

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

This chapter starts by giving the demographic outline of the sample, which is followed by the presentation of the results obtained from this study.

Table 1:

4.1 Sample profile

Name*	Age	Gender	Nature of disclosure
Matimba	22	Male	Full disclosure
Victor	19	Male	Full disclosure
Alfred	20	Male	Full disclosure
Simpbiwe	21	Male	Full disclosure
John	22	Male	Partial disclosure
Edward	22	Male	Partial disclosure

* Not their real names

The sample consisted of six male participants between the ages of 18 and 25; three aged 22, one aged 21 and two aged 20 years. Four of the participants reported to have fully disclosed while the other two reported to have partially disclosed their sexual orientation. As the participants' real names are protected by the confidentiality clause, pseudonyms are used in reporting the results.

4.2 Summary of main results

4.2.1 Awareness of a homosexual identity

When participants were asked at what age they discovered their homosexual orientation, all participants reported that although they have always known that there

was something “different” about them, they did not understand exactly what was different until during the adolescence stage. Although they stated feeling different from their male counterparts throughout their childhood, they mentioned that there was a specific stage whereby they became aware of the fact that what made them different was their sexual orientation. Most participants could remember the exact ages when they became aware of their homosexual feelings. Only a few found it difficult to recall the ages at which they discovered that their feelings and behaviour were homosexual. It was evident that it was during early and late adolescent that participants discovered the term “homosexual” and therefore began to associate it with themselves.

Simphiwe*(21 yrs): ... I’ve always known that there was something different in me...because...I’ve never played with guys, I mean I’ve always been constantly surrounded by girls...so I always knew there was something about me...but it was in a later stage, probably in the beginning of high school, that’s when I knew that I’ve got an attraction for guys, therefore there is a thing called being gay.

4.2.2 Childhood indicators of homosexual tendencies

Participants were asked what made them aware of their homosexual tendencies. All six participants reported that they have always known from an early age that there was something different about them, but were not necessarily aware that it was linked to homosexuality. The number one indicator of homosexual tendencies reported by all participants was feminine behaviour (playing with dolls and female related activities) and lack of or limited interest in male activities from an early age. Others identified strongly with their feminine behaviour. They felt as though they were female. Both the feminine tendencies and a lack of interest in male activities resulted in the participants feeling different and odd:

Edward*(22 yrs): Since I was young I used to be with girls, always playing with girls, playing netball and doing girl’s chores. I used to imitate whatever girls were doing around ...

Alfred*(20 yrs): ... I thought I was weird ... instead of playing with boys I'd play with girls, instead of asking my parents to buy me toys and cars I'd ask them to buy me dolls.

The second most reported childhood indicator of homosexual tendencies was an attraction to males which was reported to have developed during early adolescence. This helped shed some light into their lack of romantic interest in girls. In addition to feeling like the odd one out, Victor*(19 yrs) recalls his frustration sparked by the obvious difference between him and his friends which was later worsened by his feelings towards males:

“...ehh my friends had girlfriends and I was the only one who didn't understand what was going on, because I totally didn't have any interest in girls and ehh it was seen as odd because I did have feelings for boys which was like completely something scary.”

4.2.3 The process of discovering homosexuality

When asked to explain how they discovered their homosexuality, each participant had a different story to tell on how they came to learn about the term 'homosexual' and that it applied to them and thus giving a name to what was experienced as foreign feelings, interests and fantasies to them. Matimba*(22 yrs) had an intimate encounter with another man and it was when he tried to find out why he enjoyed the encounter that he discovered that he was gay:

“ I think it was September when somebody (male) from my community kissed me...that's when I found out that I'm gay. I felt that mhh ...maximum attraction ... well at first I asked myself why is a male kissing a male? And when time went by it made me to understand why...I've never been interested in heterosexual relationships.”

For John*(22 yrs), it was a matter of being in a facilitating environment and engaging with other homosexuals and comparing himself to them, that made him discover that he was homosexual. Simphiwe*(21 yrs) on the other hand had never heard of term homosexual until a friend asked him if he was gay:

“... I remember he was like oh are you gay as well? And I’m like what do you mean? And he said like gay you know, when you are attracted to guys. I’m like ... oh that’s what it is.”

