Sexual Identity and Sexual Fluidity among Gay Men and Lesbians


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ABSTRACT

Sexual identity development among gay men and lesbians consists an important component of coming out. Coming out is considered a vital component in the sexual identity development among gay men and lesbians. This paper explores the experiences of gay men and lesbians with respect to sexual identity development particularly in issues relating to sexual fluidity. Purposively selected 20 gay men and lesbians were involved in an in-depth semi structured interviews. The results found that 90% of male and 30% of female respondents came out to self in their teens. Male compared to female respondents seemed to portray an earlier age of coming out. Coming out to self and others was regardless of one’s age with the 40s as the latest age found in this study. Half of the respondents agreed that sexual fluidity could happen or indicated that they had heard of or witnessed sexual identity changes in someone. Some implications for better practice by mental health professionals in ensuring gay men and lesbians well being are provided.

Keywords: Sexual identity, sexual fluidity, coming out, well-being, gay men, lesbians

INTRODUCTION

Individuals who identify themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual describe their emerging sexual orientation as beginning with a sensation of being different from other members of their sex (Arey, 1995; Kaufman and Raphael, 1996). This identification of themselves as gay or lesbian is also known as the starting point of the ‘coming out’ process. Previously, coming out was viewed as a single event that occurred the first time a homosexual person identified himself or herself to another homosexual person (Hooker, 1965). Currently, however, coming out is suggested to involve two components: (1) acknowledging one’s sexual orientation to oneself; and (2) disclosing one’s sexual identity to others (Cohen and Savin-Williams, 1996). It is also proposed that this coming out process occurs over and over again (Rhoads, 1994) as family, friends, colleagues, and others are informed of a person’s sexual identity.

Even though a person might face consequences of being rejected upon coming out, it is viewed as an important component in sexual identity development among gay and lesbian individuals (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979). There are several models that attempt to explain the process of sexual identity development among gay and lesbian individuals. These models can be organized into categories such as (a) general sexual identity development (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989),
(b) gay men identity development (Alderson, 2003; McDonald, 1982; Troiden, 1979), (c) lesbian identity development (Chapman and Brannock, 1987; Sophie, 1986), and (d) valuative frameworks on sexual identity development and synthesis (Yarhouse, 2001).

The literature often treats identity development and the coming out process as synonymous. Some of the earliest models of sexual identity development (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989) made the assumption that gay men and lesbians have virtually identical developmental experiences. However, several models have since emerged that attempted to focus on a particular gender on the assumption that men and women have different sexual development because of their anatomical differences. Thus, attempts have been made to confine sexual identity development within gender. For some gay and lesbian youth, sexual identity development might occur simultaneously and in juxtaposition with other associated factors such as race, gender, and religious identity development. Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) found that race alone had no systematic effects on how coming out was experienced unless the presence of traditional family values, which included religion, were taken into consideration in the process of one accepting a gay identity.

The valuative frameworks on sexual identity development and synthesis proposed by Yarhouse (2001) emerged based on the missing element of an integrated religious perspective in previously developed sexual identity models. The valuative framework challenged the strong essentialist view of sexual identity, which considered same-sex attraction as a fixed part of who one was and suggested that one needed to act on the inclination towards achieving identity synthesis (Yarhouse and Jones, 1997). At the same time, it was also possible for someone to identify as gay and lesbian, and, based on their valuative framework, opted not to act in any form of same-sex behaviour (Yarhouse et al., 2005). Yarhouse (2001) cautioned that making this claim without empirical support (e.g., indicating homosexual people might experience self-hatred and despair) might lead to potential bias against those homosexual people who identified with the valuative framework.

D’Augelli (1994) viewed coming out as a fluid process influenced by personal subjectivities and actions, interaction with others and socio-historical connections. In a broader sense, this relates to the concept of sexual fluidity. This has also been referred to in different terms such as ‘erotic plasticity’, defined as “the degree to which a person’s sexual drive can be shaped and altered by cultural and social factors, from formal socialization to situational pressures” (Baumeister, 2000, p. 348). For example, a qualitative research study conducted by Evan and Broido (1999) reported that sexual fluidity within identity development created challenges with regard to coming out. This research was carried out on 20 GLB undergraduate students at the University Park campus of Pennsylvania State University living in a residence hall. The study was conducted using a constructivist framework with the intention of emphasizing how respondents made meaning of their personal experiences. Nonetheless, a more detailed discussion of Evan and Broido’s (1999) finding on sexual fluidity could make a valuable contribution to the field of sexual identity.

