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Lesbians' coming-out stories as confessional practices: liberatory politics or an incitement to discourse?

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Abstract

For homosexuals, "coming out" or disclosing one's sexual orientation has come to be seen as a marker of self-acceptance, actualisation and the imperative first step in the authentication of a liberated subjectivity and social identity. This popular construction of "coming out" has been supported by a range of feminist and queer theory. However, other critical schools of thought, largely informed by Foucault's middle writings, have argued that "coming-out" is merely a confessional response to an incitement to discourse about sex. Confessions of this kind form important relays in modern forms of power. Thus while homosexual subjects may experience "coming-out" as a form of liberatory identity politics that challenges the repressive power of the heteronormative, this rite of passage may also be viewed as forming an insidious entry into nets of self and social surveillance that are characteristic of disciplinary and biopower in modern societies. Against this backdrop, this study aimed to explore constructions of coming-out by a group of self-identified lesbians in South Africa. Data was collected via eight semi-structured interviews and then subjected to a discourse analysis. While coming-out stories appear to conform to some of the discursive practices characterising confessional modes of response to incitements to speak, they are also de-emphasised as central to the constitution of selfhood. The changing conditions of possibility for the production of sexual subjectivity in contemporary South Africa thus seem to disrupt understandings of coming-out as either solely a confessional or liberatory practice. Ultimately, the study holds important implications for the way that coming-out stories are understood and activated by both homosexual subjects and a sexually "liberated" society in general.

Declaration

I declare that this research report entitled “Lesbians’ coming-out stories as confessional practices: liberatory politics or an incitement to discourse?” is my own, unaided work and that all sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated by means of complete references. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts (Community-based Counselling Psychology) at the University of the Witwatersrand. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university.

Signed this _____ day of _____ 2010

_____

Ella Susanna Gertruida Kotze

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Eppies Kamfer, whose life proved the value of being true to yourself.

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Without the support and encouragement of a number of people this dissertation would not have been possible. My sincere gratitude to the following people:

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All the friends who listened patiently while I went on and on about lesbians, coming-out, Foucault and this project.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

"Coming out" is a commonly accepted colloquialism that refers more formally to the process of disclosing a previously hidden sexual orientation and forming a new identity in the process (Stein, 2003). According to Ward and Winstanley (2005), coming out is an important process for lesbians as it serves to recognise and renegotiate their identities through a discursive process. Humphrey (1999) sites three reasons for coming out: the issue of personal honesty and integrity; the benefits of open relationships; and the perceived importance of educating society about sexual minorities. It is considered a common, definitive process in the identity development of lesbians, and the coming-out story is worn as a badge of honour by those who have come out, with little thought given to the power relations and social structures that contour the conditions of possibility that enable coming-out in the first place and privilege the practice above other identity dimensions.

This project has as its aim the critical interrogation of lesbians' coming-out stories and it hopes to fundamentally challenge a number of popular and academic assumptions underpinning coming-out as a valuable and liberating developmental process for lesbians. The study thus holds important implications for historical and contemporary theoretical understandings of the relationship between sexuality, truth and identity politics.

Lesbians are often viewed as doubly disadvantaged within prevailing systems of heterosexual patriarchy (Rich, 1980, Crenshaw, 1991, Wells & Polders, 2006), with race and disability potentially adding to their compromised position in a world where whiteness and able-bodiedness are regarded as standards of normalcy (Crenshaw, 1991, Moncrief, Thompson & Schuhmann, 1995). In South Africa this double disadvantage is evident in the number of

discriminatory acts and the prevalence of sexual violence against lesbians, especially in the form of corrective rape (Wells & Polders, 2006, Gontek, 2009). Yet, despite this, South African lesbians increasingly choose to disclose their sexual identity (Wells & Polders, 2004, Wells & Polders, 2006, Gontek, 2009).

While literature, both academic and popular, on the coming-out process and coming-out stories abound, a critical interrogation of the power relations and social structures that influence the production of the coming-out stories of lesbians in South Africa is scarce (Stein & Plummer, 1994, Spurlin, 2001, Wells & Polders, 2004). Given the recent emphasis on critical studies of sexuality, most notably in the field of queer theory (Namaste, 1994, Sullivan 2003, Abes & Jones, 2004, Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007, Abes & Kasch, 2007), and the place of Foucauldian theory therein, it is surprising that very little critical work has been done on coming-out narratives. Coming-out as a process of identity development for homosexuals has been well-documented since the 1970s. Coming-out is generally seen as a necessary process that has to be successfully dealt with in order for the homosexual person to achieve identity synthesis (Cass, 1979, Coleman, 1982, Diamond, 1998). However, the focus always remains on coming-out as the mostly linear developmental process pertaining to the individual, without giving much thought to the power relations and social structures that contour this process. This is ironic, as the coming-out of the individual is often encouraged for the greater good of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) community – in the words of Harvey Milk:

> "Come out to your relatives... come out to your friends... if indeed they are your friends. Come out to your neighbors... to your fellow workers... to the people who work where you eat and shop... come out only to the people you know, and who know you. Not to anyone else. But once and for all, break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions." (Foss, 2007, p. 84)

The liberatory function of the coming-out story is not readily contested. This is surprising given the fact that much theoretical and historical work has been applied to understanding identity politics and its various sexual correlates. For example, as early as 1948 Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin set out to map the sexual behaviour of human males and five years later, in 1953, they were joined by Gebhard in studying the sexual behaviour of human females. More recently the focus has been on the intersections of gender with other facets of human identity, such as race and space (e.g. Read & Eagle, 2010, Fraser, 2009, Dunbar, 2006).

Perhaps the most well-known but least applied theorist in this tradition is Michel Foucault. When conceptualised within a Foucauldian theory in which institutions exercise power through the production of knowledge and vice versa, the coming-out story may well be aligned to what Foucault regards as the mode of confession and Foucault's (1976/1978) conception of the confessional as "one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth". This seems to provide a valuable lens through which the coming-out narrative can be explored. In response, this research aims to deploy some of the obviously relevant precepts underlying general critical theory and Foucault's theorisation of the confessional mode in particular to explore the discourses that characterise the coming-out narratives of a group of lesbians in South Africa.

Foucault (1976/1978, pp. 61-62) defines confession as a ritualistic act of discourse that takes place inside a power relationship. The truthfulness of a confession is measured against the "obstacles and resistances" it had to conquer before it could be spoken and confessing produces "intrinsic modifications" in the person who speaks it, "it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation" – both trademarks of the coming-out story.

Against this critical theoretical backdrop, the study aims to explore the coming-out stories of eight self-identified lesbians in South Africa and in so doing, disrupting conventional knowledge regarding the coming-out story. As such the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the participants construct their coming-out stories?
2. How and in what way are these stories reflective of the social and political context in which they are produced?

Ultimately this study aims to "out" the coming-out story by critically interrogating this ritual as a discursive practice. Such a project will not only contribute to the theoretical understandings of the place of the coming-out story in the politics of lesbian identity, but it will also contribute to South African lesbians' own understanding of the role their coming-out stories play in terms of their construction of self and the way they are produced in and by social systems.

1.1 Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 presents an overview of literature relevant to the study. The conceptualisation of coming-out as a ritualistic act performed by members of the LGBTI community is explored, after which the Foucauldian concepts of biopolitics, confession and perversion and their relevance to the coming-out story are discussed. This is followed by a discussion on lesbian identity politics, with specific reference to feminist influences, as well as confessional politics and queer theory. The lived experiences of lesbians in South Africa are then explored. The chapter concludes with an appeal to critical theory as a valuable lens through which to understand "coming-out" as a discursive practice

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methods employed in the current research, beginning with the research design and sampling. The data collection procedure is detailed, as is the data analysis procedure, which takes the form of a discourse analysis. A reflective section expounds on the strengths and weaknesses of the study, with a focus on the reflexive nature of the research process in a discourse analytic tradition, as well as the nature of the data gathered. Lastly, ethical concerns, and the steps taken to prevent ethical problems are detailed.

Chapter 4 presents an analysis and discussion of the main themes and discourses that were identified in the study. The chapter begins with a section on the social or moral obligation the participants felt to come out, focusing on the obligations they felt towards friends, towards "knowing" others and towards patriarchal figureheads. The second section in this chapter expounds on the notion of coming-out as an authentication of the self, focusing on the construction of the coming-out story as emotional labour, the moves into adulthood that often accompany coming-out, and the role played by truth and its risks. The third section in this chapter explores participants' resistance to the urge to confess, starting with the flouting of labels and including the seemingly singularly definitive component of sexuality in constitutions of selfhood. The final section of this chapter delineates participants' attempts to locate themselves within "normality", as well as their repositioning of themselves as liberated and wise.

Chapter 5 provides the main conclusions reached in this study, while also addressing the limitations of the current research. Informed by these, the chapter concludes with recommendations for future areas of study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

> "The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, 'demands' only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place . . . and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation" (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 60).

2.1 The Coming-out Story

Even a cursory glance at literature, both academic and otherwise, powerfully illustrates the quote above. The 21st century human is provided with many avenues through which to confess, ranging from reality television shows documenting people's "struggles" against what is considered to be deviant from the norm, to housewives and businessmen seeking advice from agony aunts in magazines. The urge to confess is especially strong in gay and lesbian people – whether they are autobiographical tales (Bloch & Martin, 2005, Morgan & Wieringa, 2005, Nkabinde, 2008, Liebenberg, 2008) or fictionalised versions of true events (Feinberg, 1993, Van der Merwe, 2006). Coming-out is regarded as a necessary event on the path to "freedom", and coming-out stories are told and retold, both as a confirmation of identity and as the voice of dissent. Telling a coming-out story is done to move out of secrecy, out of the closet, into freedom – albeit freedom with a price. For many theorists coming-out is the culmination of sexual identity formation, a process that starts with an "awareness of being different" and moves towards the integration of sexual orientation into the sense of self (Abes & Jones, 2004). However, such theories rarely take into account the multiple dimensions along which identity is constructed, such as race and religion, or how these dimensions might interact and where they might intersect (Abes & Jones, 2004).

Subjection is "the *making* of a subject, the principle of regulation according to which a subject is formulated or produced" (Butler, 1997, p. 84). Subjection as a form of power not only regulates

the subject, but also forms it. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975/1977) Foucault describes subjectification as a process of the body – a person is not regulated by an outside institution of power, but by the identity discursively ascribed to her/him (Butler, 1997). For Foucault (1982, p. 780), the best way to understand the relationship between subject and power is to interrogate "the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations", implying a need for critical interrogation of the story constituted at various intersections of discourses.

Foucault's concept of identity as a product of power relations stands in contrast to the popular, modernist view of identity as a source of meaning – for both individuals and communities – and something that needs to be explored in order to attain meaning, truth and freedom (Weir, 2009). Indeed, for Foucault, the question "Who am I?" is an act of normalisation and constitutes an affirmation of being subject to domination (Weir, 2009).

Taylor (1989, p. 27) interprets the question "Who am I?" as follows: "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand." For Taylor and the modern philosophers before him – starting with Descartes' "I think therefore I am" – discovering and defining the self is a matter of authentication.

Foucault, however, has a different view. He sees the definition of self not as authentication, but as a determination of normalcy. For Foucault (1975/1977, p. 191), identity is a production through the process of being "described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very

individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalised, excluded" – with the individual's full co-operation.

Weir (2009, p. 533) acknowledges that there is a tension between Foucault's and Taylor's views on identity, but attempts to defuse this tension by suggesting that they are in fact describing different forms of identity, with Foucault exploring an ascribed, third person identity and Taylor a created, first person identity. She further suggests that both interpretations are necessary on an individual's path to gain self-knowledge and freedom, calling it "a quest for authenticity that involves both an analysis of relations of power and identification with resistant identities".

