

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK LESBIAN STUDENTS IN
AN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING IN THE WESTERN CAPE-
SOUTH AFRICA.

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A mini-thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree:
Masters in Psychology (M Psych. Counseling)

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Keywords: lesbians, homosexuality, students, higher learning, black, gender,
homophobia, heterosexism, stereotypes, invisible

DECLARATION

I, Nomasango Tati declare that, **An Exploratory Study of the Experiences of Lesbian Students at in Institution of Higher Learning in the Western Cape – South Africa** is my own work and has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Nomasango Tati



November 2009

Signed:

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my late Grandmother,

LIZA TUSE ‘ZAMI’ TEMBA.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

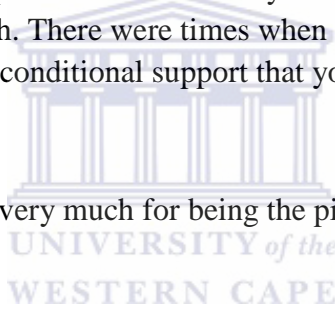
I wish to thank all those who supported me throughout the period of undertaking this study.

I would like to thank Our Heavenly Father, God the Almighty for bestowing me with his blessings since I started with my studies.

A word of gratitude is extended to my parents for taking a responsibility by showing me a fountain of education.

My two lovely daughters, who supported me emotionally and otherwise, thank you ever so much girls for being my pillars of strength. There were times when I could not be there for you as a mother. I appreciate every bit of unconditional support that you gave me.

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Ndakuba andenzanga nto ukuba andibabuleli OoThahla, OoNdayeni, OoZiqele, OoFaku, OoNyawuza, OoNgqungqushu, aMampondo, Oohlamba ngobubende amanzi ekhona ngokundixhasa. Enkosi boDakile. Manditsho ndithi Mazanethole nakooDikela amaQwathi ngokundiweza.



ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative study which seeks not only to explore the psychological histories and experiences of lesbian students in institutions of higher learning but also to highlight the dilemma that this marginalized group is confronted with. This study further seeks and attempts to highlight the presence of a student population with a non-heterosexual identity in the university environment, which seems to be dominated by heterosexual norms and practices in and outside of the academic learning environment. There is a dearth of research both locally and internationally on homosexuality particularly on black lesbianism. Few local studies have focussed on the experiences of black South African lesbians. In addition, the limited research which exists focuses on white males and white middle class women. The paucity of empirical research in this phenomenon could also be as a result of the stance that is assumed the non-heterosexual minority to remain invisible by being closeted. Within many disciplines, the possibility of lesbian existence goes unrecognized pathologised, and in others it is rendered impossible. There are still negative attitudes towards homosexuality among the general public as most people do not accept that homosexuality is part of an African culture. This study aims at exposing and challenging the effects of heterosexist assumptions that are prevalent in institutions of higher learning. It (study) further seeks to highlight and address the gaps that exist within the academic literature in South Africa with regards to homosexuality. Five students from an institution of higher learning in the Western Cape Province of South Africa with predominantly Black Students were used for this study. All the participants were Black students aged between 19 and 25 years who openly identify themselves as lesbians. Their participation was voluntary. A narrative approach was utilised as an attempt to afford the participants an opportunity to narrate

their histories and personal experiences. This is a qualitative research approach which deals with personal stories that are told to describe human action and make sense of events that surround an individual. It involves getting a story from an individual who is identified as having some knowledge or experience with the topic of study. In an attempt to gain a better understanding and an insightful perspective into the personal narratives that were shared by the participants of this study, all their experiences will be put under the control of the thematic analysis. A thematic analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and behaviour (Aronson, 1994). Themes are defined as units derived from patterns such as conversation topics, meanings, feelings, etc. (Taylor & Boglan, 1989 cited in Aronson 1994). The following themes emerged namely, identity formation in a heteronormative society, the impact of cultural and religious beliefs on homosexuality, attitudes of heterosexual students and the academic staff and the non-availability of support structures for non-heterosexual students. This results of this study revealed that the heterosexual community in South African institutions of higher learning is not as homophobic as some researchers have suggested. The personal narratives that were shared by the participants of this study highlighted that the university community was open to diverse identities and was non-judgemental. In most residences there are students who are out about their sexual identity and this kind of openness gave the participants a supportive social context and a social group that they can identify with. The non-heterosexual students display a lot of understanding with regard to lesbianism as a phenomenon despite its perception as a deviation from heterosexual norms, roles and expectations. However, the results of this study contradict the results of the previous studies which reflected disproportionate incidences of discrimination and prejudices towards non-heterosexual students and they further reveal that the South African youth is not as homophobic as suggested by previous studies.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Lesbian – a homosexual woman

Homosexuality – a sexual attraction to people of one's own sex

Gender – the state of being a male or female (with reference to social or cultural differences)

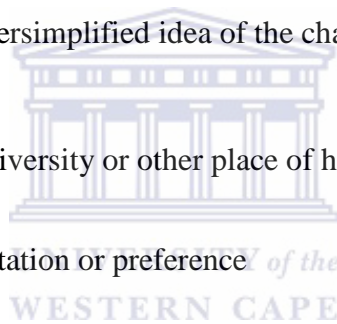
Invisible – treated as if unable to be seen

Homophobia – an extreme and irrational aversion to homosexuality

Stereotypes – preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person

Student – a person studying at a university or other place of higher education

Sexuality – a person's sexual orientation or preference



Patriarchy – a system of society in which men hold most or all of the power

Heterosexism - discrimination or prejudice against homosexuals on the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Dedication	iii
Abstract	iv
Glossary of Terms and Concepts	v

CHAPTER ONE

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. Aims of study	9
3. Preview of the contents of the following chapters	11



CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Overview	12
2. Defining and Conceptualizing Lesbianism	21
3. Heterosexism and Gender	23
4. The Cultural Construction of Gender and Personhood	23
5. Understanding and Talking Identity: Who am I?	25
6. Social Construction and Identity	26
7. Homosexuality and Pathology	28

8. Homosexual People in Institutions of Higher Learning	29
8.1 Developmental Issues: Personal Issues	30
8.2 Exiting a Heterosexual Identity	31
8.3 Developing a Lesbian Identity	31
8.4 Mental Health Issues	32
9. Attitudes towards Lesbians and Gay men	35

CHAPTER THREE

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	38
3.1 The Qualitative Approach	39
3.2 Defining Narratives	40
3.3 The Nature of Narratives	41
3.4 Narratives: theoretical Considerations	44
3.5 The Value of Narrative Research and Analysis	46
3.6 Research Participants	46
3.7 Research Method	48
3.8 Ethical Considerations	49
3.9 Data Collection	50
3.10 Data Analysis	51
3.11 Reflexivity	52



CHAPTER FOUR

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Overview	53
4.2 Significant Themes	54
4.2.1 Identity formation in a Heteronormative Society	54
4.2.2 The Impact of cultural Beliefs on Homosexuality	56
4.2.3 Religious Perspectives on Homosexuality	58
4.2.4 Attitudes of Heterosexual Students	61
4.2.5 Attitudes of the Academic Staff	64
4.2.6 Support Networks and Intervention Programmes	67

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of Findings	69
5.2 Recommendations	71
5.3 Limitations of the Study	72
5.4 Conclusion	73

REFERENCES	79
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APPENDICES

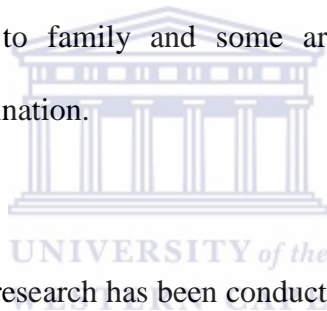
Appendix A	74
Appendix B	76
Appendix C	77



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Attending an institution of higher learning is a major life transition for lesbian and gay youth. In addition to the developmental tasks faced all students in institutions of higher learning and the challenges related to coming to terms with their sexual orientation, lesbian students have to face unique challenges that result from living in a heterosexist and homophobic society. Some of these challenges are personal, and among other things involve maintaining their self-esteem and coping with being different and at the end of the continuum there are interpersonal challenges that encompass the establishment of the same-sex relationships and deciding whether to come-out to family and some are environmental such as facing harassment, violence and discrimination.



Though substantial and valuable research has been conducted on the attitudes that individuals hold against lesbian and gay men there is very little, if any, research that has delved into the experiences of South African black lesbian student population through personal narratives.

Current international studies suggest that lesbian, gay and bisexual students experience high rates of discrimination and harassment on campuses. For lesbian students, this campus climate has adverse effects on the process of identity development (Evans & Broido, 1999). Student development theory suggests that sexual identity formation is a developmental task of the university years (D'Augelli 1991; Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). The experiences that were mentioned earlier subsequently result in a negative impact on their

sexual identity development, retention and academic success (Sanlo, 2004). These facts will be discussed extensively in the following chapter (Chapter 2).

Longerbeam (2007) asserts that the current status of higher education research on lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) students offers an incomplete picture of these overall experiences. Much of the literature on LGB students discusses overt and covert forms of discrimination (e.g. Aberson, Swan & Emmerson, 1999; D'Augelli, 1992; White & Kurpius, 2002). Another portion of the LGB literature focuses on the psychological issues and counselling treatment (e.g. De Bord, Wood, Sher & Good, 1998; Fassinger, 1991; Lipton, 1996; Sweet, 1996) as well as alcohol use by LGB students (e.g. De Boord et al.). A final domain of the research focuses on the heterosexual students' attitude towards LGB students (e.g. Brown and Bowen, 2001; Bergstrom & Sedlack, 1997; Liang & Alino, 2005; Simoni, 1996). There has been a paucity of research in the field of homosexuality in South Africa (Potgieter, 1997). The lack of published homosexual related articles in the South African Psychology Journals is an illustration of this scarcity (Kinsey, 2005). This could be a consequence of diverse issues. The issues may range from scholars fearing homophobic reactions and stigmatization. Diverse views have been expressed on the significance of research in this field (Research Report, 2009). Research with a homosexual content has, with few exceptions, been limited to men and been American based. Funds available for research with a non-heterosexual focus have been limited or non-existent. Further, locating research participants is usually fraught with difficulties because of issues with access, participant fears over confidentiality and ethnic committee frameworks and guidelines (Bensimon, 1992; D'augelli; Goldstein, 1997; Grayson, 1987). Methodological realities impact on the quality of the current research. The

methodological issues include accessing populations, sampling concerns and sexual identity labels (Travers, 2006).

According to Tierney (1992) literature about homosexuality and its relationship with education was framed in one of two ways; either by absence or by defining the topic as deviant. The only scholars who would study the topic were either psychologists or sociologists and they would utilise the framework of deviance to define the topic.

