CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem statement

Homosexuality is a universal phenomenon and is believed to have existed in Africa for centuries (Luirink, 2000). According to Murray & Roscoe (1998) a public gay subculture was identified in Cape Town, South Africa since the 1950's. During the 1980's more black homosexuals became more visible. Regardless of this fact, homosexuality is still shunned by the majority of South Africans across race, gender and culture. We live in a world where heterosexuality is a preferred leading sexual orientation, while homosexuality is classified as a deviation from societal norms and beliefs. Such societal beliefs and misconceptions about homosexuality are rooted in, and internalised by many. Subsequently, it seems that even homosexuals have internalised these negative perceptions about their sexual identity and thus are afraid to live openly as homosexuals. These misconceptions also make up many people's core beliefs such that it becomes difficult to uproot them (Luirink, 2000; Yorburg, 1974).

Luirink (2000) however indicates that societal attitudes towards homosexuality are gradually shifting. Society is slowly coming to terms with homosexuality in South African communities, as reflected by, among others, tolerant social institutions. For example, South Africa is one of the first countries in Africa that has taken a step towards alleviating homophobia and accommodating homosexuals. This was done by banning from its constitution discrimination based on sexual orientation, and thus endorsing homosexual rights in the South African constitution (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). Although the South African government has taken a step towards tolerating and protecting homosexual rights in the country, Luirink (2000) contends that many South Africans still view homosexuality in a negative light and thus treat homosexuals in a discriminatory manner. Given the state of societal attitudes towards homosexuality, it can be speculated that coming out of the closet and disclosing one's homosexuality takes much courage and determination as that is perceived as deviating from societal norms. Hence a need for will power to

risk the consequences. In a society where people's objectivity is clouded by societal norms and beliefs against homosexuality, it becomes difficult, if not undesirable for homosexuals to disclose their sexual orientation without fear of being discriminated against (Blasius & Phelan, 1997).

Disclosure is a significant and a life long process in every homosexual person's life. It begins with an individual's awareness and acknowledgement of their homosexual identity. It is a process that requires will power and motivation from a person who wishes to disclose. There are three levels of disclosure; disclosing to the self, to others close to the self and finally, to the public. There are two types of disclosure, partial disclosure that involves disclosing to a certain group of people only, and full disclosure that entails disclosing to the general public at large. Disclosing to the public brings about a sense of relief but is often inhibited by society's negative attitudes towards homosexuality, which in turn is likely to lead to partial disclosure. Like most processes that take place throughout life, disclosure also has its advantages and disadvantages; it can be a risky venture that brings about traumatic experiences and can also be a liberating experience that brings about positive mental health (Coleman, 1989; Nardi & Schneider, 1998).

1.2 Rationale and aims of the study

Murray & Roscoe (1998) indicate that although homosexuality is shunned by the majority of the South African black society and regarded as a white sexual orientation, there are many black homosexuals who have emerged and are still emerging. Given the state of societal attitudes towards homosexuality, it is often difficult for homosexuals to disclose their sexual orientation. There is however, very little research on the process of disclosure of homosexual orientation. Not much is known about what it takes to openly declare one's homosexual identity and to live openly as such, as well as the challenges faced with during the process of disclosure.

The aim of this study is to investigate the process of disclosure among a group of black South African homosexuals and to explore the procedures involved before, during and after disclosure. The study seeks to investigate the factors that are perceived to facilitate and/or inhibit the process of disclosure. Furthermore, the challenges faced with during disclosure and how they are dealt with, as well as the benefits and costs of disclosure will be explored.

The study focuses on black South African homosexuals because although homosexuality is becoming a visible phenomenon in the black African community, little research has been done to understand the life world of this community. This study hopes to help other homosexuals in general; in particular black homosexuals who are still struggling to come out of the closet. It might help them to realise how other homosexuals have come to a decision of coming out, the challenges they came across as well as how those were dealt with. The study is also relevant for practitioners involved in counselling to inform themselves about black South African homosexuals' experiences in terms of disclosure, as they are likely to come across such people at some point in their practice. In essence, this study hopes to highlight some of the issues faced by black South African homosexuals in terms of disclosing their sexual orientation in communities which may still hold conservative views toward homosexuality.

1.3 Research questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

- What is the nature of the process of disclosure of a homosexual identity among black South African homosexuals?
- What are the factors that facilitate and/or hamper the process of disclosure?
- What are the perceived benefits of disclosure?
- What are the difficulties experienced after disclosure and how are these dealt with?

1.4 Research report outline

Chapter two of this research reviews the relevant literature on homosexuality and disclosure. The chapter also defines and gives a brief overview of the key concepts, looks at the origins of homosexuality as well as factors that play a role in the process of disclosure. A theoretical framework on homosexual identity formation is also discussed. Chapter three focuses on the research design and methodology and gives an outline of the sampling method used as well as methods utilised for the collection and analysis of data. Chapter four is the presentation of the findings of the study. The fifth chapter discusses the results of the study. Conclusions and recommendations for future research are in the sixth chapter.