2.2 Foucault, Biopolitics and the Confessional

Foucault's theories about power contradict Marxist and liberalist views of power and he posits that power is productive instead of repressive, it exists within relationships, it is not the exclusive function or property of the State and is in fact exercised on all levels of life, and it serves a strategic function (Foucault, 1976/1978, Foucault, 1975/1977). Furthermore, Foucault theorises about power existing in various forms. Sovereign power involves allegiance and obedience to a sovereign head of state, enforced by grandiose displays of force (Foucault, 1975/1977). This form of power was gradually replaced by disciplinary power in the 19th century. Disciplinary power serves to regulate the behaviour of members of the human race through organisation of space, time and activity, as well as meticulous surveillance throughout the subject's life, starting in institutions such as schools and continuing in institutions such as hospitals and prisons (Foucault, 1975/1977).

Bio-power is described by Foucault as a technology of power, or a function of power directed at a specific aim, namely that of population control and population prosperity – it functions at the

level of life, developed out of sovereign power and was key in the development of capitalism as it ensures the productivity of the population (Foucault, 1976/1978). Bio-power works through examining, objectifying and arranging and, through arranging it attempts to normalise society (Tell, 2007). Objectification is an integral part of existence, as Foucault makes clear in *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (1975/1977). As techniques of examination produces or objectifies the delinquent (Foucault, 1975/1977), so techniques of (self-) examination objectifies the homosexual, as both are social constructs, living only in the discourses of power. As the delinquent is "known, assessed, measured, diagnosed, treated" (Foucault, 1975/1977, p. 255), so the homosexual becomes an object to be "known, assessed, measured, diagnosed, treated".

Foucault proposed a bipolar understanding of bio-power (Rabinow & Rose, 2006). The first pole, what Foucault calls anatomo-politics, focuses on the human body as a machine that needs to be optimised, extorted, and always useful for the greater good of the economic state (Foucault, 1976/1978). The second pole, biopolitics, involves the body of the human species as a whole and the continuance of its existence in terms of biological processes such as propagation and life expectancy – the biological actions of the individual have to be for the greater good of the species (Foucault, 1976/1978).

For Foucault, sexuality is a crucial technology of power as it conjoins these two poles (Rabinow & Rose, 2006), resulting in an overarching bio-power that aims "at reducing the levels of inherited morbidity and pathology in a population considered as a whole by acting on the individual reproductive choices of each citizen, through various forms of authoritative calculation and guidance, sanctioned by a range of religious and secular authorities, including bioethicists, and approved of by the population" (Rabinow & Rose, 2006, p. 210).

For Foucault, confession is a discursive practice of the body and its functions, through which bio-power disciplines the human body and controls populations (Foucault, 1976/1978). Furthermore, confession is understood as the ultimate production of truth – first in the church's confession booth and later in prisons, hospitals, literature, art, relationships and schools (Foucault, 1976/1978), with sex being the "privileged theme of confession" (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 61).

According to Foucault (1976/1978, pp. 62-63), confession is a ritualistic act of discourse that takes place inside a power relationship; the truthfulness of a confession is measured against the "obstacles and resistances" it had to conquer before it could be spoken; and giving confession produces "intrinsic modifications" in the person who speaks it, "it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation".

Rose & Rabinow (2006, pp. 197-198) conceptualise bio-power as existing in a plane of actuality where at least three interrelated preconditions exist, namely the presence of "one or more truth discourses about the 'vital' character of human beings and an array of authorities competent to speak that truth"; "strategies for intervention upon collective existence in the name of life and health", or strategies for discipline; and "modes of subjectification through which individuals are brought to work on themselves, under certain forms of authority by means of practices of the self, in the name of their own life or health, that of their family or some other collectivity, or indeed in the name of the life or health of the population as a whole".

For Tell (2007) "what started as the simple labelling of impulses and a desire to find an essential self behind the physicality of the body, ends by providing power, an inroad to the recesses of the self". This is strikingly similar to Rose and Rabinow's (2006) conceptualisation of bio-power,

illustrating the intertwined nature of these two concepts: bio-power wants to arrange, while confession labels. One cannot exist without the other.

Sexuality, as the only means of ensuring the continued existence of the population as a whole – at least at the time of Foucault's writing – is an obvious key factor to consider when discussing the prosperity and productivity of the human race, for two reasons. Firstly, despite the development of procreative science, sexuality is the only means of ensuring the continuous existence of the human race, especially at the time of Foucault's writing and, in the 21st century, this continues to be the case for developing populations, such as most of South Africa's population, where every member of the population does not have easy access to procreative science. When considered as such, any form of sexuality outside the procreative is superfluous. This leads to the second reason: any form of sexuality practiced for the purposes of pleasure, instead of procreation, is not only superfluous but also counterproductive and defiant of bio-power (Foucault, 1976/1978). Confession about such deviant sexual deeds provides access for discipline, it ensures that deviance is noted, measured and located in relation to the "norm". It provides "deviant" pleasure with a calculability.

Tell (2007) describes the way in which confession operates as the conviction that there is something outside the human body and all its functions, which is regulated by a law of its own and the conclusion that there is an "essential self" (e.g. a "lesbian") behind what is empirically known about the body; the grouping together of arbitrary bodily functions and sensations to constitute this essential self; and treating this group of sensations as the ultimate truth about the self.

To confess to homosexuality, or "perversity", as it were, means more than stating a sexual preference. Instead, it is to subject oneself to being labelled "homosexual", "lesbian", or "pervert" as defined by the ideology of prevailing discourse (Buckton, 1998).

2.2.1 "Perverts"

For much of the 20th century homosexuality was classified as a mental illness, and while it may have been removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973, the proliferation of heteronormative discourse in mental institutions remains (Semp, 2008). Thus, when Foucault (1976/1978) conceptualised homosexuality as a relatively new invention, the pathologisation of homosexuality was still fairly entrenched. In fact, according to Semp (2008), homosexuality is still pathologised as mental health practitioners cling to medical discourses on the subject.

Foucault (1976/1978, p. 39) argues that before the 19th century, homosexual behaviour was viewed simply as acts, albeit criminal acts, unrelated to a person's identity. But with the establishment of discourses of perversity in the 19th century, as the "Sixth Commandment began to fragment" into different pieces of what was regarded as the sexual puzzle, homosexual behaviour revealed much more than a person's criminal inclinations: it revealed the person's soul. The person became a homosexual, a pervert. McCance (1996, p. 116) explains:

> "... Foucault considers the centrifugal movement toward the heterosexual couple as being, at the same time, a scrutinising elaboration of all manner of peripheral sexualities, so that sex 'came apart' rather than coalescing into unity ..."

Foucault (1976/1978) questions the perceived repression of sexuality. Through a genealogical study of sexuality, he comes to the conclusion that it has not been repressed since the 19th century, but that there has been a boom in discourses surrounding the subject. The ever-

increasing scrutiny of sexual behaviour, according to Foucault, results in "perpetual spirals of power and pleasure" (1976/1978, p. 45). Power is exercised by the observer when sexual behaviour is examined, and the observer enjoys the execution of power. The observed, on the other hand, realises the importance of the sexual behaviour in terms of being observed, and starts to place more value on the behaviour, enjoying it more and maybe discovering a sort of pleasure that was not there before. This exercise is repeated *ad infinitum* as observer, drawn to pleasure, basks in power, and observed, drawn to power, lives for pleasure.

An examination of coming-out stories (Bloch & Martin, 2005, Feinberg, 1993, Morgan & Wieringa, 2005, Nkabinde, 2008, Liebenberg 2008, Van der Merwe, 2006) confirms the similarities between the structure of a coming-out story and Tell's model of the mechanics of confession. The stories all tell of a feeling of being somehow "different" to the (heterosexual) norm, is followed by dissonance caused by the gradual realisation of homosexuality – which is eventually termed as such – culminating in the acceptance of homosexuality as the deepest truth about the homosexual "self".

Indeed, Plummer (1995, p. 82) calls the coming-out story the "most momentous act" in the lives of gay and lesbian persons – the momentousness of the occasion achieved through the discarding of others' stories about one's own identity in favour of one's own story and identity. But, according to Plummer (1995), the coming-out story does not denote only identity. It also speaks into being a new culture into which the homosexual person is assimilated, and a new politics to adhere to. These are intricately interweaved, as Plummer argues:

> "... for narratives to flourish there must be a community to hear; that for a community to hear their must be stories to weave together their history, their identity, their politics. The one – community – feeds upon and into the other –

> story. There is an ongoing dynamic or dialectic of communities, politics, identities and stories ...” (Plummer, 1995, p. 87)

Thus homosexuality is not only the deepest truth about the homosexual but it is also the deepest truth about the homosexual community. Homosexuality as truth is so pervasive, in fact, that it influences not only who one socialises with, but also one’s beliefs and actions.

2.3 Lesbian Identity Politics

While a central tenet of feminism is that the “personal is political” (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993, Evans, 1995), the term “identity politics” was first used by Anspach in 1979 in reference to social activism by disabled communities (Bernstein, 2005). It has since been used in the context of, among others, multiculturalism, civil rights, the feminist movement and gay and lesbian rights, to describe “ethnicity as a contemporary form of politics”, “a form of critical pedagogy that links social structure with the insights of poststructuralism”, “general efforts by status-based movements to foster and explore the cultural identity of members” and “the activism engaged in by status-based social movements” (Bernstein, 2005, p. 47, 48). In general, identity politics can be defined as “any mobilisation related to politics, culture and identity” (Bernstein, 2005, p. 48), where identity is positioned as central to politics.

Lesbian identity politics is intricately linked with the birth and development of both the gay pride movement and the feminist movement. Like many social movements, the gay pride movement as well as the feminist movement date back to the 1960s and 1970s (Jeffreys, 2003). The 1969 Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village, where gays, lesbians and drag queens fought back against police, are regarded as the gay pride movement’s birth, although the resistance against the police’s routine harassment had risen steadily since the early 1960s (Jeffreys, 2003). The members of the gay pride movement argued that the oppression of gays and lesbians came as a

result of patriarchy and male domination, linking themselves with the women's liberation movement (Jeffreys, 2003). In the 1970s, a special brand of lesbian feminism was born out of the "most radical sectors of the women's movement", with the aim of demedicalising and normalising lesbianism (Stein, 1992, p. 33). The rise of lesbian feminism was not necessarily welcomed in the larger feminist movement, with Betty Friedan declaring lesbian feminists a "lavender menace" (Gilmore & Kaminski, 2007) which threatened the stability and political position of feminism as a whole.

Furthermore, lesbians who are also members of minority or oppressed social constellations report finding it difficult to assimilate their lesbian identities with their cultural or religious identities and for many lesbians, coming-out is mainly a meaning-making experience, attempting to integrate and negotiate the tensions that exist between the different aspects of their identities (Abes & Jones, 2004). With this focus on personal-as-political and identity formation in mind, it can be argued that the popular view of coming out is informed by a feminist view of identity, aiming to define the identity of the oppressed and working towards social change based on such a definition by turning it into a political statement (Phelan, 1997). For lesbian feminists, the visibility of the lesbian identity is closely linked to political and social rights (Shaw, 2009). However, further exploration of the identity formation of lesbians, especially in a multidimensional context, which includes facets such as race and space, reveals that the finite nature of a set definition of identity becomes a burden for some lesbians as they realise the rigidity of boundaries put in place by such definitions (Abes & Kasch, 2007).