Rivers and D'Augelli (2001) emphasized the need for empirical research on the victimization of the sexual minority groups. The dearth of empirical research on this phenomenon could also be as a result of the stance that is assumed by the non-heterosexual minority to remain invisible by being closeted. This enforced invisibility is not a reflection of the fact that there are fewer lesbian individuals but is rather a product of social erasure (Kinsey, 2005). They remain closeted because of the uncertainty with regards to the process of coming out. Being closeted could be a coping strategy. It is often effective in helping the homosexual person to reduce gay related stress to avoid or escape harm or to retain services or employment that would be otherwise inaccessible to them because of discrimination (Greene, 1993). When remaining closeted is accompanied by the belief that being a lesbian or gay is a sign of inferiority or pathology, it represents an oppression of internalized homophobia. This form of homophobia according to Greene and Herek (1994) is defined as a set of negative attitudes and affects towards homosexuality in other persons and towards homosexual features of oneself. Some of them choose to maintain two identities, namely the heterosexual one known to family and friends at home and the new emerging sexual minority identity. The two worlds

are often kept distinct and this often has detrimental effects on their identity management. Those who disclose their sexual orientation to their families hope for support and validation and others fear losing financial support should they come out and disclose their sexual orientation. Unlike people from other minority groups they usually do not have immediate family members who identify in the same way. As a result, there is a lack of support and understanding about what they are experiencing.

Most gay and lesbian teenagers carry the double burden of being part of an oppressed minority and knowing absolutely no one like themselves (Kissen, 1993). While the sexual minority students share many of the similarities of the other students, there are a number of major stressors and behaviors that are highly distinctive to this population because of the stigmatization and harassment that they are subjected to. They experience a variety of serious problems that deeply affect their physical and mental health as well as their academic success and retention. In addition to the stress that is related to issues of peer pressure, parental authority and personal identity as well as general life events, these students experience minority stress. The concept of minority stress emanates from social and psychological theories and is defined as a state resulting from being culturally sanctioned, categorically ascribed an inferior status, social prejudice and discrimination, as well as the impact of these environmental forces on the individual's well-being and the consequent re-adjustment and adaptation (Brooks, 1981). Meyer (1995) asserts that the minority stress arises not only from negative events but from the holistic experiences that the minority person is subjected to in the society that is dominated by heterosexual norms and stereotypes attached to it.

Lindquist and Hirabayashi (1997) suggest that the minority group related stress is unique from other minority stresses in that lesbian and gay people may not have a cultural identity outside the mainstream and unlike the members of other minority groups they easily veil their minority status. Gay related stress has constantly been associated with psychological stress in general (D'Augelli, et.al 1998). Lewis (2003) stresses the importance of taking into consideration the gay related stress that young lesbian and gay men experience as this may be precipitate a suicidal behaviour.

The focus of this study is on the experiences of black South African students in institutions of higher learning who identify themselves in a non-heterosexual way. No research has been done to understand the life experiences of this minority group even though this phenomenon is gradually emerging and becoming a visible. Their experiences are usually assessed and evaluated by studies that are conducted to determine the attitudes of heterosexual students towards this marginalized group, their counterparts.

This study attempts to provide the narratives which will provide readers with specific experiences undergone by an individual (Crossley, 2000). These students hope for the first time to find themselves in an environment (university) where they are not obligated to identify themselves within the confines of heteronormativity - the social context which assumes that all people are heterosexual, creating an atmosphere where the non-heterosexual youth feel invisible and silenced (Willamette University report, 2008). Lesbian students come from a social background where sexuality is historically, culturally and subjectively constructed and culture providing widely different categories, schema and labels for framing sexual acts and affective experiences (Vance, 1995). They are raised in social environments where homosexuality is defined in negative terms. Maylon (1992) pointed out that children

who later become lesbians and gay men as adults are raised in a culture of bias. Negative attitudes are part of the social context in which they grow up. They lack role models whilst negotiating their dilemma and vulnerability towards AIDs and HIV and coming out at an early age which increases their risk for victimization (Broido, 2000).

Despite the significant changes in contemporary South Africa, the lesbian youth is still faced with numerous challenges which affect their daily lives. They suffer at the hands of a homophobic society which believes that women have stepped out of line through challenging the hegemonic discourses stipulating that they have specific and distinct roles to play – that of wives, mothers, home makers and sexual partners to men. Because lesbians do not fit into this construct, their behavior is socially and legally condemned for diverting from the “natural order”. Some of these challenges were highlighted in the Mail and Guardian. According to the reporter men were raping women to cure them of being lesbians (Mail and Guardian, 2009). One of South Africa’s best known female footballer and a voracious equality rights campaigner as well as the one of the first women to live openly as a lesbian in Kwa Thema a township in Gauteng, was gang raped and brutally beaten before being stabbed 25 times in the face, chest and legs. These attacks were reported to be prevalent in the other provinces such as Cape Town (Western Cape), (Mail & Guardian, 2009). Such corrective attacks signify the magnitude of homophobic reactions to non-heterosexual populations. Gender construction referred to as the roles and responsibilities of women and men that are created in families, societies and cultures become internalized and socially acceptable despite the emerging sexual identity groups which might not fit in with the pervasive heterosexist assumptions (ABC of Women Worker’s Rights and Gender Equality, 2000).

Sanger (2001) advocates for discourses and debates with families and friends around the issues of homophobia in order to produce social change and construct a truly democratic society.

Despite their high expectations about their new social environment, a study conducted by Lopez & Chism (1993) to investigate the campus and classroom experiences of lesbian and gay college students revealed hostile incidences which ranged from the destruction of posters advertising their events to being subjected to offensive remarks. These students perceived to be deviant to the heterosexual norm also experienced feelings of alienation by peers in the residence halls and in their academic program. The students were reported to have difficulties disclosing their sexual orientation to their professors for fear of retaliation in how they would be treated and graded and the failure to respond positively to homophobic results. Evans & D'Augelli (1996) and Rankin (2003), also noted that the environment in institutions of higher learning do not provide a welcoming context in which sexual minority groups may develop a positive identity. Further studies indicate that campus climate affects students' social and emotional development as well as their academic performance (Waldo, 1998).

Attending an institution of higher learning is a major transition for lesbian students and other students who belong to a sexual minority group. This transition plays a significant part in their lives as some of them (lesbian and gay students), are in the formative stage during the university years. Many, if not most share their evolving status with others for the first time during this period as they explore feelings away from the scrutiny of family and high school friends (D'Augelli, 1992). While the majority of this group acknowledges their sexual orientation to themselves during adolescence, few of them manage to come out prior to enrolling to universities (D'Augelli, 1991). The process of disclosing one's lesbian identity

to others starts during this period for traditionally aged students (normative age of admission). Higher education provides an important space where students can be themselves and establish an independent adult identity away from the childhood context of school and family life (Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001). Older lesbian and gay students may also find that their experiences in university years change the way they view themselves and how they choose to present themselves to others. Levine and Burr (1989) as cited in Evans & D'Augelli (1996) found that students who were beginning to develop a strong gay or lesbian self-image but were struggling with coming out had not progressed as far as other students in developing autonomy, purpose and mature interpersonal relationships. Generally, students are faced with a number of developmental tasks which are precipitated by the internal processes of maturation and the environmental challenges offered by their experiences in the novel social context. According to Chickering and Reisser (1993) these vectors of development include developing competence, emotional intelligence moving through autonomy towards interdependence, developing of mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose and developing integrity. For lesbian students, dilemmas related to sexual identity often take precedence over all other developmental tasks. Sexual identity development is a process that evolves over time rather than a decision one makes at a particular point in time (D'Augelli, 1994). In addition to the developmental tasks faced by all students at an institution of higher learning and the challenges related to coming to terms with their sexual orientation, lesbian students face unique challenges that result from living in a heterosexist and homophobic society. Research has shown that lesbian and gay students go through a process that involves "shifting" one's identity from the socially accepted heterosexual identity to the socially denigrated non-heterosexual lesbian and gay identity. Coming to terms with the aspects of the sexual self represents a challenge to someone trying to reconcile a lesbian and gay identity (Dworking, 2000). Although many

individuals are aware of their same gender sexual orientation prior to university years, it is often during these years that they surrender their assumed heterosexual identity (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996).

Higher education supposedly provides an important space where students are able to form personal and independent identities away from the childhood contexts of school and family life but this is disputed by Evans & D'Augelli (1996) and Rankin (2003) who noted that the environment still does not provide a welcoming context in which the sexual minority students can develop a positive identity. The question that the author is battling to answer is to what extent is the climate conducive for students who identify themselves differently from the dominant heterosexist way of distinguishing between men and women? Why is there a dearth of research with regards to the experiences of non-heterosexual students in institutions of higher learning in South Africa when there are claims about the widespread incidents of prejudice, violence, victimization and defamation in university campuses that are experienced by the non-heterosexual students (Berrill, 1992; D'Augelli, 1989a, 1989b; Herek, 1989; National Gay & Lesbian Task Force Institute, 1992; Palmer, 1993; Rhoads, 1995; Sedlacek, 1995).

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to bring about a new dimension to the current studies. It also seeks to explore and expand on the studies done on homosexuality in institutions of higher learning. Current research documenting the existence and structure of negative attitudes towards lesbians mostly focuses on the homosexual group rather than distinguishing between lesbian and men (Bowen & Baurgoois, 2001; Lance, 2002; Mohr & Sedlacek, 2000; Sanlo &

Leiders, 2000). Little attention has been paid to female homophobia except that it seems less intense than male homophobia (Herek & Glunt, 1993; Kite and Whitley, 1993). Sanger, (2001: 40), contends that few local studies have focused on experiences of black South African lesbians and notes that elsewhere they have largely been ignored both in terms of their gender and sexual orientation by the academy. The author concurs with Sanger (2001) when she asserts that in South Africa, feminist researchers have barely taken into cognizance that as a minority group lesbians have been severely oppressed and that black lesbians in particular have been further marginalized through lack of recognition. Lastly the study seeks and attempts to highlight the presence of a student population which has a non-heterosexual identity in the university environment which seems to be dominated by heterosexual norms and practices in and outside of the classroom environment. The study will further assist the higher education sector in identifying where efforts can best be placed to develop this part of the diversity agenda. Harris (1999) expressed concerns about the dichotomy that exists between the environment of education and the rest of the world, and further notes that while significant changes have occurred over the past few years specifically with regards to the process of coming out and the increased visibility of the gay and lesbian community, the magnitude of change is not reflected in the environment under which a child or adolescent grows specifically in the school system. Travers (2006) highlights concerns about the repercussion due to the absence of empirical investigation, as university leaders rely on intuition emotion and popular knowledge when addressing concerns regarding sexual orientation and gender identity across campus life.

