



Disclosure of sexual orientation: case series depicting parental response

Abstract

Parent-child relationship is an eternal bond of love, security, and closeness. In the course of family life, certain issues have profound impact and one of it is, if the child is homosexual. The disclosure process is not as simple as it sounds, as it involves intra-psychic as well as social identity. The present study focused on coming out process of gay individuals, reasons for disclosure, and the attitude and reaction of parents on disclosure of their sexual orientation. Drawing from the data generated by in-depth interview with five gay people in Assam, India, the case series illustrates differences in parental attitudes. Results indicated a difference in attitude from non-acceptance to acceptance and a more positive relationship with mothers as compared to fathers.

Keywords: Parent-Child Relations. Homosexuality. Attitude.

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'coming out' is usually described as public self-disclosure of gay identity.[1] Coming out is considered a life process and disclosure is one of many phases through which individuals pass by. For the present study, disclosure is mentioned here as the exclusive revealing of one's sexual orientation. When mentioning about coming out process, it has to be remembered that it is an awareness of one's sexual identity and being more open about it with others. As mentioned by Plummer, "disclosure becomes necessary because, unlike skin color or gender, which is overt physical indicators of social group membership, homosexuality is a way of feeling and acting; homosexuals are thus "invisible" both as individuals and as a group".[2]

Cass[3] developed a homosexual identity formation (HIF) model, which includes six distinct stages. The stages include identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. The stages are motivated by the inclination to establish congruence between one's self-perception and the immediate environment. Disclosure of homosexual identity to others was not often encouraged and supported by those in the homophile movement.

Individuals with identities of homosexuality are misclassified by others and therefore require neutralising this classification by disclosing their identity. This is done so that false hopes and expectations can be minimised and clarity can evolve regarding their behaviour.[4] There are limited empirical evidences about parental response to their children's sexual orientation, regardless of parents' age, family structure, or community context. It is hard to identify the factors that contribute to parental reactions to have their children disclose on homosexual identity.[4]

It is considered as parental support and attachment are important for healthy development of an individual; there has been interest in reaction of parents towards their children's disclosure of sexual orientation.[5] Two different surveys of parents of lesbians and gays have revealed that initially parents respond negatively to the disclosure,[6] and it has been hypothesised that youths' mental health and behaviour are adversely affected with unsupportive parental reactions.[7]

It has been observed that often parents respond in a less idealistic manner after learning of their child's sexual preference. Though limited research yet it indicates that eventually parents become tolerant or accept their child's sexual orientation.[8] The process is not an easy one and period of disruption, uncertainty, and chaos often builds up within the family. The case studies below describe the coming out process and parental reaction to their revelation. Pseudo names have been used to maintain confidentiality of identities.

Case series

Manas, 27 years, fashion designer by profession was brought up in a nuclear family. Following an elder brother, he was the second child of his parents. As expressed by Manas, he was very much pampered and cared as he used to fall sick often. Manas was quiet oriented about his sexual orientation since his adolescent days but he somewhere could not reveal about this to any of his family members. Since his school days, Manas was very much interested in extracurricular activities and thus joined a theater group after his school days. There he met a boy with whom he started initiating intimate relationship. Very soon it happened that his partner started to stay with him at his house. Everyone knew that they were good friends and cited example of their friendship. One

fine day an argument broke between them and his partner was ready to leave him. That was the day when his family and neighbours got to know about his sexual preference. As mentioned, "It was no less than a dramatic scene. I cried and begged in front of him and my parents could not interpret what was actually going on". Nothing could melt his partner's heart. His parents got furious and asked his partner to leave immediately. As his partner left, he told his parents "I love him and it is impossible to put in words the kind of pain I am going through". For few seconds as remarked by Manas both his parents looked at each other and then scanned their eyes towards their standing neighbours. Manas could feel the humiliation his parents were undergoing but none could feel his anguish. Since that day the blue eyed boy Manas started having strained relationship with his family. His parents were upset and even thought of consulting professional help. Though Manas never consulted any, rather started staying out of home mostly, citing work related issues.

John, 25 years, teacher by profession was brought up in a nuclear family. He stayed with his parents and two younger brothers. From a tender age, John was not very close with his parents but was emotionally close with his brothers. As mentioned, his parents were not comfortable the way he was treated by his friends. There was a persistent complaint from his parents' side over his involvement with his friends. After his class 12th examination, he went out on a trip with his friend and on returning he was astonished with his parents' rude behaviour. On enquiring, his mother bombarded with the information that he was seen hugging and holding his friend's hands by a relative, who found it bit peculiar. He felt that it was enough and he told them "Yes, I have been going around with him and as you all can quiet understand I am attracted to him and desire to spend my entire life with him". He revealed that there was a peculiar kind of silence following his statement and till date, on remembrance of that silence, he gets cold shivers. His father left the room without a single word. His mother, on the other hand, asked him to never ever mention this again and to concentrate on his studies and career. John mentioned that his relationship with his parents changed aftermath. His parents maintained minimal communication with him and had cold response towards him. As mentioned, he realised that his parents' relationship became strained and on arguments, often heard his parents blaming each other for his sexual orientation. Thus, after his results, John left his home for his further studies.

