



Homosexual Students' Experiences in a Higher Education Institution in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The most prominent debate in institutions of higher learning today is the manner in which homosexual students are treated. This paper examines the experiences faced by homosexual students in a purposefully selected South African University. Thirty-six participants were selected using purposeful and snowball sampling techniques. The participants were students who voluntarily identified themselves as gay and lesbian persons in long-lasting relationships. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and analysed thematically. The findings indicate that all the participants occasionally found themselves in difficult positions such as discrimination, stigmatisation, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and exclusion. It is concluded that LGBT University students go through numerous challenges to establish their own identity within the university, which affects their academic performance. In this regard, social workers and other stakeholders owe these students a duty to educate and train different population groups on the diverse nature of the South African society.

INTRODUCTION

The term homosexuality has brought reactions in many African countries. This is because some African Countries see it as a taboo and as 'un-African'. In this regard, those practicing it are stigmatized. Homosexuality is a situation whereby an individual is emotionally and sexually attracted to another individual of the same sex (Cass 1979; Cass and Lyons 2014). "It is known that this phenomenon of same-sex relations existed before colonialism began in Africa" (Msibi 2011: 55-72). Therefore, some argue that it is not new, and, perhaps, a continuation of history. The issue here is not how bad or good this practice is, but how the society treats the individuals who involve themselves in this kind of practice. There has been a robust debate on the experiences of homosexuality, especially in the African continent. The experiences differ from one society to another. The International Gay and

Lesbian Association (2015) indicates that out of the 55 African states recognized by the United Nations, homosexuality is criminal in 34 of them (Lane et al. 2008). This shows the diversity of views about homosexual people. Therefore, people's feelings vary from one society to another. According to Bob (2011), Benin and the Central African Republic do not see homosexuality as criminal, but have certain laws, which apply differently to heterosexual and homosexual individuals. Therefore, homosexual experiences may differ from one country to another. Mbatha (2012) explains that homosexuality is influenced by different factors and personal choices. In most instances, the public attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) diverge greatly in different cultures, locations and in many societies. However, they remain as personages who are mythical, strange and even disgusting (Mapayi et al. 2016).

According to Ferreira (2015), there is brutal and widespread discrimination against LGBT people in the world. The report continues to state that adults in same sex relationships are criminalised in 76 countries. This, thus, exposes LGBT people to the risk of imprisonment, torture and even the death penalty. However, some countries in Africa have put legislative systems in place to protect homosexual people. Carlse (2018) and

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Mbisi (2015) note that South Africa was the first country in the world to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation, and the fifth country in the world and the first in Africa to legalize same-sex marriage. According to Section 8 of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, the University community will commit itself "not to discriminate, directly or indirectly, on the grounds of birth, race, colour, nationality, ethnic or social origin, gender, age, illness or disability, language, culture, political or other opinion, religion, conscience, belief, marital status, pregnancy or sexual orientation". This clause, therefore, ensures that the University complies with relevant human rights legislation and fosters an environment free of conduct that might be hurtful or offensive.

Despite this legalisation, homosexual people in South Africa still face the rode of making decisions on how to identify themselves in the public (Matebeni 2013). In fact, attacks against LGBT still happen on a regular basis (Boonzaier and Mkhize 2018). In the Guardian African Network (2015: 55-72), Mbisi notes that, "If you say being gay is not African, you don't know your history". He goes further to state that, "The idea that homosexuality is 'western' is based on another western import Christianity. True African culture celebrates diversity and promotes acceptance" (Mbisi 2015: 55-77). According to Mbisi, the idea that homosexuality is "un-African" emanated from most African leaders who used the issue of homosexuality for their selfish interests. Some former African leaders, in their public speeches and policies, have been very clear on anti-gay laws, and describe homosexual people as being un-African (Van Zyl 2011). Hence, if the African society views LGBTs in this context, it would be interesting to know the experiences and challenges faced by homosexual students in a university in South Africa. The next section of this paper is the literature review, followed by the theoretical framework. The methodology that was adopted for the study is described, and the results are then presented and discussed. Finally, the conclusion and recommendations end the paper.