According to Bernstein (1997), the deployment of identity, whether it is in a suppressive or celebratory form, is the central tenet of identity politics, with some movements celebrating the difference between a minority and majority, for example, and others searching for the similarities

between social constellations. Bernstein (1997) in fact suggests that both celebratory and suppressive identity politics can coexist in a single instance, with the ultimate aim of identity deployment informing its structure.

In attempting to establish a theoretical framework from within which to conduct the present study, it becomes apparent that feminist and Foucauldian thought on sexuality and coming out cannot coexist without some tension. Foucault's seeming lack of interest in gender has been a constant source of critique from within feminist circles, while Foucauldian scholars have criticised feminists' apparent misunderstanding of the power relations they aim to transform (Ramazanoglu, 1993, Butler, 1997). Feminist theorists such as Alcoff (1988) have grappled with exactly this concept, as the concept of "woman", on which feminist theory is invariably built, necessitates an understanding of subjects formed by misogynist discourse. According to Alcoff (1988), and echoed by other theorists (Butler, 1997, Ramazanoglu, 1993), the solution to this identity crisis in feminist theory is to deconstruct definitions of "woman" and in so doing undetermining – undefining, undelineating and uncapturing – female behaviour, as the continued determination of female behaviour reinforces misogynist subjectification.

2.4 Confessional Politics

Gammel (1999), influenced by a postmodernist reading of feminism, argues that the confession has become the almost exclusive discursive domain of women, who through confessing are subjected to recolonisation and appropriation, but are also defiant of the very power discursively assigned to confession, by redefining the boundaries of what may be said. Describing the telling of sexual stories in the form of diaries and positioning it as the practice of confessional politics, Gammel (1999, p. 48) writes:

> "... many of the forgotten sexual diarists did more than just *confess*: they strategically used and abused traditional confession, turning its conventions upside down and inside out in order to voice critiques against sexual norms and traditional forms of female self-representations. Determined to push against the boundaries of popular confession, which regulated the expressions of female sexuality."

Gammel thus positions confession as a critical tool with which to challenge prevailing discourses – a decidedly more positive view of confession as a discursive practice than Foucault's, who positioned confession as an act succumbing to prevailing discourses and granting power access to the pleasures of the body and the "truth" of the self (Tell, 2007).

Gammel's view closely resembles the concept of the performative act in queer theory. Britzman (1995) suggests that queer theory in itself contains a paradox, as its aim is to interrogate the concept of identity, while adopting and using the term in doing so. At its essence, however, lies the confrontational nature that makes such a paradox bearable and, indeed, necessary, as even its name provokes anger, discomfort and social anxiety (Britzman, 1995). For lesbians in queer theory, identity development requires the resistance of power structures that define them as abnormal, through the use of performative acts such as coming out (Abes & Kasch, 2007).

2.5 Queer Theory

By the 1990s, the militancy that dominated lesbian feminism lost its momentum and "queer theory" was born, specialising in what Stein & Plummer (1994) call "standpoint theorising", which assumes that knowledge regarding those in power can be gained through theorising from the viewpoint of the oppressed. Concurrently, postmodern critics of identity politics decry its focus on essentialism, as this does not serve to promote universal social change, instead focusing on the alleviation of discrimination against specific groups (Bernstein, 2005). In such theorists' view, the class differences that exist in society and that give rise to identity politics, is the result

of regulatory processes and, accordingly, the aim of identity politics should not be the end of discrimination against a specific class or culture, but rather the achievement of broad-based social change (Bernstein, 2005). It is generally accepted that queer politics and queer theory was created as the poststructuralist answer to the essentialism that underlies identity politics (Phelan, 1997).

A critical reading of queer theory in the 21st century poses similar views of lesbian identity to that of the poststructuralist movement. Influenced by the philosophies of Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard, queer theory critically examines intersections of sexuality, gender, race and class (Abes & Kasch, 2007). Queer theory embraces a liminality between that which is considered the heterosexual norm, and that which is not, effectively shunning the idea of a stable identity and placing lesbians in a framework where they make their own rules (Abes & Kasch, 2007).

Queer theory concerns itself with identity and it is here that it intersects with feminist theory:

> "Feminist theory and queer theory have pointed to the fundamental indeterminacy of identities – of inside/outside communities, of masculine/feminine, of homo/hetero/bi, of male/female and of racial and ethnic categories." (Phelan, 1997, p. 2)

At the same time, queer theorists like Judith Butler argues that, rather than identity being what one is, it is instead what one does (Butler, 1997). To this end, the concept of performativity, or the "reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena it regulates" (Butler, 1997, p. 11) is employed:

> "Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements which, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power." (Butler, 1997, p. 11)

It can thus be argued that the proclamation: "I am a lesbian", or coming out, is a performative act. It performs the action of "I am", while at the same time binding the speaker to specific ways of acting, of conforming to whatever is perceived to be the "lesbian" standard of living. In claiming a specific identity, however, is where the central tension within queer theory lies: laying claim to identity terms such as "gay", "lesbian", "bisexual" or "queer" is considered necessary in challenging oppressive discourses, but through using these terms the discourses are preserved (Butler, 1997). However, the reiterative nature of coming out as a performative act is viewed as a continuous process that serves to not only define the boundaries imposed by prevailing discourses, but also to challenge and redefine those boundaries, and it is for this reason that a critical form of coming out is encouraged:

> "… it remains politically necessary to lay claim to 'women', 'queer', 'gay' and 'lesbian', precisely because of the way these terms, as it were, lay their claim on us prior to our full knowing … The political deconstruction of 'queer' ought not to paralyse the use of such terms, but, ideally, to extend its range, to make us consider at what expense and for what purposes the terms are used, and through what relations of power such categories have been wrought." (Butler, 1997, p. 15)

2.6 Being a Lesbian in South Africa

Despite the abolishment of anti-homosexual legislation in South Africa in 1996, homophobic sentiments prevail throughout the country (Wells, Kruger & Judge, 2006). This, coupled with the strong sense of patriarchy that exists in South Africa, ensures that coming-out can be a harrowing experience for lesbians in South Africa – despite constitutional protection (Nel & Judge, 2008, Butler & Astbury, 2005, Butler, Alpaslan, Strumpher & Astbury, 2003). Butler and Astbury (2005) suggest that it would be unfair to characterise the experiences of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) community, especially youth, in South Africa as generic and similar to the experience of their peers in different parts of the world, as their

experiences are complicated by an intricate interplay between South Africa's demography, family and cultural support, lobbying efforts, access to information and mental health support, among others. Nel and Judge (2008) stress this point when they assert that hate crimes against members of the LGBTI community increase at specific intersections of class, race and gender and that the incidence of hate crimes is also closely related to appearance and mannerisms. According to Graham and Kiguwa (2004), South Africa lesbians are twice as likely to be victims of violence than heterosexual women in South Africa.

In a coming-out story in *Balancing act: South African gay and lesbian youth speak out* (Bloch & Martin, 2005, pp. 30-31), 25-year-old Matsheko explains: "When you are a lesbian there should be one thing: don't say you are a man while your heart is not strong ... When they're standing in the street, gangsters will look at you and say, 'This one, we are going to get her' ... You are not safe. Most of the people in the community don't like you." Another young lesbian, identified as Yanda, says: "Lately I've heard a lot of stories of lesbians being raped. They often get raped by guys they know" (Bloch & Martin, 2005, p. 52).

Lesbians in South Africa's townships also talk about the apparent inaction of police when they report these "corrective rapes". "Every day I am told that they are going to kill me, that they are going to rape me and after they rape me I'll become a girl," Zakhe Sowello from Soweto, Johannesburg, told the *Guardian* newspaper. "When you are raped you have a lot of evidence on your body. But when we try and report these crimes nothing happens, and then you see the boys who raped you walking free on the street" (Kelly, 2009).

Yet, despite these and other obstacles, many South African lesbians cannot resist coming out, confessing. "I've started speaking in public. I always tell them, during my talk, that I am a

lesbian ... People are raping lesbians because they want to fix us. But that won't change the fact that I am a lesbian. The solution is to talk about it," says 25-year-old Nunu in Bloch and Martin (2005, p. 62). It appears as if these young lesbians want to confirm their identities as sexual beings by speaking about it, as if they want to off-set the apparent repression of their sexuality by confessing to it.

A Foucauldian reading of Nunu's solution of "talking about it" provides an interesting paradox, however. Confession, or talking about it, functions at the level of disciplinary power, while corrective rape falls squarely within the realm of sovereign power. This implies the parallel existence of both disciplinary and sovereign power – at least in the experience of some South African lesbians – a deviation from Foucault's view that sovereign power disappeared and was replaced by disciplinary power in the 19th century (Foucault, 1976/1978). Thus a reading of the coming-out story as a discursive practice in South Africa complicates a clear extraction of the act from sovereign power and its implications in this context.

It is noteworthy that research on the lived experiences of South African lesbians focus almost exclusively on that of black lesbians, specifically in the context of corrective rape. As such, the lived experiences of white lesbians, and therefore the majority of participants in this study, are not well-documented. Wells, Kruger and Judge (2006), however, do pay attention to the experiences of white South African lesbians, specifically in terms of power and empowerment. For white women in their study, coming-out was experienced as empowering, and the suppression of their sexuality, or failure to demonstrate it, was experienced as disempowering. It seems as if their experience of power is enacted within the modern disciplinary matrix while the black lesbians (in the study) "come out" within the field of sovereign power.

Taking into account the tension between the popular understanding of the coming-out story as liberatory practice and Foucault's understanding of the coming-out story as a mode of confession, as well as the tension between the modernist view of a singular identity and the poststructuralist view of a discursively produced set of identities, a critical interrogation of the coming-out story is an exercise in autonomy and a step in the direction of self-determination (D'Entreves, 1999). It is with these sentiments in mind that the tensions inherent in the coming out process, both theoretically and pragmatically, are interrogated in the current research. A disruption of conventional knowledge on coming-out, which is the aim of this project, has possible profound implications for both research and activism.

Chapter 3: Method

3.1 Research Design and Sampling

Located firmly within the discursive analytical tradition, this qualitative research subjected data transcribed from semi-structured interviews to a discourse analysis using Parker's (1992) 20 steps of discourse analysis.

The eight participants were purposively selected through contact with Activate, a gay, lesbian, transgender and intersex rights organisation at the University of the Witwatersrand. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 25. Two were black and six white. Seven participants are completely "out", as most people they are in contact with know of their sexual orientation, while one participant had not yet come out to her family at the time of the interviews. Participants were in the process of completing undergraduate degrees in various fields at the time of the interviews. It is argued that relative urbanisation and education impact greatly on the incidence of coming out among South African gays and lesbians, with traditional, conservative values and mores prohibiting homosexual lifestyles in most rural areas (Butler & Astbury, 2005), and educational homogeneity ensuring that participants feel they have control over the interview situation and are not "forced" to talk about themselves (McDermott, 2004). The participants appeared comfortable in the interview situation and they did not seem hesitant to "open themselves up" to questioning around the circumstances connected to the coming-out process.

The interviews were conducted in English and as such, participants had to be fluent in the language. English was the first language of six participants, while being the second language of two participants. However, these participants, whose home language was isiZulu, showed a good grasp of the English language and did not hesitate to request clarification where needed.

Participation was voluntary and participants were not offered any rewards. Sampling was anticipated to be challenging due to the potentially sensitive nature of the study. However, participants seemed keen to contribute to the study and these fears proved to be unfounded.

The interviews were digitally recorded[1] and then transcribed. The interviews were conducted in an office on the campus of the University of the Witwatersrand.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

Because this type of discursive work often requires first-hand accounts and rich detail (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006), the interviews[2], conducted by the researcher in English, were semi-structured in nature, which allows for richer detail as opposed to structured interviews, as open-ended questions allow participants to elaborate on their experiences, while at the same time encouraging depth, vitality and creativity (Dearnley, 2005). Furthermore, using the interview guide as a framework instead of a set, linear progression of questions allowed for the identification and integration of concepts that were not anticipated by the researcher prior to the project.