Kabir, 27 years, architect by profession has been brought up in a nuclear family. With both parents being employed, Kabir was the third among three siblings. From his childhood days, Kabir was emotionally close to his mother and elder sister. He was a meritorious student, and was quiet popular in his school and neighborhood. After his 12th examination, he went out of his hometown for his further studies. In his new college, he was asked to write about his self and his future. Since he moved to a metropolis, he found it very convenient to deal with his sexual orientation. He wrote exactly what he had in his mind regarding his career and also his dream of setting up his own family with his male partner. His writing was so captivating that it was posted in college's website. Coincidentally that article was read by his mother after a few days. Then one fine evening on regular conversation with

Kabir, his mother mentioned about it. Kabir was specific in saying, "My mother loved my article and praised me more for being genuine over everything else". Kabir mentions that his disclosure of his sexual identity was serendipitous and he feels blessed to have such a supportive family.

Arun, 28 years, engineer by profession was brought up in nuclear family of four members. Being the younger one in the family, Arun was loved by all but in particular by his maternal grandparents. He was not a very social kid since his childhood days and spent his hours mostly with books, pets, and music. During his class ten days, he started taking tuitions and as recalled by him, he hardly made friends over there. Then, there came a time when a special kind of feeling started evolving towards his tuition teacher. He found it extremely confusing, as he always desired to be with him and found it hard to control his emotions when other students caught his attention. One evening unable to control his turmoil and confusion, he came up to his mother and enquired "Is this natural to have a strong romantic attachment towards my male teacher?" Arun still recollects his mother's words with pride saying, "Son, love is love and there is nothing unnatural about it. If you love him and feel for him then there is nothing unnatural about it". Arun mentioned that his mother has been a pillar of strength for him even though his elder brother never accepted his sexuality part. His parents have been supportive all throughout and believe that their support has helped him reach where he is today.

Krish, 25 years, student by profession, brought up in a nuclear family was younger between the two siblings. He was emotionally close to his mother and as recalled by him, he was brought up in a culturally enriching surrounding consisting of art, literature, and music. He has been a well-performing student; thus, Krish preferred being in the academics. The understanding and cohesiveness among his family members were so strong that Krish never felt necessary to ever reveal his identity to his parents. It happened one fine evening when few of his relatives were back at his home and just for fun mentioned that it is high time to find a good bride for Krish. To which his mother replied that "Bride-groom, now or later, whatever and whenever Krish finds it appropriate, he will settle down". Krish felt so proud of his mother that he immediately went and hugged her and burst into tears. No one around them could comprehend what happened but only mother-son could relate. As Krish mentioned, "We never discussed about my sexuality over evening snacks, dinner, or anytime later, but my parents just knew, they just knew and that is what makes my bonding so special with my parents".

METHODOLOGY

The universe of the study was Assam, India. For the present study, non probability sampling method was used. Five males with homosexual orientation were interviewed, using convenience sampling. One of the respondents was contacted directly and from him, the rest others were contacted using snow ball techniques to collect information. On taking consent and assuring confidentiality, open ended interview technique was applied to collect information from the participants. Face to face interviews were held to obtain firsthand experience.

Probing was done in order to gather free flow of information. All the interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis technique was used to identify common themes in each interview (themes discussed in the results section).

Sample

For this study, five male homosexual respondents were selected. The nature of the group was a homogenous one with educated males in their twenties. The inclusion criteria for the study included respondents who were above 18 years of age, and who were willing to participate and share their experiences on sexual orientation. Individuals who were confused regarding their sexual orientation were not included in the present study.

RESULTS

As homosexual individuals undergo certain crisis, so do parents, who have distinct yet related needs during the process of coming out. Interviews were held with five participants (cases already discussed above in the case series section and all names have been changed) and the most common themes that were identified were acceptance and rejection. As seen, three of the respondents were easily accepted by their parents and two of them were not.

Acceptance

This theme encapsulates parents' reaction by adopting their child beyond their sexual orientation. Participants have experienced emotions of being accepted the way they are after their disclosure process. Respondents had positive encounter which resulted in self-growth, satisfaction, and release of dilemma. "Son, love is love and there is nothing unnatural about it." As mentioned by Arun, who chose his mother to disclose his orientation about. Similarly, even Krish's mother was very straight in accepting his identity, "Bride-groom, now or later, whatever and whenever Krish finds it appropriate, he will settle down". Krish explains a sense of pride towards his mother for being so understanding and liberal.