Overview of Literature Review

The literature review comprises of a brief presentation of the African perspectives on homo-

sexuality and the experiences of LGBTs at various institutions of higher education. The review is based on these two themes.

African Perspectives on Homosexuality

The concept of homosexuality is viewed by different writers in Africa in different perspectives. Some argue that homosexuality is un-African while some say it existed in Africa in the pre-colonial period. Msibi (2011) provides evidence showing why same-sex relations are not new in the African continent. She cites examples from Nigeria amongst the Igbos and Hausas and the Nuar in Sudan. She also cites other examples of Nilotic Lango of northern Uganda, Shaka Zulu of South African as well as others in the Central African Republic and the Congo. Many historical experts believe that Shaka Zulu encouraged inter-rural sex (non-penetrative sex, in which a male partner places his penis between a male partner's thighs, and thrusts to create friction and achieve orgasm) among his troops to 'create intimacy and loyalty' (Msibi 2011). Similarly, Shoko (2010: 634-649) suggests that homosexuality has always been there, though it was named differently. For example, women in villages would practice lesbianism, especially when their husbands had left for work in mines. Since time immemorial, LGBT groups have been invisible and dormant, but since they have started to surface it has brought so much confusion and chaos in societies (Nyanzi 2013; Canham 2017; Kramer 2015). Nonetheless, the concept is widely practiced, in the open or in hiding. Many homosexual students have narrated bitter experiences related to efforts to 'come out' with their hidden identities (Segalo 2014; Smuts 2011; Lynch and Sanger 2016). It would appear that those LGBT who suffer most in Africa are black Africans (Lake 2014; Mkhize et al. 2010). Also, despite these experiences, there is a resistance put up by the LGBT to defend their identity (Moreau 2015; Rudwick 2011).

Other writers are of the opinion that homosexuality in Africa is strongly viewed as a borrowed concept, structuring on the interpretations made by various presidents in Africa. It is easy to convince citizens that homosexuality is not only a sinful abomination, but it is a phenomenon that is learnt from Western cultures

(Nyanzi 2013; Cho et al. 2013). Externalizing homosexuality to foreigners, Nujoma alienated African homosexuals in IOL news (2001). He argues, “The supporters of these perverts are Europeans who imagine them to be the bulwark of civilization and enlightenment. We made sacrifices for the liberation of this country and we are not going to allow individuals with alien practices such as homosexuality to destroy the social fabric of our society” (Reddy 2002: 168). It is argued that it is in this context that homosexuality does not originate in Africa.

Experiences of LGBTs at Various Institutions of Higher Education

The experiences of students are ever changing, which means that staff and faculty members have to recognize and act on these changes or they will quickly find themselves left behind (Beemyn and Rankin 2011a). Higher education institutions have made policies or advancements to make LGBT people comfortable. Messenger (2011) indicates that making inclusive spaces for LGBT students is a priority for many universities nationwide. Looking at the experiences of LGBTs from a global perspective, Pope et al. (2007) state that many LGBT international students do not go through the process of sexual identity development in their home countries because they have been exposed to homophobia there. International students who are LGBT persons struggle with sexual orientation and how to define their sexual identity. They stay in the closet, feel isolated and hopeless with their futures in another country because they have hidden their sexual identities in their home countries (Heuchan 2017; Judge 2017). LGBT international students seem resistant to change their sexual identity and do not know how to cope with the growing awareness of the identity because of their own internalized heterosexism, as well as simple lack of knowledge of how to do this effectively (Oba and Pope 2013). In this light, Francis and Msibi (2011) and Zway (2015) argue that identity crisis does not only lie within LGBT students, but also with other students, and there is much confusion among students regarding the relationship between homosexuality and biology.