Edward*(22 yrs) reported that people from his society called him names and ridiculed him because he was feminine; it was from this experience that he learnt about homosexuality. Victor*(19 yrs) and Alfred’s*(20 yrs) discoveries show how much an environment plays a role in informing people about homosexuality. They both stayed in rural areas where they report that there was hardly any discussions about homosexuality, which made them feel like outcasts. They started making sense of what they were feeling when they moved to an urban area where homosexuality was discussed.

On the other hand, Alfred*(20 yrs) recalls one day while watching television he saw two males kissing and could identify with what he saw:

“ ... I was watching TV and I saw two men kissing and I was like “oh my God that’s how I feel.”

For him this experience was a liberating one because what he thought was odd was also experienced by other people and had a name.

4.2.4 Reactions to the awareness of homosexual feelings

Participants were asked how they reacted after learning about their homosexual identity. The reactions ranged from relief and excitement to fear. It was relief from learning that what they felt had a name and could be explained. The excitement was accompanied by fear, fear of the unknown, fear of venturing into a field which is considered immoral by their community. This fear gave birth to feelings of frustration and ambivalence. For other participants it was a combination of relief and frustration which paralysed them for a while. They were relieved that they could express themselves as a gay people, but at the same time, they had to deal with negative stereotypes surrounding homosexuality. They had to take a conscious decision to uproot the negative stereotypes and try to understand what homosexuality is about. It was after they understood what homosexuality was that they learnt to accept it as their sexual orientation. Other participants also reported fear as one of the reactions, their fear was mainly of the consequences that came with being gay:

Alfred*(20 yrs):I was excited and at the same time ... very ... a bit scared, because later I'd seen how such people (homosexuals) were treated ... and I'm thinking oh my God am I gonna be treated like this as well ...

For Matimba*(22 yrs), he was initially surprised that he was attracted to a male person, but at the same time it was a revelation in the sense that he derived a new meaning to attach to his behaviour and thus define himself. Although it made sense to him, his initial reaction was denial:

“... Ok but I denied the fact that I was homosexual at that age ... because in the society that I'm from it is not believed that a man can be involved with a man. Like when you said you are gay it was some kind of a taboo.”

After learning that he is gay, Simphiwe*(21 yrs) got curious and went on to research more about homosexuality in order to have an in-depth understanding of it. He went to the library and read more literature on homosexuality. Having a label for his feelings motivated him to continue being himself with confidence and pride. The knowledge that he acquired helped him to understand himself better and be able to make sense of his homosexuality. Despite the initial reactions that were experienced by participants, they all reported that they eventually accepted their sexual orientation

4.2.5 The process of disclosure

4.2.5.1 Making a decision to disclose

After making sense of their homosexual feelings, the next step is deciding what to do with the information about their discovered sexual orientation; whether to share it with others or to keep it to oneself. Participants were asked what made them decide to disclose. From the participants' responses, it became evident that the decision to disclose impacted on individuals differently. Some participants reported that it took a lot of contemplating while others reported that they did not make a conscious decision as such, it just happened. A number of individuals reported that they have never been in a closet, they just learned about the term "homosexual" later in their lives. As such, they implied that they did not have to make a decision about disclosing but continued to be themselves. The only difference was that they now had a name that defined their feelings, interests, behaviour and desires. This group of individuals reported to have had little difficulty in letting people know about his homosexual orientation:

Simphiwe*(21 yrs): To be honest with you I've always been myself at home ... so I've always been myself ... my friends and my family they've always allowed me to see whoever I want to see ... I would actually say that I've always been myself.

For others, the decision to disclose is a difficult one that involves the process of understanding what being homosexual means to them before they can share it with

others. It often takes time and other individuals had to wait until they left home and be in a neutral environment before they could decide to disclose:

John*(22 yrs): ...it is very difficult, it's more about coming to terms with it than how do I live with it or what does it mean to me ... it was a struggle, do I keep quiet about it or do I continue living being gay.

