

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter starts by giving a brief overview of the literature discussed. The literature starts off by defining the concepts that are utilised throughout the study, which is followed by a brief background on the origins of homosexuality. A theoretical model of homosexuality which elucidates the process of the formation and the acceptance of a homosexual identity is examined. Furthermore, the process of disclosure, personal and environmental factors that facilitate and inhibit disclosure, as well as the benefits and challenges of disclosure are highlighted. The factors to be explored are: identification and acceptance, the role played by significant others in the process of disclosure, the concept of homosexuality as being unAfrican, and religion and its role in disclosure.

Homosexuality is a complex phenomenon which has been a subject of interest for centuries. Research emphasis has been placed on the causes of homosexuality and subsequently, various theories have been speculated and justified to be responsible for causing a homosexual orientation (Blasius & Phelan, 1997). However, this study does not place much focus on the causes of homosexuality but gives a brief overview of its background.

2.2 Definition of terms

There are a number of homosexually related concepts used throughout this study. The background of homosexuality follows after a brief discussion and definition of these concepts. The term homosexuality is a broad concept that involves both men and women. It is usually described as a sexual activity or behaviour between people of the same sex or having sexual feelings toward other people of the same sex (Trippo, 1977). However, this definition tends to pose some confusion in identifying

homosexuals. This is because there are people who have sexual feelings towards people of the same sex but do not act on these feelings. There are also those who have sex with people of the same sex but feel that their sexual feelings are more directed to people of the opposite sex. The societal definition of homosexuality is stereotyped and carries with it negative connotations. There are people who are not sexually involved with people of the opposite sex but are usually labelled as homosexuals; men who are more feminine are often assumed to be gay, while women who are more masculine are also sometimes labelled as lesbians. Therefore, defining homosexuality predominantly lies on the individuals, their behaviour, sexual feelings and most importantly, how they define themselves (Trippo, 1977). Homosexual is therefore a term used to describe or refer to a person who is emotionally and sexually attracted to someone of the same sex and defines himself or herself as homosexual (Germond & De Gruchy, 1997; Trippo, 1977).

Homosexual people are classified into gays and lesbians. The term gay was originally formulated by homosexual men and women who wanted to distance themselves from the initial negative connotation linked to the term “homosexual” (Nardi & Schneider, 1998). The term initially referred to both male and female homosexuals but has become particularly associated with males. Usually in layman’s language, the term gay is used to refer to both male and female homosexuals. For the purpose of this study, the term gay will be employed to refer to male homosexuals only. Nardi & Schneider (1998) further stipulate that the term gay is frequently used in a generic and adjectival sense to describe the subculture, persons, lifestyle, communities, relationships, places and situations associated with homosexuality. For instance, a homosexual club would be referred to as a gay club. Lesbian is a term formulated to refer to female homosexuals. (For the purpose of this study, both lesbians and gays will be collectively referred to as homosexuals).

On the other hand, a heterosexual is a person who is emotionally and sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex (Germond & De Gruchy, 1997). The term “straight” is used as an informal term to refer to a heterosexual person.

Homophobia is a term used to describe hatred and rejection of gays, lesbians and homosexuality. It refers to the irrational fear of and/or hostility towards homosexuals, which is usually coupled with refusal to accept homosexuals (Shepherd & Wallis, 1989). People who practice homophobia are said to be homophobic. Coleman (1989) further describes homophobia as a term used to describe the reaction of fear and dislike which the heterosexual majority tends to express to homosexual culture and people. Germond & De Gruchy (1997) add that this fear often results in discrimination and persecution of homosexual persons.

Given this situation, a homosexual person who hides his or her sexual orientation is said to be hiding in the closet (Germond & De Gruchy, 1997). Therefore coming out of the closet is an informal term used to refer to disclosure (to be used interchangeably with the term disclosure). It is a term commonly used among the gay community. Disclosure is a process that follows after one has individually identified oneself as homosexual and then starting the process of revealing one's homosexuality to others Plummer (1975). One can either choose partial disclosure which is a private sharing of ones homosexuality with people that are close to the individual (Out on campus, 1994). One can also opt for full disclosure which entails disclosing to the community and to the public that one is living as a homosexual.

2.3 The background of homosexuality

Homosexuality has been part of human experience for centuries. The term "homosexuality" was first used in the United States of America but originated from European medical literature (Blasius & Phelan, 1997). Originally known as a number one "sexual inversion", homosexuality was a descriptive term used to denote a sexual illness (Le Vay, 1996). Following this illness model, homosexuality has been much debated over the past 100 years in medical and social circles. The debates led up to the conclusion that homosexuals, compared to heterosexuals, were not necessarily more predisposed to mental illness. These findings led the health care community to

re-examine the 19th century disease model assumption (Blasius & Phelan, 1997; Le Vay, 1996). In the past 25 years, the American Psychology Association, American Psychiatric Association and the American Medical Association, changed their definition of homosexuality to that of a “normal variant” rather than a “disease” (Le Vay, 1996). This implied that they viewed homosexuality as a natural state of being to certain people. Homosexuality in itself is unrelated to psychological disturbance or maladjustment. As a group, homosexuals are not more psychologically disturbed on account of their sexuality (Blasius & Phelan, 1997).

Often the question “what causes homosexuality?” accompanies homosexuality-related discussions. To answer this question, Gochros (1989) contends that clinicians and researchers have spent considerable time and money over the years trying to learn about the causes of homosexuality. There are theories and explanations of hormonal and chemical imbalance, heredity and “different” gene structures as well as psychological factors. However, to date, there are still many debates and different views about the causes of homosexuality. In trying to condense most of the opinions about the causes of homosexuality, Le Vay (1996) wrote “...at this point, the most widely held opinion (on the causes of homosexuality) is that multiple factors play a role” (p 99).

Goldberg (1994) describes these multiple factors as being genetic/biological, psychological, hormonal, social and early childhood experiences. He further states that the truth is that “despite all the research and all the explanations, nobody yet really knows what makes some people homosexual” (p 43) as much as there is no clear explanation of why other people are heterosexual. Herdt (1997) indicates that it is unlikely that such a cause will ever be found, given the incredible complexity of sexual identity development, cultural contexts of desires and relationships, and the individual differences that exist in and between people who are homosexual.

