PARENTAL 'COMING OUT': THE JOURNEYS OF BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN MOTHERS THROUGH THEIR PERSONAL NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

The expression 'coming out' is generally associated with lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) persons (and other sexual minorities) in the literature on disclosure. However, disclosure literature shows that a child's coming out of the proverbial closet to the child's family is often followed by a figurative 'moving into the closet' of the child's parents with regard to their own disclosure of their child's sexual orientation to others. Like their LGB children, parents go through stage models of identity development as parents of LGB children. Despite the progressive nature of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act no. 108 of 1996) (RSA 1996) on issues affecting sexual minorities, individuals who belong to these minorities still face harassment and violence on a daily basis in some communities. Given this scenario, in this study on six black mothers of LGB children I argue that the reasons some mothers 'out' themselves include pledging solidarity with their children; showing unconditional love for their children; normalising LGB identities by queering their homes; and, most importantly, providing their children with protection against the kinds of harassment and violence to which they are subjected in some communities.

Keywords: mothers, coming out, narratives, lesbian, gay, bisexual, journeys, lesbian, gay and bisexual, black, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

It is often assumed that South African black urban communities are characterised by a strongly patriarchal culture, supported by religious beliefs, which insists on heterosexuality as the God-given norm, and views any deviation from this norm as deserving of social sanction. Reports in the press of what is considered 'corrective rape' of lesbians and the social stigmatisation of sexual minorities in general, have contributed to this stereotype. However, this article shows that there are examples in urban African communities of parental support for their lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) children, suggesting that generalisations regarding such communities fail to consider the whole picture. In the article, I begin to explore the extent of the phenomenon of parental support for LGB individuals.

Peplau and Beals (2004: 234) assert that lesbians and gay men are usually raised by heterosexual parents who assume that their children will be heterosexual. When children in such families come out as lesbian, gay or bisexual, their parents often go through a range of emotions, including shock, disbelief, denial and isolation, and anger (Griffin, Wirth and Wirth 1986; Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998), particularly in the beginning. For some, these feelings and emotions are replaced by acceptance or affirmation of their child's sexual minority status and his/her identity. All six mothers, whose narratives form the foundation of the discussion in the article, have come to accept and affirm their children's sexual minority status.

All the participants in the study, that is, the black mothers of LGB children, hold Christian beliefs, but do not subscribe to the 'homosexuality is a sin' myth. Consequently, they experienced no conflict between their religious beliefs and the sexual identity of their children. Rather than viewing their children as aberrations as some interpretations of Christian teachings suggest, they instead saw their children as special gifts from God. However, this does not imply that they accepted their children's sexual minority status without any difficulty. For most mothers, their journeys were initially marked with pain and grief. Consistent with the available literature on disclosure of sexual orientation, over time, the mothers gradually came to terms with their children's alternative sexual orientation. All of them eventually came out of the closet regarding their children's sexuality, and some were prompted by the fact that their children had themselves come out. One of the mothers even went on to become an LGB activist.

PARENTAL DILEMMAS OF COMING OUT

In disclosure literature, 'coming out' is portrayed as beneficial to the health and well-being of LGB individuals. According to Sprecher and Hendrick (2004: 857), self-disclosure 'is an act of intimacy and serves a maintenance strategy' in relationships. By contrast, secrecy has a negative impact. The San Francisco State University-based Family Acceptance Project (FAP) has shown that young LGB children's family and

caregivers have a great impact on their LGB children's health risk and well-being, and in particular on their physical and mental health (Ryan 2009). Furthermore, FAP research findings have revealed that rejected LGB youths develop low self-esteem; have fewer people to turn to for help; and are generally more isolated and have less support compared to those who are accepted by their families. Subsequently, LGB teens who are rejected have more problems with drug use, and are much less likely to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), which puts them at a higher risk of HIV and AIDS (Ryan 2009).

