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"Getting married was like I had killed her": same-sex couples negotiating the wedding announcement with their families

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“Getting married was like I had killed her”: same-sex couples negotiating the wedding announcement with their families

Abstract

This paper focuses on how same-sex couples negotiate and navigate the wedding announcement to their families of origin, particularly their parents. Throughout their relationships, and perhaps through the coming out process as well, same-sex couples, both individually and together, are engaged in a cognitive labour process where they prepare their parents for same-sex relationships. Same-sex couples live in a heteronormative world, which means that their relationship milestones are often hurdles to be overcome rather than joyous occasions with their families of origin. This paper demonstrates how families of same-sex couples harbour prejudice towards same-sex couples, even those parents that seemingly are accepting of their children’s sexual orientation. Same-sex couples have to negotiate and navigate the announcing of their impending marriage and figure out how to deal with the negative reactions from family members, as they prepare to marry. Heteronormativity is inescapable and it ensures that families of same-sex couples are prisoner to normative ideas of sexuality, and therefore marriage. The hostile reactions of families towards same-sex couples who desire to marry are a reflection of the heteronormative culture that governs South African society. The hostility from families, as narrated by same-sex couples, also demonstrate that while the legislation in South Africa is progressive, and permits same-sex marriage, there are limits, in that ordinary people do not embody the law in ways that fully accommodate same-sex couples.

1. Introduction

For many people, marriage is a marker of transition. It is a marker of transition in a couple’s life, and also the family’s life, particularly the parents of those getting married as new relationship boundaries are drawn by marriage. Inevitably, like most transitions, the transition through marriage creates all kinds of discomforts and ambivalence, and this can be a source of anxiety for those involved. These

discomforts and ambivalences take on new significance when the couples marrying are same-sex couples. This paper focuses on the multi-faceted navigation that same-sex couples undergo when they announce their desire to marry, as they wrestle with hostile reactions from their families towards their announcement. While some parents are accepting and attend their adult children's weddings, some parents are not accepting and sometimes do not attend the weddings. This paper focuses on the latter parents. The announcement of impending nuptials of same-sex couples is a source of anguish for many families. This anguish is in line with the changes experienced through milestones like marriage in parent and adult child relationships (Umberson, 1992; Fingerman, Hay & Birditt, 2004). What I call anguish is probably in line with what Connidis and McMullin (2002) called intergenerational ambivalence. Relationships that are categorised as ambivalent can be described as relationships that are "both close and bothersome" (Fingerman, Hay, and Birditt, 2004: 802). While this anguish is evident when all involved are heterosexuals, it is further complicated by same-sex couples in families. Indeed, for Luescher and Pillemer (1998), what creates ambivalence in intergenerational ties is partly the non-normative relationship constructions like same-sex marriages of younger generations. In many ways the wedding announcement of same-sex couples is akin to couples "coming out" as same-sex couples have to defend and justify their desire to marry to heterosexual family members who struggle to understand this desire. The navigation of wedding announcements echoes the struggles over coming out and demonstrates that people with non-heterosexual sexual identities have the burden of an ongoing "coming out" (Klein, Holtby, Cook & Travers, 2015). Furthermore, it demonstrates the resistance to heteronormativity that same-sex couples are engaged in, in their pursuit of marriage. What becomes apparent with hostility over the desire to marry is that same-sex couples have to negotiate with their loved ones over their milestones as they navigate a heteronormative South African society.

The possibility of marriage creates new avenues for same-sex couples to imagine their relationships. Through marriage, same-sex couples can publicly demonstrate commitment, and make symbolic declarations of love before the state, their families, and friends. A privilege that has historically only been granted to heterosexual couples. What is perhaps not obvious with the legalisation of same-sex marriage is that heterosexual family members, including parents of same-sex couples, have to contend with the legalisation of same-sex marriage. The institution of marriage has historically been a heterosexual institution anchored by the pillars of patriarchy, heterosexism, and misogyny. When same-sex marriage was legalised in South Africa in 2006 it challenged the heteronormative aspects of the institution. This has meant that lesbian and gay people can access the institution of marriage, but the idea of lesbians and gays marrying remains a struggle for many heterosexual people who still see marriage as a heterosexual

institution. In this paper, families of same-sex couples demonstrate difficulties in dealing with the impending nuptials of same-sex couples. With same-sex marriage, heterosexuals are forced to rethink their heteronormative ideas about marriage.

Broadly speaking, this paper is a contribution to queer African studies, particularly queer families. Specifically, this paper contributes to the understanding of intergenerational family relationships in a context of a rapidly changing South Africa. This paper is an articulation of the experiences of same-sex couples as they announce their desire to marry, and makes links between heteronormativity, coming out, and same-sex marriage. While thinking through these concepts or processes, I pay attention to the particularity of the South African context. Furthermore, these concepts or processes are discussed through the analysis of empirical interview data from interviews with married same-sex couples. This paper speaks to the complexities of same-sex marriage and is grounded in empirical data from the lives of same-sex couples in South Africa. Here I draw on the ways that same-sex couples are engaged in cognitive labour, which involves disclosure management with their families about their desire to marry someone of the same sex. It is important to keep in mind that for many families, same-sex marriage is a new concept, and family members need to be walked through the process of what it means when same-sex couples marry.

