CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The aim of this study was to explore the process of disclosure among a group of black South African homosexuals. The sample consisted of six (6) male black South African homosexuals between the ages of eighteen (18) and twenty five (25) who had already disclosed their sexual orientation. Data was collected using the semi-structured interviews and the results obtained were presented in the previous chapter. Results were analysed using the thematic content analysis which allows for the discussion of results using themes that emerged from the data. The current chapter discussed the results of this study.

5.1 Key findings

The key findings were categorised into themes. The themes were formulated according to the research questions of the study.

5.1.1 The process of disclosure

5.1.1.1 Awareness of self as a homosexual

This awareness is parallel to Troiden's (1988) sensitisation stage which he indicates, occurs during childhood whereby homosexual persons typically acquire social experiences that later serve as a ground for viewing homosexuality as personally relevant. This fact was evident from all participants' narrations of their early childhood experiences. They remembered feeling and acting different from what was considered normal and having interests that differed with what was expected from them. This is what Plummer (1975) termed "gender-inappropriate" interests. The fact that these individuals observed a difference between them and their male counterparts made them aware from an early age that there was something different about them, although they were at that time not aware that those were homosexual feelings.

Participants reported that they have always known even from an early age that there was something "different" about them through their areas of interest and activities. Spending time with girls and participating in female related activities was one gender-inappropriate activity that was experienced by all participants as an indicator of being different from their male counterparts. This is often accompanied by same-sex attraction, which is a completely strange phenomenon at this stage. Such homosexual behaviours and feelings are experienced as foreign, because they are not openly discussed in families or societies at large, hence they become confusing to an individual who experiences them.

5.1.1.2 Making sense of the homosexual feelings

As much as there is an awareness of being unique in terms of behaviour, feelings and interests, it is usually confusing to feel different when one cannot make sense or label what one is feeling. The increasing awareness of homosexual tendencies and its probable relevance to the self often cause disorientation (Plummer, 1957) as one receives negative results for behaving in a homosexual manner (Herdt, 1997). This is because children are orientated to be heterosexual and whatever behaviour is observed to be contrary to that is discouraged (Murray & Roscoe, 1998).

It was evident that more information about homosexuality is acquired between early and late adolescence, around the same time that one starts attending high school. However, it was only after the onset of puberty that participants became aware of what their uniqueness meant; that is, learnt that their behaviour has a name; homosexuality. It is during this stage that those early social experiences serve as a basis for viewing homosexuality as relevant to them or defining themselves as homosexual. In other words, the same then confusing experiences help to make sense of one's sexual orientation.

Information about homosexuality is acquired from friends (both homosexual and heterosexual), media, members of society, and for others, through unusual but pleasant intimate encounters with persons of the same sex. Media has proven to be one of the sources through which people learn about homosexuality and thus learn to identify with the information they acquire and that it relates to them. One of the participants was initially surprised and felt guilty for experiencing an attraction towards a male person but later used the same experience to explain why he was not sexually attracted to girls like guys his age.

Members of society often make comments about homosexual behaviour and such comments further heighten an individual's awareness of being different. For others, it is after they have been asked if they are homosexual that they learn of the term "homosexual" and that it applies to them. This becomes an "aha moment" in that one finally has a name for what one was experiencing. Often this knowledge of homosexuality as one's sexuality is accompanied by a sense of relief and excitement. Relief after learning that one's feelings are not after all weird.

5.1.1.3 Identity confusion

After learning that their behaviour and feelings are considered as homosexual, individuals start reflecting on the idea of being homosexuals. It can be said that this period is confusing because one has to forsake the already given heterosexual identity and start perceiving and accepting oneself as a homosexual (Cass, 1984). Troiden (1988) indicates that this is a phase where individuals go through a stage he termed identity confusion. However, only two of the six participants went through a period of identity confusion after learning that their sexual orientation was different from what is considered the norm. Denial proved to be the common reaction that follows the realisation that one is homosexual.

Denial is often used as a stigma evasion strategy. By denying one's homosexual orientation, one abstains from behaviour that is considered homosexual in order to

avoid any negative attitudes directed at homosexuals (Nardi & Schneider, 1998). The denial is influenced by fear of being perceived as deviant, and deviants are punished. Often individuals have difficulty owning up to their sexual orientation, due to societal restrictions that condemn homosexuality. As Plummer (1975) argues, stigma and societal condemnation of homosexuality creates problems of secrecy and guilt and these are also responsible for identity confusion.