The term 'coming out' was initially used by scholars, such as: Dank (1971), who considers 'coming out' as the process of identifying oneself as a homosexual; Plummer (1996), who defines 'coming out' as the process by which a homosexual individual is 'reborn' into the organised aspects of the homosexual community – a process by which they come to identify themselves as 'homosexuals'; and Troiden (1998), who considers 'coming out' as being associated with the adoption of a gay identity, to describe LGB people's disclosure of their alternative sexualities. However, more recently, the literature on the topic has revealed that the parents of sexual minority children, much like their LGB children themselves, experience 'closet time' – a time when they hide the sexual minority status of their children from others, before making the decision to disclose it (Caldwell 2004; Goldfried and Goldfried 2001; Phillips 2007; Savin-Williams 2001). Close bonds usually exist between a parent and his/her child, so a child's coming out of the closet is often followed by the parent's coming out. However, the decision to disclose a child's status is not easy for parents, because if a parent does so in a particular context before the child has done so, the parent may unwittingly sometimes 'out' the child in a social environment where the child's status is either not yet common knowledge, or is not (yet) approved by the child him/herself. Furthermore, in contexts intolerant of sexual minorities, they may open up themselves and their children to harassment and violence. Smuts (2011: 24) also emphasises the importance of context in relation to lesbians in Johannesburg who constantly need to 'strategically assess different spaces … to determine which sexual identity would come to the fore'. Orne (2011) concurs and uses a similar term, 'strategic outness', to refer to this kind of identity management that LGB individuals often need to exercise in different contexts. By contrast, McLean (2007: 151–152) argues against positioning coming out as 'good' and non-disclosure as 'bad', particularly with regard to bisexual men and women, on the grounds that for them, it involves 'revealing not just that one is attracted to the same sex, but that one is also, or still attracted to the opposite sex'.

Internationally, much research has been done on parents' reactions to their children's coming out as LGB (Ben-Ari 1995; Caldwell 2004; Kircher and Ahlijah 2011; Pearlman 2005; Phillips 2007; Saltzburg 2004; Savin-Williams 2001; Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998; Strommen 1989; Willoughby, Malik and Lindahl 2006). Many of the early findings on parents' reactions to their children's alternative sexual

orientation stress the negative attitudes of parents (Ben-Ari 1995; Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998; Strommen 1989). For many parents, this period of coming to terms with their child's disclosure is characterised by uncertainty, disruption, and, in some cases, chaotic family functioning. Some scholars subscribe to the argument that this period is akin to Kubler-Ross's (1969) stages of grief (shock, denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance). Despite the difficulties parents experience at the beginning, there is evidence that many parents eventually come to terms with their initial misgivings about their son's or daughter's sexual orientation. Some accept their child, while others may proceed to become activists. A study by Gorman-Murray (2008) reported the existence of homes in Australia where LGB youths' disclosure is affirmed by parents and siblings. He argues 'just as young people can choose to come out against the "heteronorm"', parents too possess this agency (Gorman-Murray 2008: 38).

According to the literature focused on African communities (see Epprecht 2008; Msibi 2011; Sanger 2010; Shoko 2010), the hegemonic discourse on homosexuality considers it unacceptable. Two popular myths are commonly used to sustain the prejudices directed against those who engage in same-sex relations. The first is that homosexuality is 'unAfrican', and simply a Western import. The second considers homosexuality to be a sin, particularly for some Christian believers. The former argument is used by traditional and/or political authorities to silence sexual minorities, while the latter is used by religious authorities for the same purpose. The crude prejudices emanating from these myths and authorities' endorsement thereof seem to have directly and/or indirectly contributed to increased intolerance against LGB individuals and harassment of them in some communities. Msibi (2011) refutes these popular myths by stating that same-sex desire and/or practice has always existed in Africa. Support for Msibi's argument comes from early studies by Dynes (in Epprecht 2006), who identified examples of homosexuality (or same-sex attraction) in Africa, and by Aina (in Epprecht 2006), who provided examples of bisexuality in Africa. The work of Murray and Roscoe (in Epprecht 2008) also provided the first substantive corrective to the dominant view. The existence of homosexuality has also been identified among traditional healers in South Africa (Nkunzi in Morgan and Wieringa 2005) and in the gold mines in South Africa (Epprecht 2008). These studies lend further support to the contradictory views surrounding homosexuality and its position in Africa and in South Africa, respectively.