Matimba*(22 yrs): now that I'm at Varsity I should not pretend to be somebody that I'm not, I should ... like, live my life ...I told myself that I'd rather be hated for who I am than to be loved for what I'm not.

Other individuals did not decide to disclose but were led to disclose by circumstances; like in the case of Alfred*(20 yrs) who was caught in bed with a man by a family member and had no choice thereof but to let his family know of his sexual orientation. He however admits that if he had not been caught, he would not have disclosed at that time.

4.2.5.2 Who do I first disclose to?

Once one has taken a decision to disclose, whether partially or fully, the question is who to tell first. When participants were asked to indicate who did they first disclose to, it became evident from their responses that the first person to disclose to is often a trusted person who is also likely to offer support. Most participants reported to have told their close friends first, and a few told their relatives first. The reason is that friends are thought to be more supportive, understanding, accepting and containing.

John*(22 yrs): She (*a friend*) was very supportive, actually she said to me she's always suspected that I'm gay and she was like "I'm very supportive, it doesn't change the way I think of you, you know you are still the very same person I met it's just that your sexual preference is different," that's all she said.

John*(22 yrs) further expressed how lack of knowledge about homosexuality leads people to misconceptions about homosexuality which further influences their perceptions. Sometimes the first disclosure is to people who are not very close to the person and whose reactions are less likely to have any effect on the individual. For example Victor*(19 yrs) remembers telling his friends who were exchange students from overseas first that he was gay. He felt that even if they had reacted negatively, it would not have affected him as much. It was only in the case of one participant that his parents knew first, and this was because he got caught in bed with another man by his brother who went to tell their parents.

4.2.5.3 Disclosure to parents

It was evident from the participants' responses that disclosing to parents is a very complex and difficult task which most would prefer not to face. This is because they anticipate that parents would react negatively. Often parents find out about their children's homosexuality inadvertently or after confronting them. This has proved to be a preferred method of informing parents by most participants. Four out of the six participants reported that they had disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents. The other two had decided not to inform their parents because they imagine that the consequences would be negative. They fear that their parents would not understand, would be in shock and might even reject them. Hence, they choose to compartmentalise their lives; express their homosexuality when they are with a certain group of people and hide it when they are with their family members.

Those who disclosed to their parents did so after being confronted by their parents. Often parents become suspicious when their children do not behave like other children of their same sex. For instance, when they realise that their son does not show any interest in girls or male related activities. Even after confessing that they are homosexual, the first response from parents is often denial.

Simphiwe*(21 yrs): ... one day my mom called me aside and said “why don’t you have a girlfriend?” and I’m like “eish mama, I’m not into girls please” and she’s like “what do you mean?” and she was busy talking “I want a wife and grandkids” and I’m like “ ohh please mama you are not gonna get them from me” and she was like “when were you gonna tell me?”

Simphiwe*(21 yrs) realised that his mother thought he was joking and she returned a week later to verify if her son was really gay. When he reiterated what he initially said, she was disappointed. However, he reported that she eventually accepted his sexual identity and offered her support even when his father was against it. Sometimes parents’ reactions to the news of their child being homosexual are influenced by their religious background. Religion condemns homosexuality and defines it as an act of immorality; therefore a religious parent would not want to have a child who conducts in such an immoral behaviour. One of the participants reported that his religious mother was very angry when she found out about his sexual orientation, she prayed for him and asked God to change him. When this did not happen over the years, she reportedly learnt to accept her child despite the condemnation from her church members.

Those participants who had not disclosed to their parents asserted that if their parents were to ask them, they would not deny it, in fact that is what Edward*(22 yrs) is hoping would happen:

“I’ll tell them if they ask because ...I can’t just like disclose ...”

Certain participants refrained from disclosing to their parents in order to protect them from the pain that they would encounter if they were to discover that their child is homosexual. One of the participants indicated that as much as he wanted his mother to know about his homosexuality, he however feared the worst if she found out:

“My mother has high blood (pressure) ... I think she could faint ... because she’d be surprised, shocked ...”