2. Same-sex marriage in a heteronormative world

In thinking about hostile reactions by family members towards same-sex couples announcing their upcoming nuptials, links are drawn between the social context of heteronormativity, coming out, and same-sex marriage. Heteronormative social structures that make coming out necessary can be linked to ways that same-sex couples and their families experience coming out a second time through the announcement of a desire to marry. Perhaps, to begin, an operational conception of compulsory heterosexuality and the structuring of society according to binary systems is necessary. Coined by Rich [(1996) originally published in 1980], compulsory heterosexuality speaks to the coercive force of heterosexuality which unveils itself most obviously through homophobia. Rich's (1996) concept of compulsory heterosexuality led to the development of other more specific concepts like heteronormativity by Warner (1993). Heteronormality is the idea that heterosexuality is the only sexuality, that there is a gender binary of male and female, and that the only "normal" relationship pairing is with these opposite genders. In a heteronormative world, same-sex relationships are read as "abnormal". In the South African framework, Donaldson and Wilbraham (2013: 137) argued that "heteronormative understandings predominantly manifest within

religious and cultural discourses in which religious and cultural prescriptions are used to determine what is moral, natural and normal." In these religious and cultural prescriptions, same-sex relationships are not only shunned, but are at times actively discouraged through violent means. Hence, the negotiation and navigation that same-sex couples are engaged in when they announce their desire to marry must be appreciated because of the environment the couples find themselves in.

Queer theory scholars call into question the centrality that is bestowed on heterosexuality underpinned by normative ideas of gender and sexuality. In this context, same-sex marriage goes against the norm in that, under heteronormativity, people of the same-sex shouldn't be getting married. Same-sex marriage upends both the gender and sexuality norms of South African society in a bid to create more space for alternative ways of being.

Same-sex marriage unsettles normativity ideas around relationship construction. This is made more powerful by the fact that same-sex relationships are sanctioned by the state, therefore can't be refuted as existing outside the law. There are disputes about the radical merits of same-sex marriage, and the debate is captured in the arguments between Sullivan (1998) and Warner (2000). Whereas Sullivan (1998) argued for same-sex marriage and the positive value it would bring to same-sex couples, like normalising same-sex relationships, Warner (2000) argued against same-sex marriage because of its assimilationist force that panders to heterosexual norms like monogamy. In the South African context, regardless of where you stand in the assimilation or radicalisation debate represented here by Sullivan (1998) and Warner (2000), same-sex marriage unsettles ideas of normativity around gender and sexuality. The reactions of families to the desire of same-sex couples to marry is a testament to the disruption of normativity.

Coming out of the closet has been characterised as a core element of being gay in the twentieth-century western discourse of gay culture (Rossi, 2010; Savin-Williams, 1998, 2001; Trachtenberg, 2005). For a long time, coming out has been regarded as a rite of passage for sexual monitories (Meeks, 2006), in which they disclose, to family and friends, their differing sexual (and/or increasingly gender) identity. Coming out has predominantly been a western phenomenon and, through the globalisation of gay culture (Altman, 2001), it has also become expected in other parts of the world. South Africa is no exception: albeit localised, gay and lesbian South Africans embrace the discourse of coming out of the closet. While adopting the discourse of coming out is true for lesbian and gay South Africans, this does not mean that coming out means the same thing for all lesbian and gay South Africans. The concept of coming out does not directly translate or sit comfortably in the South Africa context. Through the works of Reid (2013) where he talks about the lives of black gay men in the township, the work of Matebeni

(2011) where she writes about the intricacies and intimacies of the lives of black lesbians, and Kendall (2001) where she talks about the lives of rural women who have same-sex intimacies but would never call themselves lesbians, we see the inadequacy or at least the simplicity of the concept of "coming out" for the local context. Reid (2013), Matabeni (2011), and Kendall (2001), demonstrate that coming out means different things to different gay and lesbian people in South Africa, depending on gender, culture, location, race, and socio-economic status. With that said, the idea of a public same-sex sexuality has become part of the discourse in South Africa but with a different narrative.

The interesting links between same-sex marriage and coming out (and the coming out of the parents) are centred on how marriage seems to play a role in facilitating coming out. Whereas the parents of same-sex couples can go on without having to disclose the sexuality of their children to others, with same-sex marriage, disclosure is often inevitable. In this then, same-sex marriage has a revolutionary element in challenging families of same-sex couples. The relationship between coming out and same-sex marriage demonstrates how coming out is an ongoing process. It shows us that same-sex marriage enables some same-sex couples to claim their sexual identity and not be relegated to the position of "roommate" or "friend" by families. Many have tried to define coming out, like Oswald (1999: 66) who wrote, "coming out is a process of significant change for women who accept and disclose bisexual or lesbian identities, and for those to whom they come out". Having a definitive description of coming out is impossible because coming out is as varied as the number of people coming out. Oswald's description gives one a placeholder but does not encompass coming out for all lesbians, all the time, in all places. Nonetheless, coming out is seen as a lifelong process, where one continues to come out in everyday life as one encounters people who discover one's sexuality (Carrion & Lock, 1997; Johnson, 1997; Vargo, 1998). According to Guittar (2013), many gays and lesbians describe coming out of the closet as transformative and crucial in identity-construction. In trying to understand the meaning of coming out, Guittar (2013) argued that coming out is like telling a story about the self. This is similar to Plummer's (1995) idea of narrating sexual stories in the modern age, and of how people create meaning in their lives and forge identities in the creation of stories.

Many gay and lesbian people describe their coming out as an important milestone in their process of self-actualisation (Guittar, 2013). The volume of literature that is a guide for parents on how to handle the coming out of a child (Armesto & Weisman, 2001; D'Augelli, Grossman & Starks, 2005) demonstrates that the coming out of a child is a difficult process for most parents. Research has demonstrated that how parents react to the coming out of the children affects the mental health of the children (D'Augelli, Hershberger & Pilkington, 1998; Floyd et al., 1999). What all of this literature is pointing to is not only how coming out

matters for lesbians and gays, but also, importantly, how parents of lesbians and gays react to the coming out. Same-sex couples declaring their desire to marry is, in a way, a coming out. The reactions from families about same-sex marriage are in line with the reactions that families have when gay and lesbian people come out. There are links to be drawn between the ways that families react to coming out, and the ways that families react to the desire to marry. How families handle a coming out is an indication of how they will handle the desire to marry. Knowing this, same-sex couples engage in cognitive labour, preparing their families.

