corresponds with the findings reported by Savin-Williams and Ream (2003), and also corresponds with a previous research finding in which lesbian and gay adolescents reported feeling relief after having told their parents about their sexual orientation, because they would no longer need to waste energy on concealing the truth (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Hence, coming out liberates lesbian and gay people and frees them to live life the way they were meant to (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003).

We found it more difficult than we had expected to find previous research on the coming out experience. The focus in the research we found was on factors concerning emotional life and parental reaction, but not on the feelings that people experience when disclosing their lesbian or gay sexual orientation to their parents. One of the limitations of this study was difficulty in finding participants. The sample we used was the result of asking friends of friends for help with finding participants. However, our procedure may have contributed to participants being willing to confide in the interviewer because of the unspoken trust between interviewer and participant and, at the same time, this procedure had the advantage that the people who participated in the study have been able to talk freely and frankly about their experiences. According to Smith and Osborn (2008) it is crucial to find those participants who really want to share their experiences and who can do so. Furthermore, although the sample in our study was small the six people came from various backgrounds, such as different geographical locations, with some living in cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants, and some living in small villages. Smith and Osborn (2008) recommend a "fairly homogenous sample" (p. 54) because randomizing and representative sampling is not possible with a sample size of six participants.

Conclusion

We fulfilled our aim in this study and answered the research question in an unambiguous way. Based on the four themes that we extracted from the collected data, we developed a comprehensive overall picture of what coming out as gay feels like. According to the narratives of our participants it feels liberating. All

six of our participants gave similar descriptions of the feelings they had before, during, and after disclosing their sexual orientation to their parents. They reported that they felt true to themselves, and they were all relieved that, finally, they could be who they really were. Even those of our participants who experienced negative parental reactions felt that their relationship with their parents improved because they no longer had anything to hide from them. They felt liberated from the uncomfortable feelings, thoughts, and ideas that had previously marred their existence.

In conclusion, it is also important to highlight the views brought forward by the study participants regarding their perception of the lack of knowledge of homosexuality that still permeates society. Providing information to children early on in school when discussing biology and sexuality, could lead to less of a taboo concerning homosexuality: It could lead to a more open dialogue in society generally which could get parents to reflect on homosexuality and their own values concerning the subject.

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