Rejection

It is usually believed that parents contribute in molding up their child's personalities. Thus, it is not to be surprised when parents react with feelings of denial, anger, and un-acceptance when a child discloses a stigmatised identity. This theme captured the discontentment, anger, and discord on coming out. The disclosure process (to parents) is bi-directional, they must also be given time to get back to the individuals. Parents too need time to accept their child's new identity and in the process, need time to vent out their emotions and feelings. As recalled by John, his father left the room without a single word. Aftermath the incident of disclosure, John's parents shared cold relationship and John too left home with an excuse of further studies.

It can be seen that in two of the instances, parents found it hard to accept their son's disclosure of sexual identity. Thus, resulting in rejection and in rest of the cases, parents, especially mothers have been understanding and supportive.

DISCUSSION

On learning of one's gay identity, the disclosure is a lengthy and complex process. Mostly disclosure at some point of time become necessary because, unlike gender, or skin colour (which are overt), homosexuality is a way of feeling and acting; homosexuals are thus "invisible" both within a group as well as individuals.[2,9,10] Homosexual individuals are usually referred to as invisible minority due to socialised pattern of heteronormative presumptions, that label homosexuality abnormal.[11] According to Herek and colleagues,[12] persistence of heteronormativity through religious based bias and legal norms pose a barrier in disclosure and acceptance. Fassinger and Arseneau[13] emphasised on the fact that internalised homonegativity in society effects and influences both the heterosexual as well as the homosexual. The influence is on their sensing of same-sex relations and in the process, even homosexual individuals learn to internalise these homonegative contents.[13]

Even though there is an intense likelihood of disapproval, studies have brought out various reasons for individuals to opt for disclosing their sexual identity.[14] Many expect increase in closeness and honesty with their parents.[15] A sense of satisfaction is associated on being out to their parents. Few do it with the purpose of leading a psychologically healthy life and revealed a boost in their self-esteem.

When we relate to parents' reaction of having a gay child, intra-psychic contextual factors as well as attribution styles are to be taken note of. For example, when parents find out that their son is gay, it is likely to judge their son's sexual orientation against their cultural and personal standards.[16] They somewhere perceive it as a crisis in the family; thus, often experience shame as a result of their child's disclosure of sexuality. It is true that not all parents react in a homogenous manner; few may be shocked, few angry and sad, and another set of parents may just accept their children as they are. Yet it is to be noted that many parents find it extremely difficult to entirely reject their offspring.

There are few themes, which are thought to be relevant to family reaction to disclosure. Weinberg[17] classified two pressing 'parenting themes' towards their children. These are considered as parental reaction to disclosure: love and conventionality. Love (acceptance theme) in which parents try and accept their child. On the other side, conventionality advocates parents to reject their offspring on the basis of social values.[17] The three themes mentioned that are likely to act as a source of severe conflict include: (a) "maintain respectability at all costs," which implies rejecting or censuring the gay family member as a way to avoid loss of status in the community; (b) "as a family we can solve our own problem," which implies a lack of openness to alternate or unfamiliar values and suggests that the deviant family member is a "problem that needs to be fixed"; and (c) "be as our religion teaches us to be," which implies rejection of the family member if homosexuality is negatively sanctioned by the family's religious values.[17]

There may be various factors which might explain the differences between the parents' attitudes. Fathers and mothers both react to the disclosure process; yet, fathers' tend to have more negative reactions to sons' cross-gender play.

First, they may occur because mothers generally spend more time with their children (especially during infancy) than fathers and typically are more involved in children's daily care. Because these day-to-day care giving responsibilities are not particularly gender-specific (children need to be fed, clothed, bathed, and so on), the roles of parent and child may be more significant than the roles of mother and daughter or son.

Limitations and future directions

For the present study, firstly, it was only the participants who were contacted. Parents were not involved in the interview process; thus, their actual perception is missing. Secondly, only limited sample of five respondents were taken. With more respondents, more information would surface up and that would provide more data for participants and professionals from various fields to work in a more collaborative way.

In India, the introduction of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code prohibiting same sexes "against law of nature" is still a debatable topic. If we dig the past, we can reflect that there was a time when homosexuality was considered and labeled as mental disorder. Yet, the view held by professionals changed and redefinition of homosexuality as non-pathological is one of the more thoroughly explored example of normalisation of behaviour that was once considered as deviant. Thus, we can look forward to a society where alike heteronormativity, homosexuality too would be considered normal and regular.

Conclusion

The present study which emphasises on disclosure process and how parents respond and react towards their children being homosexual is fragmentary. The study reflects that disclosure process is complex and along with the individuals, parents too require time for acceptance of their child's homosexual identity. Though there are parents who do accept their child's sexual orientation and act as a support and pillar of strength for their children and set an example for the rest of the society. Thus, knowledge and values held by parents can be a source of strength for few and distress for the rest. In spite of increase in social acceptance of gay people, heterosexist attitude remain strong hindrance to openness about sexual orientation.

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