Some individuals indicated that although their parents were aware of their homosexual tendencies, they did not discuss it with them. As such, their parents did not know that their children actively engage in homosexual activities. Although Matimba*(22 yrs) has never discussed his sexual orientation with his parents and does not live with them full time he has fantasies about what his mother thinks about his sexual orientation, he expressed them in this way:

“I think she regretted, she regretted why she had (*gave birth to*) me ...as a gay person.”

Often disclosure to parents leads to disclosure to one's extended family as well. Therefore an individual does not only deal with his parents' reactions but has to endure discrimination from other extended family members. One of the participants recounted his ordeal with his uncles. They insulted him and hardly ever spoke to him. When they do speak to him they ensure that he understands their view on homosexuality:

“...he says (*his uncle*) that in his family history there has never been a gay person and then ... he does not think that he will ever accept me as one of his family member.”

Despite this rejection, he maintains that he is not discouraged and he is determined to lead a happy life as a gay person.

4.2.5.3.1 Mothers' versus fathers' reactions

It also became evident that mothers and fathers reacted differently to the news of their children being homosexual. The only similar reaction is the initial one, that of denial. However, mothers tend to move out of the denial stage more quickly and learn to accept their children than fathers. Mothers tend to be sympathetic and comforting to their children while fathers often resent their children for being homosexual. Some

fathers respond by not speaking to their children, trying to convert them to the “straight” way. They even threaten to throw them out of the house. This often causes tension in the house, as the mother is likely to side with the child and would try to make the father understand and accept the child. Participants who had disclosed to both their parents indicated that their fathers had not accepted their homosexuality but were merely tolerating it and had not given up trying to change them into becoming heterosexual.

Simphiwe*(21 yrs): I know my dad is trying to change me you know, he’s always trying to make me a little more manly... he tried to involve me in ... man activities.

Simphiwe’s* father was not happy about his son’s sexual orientation. He called him crazy and claimed that homosexuality does not exist. This was followed by a silent treatment for about two weeks. Although he was concerned and pained by his father’s reaction, Simphiwe*(21 yrs) mentioned that he found solace from his mother’s support. It seems like it takes longer for fathers to accept their children’s homosexuality, while mothers tend to come to terms with it fairly earlier. Other participants reported that they never expected their fathers to accept their sexuality but are just happy that their fathers had not disowned them and were still financially taking care of them.

4.2.5.4 Partial versus full disclosure

From the six participants, four considered themselves to have fully disclosed, in other words, have undergone through all three stages of coming out; coming out to the self, to those close to the person and coming out to the public at large. The other two participants had gone up to level two, which is coming out to the self and to other homosexuals and trusted heterosexual friends only. They all had different motivations behind their choice of disclosure. It is interesting that those who had partially disclosed did not necessarily mind the public knowing about their sexual orientation,

but they were mostly concerned about their parents finding out. They feared that their parents would not accept them. They therefore chose to disclose to a particular group of people that they felt were likely to be accepting and those they were comfortable with. Even such people were chosen carefully. John's*(22 yrs) selection of people to disclose to was based on his subjective view of who he thought and felt were ready to know. Those people were his close friends who were perceived to be open minded about homosexuality. He decided not to discuss it with his family as he felt uncomfortable and thought that they would have had difficulty coming to terms with his sexual orientation:

“... I have told people that I think are ready to know. I think it is my close friends, people I live with here, I've never discussed it with my family ... it's a bit uncomfortable ... maybe it's because they won't understand one, and ehh it will be difficult for them.”

Other individuals' choice for partial disclosure was informed by the code of conduct from their society which promotes and recognises heterosexuality as the only accepted sexual orientation:

Edward*(22 yrs): ... in each an every home, society or community there are certain values, principles that guide the behaviour ... and what sexual orientation you have to follow. They only approve of heterosexual orientation.

Those participants who had fully disclosed believed that it was important that they did not try to hide their homosexuality. In fact, they believed that it was more difficult to hide their homosexuality than it was coming out because some of them are feminine. They indicate that being in the closet constrained them from expressing themselves authentically. This group of people did not seem to care much about who found out about their homosexuality. They further reported that for them full disclosure was the only way to go despite the negative consequences that might ensue.