RATIONALE

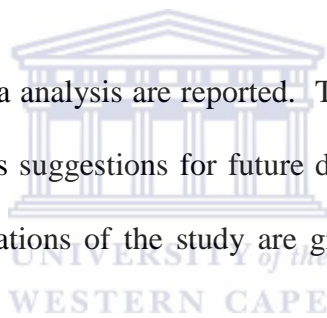
This study seeks to highlight and address the gaps that exist within the academic literature in South Africa with regards to homosexuality.

PREVIEW OF THE CONTENTS OF THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS

Chapter 2 focuses on the research conducted both locally and internationally on homosexuality. This chapter further attempts to highlight the gaps which exist within the literature on homosexuality in South Africa, with reference to the experiences of non-heterosexual students in institutions of higher learning.

Chapter 3 provides a description of the research method utilized in this research. This description includes details of the participants and the instrument utilized in the study.

In chapter 4 the results of the data analysis are reported. This is followed by a discussion of the results in chapter 5 as well as suggestions for future directions and interventions in this area of investigation. The limitations of the study are given and these are followed by a conclusion.



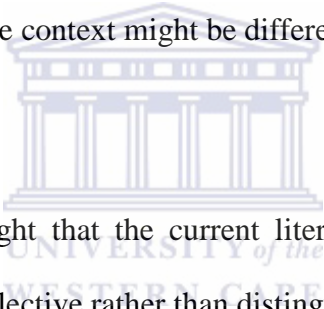
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. OVERVIEW

This chapter focuses on the research conducted both locally and internationally. It will attempt to highlight the gaps that exist within the literature on homosexuality with reference to the experiences of non-heterosexual students in institutions of higher learning. It will also pay attention to the South African view on homosexuality.

The international studies focus on the American literature but the author will be cautious not to generalize the experiences as the context might be different.



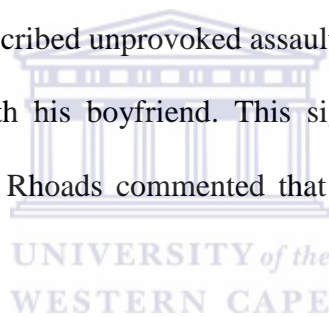
The author would like to highlight that the current literature on non-heterosexual issues focuses on homosexuality as a collective rather than distinguishing between lesbian, gay men, bisexual and transgender populations (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001; Lance, 2007; Mohr & Sadlacek, 2000; Sanlo & Leiders, 2000).

International Studies

Research on homosexuality in America has focused primarily on white middle class individuals in same sex relationships, ignoring the existence of black lesbians and gays who constitutes diverse group of individuals with various cultural origins shaping their experiences in different ways (Capitanio & Herek, 1995; Greene, 1997) as cited in Sanger 2001.

A study conducted by D'Augelli (1989b) which surveyed nearly three quarters of the gay male and lesbian students, reported that they had experienced verbal insults, one quarter reported being physically threatened and one half expressed concerns about their personal safety. In addition, almost all participants indicated that they had not reported these incidents to authorities for fear of additional harassment or lack of follow-up.

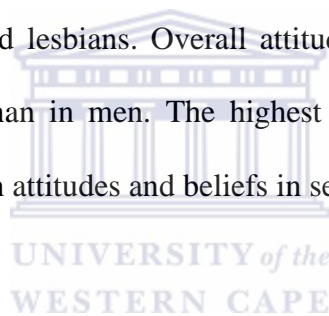
The gay and bisexual male college students in Rhoads (1995), shared vivid incidents of being assaulted at parties, beaten at downtown night clubs, harassed in residence halls and alienated in their classes. One gay male described unprovoked assaults resulting in injuries requiring 18 stitches as he walked home with his boyfriend. This signifies the high levels of sexual prejudices in education settings. Rhoads commented that the stories of discrimination and harassment seem endless.



In a study conducted by Lopez and Chism (1993) which investigated campus and classroom experiences of gay lesbian students, hostile incidents were reported and they ranged from the destruction of posters advertising gay, lesbian and bisexual events, to being subjected to offensive remarks. Gay and lesbian students also experienced feelings of alienation by peers in residence halls and in the academic program. They shared that they were afraid to reveal their sexual identity to their professors for fear of retaliation in how they would be treated and degraded and were also frustrated by faculty which failed to react to homophobic remarks. The silences in campuses leave gay, lesbian and bisexual students wondering where they can comfortably divulge their identity and discuss related concerns (Kato, 1998).

Herek (1995) found evidence of prejudice and discrimination against lesbians and gay men on campuses. Evens and D'Augelli (1996) found the campus environment to be unwelcoming and hostile towards lesbians and gay men. Herek (1998) reported that attitudes of heterosexual peers towards lesbian and gay students have not been favourable. It was reported by Wong, Mc Creary, Carpenter, Eagle and Korchynsky (1999) that heterosexual students have negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men.

Bastow and Johnson (2000) conducted a study amongst female college students with regards to attitudes towards gay men and lesbians. Overall attitudes towards gay men and lesbian women manifested differently than in men. The highest correlation with homophobia for college women were authoritarian attitudes and beliefs in sex role egalitarianism.



A report by D'Augelli (1989) describes the nature of the harassment and discrimination experienced by self-identified lesbian and gay undergraduate students at the University Park campus of the Pennsylvania State University. Information was collected by anonymous surveys. An earlier report on the first survey, which included faculty, staff and graduate students as well as undergraduates, found that three quarters of lesbians and gay men responding had been verbally harassed, one quarter had been threatened with violence and many feared for their safety on campus. Two other studies of the same campus have documented pervasive homophobic views among heterosexual freshmen and among students who were planning to be resident assistants in campus housing. Non-gay students in those studies commonly held negative views of lesbians and gay men, acknowledged making

derogatory comments and shared the presumption that the average lesbian or gay men would be harassed on campus.

Rivers and D'Augelli (2001) document the very high proportion of lesbians and gay men who are subject to bullying, harassment and physical abuse. This phenomenon in its extreme form is evident, even in the absence of research. Newspapers and television news reveal the nature of recent acts of hatred against lesbian and gay male students. The stories of Matthew Sheperd and Teena Brandon illustrate the abovementioned. In 1998, 21-year-old Matthew Sheperd, a student at the University of Wyoming, was a victim of a fatal anti-gay attack. He was brutally beaten, burned, and then tied to a fence in freezing weather. He eventually died (Harper & Schneider, 2003). Teena Brandon, a lesbian from Falls City, Nebraska was brutally raped. Brandon reported the rape to the county sheriff who, instead of protecting her, told the two rapists that Brandon had reported the rape. The two men then shot and killed Brandon (Harper & Schneider, 2003). In view of the above, measuring the pervasiveness of negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, finding the most significant predictors of homophobia, and documenting attitudes towards lesbian and gay male students within a university setting, is a critical first step in promoting change. The assessment of attitudes towards lesbian and gay male students is but one step towards a healthy campus climate. Fundamental to this process is the analysis and dissemination of information so that appropriate intervention programmes can be instituted (Davis, 1998).

Studies conducted by Griffin (1998) and Lance (2002) concluded that verbal and behavioural hostility are directed towards lesbians and gay men; and Peters (2003) supported these findings reporting physical harassment and negative attitudes on university campuses.

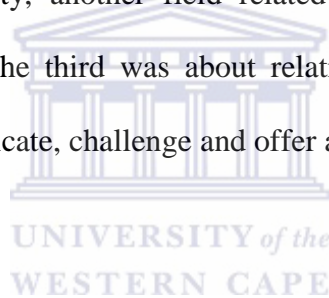
Local Studies

Not much has been published in the area of homosexuality particularly on black South African lesbian students. The majority of the emerging studies focus on lesbianism in a broader context.

Kowen (2001) explored and highlighted the experiences of lesbian youths in families, at school, in their relationship with peers and other lesbians and in the societies in which they live. The author further examines the theories of adolescence as proposed by the psychoanalytic, psychosexual, cognitive and learning theories. The broader population under this study consisted of female youth aged 19 years who identify as lesbian. The participants were required to be females and identify as lesbian. The techniques that were used for recruiting the participants included networking and snowballing. Two notices were displayed on internet sites that are primarily accessed by South African gays and lesbians. A notice of the research was also put up on various pin boards at a Cape Town University. The sample consisted of four English speaking females. Their ages ranges between 16 – 19 years – 2 of the youths were 16, one was 17 and the other was 19 years. In-depth interviews were used to elicit information from each participant. Interviews questions were semi-structured and open-ended. The results highlighted the difficulties experienced by the lesbian youth because of

the feelings of isolation and marginalization due to homophobic attitudes within their social environment.

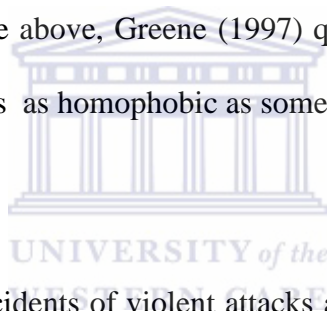
Potgieter (1997) undertook an examination of the discourses regarding lesbianism as produced by a group of black South African lesbians. The way in which female homosexuality has been constructed within the dominant discourses was explored. The study is based within a feminist social constructionist paradigm. The data was collected by conducting nine individual interviews and ten focus groups. The analyzed text identified dominant and alternative discourses as well as minor discourses. Three broad discourse fields emerged, one was around gender and sexuality, another field related to discourses with reference to psychological intervention and the third was about relationships and cultural issues. The results indicated that women replicate, challenge and offer alternative discourses.



Potgieter (2006) in one of her publications, *The Imagined Future for Gays and Lesbians* focuses on the idea of an African homosexuality within the landscape of African feminism and highlights the significance of being understanding and open to the lives and identities of gay and lesbian African men and women. The author of this edition asserts that homosexuality is African. This notion is further supported by Luirink (2000), who asserts that homosexuality is a universal phenomena and is believed to have existed in Africa for centuries.

Greene (1997) conducted a research on sexual orientation in the South African context and interviewed homosexuals in the black community. According to the research, the family's

reaction to black lesbians and gay men that disclose their sexual orientation was to get them healed and subsequently take them to traditional healers. The discourse according to Greene (1997) seems to be that the homosexual person is sick and in need of healing. Family members felt that it was their responsibility to take care of the sick relative whether they approve of the sick relative's conduct or not. The problematic assumption of the sickness of homosexuality in the black South African context, ironically leads to a mandate for family members to maintain contact and support lesbian and gay male family members rather than reject them. According to Greene (1997) the findings in South Africa also suggest that women in the families were more understanding than the men, that homosexuality was not spoken about and when members of the community have been educated they have been more understanding. In the light of the above, Greene (1997) questions whether the heterosexual black South African community is as homophobic as some researchers have suggested.