Another source of identity confusion as indicated by Bell, et al., (1981) is heterosexual sexual experience. These authors argue that by early to middle adolescence most homosexuals have experienced a heterosexual arousal and behaviour. However, only the minority of the participants reported to have experienced heterosexual feelings. One of the participants reported that he was involved in a heterosexual relationship for four years. He argues that the main reason for such a relationship was more about masking his homosexuality than responding to a heterosexual feeling. Thus he used a heterosexual relationship as a way of avoiding discrimination. Fortunately for him, he later moved to a more facilitating environment that allowed him to make sense of his sexuality, learn to accept and freely express himself without constraints.

Some of the participants indicated that they never went through the identity confusion stage. Instead they expressed relief and excitement after learning that they are not abnormal after all; what they felt had a name and they were not the only ones going through it. They felt a sense of belonging and they began the journey of internalising and identifying with their newly discovered sexual orientation, which is discussed below.

5.1.1.4 Accepting the homosexual identity

As indicated in the literature, Ponse (1978) in Nardi and Schneider (1998) argues that one has to be at peace with, and have positive feelings about his (homo) sexuality or else it would prove futile to share one's sexual orientation with others. Often

accepting one's sexual orientation takes time, as one has to first come to terms with it. The process of self-acceptance can be hindered by negative connotations that are attached to homosexuality by society. Generally people do not like to be associated with what is perceived as negative by society at large. Therefore an individual who wishes to accept his/her homosexuality has to be willing to endure being labelled as a "deviant" (Savin-Williams, 1996).

Self-acceptance is also influenced by the already existing knowledge one has about homosexuality (Nardi & Schneider, 1998). If the knowledge is more negative, then it becomes even more difficult if not undesirable for one to associate himself or herself with homosexuality. However, if one has positive knowledge about homosexuality it becomes easy to accept one's sexual identity. One of the participants remembered how he initially hated anything that reminded him of homosexuality but as he learnt to accept his homosexuality, he was then able to give himself a chance to understand what homosexuality is about:

> John*(22 yrs): "I hated anything that reminded me of homosexuality. I hated people who were just too much, I hated screaming queens … all girlie girlie, that really annoyed me, disgusted me and I hated all of that, and then I hated that aspect of myself as well, that I would have feminine tendencies and that people would pick that up. But then as I accepted that I am also homosexual, then I'm able to give me a chance to understand what homosexuality is about you know, and also understand that there's different levels and different forms of expressing homosexuality and that I would take one that is comfortable with me.

Therefore, it can be argued being proud of one's sexuality appeared to be salient in terms of self-acceptance. For others being homosexual is part of who they are and do not try to question why they are but accept that they are, despite of all the ongoing discussion about the causes of homosexuality.

After making sense and accepting one's sexuality, the next step is to decide what to do with the information; whether to disclose and whom to disclose to and what informs that decision.

5.1.1.5 Disclosure of one's homosexuality

Disclosure is a critical process in every homosexual's life Plummer (1975). As indicated early, disclosure takes place at three levels (Troiden, 1988). The first level involves "coming out" to the self, that is, accepting and identifying oneself as a homosexual. This is followed by disclosing to a certain group of people that an individual feels comfortable with. The final step of disclosure is coming out to the community in which one belongs (Gevisser & Cameron, 1994; Nardi & Schneider, 1998). Disclosing to the self comes with one's awareness and acceptance of the homosexual identity. The difficult stages are the last two and often require one to make a conscious decision. Sitting with the knowledge of one's sexual orientation without sharing it with anyone can be a heavy load to bear. However, the question is who to tell? What will be the consequences thereof? What makes disclosure difficult is the fact that many people consider it as a deviation from the norm, and no one is born expected to be homosexual (Krouse, 1993).

In most cases, the first person to disclose to proved to be a person who is trusted to be supportive. Often, such a person is a friend. Parents and close family members are unlikely to be told first of one's homosexuality. This is because generally, parents and certain close family members tend to react negatively, and find it difficult to accept it. This is what often leads to individuals choosing partial disclosure instead of full disclosure. In most cases where partial disclosure takes precedence over full disclosure, it is done so to protect oneself from unpleasant consequences that may come with full disclosure.