Studies by Reid (2005), Rabie and Lesch (2009) and Cook et al. (2013), have also confirmed the existence of homosexuality in Africa and South Africa in particular. For example, according to Reid (2005), in some black gay relationships there are 'wives' and 'husbands' with clearly defined boundaries. Similarly, according to Rabie and Lesch (2009), in some townships in South Africa, it is normal for feminine gay men to visit with females in the community and participate in traditionally feminine activities. Logically, these things can only happen if these black gay males

are not only out, but are also accepted in their communities. Cook et al. (2013) added another dimension to this debate on sexual minorities in South Africa. They found that, unlike in Western studies which have shown that a correlation exists between white gender nonconforming (GNC) males and depression, this correlation did not hold among black GNC gay and bisexual men in South Africa. Yet, available research suggests that black GNC gay and bisexual males in South Africa experience more discrimination than their black gender conforming counterparts. This led Cook et al. (2013) to speculate that black GNC gay and bisexual males in their study had higher levels of self-esteem than their gender conforming counterparts, and perhaps their high levels of self-esteem enabled them to cope better with discrimination. Because these black GNC gay and bisexual males were also likely to be more 'out' compared to their gender conforming counterparts, Cook et al. (2013) further speculated that the latter may have developed their coping mechanisms very early on and also may have built social networks consisting of friends and kin, who in turn provide a protective function against discrimination.

In contrast to the abundance of literature from the West on parental reactions to the coming out of their children, there is relatively little literature on this topic in South Africa. What is known about parental reactions comes from anecdotal evidence from LGB individuals themselves, rather than from their parents (Dlamini 2006; Gevisser and Cameron 1995; Nel, Rich and Joubert 2007; Nkunzi in Morgan and Wieringa 2005; Reid 2006). However, Livingston (2014) explored the experiences and meanings that shape heterosexual fathers' relationships with their gay sons. While Livingston's study is undoubtedly important, it nevertheless focused exclusively on white middle-class fathers of gay sons. This still leaves a gap on the reactions of black parents of sexual minorities. The current study, therefore, attempted to close part of this gap in the South African literature by focusing on the experiences and psychological journeys of 'out' black mothers of LGB children.

The understanding of bisexuality in South Africa is another area that has not received adequate attention. The few studies (Arndt 2009; Lynch 2012) that have explored it from the perspectives of bisexual individuals show that this category is misunderstood. Arndt (2009) focused on attitudes towards bisexuality in a university setting and his study revealed that attitudes towards bisexuality are largely negative. Lynch's (2012) study, which focused on the experiences of bisexual women, found that bisexuality as a category in discourse on sexuality is viewed as unintelligible, and is, therefore, either dismissed or silenced. Thus far, to my knowledge, no study has focused on how parents react to their child's coming out as bisexual.

In summary, although the discourse on sexual minorities in black communities in South Africa may be contradictory, the fact remains that LGB individuals have always been known to exist in African and South African contexts. Furthermore, some studies have countered the dominant view that townships are hostile spaces for

all LGB people. However, family reactions to the coming out of LGB people remain under-researched. I hope to contribute to the understanding of such reactions.

METHODOLOGY

The specific research goals which I set myself were to trace the journeys of accepting black mothers of LGB children from the moment of discovering their child's status to their moment of accepting and/or 'outness'. Given that press reports suggest that violence against LGB individuals is indeed still rife in some communities in South Africa today, I sought to trace their journeys with the aim of understanding these mothers' motivations for coming out about their children's alternative sexuality. I specifically wanted to know to whom they disclosed their child's status, and to whom they did not, as well as their reasons for either disclosing or not disclosing, the impact of their coming out on their relationships with their LGB children, and the LGB community at large. Lastly, I wanted to explore the meanings they ascribe to having LGB children. I gathered the findings through in-depth qualitative interviews, which were conducted in English at the participants' residences, except for Mpho's, which was conducted at her workplace, as well as a technique called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which was used for three reasons. Firstly, I was interested in people's lived experiences and in understanding the subjective meanings they ascribed to these experiences (Biggerstaff and Thompson 2008). Secondly, since IPA acknowledges that the analysis is interpretative in nature (Biggerstaff and Thompson 2008; Smith and Eatough 2007; Willig 2008), my role as a researcher involves co-creating meaning with participants and understanding their experiences. Lastly, as a mother of a sexual minority child myself, interacting with mothers of LGB children enabled me to reflect on my own journey and experiences, particularly by highlighting similarities and differences between their experiences and mine.