Participants received verbal and written information[3] regarding the research prior to the interviews and were required to sign consent forms for both the interview and the sound recording.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim (see Appendix F for a list of transcription symbols used) by the researcher and were then subjected to a discourse analysis guided by Parker's (1992) "method".

[1] Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews. See Appendices D and E.
[2] See Appendix B for the interview guide.
[3] See Appendix C.

3.3 Analysis

Discourse analysis, as a form of qualitative research, is the analysis of a "system of statements which constructs an object" (Parker, 1992) – in the current research, analysing the recurring system of statements which construct the coming-out stories of South African lesbians. Discourse analysis should not be regarded as a formal research "method", however, but rather as a set of guidelines for analysis, in this case provided by Parker (1992).

According to Parker (1992), a discourse has several definitive characteristics. While discourse analysis is an organic and holistic process, these characteristics provided a framework within which to do the analysis. According to Parker (1992), a discourse is expressed in written or spoken texts – in the case of the current research discourse will be expressed in the transcribed interviews with participants. Discourse revolves around objects – the coming-out process and its culmination in a coming-out story – and discourses consist of subjects, in this research the participants who are telling their coming-out stories, and the researcher, who brings her own system of meaning to the research. A discourse is a "coherent system of meanings" – the meanings ascribed to the coming-out process, by both the researcher and the participants – while discourses are also interconnected. A discourse is reflected in its vernacular and must be understood in relation to its place in history, in the current research, the history of South Africa, the personal histories of the participants, the personal history of the researcher and the way these histories interrelate will be taken into account. "Discourses support institutions" – in this case institutions of power – and power relations are extended through and born out of discourses. Finally, discourses reflect ideologies – the current research analyses the effect of the coming-out discourse on prevailing ideologies.

3.4 Strengths and Weaknesses

The current research aims to provide new insight into the social and power relations at work in the production of a coming-out story. The fact that the interviews covered past material and that participants' recall of events may be tainted or romanticised could be considered a possible weakness. However, the researcher is not interested in the way that the coming-out narrative may or may not be considered accurate or truthful but rather how this truth is constructed in the interactional space of the interview. Furthermore, discourse analysis does not focus on cold, hard facts, but on the way social constructs are reflected in the use of language and the construction of stories.

3.4.1 Reflexivity

All research is born out of researchers' background and position, inevitably influencing the research topic, the angle of investigation, the choice of methods, the findings and the final product (Malterud, 2001). Bias is thus unavoidable and objectivity as defined by the empirical sciences impossible. Haraway (1991) redefines objectivity as the recognition that knowledge is situated in a specific context and partial to both internal and external influences.

Reflexivity requires discourse analysts to be aware of every way in which they contribute to the construction of meaning in every stage of the research, and also to acknowledge the impossibility of remaining detached from the research (Willig, 2001). Reflexivity needs to be exercised with regards to the analyst's personal values, beliefs and interests and how these might have been influenced by the research, as well as epistemologically, exploring how the research question, methods of data collection and analysis, and other facets of the research process might have influenced the research findings (Willig, 2001).

Antaki, Billig, Edwards and Potter (2002) list several potential shortcomings in analysis, namely "under-analysis through summary; under-analysis through taking sides; under-analysis through over-quotation or through isolated quotation; the circular identification of discourses and mental constructs; false survey; and analysis that consists in simply spotting features". The researcher has gone to great lengths to avoid these pitfalls. Specifically, summarising as an inadequate substitute for analysis has been avoided by using full transcripts, including the use of symbols to indicate pauses, the quality of voice and the rise and fall in intonation, among others. It is the contention of the researcher that through the use of full interview transcripts for analysis, theorising from the researcher's exclusive point of view has been avoided. Furthermore, while the researcher acknowledges the existence of her own viewpoints on the constructs under investigation, she has consciously avoided taking sides. This has been achieved through an openness to different positions on the interrogated constructs and the researcher at various times immersed herself in different theoretical frameworks as well as the corpus of texts as verbalisations of participant's lived experiences, while at the same time recognising and reflecting on her own relevant experiences.

In order to avoid over-quotation, the researcher attempted to consistently connect participants' quotation to its discursive context, resulting in the occasional presentation of extensive extracts. While the researcher realises that such extensive extracts are unusual for research of this nature, excessive trimming would have resulted in a loss of context. In addition, the focus was on analysing rather than presenting the data and, in order to avoid isolated quotation, the researcher avoided the use of quotations to prove or reinforce arguments, resorting rather to the use of conscientious analysis to do so. This strategy also served to prevent circularity in the "discovery" of discourses and constructs. The researcher realises that the participants represent only a small

and arguably unrepresentative sample of lesbians in South Africa, and therefore claims of the universality of findings, or false surveying, was avoided. The researcher avoided under-analysis by immersing and re-immersing herself in the data, trying to find novel angles from which to probe it and focussing on the whole as well as the deconstructed parts of each interview.

As a lesbian who has grappled with the concept of coming out for over a decade, the researcher found herself in differing positions for the duration of the research and as a result the research was conducted in a decidedly amorphous, antilinear manner, with the researcher visiting and revisiting, defining and redefining key concepts arising from the corpus of texts analysed, throughout the research process. However, it is important to understand that the researcher did not understand this to be problematic, but rather as an example of the shared creation of reality (Speer, 2002) and a necessary result of immersion in the texts under analysis.

It must also be borne in mind that researching a domain that is the exclusive experience of members of the LGBTI community, namely coming out, further objectifies homosexuals as objects to be "known, assessed, measured, diagnosed, treated" (Foucault, 1975/1977, p. 255). With this in mind the researcher views the present research as a performative act (Butler, 1997) concerning performative acts, and in so doing hopes that it would serve to redefine and shift the boundaries which currently necessitates these acts. Performative acts, according to Butler (1997), are essentially forms of confession that, through reiteration, serve to redefine the boundaries of those constraints that necessitate these acts. While the researcher is thoroughly aware of her own "confessions" in the preceding paragraphs, she feels that it is in the interest of this study to state her own position in relation to the boundaries that constrain the participants of this study, as well as her inclination to constantly push those boundaries.

3.4.2 "Natural" vs "contrived" data

A discursive approach to analysis treats research participants not as passive vessels for knowledge but as active participants who construct reality in the moment and, as a result, bias is "unavoidable and pervasive" (Speer, 2002). Bias and context effects form an integral part of the research, and the researcher moves from a traditional position of detached questioner to a position of active participant (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, Speer, 2002). Despite discourse analysts' insistence on "celebrating" bias and context effects (Speer, 2002), they, however, make a distinction between "natural", or naturally occurring, data and "contrived", or researcher-provoked, data with "natural" data regarded as somehow superior to "contrived" data (Heritage & Atkinson, 1984, Ten Have, 1999, Speer, 2002).

The degree to which data is regarded as natural, is closely related to the method used for data collection (Speer, 2002). Potter notes that interviews are "contrived; it is subject to powerful expectations about social science research fielded by participants; and there are particular difficulties in extrapolating from interview talk to activities in other settings" (Potter, 1997).

Speer (2002) argues that the distinction between "natural" and "contrived" data is nonsensical in the light of discourse analysts' "celebratory" view of bias. Furthermore, she argues that the recording of data and the ethical requirements associated with it (e.g. signing a consent form) render the collection of completely "natural" data impossible. This is similar to Silverman's (2001) statement that "no data are ever untouched by human hands".

Speer (2002) suggests reframing the unsophisticated distinction between "natural" and "contrived" data in terms of "procedural consequentiality". In ensuring that methods of data collection complement the focus of data collection, contextual influences on data collection will

have a minimally pervasive influence. It can be argued that the data generated for the purposes of the current research would have yielded different results if another method of data collection was employed, but it is the view of the researcher that the methodology employed in the current research complements its focus and that further methods of data generation could be usefully employed in future studies.

3.5 Ethical Concerns

The aims and purposes of the study were explained on a participant information sheet[4] given to all participants, and was also verbally explained to participants at first contact with the researcher. Participants were required to sign an informed consent form[5], explaining issues of confidentiality, nonmaleficence and beneficence and consenting to the use of direct quotes in the research report, as well as a recording consent form[6], before the interviews took place.

The participants received written and verbal assurance of confidentiality. Confidentiality was ensured by the safe storing of the digital sound recording files on a password-protected home computer – no one else besides the researcher and her supervisor had access to the original files. Participants, as well as persons named in the interviews, were assigned pseudonyms during the transcription process, which are used in this report and other potential identifying information was also changed to protect the identities of the participants. The raw data will be kept for two years in the event that publication should arise. The current research report, required for the completion of the researcher's degree, will be made available to interested participants. Ethical clearance number MACC/10/006 IH[7] was obtained for the purposes of this study.

[4] See Appendix C.
[5] See Appendix D.
[6] See Appendix E.
[7] See Appendix A.

Because of the sensitivity of the issue at hand, the following steps were taken to prevent the participants from coming to harm: participation was voluntary; participants were free to leave the study at any time, for whatever reason, without fear of intimidation; participants were debriefed at the end of each interview; and participants were supplied with contact details of counselling facilities at the University of the Witwatersrand if they felt the need to further discuss sensitive issues.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Discussion of Results

Does coming out serve as a mode of confession which serves to further subjectify/subjugate the subject into the broader net of sexual surveillance that characterises configurations of modern power or is it an affirmation of sexual identity and therefore an element of liberatory identity politics? As will be demonstrated in this chapter, the theoretical tension between a Foucauldian, poststructuralist position on the nature of coming out stories and a feminist reading thereof, is echoed in a critical reading of the corpus of texts utilised in this study. Coming-out is always done to move out of secrecy, into the truth, in the hope that the truth participants speak will outweigh the "deviance" of their sexual orientation. This truth is invariably linked to the concept of a singular, knowable identity, something that is an inherent part of the participants' self, something that, in being uttered, will push and redefine the boundaries of who they are allowed to be – a marker of identity politics.

The discourse analysis produced four discursive "clusters" or themes. These included the *perceived social or moral obligation to come out*, *coming out as an authentication of the self*, *resisting the urge to confess* and *being more normal than not*. Each theme could also be subdivided and subthemes of the social or moral obligation to come out include the role played by friends in the de-emphasis of the sexual secret and the existence of "knowing" others. The theme of authentication of the self consists of the subthemes of emotional labour, the finding of the self in moving away from home and truth and its risks in terms of sovereign and disciplinary power. The theme of resisting the urge to confess is divided into the subthemes of shirking the use of labels, and the inherent knowledge of one's sexual identity, while the perception of being more normal than not as a theme consists of subthemes involving finding a foothold in normality

and a call to experimentation. These themes and subthemes are tabulated below. However, even though the themes and subthemes are presented in a linear, categorical manner, they should not be considered to exist as fixed and distinctly separate entities. Instead, many themes and subthemes intersect and speak to each other, as will be seen in the discussion to follow.

Discursive theme	**Subtheme**
Coming-out as social or moral obligation to others	Friends: practicing the de-emphasis of the sexual secret
	Knowing others
Authentication of the self	Emotional labour
	Moving away from home, finding a sense of self
	Truth and its risks: Telling is not easy
Resisting the call to confess	"I don't like dyke"
	"It's like not knowing my favourite colour"
More normal than not	Finding a foothold in normality
	"Have you tried it?"

Table 1: List of discursive themes and subthemes.

The participants[8] who will be quoted in the discussion, are Ella (researcher), Angela, Claire, Emma, Lisa, Marion, Mbali, Tessa and Zodwa.