In the absence of documented incidents of violent attacks against gay and lesbian students in South Africa, Rivers and D'Augelli (2001) documented the very high proportion of lesbians and gay men who are subjected to bullying, harassment and physical abuse. This phenomenon in its extreme form is evident even in the absence of research. Newspapers and television news reveal the nature of acts of hatred against lesbian and gay individuals. To quote a few of those incidents, in 1998, 21 year old Mathew Sheperd, a student at the University of Wyoming, was a victim of a fatal anti-gay attack. He was brutally beaten, burned and then tied to a fence in a freezing weather. He eventually died (Harper & Schneider, 2003). In another incident Teena Brandon, a lesbian from Falls City, Nebraska was brutally raped. Brandon reported the rape to the county sheriff who instead of protecting

her, told the two rapists that Brandon had reported the rape. The two men then shot and killed Brandon (Harper & Schneider, 2003).”

Lesbianism has usually been ignored or treated within the medical or clinical domain. The bulk of research on sexual minority has either excluded or underrepresented women (Harris & Bliss, 1997). This notion is further supported by Greene (1997) when he asserts that the psychology of oppression has received modest attention. According to Greene, the literature indicated that when sexuality has been a focus of research, most researchers have not mentioned the issue of sexual orientation at all. The point of departure is within a heterosexual framework. A comment is further made on the ‘scarcity or complete absence of research in South African psychology journals on both lesbians and gay men’. Tarrant (1992) examined 15 psychologists’ attitudes towards homosexuality and approaches to therapy with homosexual clients. The findings indicate that the majority of psychologists did not view homosexuality as being pathological. However, they demonstrated a lack of familiarity with the literature in their field of study. The lack of familiarity with the literature on lesbian and gay issues was explained by Greene (1997, p. 108) as follows; “Issues pertinent to lesbians and gay South Africans are not popular in the corridors of the post-apartheid South African academia, and such absence of work in the field of homosexuality by professionals, lecturers as well as students in the academia, negatively impacts on attitudes towards lesbian and gay students.

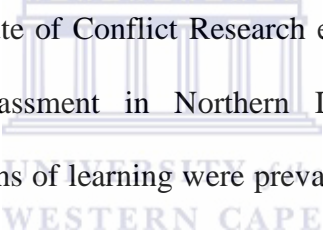
Some of the South African books that are available such as the *Invisible Ghetto* and the *Defiant Desire* have documented mostly the lives of gay men, and their experiences have been

generalized to those of lesbian females. Mark Gevisser (1994) in the book titled the Defiant Desire documented an interview conducted by Mike Olivier with the first Umtata lesbian who openly declared her status. Vera Vimbela depicts the challenges and hardships that she had endure from early childhood through to adulthood. It is a narrative about being stigmatized, shamed and being criminalized as a consequence of her non-heterosexual identity.

It is at this stage worth noting that there is a paucity of research on the issues of homosexuality in the South African institutions of higher learning. Homophobia and stereotypes on issues of homosexuality have strengthened and reinforced the assumptions and beliefs that the lesbian population is non-existent. Their invisibility could either be by choice or by circumstances within the institution which create an environment that is not safe for them to disclose their identity. As a result there is a lack of support and understanding about what they are experiencing. Kissen, (1993) asserts that most gays and lesbian teenagers carry the double burden of being part of an oppressed minority and knowing absolutely no one like themselves. So, not only do they deal with issues of peer pressure, parental authority, sexuality and personal identity but they also have to negotiate a society that fears and rejects them (D'Augelli, 1989a, 1989b; Grayson, 1987; Kissen, 1983; Smith 1993).

The focus of this study is on the experiences of Black South African lesbian students. It is at this stage imperative to highlight the challenges faced by such a population within a broad heterosexual context. Though homosexuality is becoming a visible phenomenon in the aforementioned communities a minimal amount of research has been done to understand the world view of this community.

Despite the non-availability of literature on the experiences of lesbian students in South African institutions of higher learning which highlights the incidences of discrimination, harassment and violence towards this minority group, this phenomenon has become the focus of increasing empirical research internationally (D'Augelli, 1989). Current international studies suggest that lesbian, gay and bisexual students experience high rates of discrimination and harassment on campuses, the classroom environment has an impact on students' coming-out experiences and that developing an individual sexual identity is often linked to becoming politically active in support of gender and sexuality issues.



In a report released by the Institute of Conflict Research entitled "An acceptable Prejudice? Homophobic violence and harassment in Northern Ireland, it became evident that homophobic bullying in institutions of learning were prevalent and recurring. The report also revealed that they were persistent and a widespread problem (Union of Students in Ireland, 2004).

2. DEFINING AND CONCEPTUALISING LESBIANISM

Different schools of thought have emerged with regards to the origins of sexual orientation. Money (1987) provides a detailed examination of the process by which prenatal development affects an individual's physical sex/gender and the complex relationship between the prenatal influences, post-natal influences and the individual's gender identity. This psychobiological approach is compatible with the viewpoint that one's sexuality is relatively fixed and an essential characteristic of one's identity. It also provides a framework for understanding the

flexibility of sexual orientation, including bisexuality. Because Money's perspective is based on his research with atypical prenatal development, his work has been criticized to the extent that he views homosexuality as atypical and that he uses as a norm of stereotypic heterosexual behaviour for masculinity and femininity. Readers who view sexual orientation as a matter of choice may find Money's perspective incompatible with their own.

In contrast to the essentialist view, which argues that human behaviour is predetermined by genetic, biological or physical mechanism and therefore is fixed and not subject to change (Szesnat, 1997; Vance, 1989), other scientists argue that sexual orientation is a social construction. Regardless of the origin of one's sexual and affectional preferences, it is the social meaning attached to them that is critical. At the core of this constructionist view is the idea that all individuals construct their own identity. Although this process is influenced by individual characteristics and by societal norms, the self-creating and re-creating process can transcend the limits. This implies that one may construct one's sexual orientation through choice, possibly influenced by political ideology, group loyalty to the family or nation, religious inspiration or other powerful factors that influence one's construction of social reality.

A major contemporary view of sexual orientation development is that it reflects an interaction between some sort of inborn disposition to learn sexual-erotic responses and key experiences at critical times of development. There is currently a debate concerning the extent of choice versus no choice in the nature of sexual orientation. Whether sexual orientation is fixed or immutable as race, eye colour, height is of considerable interest in the political debate about

the meaning of sexual orientation. The no choice position is that if sexual orientation is determined, perhaps as some essential part of oneself, such as one's race then civil rights protection would be granted more readily as is the case in South Africa. In contrast, persons who believe sexual orientation is a matter of choice imply that people have voluntarily chosen to subject themselves to stigma and oppression and therefore do not require legal protection since they could choose to conform to the majority position. Some religious leaders believe that homosexuality is a sinful behaviour that can be changed through some kind of religious practice.

3. HETEROSEXISM AND GENDER

Whereas biological sex is about physiology, gender is about behaviour. The ideology of gender is a set of shared beliefs, values and customs concerning 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. Children internalize the rules for behaviour prescribed by this cultural ideology in the course of defining their gender identity (i.e. their core sense of self as a man or a woman, (Money, 1987). Because they are learned at an early age, the meanings attached to masculinity and femininity subsequently seem 'natural' rather than socially constructed. Homosexuality is associated with deviation from something so 'natural'. Gay people are stigmatized not only for their erotic behaviours but for their perceived violation of gender norms. Heterosexuals with deep-seated insecurities concerning their own ability to conform to cultural standards may even perceive homosexuality as threatening their sense of self as a man or woman. A dual pattern of denial and condemnation is associated with gender. People who do not conform to gender roles regardless of their actual sexual orientation are often labelled as homosexual and stigmatized or attacked. Fear of such labelling leads homosexuals and

heterosexuals alike to monitor their own behaviour carefully to avoid any appearance of gender non-conformity (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993). Being heterosexual is by no means a situation of unproblematic privilege (Adkins and Merchant 1996).

4. THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER AND PERSONHOOD

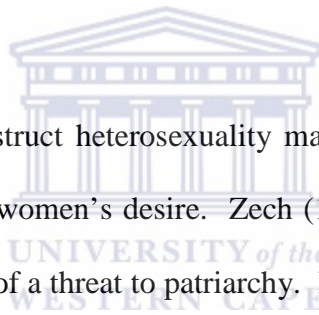
Many people experience culture as a way of life. However, it may also be experienced as a productive process which provides us with the tools to master the world. In the area of the sexual, culture further provides us with an unquestioning acceptance of a sexual instinct. Through socialization, culture presents vivid images and ideas of acceptable sexual behaviours. Through culture, sex becomes institutionalised or ritualized and ultimately imprints upon our minds a dominant sexual ideology (Ettore, E & Rista, E. 1995).

We all live in a world of symbols that assign meaning and value to the categories of male and female. Despite several decades of consciousness raising, advertising on television and in the print media perpetuates sexual stereotypes. Although advertisements depicting women as housewives are less prominent, women are increasingly shown in the workplace context. In children's cartoons, women are still helpless victims that the fearless male hero must rescue. Toys are targeted either for little boys or little girls and are packaged appropriately in colors and materials culturally defined as either masculine or feminine.

Contemporary feminist theorists argue that the dual assumption of innate sexuality and an innate desire to mother has restricted women's lives and masked social constructs as biological imperatives. Adrienne Rich with Alice Rossil as quoted by Adrienne Hantzis and Valerie Lehr (1986) frame their discussion of compulsory heterosexuality and mothering to be

conventionally understood as being central to women's identity. Biologically men have only one innate orientation – a sexual one that draws them to women, while women have two innate orientations – sexual toward men and reproductive towards their children.

Rich (1986) asserts that unless the compulsory nature of heterosexuality is revealed, women's sexual options will be regulated toward relationships with men. The unmasking of compulsory heterosexuality disrupts materialism as well, challenging the social devaluing of the labour of mothering which depends on understanding mothering at the expression of an innate tendency.



The social mechanisms that construct heterosexuality manifest self-perpetuating patriarchal structures which seek to contain women's desire. Zech (1999) identifies the containment of women's desire as the mediation of a threat to patriarchy. It is certainly within the interests of the patriarchal system to keep women from examining their relationships to other women, for the greatest threat to male dominance lies precisely in women redefining their own relationships to each other without regard to their patriarchal obligations to men and the institutions of marriage and the family.