Full disclosure on the other hand is the ultimate wish by most homosexuals but can only be achieved by a few. Those who chose this type of disclosure made a conscious decision to face whatever sanction may come to them. They report that it is often difficult as they are often discriminated based on their sexual orientation. Discrimination can take a form of verbal abuse, physical threats, and rejection. Others lose their friends and/or are resented by their parents and ridiculed by people. However, one's determination to be true to one's feelings drives most homosexuals to come out of the closet and endure the discrimination. Self-acceptance and social support are likely to facilitate disclosure while discrimination based on sexual orientation is likely to inhibit disclosure.

5.1.2 The impact of family's attitude towards homosexuality on disclosure

In most South African cultures, one's family includes the extended family members and as such, their views are greatly considered. If one discloses to the parents, they are most likely to inform the other close family members who are entitled to express their views on the matter. Hence, disclosing to one's parents often leads to the extended family knowing. Therefore, not only does one have to deal with the parents, but with other family members' reactions and opinions of homosexuality as well.

Many young homosexuals are dependent on their parents and thus try to please them by avoiding that which is considered to be a deviation from their ways of living (Herdt, 1997). As indicated in the literature, many parents assume that their children are heterosexual and experience the news of their children's homosexuality as a sense of loss and failure in their part to raise morally abiding children (Gough & Macnair, 1985; Herdt, 1997). This need to please parents and fear of being thrown out of home restricts many young homosexuals from exploring their sexuality until they leave home. This then impacts on their identity development, as they are forced to postpone the process of exploring their sexual identity until they are out of home. After leaving

home they have the freedom to establish support systems from friends and fellow homosexuals where they can experiment with and experience their homosexuality.

Family support, even from one family member, proved to be an important aspect in the process of coming out. While some of the participants reported to be enjoying the benefits of family support, others can only dream about it and hope. Family support has been described as a very important factor that motivates individuals to be proudly homosexual. It becomes difficult to come out in an environment where one is constantly reminded that one's sexual orientation is a mistake, and where attempts to change one's homosexuality are constantly made. It became evident that parents also fear discrimination based on their child's homosexuality. Society tends to accuse parents for failing to instil norms in their children.

Although they report that they find it difficult to disclose to parents, the participants asserted that if their parents were to ask them about their homosexuality, they would not deny it at all. It is apparently easier to be approached by parents instead of approaching them with the news of one's homosexuality. Luirink (2000) contends that parents' reaction about their children's sexual orientation has to do with their knowledge about homosexuality. Some parents hold the view of homosexuality as unAfrican and evil, hence would discourage their children to engage in that which is considered evil (Murray & Roscoe, 1998).

As much as family support facilitates disclosure, some homosexuals do not only rely on it; they choose to disclose to people who accept them, and such people are not necessarily their parents. Hence, parents' views on homosexuality may only determine the type of disclosure one chooses, not necessarily the choice to disclose. If it is imagined that parents are likely to react negatively to one's disclosure, then one is likely to adopt partial disclosure, while if positive feedback is anticipated, full disclosure would result. It is evident that disclosing to parents can be a taunting task.

It can be argued that parents also want to protect themselves from being viewed as bad parents for raising homosexual children. At the same time, it seems like parents' views on homosexuality are influenced by the area in which they are located; it was evident from the data gathered that parents from rural areas have more difficulty understanding and therefore accepting homosexuality than parents in semi-urban area. This is so because in semi-urban areas homosexuality is more openly discussed than in rural areas.

5.1.3 Rural versus urban areas

From the participants' responses, it became evident that coming out was considered safer once one is out of the home environment and in an environment perceived to be non-judgmental and facilitating environment. The subject of rural versus urban area is an area of interest in terms of how the nature or the level of the development of an area can encourage or discourage disclosure. From the gathered data, it was evident that the participants held the opinion that societies in rural areas were still behind in terms of homosexual related information. Rural areas still perceive homosexuality as a taboo, which makes it difficult if not undesirable for one to disclose in such an environment. Growing up in developed areas is believed to make it much easier because people are exposed to homosexuality and therefore they are likely to be accepting. It was a common view among participants that people from rural areas believe that they should follow in the footsteps of their ancestors, this is in line with the perception that homosexuality is a modern "way of living". This leads to a number of homosexuals not coming out, as they need to belong and fear to deviate from the norm.