2.4 Is homosexuality African?

The concept of homosexuality as “unAfrican” is often used by homophobic people to discourage homosexuality and therefore can hamper disclosure because those individuals who are made to believe that their sexuality is “unAfrican” might be reluctant to disclose, as they are likely to be considered unAfrican themselves. One of the oldest myths in African tradition is that homosexuality is evil: a sin, a disease and a crime against society and nature. This myth is also backed up and shaped by religious beliefs (Moberly, 1983). As a result, these myths shape (negative) social reactions to homosexuality. Edwards (1994) states that homosexuality has existed throughout history, in all types of societies, among all social classes and people, but their attitude to it varies.

According to Murray & Roscoe (1998) many black South Africans believe that homosexuality is not African; but was brought by the colonisers, hence it is shunned. Homosexuality is named as one of the immoralities blamed on the effects of colonialism. For an example, when the late Simon Nkoli’s (a political and gay rights activist) mother found out that he was gay, she immediately regretted sending him to a white school (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). However, Luirink (2000) argues that homosexuality has existed in Africa for centuries, he further elaborates that it is not homosexuality as such that has been imported, but rather a set of far more open and visible expressions of it.

On the other hand, in relation to religion, Germond & De Gruchy (1997) argue that with the introduction of missionary Christianity in South Africa, came a whole new way of thinking about the morality of sexual activity. The subject was encircled by secrecy and taboos, and homosexuality was according to Luirink (2000), given a bad name by condemning it. Those who argue that homosexuality is new to Africa do so not in order to draw attention to a historical novelty, but rather to condemn it as

immoral. What needs to be done instead is to accept the presence of homosexuality in Africa (Luirink, 2000).

In African culture, homosexuality is a stigma label. In other words, being called a homosexual is to be degraded, denounced, devalued and to be treated as different (Edwards, 1994; Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Although some African leaders condemn and refer to homosexuality as being unAfrican, on the 8th of May 1996, South Africa became one of the first countries in Africa to enshrine lesbian and gay rights in its constitution. This was an effort to protect homosexual people's rights. It was also an attempt by the South African Government to alleviate, if not to eliminate discrimination based on sexual orientation in South Africa. By April 1996 every political party - with the exception of the minority African Christian Democratic Party - had stated their support for protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination in the constitution (Luirink, 2000; The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

It can be argued that in African communities, disclosure is likely to have disastrous effects. The local term in many African languages that classifies homosexuals is not always positive, homosexuals are often called names such as *man-woman* or *mofie*, and people typically shun what is negative. Many homosexual persons therefore do not have the courage to face the consequences such as economic loss, social stigma, criticism, ostracism and even punishment that comes with disclosure. Thus for some people, the costs of full disclosure heavily outweigh the benefits, subsequently, some individuals seek to maintain partial disclosure over a period of time (Herd, 1997). They participate in gay scenes where homosexuals meet. In such an environment, one can come out safely than elsewhere (Gough & Macnair, 1985).

2.5 The development of a homosexual identity

Nardi & Schneider (1998) argue that a homosexual identity is formed. As we live in a heterosexually dominated world, no one is born expected to be homosexual, thus children are raised and socialised to be heterosexual. As a result, those who have a homosexual identity are caught up between how they are expected to behave and how they feel like behaving (Coleman, 1989; Plummer, 1975). Troiden (1988) in Nardi & Schneider (1998) has come up with a model of homosexual identity formation that stipulates the stages that homosexual people go through in their journey of discovering and accepting their homosexual identity. The model is discussed below.

2.5.1 A model of homosexual identity formation

Troiden (1988) in Nardi & Schneider (1998) developed an ideal-typical model that describes how committed homosexuals (men and women who have defined themselves as homosexuals and adopted homosexuality as a way of life) recall their arrival at perceptions of self as homosexual. He stipulates that his four-stage model of homosexual identity formation only describes general patterns encountered by committed homosexuals – that is, men and women who see themselves as homosexuals and adopt corresponding lifestyles.

Troiden's conceptualisation of the four-stages of homosexual identity formation was an integration of various theories. Troiden's theory was based on the works of Plummer (1975) who focuses on homosexual identity formation on men; Ponce (1978) whose focus is on homosexual identity formation on females; and Cass (1979) whose work accounts for homosexual identity formation in both males and females. It is therefore crucial to include a brief overview of the above-mentioned theoretical accounts of homosexual identity formation before exploring Troiden's model.

2.5.1.1 Plummer's theory on male homosexual identity formation

Plummer (1975) asserts that homosexual identity formation is part of the larger process of “becoming homosexual”, that is, adopting homosexuality as a way of life. Becoming homosexual involves the decision to define oneself as homosexual, the learning of homosexual roles and the decision to live one's adult life as a practicing homosexual. He indicates that every homosexual male passes through four stages: Sensitisation, signification and disorientation, coming out and stabilisation.

In the *sensitisation stage*, boys gain childhood experiences that may later serve as bases for defining themselves as homosexuals. These experiences occur in the social area through gender-inappropriate interests, on an emotional area through same-sex emotional attachments and finally, in the genital area where they experience same-sex genital activities. These childhood experiences later sensitise boys to interpret past events as indicating a homosexual potential (Plummer, 1975).

Plummer (1975) indicates that the second stage, *signification and disorientation*, occurs during adolescence. It is during this stage that boys begin to contemplate that their interests and feelings might be homosexual. Subsequently, their awareness of homosexuality and its potential relevance to the self is heightened (signified). The homosexual implications of their activities, feelings, or interests produce anxiety and confusion as they were socialised differently (disorientation) (Plummer, 1975).

The third stage, *coming-out*, begins between middle to late adolescence. During this stage, boys establish contact with other homosexuals, self-define as homosexual, and begin to learn homosexual roles. The final stage, *stabilisation* occurs when they feel comfortable with homosexuality and commit to it as a way of life (Plummer, 1975 in Nardi & Schneider, 1998). Plummer's theory tends to assume that all male homosexuals will go through the same stages and eventually accept their homosexual orientation. As Plummer's focus was on males, Ponse (1978) came up with a theory that attempts to elucidate the phases involved in the homosexual identity formation among females.

2.5.1.2 Ponse's theory on female homosexual identity formation

Ponse's (1978) theory was based on her sociological study of identities among the lesbian population. She focused on how lesbian identities are formed in relation to the norms of the lesbian community. Ponse's research findings identified five elements that serve as possible steps toward assuming lesbian identities. She identified the first element as a subjective sense of difference from heterosexuals, which is identified as an emotional or sexual preference for other woman. In the second element, women gain an understanding of the lesbian or homosexual significance of their sexual or romantic feelings. The third element is the assumption of a lesbian identity. Fourth, they therefore seek the company of similarly situated women. Lastly, they become involved in lesbian relationships. Nardi & Schneider (1998) highlight that Ponse tends to simplify the process which lesbians go through and does not pay much focus on the difficulties that female homosexuals face in terms of exploring and accepting their homosexuality.