Gay men are perceived as wanting a female identity (Swarr 2012). The misunderstanding indicated by students when the diverse forms of sexual identification are discussed highlight the gendered nature of homosexuality (Ncanana and Ige 2014). As one student stated, “A man that is gay, is no longer a man. He is like a woman. He does things that women do and acts like how women act” (Francis and Msibi 2011). According to Pinheiro and Harvey (2019), not only identity crisis is a problem, but LGBTs also experience being called names that are disheartening. Regardless of a much shown campaign through YouTube that “It Gets Better” for youth when they graduate from high school and enter higher education, universities remain a hostile environment for gays and lesbian students (Beemyn and Rankin 2011b). LGBT students are experiencing harassment because of their sexual orientation. Rothmann and Simmonds (2015) reveal that students who experienced this kind of oppression were negatively affected in their well-being.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by the Psychodynamic Theory. The Psychodynamic Theory explains human behaviour and human motivation in terms of conscious and unconscious forces and the interplay between them. Even though different psychodynamic theories exist, they all emphasize unconscious motives and desires, as well as the importance of early childhood experiences in shaping personality. The psychodynamic theories of personality are mainly composed of famous theorists such as Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson and Alfred Adler. In this write-up, we see how Sigmund Freud tries to develop the theory of Psychosocial Development to explain human behaviour and its relation to homosexuality. Sigmund Freud explains three parts of a person’s personality (id, ego, and superego) (Sarah 2012). According to Freud (1953), the environment has little impact on how certain individuals behave. It should be noted here that Freud does not rule out environmental factors, but argues they have an altering behaviour. However, the same cannot be said of students in learning institutions like the university under study, who, under peer pressure or exclusion

from their group, might end up gay or lesbian to identify themselves with their peers. Therefore, it may be seen that Freud skipped an important factor that might help us explain certain behaviours among students who behave in ways that are considered abnormal to those set by societies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Selection of Participants

At the University under study, a sample of 36 lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender students were selected using purposeful as well as snowball sampling techniques. Informal networks of lesbians were used to identify the participants as well as self-identification of those who were committed in relationships with their partners. The participants were all South African citizens ranging from 20 to 32 years of age at the time of interviews.

Data Collection Method and Procedure

In-depth interviews were conducted with these students at places convenient to them. An interview guide with guiding questions enhanced the asking of open-ended questions, which led to probing further to get in-depth insight into their experiences. Questions elicited biographical details as well as their experiences. The participants were able to choose which language they wanted to speak during the interview: though only six spoke English as a first language, and 14 chose English for the interviews, 10 spoke in Xhosa, and six spoke Afrikaans. These were translated into English following transcription by the interviewers.

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Transcripts were read with overarching themes of the experiences, challenges and coping strategies employed by LGBT students. Interviews were transcribed and coded from where themes were extracted. To ensure consistency, Xhosa and Afrikaans speaking interviewers did inter-coder checks with the original language transcriptions. The themes that emerged from the data are presented in the next section. Considering the sensitive nature of the research, the

use of the real names of the participants was avoided. Therefore, names presented in this paper are simply pseudonyms and not the real names of the participants. Consequently, anonymity and privacy, confidentiality, avoidance of harm and other ethical issues were strictly adhered to by the researchers. The participants signed two informed consent forms, one to participate in the study and accepting the interview to be audio-taped and the other for confirming the accuracy of the interview transcripts. Further, ethical certificate number TAN03SNYA01 was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University under study.

RESULTS

Data presented in this section is made up of the demographic characteristics of the participants, followed by the different themes that emerged from the outcome of the interviews with the participants.

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Regarding the basic demographic characteristics of the participants, all the participants were South African citizens and were made up of undergraduate and postgraduate students, representing all the races in South Africa. While the youngest participant was 20 years old, the oldest was 32 years. Most of them (15 participants) used terms like "lesbian," "gay," or "homosexual" to describe themselves. The participants used a range of personal as well as political labels for self-identification. A few participants explicitly mentioned not being religious, but that they were spiritual, whereas some indicated that they were Christians in the same sentence as being lesbian or gay. A few participants were female Black South Africans or "Africans". Some (female) of them identified themselves as "Afrikaners". A few male students identified themselves as blacks or Afrikaners.

Themes that Emerged During the Interviews

The major themes that emerged during the discussion with the participants were five and include; being knowledgeable of the policies

protecting homosexuals, sexual abuse resulting in HIV and AIDS and other transmissible diseases, identity disclosure of LGBT students, rejection and exclusion through prejudice remarks against LGBT students, and identity hiding as strategy to overcome challenges. These themes are discussed below.