Gay and lesbian people having to come out of the closet exists because we live in a heteronormative world that assumes that everybody is heterosexual. Coming out is a claiming of one's sexual identity, an identity that is positioned as deviant. Weeks (1995: 323) argued that "the moment of citizenship is the moment of making claims on society, a claim for inclusion." So, in many ways coming out is a way lesbian and gay people claim their citizenship. Therefore, the proclamation to marry is a further claim of citizenship on society. In the coming out process, often parents concern themselves with how they are implicated in the sexual identity of their children. In other words, worrying about the stigma, in the Goffman (1968) sense, of homosexuality is often how families react to coming out. For many gays and lesbians, the decision to come out is often weighed against the potential of loss of family (Weston, 1997). Furthermore, after coming out to their families, there remains tension and sometimes hostility within families. The residue of the tension is demonstrated by the hostility in the reactions displayed when same-sex couples express their desire to marry.

The concept of coming out is linked to same-sex marriage in that both acts have to do with the visibility of sexual identity. Marriage is a public institution, where those involved often marry in the presence of friends and family, and they register with the state and get a certificate. Perhaps what same-sex marriage does, that a coming out doesn't, is the forcing of families to engage with gay and lesbian sexuality through the pageantry of a wedding. In other words, a wedding and all that surrounds it often include much public funfair, and, unlike a coming out over a dinner conversation, a wedding demands public engagement. With many same-sex couples who are accepted within their families after coming out, there remains an implicit assumption that the couple will live a quiet life that does not cause any "trouble" for the family vis-á-vis sexuality. The "trouble" here refers to the "flaunting" of sexuality by same-sex couples through supposedly undesired public displays of affection. "Flaunting" is a term often invoked in everyday discourse by those who seek to make invisible same sex intimacy in society. Make no mistake, the hostile reactions towards same-sex couples announcing their engagement are partly fuelled by the understanding that same-sex couples, by desiring marriage, are read as wanting to "flaunt" their homosexuality. A same-sex marriage poses problems for families that implicitly demand that same-sex

couples be inconspicuous. In the South African context, although same-sex marriage is legalised, and there is a non-discrimination clause against sexual orientation in the Constitution of South Africa, all of this exists alongside Hate Crimes towards gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people (Mkhize et al., 2010) particularly those who eschew gender binaries. So, the families of same-sex couples are aware of the homophobic context, how the context affects them and how they will look to their friends and neighbours as they have a same-sex wedding in the family. In a context like South Africa, it is perhaps inevitable that parents would struggle with the idea of a same-sex marriage.

3. Methods

The data presented in this paper was part of a study on same-sex marriage in Cape Town, South Africa. The data was collected through interviews conducted with same-sex couples married through the Civil Union Act. The interviews were conducted with twenty couples between 2014 and 2015. The twenty diverse same-sex couples were interviewed in a joint interview with the couples, and some individual partners were also interviewed on their own. The sample included ten white couples – five male couples and five female couples. It included three interracial couples – two of the couples were male couples, and one was a female couple. It included three male coloured couples. It included three black couples – two females couples and one male couple. The interviews were subjective accounts of the married lives of same-sex couples, giving us a glimpse into the lives of twenty same-sex couples that lived in Cape Town. What is presented in this paper is drawn from couples that explicitly referred, within the research data, to the reactions of their families about the couple's desire to marry. The focus here is on the parents whose reactions became a focus point, a point of contestation, for the couple and the family. The focus is on family reactions that caused so much contestation that in one case family members were disinvited from the wedding.

During the data collection stage of the research, couples were asked specific questions about how their families of origin reacted to the news of their upcoming nuptials. In marrying, particularly in the wedding ceremony, the parents of those getting married often play a significant role. The significant role that parents play in the wedding of their adult children is often constructed as a happy experience; this is not the case for some same-sex couples. Exhuming these experiences from the data was important because these experiences demonstrate the struggles that same-sex couples continue to go through, even as the law protects them. The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase thematic analysis procedure. After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed. Three of

the interviews were also translated from Xhosa to English and then all of the data was analysed. Following the teachings of Reissman (1993) and Kvale (1996), the transcription process was seen as part of the initial stages of analysis. Hence I, the principal researcher, was responsible for the interviews, the transcription, and the writing up of the research. This was after I initially familiarised myself with the data through multiple readings, and I could see patterns emerging, particularly with regards to the couples' ideas about "legality/rights/protections" and "normativity/heteronormative/queering". After the initial codes had been created, a mind map of the data was created using the software *MindMup* (2018). This tool assisted in strengthening the codes and helped with the development of themes, theme development being the third phase of the Braun and Clarke (2012) process. The data presented here is comprised primarily from the theme about "conceptions of family" and "coming out/public acknowledgement". What became apparent here is that the law can grant same-sex couples the right to marry, but it can't grant them family approval for their weddings and marriage.