[8] Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality purposes.

4.1 Coming-out as Social or Moral Obligation to Others

> *I feel like I owe some people an explanation because I've been lying to them for so long, or I have hidden myself around them. And people who are actually genuinely like and I want to know if they'd like me for who I am or for who they thought I was, you know. So there are those people who I feel like I have to have a conversation with ...* (Mbali)

> *I try to do it kind of at a halfway point. I don't want them to think, you know, we're really tight, we're best friends and then I kind of tell them something and they're like (..) okay, if I had known that a few weeks ago or months ago or years ago then this (..) you know I wouldn't have been as close to you. So in the developing kind of any friendship or relationship or whatever that I have I'll try and put it in that place where I'm comfortable, but I want that person to be able to decide if, for whatever reason, they're against it, or they'd rather not be more comfortable with me for whatever reason, then they can have that choice. And that's fine, I don't want them to feel cheated, like I lied to them or didn't tell them something like down the line …* (Emma)

The two extracts above reflect a pattern that is evident throughout the corpus of texts analysed: "I am a certain way, which you may or may not suspect, and while the way I am may not be completely acceptable to you, to lie about it is even worse. Therefore I feel obliged to reveal my true identity, in the hope that you might grant me the right to be who I am."

It also demonstrates the intricately woven web that is truth, identity and confession, affirming Tell's (2007) argument that confession operates as the conviction that there is an essential self, or identity, constituted by a group of arbitrary bodily functions and sensation, which serves as the ultimate truth of self – confession, truth and identity always operate together.

In both the above extracts, participants describe a sense of responsibility to reveal the "truth" about themselves. Mbali's statement that she "owes some people an explanation" is an especially poignant illustration of the burden of truth that rests on the participants and, in the context in which she positions it, it seems as if the denial of "who they are" is not an instance of wrongdoing against themselves, but rather against others. This is disciplinary power in action

(Foucault, 1975/1977) – Mbali, like Foucault's prisoner, has to be "corrected" in the interest of society, and while society might not expect Mbali to conform to heteronormativity, at least not overtly (Wells, Kruger & Judge, 2006), it expects her to declare herself, to classify herself as somehow different from the norm, through confession.

Mbali describes feeling a sense of guilt at not showing people who she really is. While she starts her statement by declaring her regret over "lying" to others, with the focus here being on her actions toward other people, her sense of guilt and regret quickly turns toward herself, as she explains how she was "hiding" from others, not granting them the opportunity to decide whether or not they "liked" the "real" her. It is interesting to note that Mbali takes the responsibility in the first part of the text, and then places it squarely in the laps of others *("… I want to know if they'd like me for who I am or for who they thought I was, you know.")*. This taking of and then parting with responsibility is a recurring theme in the texts analysed and can be considered a true reflection of the confessional nature of coming out, with the confessant declaring, "I am guilty", and the confessor replying, "You are forgiven" (Foucault, 1975/1977). This is echoed by Emma, who apparently views coming out as granting the person to whom she is coming out (the "confessor", as it were) the opportunity to "decide" the way they feel about it and to make a "choice".

For Emma the timing of the coming-out story is important, as the confession itself might influence the nature of her relationship with the person to whom she discloses. Despite this seemingly inevitable change in the relationship, however, it is interesting to note that Emma's choice of words does not reflect the loss she might be potentially suffering, but rather the loss the listener might be suffering when realising that Emma "cheated" them. This again places the onus of forgiveness on the other, while the onus of truth rests on the self. For Foucault (1975/1977),

the confession of "truth" is the ultimate evidence – it grants the other the power to either condemn or liberate. Similarly, Emma experiences the confession of truth as a granting of power to the other to "decide" – to either condemn or liberate.

4.1.1 Friends: practicing the de-emphasis of the sexual secret

Drawing on a range of social and moral discourses underpinning the construction of coming-out, it is also interesting to focus on the "others" that are most commonly the immediate targets of disclosure. Contrary to Foucault's (1975/1977, 1976/1978, Tell, 2007) hierarchical understanding of the mode of confession in which "one must come out to an expert first" and then reveal oneself in an outward circle to the general population or social capillaries, the participants in these interviews insisted that the circle be inverted. In this way friends or aquaintances were the first to "know". This process can be envisioned as a concentric progression that starts at the outside, furthest removed from the participant, working its way to the inside, to those people who are closest to the participant. Consequently friends often know before siblings, who know before parents. This concentricity is almost counter-intuitive – should the obligation to reveal the truth about oneself not be felt stronger towards those who knows one best, or to whom one is relationally closer? Yet, it echoes the findings of Wells and Kline (1987) and Savin-Williams (2001), whose studies found that young members of the LGBTI community often come out to a friend before disclosing their sexual identity to a parent, especially where a family is characterised by authoritarian parents or parents with strict beliefs and values. This aspect of coming-out is particularly pronounced by Tessa:

> *Effectively at that point I had come out to people provincially, nationally uhm (...) and at that point, uhm, I was about to come out to my school, and I did so. And, from that point on, <@ there wasn't really any going back @>, @you know @@. The closet had kind of (..) shut behind me, so to speak ... Uhm (...) so*

> *at that point I was pretty much (...) there, in terms of being out uhm, and I mean the last stage for me then was (..) I'd moved from being out to people who weren't so familiar to me, uhm (...) moving into people who were very familiar with me, uhm my community.*

In strong contrast to much of Foucault's work on the nature of the confession, the participants in this study did not disclose their lesbianism to experts or family (presumably those who are conventionally considered most trustworthy) first. Instead the first points of disclosure were acquaintances or sometimes friends:

> *My sexual orientation. I think, with myself, with my family, they don't know at all, but with my friends I'm so out. I started telling people about my (..) actually I started to be aware that (..) I was gay when I was 13 and I was so open, telling people …* (Zodwa)

In this way participants deprivilege sexual identity as an incitement to confession, raising the question of whether privileging peers above family or experts is a general trend, or concentrated among participants in this study. Recent research seems to suggest the former. Butler and Astbury (2008) link this trend to LGBTI youths' use of defence mechanisms, while Rivers and Gordon (2010), Elizur and Ziv (2001), Savin-Williams (2001), like the participants of this study, all relate this to a lack of support in the family, as compared to friends.

In general, it seems as if friends' privileged knowledge about the participants' sexual orientation can be attributed to the level of their social interaction, but it also seems as if this part of the process serves as a "practice round" for coming out to family members and society in general, where participants can test the type of reaction they will get to their disclosure. These reactions vary from accepting to condemning.

While disclosure to friends might not fit the Foucauldian concept of confession perfectly, such disclosures do show themselves to have a confessional undertone. While Angela may establish

the timing and scope of coming out, and therefore the amount of "truth" wished upon the person who listens, "truth" itself has a will of its own and will sometimes manifest without the participant's approval, placing her under obligation to come out: "*the few [friends] that just figured it out … asked you out blatantly …"* This is reminiscent of Foucault's statement (1976/1978, p. 59):

> "One confesses – or is forced to confess. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person … it is driven from its hiding place in the soul …"

Such a manifestation works as a form of torture, forcing the confession first from the body and then from the mouth of the confessant (Foucault, 1975/1977, Tell, 2007).

Marion's use of the word "obviously" when she says, "*my friends knew a long time before my family obviously*" suggests the existence of privilege in the disclosure granted to friends as opposed to family. This privilege is also pointed out by Zodwa, who explains its occurrence through the amount of judgment expected from friends as opposed to family:

> *You know with friends, they are more accepting, they they understand you the way you are, they won't judge you because they've got nothing against you whatsoever. … With my family, they won't understand, they'd still want to understand why you love women, what's this fascinating thing about women and all that. So with my friends I'm much more aware, much more, not ignorant but more informed than my family and all that stuff.*

Zodwa's claim specifically seems to draw on an underlying discourse of the family home as a homophobic and hostile environment. Gorman-Murray (2008) found that this discourse, which informs much literature on coming-out experiences, often gives little consideration to the existence of supportive home environments, where coming-out is an affirming experience for everyone involved. The same discourse can be seen at work in the lives of homeless homosexual teenagers, according to Berger (2005).

4.1.2 Knowing others

> *I think formally, like I'm sure they knew (..) bits and pieces, but formally, uhm, when (..) like round about 21, like (..) it was formal, where it was said and things like that. Before that I'm sure a lot of them knew. Like they never actually said anything. I think they were giving me the benefit of the doubt …* (Angela)

Like Angela, most participants claim that some friends and family members "knew" about their sexual orientation prior to their coming out or that it explains some sort of observable behaviour. This is reminiscent of the notion of "gaydar", or the ability of one individual to accurately identify the sexual orientation of another individual (Woolery, 2007), and seems to feed into the discourse of deviant sexuality, where deviance is easily recognisable when compared to the norm. An essentialist scientific discourse also seems to be at work here, as it positions homosexuality as an observable, analysable and classifiable behaviour (Foucault, 1976/1978, Landau, 2009), as suggested by Zodwa:

> *… to say[to my parents] you know what, all these years you have seen me, I was such a different child, you sometimes asked me why am I not dating, you know, I'll be like no, I'm not dating because I'm not ready, but I was lying, you know, I'm dating (..) but, it is same sex, you know. So I'm planning to come out, sit with them and tell them, you know, if they get angry, they get pissed, I don't know, I'm planning to tell them.*

Mbali reports the same experience, saying that when she "came clean" on the social networking website Facebook, some of her friends "*were like, oh, that makes so much sense*", suggesting that they had at least suspected that something about Mbali was "different" – something that was explained by her coming out..

It is important to note that the perception of truth alone is not enough. Truth must be spoken in order for it to be true, and in order for those who listen to accept, or reject, those who speak. Therefore, even if someone close to the participant had some knowledge of her sexuality prior to

her coming-out, this knowledge is invalid until confirmed by the participant. Angela, Zodwa and Mbali's choice of words ("benefit of the doubt", "different" and "come clean") reflect the notion that the "truth" about them is somehow deviant or abnormal (Ferfolja, 2008, Robinson & Ferfolja, 2002) – a discourse of deviance, in other words, a "truth" that must be disclosed. When "truth" is positioned in such a way, it seems senseless for its object, in this case the participants, to deny it, as they are then "lying" to or "hiding" from themselves alone, tying this aspect of coming-out to the process of self-authentication, through which coming out, or producing "truth", frees them from the burden of keeping "truth" from themselves.

The corpus of texts analysed also reveal a sense that a higher power knew of participants' sexuality and, in fact, created them "lesbian" for the purposes of an as yet unknown goal, as illustrated by Mbali:

> *... this is who I am and this is how the Lord made me, you know? And (..) there's a reason that I am who I am and (…) I don't know. I know now that God loves me, you know? Despite anything that they may say ...*

Homosexuals' negotiation of religious discourse has been well-documented (Conroy, 2010, Capps & Carlin, 2008, Hillier, Mitchell & Mulcare, 2008) and, where both the legal and medical systems have recanted earlier homophobic positions, religious institutions remain one of the final strongholds of heteronormativity (Hillier, Mitchell & Mulcare, 2008). As such, it presents one of the great "obstacles to overcome" in the confession of sexuality (Foucault, 1976/1978) and it is therefore not a surprising feature of the coming-out narrative.