2.5.1.3 Cass's theory on homosexual identity formation on males and females

Cass's (1979) theoretical account of homosexual identity formation was the first attempt at explaining homosexual identity development in both males and females. Her formulation cast homosexual identities into six stages. According to Cass (1979), before the first stage, people already believe that they are heterosexual and never question this assumption. During stage one, *identity confusion*, they begin to think that they might possibly be homosexual due to their feelings, interests and behaviours that are not perceived to be heterosexual. In the second stage, *identity comparison*, people begin to believe that they are probably homosexual. In stage three, *identity tolerance*, men and women define themselves as homosexual but remain uncomfortable with their homosexual identities due to the negative connotations attached to homosexuality. Stage four, *identity acceptance*, occurs in the wake of positive contact with other homosexuals who provide neophytes with information and justification that normalise homosexuality as an acceptable identity and a lifestyle (Cass, 1979 in Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

During the fifth stage, *identity pride*, individuals are proud to be homosexual and enjoy their homosexual lifestyles. They do not hide their homosexuality, but frequently disclose it to others. Moreover, they become angry when exposed to anti-homosexual attitudes held by many heterosexuals, and vigorously defend homosexuality. In the final stage, *identity synthesis*, gays and lesbians are prepared to disclose their homosexuality to anyone, although they no longer view their homosexual identity as the most important part of themselves. They begin to mix with both homosexuals and heterosexuals (Cass, 1979).

2.5.1.4 An integrated model of homosexual identity formation

As mentioned earlier, Troiden's (1988) in Nardi & Schneider (1998) four-staged model of homosexual identity formation encompasses all the above-mentioned theoretical formulations. From these theories, Troiden formulated what he termed an ideal-typical model to the formation of homosexual identity. Troiden introduces his four-staged model by warning that although identities develop over time in a series of stages, identity formation is not conceptualised as a linear, step-by-step process, in which one stage follows and builds on another. Instead, the process of homosexual identity formation resembles a horizontal spiral, like a spring lying on its side (Troiden, 1988 in Nardi & Schneider, 1998). Progress through the stages occurs in a back-and-forth, up-and-down fashion; the stages overlap and occur in somewhat different ways for different people. In other words, the progression through the stages differs from individual to individual. In some instances, stages are encountered in consecutive order, but sometimes they are merged, glossed over, bypassed, or realised simultaneously (McWhirther & Mattison, 1984 in Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

It is important to note that the estimated ages outlined in each stage only serve as guidelines. These ages are based on averages; therefore variations are to be expected and should not be interpreted as regressions (Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

(a) Stage 1: Sensitisation

This first stage was borrowed from Plummer. The sensitisation stage occurs before puberty, at which time most homosexuals do not view homosexuality as personally relevant. In other words, they assume that they are heterosexual, if ever they think of their sexual status at all. However, it is during childhood that homosexuals normally acquire social experiences that later serve as a ground for viewing homosexuality as personally relevant, lending support to emerging perceptions of themselves as possibly homosexual. In short, childhood experiences sensitise individuals to subsequent self-definition as homosexual (Plummer, 1975; Troiden & Goode, 1980).

Sensitisation is characterised by generalised feelings of nonconformity and perceptions of self as being different from the same sex peers. During sensitisation stage, childhood social experiences play a more significant role in generating perceptions of difference. The significance of sensitisation lies in the meaning attached subsequently to childhood experiences, rather than the experiences themselves. It is during adolescence that childhood experiences gained in social, emotional, and genital realms come to be invested with homosexual significance. Therefore, the reinterpretation of past events as indicating a homosexual potential appears to be a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the eventual adoption of homosexual identities (Nardi & Schneider, 1998; Plummer, 1975).

(b) Stage 2: Identity confusion

This second stage combines insights borrowed from Plummer, Cass and Troiden's own model. Lesbians and gays typically begin to personalise homosexuality during adolescence. This is the stage where they begin to reflect upon the idea that their feelings and behaviours could be regarded as homosexual. The thought of potentially being homosexual is dissonant with previously held self-images. This stage of *identity confusion* is characterised by inner chaos and uncertainty regarding their ambiguous sexual status. Their sexual identities are in a limbo; they can no longer

take their heterosexual identities as given, but they have yet to develop perceptions of themselves as homosexuals. Cass (1984: 56) in Nardi & Schneider (1998) describes the early phase of identity confusion in the following manner:

“You are not sure who you are. You are confused about what sort of person you are and where you are and where your life is going. You ask yourself questions “Who am I?” “Am I a homosexual?” “Am I really a heterosexual?”

A perception of self as “probably” homosexual begins to emerge around middle or late adolescence (Troiden, 1988 in Nardi & Schneider, 1998). Schafer (1976) indicates that males begin to suspect that they “might” be homosexual at the average of seventeen (17) years while lesbians at an average of eighteen (18) years. It is in the later phase of identity confusion that gays and lesbians feel that they are probably homosexual, although not completely sure. They feel distant from other people. They begin to think that it might help to meet other homosexuals but are not really sure whether they want to or not. They prefer to put on a facade of being completely heterosexual.

There are several factors responsible for the identity confusion in this phase: altered perception of self, the experience of heterosexual and homosexual arousal and behaviour, the stigma attached to homosexuality, and inaccurate knowledge about homosexuals and homosexuality. Altered perception of self contributes to the identity confusion experienced in this phase. Childhood perceptions of self as different crystallise into perceptions of self as sexually different after the onset of adolescence (Nardi & Schneider, 1998; Troiden & Goode, 1980). Bell, Weinberg & Hammersmith (1981a) indicate that the most frequently cited reasons for feeling sexually different for both male and female homosexuals are homosexual interests and or lack of heterosexual interests. Thus genital and emotional experiences, more than social experiences, seem to precipitate perceptions of self as sexually different during the stage of identity confusion.

Another source of identity confusion is found in sexual experience itself. Bell, et al. (1981a) indicate that by early to middle adolescence, most homosexuals have experienced both heterosexual and homosexual arousal and behaviour. Thus a significant number of homosexuals experience heterosexual and homosexual arousal and behaviour before the age of nineteen (19) years. Males report awareness of their same-sex feelings at an average of thirteen (13) years, which is earlier than females. Another factor that contributes to identity confusion is the stigma surrounding homosexuality; this is because it discourages most homosexuals, both young and old, from discussing their emerging sexual desires. As Plummer (1975) noted, the societal condemnation of homosexuality creates problems of guilt, secrecy and difficulty gaining access to other homosexuals.