4. Findings: Family Reactions

The parent and child relationship gets more complicated as adult children get older and they do not rely on their parents like they used to. Merrill (1997) argued that parent and adult child relationships worsen as the roles reverse with old age of parents, and the parents need more assistance from their children as they get older. Elsewhere Merrill (2016: 3) argued that "parent-child relationships are also affected by the marriage of a child or a parent" and this means that relationships need to be reconfigured because spouses must now be considered. Merrill (2016: 3) went as far as to say that "marriage is a 'greedy institution' that takes away from relationships with other family members and the community." Marriage instigates change in families and there are different variables that determine how parents of adult children will respond to the change. Same-sex couples carry the cognitive labour burden in gearing up their families for their same-sex weddings and marriages. Daminger (2019: 618) argued that "cognitive labour is best understood as a sequence of anticipation, identification, decision-making, and monitoring." This description lays out the steps that same-sex couples follow as they navigate the announcing of their upcoming nuptials. The cognitive labour adopted by same-sex couples is similar to that of women in heterosexual relationships. Daminger (2019: 610) argued that in marriage women "carry a heavier cognitive load than their male partners and, in particular, complete a disproportionate amount of anticipation and monitoring work." The nuptial announcement of same-sex couples in the sample came after couples had already came out of the closet, which can be read as the first step in alerting the family about same-sex relationships. The same-sex couples in the sample were in same-

sex committed relationships prior to their engagements, and many couples spoke about their wedding announcements as "the next logical step" of their open-to-family-relationship. In many ways the same-sex couples had been involved in cognitive labour with their families since coming out of the closet, and announcing their upcoming nuptials formed part of that cognitive navigation.

Same-sex couples bemoaned being forced into a position where they had to explain and defend their desire to marry. While the couples complained about being in this position, they were willing to engage with family members to make them understand same-sex desires and how same-sex marriage is "the same as heterosexual marriage." The hostile reactions from families at the prospect of a same-sex wedding is not entirely surprising from families not accepting of diverse sexuality. If parents, for whatever reason, don't support homosexuality, it stands to reason that they won't be supportive of same-sex marriage. This of course does not minimise the hurt caused by the hostility towards same-sex wedding announcements. When same-sex couples know their families do not support their relationship, they prepare themselves for a negative reception of their nuptials. Admittedly, even knowing one's family is not supportive, hostile reactions cause much pain for same-sex couples. This was apparent in the narratives of the same-sex couples as they retrospectively made sense of their family reactions. The story of Paula and Andiswa, a black lesbian couple, demonstrates how the couple knew that their parents were not supportive of their lesbian relationship primarily because the parents were very religious. Paula's mother was trying to understand the lesbian relationship, but the wedding announcement was the straw that broke the camel's back.

> Paula: She made it clear that she is not going to dance to this music. [mimicking her mother] 'I don't want this, and I will never want this', and over the years she has tried, actually forced herself, that 'I should accept that Paula is gay, and she is not going change'. And I don't give her a choice, I don't give her options, I didn't entertain her when she told me all kinds of things like 'why am I getting married in a church, what are the men in the church gonna say?' [mimicking her mother] I never gave her a choice; she had to make peace with it herself. I accepted the fact that I am never gonna change, getting married was like I had killed her, like I had killed literally. Ok, she was so shocked, she actually said to my sister, I didn't know Paula would take it this far, this thing that she has chosen. That's what she calls it, this *thing* that she has chosen.

In the narrative above, according to Paula, her mother has struggled with Paula's sexuality since she came out. The fact that Paula desired to marry only exacerbated her struggles. Paula described her mother's reaction as 'getting

married was like I had killed her.' This is obviously a hyperbole, but it captures the drama surrounding the wedding announcement. The trauma experienced by Paula's mother as described by Paula is akin to the sentiments of LaSala (2000) and Savin-Williams (2005) that parents of lesbian and gay children experience their coming out as a death in the family. In Paula's case it was her mother's death caused by Paula's desire to marry a person of the same sex. The idea of Paula killing her mother is no small matter of course, so for Paula to describe her marriage as something that might have killed her mother speaks of the hard-to-accept nature of Paula's relationship. In the narration above, Paula's mother was characterised as seeing Paula's sexuality as a choice. She saw it as something Paula had control over that she could move away from, and she was choosing not to. Here, the burden was placed on Paula to change her ways, and not on her mother to change, as Paula's sexuality was characterised as something passing. The implication here is that Paula knew that her sexuality was killing her mother, but she was choosing to go ahead and date women and take it even further by wanting to marry one. How Paula navigated the wedding announcement hostility was by not compromising and by forcing her mother to come to terms with her sexuality and her marriage. Paula challenged her mother, and did not feel sorry for her mother, as she stated, 'I don't give her options.' Paula was clearly engaging in a cognitive labour process here where she was using what some would call 'tough love' to create a path towards acceptance for her mother.

While Paula and her mother didn't agree over Paula's sexuality, they continued to have a mother-daughter relationship. As demonstrated by Merrill (2016), parent and adult child relationships continue to function even through strained periods. Furthermore, Seidman (2002) argued that in a post-the-closet society children remain in their families of origin after coming out, even as they struggle to be fully accepted. "I didn't know Paula would take it this far" was a striking revelation from Paula's mother. It was also important that Paula heard this revelation from her sister, who obviously was talking about Paula's pending marriage in the family. This revealed the depth of the familial links that included family gossip. For Paula's mother, Paula's sexuality was something that was temporary. This was perhaps wishful thinking. Nevertheless, we know the discourse of homosexuality as a passing phase is used by many families of LGBTI people when they come out. Of course, concluding that it is a phase holds the hope that one day heterosexuality will prevail. This is a hope that was shattered by the wedding announcement. The wedding announcement had potency because, like many heterosexuals, Paula's mother understood that marriage is a socially and culturally significant endeavour, which meant that Paula was serious about being a homosexual. The idea that marriage is permanent, not to mention public, is what caused distress. A non-married Paula has the potential to change her sexuality, but a married Paula cements homosexuality, as it were. The mother's hope of

Paula turning heterosexual was "killed" by the wedding announcement and this caused much distress.

Similarly to Paula, Anna and Belinda, a white lesbian couple, whose fathers both refused to attend their wedding, narrated their story of familial hostility towards their wedding announcement. Anna and Belinda's fathers were already not active in the lives of the couple, but the couple still invited their fathers to the wedding. The invitation to their fathers was an act of inclusion of people who otherwise did not agree with the couple's relationship and a sign of the kind of emotional work that same-sex couples are engaged in. Their fathers did not attend the wedding because they did not approve of their homosexual relationship. In the narrative below, Anna elaborates on the difficulty of their fathers.