4.2.6 Factors that determine disclosure

4.2.6.1 Negative attitudes towards homosexuality

Participants reported that the environment in which one finds himself in plays an important role in determining their decision to disclose their homosexual identity. If the environment condemns homosexuality; disclosure tends to be difficult, while a supportive environment facilitates disclosure. Their home and the high school environments were reported by some participants as posing difficulty in coming out. It was reported that it was very difficult to express one's homosexuality in high school because most students had a negative attitude towards homosexuality. In order to avoid discrimination by other students and even by certain teachers, most participants reported that they only started the process of disclosure when they were in tertiary institutions. They believe that such higher institutions of learning allow them to explore their homosexuality. They believe that in tertiary institutions, there are many students who do not pay attention to what other people do, as opposed to a high school environment which is much smaller and people tend to notice and pay much attention to that which is perceived to be different. They further recounted that while in high school, one does not get enough exposure or information about homosexuality. Most participants reported to have disclosed during their late adolescent stage, after completing their matric and believe that one gets freedom after high school. John*(22 yrs) explains why he only disclosed his sexuality at the age of 18 years:

“At 18 I wasn't at home, I was overseas ... so it was more of a free environment to be myself.”

After discovering that one is homosexual, one is faced with a difficult decision of what to do; whether to disclose or not. This proved to be a lonely process when one is in an environment where there are no homosexual people around. Therefore, being in at a tertiary institution where one meets other homosexuals and learn that it is comfortable living a gay life, motivated most individuals to disclose:

John*(22 yrs): WITS does give a chance to express ourselves well...
I've got gay friends but at home I don't have gay friends.

Alfred*(20 yrs): I think coming out has fully to do with which community a person is in.

Three of the participants reported that it was more difficult to come out in rural areas as people are less exposed to homosexuality than in the urban areas.

Edward*(22 yrs):It's easier for a person in Soweto to come out because people are exposed to the media more and people are used to it ... unlike places like Venda where a lot of stigma is attached to being homosexual even those who are homosexual they don't come out ...

Fear of homophobic attacks is also one factor mentioned by participants as an inhibitor of disclosure. The attacks took forms of verbal and physical abuse as well as religious discrimination. Name-calling was the number one verbal attack reported by all participants. Those who had fully disclosed experienced more homophobic attacks than those who had partially disclosed because their sexual orientation was public knowledge. However, most participants had found ways of dealing with homophobia and tried not to let it hinder their disclosure.

Some of the participants reported to have experienced religious discrimination. As indicated in the literature, most churches have adopted the view of homosexuality as a sin and as such, shun homosexuals and do not accept them in their churches. Religious discriminations can be both direct and indirect. Direct discrimination involves discussing the immorality of homosexuality in front of homosexual individuals and commanding them to change. Indirect discrimination can be illustrated by Alfred's* case; he views himself as a born again Christian and was a member of a student's Christian Organisation until the organisation drew up a policy

against homosexuality because he joined. Fortunately for him, he found another church where he felt accepted and supported. Christian homosexual individuals believe that God made them the way they are and cannot do anything to change. Therefore it is both disappointing and hurtful to them that people who consider themselves to be God's children are rejecting them instead of supporting them.

4.2.6.2 Social support systems

A good and sound support system has been reported by participants to have played a motivating role in the coming out process. All participants held the view that it was easier to disclose to people who were likely to be supportive of one's sexual orientation. Support from family member(s) and friends proved to be important in terms of encouraging one to live openly as a homosexual. However, not all participants had that kind of support. However, all participants reported to have support from friends and indicated that it is very important in order to survive. Simphiwe*(21 yrs) reported that his family's support was enough to keep him going despite other people's views about him:

“ ... I've got this motto, as long as my family is really cool, that they're behind me ... they don't mind me being ... myself, I really don't care what everybody else think.”

Edward*(22 yrs) expressed his view on the importance of a support system:

“ I have a strong social support system ... gay friends, both male and female. It is very important because otherwise you'll commit suicide. It's really hard because at the end of the day you'll be alone in the room and trying to introspect what has been affecting you during the day, so if you are a weak person and don't have a support system it's gonna be difficult ... and you'll end up doing things that you'll regret.”