Knowledgeability of Policies Protecting Homosexuals

Finding a legal and policy response to the perpetration of victimized participants was particularly challenging, more on a practical level. At the university under study, the majority of the homosexual participants were aware of the policies that protect gays and lesbians around campus while the rest were ignorant of these policies. Some of the homosexual students were able to highlight some of the policies. One participant said:

There's a Code of Conduct which fully subscribes to Principle 8 of the Charter, which states that the University community will commit itself "not to discriminate, directly or indirectly, on the grounds of birth, race, colour, nationality, ethnic or social origin, gender, age, illness or disability, language, culture, political or other opinion, religion, conscience, belief, marital status, pregnancy or sexual orientation". This clause, therefore, ensures that the University complies with relevant human rights legislation and fosters an environment free of conduct that might be hurtful or offensive. (Tom-mystaf, 29 year old postgraduate gay student)

Many other participants corroborated the above sentiments. It was generally understood by these categories of students that if one was mistreated on the basis of their sexuality, it could lead to dismissal of the perpetrator from the university. On this basis, a participant indicated that:

The University supports personal growth and continuous learning for all its students. The will is to provide an equal opportunity to access goods and services for all University students. The University commits itself to processes and efforts to redress the imbalances of the past. (Glorica, 30 year old postgraduate lesbian student)

Equal access to services is highly promoted at the university, specially designed to protect

minority groups like homosexuals who are viewed as a vulnerable group. This is acknowledgement of the existence of a guiding code, which states that no student was going to be discriminated based on his/her sexual orientation; they are to be treated equally in all areas of life. Another participant indicated that:

The University will not tolerate any form of harassment of its employees or students in any form. All students are responsible for ensuring that the university is free from sexual harassment. Any sexual advances, inappropriate physical contact or sexually orientated gestures and pictures may result in disciplinary action, which could lead to suspension. (Chiky Babe, 25 year old undergraduate lesbian student)

This is a clear indication that gays and lesbians are protected at the university under study. Unfortunately, others were ignorant of these policies. One of the ignorant participants reported as follows:

I don't think there is any policy protecting us in this University; I don't talk to people who are not lesbians because I don't want anyone to insult me or call me names. If the University has any policy protecting us, I will be happy and will talk about my sexuality proudly. (A 25 year old undergraduate lesbian student)

Sexual Abuse Resulting in HIV and Other Transmissible Diseases

When participants were asked if they were challenged by HIV/AIDS, most of the participants reported that they were confronted with the problem of contracting HIV. A good number of the participants indicated that they contracted the HIV virus after being raped by other gay people they were staying with. The following statements are excerpts from some of the participants:

My uncle rapped me because he wanted me to feel how it is to be with a person of the opposite sex and that is when I contracted HIV. (Nana, 22 year old undergraduate lesbian student)

I was raped at an entertainment bash around campus and that is how I contracted the deadly disease. (Bob, 23 year old gay undergraduate student)

I was raped in a room by my friends, and I contracted HIV. The worst thing is that I could not report it because I feared to be stigmatized. (Shaba, 22 year old gay undergraduate student)

Some of the participants who took part in the study reported experiencing sexually transmitted diseases. Some of them reported as follows:

I have contracted STI's several times from heterosexual students; I sometimes sneak to have unprotected sex with them. (Gloria, 26 year old lesbian undergraduate student)

STI's and HIV are experienced by everyone, one's sexual orientation does not determine if you are going to experience this deadly disease. Everyone is at the risk of contracting HIV despite their sexual orientation. (Nkwe, 27 year old transgender undergraduate student)

However, most of the participants stated that it was difficult for them to attain medical services because of the beliefs people have about LGBT. One participant indicated thus:

When I went to the clinic and complained of Syphilis, I was told that gays and lesbians are not treated until you stop the idiotic behaviour. The nurse who attended to me was even scared to touch me; she even thought that homosexuality is contagious. (Akwe, 28 year old undergraduate gay student)