> Anna: Well, actually having said that though our fathers were quite difficult about the whole thing, …. Both of us [Anna and Belinda] took opportunities to invite our fathers to our wedding and for various reasons, the least of which is I don't think to be honest they approve, you know that was difficult for both of us but we let it go because the reality is that my father is an old Afrikaans man who's recently discovered Jesus which is his prerogative. He's 85 now and so he found difficulty in that and Belinda darling your father isn't particularly religious, but he found difficulty in accepting the concept of us being married in some kind of union. And so that was the only kind of gaping hole that's kind of surfaced in amongst everything else.

The act of inviting their fathers to the wedding was more than just an olive brunch. It demonstrated the cognitive labour involved as the couple was preparing to marry. It showed the cognitive labour in the deliberation that the couple had prior to inviting the fathers knowing that they did not approve of their relationship. The cognitive labour of the couple is linked to three interrelated points in the narrative above. Firstly, it is revealing that for both Anna and Belinda, it was their fathers who rejected their same-sex union. Men and masculinity must be factored in when thinking about why particularly the fathers were hostile to the wedding announcement of their daughters. Secondly, Anna's father was religious, which added yet another layer of complexity to the idea of his daughter marrying another woman. Lastly, the idea of two women being "married in some kind of union" was presented as "difficult" to accept for the fathers. There was an interesting intersection of masculinity and religious belief in Anna's father, while it seemed Belinda's father struggled with the concept of two women marrying. The gendered element here is instructive in that, elsewhere in their interview, the couple shared that both the mothers of the couple were supportive. We know from Daminger (2019) that in relationships, and in families, women carry the bulk load of cognitive labour, and here it was the mothers and daughters who seemed to be

doing the work. Furthermore, Theodore and Basow (2000) have shown that there is a relationship between dominant forms of heterosexual masculinity and homophobia in that men question how they appear to others and desire to be far removed from any traits of femininity or sexuality that would place their masculinity in question, even by association. The fact that it is the fathers who have a problem with their marriage reiterates Kimmel's (1997) argument in the aptly titled *Masculinity as homophobia* piece, that homophobia is embedded in the construction of masculinity. Furthermore, Pharr (1988) has convincingly argued that homophobia is a weapon of sexism. With Anna and Belinda's fathers, the worry was that they were guilty or are tainted by the homosexuality of their daughters, and so they distanced themselves from their marriage. This was amplified for Anna's father by his newfound religion.

For many people religion is an important cultural practice that enables them to make sense of the world around them (Etengoff & Daiute, 2013). Of course, people have different ways in which they read religious text, where two people can practise the same religion differently. As demonstrated by Brelsford and Mahoney (2009) and Brelsford (2011), while some people use religion in destructive ways, others use it constructive ways, and the different readings of religious scripture and practice affects how people interpret homosexuality. Anna's father, similar to Paula's mother above, used religion in maladaptive ways. Also, in both cases, while the adult children knew the religious views of their parents, they took on the burden to engage with them because of familial ties. While at times ambivalent, they were trying to keep those relationships alive by providing avenues for reconciliation. The limited ways in which Anna's father and Paula's mother understood religious prohibitions and homosexuality affected their relationships with their daughters. What we see with Anna and Belinda's fathers is that, although ideas around gender and sexuality are changing in contemporary South Africa, there remains a homophobic prejudice sustained through religion. This is not just in interpersonal relationships but also in South African institutions. The Constitutional Court case *De Lange v. Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa* (2015) is a perfect example of the power and influence of religion on societal institutions. De Lange took the Methodist Church to court after she was dismissed as a pastor in the church because she announced that she was getting married to her lesbian lover. This dismissal was perplexing to De Lange, and to many South Africans, because the congregation already new that she was a lesbian and that she was seeing a woman, but it was the wedding announcement that resulted in her losing her job. De Lange lost the case against the Methodist Church at the South African Constitutional Court.

Paula's mother was described as very religious by Paula, Anna's father was also described as religious, and they both struggled with the concept of two women

marrying. The social and cultural meanings of marriage matter a great deal to South Africans. These meanings are embedded in religion, because religion and the way people conceptualise family are often interrelated (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Walsh, 2009). It is in this context that we find the hostile reactions to same-sex marriage. The many arguments against the legalisation of same-sex marriage in many parts of the world, including South Africa, came from religious groups and organisations as demonstrated by Vermeulen (2008) and Hendricks (2008). In the intersection of religion, sexuality, and the family, the power of religion often trumps sexuality and diverse family forms. The hold of religion is not only strong, but is also a framework through which societal control is exercised, to a point where parents are willing to rather not have a relationship with their children than accept their sexuality and their same-sex marriages. Interestingly, some parents that have had a good relationship with their gay or lesbian children, also struggle with the idea of their children marrying someone of the same sex. The example of Jo and Rupert is an illustration of parents who were otherwise accepting of their gay son, but had a hostile reaction to the wedding announcement.

> Jo: We have a very good relationship [with the parents], once a week they will come to us for dinner and the alternate week we will go to them for dinner. I mean there's never been any issues but the moment we said we were gonna get married, it was fireworks and we didn't understand it. We really did not know why they reacted so badly to the fact that we said we were gonna get married. And then we realised that even though they accepted our relationship, they had never come out to their friends. It was very easy for them to say yes Rupert is living with …
> Rupert: His friend.