5. UNDERSTANDING AND TALKING IDENTITY: Who am I?

The topic of identity and the self has generated much philosophical and psychological debate. Our general and taken for granted understanding of the individual or the self as central, autonomous, rational, unique, bounded and self-contained has come under fire in the light of

post-structuralist critique. Post-structuralism has made it difficult if not impossible to talk about an individualized, coherent unified self or object who has inherent qualities that enable action on the world (Archer, 2000; Burr, 1995; Craib, 1998; Woodward, 2000). Within post-structuralist theorization, there is a talk of a de-centered talk, a multiple self and even a contradictory self.

Woodward (2000) argues that identities are formed through interaction between people and their 'positioning' in the social world. Therefore personal dimensions of identity involve an interrogation of the relations and connections to the social world in which the person is embedded. Put differently, identity involves an inner-relationship, Miller (1984), suggests an inter-penetration between personal/individual agency and the social/cultural structure. In this way, identity provides a link between the individual and the social world. While individuals have agency, i.e. control in exerting who they are and who they become, this agency exists within socially constrained, mediated and structured realities. We therefore need to think about identity in ways that allow for agency and actions within the constraints of social structure, language, material and cultural conditions.

Therefore identities are touched by social and material realities. People are socially positioned in different ways (Craib, 1998) which shape experiences and makes certain identities possible and renders others inaccessible and impossible (cited in Woodward, 2000).

6. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND IDENTITY

The social constructionist framework underpins the thoughts, ideas and the discussions around this study.

Research from a social constructionist perspective is concerned with identifying the various ways of constructing social realities that are available in a particular culture, to explore the conditions of their use and to trace their implications for human experience and social practice (Willig, 2001).

The social constructionism draws our attention to the fact that human experience including perceptions, are historically, culturally and linguistically mediated. What is perceived and experienced is not a direct reflection of environmental conditions. This does not mean we can never really know anything, rather this suggests that there are 'knowledges' rather than knowledge. In this case sexuality and gender cannot only be categorized as male or female but in trying to make sense of the world around us we need to look beyond the heterosexuality and its norms.

Social constructionist theory states that sexuality, is far from being inevitable or biologically driven, natural or normal, it is socially constructed, shaped, controlled and subject to social, economic and political developments and circumstances (Burr, 1995; Weeks, 1986). The perspective of social construction has developed primarily out of an opposition to the essentialist perspective which views sexuality and sexual identity as a uniform, fixed and an unchanging phenomenon (Burr, 1995; Greene, 1985; Greenberg, 1988). As a consequence, social constructionist theory asserts that sexuality, as a practice and an identity varies in the

way it is seen and practiced from time to time and from place to place (Burr, 1995; Edwards, 1997; Greene, 1985; Greenberg, 1988; Weeks, 1986).

In line with the concept of social construction, Golden (1987) believes that identity construction is both a personal as well as a social process. The process of self-definition takes place within the context of the existing dominant culture's definitions, the meanings and values of society as well as from those that emanate from within the minority community itself (Golden, 1987). Lesbianism can be seen to be a product of many influences. It does not exist outside of history but is a historical product (Kritzinger, 1987; Potgieter, 1997; Weeks, 1986). Thus it is important to acknowledge that understandings of lesbian women are bound in particular contexts and historical timeframes. It is also important to note that there is no uniform lesbian experience and that lesbian women around the world may experience and label same sex identification/ sexual intimacy differently (Chan, 1993; Espin, 1993; Tsui, 1990).

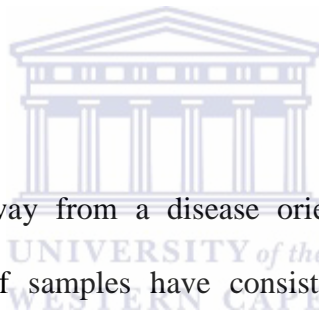
Therefore the social constructionist framework alerts us to the dangers of looking into the world with unquestioning eyes; it gives us a scope to reflect on what is presented to us as being the absolute truths.

7. HOMOSEXUALITY VERSUS PATHOLOGY

Prior to the early 1970's the view of homosexuality as a mental disorder predetermined the goals of treatment for practitioners. The aim was to provide patients with a 'cure' for their

psychological condition. Therapeutic success was usually defined as the elimination of homosexual behaviour.

Over the past decade this situation has changed, there has been an emergence of view points that have sought to re-conceptualise ideas about mental health and homosexuality. The feminist and gay movements have directly challenged the view of homosexuality as a sickness. In the face of such social change several professional bodies have recognised the need to move away from a sickness model of homosexuality and one of the steps toward achieving this was the deletion per se from the American Psychiatric Association's official list of mental diseases.



Research supports the move away from a disease oriented approach to homosexuality. Numerous studies on variety of samples have consistently concluded that there is no difference in psychological adjustment between homosexuals and heterosexuals. This is not to say that psychologically disturbed individuals who happened to be homosexual do not exist not that certain individuals may in a stigmatizing situation have problems associated with being homosexual, but rather that homosexuality per se is unrelated to psychological adjustment.

Despite supportive evidence to a move away from psychopathological models of homosexuality not all therapists accept such changes. Instead they may continue to uphold the view that homosexuality is an important and a serious mental disorder. A range of views about homosexuality therefore currently inform the therapeutic practice even among

therapists who have come to regard homosexuality as 'non-pathological'. There will be important differences in the extent to which they reject not merely a pathological attitude toward homosexuality but equally important, the casual models on which they predicate such attitudes. In recent years however, new ways of thinking about homosexuality have begun to emerge that require us to face the contradictions inherent in the therapist saying, "I accept you" while at the same time maintaining a pathological model of explanation. (Garnetts and Kimmel, 1993) (pg 117-119)

8. HOMOSEXUAL PEOPLE IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

Attending an institution of higher learning is a major life transition for lesbian and gay youth. In addition to the developmental tasks faced by all students in institutions of higher learning and the challenges related to coming to terms with their sexual orientation lesbian students have to face unique challenges that result from living in a heterosexist and homophobic society. Some of these are personal, such as maintaining their self-esteem and coping with being different; some are interpersonal, such as the establishment of the same-sex relationships and deciding whether to come-out to family and some are environmental, such as facing harassment, violence and discrimination. These challenges according to D'Augelli (1991a) become difficult as soon as the growing adult decides to become known as a lesbian, and that is when she has to come out to others on campus. While campus climates vary, few present a welcoming environment for lesbian students.

8.1 Developmental Issues: Personal Issues

A majority of students in institutions of higher learning face a number of developmental tasks which are precipitated by the internal processes of maturation and the environmental challenges offered by their experiences in such unprotected environments. Chickering & Reisser (1993) assert that lesbian student over and above the above-mentioned challenges, dilemmas related to sexual identity often take precedence over all other developmental tasks. Sexual identity development is a process that evolves over time rather than a decision that one makes at a particular point in time. The way in which one views oneself as a sexual being and chooses to present oneself may change significantly over the lifespan, particularly for individuals who identify as lesbians. Individuals born in this society are presumed to be heterosexual, learning the norms and expectations related to heterosexuality. Thus, developing an alternative identity requires two processes: letting go of an ingrained heterosexual identity and learning what it means to be lesbian. Given the heterosexist and homophobic society in which we live neither process is easy (D'Augelli, 1994).

8.2 Exiting Heterosexual Identity

Although many individuals are aware of their same gender sexual orientation prior to tertiary education, it is often during this period that they surrender their assumed heterosexual identity and identify as lesbians. Lesbian individuals go through several stages in the process of relinquishing their heterosexual identity (Levine & Evans, 1991). The first is an awareness of attraction to individuals of the same gender. Eventually most individuals move to the next stage which involves self-labelling as lesbian. At this time individuals make some tentative contacts with lesbian and gay communities. Often these steps are taken when students are

away from families, high school peers and home communities. The success or failure of these early efforts determines if the individual moves to other stages in which she becomes more comfortable identifying as a non-heterosexual person and discloses her sexual orientation to others. Because of the pervasiveness of heterosexist assumptions in our society, coming out becomes a lifelong process. (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996).

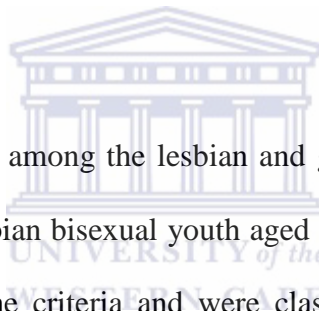
8.3 Developing a Lesbian Identity

In addition to letting go of a heterosexual identity by acknowledging to self and others one's homoeroticism, the lesbian person must also determine what it means to assume a new sexual identity. Because of the scarce nature of the lesbian role models and the overwhelming negative cultural stereotypes this can be a difficult process. Internalised myths about homosexuality have to be unlearned and an individualized identity be created. Other aspects of the self, including values, beliefs, interests and skills get examined in the light of this newly formed identity. Henderson (1984), as cited in Savin-Williams (1996), suggests that women's sexual orientation may be more variable than men's and its expression may be more tied to particular relationships, alternatively, women may be more influenced by gender role expectations and find it more difficult to relinquish their heterosexual identities.

8.4 Mental Health Issues

Comprehensive reviews of the research indicate that emotional adjustment and mental illness are not related to sexual orientation (Gonsiorek, 1991). Nonetheless, the oppression, stigmatization, hostility and rejection experienced by lesbian individuals can cause mental health problems and can also exacerbate other psychological problems they may have. These

problems often become especially acute during their tertiary education days. Suicide and self-destructive behaviours are serious problems among the sexual minority students. Gibson's (1989) review suggested that lesbian and gay youth are two to three times more likely than the heterosexual youth to attempt suicide and that 30% of all youth suicides may be committed by gay or lesbians. A survey of 1 900 lesbians between the ages of 17 and 24 revealed that 59% were at risk for suicide (National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation, 1987). In another study, 19% of gay college students had made suicide attempts (Schneider, Farberow & Kruks, 1989). The students reported feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, alienation and pain at the time of the suicide attempts. Many attempts were related to conflict about sexual orientation.



Substance abuse is also common among the lesbian and gay youth. Ramafedi (1987) found that over 80% of the gay and lesbian bisexual youth aged 15 to 19 that he studied used drugs and almost 60% of them met the criteria and were classified as abusers. Among young lesbians, 8% reported that alcohol use was a problem and 6% noted problems with drug use (National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation, 1987). As many as 30% of lesbian and gay population are estimated to be alcoholic compared to 10% of the heterosexual population (Nardi, 1982).