Ignorance and inaccurate knowledge about homosexuality also contribute to identity confusion. Before they can see themselves as homosexual, people must realise that homosexuality and homosexuals exist, learn how homosexuals are actually like as people, and be able to perceive similarities between their own desires and behaviours and those of homosexual people. Today, accurate information about homosexuality is being distributed throughout society, making it relatively easier to identify homosexual elements in feelings and activities (Troiden & Goode, 1980). Riddle & Morin (1977) in Nardi & Schneider (1998) add that knowledge about the term homosexual may be acquired more rapidly in urban areas than in rural areas, where homosexuality is less likely to be discussed.

According to Cass (1979), gays and lesbians typically respond to identity confusion by adopting one or more of the following strategies: denial, repair, avoidance, redefinition and acceptance. Those who use *denial* disclaim the homosexual component to their feelings, fantasies, or activities by adopting a heterosexual stance and engaging in heterosexual activities. *Repair* involves attempts to eliminate homosexual feelings and behaviours. People who make use of this strategy might even seek professional help to eradicate their homosexual feelings. Others, although recognising their homosexual feelings, regard them as unacceptable, something to be avoided. *Avoidance* includes inhibiting behaviours associated with homosexuality,

limiting their opposite-sex exposure to prevent their peers and family members from learning about their relative lack of heterosexual responsiveness. Others limit their exposure to information about homosexuality because they fear that the information may confirm their suspected homosexuality. Assuming an anti-homosexual posture is another avoidance strategy. This is done by distancing oneself from his or her own homoerotic feelings by attacking and ridiculing homosexuals (Cass, 1979).

Another avoidance strategy is heterosexual immersion. Some homosexuals establish heterosexual involvements at varying levels of intimacy in order to eliminate their “inappropriate” sexual interests. Another avoidance strategy is escapism whereby homosexual people avoid confirming their homosexual erotic feelings through the use and abuse of chemical substances. Getting high on drugs provides temporary relief from anxiety arising from feelings of identity confusion and may be used to justify sexual feelings and behaviour ordinarily viewed as unacceptable (Troiden, 1988 in Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

A fourth general means of dealing with identity confusion is to *redefine* behaviour, feelings, or context along more conventional lines. Redefinition is reflected in the use of the following strategies: special-case, ambisexual (bisexual), temporary-identity or situational strategies. In the special-case strategy, homosexual behaviour and feelings are seen as an isolate case, a one-time occurrence, part of a special, and never-to-be repeated relationship. Another redefinitional strategy is defining oneself as ambisexual. People who adopt the temporary identity strategy see their homosexual feelings and behaviour as stages or phases of development that will pass in time. Those who adopt the situational strategy define the situation, rather than themselves, as responsible for the homosexual activity or feelings, they would give excuses like “It only happened because I was drunk” (Troiden & Goode, 1980).

Acceptance is the overall strategy for dealing with identity confusion. Men and women accept that they may be homosexual and seek out additional sources of information to determine the nature of their sexual preferences. Although individuals

may use several different strategies for stigma management, they characteristically use some more than others (Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

(c) Stage 3: Identity assumption

Regardless of the differences in stigma management strategies, a significant number of homosexuals proceed to the third stage, *identity assumption*. It is during this stage that homosexual identity becomes a self-identity and a presented identity – at least to other homosexuals. Defining the self as homosexual and presenting the self as such to other homosexuals are the first stages in a larger process of identity disclosure called “coming out”. The hallmarks of this stage are defining oneself as homosexual, identity tolerance and acceptance, regular experimentation, and exploration of the homosexual subculture (Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

Although homosexual identities are assumed during this stage, initially they are tolerated than accepted. The quality of a person’s initial contacts with other homosexuals is extremely important. If initial contacts with homosexuals are negative, further contact with homosexuals may be avoided and non-homosexual perceptions of self will persist, maintained through the strategies of denial, repair, self-definition as ambisexual, or temporary identity described earlier (Troiden, 1988 in Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

On the other hand, positive contacts with other homosexuals facilitate homosexual identity formation. Such favourable contacts provide the newly discovered homosexuals with the opportunity to obtain information about homosexuality first hand. Direct positive exposure further provides a basis for re-examining and re-evaluating one’s own ideas about homosexuality and for seeing similarities between oneself and those labelled as “homosexual”. The meaning attributed to the homosexual label begins to change in a more favourable direction. Personally meaningful contacts with experienced homosexuals also helps to see that homosexuality is socially organised and that a group exists to which they may belong,

which reduces feelings of alienation. These contacts also help in terms of learning new strategies for stigma management, rationalisations that legitimise homosexuality and neutralise guilt feelings, and the norms governing homosexual conduct (Troiden, 1988 in Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

Once the homosexual identity has been adopted, homosexuals are confronted with the issue of stigma and its management. Humphreys (1972); Levine (1987) in Nardi & Schneider (1998) added passing and group alignment to the stigma evasion strategies mentioned earlier. *Passing* as heterosexual is probably the most common stigma-evasion strategy, especially among recently self-defined homosexuals. Such individuals who pass as heterosexuals define themselves as homosexuals but conceal their sexual preferences and behaviour from heterosexuals (friends, family, and colleagues) “by careful, even torturous, control of information” (Humphreys, 1972: 138). This strategy requires individuals to lead “double lives”; they separate their lives into heterosexual and homosexual spheres and hope that the two never collide.

Group alignment is another common strategy used by recently self-defined homosexuals to evade stigma. Individuals become actively involved in the homosexual community by doing what other homosexuals do. They look up to other homosexuals for social and emotional support as well as sexual gratification. In review, positive homosexual experiences facilitate homosexual self-definition. While unrewarding experiences reinforce negative attitudes toward homosexuality. By the end of the identity assumption stage people begin to accept themselves as homosexual (Troiden, 1988 in Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

(d) Stage 4: Commitment

In the homosexual context, commitment involves adopting homosexuality as a way of life. Plummer (1975) indicates that for a committed homosexual, “it becomes easier, more attractive, less costly to remain a homosexual” (p 150) than to try to function as a heterosexual. The onset of commitment is marked by entering a same-sex love

relationship (Coleman, 1989). The hallmarks of this stage are self-acceptance and feeling comfortable with the homosexual identity role. Commitment consists of both internal and external dimensions.