In general, the female sex drive was considered to be more malleable than the male sex drive, indicating that females possessed a higher level of sexual fluidity (Baumeister, 2000). Specifically, lesbians were more likely than gay men to report having previously identified as something other than homosexual and generally the model prior identification for lesbian was heterosexual while for gay men it was bisexual (Kinnish et al., 2005). A longitudinal study by Rosario et al. (2006) on 156 GLB youth showed that sexual identity could change over time with 18% of their participants transitioning from a bisexual to a gay or lesbian identity. Furthermore, Rosario et al. (2006) found that youth who transitioned continue to change their sexual orientation and sexual behavior to match their new sexual identity compared to those whose identity remained consistent. In
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other words, this suggests that sexual identity development continues after the adoption of the newly chosen sexual identity. Political ideology was found to be among the few reasons that could contribute to sexual fluidity (Baumeister, 2000). For example Charbonneau and Lander (1991) found one third of their sample of women who came out as a lesbian during midlife cited reading feminist texts as a cause of their action and indicated that lesbianism was an extension of the commitment to feminism. In that sample, women who came out as lesbians as an act of self-discovery underwent less adjustment difficulties than those who came out as lesbians through an active choice. A similar stand was noted by Kitzinger (1987) on the issue of coming out as a lesbian due to political reasons through a quote asserted by a feminist, “I take the label ‘lesbian’ as a part of the strategy of the feminist struggle” (p. 113).

As mentioned sexual identity development might occur simultaneously and intertwining with factors such as race, gender and religious development which can lead to personal and psychological effects faced by gays and lesbians. For example, Subhi et al. (2011) found that 80% of their gay and lesbian respondents were affected by the conflict between their Christianity and their homosexuality and found that the most common personal effects of the conflict faced included depression, self-blame/guilt, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and alienation. Suggestively, if the conflict was not handled accordingly it can inflict negative implications on their well-being. This has led to the increment of current literature discussing issues of well-being among gays and lesbians (e.g., Bauermeister et al., 2010; Beals and Peplau, 2005; Bouris et al., 2010; Diamond and Lucas, 2004; Mallon et al., 2002).

Various models have been proposed relating to sexual identity development and it would be unfortunate to limit this study to one particular theoretical model considering that more than one model might fit the various experiences reported by each gay man and lesbian (Reynolds and Hanjorgiris, 2000). The aim of this paper is to explore the experiences of gay men and lesbians in and around Brisbane with respect to sexual identity and sexual fluidity together with how they attempted to make sense of the experiences reflecting on their well-being.

METHODS

This study comprised of 10 gay men and 10 lesbians living in the Brisbane City area and surrounding suburbs. During the time of interview the respondents’ ages ranged from 20 to 51 years (mean age 36.5 years old). The mean ages for gay men and lesbians were 35.4 and 37.5 years old, respectively. The majority of respondents had a high level of education with 18 respondents having completed tertiary degrees (8 males and 10 females). Of the remaining two male respondents, one possessed a secondary education background while the other possessed a primary education background.

Respondents started to become aware of their attraction towards the same sex at a range of ages from as early as 10-11 years old up until 41 years old. Respondents started off coming out to themselves first then only proceeded to come out to others. In terms of coming out to self, a total of 90% gay men and 30% lesbians came out during their teens while 10% gay men and 60% lesbians came out in their 20s with the remaining 10% of lesbians came out in their 40s. In terms of coming out to others, a total of 50% gay men and 10% of lesbians came out in their teens, 40% gay men and 70% came out in their 20s. The remaining 10% gay men and 20% of lesbians subsequently came out in their 30s and 40s.