The narrative above was a relatively unique situation in that, for the majority of the couples in the sample, it was family members who were anti-gay and found it difficult to accept homosexuality who were hostile to same-sex marriage wedding announcements. Hence, unlike some same-sex couples who expected a hostile reaction from family members, when Jo and Rupert did the wedding announcement, they were shocked by Rupert's parent's hostile reaction. Jo and Rupert had already engaged extensively in cognitive labour to prepare the parents for milestones in their relationship. This preparation work included involving the parents in their lives, which included alternating hosting dinner nights with the parents. In negotiating and navigating the hostility after the wedding announcement, Jo reasoned that Rupert's parents were upset with their impending nuptials because the parents had to come out to their friends about having a gay son, something it seems that they had avoided, which would be unavoidable with

marriage. This was an apt reading by Jo. Unlike the adult children, the parents hadn't been involved in cognitive labour with those in their lives to ready them for this news. So in many ways their non-readiness to publicly be involved in a same-sex wedding was transferred to the couple. The hostility in the wake of the wedding announcement makes obvious how the parents have avoided cognitive labour, and perhaps their immediate refusal to engage. Here we see that marriage is an institution that forces families to come out. The parents of Rupert had never had to come out about the fact that they have a gay son. The idea of stigma, theorised by Goffman (1968), tells us that people who possess a stigma are riddled with shame and try their best to cover the stigma. The parents of Rupert were aware of the stigma and feared the stigma of homosexuality. Goffman (1968: 125) talks about the act of "covering" where he argues that "persons who are ready to admit possession of a stigma … may nonetheless make great effort to keep the stigma from looming large". Covering is an act of knowing that there exists a stigma but making sure that the stigma does not take centre stage; that it is controlled. Building on Goffman's work, the concept of covering was further conceptualised by Yoshino (2007) built on the idea of stigma. Often, the demand to control the stigma, in this case homosexuality, comes from society, and often the burden to control the stigma lies with the gay person or the gay couple. Interestingly in the case of Jo and Rupert, the burden to hide the stigma has been the affliction of Rupert's parents. You see, the stigma of homosexuality means that not only do those who are homosexual feel shame, but those who are associated with homosexuals as a family member also feel shame. With the advent of same-sex marriage Rupert's parents would no longer be able to hide behind words like "partner", "flatmate", or "friend" to describe their son's gay relationship once he is married. The possibility of being exposed as having a gay son through a same-sex wedding produced the hostile reactions of the parents.

The idea that parents themselves have to come out of the closet when their children come out is under theorised in the South African context. Often, in the absence of readily available resource material for parents as children come out, there is reliance on religion to make sense of the sexual identity, and subsequently same-sex marriage, and this has caused damage to lesbian and gay children and to their relationships with their parents. Hill (2015) and Coyle and Rafalin (2001) showed that lesbian and gay individuals find it hard to reconcile their sexual identity with their religion because of the hostility that comes from their places of worship. Although research shows that South African's ideas about sexuality and the rights of sexual minority have improved, it is still a bleak situation as many still see non-heterosexual sexuality as abhorrent (Other Foundation, 2016). The reactions of parents towards same-sex wedding announcements demonstrate that heteronormativity remains the predominant structure of society (Kitzinger, 2005; Jackson, 2006) and lesbian and gay lives are measured against this structure and come up short. In the case of Heinz and Brady, a white gay couple, and the hostile

reactions of Heinz's parents, we see the ramifications of the hostile reaction to wedding announcement. When Heinz's parents decided not to attend their son's wedding, Brady's parents also decided not to go to their wedding, so that Heinz didn't feel bad about not having his parents at the wedding. Although this was a gesture of goodwill by the parents of Brady, it did hurt Heinz that Brady's parents didn't attend their son's wedding.

> *Lwando: Ok. And how were your family reactions when you told then that you were going to get married?*
> Heinz: Not positive. It was many years after I came out to them and they are actually being fine with me being gay but for them marriage is very much a straight institution they are both Christian. And because of their religion they don't think that gay people should get married. So, none of my family actually attended (the wedding). Brady's brother attended, but that was pretty much it. His parents actually were with it better than mine. Which is weird because they are devout Christians. And then when they found out that my parents weren't coming, they thought it wouldn't be appropriate for them to be there. Yeah, so
> *Lwando: And what did you think of Brady's parents deciding not to come?*
> Heinz: I was, I felt guilty because I knew that they, I suppose I don't know, I kind of assume that they weren't there to make me feel better about my parents not being there. And as much as I appreciated that it felt as if I was the reason why Brady's parents couldn't attend his wedding. And he's the only one of their three children who has gotten married at that stage. So, it was an experience that I thought they couldn't have because of me. Granted it's not something that I have topped over in subsequent years, but at the time it was tough.

Religion is a prism through which many South Africans see the world and the parents of same-sex couples are no exception. Paula's mother, Anna and Belinda's fathers, Heinz's parents are all Christians. The power of religion in how families deal with same-sex couples is palpable. In the narrative above Heinz mentions Christianity because this is partly why his parents objected to his wedding. The power of religion cannot be underestimated in the ways it affects how people react to sexual diversity. In the lead up to the legalisation of same-sex marriage, religious leaders were very vocal about their position against same-sex marriage. Mufti Bayat, the spokesperson for the Council of Muslim Theologians, was quoted (in Hendricks, 2008: 224) as saying, "Same-sex marriages are a violation of the limits prescribed by the Almighty, a reversal of the natural order, a moral disorder and a crime against humanity". The potential loss of the sacredness of marriage was used to lobby against same-sex marriage. While some people have been able to reconcile their religious lives with progressive ideas about sexuality,

many people aren't able to reconcile religion and sexuality. Religious people like Janine Preesman and Reverend Nokuthula Dhladhla embraced same-sex marriages and helped same-sex couples marry in their respective places of worship (Judge, Manion & De Waal, 2008). Lesbian and gay people are often presented as ungodly, and against religion, but this is not always the case. In Tan's (2005: 141) research they found that gays and lesbians have high levels of "religious well-being" and high levels of "existential well-being", thus proving that lesbian and gay identity is not oppositional to religious identities.