Internal Indicators

One of the internal measures of a person's commitment to homosexuality as a way of life is the fusion of same sex sexuality and emotionality into a significant whole. A person feels emotionally comfortable about being homosexual and looks forward to engaging in an emotional relationship with other homosexual persons. The perception of the homosexual identity as a valid self-identity is another sign of internal homosexual commitment. Homosexual identities and roles are seen as growing out of genuine needs and desires. Homosexuality is reconceptualised as "natural" and "normal" for the self. The degree of satisfaction expressed by people about their present identities and increased happiness are other measures of internal commitment (Troiden, 1988 in Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

External Indicators

One external sign of commitment to homosexuality as a way of life is a same sex love relationship, which is a tangible manifestation of a synthesis of same-sex emotionality and sexuality into a meaningful whole. Another external measure of commitment to homosexuality is characterised by increased desire to disclose the homosexual identity to non-homosexual audiences over time. However, often people are reluctant to disclose their homosexual identities to everybody in their social environments due to anticipated homophobic reactions. Instead, they fluctuate back and forth in degrees of openness, depending on personal, social, and professional factors. A shift in stigma management strategies to more mature strategies is another indicator of commitment (Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

2.6 Coming out of the closet: The process of disclosure

Plummer (1975) defines disclosure as the process that follows after one has individually identified and accepted oneself as homosexual and then starting the process of revealing one's sexuality to others. Plummer (1975) starts by distinguishing between individuation and disclosure. He describes individuation as an internal psychological process whereby one recognises and accepts his or her homosexuality; and disclosure as the process whereby others learn about one's homosexual identity.

The process of coming out starts with one discovering and accepting one's homosexuality. The term 'discovering' is used because from an early age, children are socialised to be heterosexual and homosexuality is discouraged. Therefore it is only when they realise that they do not fit into the prescribed norm of heterosexuality that they discover that they are homosexual. This discovery or realisation comes with cognitive changes; one now becomes more aware about the existence of and identifies with the homosexual category. However, some people who eventually identify themselves as homosexuals require a change in the meaning of the cognitive category "homosexual" before they can place themselves in the category (Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

The meaning of the category has to be changed because the person has learned the negative stereotypes associated with homosexuality by most heterosexuals. People live in a society in which they have been consistently indoctrinated with the worst myths, fears, and stereotypes about homosexuality. A message is consistently portrayed from an early age that it is not acceptable to be homosexual. Within such a context it is not surprising that many people have experienced difficulty in accepting their homosexual feelings or orientation (Plummer, 1975; Krouse, 1993).

In order to change this perception of homosexuality, such people have to differentiate themselves from the homosexual image that heterosexual society has presented to

them. Their direct or indirect contact with the homosexual subculture provides them with information about homosexuality that will challenge their heterosexual image of the homosexuals. People who are exploring their homosexuality will quite often identify with other homosexuals that they find socially acceptable. They therefore know who and what they are because the meaning of the cognitive category has changed and they therefore know where they belong. This realisation is often accompanied by a sense of relief and freedom from tension. In essence, coming out often signifies to them, the end of a search for their identity (Nardi & Schneider, 1998; Krouse, 1993).

There is little or no choice about being homosexual, but one can choose what to do about it; whether to pursue or deny it. Living in a predominantly heterosexual world, where being homosexual is not only “different” but also “deviant”, it is not easy to be happy, proud and open about it. In many black South African cultures, no one grows up assumed to be homosexual, as such people on the verge of coming out are faced with a psychic individual-against-society dilemma: a contradiction between societal expectations and their feelings. In such an instance, they have to choose between the two stances: to deny their desires or defy the societal expectations. If they choose to deny their desires, they suppress them and are likely to adopt a heterosexual lifestyle, but if they defy the societal expectations, they assert their homosexuality and begin the process of coming out (Herdt, 1997). Therefore, coming out is the process of putting all risks of society’s rejection aside, to take an enormous step and be true to oneself and to others and to be ultimately happy and proud about one’s sexual identity (Out on campus; 1994).

For some homosexual individuals, both males and females, the process of coming out proves to be simple and straightforward; there never is any great difficulty in recognising or accepting their homosexual identity. For others, it is a difficult process which is often far more painful in its initial stages. The latter may struggle for a very long time before they are able to affirm themselves as homosexuals. But for many it is a learning experience. It seems that for too long homosexuals have been asked by the homophobic society to live a lie by denying who they really are, and have

subsequently lived with enormous fear - concern for their rights; apprehension for their jobs; fear for the loss of those they care about; at times, fear for their lives (Herdt, 1997). Hence Coleman (1982) in Coleman (1989) describes coming out as a testing of fears and paranoia about personal rejection, and warns that coming out will not solve all problems; indeed it often creates new ones. Coming out is a life-long process whereby individuals constantly deal with the acceptance and integration of their homosexuality within a partially repressive and hostile society.

Ponse (1978) in Nardi & Schneider (1998) contends that coming out is the initial process of indicating to the self that one is homosexual, as well as an indication of commitment to homosexuality as a way of life. Coming to have positive feelings about one's homosexuality is an essential part of the coming out process. Until one feels good about being homosexual, it makes little sense to share the fact of one's sexual orientation with others. Basically, coming out of the closet is an on-going issue in the life of virtually every homosexual person. It has to do with self-perception, how one's sexuality is dealt with, and with how individuals present themselves to their loved ones, families, friends, or to the world (Coleman, 1989).

Disclosure is a process that takes place at a number of levels: to the self, which is a personal experience, to other homosexuals, which is private, and lastly, to heterosexual friends and family, to co-workers and to the public at large (Troiden, 1988 in Nardi & Schneider, 1998). The process of disclosure begins with a very personal, inner core of thoughts by an internal processing of feelings and impressions of one's sexual orientation. The self is the first audience to the coming out process. Some individuals are very private people who consider sexual orientation to be an extremely personal matter (Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

The process then progresses through to a private sharing of these personal aspects with others that are close to and trusted by the individual (partial disclosure). This phase can often take years before proceeding to full self-disclosure. This period can be described as a time when they, as homosexual individuals, are thinking about who

they are, coming to terms with it, and deciding what they are going to do about it. They may be feeling pain, denial, powerlessness, embarrassment, depression, anger, joy, excitement, relief and other feelings about the fact that they feel *different*, that they are attracted to people of their own gender. These feelings are normal; they are just a reaction to all the negative messages that surround them about homosexuality (Gevisser & Cameron, 1994).