I used snowball sampling and relied on contacts because of the stigmatisation of same-sex love and bisexuality in South African society. I adhered to the ethical considerations prescribed by the University of South Africa's Ethical Board and the Health Professions Council of South Africa. The mothers and their (adult) LGB children signed informed consent forms. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, as Kaiser (2009) advises, I ensured anonymity through use of pseudonyms. There were three criteria for the inclusion of participants. Firstly, due to financial constraints and the fact that I live in Pretoria, I only recruited black LGB mothers from Gauteng (Johannesburg and Pretoria) to allow me easy access to participants. Secondly, they had to be out of the closet regarding their children's alternative sexuality. Thirdly, I ensured diversity in my study by recruiting mothers from diverse social, educational and demographic backgrounds.

The sample comprised six mothers: four came from a semi-urban area in Pretoria, one from the eastern suburbs of Pretoria and another one from a semi-urban area in Johannesburg. Their ages ranged from 50 to 65 and their children's ages ranged from 25 to 33. Two of the mothers have university degrees (a PhD and a Bachelor's degree), two have matriculation certificates and the remaining two have Standard 6 (Grade 8) certificates. I chose mothers rather than both parents for two reasons. Firstly, in South Africa, there are many families raised by lone mothers (either single or divorced) (see Dlamini 2015; Kalule-Sabiti et al. 2007; Ntshongwana et al. 2015), and arguably in such families LGB youths are more likely to 'out' themselves to their mothers. Secondly, I am myself an 'out' mother of a sexual minority child. So, the study enabled me to reflect on my own journey and motivations for coming out, and compare my experiences to those of similar black mothers.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion of the findings is divided into two main themes with subheadings. The first is entitled 'Themes depicting the mothers' journeys' and discusses the stages of the journeys in chronological order, and the second is entitled 'Themes addressing the study research questions'.

Themes depicting the mothers' journeys

Here, the focus is on the journey theme and traces the experiences of these mothers from shortly after discovery to the moment of acceptance. The mothers' journeys consist of six stages in the following order: awareness of difference; shock, confusion and denial; seeking causality; seeking support; seeking information; and queering the home.

Awareness of difference

This theme refers to the mothers' early awareness that their children were different compared to others of the same gender, before the actual moment of disclosure. Saltzburg (2004) alludes to a level of semiconscious awareness that parents of LGB children normally have that dates back to childhood. Although five of the mothers noticed that their children exhibited gender a-typical behaviour during childhood, only one mother linked it with the development of homosexuality in later life. Four mothers dismissed the telling signs which their children exhibited, but made the connection between gender nonconformity and the development of homosexuality retrospectively. For example, for Vuyiswa's daughter, the clues included a refusal 'to wear skirts ... and liking fist-fighting'. For Mamana, it was her son's 'effeminate behaviour', while for Lina, it was her son's 'mannerisms and movement' that made her uncomfortable. For Mantombi's daughter, it was a refusal to do typical 'girly'

things such as having her ears pierced for earrings, and beating up a boy who made advances towards her. These examples confirm the findings of prior studies on the subject (Aveline 2006; Goldfried and Goldfried 2001; Livingston 2014), which suggest that parents often suspect that their children are lesbian or gay long before discovery and disclosure.

Shock, confusion and denial

This theme describes the dominant emotion/s of these mothers shortly after discovery. In Kubler-Ross's (1969) grief model, which is widely used in coming out literature (Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998), denial and isolation are considered the first stage of the grieving process. Shock and confusion are commonly prevalent during this stage, but are not considered stages of grieving. All but one of the six mothers described the start of their journeys as characterised by shock, confusion and denial. According to Griffin et al. (1986: 20), the reason parents of LGB children react with shock, confusion and denial after disclosure, stems from the unreliable knowledge they possess at this stage on homosexuality which consists of myths and 'outdated, unsubstantiated and often opposing "expert" opinions' that prevail in various communities. Thus, an important challenge for these mothers at this stage of the journey was unlearning the old myths. For example, Vuyiswa had to unlearn associating the word *isitabane* with individuals with two sexual organs, as is evident from her comments in the interview:

> A female teacher. She said, 'Your child now acts funny to me …' And she asked me, 'Is your child a girl or a boy?' … She asked me, 'When you look at her, is she alright?' And I said, 'She is a girl, her name is B (Vuyiswa's daughter). Her body is a girl's … She is a girl, I changed her nappies …'

The emphasis on nappies (which implies that she saw her daughter's genitalia), girlhood and names vividly expresses Vuyiswa's confusion, which stemmed from the incongruence between what she knew about her daughter's genitalia and what the teacher implied her daughter was (*isitabane*). Vuyiswa's denial was made evident by her admission that when B was about 13 years old, they had had a discussion in which B said: 'When I get married, I'll marry a woman.'

Similarly, denial is implied in the manner in which Mamana described her son's growing up:

> He was effeminate, he behaved like girls and he got many friends who were girls. He could even sleep with these girls in the same bed and nothing ever happened. *Hayi* (No), it was not easy.

She also said, that unlike other boys his age, her son preferred to stay indoors. The fact that Mamana missed the significance of the many GNC behaviours her son exhibited is suggestive of denial. Mantombi's denial is reflected in the following dialogue with me:

> Mantombi: When she stopped schooling, she left home and started living with a girl. At that time I asked her what was going in her life.
>
> KSK: What did you mean by that?
>
> Mantombi: I was trying to find out if she had a boyfriend.
>
> KSK: Why a boyfriend? You already knew by then that she was interested in girls not boys.
>
> Mantombi: Yes, I guess maybe I was in denial. I would hear and see what she was doing, but in my mind I expected normal things … I expected her to have a boyfriend.

Mantombi's continued denial of the possibility that her daughter was lesbian is reflected in her word choice 'expected normal things' and 'expected her [daughter] to have a boyfriend'. Mantombi seemed to equate normalcy with heterosexuality, and not with same-sex attraction.

As already suggested previously, the only mother who did not respond with shock, disbelief and denial was Maria. This is not surprising as she had read her son's GNC behaviour as an indicator of the development of homosexuality. Her reaction is consistent with Saltzburg's (2004) findings which suggest that the years of speculation seem to prepare parents for the disclosure and this helps them to move more fluidly in their adjustment after disclosure.

Seeking causality

This theme addresses an attempt by the mothers to find a plausible explanation for their children's homosexuality. Most of the mothers of LGB children were preoccupied with issues of causality after the denial phase. In Vuyiswa's case, this is consistent with the myth #4 noted by Griffin et al. (1986: 28), which suggests that 'a traumatic event with a person of the opposite sex can cause homosexuality'. Vuyiswa confirmed this when she told me that her daughter had become 'a victim [of rape]'. Lina and Mamana perceived the absence of male role models in their sons' lives as possibly linked to their same-sex attraction. Mpho attributed her bisexual daughter's fluid sexuality to the influence of her field of study at university (Drama):

> I thought it was the drama thing. It happens in Hollywood. Once I read about it I felt like it was her world. It makes sense to her … it is her world.

All these mothers took time to come to an understanding that their children were born that way and there were no other causes.

Seeking support

This theme highlights the belief that healing can be achieved if one receives both knowledge and human support (Czillinger 1983). Five of the six mothers shared their hurt with someone within or outside their family circle, thus all but one of the

participating mothers confided in someone. Mantombi and Mpho confided in their mothers and Mantombi's mother was very receptive. She said:

> Don't worry, this is how she is … she is made like that … she is not going to change. We can't do anything about that.

Mpho's mother also listened, but did not appear to understand what her granddaughter's bisexuality really meant. Mpho's younger sister, in whom she also confided, appeared to be judgmental. Mpho said:

> She listened, but you realise that it is a taboo. It's one of those things where you realise you have exposed yourself to people who look down at you and [are] asking: 'What have you done as a mother?'

However, Mpho's son was openly supportive. Two mothers, Lina and Mpho, also confided in people outside the family, in friends who were all very supportive. Lina confided in a gay male friend in Britain, while Mantombi and Mpho confided in female friends, who were very helpful in steering them towards acceptance.