The sets of parents of the couple demonstrated the different ways in which they interpreted religious doctrine and practice. While Brady's parents were supportive of the marriage between Heinz and Brady, they sacrificed attending the wedding of their son in order to balance the absence of Heinz's parents. Although religious, Brady's parents were able to be supportive of their son. The oppositional response of Heinz's parents compared to Brady's parents demonstrate Brelsford's (2011) point that, when it comes to religion and the coming out of children, parents choose between maladaptive and adaptive strategies on how to deal with the coming out of their children. Although the goodwill gesture of Brady's parents of not attending the wedding is welcomed, it still produced feelings of guilt in Heinz because Brady was also deprived of his parents' attendance at the wedding. Although Heinz admits to not being "topped over" in subsequent months about the situation, he did experience feelings of guilt over not having Brady's parents at the wedding. To remedy the situation, elsewhere in the interview, the couple spoke about having a renewal of vowels ceremony where they would involve both sets of parents, as Heinz's parents had by then come around and were more accepting of the couple.

For Clark (2005), the reactions of parents are rooted in homophobic prejudice and therefore can't be excused. Living in a heteronormative environment, parents are not equipped to deal with same-sex marriage announcements, and with their fictive ideas about homosexual relationships. It is the cognitive labour of same-sex couples that assist in parents understanding their lives. As demonstrated by Daminger (2019), this is a process, and sometimes the results of the process are only visible much later in the relationships. This then tells us that, for some, the wedding announcement and the process of marrying are themselves a process of learning for parents of adult same-sex couples. Merrill (2016: 3) argues that "parent-adult child bonds are a key source of feeling whole or complete in the world for both parents and their adult children and significantly affect psychological functioning." This then means that as the relationship progresses, parents, like Heinz's parents, eventually learn to accommodate their children. Although, of course, this not true for all parents. The ways that same-sex intimacy is negatively depicted in society are sometimes hard to overcome. The negative depiction often dictates how parents view two men or two women in an intimate

relationship. Take the case of Willem, and the hostility from his mother and how in the end Willem, in what can be seen as a political act, decided to disinvite his mother from the wedding.

> Willem: Like his parents are very, I think both of our parents are a bit unsocial in that sense, they are a bit like shy because they do, we do come from two quite different social, not social classes but his parents are kind-of like educated and successful and I think that's how my parents see them. Successful financially and they professional people and my, my people are very much like plain folk. And I think for my parents especially I think it's a bit difficult for them to just jell into his family from the start also because of this awkwardness of the gay situation. So, knowing that and judging my family's response and the type of questions they started asking me things like, so how is it gonna happen [changes voice to sound like parents], are you gonna try and make it like a straight wedding or a normal wedding, they might say and the kind-of like cherry on the cake of all these questions was when my mom asked me whether we actually gonna kiss each other like normal people on a wedding. And I just realised that they obviously struggle with things that is going to make this not a pleasant experience for them, knowing that I wanted to be happy and not worry about my family on my wedding day, and knowing how easy his family will be with everything. I said to them listen here, I know you are not going to get to the point where you tell me that you don't want to come to my wedding because it is just going to be horrible for you. So, I will do you the favour in telling you that you are not invited anymore.

Willem and Ruan are a white gay couple. In the narrative, Willem gave us a picture of his parents and where they come from as he explained that they are "unsocial". In the narrative Willem and Ruan, like many couples speaking retrospectively about the marriage processes, were still making sense of their relationships with their families. Many couples, including Willem and Ruan elsewhere, mentioned the cathartic experience of talking about their negotiation and navigation with their families after their wedding announcement. Willem made a comparative analysis of his parents and his partner's parents and concluded that Ruan's parents were "financially successful" and "professional" unlike his parents. According to Willem his parents saw themselves as "plain folk" which sets up a way for us to understand Willem's parents as unsophisticated people vs. Ruan's parents who were set up as educated and upwardly mobile. The middle class, upwardly mobile parents were more accepting of the gay couple. Willem is demonstrating here that class matters in the ways that his parents and the parents of his partner react to their wedding announcement.

According to Valocchi (1999: 207) the construction of gay identity is a "class-infected process" in that the process – "the intersection of middle-class understandings of homosexuality and the political creation of gay identity" shapes people's understanding of gayness. This is in line with the argument that gay culture and gay political activities are middle-class, and gays are often depicted as middle-class (Shugart, 2003; Barrett & Pollack, 2005) in the popular media. This middle-class characterisation of homosexuality and understanding of homosexuality seems to be how, according to Willem at least, Willem's parents understood his relationship with his partner. The picture painted by Willem of his parents is in line with Bowman's (2004) argument that gays are concentrated in urban and suburban areas because of higher levels of acceptance and amongst a population of higher income earners. As demonstrated by Valocchi (1999), this is a product of historical process where people with marginal sexualities congregated in urban areas escaping prosecution in their families of origin and/or in small towns and/or rural environments. So what Willem was referring to here was that the middle-class-ness required in understanding the gay identity was absent for his parents while it was apparent in Ruan's parents.