At some point an individual may decide to speak to more people about his or her sexual orientation. This is the stage where the person comes out to an ever-expanding audience of people; this is the public phase whereby the individual becomes open to the community to which one belongs (full disclosure). Full disclosure can be a traumatic experience which is dominated by fear of emotional and social loss, rejection and violent persecutions, loneliness, lack of support and religious condemnation. One is virtually “all the way out” when most people with whom the individual is in contact with are aware of one’s homosexual identity, and when one no longer cares about who knows about their sexual orientation (Krouse, 1993; Out on campus, 1994).

Moving from partial to full disclosure is often a formidable and protracted process which results in some individuals choosing to conceal or to selectively share their sexual orientation with others, often people that they consider trustworthy. On the other hand, others choose to compartmentalise their lives by developing two distinct groups of people in their lives: those who know and those who do not know about their sexual orientation. Some hold back or feel discouraged because they anticipate immediate negative reprisals than positive consequences of sharing with others their true nature (Savin-Williams, 1996).

Savin-Williams (1996) indicates the two sides of disclosure; he warns that coming out can be a risky venture, and homosexual individuals hoping to come out may have legitimate concerns about their physical and emotional safety if their sexual orientation were to be known by those they love, as well as by those they do not

know. At the same time, disclosure may be a liberating and monumental experience, resulting in a greater sense of relief and personal freedom of being oneself, of not living a lie, and of experiencing genuine acceptance from those who know one's deepest secrets of one's life. Those who have come out, in whatever ways and to whatever degrees, generally experience a greater sense of relief and increased self-esteem through sharing the "secret" of their sexual orientation. Disclosure can be a step towards greater integration and leads towards fuller and more honest and satisfying relationships (Gevisser & Cameron, 1994).

Disclosure may also result in positive mental health outcomes that are associated with openness, including identity synthesis, healthy psychological adjustment, decreased feelings of loneliness and guilt, and positive self-esteem. Disclosure is thus assumed to reduce the stress that accumulates to people who actively hide or suppress their sexual orientation. Furthermore, coming out gives a public expression to the desire long felt to be basic to the person's sexual nature, but formerly hidden because of social taboos and homophobia (Herdt, 1997).

One can say that homosexuals who choose to live their own lives and be part of society pose a threat to those who would not like to examine their assumptions about sexuality, in particular homosexuality. By coming out, homosexuals have chosen to construct a social world based on the politics of social change and progressive moral activism, which requires choosing "not to hide" as a means of creating and advancing their own community (Herdt, 1997). Germond & De Gruchy (1997) describe coming out as an act of social defiance (by disclosing one's homosexuality to a heterosexual society, one offends its norms, and so place him/herself in conflict with it). They capture such an experience by these words "In the closet I die to myself that I may live to others; outside of it I die to others that I may live to myself" (p 87).

One of the problems faced after disclosure is that one's sexual orientation tends to predominate over other aspects of their identity. Often, their sexuality is made an issue in most places, such that they are first seen as homosexual individuals before

other aspects of their lives are considered. When individuals realise that they are homosexual, they first become aware of the fact that there is something wrong with them, and that their feelings about themselves are wrong. Society tells them that they are sick; their sexual desires are unnatural. These perceptions are connected to people's view about heterosexual marriage as the natural way of life. Therefore, even before homosexuals can gather the courage to act out on their feelings, they learn from the society that their personality is deformed (Luirink, 2000).

Herdt (1997) contends that there are those homosexuals who adopt two stances, by trying to accommodate and conform to society's disregard for homosexuality, and at the same time trying to live as homosexuals. They might go through a compromised heterosexual marriage and friendship, and extramarital homosexual relations on the side. However, such a stance is difficult to maintain and results in the development of a negative sexual identity. A positive sexual identity is an essential component of sexual health (Yorburg, 1974). Hence Atkinson & Hackett (1998) noted, "psychological problems experienced by homosexual people are profoundly influenced by the hostile and derogatory societal attitudes" (p 119).

However, according to Ponse (1978), it is expected in the homosexual community that some individuals may have homosexual feelings and engage in homosexual acts and still maintain a heterosexual identity for some time. The homosexual community gives permission for a period of transition in which the individual's identity may not have caught up with their feelings and behaviour. At the same time, one is not expected to tarry too long in the transitional phase. If a person continues to assert an identity that is perceived as incongruent with feelings and behaviour, repercussions may ensue. The person may be accused of inauthenticity and stigma evasion. Unfortunately, there are still some people who live in situations where reality simply demands that their sexual orientation be kept a well-guarded secret (Ponse, 1978).

There are those people who, still "living in the closet", use marriage as a refuge or an escape from their homosexual feelings. More often in cultures that disapprove of

homosexuality, people try to accommodate and blend in, to find what satisfaction they can through compromised heterosexual relationships of marriage and friendship and extramarital same-gender relations (Herdt, 1997). However, they sooner or later realise that they cannot run away from their homosexual feelings. In such cases coming out becomes an even more complicated process because there are more people directly involved; the spouse and sometimes children as well (Gochros, 1989).

Based on the above, it can be argued that everytime homosexual individuals come out; they are taking a risk of ostracism, rejection, and of violence. They continually experience prejudice from the people they come into contact with, including friends, family, co-workers and people in general. This can be a terrifying experience, but some individuals have the courage to withstand such circumstances. These can be perceived as some of the experiences that inhibit black South African homosexuals from openly coming out, and thus not being true to their homosexual identity (Gough & Macnair, 1985). Savin-Williams (1996) also argues that it is society's attitude about homosexuality that fosters the fear of disclosure.

2.7 Factors that can facilitate and inhibit disclosure

There are personal and environmental factors that play a role in facilitating and inhibiting the process of disclosure. Below is an elaboration of how these factors can either discourage or encourage homosexuals to come out of the closet.

2.7.1 Personal factors

2.7.1.1 Identification and acceptance

Self-identification as homosexual and acceptance of one's sexuality play a facilitating role in the process of disclosure. The first step in the coming out process is that of moving towards a recognition and acceptance of one's homosexuality Plummer (1975). Some people become aware of their homosexuality early in life. Others, on

the other hand, do not reach that awareness for a long time because of the many social pressures that demand heterosexual conformity (Krouse, 1993).

The process of recognising and accepting one's homosexuality can be a very lonely experience. But increasingly people have been able to accept their feelings and their homosexual identities more readily. They can see their sexuality as a positive and joyful part of their lives. If, like many people who are heterosexual, they have problems in their lives, they can seek professional help to deal with those problems rather than being told that they need to change their sexual orientation (Luirink, 2000).