Identity Disclosure Crisis of LGBT Students

The issue of identity disclosure was a major factor amongst the LGBT students. An overwhelming majority maintained that they were scared to expose their identity to their peers and significant others (such as parents, guardians, lecturers and administrative staff of the university) for many reasons. However, a few of the participants who were undergraduate female students admitted that while their friends knew they were lesbians, their parents did not. They all lived in Cape Town but were students of the University under study. One of the students reported that:

I am afraid to tell my parents that I am a lesbian, because they will not take care of me as a child. My father once asked me why I dress like boys, I did not tell him that I was a lesbian because I was scared of rejection and that he would kick me out of his house, or would say that if I don't change he won't look after me and would not take me as his child. (Gaga, 22 year old undergraduate lesbian student)

Another participant, when asked about their friends knowing that they were gay or lesbian, had this to say:

We are not very comfortable revealing our identity as homosexuals because of the issue of stigmatization and rejection. We just keep it to ourselves and we don't relate to other students because we are afraid that they will notice that we are not the same with them. (Babel, 24 year old gay undergraduate student)

As a result, LGBT students faced alienation due to fear of being stigmatised and rejected by others.

Rejection and Exclusion Through Prejudice Remarks Against LGBT Students

All the participants revealed that prejudice remarks were unavoidable because of the different religious beliefs people had. One male participant went on to say that he was once told, 'mboko idzi dzinofanirwa kuurayiwa' (these idiots should be killed). Another participant indicated that he experienced prejudice remarks such as; 'these dogs should be removed from this university'. Rejection, for some of the participants, was mainly experienced through prejudicial remarks. Some of the participants stated that they noticed social segregation and tagging. They reported the use of slang words to insult them, such words as 'fagot', 'ass' and 'hole'. Many of the participants revealed that some derogatory words linked with femininity and others referring to male homosexuals were used in labelling LGBT students by their peers. Also reported by all the participants was the use of idioms by their peers to describe them. One participant said that heterosexual students would say to him things like:

Gays and lesbians are not real people; they are evil spirits which manifest into the physical so as to pollute the righteous people of God. (28 year old gay undergraduate student)

Participants' description of their experiences indicated that they were victimized mostly through prejudicial remarks and homophobic verbal harassment. Most of the homosexual participants who were interviewed explained why it was easier for them to be persecuted. One of the reasons mentioned by a participant was that:

It is unacceptable for homosexuals to be seen kissing, or holding hands in the public. (29 year old transgender postgraduate student)

A few of the participants reported that when they were seen publicly displaying their affection, this could cause them to be victimized. A few of the participants indicated that they experienced physical abuse from heterosexual students. One of them said that; 'We are bullied' (22 year old transgender undergraduate) and another participant said, 'We are physically ambushed, especially when we walk in the evening around campus' (23 year old lesbian undergraduate student).

Identity Hiding as a Strategy to Overcome Challenges

During the interview, all the participants indicated that they devised different strategies so as to survive in the community in which they found themselves, such as the university community. The participants mentioned that they used strategies only when they were victimized. Hiding the identity of gays and lesbians was one of the main strategies indicated by all the participants. They hid their identity so as to avoid the challenges they would experience due to their sexual orientation. All the participants indicated that they usually stayed silent or just left as a way of not antagonizing anyone. A participant who used the tactic of hiding her identity when she was expected to engage in a conversation stated as follows:

I change the topic unless I am the key subject of a discussion. But, if they do ask me directly, I pursue an avoiding strategy. When they ask whether or not I have a boyfriend, I say "No" or "I do not want". I give such oblique responses. (Cheri, 30 year old postgraduate student)

Another participant revealed that:

I use disguise; I try to behave normally like them (heterosexual students). I pretend to be like them. I even speak about men and sometimes say that a certain man is very handsome, so that they won't even suspect what I am really. (Mama, 23 year old undergraduate lesbian student)

Imposing a question mark on other heterosexual students was another strategy that was noted during the interviews as it was mentioned by a participant. She made the following remarks:

I do not hide myself. But, I always leave a question mark on their minds. "Is she homosexual or not?" Nobody can understand me. (Hugo, 25 year old undergraduate lesbian student)