Coming-out is construed as a continuous process throughout the corpus of texts analysed, with each new situation requiring disclosure. In a way this serves as surveillance of the self (Foucault, 1975/1977), but some participants find easier ways to do it. Mbali, for example, used social

networking, specifically the website Facebook, to come out "*to the world*", even though some of her family members are not yet aware of her sexual orientation. In this way Mbali pre-empts the continuous nature of coming-out:

> *On Facebook I'm out, everywhere I am I'm out, so that I don't have to have (..) you know, these conversations whenever I meet someone like, they knew ...*

Emma uses a different strategy to make this easier. She explains how joking about her sexuality eases the process – not only for her but also for those around her – again there is an emphasis on the other. Emma is also quick to mention that joking about it ensures that she is not "*hiding*" her sexual orientation and that she is in fact "*comfortable*" with it. In a way this also serves to pre-empt interrogation *("...then it becomes a rumour, then is it true, isn't it true, and why doesn't she want to tell us ...")* as it does for Mbali.

Claire explains how she made use of a game, which in this case can be considered to be in the exclusive domain of heteronormativity, to come out to her friends:

> *... we were all talking about something like exes' names (..) and so I was like M or whatever and then randomly somebody just said like Mandy and I was like okay, <@ cool but why a girl name @> and then eventually it it was like a very fast happening and the way it worked out was amazingly and they were like wow okay that's cool and then came the questions.*

4.2 Authentication of the Self

Coming-out is constructed as an important means to authenticating the self in various ways. Authentication of the lesbian self, or accepting a lesbian identity, is a distinctly identity political process, aimed at redefining the boundaries set in place by exactly such an admission, but also seeking out and acknowledging the existence of "difference" (Toynton, 2007).

The process of authentication of the self took various turns in the corpus of texts analysed, with participants resorting to various authentication strategies, and sometimes combining the concept of a sexual self with other aspects of self. Mbali, for instance, combines the existence of her sexual self with the existence of her spiritual self, exclaiming almost triumphantly: "*there's a reason that I am who I am*".

Authentication of the self is constructed as being hard in the corpus of texts analysed – it requires introspection and a negotiation of construction of the self. Discourses of difficulty, or emotional labour, are used to portray this in the texts. Additionally, discourses of adulthood are utilised when participants speak of finding themselves when they left home or encountered other signifiers of growing into adulthood.

4.2.1 Emotional labour

Emotional labour makes out a large part of the process of coming out, as participants aim to integrate their surface identities – that which is shown to the world – with their deep identities – that which they have felt to be true about themselves for a long time (Stein, 2007). Toynton (2007) lists several aspects of emotional labour involved in the coming-out process, including perceptions of isolation or vulnerability and self-regulating behaviour and thoughts.

Vulnerability and isolation in terms of families are regular features of the corpus of texts analysed, and every participant discussed feeling vulnerable prior to or after coming out to family. Feeling vulnerable prior to coming-out can be linked to the discourse of families as homophobic and dangerous sites for disclosure (Gorman-Murray, 2008). Zodwa regards herself as vulnerable in terms of her sexual orientation, and this is the reason why she has not yet come out to her family:

> *I'm surrounded by my culture and by my religion, you know … they will say this is not cultural, this is not African, this is not Christian, and all that … I feel like if I, I will tell them and they will like, no we've never seen anybody in this family who's like this, so where did you adopt this thing of yours? So I think in a way it would be difficult because I know they will attack, their reasons not to accept me will be based on their religion and on their culture, not on the normal thing, you know …*

It is interesting that Zodwa utilises the discourse of the un-Africanness of homosexuality (Morgan & Wieringa, 2005) in conjunction with the religious discourse of homosexuality as "unnatural" (Conroy, 2010, Capps & Carlin, 2008, Hillier, Mitchell & Mulcare, 2008) – a commonly found intersection of discourses on sexuality in South Africa (Morgan & Wieringa, 2005). That the religion used most often in this context is Christianity, which is itself a decidedly un-African practice, is an irony that appears to go unnoticed among all involved.

In terms of self-regulating behaviour and thought, Zodwa's explanation of the adoption of butch and femme personas by lesbians elucidates not only the practicality of such adoptions, but also the "price of pretending" some lesbians have to pay in order to avoid punishment:

> *… in terms of this corrective rape, in most cases it happens with butch women, you know? Being a femme woman it's not really easy to be (..) raped, you know. It's it's there, but you know you are a femme woman hiding yourself, pretending to be straight … I don't really want to box myself … because at the end there's a time where you just want to be yourself and express yourself …*

4.2.2 Moving away from home, finding a sense of self

Coming out often coincides with significant life events or stages, particularly moving away from home. Other significant events include reaching certain ages, like 16, 18 or 21. This makes sense in a confessional framework, as such events signify a formalisation of the self as a disciplinary agent – the self takes responsibility for discipline from disciplinary institutions such as school (Foucault, 1975/1977). It also draws on discourses of adulthood as a time of autonomy –

underwriting the notion that when one is an adult, one has to know who one is, and one has to live according to that knowledge, one has to be one's "true self" (Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007).

> *... formally, uhm, when (..) like round about 21, like (..) it was formal, where it was said and things like that. Before that I'm sure a lot of them knew. Like they never actually said anything. I think they were giving me the benefit of the doubt but, like I said, formally was 21 …* (Angela)

> *The only person I physically went and told was my gran and I only told her because it was my 21st birthday party ....* (Lisa)

Tessa speaks of "trying to come out" at age 12 and connects it to a significant life stage herself later in the interview when she claims that "the most commonly found age of self-actualisation is 12 years old".

One gets the sense that for the participants, coming-out means accepting who they are and that this acceptance accompanies a transition into a "fixed identity" adulthood, as denoted by Tessa when she speaks of the "age of self-actualisation". The adulthood discourse also carries with it a sense of taking responsibility for specific others but also for oneself and one's actions (Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007). For the participants this means taking responsibility for others who share their "difference" – in other words the lesbian/gay/queer community – but also for their own "difference" and the acts that accompany their being so.

> Ella: *And when you hear coming out, what do you think? What's the thoughts that that jump into your mind?*

> Angela: *Taking that first step from experimenting to, like, realisation and acceptance.*

Coming out at a significant age also denotes a transition from "experimentation" to "identity". There has been a long-standing discourse relegating lesbian sexuality to the domain of experimentation, rendering lesbians invisible (Jackson & Gilbertson, 2010, Ciasullo, 2001). For

Angela, speaking herself out of experimentation, and invisibility, is the key to self-actualisation, or "realisation and acceptance".

4.2.3 Truth and its risks: Telling is not easy

Often speaking the truth about one's identity carries inherent risks. In a demonstration of the effects of disciplinary power, which punishes not in overt but in hidden ways after getting hold of the self through confession, Marion's coming-out to her sister has as its result a forced disclosure to her parents. While she states that she was "*not ready*", it can be argued that, because the confession did not follow its usual exclusionary progression – her sister wanted to include their parents despite Marion's hesitance – her parents as a structural unit were the ones "not ready" to accept her disclosure. This argument gains momentum when one considers the fact that Marion's "second confession" was more readily accepted by her mother. It is interesting to note that Marion's initial forced confession is followed by a retraction: *"… I started dating someone else, and I lied to my mom and told her it was a boy and you know she'd get a chance to meet him but I wasn't ready to bring him home …*" The retraction is then followed by a second confession, in which Marion confronts the restrictions placed upon her by her mother. In this instance Marion's confession resembles a performative act, in which she not only denoted the boundaries of her existence, but actively challenged and renegotiated them:

> *I just said to her you know mom it was very difficult you made it very difficult for me so= I lied to you. I mean you can't expect me to be honest if (..) you're not gonna talk to me and if you're gonna constantly rag me about it I mean she used to call my girlfriend a /dyke and I was like, that's not very nice for me to hear so and basically my mom and I came to a bit of an understanding after that and it was (..) you know if we want to be in each other's lives we're gonna have to accept each other for who we are.*

Once the truth about the self is out, the production thereof does not stop. In order to avoid the production of a "false truth", many participants are keen to be interrogated about their sexuality.

> *If it [sexuality] comes up in conversation and they ask I'll never lie about it ... its not something I like display, but if people ask me I'm not ashamed of it. I'm completely (..) I /won't say completely comfortable sometimes sometimes I'm like I don't like being affectionate in in front of certain people or whatever the case might be, but other than that I'm, pretty open about it.* (Lisa)

> *Like if they have a question I would want to be able to answer it for them instead of them assuming usually wrong answers, which I find happens a lot. If they don't ask they'll just assume certain things. So, I'd rather them ask questions.* (Emma)

Such willingness to consider questions about their sexuality also denotes participants' resignation to a process of surveillance of the self and in so doing they ensure that the truth about them is their truth, not others' truth. There is a striking similarity between this practice and Foucault's (1975/1977, p. 255) concept of the delinquent as an object to be "known, assessed [and] measured", and the researcher can only wonder whether the participants ever feel somewhat objectified when subject to interrogation.

Emma's insistence on clarifying issues surrounding her sexuality rather than allowing others to wrongfully assume aspects of her sexual orientation ("*I'd rather them ask questions*") is a particularly poignant illustration of the mediation of truth, or emotional labour.

Closely linked to participants willingly subjecting themselves to interrogation, is the mediation of displayed truth – another way of ensuring that the truth that is known by others is participants' own truth. The mediation of displayed truth is especially visible in settings where corrective rape is a real fear, or where other potentially compromising situations exist – in other words, where sovereign power is in existence.

Zodwa makes a distinction between butch lesbians, whose overall appearance might be construed as more masculine, and femme gay women, whose overall appearance might be

construed as more feminine. In Zodwa's words, butch women are "*more seen*", while femme women "*pretend to be straight*", placing butch women at an increased risk for corrective rape, according to her. In addition, the displayed truth can also include shows of affection – another risk factor in an area where corrective rape is a real threat. Corrective rape is a technology of sovereign power – it is overt and spectacular. This is in contrast to confession as a technology of disciplinary power, which according to Foucault (1976/1978) replaced sovereign power in the 19th century. For these lesbians the sovereign intersects with the disciplinary – disciplinary power urges lesbians to confess to desire, while sovereign power punishes them for deeds.

> *I think coming out as a lesbian, being femme whatsoever, it's much more simpler than being a butch, because being a butch, you are being seen, you know, being there. And it's much more difficult in that way, so I think coming out (..) just come out in a safe environment … they don't want you to display that, according to what I see. Come out, just leave your personal small (..) in your little box and that's it, that's how they can accept you but displaying your affection to [inaudible] bunch of that guys, it irritates them, and actually then they'll try to rape you, trying to say, you know, you are like this because you have never ever slept with a guy, that's why …* (Zodwa)

The mediation of displayed truth, however, begs the question: is truth concealed in such a way still truth? Does it not give in to misogynist discourses about the place of women in the order of things? Does it not negate the freedom that supposedly comes with coming out? Zodwa seems to struggle with this apparent contradiction (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1994). After identifying as femme she contradicts this earlier statement by claiming not to "*box*" herself. Her use of the word "*box*" in this instance can perhaps shed more light on the contradiction – by claiming to be femme, Zodwa is succumbing to the pressure to produce one ultimate truth about herself, but in doing so she realises the boundaries that she puts in place for herself and she finds this constricting. The similarity between a box and a closet is striking, and it is as if, in identifying herself as femme, Zodwa goes back into the closet:

> *… I don't really want to box myself, you know, to say whether I'm femme, strictly femme, or I'm butch or whatsoever, because at the end there's a time where you feel that you want to be in touch with your femininity, there's a time where you just want to be yourself and express yourself.*

Even later in the interview, Zodwa expounds on the boundaries put in place by "boxing" herself by including the boundaries put in place by others in terms of heteronormativity, calling lesbians' public displays of affection "*natural*" and ultimately finding recourse in being truthful when she says "*they don't pretend, that's the way they are*".