Krouse (1993) asserts that self-identification as homosexual and the acceptance of one's homosexuality usually occur simultaneously, but Nardi & Schneider (1998) state that this is not always the case. These authors hypothesise that those who identify themselves as homosexuals but not in the context of interacting with other homosexuals, are more likely to have guilty feelings than those who identify themselves as being homosexual in the context of interacting with other homosexuals. Society receives this self-identification and acceptance as a deviation from the norm. However, it would be incorrect to state that homosexuals accept themselves as deviant. They may know they are deviant from the societal standpoint but often do not accept this as part of their self-definition. But those who consider themselves to be deviants are likely to reject their homosexual identity. Once people identify themselves as homosexuals, they do develop means, often in the process of the change in self-definition, of adjusting to the societal reaction to their sexual behaviour (Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

The interaction with other homosexuals allows the recently disclosed homosexuals to learn various ideas that allow them to say, "I am homosexual, but not deviant" or "I am homosexual, but not mentally ill". It should be mentioned that coming out often involves an entire transformation in the meaning of the concept of homosexual for

them. The “cognitive category” of *homosexual* now becomes socially acceptable, and they can place themselves in that category and yet preserve a sense of their self-esteem or self-worth. However, it should be noted that the self-identification as a homosexual does not generally take place in the context of a negative public labelling (Nardi & Schneider; 1998).

Accepting one’s homosexuality and the change of self-identity to a homosexual one is intimately related to how much information and knowledge one has about homosexuals and homosexuality. The more unbiased information one has about issues of homosexuality; one is in a better position to accept his/her homosexual identity. Since there has been a freer circulation of information on homosexuality during the past few years, it can be hypothesised that the development of a homosexual identity is now occurring at an increasingly earlier age (Luirink, 2000).

It is evident that more young homosexuals are coming out at an earlier age. One of the reasons is that there is a trend towards greater circulation of information that is not highly negative about homosexuals and homosexuality, which also contributes to the relatively changing attitudes of society toward homosexuality. However, this does not mean that more information about homosexual and homosexuality will lead to a significantly greater prevalence of persons engaging in homosexuality. What is being asserted is that a higher proportion of those with homosexual desires and behaviour are likely to develop a homosexual identity, and that the development of that identity will continue to occur at an increasingly younger age (Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

2.7.2 Environmental factors

2.7.2.1 The role played by significant others in disclosure

The family can play both facilitating and inhibiting roles in the process of disclosure. Negative responses or reactions from one’s next of kin are likely to discourage disclosure while supportive reactions may encourage disclosure. The family plays a crucial role in the regulation of sexuality in all classes, races and societies. The lives

of many young homosexuals are sharply restricted by family. This is so because they are dependent on their parents for basic needs such as money and housing. Disclosing at this stage poses risks of being thrown out of the house. In such an instance, people find support and solidarity from other homosexuals; such support is essential for survival in an anti-gay environment (Gough & Macnair, 1985).

As far as Herdt (1997) is concerned, nearly all parents experience the news of their children's homosexual orientation as a sense of loss, which might be coupled with feelings of anger, rage, blame and grief. Some parents often assume that something is wrong with their child and it should be rectified. Thus they immediately want their child to go for treatment. This is so because socially, children are constitutionally expected to be heterosexually programmed. If not, parents feel that they have contributed to their children's "abnormality" by failing to instil social norms within them.

The late Simon Nkoli, a popular gay activist (Murray & Roscoe, 1998) also indicated that when his mother found out about his homosexuality, she was convinced that he was bewitched and was taken to several sangomas who also confirmed his mother's belief. His mother in particular, felt that she was being punished for sins she has committed. Some of her major concerns were the reactions from the extended family members and her family's reputation that was about to be ruined by having a homosexual son. The visits to the Sangomas who claimed that he was bewitched led Simon to a state of confusion and doubt "I also thought that my homosexuality was abnormal" (Luirink, 2000:14). He further recounts that his stepfather was however not convinced about the Sangoma's explanations. This is because he had homosexual colleagues and hence was aware that homosexuality was normal. However, his support for Simon almost cost him his marriage because Simon's mother accused her husband of being gay as well for siding with and accepting Simon's homosexuality (Luirink, 2000; Murray & Roscoe, 1998).

Often parents tend to blame their child's lover or friends for converting their child into homosexuality. This was also the case with the parents of Simon Nkoli's then lover; they suggested that the two (homosexuals) get psychological assessment. It was after a few months of weekly therapy sessions that Simon and his partner were assured by their therapist that they were "one hundred percent homosexual and the best thing to do is to accept it" (Luirink, 2000:15). This information brought about some shift of perspective and relief to Simon's mother who, after a year of denial, accepted her son's sexuality (Gevisser & Cameron, 1994).

Often parents' reactions are based on the availability or lack of knowledge about homosexuality. Lack of or limited knowledge about homosexuality makes it difficult for most parents to accept their homosexual children. In most cases, parents acquire biased information about homosexuality, which then informs their negative view of homosexuality. Unfortunately not all parents end up accepting their child's homosexual identity. Other disclosures are met by verbal and physical abuse from the parent(s) as an attempt to help their children understand that they are confused to think that they are homosexuals (Luirink, 2000). Some parents' disapproving responses are accompanied by emotional blackmail; "now we won't have grandchildren" is a common one (Gevisser & Cameron, 1994: 343).

In their book, Germond & De Gruchy (1997) recorded some personal South African narratives of homosexual individuals and their parents. One of these stories shows the process that parents often go through after learning of their children's homosexuality: when Rina Repsold realised that her daughter showed no interest in dating boys, she thought that her daughter was just "slow" until she heard that her daughter had a special friendship with another girl. Her first reaction was to declare war with her daughter, she yelled, prayed, pleaded with her to stop and then condemned. But nothing worked. She kept the secret of her daughter's homosexuality for six years where she was chained by shame and guilt. She feared that her family would reject both her and her child if they knew that her daughter was a lesbian. But she was proven wrong, when after telling her family, they understood. Although they voiced their disappointment, they still accepted her daughter and did not love her any less. To empower herself, Rina undertook the trouble to research the phenomenon of

homosexuality in an attempt to understand her daughter better. The information she acquired through research also helped her to overcome the blame she felt for her daughter's sexual orientation.