Another issue that has greatly affected lesbian and gay communities is the impact of HIV epidemic. In D'Augelli's (1991a) study of the mental health problems of gay college men, 92% reported being worried about AIDS. Although young gay and lesbian individuals that are currently studying in institutions of higher learning have fewer sexual partners and engage

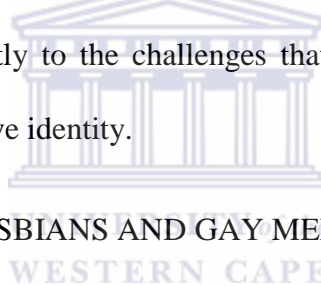
safer sex practices more consistently than older cohorts, they nonetheless face difficult issues of discussing safer sex with potential partners, deciding about HIV testing and maintaining safer sex patterns overtime. Young gay and lesbian students often struggle with whether to be tested for the HIV virus, fearing that they will be unable to cope with the knowledge that they are HIV positive. This sexual minority have to cope also with the impact of seeing friends and acquaintances become ill and die. Grief and depression are common reactions to this reality (Martin, 1989).

Young lesbians and gay men report high levels of emotional distress. Emotional problems led 72% of the gay and lesbian teenagers in Ramafedi's (1987) study to seek help from a psychologist or psychiatrist. In D'Augelli's (1991a) study of gay college, over 60% reported having trouble with their emotions and experiencing depression and 77% noted that they felt anxious. Lesbians surveyed by the National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation (1987) reported similar concerns, though the prevalence rate was considerably lower.

Several researchers have found evidence that positive psychological adjustment and self-esteem are associated with high levels of sexual identity development. Miranda & Sterns (1989) reported that self-labelling and self-disclosure as lesbian or gay was related to emotional well-being. In a study of gay and lesbians between the ages of 18 and 46, Walters and Simoni (1993) also found that acceptance of one's gay or lesbian identity was positively associated with self-esteem. Schneider and colleagues (1989) reported that only 2 of 21 gay young adults who reported serious suicide attempts indicated feeling good about being gay or

lesbian before the attempt and 4 of the men had disclosed their sexual orientation to a significant person in their life.

Recognising the stressors associated with identity formation, D'Augelli (1993) noted, "It is not surprising that the most common phenomenological experience of being a young lesbian or gay man is a profound sense of difference" (p.250). Lesbian and gay students are immersed in heterosexually oriented college environments. Activities, social functions and educational programs are nearly exclusively geared to a heterosexual audience while the issues and needs of lesbian and gay students are ignored. Isolation resulting from a lack of role models, difficulty in finding a peer group and non-acceptance by the heterosexual community contribute significantly to the challenges that lesbian and gay college students experience in developing a positive identity.



9. ATTITUDES TOWARDS LESBIANS AND GAY MEN

Lesbian and gay men have historically been the victims of discriminatory laws and prejudices in South Africa. Because of a history of division and resistance, the experiences of homosexuals in South Africa are unique (Gevisser & Cameron, 1994). Until 1994, our country (South Africa) was ruled by a minority government which founded a separatist ideology based on conservative theology, barring all expressions of sexuality outside heterosexual marriage. Therefore, the laws prior to 1994 denied lesbians and gay men their basic human rights and reduced them to social outcasts and criminals (Gevisser & Cameron, 1994).

Lesbians and gay men have historically experienced oppression in the form of harassment and violence; discrimination in areas such as employment, housing, access to education and human services, and laws that have either actively discriminated against them or failed to protect their basic human rights (Mohipp & Morry, 2004). This oppression served its purpose for many years by keeping lesbians and gay men invisible. At the same time, the prevailing images of lesbians and gay men were pejorative stereotypes which fuelled homophobia and heterosexism.

There has been a history of portraying and stereotyping the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in a negative way. This vision has a significant impact on if and how this minority group come out, how they feel about themselves, their schooling (primary, secondary and tertiary) experiences, the occupations they choose and their relationships with and acceptance by their families and friends (Burnett, 1998; Kitzinger, 1996a, 1996b, 1989; Perkins, 1996). Unfortunately attempts to address homophobia or provide positive non-heterosexual role models within educational facilities such as schools and tertiary institutions are often met with indifference or accusations of promoting a particular life-style or gay agenda (Beckett, 1997).

Greene (1997) maintains that certain fields in psychology have been negatively affected South Africa between 1948 and 1988. Seedat (1988) highlights the manner in which oppressive discourses historically and continues to inform the research agenda, practices and theoretical concerns of many South African psychologists, lecturers and students. Regardless of the fact that South Africa officially adopted a constitution that guarantees the protection for lesbians

and gay men, societal norms generally forbid open discussions about sexual orientation which makes it difficult to ascertain whether heterosexual individuals are accepting of lesbians and gay men. According to the Human Rights Watch (2001) litigation has not filtered down to the level of everyday life in South Africa and prejudice against lesbians and gay men persist. According to Lewis, Derlega, Griffin and Krowinski (2003), the lives of lesbians and gay men are often punctuated with both blatant and subtle reminders of negative attitudes that still exist. As a result of fear and anxiety lesbians and gay men do not disclose their sexual identities.

Luirink (2000) indicates that societal attitudes towards homosexuality are gradually shifting. The Society is slowly coming to terms with homosexuality in South African communities, as reflected by, among others, tolerant social institutions. For example, South Africa is one of the first countries in Africa that has taken a step towards alleviating homophobia and accommodating homosexuals. This was done by banning from its constitution discrimination based on sexual orientation, and thus endorsing homosexual rights in the South African constitution (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). Although the South African government has taken a step towards tolerating and protecting homosexual rights in the country, Luirink (2000) contends that many South Africans still view homosexuality in a negative light and thus treat homosexuals in a discriminatory manner. Given the state of societal attitudes towards homosexuality, it can be speculated that coming out of the closet and disclosing one's homosexuality takes much courage and determination as it is perceived as deviating from societal norms, hence a need for will power to risk the consequences. In a society where people's objectivity is clouded by societal norms and beliefs against

homosexuality, it becomes difficult, if not undesirable for homosexuals to disclose their sexual orientation without fear of being discriminated against (Blasius & Phelan, 1997).

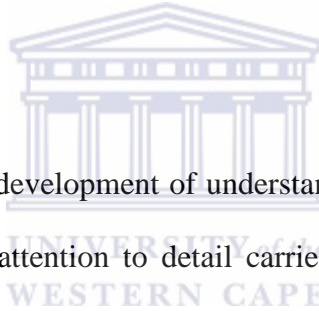


CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 The qualitative Approach

For this study a qualitative research methodology was preferred and utilized as a tool to access personal experiences of individuals (Cieurzo, Keitel & Newman, 1994). Qualitative methodology values the description of the perceived reality of a selected group of individuals (Asher & Asher, 1999) as cited in Kowen, 2001. When conducting research with minority groups it is critical that investigators remain open to the richness and a variety of experiences within that population. This is one way that stereotypes are avoided as they tend to be easily attributed to minority populations (Cieurzo, Keitel & Newman, 1994).



Qualitative research is about the development of understandings consequent to and not prior to the analysis of the text. The attention to detail carries the weight of the research with understandings gradually emerging as a result of the investigation (Mouton & Marias, 1988; Rennie, 1989). Unlike quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers predominantly stress that objective reality can never be captured rather, reality is said to be socially constructed. Thus qualitative researchers study phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them in particular social contexts and historical time (Banister, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Mason (1998) asserts that there are three critical qualities of qualitative research. Firstly it is grounded in an interpretive philosophy that employs flexible methods of data generation. Secondly, it is sensitive to the social context and lastly, it uses methods of analysis that

involves an understanding of complexity, detail and context. Within the qualitative research approach, the research strategy is a contextual one where the focus of an individual case or small amount of cases is on the specific context of the meanings that emerge. In this approach known as the 'insider perspective', the general meaning of the data is more salient than the specific meaning of its parts (Mouton, 1996).

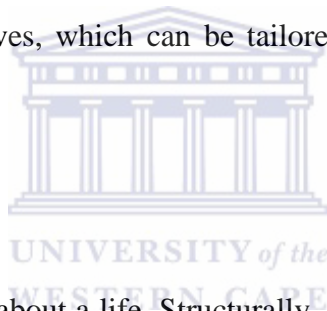
Qualitative methods are specifically geared towards discovery, exploration and inductive logic (Patton, 1990).

This study utilized an increasingly popular research in the social sciences known as the narrative research (Andrews, Sclater, Rustin, Squire & Lieblich, 2004). Roberts (2000) postulates that a narrative study of lives is a qualitative research strategy that deals with personal stories told to describe human action and to make sense of events that surround an individual. This method is primarily concerned with individuals' personal stories or stories of identity and the self. There are various 'storied' research approaches, all of which accord primacy to individual's personal stories such as autobiographical methods, life story or life history; life course research. Miller (2000) suggests that biographical and narrative research approaches are revolutionary in social science practice as they require paradigm shifts in thinking differently about the nature of social scientific research. Biographical and narrative methodologies take the individual's personal and social experiences as their primary base and foci of interest (Chamberlane, Bornat & Wengraf, 2000). The theoretical power and practical value of these story-based methodologies lie in their linking of 'the personal' and 'the social' in exploring and studying self, identity and society. Therefore narrative research is concerned

with the connections of the psychological realities of ‘the individual’ or ‘the personal’ with ‘the social’ and ‘cultural’ dimensions of experience. Narrative methodologies are qualitative research strategies that are an alternative to traditional scientific social understandings of self and society (Roberts, 2002).

3.2 Defining Narratives

There is a great conceptual diversity in literature about narratives and its definitions (Riessman, 1993). Like most elusive concepts, the definitions of narratives tend to be too broad and inclusive and too narrow and strict. However, Roberts (2002) argues for loosely formulated definitions of narratives, which can be tailored by an individual researcher for different studies and objectives.



Put simply, a narrative is a story about a life. Structurally, a story is generally identifiable by a beginning, middle and ending. Narratives are primarily characterized by a sequence of events that take place in time. Berger (1997) defines a narrative as a story that contains an ordered sequence of events temporally organized. Sarbin’s definition of a narrative or story incorporates the main characteristics of narratives sequenced and interrelated events, foregrounded individuals and crises and resolutions. (Toolan, 2001). The most critical aspect of narrative is the plot or the structure that the story takes. A narrative is only meaningful because of the plot in the story Leich (1986) defines the plot as the ‘dynamic, sequential’ element in narratives.

3.3 The Nature of Narratives

A narrative is a story of the events and individual experiences, told most often in a chronological fashion for the purpose of understanding, conveying and creating meaning of experience. People understand themselves through telling and hearing stories. We live in stories not in statistics asserts Gilbert (1997). Narratives are useful in their focus on people's complex lives as narrated by them rather than being limited to an aspect or portion of an individual's life (Miller, 2000). In this way, narrative research is primarily concerned with people's collection of their past and present as well as their anticipation of their future (Miller, 2000). Narratives therefore offer us as researchers an advantage to pay attention to the specificity of lived human experience and social realities (Stephenson, 2000). Narration is the forward movement of a description of actions and events that makes the backward action of self-understanding possible. Stories provide direct access to the richness of an encounter including the situations, perceptions and feelings that guide that person. Stories also serve to relate individual experiences to the explanatory constructs of society and culture. The study of multiple stories allows the discovery of connections that link people together and accounts for the differences between people. People use narratives to explain the events that befall them. Stories create a sense of order out of chaos and give significance to and inexplicable events.