4.3 Resisting the Call to Confess

The participants seemingly subscribe to the notion that they each have one identity that needs to be discovered, and that their sexual orientation is one part of their identity. Coming out, then, is perceived as a necessary part of defining oneself and, in some instances, celebrating one's identity (Shaw, 2009, Abes & Jones, 2005). However, two apparent contradictions of this notion exist in the corpus of texts analysed. Firstly, when asked to define themselves, most participants struggled to do so:

Ella: *Okay. And how would you define yourself in general?*

Emma: *In general …*

Ella: *If someone asks you, who are you? What would you say?*

Emma: *I'm= I actually don't know, because (…) I don't think I fit any particular mould, so it's difficult.*

Ella: *And how would you define who you are?*

Lisa: *Uhm=, I don't know how to answer that question.*

This begs the question of whether one's sexual identity, as part of one's overall identity, can be truly known when one's overall identity is not yet known. Secondly, many participants only found the need to define themselves as lesbian once in a relationship. Furthermore, many participants' conceptualisation of identity fluctuated between being a fixed entity and being a fluid construct, as their interviews progressed, most notably changing when they tried to normalise their sexual orientation.

While seemingly conceptualising identity as a fixed attribute of themselves, many of the participants struggled to define themselves when asked to do so. Furthermore, when they did define themselves – often following much prompting – sexuality very rarely occupied a prominent place in the way they see themselves, bringing into question claims that sexual orientation is often known by outsiders prior to coming out.

If sexual orientation is part of a fixed identity, as many of the participants seem to claim, it can be argued that sexual orientation cannot be known unless identity can be clearly defined. That many participants struggled to define their identities then brings this assertion into question. The researcher wants to argue that identity in this instance is a discursive concept aimed at classifying, describing and normalising the subject, it is what Foucault (1976/1978) called bio-power and as such it exists in close proximity to confession. Participants' struggle to define themselves may indicate their resistance on some level to give in to bio-power, even though they acknowledge its sovereignty in one part of their lives, namely their sexuality. After all, the sexual gives power easy access to the self (Foucault 1976/1978). However, their struggle in defining themselves could also denote some sort of resistance to power: they have given in to the urge to confess, thereby succumbing also to bio-power, but in so doing they have placed themselves in a vulnerable position which they must now defend and, if possible, overcome. By refusing to give

in to the urge to classify, the participants are in some way escaping the disciplinary grasp of power. Of course, this is not to say that they are not simultaneously produced as unconfessing subjects in the matrix of power relations.

Realising and/or confessing to their sexual orientation for most participants happen within the context of a romantic relationship in various permutations, ranging from "crush" and "admiration" to "girlfriend" and "partner". It could be argued that one's hetero- or homosexuality only comes to function within a relationship and when sexuality is defined as such, it makes sense for coming out to occur on these terms.

> *... I got to the point where I was just sick and tired of, of it being a secret and, look, I'm very very proud of my girlfriend and our relationship and what we have, a lot of the friends that had known us through all the hardships that we've gone through (..) like, they know us for that, and so it was just a matter of just getting parents on the same (..) playing field, pretty much.* (Angela)

> *... I just remember being like, I'm going out tonight and this person's coming with me oh by the way that's my girlfriend. She's like oh okay cool can I speak to her? @@@ I was like there you go, ja, she was pretty cool about it.* (Claire)

> *So when I was 12 I had a really deep crush on a girl in my class, called Carly and (..) quite a crush on her best friend Joanne (..) and I had a crush on her other friend whose name I forget. So (..) stuck with quite a few multiple crushes at that point and (..) I knew nothing about being gay or lesbian other than what the terms meant. So I referred to it at that point was (..) uhm when I sat down with a group of friends I said look; I think about Carly the way her boyfriend Kevin thinks about her (...) Which /at that point I think was quite <@ a cool way to put it @>*. (Tessa)

If one agrees that sexuality does not function outside any stage of a sexual or potentially sexual relationship, it brings into question the lesbian identity or, for that matter, the heterosexual identity: can one really be considered a sexual being outside of a sexual relationship?

4.3.1 "I don't like dyke"

Defining oneself is inevitably an act of labelling, yet many participants are hesitant to subscribe to particular labels, with many preferring the generic "gay"-label, which is used interchangeably for both men and women:

> *Uhm, well I don't like dyke, that irritates me and it makes me very angry, I don't mind being called, I prefer gay as opposed to lesbian uhm, but I am <@ lesbian @> so you know if people say oh you lesbian it doesn't offend me, but like you know butch or dyke like that, that offends me.* (Lisa)

> *… I feel like I'm a gay woman, you know, I don't lead life like a butch lesbian, but I feel like I'm a gay woman who's just being me, you know. I don't really feel like I'm a femme either, because being a femme you're also bound to certain things, bound to dress in a certain way, bound to date certain people.* (Zodwa)

Alternatively, participants place themselves on a bisexual spectrum, "*leaning towards the lesbian side of things*":

> *What I settled for is uhm on the Kinsey scale moving towards the idea that I'm five rather than six. Which /makes more sense for me. Because though I did not feel any sexual attraction to the guys I was having sex with I enjoy having sex with them ...* (Tessa)

> *… technically I suppose I would be bisexual, but I haven't had a long, deep enough relationship with a male to be able to say, you know what, that could work, as much as a deep relationship with a female. So it's an unexplored area, so I'd have to put myself in the middle as a bisexual I suppose until proven otherwise, but some people don't need that (..) decision they'll just (..) know for a certain way*. (Emma)

Assuming that identity in this instance is a discursive concept aimed at classifying, describing and normalising the subject, what Foucault (1976/1978) called bio-power and which exists in close proximity to confession, it does not come as a surprise that participants are hesitant to label themselves – to do so is, after all, another act of classification. In positioning themselves in line with all-encompassing labels such as "bisexual" or "gay", the participants acknowledge the fact that their sexual orientation places them in the margins, while at the same time refusing to be

doubly marginalised by identifying with a female grouping. This indicates the existence of some form of resistance against power.

4.3.2 "It's like not knowing my favourite colour"

Most participants seemed to adhere to the conceptualisation of identity as a fixed attribute of their personalities at the start of interviews, and in most cases the realisation of their "lesbian identities" motivated the participants to come out. For Tessa "*it's kinda like not knowing what my favourite colour is, it's pretty basic, uhm (...) At the point where it's now, you know it's kinda like not knowing the colour of my hair.*" Emma ("*I want them to accept me for who I am*") and Zodwa ("*when I started to see myself as a gay woman, I didn't see the point of keeping myself [to myself]*") also seem to support the existence of the notion of a singular, definite "I am". For the participants, at this stage in their lives, being a lesbian is a non-negotiable part of themselves. It is a marker of their identities, but it is also a yardstick for their truth.

4.4 More Normal Than Not

Participants go to great lengths to convince others of their normality, and they use several strategies to achieve this. One of the strategies participants adopt to convince themselves of their normality is to call attention to discourses of homosexuality as abnormal (Ferfolja, 2008, Robinson & Ferfolja, 2002), as Angela demonstrates:

> *I have way more lesbian and gay friends than I have (..) like (..) like straight, inverted commas normal friends. @@*

By placing the category of "normal" in inverted commas and turning it into a laughing matter , Angela seems to by trying to convince the researcher, herself or both of the ridiculousness of such a claim. Tell (2007) positions confession as a function of the grouping together of arbitrary

bodily functions and sensations to constitute this essential self; and treating this group of sensations as the ultimate truth about the self. The sense that Angela has of being either lesbian or heterosexual as a distinction that is something to laugh about, is a reflection of the arbitrariness of such a distinction.

Claire also turns the notion of homosexuality as abnormal on its head when she says that listening to other people talking about their heterosexual relationships feels abnormal to her (*say a girl's talking about her boyfriend, I like that sounds weird don't say that*). While Angela turned the notion of normality/abnormality into a laughing matter, Claire seems to deny the effect of such a discourse on her own life by declaring that it is the heterosexual which is abnormal. This is again a reflection of Tell's (2007) notion of an arbitrary grouping together of bodily functions and sensations: for Claire, abnormality can go any way, it is arbitrary, as shown by the fact that she can deny discourses of abnormality in her own life and transposing them to the lives of others.

In some situations, however, being "normal" is impossible:

> *… it's never normal sitting in a family dinner and like my mom still has issues, Candice and her boyfriend can do whatever they want they can hold hands and touch and I'll like you know put my hand on Lisa and she'll be like [clears throat] you know, no.* (Marion)

Even though Marion's mother attempts to include her female partner in some ways ("*when we go out for dinner instead of saying bring your boyfriend, which my mom would've always said before she's like bring your partners*"), a demonstration of her sexuality seems to be out of bounds for Marion, effectively rendering her partner invisible in such situations (Ciarullo, 2001). The invisibility of lesbians has been well documented and refers to an overarching discourse of heteronormativity – where homosexuality is relegated to the invisible – but also of patriarchy:

gay men tend to be much more visible than lesbians in the portrayal of homosexuality, and lesbian sexuality is often reduced to experimentation or an act performed for the pleasure of the watching male (Ciarullo, 2001).

4.4.1 Finding a foothold in normality

Participants often use heteropatriarchal discourse to find a foothold in normality and this is a prominent feature of the coming-out process. Participants utilise various strategies in order to achieve a semblance of normalcy and in many cases the rhetorical devices employed by participants belie the fact that these strategies are used as much to convince themselves of the "normality" of homosexuality, as those around them. Two strategies in particular seem to be used to achieve normalcy, namely claiming bisexuality, which is perceived to be more "normal" than homosexuality, and the adoption of a femme persona, as opposed to a butch persona, where the latter is perceived to be more masculine and therefore less normal than the first.

With regards to the bisexuality option, participants who subscribe to this notion often resort to a Likert-type scale to say that most people are bisexual anyway (Marion: *"I do believe that everyone is bisexual in their way"*), and then place themselves in or near the middle of this scale (Emma: *"I'd have to put myself in the middle as a bisexual I suppose until proven otherwise"*) or closer to the "lesbian" extreme (Marion: *"I'd say I was bisexual but out of that I would rather have a woman that I love than a guy"*; Tessa: *"I would put myself on the lesbian side of things"*). The use of a Likert-type scale of supposed bisexuality, with "pure homosexuality" at the one extreme, "pure heterosexuality" at the other, and "pure bisexuality" in the middle, was popularised by the Kinsey studies (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948, Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953). Such a scale forms part of the medical discourse surrounding homosexuality,

as well as the discourse positioning homosexuality as an observable behaviour, and is often used in popular literature. While participants seemingly escape the net of power that forces them into choosing an essential sexuality by claiming bisexuality, the use of a scale such as the Kinsey scale is problematic, in that it denies the complexity of the range of human sexuality, in effect widening the boundaries of what is considered to be normal, while still excluding the range of sexualities beyond homo-, hetero- and bisexuality (e.g. transgenderism, intersexuality and asexuality).

For Zodwa the spectre of corrective rape is enough incentive to claim a femme identity as opposed to a butch identity, even if it means pretending "to be straight":

> Ella: *What do you think the impact of corrective rape is on (..) on coming out for black gay women?*
>
> Zodwa: *Wow, it's so (..) Wow, it makes you fear (..) most (..) you know, in terms of this corrective rape, in most cases it happens with butch women, you know? Being a femme woman it's not really easy to be (..) raped, you know. It's it's there, but you know you are a femme woman hiding yourself , pretending to be straight and all that, but I think for a bu (..) for butch lesbians it's much more difficult, because they are more seen …*

This dynamic has also been described by Morgan and Wieringa (2005, p. 11), who emphasise the "general homophobia of post-colonial Africa … compounded by the … patriarchal system" as the sources of corrective rape and homophobic attitudes towards lesbians. Zodwa's claim that femme women are "*hiding … pretending to be straight*" suggests that the homophobic and patriarchal discourses of post-colonial Africa not only contours lesbian identity, but also the degree to which lesbians in South Africa are out. Coming out as a femme lesbian, at least according to Zodwa, is more likely to be accepted in the light of homophobia and heteropatriarchy, and while it does place certain boundaries on behaviour, the range of behaviour

available to femme lesbians is perceived to be much wider than the range of behaviour permitted to butch lesbians.