Vuyiswa and Maria indicated that they did not disclose their discoveries to any of their relatives, because their relatives 'could see for themselves', but both participants contradicted themselves in the interviews. Vuyiswa said:

> Yes, the family was alarmed and they called her names' [saying]: 'Your child is *isitabane,* as for us, we cannot stay with *isitabane*.'

Similarly, Maria said:

> The family members had started calling him names. They'd call him *isitabane* and he would cry and come to me. At school also he told me they called him names and they ignored him.

Like Vuyiswa, Maria's real reason for not confiding in family members seemed to be linked to homophobic remarks they were making about her child at the time. Her decision not to disclose the facts to family members was linked to her suspicion that family members would have a conservative attitude towards sexual minorities. She said:

> I could see that the child was indeed a gay. I did not want to talk about it, especially to old people ...

Seeking information

This theme refers to the practical steps the mothers took to attain knowledge on alternative sexual orientation. Mpho read about bisexuality, while Mamana learnt by observing two accepting mothers of LGB children who acted as role models to her. One such mother appeared on a TV interview with her gay son in order to educate

TV viewers about homosexuality. For example, she argued that same-sex attraction is a normal form of attraction, just like heterosexual attraction. Vuyiswa learnt from social workers that same-sex attraction is attributable to hormones, and not to past traumatic incidents such as rape. Maria sought knowledge about same-sex sexuality from the mother of a gay son in a taxi, while Mantombi sought knowledge from her own mother.

Queering the home

This theme refers to the actions or steps the mothers of LGB children in the study took to try and normalise or validate their children's alternative sexual orientations in their home spaces. In much disclosure literature, the family home is portrayed as a difficult space for youths who wish to come out, because it is commonly viewed as a heteronormative space. However, Gorman-Murray's (2008) study revealed that some family homes in Australia have changed from being heteronormative and/or homophobic spaces into being spaces that affirm queer youths, as more and more of these youths come out to their families. Remarkably, the black mothers in the study not only accepted their children's alternative sexuality, but, consistent with Gorman-Murray's (2008) findings, they also began to queer their family homes by affirming other forms of, or views on, sexualities and identities.

For example, Vuyiswa demonstrated this shortly after our arrival in her daughter's bedroom where the interview took place, by drawing my attention to a photo of her daughter with her lover in an unmistakably affectionate pose. Displaying photographs, according to Gorman-Murray (2008), is one act used by parents to resist hetero-regulation within the family home. Vuyiswa also proudly told me that she has a T-shirt that she wears that says: 'My daughter, she [sic] is a lesbian'. Through these actions, Vuyiswa has transformed her home from being a heteronormative space into being a 'queer' space.

That Mamana's home had been transformed into a queer space was evident in her reply to the question regarding when her son will get married (supposedly to a woman) posed by relatives to which she replied: 'No, he's not going to get married – he is a gay.' This is consistent with Gorman-Murray's (2008: 40) belief that by supporting difference, parents and siblings in affirming homes 'begin to *normalise* non-heterosexuality within these domestic environments'. Another way in which Mamana queered her family home was by allowing her son to live with his boyfriend in an outside room of the family home. Similarly, Maria also queered her home by welcoming her son's boyfriend to her home with a meal as it is usually the case in heterosexual relationships. All the mothers also queered their homes by welcoming their children's gay and lesbian friends in their homes. The turning point for Mamana was when she celebrated her son's 21st birthday, with the whole family which consisted of the nuclear family and her son's gay family of friends, singing

'For she's a jolly good fellow', Lina queered her home by cooking for her son's gay friends on certain holidays, an act which earned her the title of 'Cool Mum'.

Mpho also queered her home and validated her daughter's relationship with her partner by lending her daughter her phone to make long distance calls abroad. Phrases Mpho used, such as 'decisions they are making together', 'understand[ing] that this is a normal relationship', 'a beautiful relationship' and 'future', vividly reflected the change of perspective Mpho has undergone. A kind of an epiphany seems to have occurred as her conception of love, at this stage, is no longer restricted only to individuals of the opposite sex, but rather she appears to see love as fluid and transcendent of such categorisation. In conclusion, through embracing their children's LGB sexual orientations, these black women's homes have become 'transgressive' sites that not only 'resist and subvert heterosexual norms', but they have also become spaces that 'nurture difference promoting multifaceted identities' (Gorman-Murray 2008: 41).