5.1.4 Dealing with negative attitudes towards homosexuality

Most of the participants have experienced or/and still experience some form of homophobic attacks. From the gathered data, most of these attacks take a form of verbal abuse (name calling and insults) and discrimination. The victimisation starts even before one discloses his homosexuality. Some of the participants recalled how

they were victimised in high school because they acted feminine. This, they indicated, was one of the reasons that discouraged them from coming out then. One of the major causes of homophobia is people's resistance to accept that which is "different", everything that is considered to be "out of the norm", is considered to be unacceptable.

Dealing with homophobia is difficult and sometimes one has to try and ignore homophobic comments. Such comments are difficult to deal with and might affect one's self-esteem. But there are other forms of comments that people seem to get used to and as such are not really affected by them. Participants seemed to hold the view that once they became comfortable with their sexual orientation, they did not care as much about what people thought or said about them.

 One of the ways of evading stigma is through what Troiden (1988) in Nardi & Schneider (1998) termed passing. Passing is whereby a homosexual person hides the homosexual identity and passes as a heterosexual (Levine, 1987). From the six participants, one person related how he concealed his homosexuality from his family and other heterosexual acquaintances by engaging in a heterosexual relationship.

> Edward*(22 yrs):   …to tell you, I once had a girlfriend at home when I was running away … hiding from discrimination.

Troiden (1988) in Nardi & Schneider (1998) indicates that passing is a very common stigma evasion strategy, especially during the early stages in the process of discovering one's homosexual identity. For four years Edward*(22 yrs) was trapped in a very unsatisfying heterosexual relationship, which he was only able to break way from when he moved to a more facilitating environment. He further reported that while he was in that relationship, he had to constantly battle with his conscious for the sake of a sense of belonging and acceptance from his society.

Most people believe that it is important to become aware of the warning signs and when to anticipate attacks from people who resent homosexuals, and therefore come up with a plan of action beforehand. For instance someone related that he has learnt that when he passes through a group of homosexual males, they are likely to pass negative comments about him or call him names. Therefore, he learnt to ignore such comments.

Participants related that most of the negative comments about their sexuality were made behind their back. Other people express their homophobia through asking questions that are meant to degrade homosexuals. Most of them seem to agree that it is safer to confront their perpetrators individually rather than when they are in a group. They believe that homophobic people tend to get ammunition from a group but are likely to be cowards when they are alone. When backed up in a corner, such perpetrators are likely to be overwhelmed by fear and usually deny what they said. Others believe that if they acquire adequate education from prestigious institutions of learning, then people would learn to respect them based on their academic achievements rather than judge them based on their sexual orientation.

5.1.5 Advantages and disadvantages of disclosure

As Coleman (1982) in Coleman (1989) indicated, coming out does not solve all problems; in fact it often creates new ones. Krouse (1993) adds that full disclosure can be a traumatic experience which is dominated by fear of emotional and social loss, violent persecutions and lack of support. Participants reported name-calling, rejection by families and friends, discrimination and public humiliation as the negative encounters that come with disclosure. A case of rejection by friends is illustrated by Matimba's*(22 yrs) case. The price he paid for disclosing his sexual orientation was rather unpleasant and painful:

> "I lost most of my friends … when they found out I was gay they just turned around … even my room mate changed … I remember when we first met, he was good … then he heard from his friends that you are living with a gay person, since from then that interaction stopped.

He said that he found comfort in knowing who he is and his purpose in life.

Despite the negative experiences encountered after disclosure, positive consequences have also been reported. One such positive aspect brought about by disclosure is a sense of freedom and relief. For others, keeping their sexual orientation a secret depresses them and disclosing brings relief and mental stability and one gets the freedom to be oneself and to discus issues that relate to him as a homosexual person. For others, being "out of the closet" means freedom to express themselves in public with no fear. Besides the peace of mind that comes with disclosing, they feel that the burden of pretending to be heterosexual amongst other people is reduced and thus according to Herdt (1997), reduces the stress that accumulates to people who actively hide their sexual orientation.