Participation of respondents was on voluntary basis. This study was part of a larger research on a better understanding of the potential conflict between Christianity and homosexuality (Subhi et al., 2011). Respondents participated in two interview sessions with each interview lasted approximately an hour. Written informed consent was obtained upon respondents’ agreement to participate. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Inductive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Boyatzis (1998) was used to analyze the interview. By means of open-ended questions, themes were
allowed to emerge without prior pre-supposing the important themes. Through this way, patterns were formed and investigated which assisted the researcher to understand and make meaning of the data collected (Patton, 2002). The process of data analysis in this study adhered to the strategy outlined by Cresswell (2003).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Coming out to self as gay or lesbian is considered to be an important developmental step for many homosexual youth (Evans and Broido, 1999). Prior to coming out to themselves as gay or lesbian, three respondents had same-sex attractions without any sexual connotation. More often than not this same-sex attraction was to someone the respondents looked up to, idolized or perceived as a role model.

Bobby revealed that he had a strong attraction towards one of his male teachers while he was in primary school, which was without any sexual feelings. The attraction towards this particular teacher might be hypothesized as a substitute for what he was missing out on in his relationship with his aggressive and abusive stepfather at home:

Well I had, I wasn’t really aware of it, really when I was little. I do remember though that I had a very strong attraction to a teacher but it wasn’t a sexual attraction... It was my first feeling of wanting to reach out to a man that was safe and that was a teacher and at that point I would probably have done anything to have his affection but thankfully nothing sexual happened so I understood intimacy between men without a homosexual connotation.

It is common for homosexual people to begin the process of identifying themselves as gay or lesbian by having an attraction towards those of the same sex very early in their life, which is usually before the age of puberty (Floyd and Stein, 2002). In the case of the present study, several respondents specifically mentioned having attraction towards those of the same sex without any sexual connotation. The person that respondents were attracted to was usually someone who they respected, admired or simply looked up to (e.g., primary school teachers).

Respondents came out at various stages of their lives. Table 1 provides a summary of the ages respondents came out to self and others. Sarah came out to herself in her early teens. Sarah started to notice that her attractions differed from those of her schoolmates of the same gender between the ages of 12 and 13. She remembered that girls her age loved to buy magazines that contained the photos of the latest pop stars, which they would display as pin-ups on their bedroom wall. Although she tried to mimic the action, she was unsuccessful in trying to get the same feelings that her girlfriends were getting from the action:

I actually got the stickers and stuck them up on the wall but they were not doing the same thing to me as they were doing for everyone else and it became very clear to me what they were feeling for men or young boys, whatever it was I was having those same feelings but for the same sex. I didn’t know why.

Besides those respondents who came out as gay and lesbian early in their adolescence, respondent such as Jules came out to themselves only when they reached adulthood. Jules came out to himself as a gay man at the age of 22 years old. Although he had sexual encounters with men during his childhood and adolescent period he did not identify the experience as being same-sex attracted. To him it was more a matter of trying to fulfill the needs of love from the void left by his absent father as he described himself as the “kid looking for love but I was looking for love from all the wrong places”. Before he came out at the age of 22 years old, it was more a case of trying to deny his homosexuality. He described this rationalization process by saying, “It’s more of you’re used to doing it with men. So you’re going back to men.”
For all of the respondents, the process of coming out to others occurred after the respondents had already come out to themselves. In order to come out to others, usually the respondents tried to evaluate the character along with the relationship of the person that he or she intended to disclose to. Only when the respondents sensed that there was a high chance of acceptance did they come out. Nevertheless there were also occasions when miscalculations resulted in different reactions from what they expected.

For some respondents, their experience of coming out to others happened smoothly. This might be due to their accurate judgment and luck in terms of identifying the correct person that they intended to disclose their homosexuality to. Dan was an example who had a smooth experience when disclosing their homosexuality for the first time to others. Dan came to Brisbane to pursue his studies. While he was in his home country Dan did not have the chance to disclose his homosexuality. Because he came from a very religious family and because the culture

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within his home country was intolerant of homosexuality, Dan had to repress and suppress his homosexuality until he arrived in Brisbane. The first two people that Dan came out to were his student advisor and language advisor. The response he received was very comforting and supportive, which built his self-confidence:

Well, I had support last year and I have support this year. I came out to my student advisor and my language advisor at my previous campus, when I was doing foundation and they were both very supportive of me, and that was the first time. They were the first two straight people I’ve actually come out to. So that was very assuring.