Themes addressing the study research questions

Now I turn to the themes that address the study research questions. They are: the mothers' reasons or motivations for coming out; the impact of their disclosure on their relationships with their children; the impact of their disclosure on their relationships with the LGB community; and, finally, the meanings the mothers ascribed to having LGB children.

The mothers' reasons or motivations for coming out

This sub-theme explains the motivations for the black mothers of LGB children to come out of their own closets. The mothers gave a variety of reasons for coming out. Vuyiswa expressed her reasons thus:

> It is when I hear about lesbians who are raped and murdered – I cry and I feel deeply hurt. I feel like going out there to hunt for the perpetrators … The question I ask myself is, in a world that is so big why are they [individuals who harass lesbians] doing this? You know there is a song which they sing which says the world is corrupt: men are having sex with men and women are having sex with other women. My question is: 'Who is better – the ones who are living their lives openly or those who are in the closet?'

From the preceding quote, Vuyiswa's motivation for coming out appears to be linked to the desire to protect her daughter against perpetrators who rape and murder lesbians in some townships in South Africa (Sanger 2010). This links to the notion of *outness* as potentially having a protective function as discussed by Cook et al. (2013). Vuyiswa also implied that parents can protect their lesbian daughters by taking a stand and identifying themselves as mothers of sexual minorities. She said:

> Yes, yes. If I support my child, I should do so even if there are other people. I can't turn against my child over someone who doesn't understand her. Tell the people the child is alright. Claim her as your child and tell people you accept her as she is.

Mpho expressed her reason for coming out as follows: 'Everyone who knows her knows who she is and where she is … that she is *bi*. Her life is in the now'. The mother-son bond and a pledge for unconditional love for her son appeared to be the motivation for Lina to support him, regardless of the initial difficulty to do so. She commented:

> … I would say, "He is my child. Who else can carry him if not me as his mother?" Even if he dropped out there in the street – it's me who would have to pick him up there. It's me the mother. It doesn't matter … some of them have been chased away from home because they are gay, when something goes wrong, the very parents are the first to go to their rescue. So why should I leave him?

This sentiment was also expressed by Maria when she said: 'I told him I love him gay or not gay'. This reassurance by this mother and the other mothers in this study served to enhance intimacy in their relationships with their children. For all the mothers the love between them proved to be an unchanging variable, before as well as after the discovery of their same-sex attraction or bisexuality. The next sub-theme addresses the potential impact of the mothers' coming out on their relationships with their children and with members of the LGB community.

The impact of their disclosure on their relationships with their children

This theme sought to establish if there were any salient changes in their relationships with their children and with members of the LGB community in the course of time. All the mothers reported that coming out strengthened their relationships with their LGB children (Sprecher and Hendrick 2004). For example, because of their closeness, Vuyiswa was able to provide guidance to her daughter in girlfriend-related problems, advising her not to have all her girlfriends in one place at the same time. Their close mother-daughter bond was also evident during my first meeting with them at a workshop organised by the United States government aimed at helping South African NGOs to start Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) chapters in South Africa. The relationships between the other five mothers and their children became close after their coming out, as was evident from how readily they agreed when their children asked if they would let me interview them for the study. All the mothers understood how important their agreeing to be part of the study was to their children.

The impact of their disclosure on their relationships with the LGB community

Besides improved relationships with their children after coming out, the mothers reported that their relationships with members of the LGB community had also improved. However, the mothers' interaction with the LGB community was limited to their children's friends only. This was evidenced by the fact that all the mothers allowed their children's LGB friends free access in their homes. One mother has gone on to become a lesbian and gay activist.

The meanings the mothers ascribed to having LGB children

This theme refers to what the mothers perceived to be the significance of having LGB children. All the mothers of LGB children in the study are Christian believers who reported that they see their children as gifts from God since He is the creator of all things on earth. This is a departure from the prevalent Christian view which regards homosexuality as either morally wrong – a position that is 'upheld today by mainstream denominations such as Catholic, Orthodox, and most Evangelical Protestants' (Subhi and Geelan 2012: 1383) – or 'an abhorrent practice' (Shoko, 2010: 642). Consequently, the mothers in the study experienced no intrapersonal conflict due to accepting their LGB children and their Christian beliefs. This is evident in the quotation from Maria:

> I think N (Maria's son) is God's gift to me. Through him, I feel God was teaching me about acceptance, about love – unconditional love'.