Krouse (1993) writes about the story of a lesbian girl who, after her mother read her diary and found out that she was homosexual, was told that “evil people” were not wanted in her mother's house and was given an ultimatum; to stop loving her partner or leave the house. Gevisser & Cameron (1994) also recorded in their book a story of a girl who recounts how her mother in particular responded to her coming out of the closet “... she was very angry and she threw me out into the street. For three days I was just in the street, they would not let me back in the house” (p 170). These are some of the factors that can inhibit homosexuals from disclosing their homosexuality to their family. Hence, as Savin-Williams (1996) indicates, family members are rarely the first to know because most people are careful to initially disclose to people that are likely to accept or understand them.

As far as Gevisser & Cameron (1994) are concerned, not only does being openly homosexual predispose one to extremely prejudicial consequences, but one's family as well. This discrimination often inhibits people from experiencing their true sexual identity. One's family members can also be discriminated against for having a homosexual family member. In cases where homosexuals do not get familial support, they tend to turn to their friends or fellow homosexuals for support and acceptance (Edwards, 1994; Plummer, 1992 in Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

In essence, a supportive family can play a facilitating role in the process of homosexual identity formation and thus facilitate disclosure. Individuals may feel more comfortable in acting upon their sexual feelings when they believe that those close to them will accept them as they are. On the other hand, a judgemental and unsupportive family may inhibit disclosure as individuals might fear the consequences that might come with their disclosure (Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

2.7.2.2 The role played by religion in disclosure

Goldberg (1994) contends that many Christians are content with the 19th century “disease” model of homosexuality. As such Herdt (1997) adds that religious beliefs have certainly been amongst the most powerful factors in shaping the continued homophobia, which in turn, is likely to inhibit disclosure. As a “disease”, homosexuality carries the added burden of immorality and this only adds to the eager efforts by many to find a cure. But over the past 100 years of research and reviews, it appears that homosexuals keep appearing within society and that a “cure” has not been readily found.

Boswell (1980) in Atkinson & Hackett (1998) states that religious beliefs merely serve to justify the oppression and persecution of groups, especially homosexuals, who are held in contempt because of personal hostility and prejudice. The interpretation of biblical references to homosexuality has been a source of controversy. Germond & De Gruchy (1997) strongly believe that “there are no biblical or theological grounds on which people should be made to be aliens in the household of God because of their sexual orientation” (p 3) and their book seeks to demonstrate their belief, focusing on homosexuality and Christian faith in South Africa. These authors further indicate that the household of God treats homosexuals as aliens, as people who are not welcome on their own right, but only on the basis of denial. Thus the church tends to discourage homosexuality and sweeps such cases under the carpet.

Germond & De Gruchy (1997) further expound that this is quite the opposite of what God commands the church to do in the scriptures (Leviticus 19:33-4). In this biblical scripture God commands his people that their attitude towards the “other” (meaning someone different) should be marked by “respect, dignity and justice” (p2). Although the church has helped to successfully fight the struggle against apartheid, it still nurtures another equally oppressive division: one that divides heterosexual people from homosexual people (Germond & De Gruchy, 1997).

Many homosexual Christians in South Africa are now rising up and disputing the existing religious beliefs about homosexuality (www.mask.org.za, undated.) Germond & De Gruchy (1997) indicate that there are a number of churches in South Africa that are particularly homosexual-friendly. Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church (HUMCC) is such a church. It was formed in 1994 and has a largely black membership. The church grew out of small group of homosexual Christians who felt isolated from fellow Christians due to homophobic attitudes and behaviour in the mainstream churches. HUMCC strives to meet the needs of mostly black homosexual Christians facing homophobia within the mainstream churches. Not only does the church cater for the spiritual needs of its congregation, but it also plays a mediating role between homosexuals and their families. The central tenet of the church's doctrine is that homosexuality is not sinful, rather, homosexuals were created by God and "God does not make mistakes". They contend that what is sinful is to act against one's natural sexuality.

The Anglican Church has also been reported to be gradually changing its standpoint regarding homosexuality (www.mask.org.za). An article which appeared on this website indicated that the Anglican Church now accepts homosexuals in the church because they have been rejected in the past. The church wants them to feel welcomed in the body of Christ. However, the church maintains that it does not promote sexual promiscuity, and not all church members are happy about the decision to accommodate homosexuals in church.

Religion is often used as a yardstick for determining what is wrong and right, and thus, religion plays an important role in shaping people's sense of moral judgement. If religion views homosexuality as an immoral act, this view is likely to be held by most religious as well as unreligious people. Subsequently, most people condemn homosexuality on the ground of immorality. This is one of the factors that may inhibit certain homosexual individuals (both religious and unreligious) from exploring their sexual identity, as they may fear discrimination (Germond & De Gruchy, 1997; Luirink, 2000).

2.8 Summary

This chapter gave a background of homosexuality and its prevalence in South Africa. It also explicates perceptions held by most people in the black South African community regarding homosexuality and how these perceptions are formed. A theory of homosexual identity formation was outlined as well as the stages involved in the process of discovering one's homosexual identity. The process of disclosure was discussed as well as the factors that play a role in facilitating and inhibiting disclosure.

As pointed out in the chapter, although homosexuality has been a part of human experience for centuries, it is still a subject of most debates (Blasius & Phelan, 1997, Edwards, 1994). In the black South African community, most people hold the assumption that homosexuality is not African but was introduced by the colonisers (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). These perceptions are backed up by religious beliefs that maintain that homosexuality is an act of immorality and a sin (Blasius & Phelan, 1997). These views therefore influence society's perception of homosexuality; hence, most people shun homosexuality. Subsequently, those homosexual individuals who wish to disclose their sexual orientation are likely to be treated with contempt (Coleman, 1989).

Disclosing one's homosexuality takes courage and will power to deviate against the norm and to withstand the consequences that come with making one's homosexual identity public. Some homosexual individuals do not have the courage to stand up and fight for their rights, and as a result, they continue to live unsatisfying lives in order to please others and to be accepted by society (Herdt, 1997). However, other individuals take the risk of being labelled as deviants and disclose their sexual orientation (Savin-Williams, 1996). Although the latter are likely to be rejected even by their families, they find inner peace and the freedom in expressing their true identities. They also

look for social support and often find it from fellow homosexuals and other people who understand and accept their homosexual identity (Herdt, 1997).

In essence, acceptance of one's homosexual identity is important in the process of disclosure. However, as we live in a community that is governed by rules, it not easy to deviate from such rules. Hence, disclosure is and can be affected by other people's perceptions about homosexuality. Social support encourages disclosure while negative reactions to one's homosexual orientation is likely to discourage disclosure.