Converse to the smooth experiences shared, the first coming out experiences of some respondents were negative. One example was the case of Wynona who possibly had made an incorrect intuition and judgment prior to coming out. Wynona was in her teens during the early 1970s. She explained that identifying as a GLBTI person then was very different from now, especially in terms of tolerance and acceptance. She perceived that society back then was not as open minded as society today and there were very limited services, if any that catered to the GLBTI community:

I think it’s easier now because you have services set up; you have counseling services, hotlines and Open Doors which is an organization specific to young people who might identify or might be questioning. There are places that you can go. I think it’s a lot more out and about than what it was back then. It wasn’t so acceptable, society wasn’t so embracing and communities weren’t so embracing. Police have now got liaison officers. None of that stuff happened back in the ‘70s. I think you get a better chance of being able to find some sort of support than what you could back then. Therefore Wynona stated that the coming out process was more complicated back then. She had a bad experience with her mother who confronted her after suspecting that she was having an intense relationship with a girl from church. This happened when Wynona was about 17 years old. Her mother was furious when Wynona confided that she was sexually attracted to her girlfriend. Her mother organized the pastor to counsel her about it and after that her mother became more vigilant about her behavior and whereabouts.

Coming out is seen as a recurring process in life (Rhoads, 1994), and, therefore, there are generally bound to be a mixture of positive and negative experiences of coming out to others. The case of Helena was chosen as the best example to illustrate such mixed experiences. Helena also received mixed responses in her experience of coming out to others. When she disclosed her sexual identity to her sisters they took it very well. She mentioned that they “never said anything bad” concerning her homosexuality. On the other hand her mother did have an issue about it and her most memorable phrase was, “I’m not accepting this!” With time, however, she was able to “get her head around it” and now after about eight years the issue has been resolved between them.

Helena also shared her experiences of the reactions that she had received from others besides her immediate family members regarding her homosexuality. Such reactions tended to become very intimidating and frustrating:

I find throughout my life people can say to you like you know... “I’m very gay friendly and I have nothing against you and your girlfriend,” and that’s all good and well just so long as it doesn’t encroach in their life. Once you get a little bit too close to their life the walls go up and you’re shut out and I had that done numerous times.

Because of the varied responses to her homosexuality, Helena had become a very private person in terms of living her daily life.
She avoided socializing with friends from work and would much prefer to relax at home in the company of her partner or once in a while hung out with their close but limited number of friends.

The present study indicated that more males than females came out to themselves at an earlier stage of their life, a finding that concurs with other studies (e.g., D’Augelli, 2002; Floyd and Bakeman, 2006; Maguen et al., 2002), which also indicated that gay men would have an earlier awareness and self-identify sooner than lesbians. However, there seems to be a discrepancy in the timing of coming out to others between male and female respondents of the present study compared to other past studies. In the present study, more females came out to others later in their lives compared to males when 20 years and older was taken as the cut off age. This finding contrasts with previous studies, which all found females to have a lesser mean age of coming out to others compared to males (D’Augelli, 2002; Floyd and Bakeman, 2006; Maguen et al., 2002). One reason that might have contributed to the difference in the findings might be because the present research study has a slightly older cohort of female respondents compared to the three studies mentioned above – homophobia has decreased as time progressed (Loftus, 2001; Yang, 1997). Tentatively, this finding suggests that it may be easier to come out in the present social climate than it was in the past. Furthermore, the few respondents who were still in their 20s at the time of interview either attended church school or grew up in a small town that was considered to have a more homophobic environment. For example, farmer David Graham of television reality show Big Brother 2006 in an interview with Qnews answered, “Uber lonely. You feel like you can’t be open and therefore you can’t be honest. You feel like you have to deny your real self. A self imposed isolation for fear of being outed,” when asked, “What’s it like to be gay in the country?” (“David Graham,” 2006, p. 32).

When the respondents were asked whether in their opinion sexual preferences and identities may change over time, 50% responded that this could happen or indicated that they had heard of or witnessed sexual identity changes in someone or even experienced it themselves. In a way this reflects on the fluidity issue that exists within the construct of sexual identity development (Baumeister, 2000). Roger agreed strongly with the idea of fluid sexual identities, saying,

> Oh certainly! I know some friends that have come from being a heterosexual and then become gay and towards the end of their relationship in the gay scene they have actually gone back to being heterosexual.