Lina expressed a similar view when she said:

> I have learnt that this is a gift and therefore I have no reason to punish him.

Mantombi echoed the same sentiment:

> The way I see it is that she did not make herself to be like that … God shows himself to us in hidden ways. Sometimes he gives us gifts which are difficult for us to accept. He wants to see what we are going to do with the gift he has given to us, whether it is good or bad.

Mpho and Mamana reiterated the sentiments already expressed by the other mothers with Mamana emphasising that, '… it is God's will' while Mpho stressed that her daughter '... was created by the same God' who created everything on earth.

It appears that these black mothers' belief in God paved the way for them to accept their sexual minority children as they are. Kitome-Gatobu (2013) confirms the role of religion in this regard when she states: '... religion has historically been considered to have an essential function for providing meaning'. The fact that this God is not the same as the one propounded by the guardians of orthodoxy did not emerge as an issue to these mothers.

CONCLUSION

In some ways, the study findings concur with those of previous studies, in particular, in relation to the initial reactions of mothers, but the study has added some new insights. As in previous studies, the journeys of these six mothers were traumatic at first. Those who did not suspect anything, despite the fact that their children were GNC, went through the grief-like stages (shock, denial and isolation), whereas the mother who had some suspicions during her son's childhood, expressed relief after disclosure.

Contrary to the findings of most prior studies that suggest that organised Christian religion is an obstacle to parental acceptance (Shoko 2010; Subhi and Geelan 2012), these mothers never experienced conflict between their Christian religious beliefs and values, on the one hand, and having a same-sex attracted or bisexual child, on the other. Rather than viewing their LGB children as aberrations, they saw the challenging situation they found themselves in as forcing them to practise the 'true' Christian teaching of love and acceptance of others. Besides learning about unconditional love and acceptance, most of these mothers saw having LGB children as a lesson God was teaching them concerning the nature of romantic love in general. From having sexual minority children, these mothers learnt that love is fluid rather than fixed and it is not necessarily heterosexual. Mpho, for example, learned through her daughter's bisexuality, that love can be between a man and a woman at one time, or between a woman and another woman, at another time. Other mothers also learnt that love is not restricted to individuals of opposite sexes, but it can be between people of the same sex.

Having LGB children also transformed these mothers into being either allies of LGB people or activists for LGB issues. The very act of coming out of the closet for the mothers signified taking a stand against discrimination by pledging solidarity with their LGB children. This resulted in all the mothers transforming their homes from being heterosexual spaces into being queer spaces.

In summary, the article has shown that, despite the hegemonic homophobic discourse operating in many South African semi-urban communities, some mothers, as illustrated by the mothers who participated in the study, refuse to be complicit in attempts to silence and render their LGB children invisible. This has resulted in these mothers' homes becoming queer spaces – spaces in which people can witness love that is not heterosexual. Although their journeys were initially traumatic, these mothers have shown remarkable resilience and courage by supporting their children through challenging times. This resulted in their growth, as indicated by the psychological transformation they have undergone personally. Among the many insights the mothers gained through opening up their worlds and embracing alternative sexualities, the most evident is that love is the most prominent factor which influenced their actions rather than the sexual orientation of their children.

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INTERVIEWS

Lina (pseudonym). Mother of a gay son, Mamelodi, Pretoria, 21 February 2015.

Mamana (pseudonym). Mother of a gay son, Mamelodi, Pretoria, 11 February 2015.

Mantombi (pseudonym). Mother of a lesbian daughter, Mamelodi, Pretoria, 28 February 2015.

Maria (pseudonym). Mother of a gay son, Mamelodi, Pretoria, 28 February 2015.

Mpho (pseudonym). Mother of a bisexual daughter, Pretoria East suburb, Pretoria, 17 March 2015.

Vuyiswa (pseudonym). Mother of a lesbian daughter, Katlehong, Natalspruit, 22 December 2014.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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