Historically and across cultures, narratives have been used in societies to inspire and guide ethics, morality and practice and pass along tradition. As asserted by McIntyre (2001) only narrative descriptions of human life can render a system of ethics coherent and meaningful. Narratives teach powerful lessons about right and wrong, good and bad and the right and wrong way to live.

Narratives are stories of the self and of identity. Narratives are the search for meaning making and identity construction. Identities are not pre-given biological entities but rather constructed and reconstructed differently (Crossley, 2000). The relationship between what really happens and how a person chooses to remember depicts agency and personal choice in a biographical and narrative episode. An individual may choose and select different events from their past that signify important aspects in their lives and choose to frame their narrative in a particular way and draw conclusions from it as they will (McAdams and Bowman, 2001) in perhaps presenting a more desirable image or account of themselves. Craib (2000) argues that sometimes people construct myths or myth-based stories for themselves. However, the question is not about the distinction between 'a true' or 'less true' story but rather about its structure and 'psychological' function it performs for the individual. Riessman (1993) argues that the 'idea of truth' – the extent to which researchers should accept what participants say - is a problem in narrative research. The issue of truth is approached differently; some assume that narratives constitute reality.

In addition, narration provides insights for the individual teller. In this way, as Munning and Cullum-Swan (1974) argue, narratives can 'empower people by giving more intimate understandings of their lives and contexts (Roberts, 2002).

Autobiographical narratives involve distance and intimacy. Distance occurs because the narrator is separated by the narrated events in time. This reflective stance could not be possible while the events were in progress. The aspect of intimacy is important in narrative enquiry because the researcher as an active participant in the interview process is the main research tool. The researcher has his or her interpersonal skills to set up the conditions for the narration to occur. Not only does the act of telling a story provide the study participant or

narrator an opportunity to order and make sense of his or her experience, the dynamics between the researcher and narrator has a bearing on how the story is told and received. The researcher identifies who the best informants are for his study, makes contact and negotiates a convenient and comfortable meeting time and place for the interview to occur.

Narrative research involves getting a story from an individual who is identified as having some knowledge or experience with the topic of the study. This places the narrator in a position of relative power because he or she knows more about something than the researcher. In addition, the fact that a researcher finds the person's experience interesting, important or relevant suggests that the experience being investigated has some worth or merit. The researcher facilitates disclosure by conveying empathy, respect and genuineness. These characteristics help in uncovering rich data because the narrator feels that the researcher can be trusted with the story. Conversely, the researcher who is bored or gestures with raised eyebrows or facial expressions of disgust is signaling to the narrator his or her disinterest or disapproval of what is being revealed.

3.4 Narratives: Theoretical Considerations

The turn to narratives in the social sciences assumes that people are constructed in and by the stories they tell (Crossely, 2000; Denzin, 2000). The turn to narrative is a theoretically strategic move in the interrogation of self and identity as well as the broader social, cultural and historical realities. Wengraf (2000) reads narratives and life histories of individuals as potentially symptomatic expressions or manifestations of history, society and social ideology of their context. Narrative enquiry rests on the epistemological assumption that we as human

beings make sense of random experiences by the imposition of story structures. That is, we select those elements of experiences to which we will attend, and we pattern those chosen elements in ways that reflect the stories available to us. Although the notions of story is common to every society, the stories themselves differ widely – one of the defining features of a culture is the story structures through which it makes sense of the world. Narratives allow researchers to present experiences holistically in all its complexity and richness.

Narrative psychology assumes that we live in a “story-shaped world (Sarbin, 1994) when who we are can be and is immersed and constructed in narratives, our dreams, hopes, fears and all that is human is potentially storied (Sarbin, 1994). Similarly, Berger (1997) argues that narratives pervade our lives from the time we are born to the time we die, we are constantly swimming in a sea of ‘stories’ and potential stories. White (1980), suggests that narratives are a ‘human universal’, in that the ability to narrate one’s life is not culture specific but rather trans-historical and trans-cultural. Like White (1980), Riessman (1993) also argues that telling stories about past events, experiences about one’s life is a ‘human universal’. Human beings, universally tell stories about who they are. However, it is these stories that may take different forms in history and cross-culturally. White (1980) argues that the nature of narrative is perhaps the very ‘nature of our culture’ and ‘humanity’.

Underlying the narrative research approach is a fundamental belief that humans are essentially ‘storied selves’ and that human experience is storied (Roberts, 2002; Andrews, Squire & Tambouskou, 2004). Elms (1994), argues that human beings differ from other creatures in their capacity and ability to review and recount their personal pasts in narrative

form. In addition, humans differ from other creatures in their fascination with the personal pasts and life stories of others (Elms, (1994). In this way researchers are also storytellers, telling stories about the people's stories (Denzin, 2000). Therefore, according to Elms (1994) the ability for humans to construct their lives in narrative distinguishes them from other living things.

Crossley, (2000) argues that the distinguishing human characteristic is our 'reflective capacity'. This makes human beings essentially interpretive creatures, who constantly reflect on their experiences on themselves and on their social world. Like Crossley, (2000) Stephenson (2000) argues that humans are involved in an ongoing process of making sense and giving meaning to their experience. Thus humans organize their experiences in and through the construction of narratives. Narratives are therefore complex cognitive schemas that organize individual human actions and events into a coherent whole (Stephenson, 2000). Narratives are a strategy in organizing and making sense of our lives and experiences.

3.5 The Value of Narrative Research and Analysis

Narrative research is an attempt to understand the specific experiences undergone by an individual (Crossley, 2000). My investigation and analysis of the stories of lesbian students' experiences is going to take place within this framework. Narratives offer a way of entering the multiple, diverse, complex and sometimes contradictory experiences of the other.

Stephenson (2000) suggests that our understanding of the present is contingent on our recollections of the past and aspirations of the future. Narratives are useful in their focus on peoples' complete lives and as narrated by them, rather than being limited to an aspect or

portion of an individual's life (Miller, 2000). In this way, narrative research is primarily concerned with peoples' recollection of their past and present and their anticipation of the future (Miller, 2000). Narratives therefore offer us as researchers an advantage to pay attention to the specificity of lived human experience, while also disclosing the variety and complexity of human experience and social realities (Stephenson, 2000).

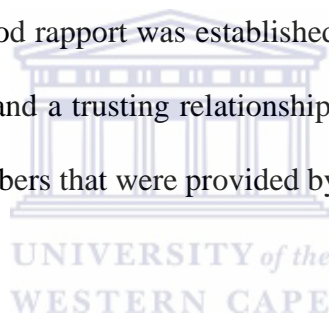
3.6 Research Participants

Five students from an institution of higher learning in Western Cape Province with predominantly Black students (racial classification in South Africa for Blacks, Coloureds and Indians) were used for this study. All the participants were black Xhosa speaking students aged between 19 and 25 years who openly identify themselves as lesbians. Blyth (1989) recommends that the experience of Black gay women be researched and documented to create a more accurate context for understanding sexual orientation. Their participation was voluntary. According to Garnetts and Kimmel (1993) this problem is a cause for concern because those subjects who willingly volunteer themselves for an enquiry probably possess different experiences which could be different from those who choose not to become involved in research.

Potgieter (1997) postulates that the nature of the subject under investigation places restrictions on the recruitment and selection of participants.

Due to nature of the research participants for this study and the struggle that scholars experience in identifying prospective participants with a non-heterosexual identity, a technique known as the snowball sampling was used as a method to access such participants for this study. Browne (2005) postulates that this method is often used because the population

under investigation is 'hidden' either due to low numbers of potential participants or the sensitivity of the topic for example women who do not fit in with the hegemonic heterosexual norm, as it is the case with this study. Snowball sampling not only results in the recruitment of particular samples, the use of this technique produces participants' accounts of their lives (Browne, 2005). Neuman (1994) describes this process as a 'multi-stage technique' which begins with few people and spreads out through links to other people. These people need to be directly connected to each other but are in fact linked to one another through the initial individuals and the common factor of belonging to a particular organization which created the links initially. The initial contact was approached on campus. I felt the need to develop courage that would help in initiating a conversation with the prospective participant. The researcher had to make sure a good rapport was established as this would help to pave a way and lay a foundation for a good and a trusting relationship. The rest of the participants were telephoned using the contact numbers that were provided by the initial contacts.



The task of the researcher was made a lot easier by the first contact who introduced the study and its primary objectives. The participants were informed about the researcher's field of interest and intended research topic. All the participants were eager to participate. This could be attributed to the researcher's role function (Intern psychologist at the institution). The participants were perceived to be open and willing to volunteer information about their sexual orientation. To some, the researcher represented a maternal figure from their own racial and cultural group who had an open mind, displayed an understanding of their sexual identity dilemma who was also willing to provide them with a space in which they could unreservedly talk about their experiences, as opposed to their parents and the broader social contexts where

the subject is a taboo and subsequently results in stigmatization and discrimination due to their perceived deviant social identities.

3.7 Research Method

Interviews rather than surveys or questionnaires were used to elicit the interviewee's responses.

Burman (1994) asserts that interviews allow for exploration of issues that may be too complicated to probe through quantitative measures such as questionnaires and surveys.

Semi-structured, one on one interviews were preferred because of their flexibility, open ended character and the possibility for qualitative depth (May, 1993; Burman, 1994; Wood & Kruger, 2000). Harre (1995) posits that semi-structured interviews and qualitative analysis are a suitable combination when the goal is to explore personal and controversial issues. Such interviews are particularly useful when the idea is to gain a detailed account of the individual's subjective experiences. One on one interviews are also more private and minimize the chances of conflicts which are inevitable within group interviews.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The research was guided by the general codes of social research. Special consideration was given to the sensitivity of the research topic.

Because sexuality is a sensitive topic for some individuals, I needed to clarify my position and thinking around issues relating to sexual orientation. Being honest with participants created atmosphere of trust and contributed to the success and outcome of this study. The

participants were informed about the aims of the study. Participants were given an opportunity to read through the interview questions and informed about the freedom of refusing to participate in the study should they feel uncomfortable with the content of the interview questionnaire. A consent form was issued to them and the issue of confidentiality was explained. They were also informed that their responses would be recorded and that they have an option of asking for the audio tapes on completion of the study. The researcher also explained how the audio tapes would be discarded. All the participants were given an opportunity to ask questions for clarity purposes and they all seemed unreservedly eager to participate. I (researcher) then decided to analyse the data personally because the majority of the participants at some points of the interview felt comfortable expressing themselves in their mother tongue which is IsiXhosa. Being a Xhosa speaker myself with the same social and cultural background as the participants, I thought it would be easier to understand the silences and language expressions that would be made by the participants during the interview sessions. Analysing the data help with the interpretation of the participants' dialogues, the reading of transcripts repeatedly so that I could be able to grasp meaning and search for securing themes.