For white participants, however, being considered "butch" or a "dyke" is an insult, a concept with which they wish to have no association:

> *Uhm, well I don't like dyke, that irritates me and it makes me very angry, I don't mind being called, I prefer gay as opposed to lesbian uhm, but I am <@ lesbian @> so you know if people say oh you lesbian it doesn't offend me, but like you know butch or dyke like that, that offends me.* (Lisa)

At the same time, however, being considered "femme" or a "lipstick lesbian" in this grouping, while it is more acceptable than being "butch" or a "dyke", is considered unlikely and a source of jest:

> *Like, my friends have ripped me off that I'm the lipstick lesbian because I faff a lot and I'll want to look nice and do the make-up and whatever, but, if push comes to shove, I really don't care, I will change a tyre, I will do those things that they probably wouldn't associate with my appearance maybe. I like to get things done, I don't like to faff and get someone else to do them for me.* (Emma)

In a way Emma also draws on patriarchal discourse: a feminine woman ("*lipstick lesbian"*) is unlikely to "*change a tyre*" and "*get things done*", while a masculine woman is unlikely to "*faff a lot*" or "*want to look nice*". This discourse places limitations on accepted lesbian behaviour, and it is therefore not surprising that Lisa despises the use of such labels.

4.4.2 Have you tried it?

> *Well I think that if you haven't tried something you can't really judge it you know like straight people say to you when did you first know you were gay and I'm like well have you ever /tried it? How do you know you're not? … I don't think there's one person out there who hasn't nowadays experimented, you know and ja sometimes you like it sometimes you don't and sometimes it's not really for you but they've at least tried it and (..) the fact of the matter is that maybe it*

> *was a bad experience but they still have the capacity to be gay, they just choose not to.* (Marion)

Marion uses the discourse of homosexual experimenting (Jackson & Gilbertson, 2010, Ciasullo, 2001) and turns it upside down, using it against the heteronormativity it is supposed to support. As someone who has "*tried*" heterosexuality, Marion is perhaps in a good position to ask heterosexuals: "*Have you tried homosexuality?*" In addition to inverting the discourse of experimentation, this question also queries the nature of the construction of identity. Throughout the corpus of texts analysed, but also in coming-out narratives in popular literature (Feinberg, 1993, Van der Merwe, 2006), a homosexual identity is accepted only after "*trying to be straight*" (Marion) – it is an exclusionary process (Marion: "*sometimes you like it, sometimes you don't*") that cannot be finalised until all options have been tested. Marion seems to suggest that this should also be true for heterosexuality: "*... have you ever tried it? How do you know you're not?*"

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

A critical analysis of the corpus of texts against the backdrop of Foucauldian and feminist theory illustrated that the coming-out process is complex and seemingly defies the logic of theoretical encapsulation. While elements of the confessional mode as described by Foucault were certainly discernible via the participants' mobilisation of discourses of truth, sexuality, absolution and authenticity; resistances to the singularisation of the self, the relegation of the sexual self to a part of a larger composite all point to a turn to other modes of constructing the coming-out story. Thus constructions of the coming-out story in contemporary South Africa present a strong challenge to both Foucauldian theorising and the liberatory identity politics that underlies some feminist theory.

While feminists and queer theorists acknowledge the confessional nature of coming-out, they argue that coming-out does not need to be a submission to prevailing discourse. Instead, they argue that coming out can serve the purposes of identity politics – in coming out lesbians can define and redefine the boundaries that constrain them. However, a critical reading of the corpus of texts analysed reveals that, while participants may agree with the principles of identity politics on the surface, their coming out stories hold much more in common with a Foucauldian understanding of confession as the eternal accomplice of bio-politics.

The discourses identified in the corpus of texts fell under the categories of *coming-out as social or moral obligation to others*, *authentication of the self*, *resisting the call to confess* and *more normal than not*, with the four categories intersecting at various points. The discourses around

confession and truth seemed to be irreparably intertwined, with several aspects of confession being echoed in facets of truth. This is indeed to be expected, as the ultimate aim of confession is the production of truth. Normalisation formed a part of all the categories, with participants finding recourse in the outright defiance of medical, religious and jurido-legal discourse surrounding homosexuality.

In attempting to establish a theoretical framework in which to position this study, the tension between the Foucauldian concept of confession and feminist identity politics was noted, with the performative act of queer theory identified as a possible middle ground. A critical reading of the texts confirmed this tension between feminism and Foucault, as it was not only apparent in theory but also in the way in which participants constantly shifted between the two positions, never sitting completely comfortably with either one. In three instances, however, coming out was framed as a performative act, pushing and redefining the boundaries of discursive practices that are usually the exclusive domains of heterosexuality.

The study yielded a wealth of data, and while the researcher attempted to explore all possible aspects of the data this was not possible, and it is therefore necessary to consider the limitations of this study, as well as to consider recommendations for future research.

5.2 Limitations

While it may be within the scope of this research project to explore the coming-out stories of young, South African lesbians, the generalisability of the results of this study to a general lesbian population is questionable. The researcher wishes to acknowledge the fact that coming out experiences might differ across age, era and location. Lesbians who came out 20 years ago in apartheid South Africa, when homosexuality was outlawed (Judge, Manion & De Waal, 2008),

will have had a distinctly different experience to lesbians who came out post-apartheid. Similarly, the experience of lesbians who came out in the past few years will differ from the experience of those who come out 20 years from now. Similarly, experiences will differ between those who came out in rural locations compared to those in urban locations, and other factors, such as education and religion may also play a role. The results of this study should therefore be seen as a contribution to the literature on coming out, and not as generalisable facts pertaining to the coming-out experiences of lesbians.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the conclusions and limitations of this study, three recommendations for future study are made, namely different methods of data collection, for example focus groups; different participants as alluded to above; and gay men as participants.

With regards to different methods of data collection such as focus groups, it is possible that data generated from such an approach, where participants are in conversation with each other, will differ from the data gathered in the present study.

With regards to gay men as participants, it is suggested that the coming out experiences of gay men differ from that of lesbians (Plummer, 1995) and a comparative study exploring these differences could be valuable for the field of queer theory, specifically with regards to the ways in which homopatriarchy functions in South Africa and the effects thereof on South African lesbians. Ultimately, however, the coming-out story is a valuable discursive site for critically interrogating more than the meanings systems of homosexuals but the politics of sexuality more generally.

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Appendix A: Ethics Clearance Documentation

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (SCHOOL OF HUMAN & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: MACC/10/006 IH**
PROJECT TITLE:	Lesbians and 'coming out'
INVESTIGATORS	Ella Kotze
DEPARTMENT	Psychology
DATE CONSIDERED	23/03/10
DECISION OF COMMITTEE*	Approved

This ethical clearance is valid for 2 years and may be renewed upon application

DATE: 05 May 2010

CHAIRPERSON K. Cockcroft
(Professor K. Cockcroft)

cc Supervisor:

Dr Brett Bowman
Psychology

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR (S)

To be completed in duplicate and **one copy** returned to the Secretary, Room 100015, 10th floor, Senate House, University.

I/we fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure, as approved, I/we undertake to submit a revised protocol to the Committee.

This ethical clearance will expire on 31 December 2012

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES

Appendix B: Interview Guide

1. When did you first tell your friends and family about your sexual orientation?
2. How did you tell them?
3. Why did you tell them?
4. (Prompt: Can you think of why it was that you told them when you did?)
5. How did they react to your homosexuality?
6. How do you feel about your homosexuality now?
7. How would you define who you are today?

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

School of Human and Community Development

Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa

Tel: (011) 717-4500 Fax: (011) 717-4559

Dear student

My name is Ella Kotze, and I am conducting research for the purposes of obtaining a Masters degree at the University of the Witwatersrand. My area of focus is the construction of coming-out stories of lesbians at the University of the Witwatersrand. The coming-out story is a regular feature of gay and lesbian lives the world over and is increasingly used in popular literature and even movies.

Participation in this research will entail being interviewed by myself in an office or interview room on campus. The interview will last approximately one hour. With your permission, this interview will be digitally recorded in order to ensure accuracy. Participation is voluntary, and no one will be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way for choosing to participate or not participate in the study. All of your responses will be kept confidential, and identifying information will not be included in the research report. The interview material (digital files and transcripts) will not be seen or heard by any person other than myself at any time, and will only be processed by myself. The files will be safely stored on a password-protected home computer for the duration of the research and will be destroyed upon completion of the research. You may refuse to answer any questions you would prefer not to, and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any point. You will not receive any compensation for your participation in this project. However, refreshments will be on offer during the interview.

Should the need for counselling arise following the interview, I can highly recommend the Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU) at the University of the Witwatersrand. The CCDU is situated at the CCDU Building on West Campus, with Gate 9 on Enoch Sontonga Road, Braamfontein, the nearest entry point. The unit can be contacted telephonically at 011 717-9140/32, or you can send an e-mail to info.ccdu@wits.ac.za. If you choose to participate in the study please fill in your details on the form below. I will contact you within two weeks in order to discuss your participation. Alternatively, or if you have any questions pertaining to the research, I can be contacted telephonically at 082 721 7863 or via e-mail at ella.kotze@gmail.com.

Your participation in this study would be greatly appreciated. This research will attempt to frame the coming-out story of South African lesbians in a new light, and in so doing it will contribute to what is already known on the coming-out process and the production of coming-out stories in South Africa. If you are interested, I would like to share my findings with you upon completion of the research. If you have any questions, you may contact me at the above number or e-mail address.

Kind Regards

Ella Kotze

Appendix D: Interview Consent Form

I _____ consent to being interviewed by Ella Kotze for her study on the coming-out stories of young, South African lesbians at the University of the Witwatersrand. I understand that:

- Participation in this interview is voluntary.
- I may refuse to answer any questions I would prefer not to.
- I may withdraw from the study at any time.
- No information that may identify me will be included in the research report, and my responses will remain confidential.
- Direct quotes from the interview may be used in the final report, but my identity will not be revealed.
- There are no risks or benefits to me if I participate in this study.

Signed _____

Appendix E: Recording Consent Form

I _____ consent to my interview with Ella Kotze for her study on coming-out stories of young, South African lesbians at the University of the Witwatersrand being digitally recorded. I understand that:

- The digital recordings and transcripts will not be seen or heard by any person at any time, and will only be processed by the researcher.
- The digital recordings will be safely stored on a password-protected home computer for the duration of the research.
- All digital recordings will be destroyed after the research is complete.
- No identifying information will be used in the transcripts or the research report.
- Direct quotes from the interview may be used in the final report, but my identity will not be revealed.
- There are no risks or benefits to me if I participate in this study.

Signed _____

Appendix F: Transcription Symbols

:	Speaker identity/turn start
@	Laugh
<@ @>	With a laughing quality
<Q Q>	With a quotation quality
<W W>	Whisper quality
<Y<Z Z>Y>	Multiple quality features
=	Lengthening
(..)	Short pause
(...)	Medium/long pause
/	Unusual rise in tone
[ ]	Speech overlap
(H)	Inhalation
(Hx)	Exhalation
%	Glottal stop
Bold lettering	Speaker's emphasis
[ ]	Researcher's comment or clarification
Italic lettering	Researcher's emphasis