Clark's (2005) assertion that perhaps at the root of the hostile reactions from parents when their children come out is homophobic prejudice was most clear in the kiss question posed by Willem's mother. Through conversations with the family, and clearly through the fielding of questions from his mother, Willem was involved in cognitive labour prior to the wedding to calm family anxieties. Through answering what appeared to be insensitive questions, Willem wrestled with the system of heteronormativity in trying to change his mother's ideas about what constitutes a "real" relationship and what happens at a same-sex wedding. Heteronormativity as a structure became visible in the words of Willem's mother when she asked the questions "are you gonna try and make it like a straight wedding or a normal wedding" and "are you going to kiss". What becomes evident here is the way that "heteronormativity underpins all social phenomenon" (Ward & Schneider, 2009: 438) because heteronormativity is the lens with which Willem's mother saw the relationship of Willem and Ruan. The overarching systems of norms and assumptions that structure society according to heterosexuality (Kitzinger, 2005) is what enabled Willem's mother to ask the prejudice infused questions about whether the couple will kiss at their wedding. The ability to imagine a wedding without a kiss is telling about Willem's mother's angst. Willem decided to disinvite his mother after the "kiss" question. Willem's mother's reaction was an apprehension about seeing two men kiss and this is linked to how society at large is preoccupied with gay and lesbian public affection; people are often voicing their discomfort over gay and lesbian public affection (Snapp et al., 2014). So, Willem's mother's fretfulness had a history behind it, a history of unease with homosexual public displays of affection. Her concern about

the kiss was really an apprehension about Ruan and Willem's sex lives, particularly if we agree that marriage is about sex (Bernard, 1972; Warner, 1999). The wedding is a sexually charged event, in that there is traditionally an expectation that on the wedding night, a couple will consummate their marriage with sexual intercourse. The kiss question unveiled the worry of Willem's mother; she was confronted by the fact that her son has gay sex.

Gay sex and the dangers thereof are always present in homophobic prejudice (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Gay sex was the source of worry for Willem's mother, hence the kiss question. In fact, one could argue that homosexual sex is at the heart of all the hostile reactions from the parents, because homophobic prejudice is often obsessed with the way gay people have sex. Thus, the subtext of the kiss question was the gay sex question. There is stigma to gay sex; gay sexuality has historically been linked to danger and death (Cohen, Feigenbaum & Adashi 2014; Low, 2014; Berkman & Zhou, 2015). Laws have been enacted to protect children against the dangers of gay sexuality (Edelman, 2004). As demonstrated by Martin, McDaid and Hilton (2014) in reporting on sexuality, gay men are often seen as a risk and at risk in their sexual behaviour. Also, the Other Foundation's (2016) *Progressive Prudes* report illuminates that although many South Africans' views on homosexuality have become positive, the majority of South Africans see gay sex as immoral. The kiss question from Willem's mother was fuelled by homophobic prejudice. The hostile reactions of all of the family members in this study took place in a heteronormative South African context, in a context that is constructed with a heavy investment in guarding the primacy of heterosexuality. This primacy is challenged by same-sex couples, even more so when they demand to enter the institution of marriage.

5. Conclusion

Same-sex couples are involved in cognitive labour processes through their individual coming out processes, through living their lives openly, and also through engaging their family with wedding plans. Through a process of wrestling with normative ideas about sexuality and marriage, some same-sex couples eventually succeed in changing the minds of family members about same-sex relationships. For many, this change comes after the wedding, and often the family members express regret for not being able to attend the wedding. For some couples, no matter how much cognitive labour was involved, the family members refuse to change their minds about the illegitimacy of same-sex relationships. In trying to understand the hostile reactions of the parents of same-sex couples, we must pay attention to the socio-cultural surroundings of the parents in question. The environments in which the parents of same-sex couples find themselves shed light on why some parents have hostile reactions towards same-sex wedding

announcements. Same-sex couples have parents who live in a heteronormative world, and who harbour prejudice towards homosexual people. So, the reactions of parents need to be understood with this context in mind. Heteronormativity as a "taken-for-granted and simultaneously compulsory character of institutionalised heterosexuality" (Nielson, Walden & Kunkel, 2000: 284) ensures that people are prisoner to normative ideas of sexuality. The reactions of parents towards their children getting married are a reflection of the heteronormative culture that the parents are part of. Their reactions speak to the heteronormative conceptualisation of intimate relationships, and how their children challenge this conceptualisation by desiring to marry someone of the same sex.

Whether it is through religious scripture, or whether parents are afraid of the visibility of the sexuality of their children and what that means for them, or whether it is the display of affection between same-sex partners, what becomes clear is that same-sex marriage pushes parents to deal with the reality of homosexuality. With marriage, it is as if the homosexuality becomes that much more of a reality, in that the couple desires to enter an institution that is socially and culturally valued. Paula's mother, who said "I didn't think she would take it this far", demonstrated how she never took Paula's relationship seriously, because her statement captured that she didn't envision that Paula was that "serious" about being with another woman. This is not unlinked to the idea that same-sex marriage makes same-sex couples visible, no more so than during the wedding. This means parents have to be open to other people about the sexuality of their adult child. Rupert's parents demonstrated in their hostility towards Rupert and Jo, even though they had been accepting of the same-sex relationship before the wedding announcement, that visibility was the problem. Jo and Rupert understood that the parents were not out to their friends about having a gay son. Marriage is an outing institution for parents of same-sex couples.

What becomes evident in this paper is that although parents live in a country with progressive laws on sexual and gender identity, those laws are not the everyday reality of people. In other words, South Africans are yet to socially catch up to the progressiveness of their own legislations. There is nothing wrong with being gay, and in a just world without homophobic prejudice, lesbian and gay people wouldn't need their sexuality digested. The reality of course is that parents have hostile reactions to their children's coming out and their desires to marry. Many parents rely on religion to make sense of the world and mainstream religious ideas on diverse sexualities are riddled with prejudice. The prejudice-filled reactions of parents to their lesbian or gay child announcing impending nuptials demonstrates that we still have a long way to go to undermine the supremacy of heterosexuality. Even as same-sex couples can marry, lesbians and gay people are still not free, because even as they legally celebrate their love, they have to fight interpersonal battles with their families on the legitimacy of that love. Furthermore, these

reactions from families demonstrate that it is not enough to change the law, and that more work is needed on the grassroots level to change the mindset of South African society about the diversity and fluidity of gender and sexuality.

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