In trying to understand more about the issue of fluidity in sexual identity development, the cases of Suzy was highlighted as the best possible example. Suzy also shed light on the issue of the fluidity of sexual identity. At the time of the study Suzy was a 50 year old woman who came out as a lesbian in her 40s, initially for a political reason, because of her understanding that heterosexuality was “by its very nature in our society bad for women because it means that we live oriented to what men want and what men think”. So for Suzy primarily it was about becoming “a woman centered woman and putting her energy into women and not into men”. The choice of fully coming out as a lesbian also coincided with her recently strong belief in feminism. Suzy’s personal choice of adopting feminism made her strongly want to identify as a lesbian and was consistent with reports of some females coming out as lesbians for political reasons associated with the women’s movement (Baumeister, 2000).

Before taking on feminism and becoming a lesbian Suzy was married to her ex-husband who worked for a Christian church for 22 years. Suzy bore two children in the marriage. She explained that during the whole period of her life while she was in the marriage they were “fairly like a conventional nuclear family with mum, dad and two kids”. After quite a number of years within the church organization they both became quite disillusioned with their congregation, which they felt was becoming like a cult and was also very
restrictive and misogynistic. Thus they both left the church. Not long after that their marriage also ended.

Previous to identifying as a lesbian Suzy admitted that she was never sexually attracted to any women, “I had close affective bonds with women but I have no awareness of being sexually attracted to women at all until my first girlfriend in ‘99 when I was 41.” For Suzy her transition in becoming a lesbian went quite smoothly because of two factors: (1) she had left Christianity and its proscription of homosexuality earlier and, therefore, experienced no guilt about the Christian stance on homosexuality; (2) she had been allowing her mind to fantasize about living a lesbian lifestyle before actually entering a lesbian relationship; “I took to it like a duck to water as they say.”

It seems that from the respondents’ perspective the issue of sexual fluidity remains an open debate. Of the total respondents, 50% agreed that sexual preferences and identities could change over time. The example of Suzy strongly suggests that sexual identity and preference could change throughout one’s course of life. Certain prominent events that occurred in life but would not immediately be associated with sexual identity, such as those previously mentioned, could trigger these sexual identity and preference changes.

The present study provides some support for the argument that sexual fluidity occurs within sexual identity development for both males and females. Half of the total respondents agreed to the notion that sexual preferences and identities could change over time. Excluding those who had been married before coming out as gay or lesbian, only representatives from the female group have actually ‘experimented’ with sexual activity with the opposite sex before later identifying as lesbian. This pattern relates to the reported higher level of sexual fluidity in females as compared to males (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1995).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the present study revealed that male respondents came out sooner to themselves compared to female respondents. Moreover, male respondents were also found to be more at ease towards coming out to self and others compared to female respondents. Coming out to self and others occurs regardless of one age. At the same time the present study found that fluidity occurs within the sexual identity development of both males and females with half of the total respondents agreeing to the notion that sexual preferences and identities could change over time. The findings of this study can better assist mental health professionals especially counselors and therapists who deal with gay men and lesbians particularly during the turmoil process of coming out and securing a sexual identity.

This study has some implications for better practice by mental health professionals in ensuring gay men and lesbians well being are provided. Undeniably there may be some members of these professions still portraying feelings and attitudes that are heterosexist and sometimes homophobic. Rejection of sexual identity being experienced by respondents would be harmful (e.g., self-esteem shattered, trust robbed, self-guilt, and alienation increased). Therefore, mental health professionals who are incapable of dealing with the issues raised should refer clients to another mental health professionals or appropriate agency capable of dealing with it. Mental health professionals also need to respond to the request from clients wanting referral to other client facing the same issue (upon prior approval of the intended referral). For those mental health professionals that take up the challenge to deal with sexual identity issue among gay and lesbian they have to bear in mind of the possibility of sexual fluidity amongst their gay and lesbian clients in order to ensure their clients’ well being.
REFERENCES