Some other participants did not have to hide or lie about their identity; they just left them in suspense. When hiding their identity, participants indicated that they had to lie about the names of their partners, so that other heterosexual students would not have a clue that they were gay or lesbian. One participant clearly stated that:

I use a false name for my partner; I say that the name of my boyfriend is Patrick or Douglas but I later forget the name that I had used. Some people think that he works in the government or he is at a University, but the truth is I would lie to protect my gender. (Iyisha, 23 year old undergraduate lesbian student)

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study focused more on the experiences, challenges and coping strategies employed by LGBT students. The results from this study indicate that lesbian and gay students experience several challenges because of their sexual orientation. The challenges that lesbian and gay students face in reaction to hostility foster a greater sense of tolerance and acceptance. Cognitive processes associated with developing an identity that is not part of the dominant group assist lesbian and gay students in their ability to think with more complexity about broader intellectual and social issues (Jones and McEwen 2000). When homosexual students keep their sexual orientation a secret, they experience moderated feelings of self-worth and increased feelings of guilt and anxiety. This finding is corroborated by that of Boonzaier and Mkhize (2018) who found out that homosexuals do not always want to reveal their identity for fear of victimisation.

The results of this study revealed that many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals, at some point or another in their lives, experience perceived rejection by society, friends, and family as reported by many other studies (Heuchan 2017; Judge 2017; Zway 2015; Moreau 2015; Segalo 2014). It was noted that

even if homosexuals disassociated themselves from other students, harassment and rejection were inevitable; they had to experience it. Though participants indicated that they were proud of their sexual orientation, despite their experiences, being proud about one's sexual orientation is said to be linked to social dysfunction. This suggests that their pride is a reaction to rejection as suggested by Mbatha (2012). The psychodynamic theory described homosexuality in line with the consequences of childhood traumas. Homosexuality can be placed in the same category as other disorders that have their source in childhood. Some of the participants in the study said that they regarded themselves as sinful with respect to their religion and rebellious attitude towards their culture. If a homosexual individual experiences disapproval which is mainly about him or her as opposed to his or her behaviour, that individual begins to view the self as bad, shameful and unlovable, especially when he relates to what he/she experienced in her childhood (Rudwick 2011). This results in internalized homophobia. Homosexuals with internalized homophobia have internal schemas that guide their interpersonal perceptions and their interpretations of ambiguous situations (Judge 2017). Perceived rejection of gay and lesbians by other students led many of the students practicing homosexuality to remain in secret about their sexuality. Relating to the social cognitive theory, it is clear that some of these strategies are a way of survival; the human race is reliant on the replication of the actions of others. Participants who were hiding identity reported to lie about their actual sexual orientation. Hiding identities is a strategy that is commonly used by anyone to protect themselves; it is a social aspect that can be learned. Many of the participants indicated that hiding their identity was a way of trying to conform to society's norms so as to be accepted in their community, just as also reported by Wilson and Miller (2002).

Many gays and lesbian students at the case University experienced non-acceptance from the general population around campus. In a university, more than any other geographic setting, conformity is not strongly urged but people are expected to learn by observing from others (Foster 1998). However, it is in this line that deviation from the traditional way of living is strongly dis-

couraged because this is the reason for most gay students experiencing victimization such as rape, physical abuse and psychological violence (Horn and Szalacha 2009). In this study, heterosexual students' attitudes toward gays, lesbians and bisexuals indicated anti-LGBT attitudes were prevalent on the main campus of the university under study. It is in this light that if homosexuals divert from the normal socially accepted norms or if they do not learn how things are done this will attract a form of victimization. For that reason, there are widely varying perspectives and attitudes regarding the climate for LGBT issues.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that LGBT University students experience numerous challenges in order to establish their own identity within their university community and settings. It is not deniable that great strides have been undertaken by the state to improve the way the South African society perceives LGBT and their recognition by many associations and groups. However, the struggle for the LGBT in general, and University students in particular, is far from over. This is because oppression and discrimination are still rife throughout South Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The university under study should strive to implement their own policies because it seems this is where the problem lies, and it is a cause for LGBT to continue to hide their identity. Social workers and other stakeholders owe these students a duty to educate and train different population groups on the diverse nature of society, such as the South African society.

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