3.9 Data Collection

The data was collected in two research phases. In the initial phase – the narrative interview, the data was collected by means of a life story approach adapted from Crossley (2000). The objective of this data gathering phase was to give the participants an opportunity to narrate their lives within a narrative framework (refer to Appendix A for this adapted interview frame work). The narrative interviews were initially open-ended but progressed to take a

semi-structured format, which meant that the questions were only set as a guide rather than a strict and rigid structure to be adhered to (Crossley, 2000).

Having explored each participant's personal narratives, the second phase of data collection utilized an in-depth interview, which specifically explored research questions and key concerns for the study (refer to Appendix B for the interview schedule). The second interview explored the participants' meanings of the concept of homosexuality.

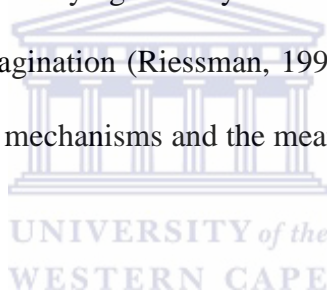
When the participants tell their stories and researcher listens, they all simultaneously constructing and co-constructing their identity and experiences. The theoretical significance of narratives lies in the fact that the interview context allows for the situational, fluid and joint construction of identity. Miller (2000), argues that the interview context mediates how participants choose to represent themselves; to actively construct their lives and to recount significant events in their lives. Therefore the point of narration during the interview is a lens through which the past and the future can be seen, remembered and foretold (Miller, 2000).

3.10 Data Analysis

It is commonly acknowledged that there are no step by step guidelines for data analysis in qualitative research (Mauthner and Doucet (1998) and narrative data analysis is no exception (Andrews et al, 2003; Riessman, 1993; Roberts, 2002). There are no prescriptions or standard procedures for conducting narrative data analysis, the researcher can loosely formulate their 'almost intuitive' terms for analysis. Riessman (1993) suggests that narratives can rather be

read for the patterns or the plots and the kinds of selves that participants claim for themselves in their narratives. Reading narratives for patterns and the plot involve reading beyond the content and looking for the structure of the narrative – how a narrative is organized and plotted to tell a story (Crossely, 2000; Riessman, 1993).

The primary aim of narrative data analysis is to see how participants create order in making sense and giving meaning to their experiences and to events in their lives (Riessman, 1993). Narrative analysis is an attempt to interrogate the different kinds of selves participants construct for themselves in the telling of their lives. It is on this basis that narrative research is appropriate and well suited in studying identity and experience because narratives give priority to human agency and imagination (Riessman, 1993). The structure of a narrative or the plot can reveal the underlying mechanisms and the means through which the identities are constructed.



3.11 Reflexivity

Reflexivity has been characterised as the most distinctive aspect of qualitative research, particularly as an alternative method of validation. Tindall (1994) proposed that a reflexive journal be kept in which the researcher explores why she chose a particular topic, who she is, how she felt and anything else that affected the research.

Reflexivity allows researchers to situate themselves, their assumptions, their biases, their social location, their personal and political interests and theoretical commitments in the research process. Qualitative research is ‘subjective’ and ‘interpretive’ in nature in that the

researchers are immersed in the process. Therefore researchers shape the research process and its outcomes (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998).



CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS

4. 1 Overview

Presented in this chapter is a detailed report of how the participants created order in making sense and giving meaning to their experiences and events in their lives. Data analysis is useful for systematically identifying, categorizing and describing patterns in qualitative data that are discernible across many respondents. The process of categorizing the qualitative data involves developing and applying codes to label the features of the data that are of interest. (Baum, A., Johnston, M. & Sutton, S., 2004) In an attempt to gain better understanding and an insightful perspective into the personal narratives that were shared by the participants of this study, all their experiences will be put under the control of the thematic analysis. Thematic analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and behaviour (Aronson, 1994). Themes are defined as units derived from patterns such as conversations topics, meanings, feelings, etc. (Taylor & Boglan, 1989 cited in Aronson 1994). Such themes are identifiable by bringing together components of fragments of ideas or experiences which can be meaningless when viewed alone (Leininger, 1985). The themes that emerged are extracts of the narratives that were presented by the participants in this study. The homogenous nature of the participants' experiences was of a great interest.

The narratives provided (the author) with a platform to argue and dispute the essentialist' point of view that has been referred to in chapter 2. The Essentialists are of the view that human behaviour is predetermined by genetic, biological factors and therefore it is fixed and not subject to change (Szesnat, 1997; Vance, 1989). The narratives affirmed the views of social constructionism which assert that sexuality is a social construct and therefore it is subject to change given the social and the cultural context and the meaning attached to it. These views are further supported by Crossely (2000)

who postulates that identities are not pre-given biological entities but they are constructed and reconstructed differently.

The following significant themes emerged i.e. identity formation in a heteronormative society, the impact of cultural beliefs and religious beliefs on homosexuality, attitudes of heterosexual students and the academic staff as well as the non-availability of support structures for non-heterosexual students.

4.2 SIGNIFICANT THEMES

4.2.1 Identity Formation in a Heteronormative Society

The majority of the participants expressed how from the beginning or rather from their early childhood days they have struggled with an identity that was incongruent with the societal expectations and norms. Despite the realisation that they were different they had to conform to socially constructed gender roles, they had to adopt a gender identity that was seen to be natural rather than socially constructed. Some of the expectations included playing with a particular set of toys that are designated for girls, conforming to certain dress codes that would not only differentiate them from boys but would give them a heterosexual identity which will be socially acceptable i.e. wearing of dresses and skirts instead of shorts and t-shirts. They have had to suppress their feelings because homosexuality was never heard of in their social contexts.

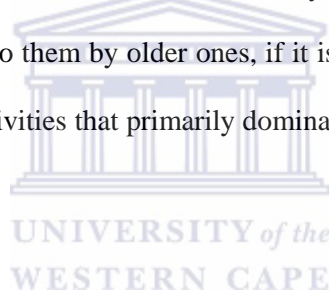
Some of the participants recalled they would constantly be in trouble at school, an institution which represents the values and normative standards of a heterosexist and a patriarchal society. Girls are expected to wear dresses and boys trousers. The challenges that were faced by the participants emanated from their non-conformity to the set of rules that were laid down by the school with regards to the dress codes.

This is what the participant had to say:

“... I used to stay with 4 brothers. When I come back from school I had to clean up the house. I had to cook and bona they will be sitting in the house the whole day without doing anything, because they told me that as a girl that is what I have to do, I had to stay out and come back late from school...”

One of the participants recounted how she had to fight constantly with her male cousins with regards to house chores. They would leave the house untidy and she would be expected to pick up things after them. As a girl in a Xhosa household, which is dominated by patriarchal views and practices, she was expected to perform certain roles i.e. sweeping the house, washing the dishes and cooking. In an attempt to defy such culture specific roles she would go to friends and come home very late.

With regards to social interactions in a heteronormative society, girls are expected to play alone and nurturing play games are modelled to them by older ones, if it is observed that they have interactions with boys or they engage in play activities that primarily dominated by boys they will be called in and reprimanded.



This experience is not unique to the participants of this study it is also supported by Vera Vimbela a self identified lesbian who was the first woman to come out and declare her sexual orientation in the whole of Transkei. In an interview with Mike Olivier (Gevisser, 1994) Vimbela speaks about the leadership role that she would assume when she played with a pack of boys. In the former Transkei rural village in the Eastern Cape near Mount Frere, where she grew up, her home would be continually over run with boys who came to play despite her urgings from her grand mother that she should try and make friends with other girls.

One of the participants indicated that her parents would express the same amount of concern if they suspect a relationship that she has with other girls especially during their early adolescent stage of development.

4.2.2 The Impact of Cultural Beliefs on Homosexuality

A traditional cultural approach to heteronormativity sheds light on several hurdles that lie in the way of achieving the self-determination of female sexuality. According to Swarr and Nagar, the traditional category of the African woman assumes that authentic femininity is based on heterosexual existence, and thus places lesbian women in a marginalised position. Lesbian Women from Soweto shared this opinion: “Every South African woman is subjected to the predominance of heterosexuality from birth. It's all about culture. Parents say you have to get married, get children. You don't live your own life; you're living for other people and families.” Cultural values and norms often result in a situation where culture is used as a justification that allows people not to have to deal with homosexuality any further. Growing up in a socio-cultural context defined by deeply rooted patriarchal structures and heteronormativity renders living conditions for many lesbian women difficult. ‘Alternative gender concepts,’ that don't conform to the patriarchal and heterosexual norm, such as that of lesbian women, are daily confronted with rejection and discrimination

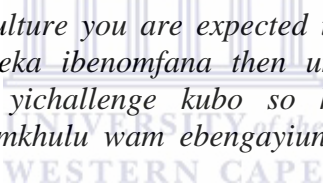
From a Xhosa cultural perspective girls are expected to model a behaviour that would prepare them as future wives and mothers. The pathway to a wife and motherhood is perceived as a unilateral heteronormative process. Young women are expected to form heterosexual relationships with men and the notion of two women that are in an intimate relationship is unheard of and therefore unaccommodated and if it does happen it is considered a taboo and

is labelled as unAfrican. Many lesbians marry to escape the condemnation from their communities in an attempt to live a normal life (Sanger, 2001).

They (participants) expressed their concerns about the societal imposition of cultural values.

This is what some of them had to say:

“They expect things from you, nobody asks if that is what you want and sometimes they arrange marriages without knowing whether you want a husband or not. Nobody asks if you want to get married. Some girls do it because that is what is expected of them. If you are not married you are not a complete person. So I believe that someone else’s opinion should not affect and influence what you want. If you want to get married you can but don’t do it because you want to be perceived in a particular way or you want to fit in.”



“mos according to our culture you are expected to behave in a particular way so intombi yomXhosa kufuneka ibenomfana then umfana alobole of which abantu abadala abayamkeli so yichallenge kubo so kubakho la challenge sibanayo kwicomunity... so utatomkhulu wam ebengayiunderstandi qho ebendibuza ukuba yintoni ingxaki”

“I am not really a cultural person I don’t understand them (cultural norms and practices). My family believes in them, a boy must go to the bush and become a man and a girl must this and that.” Their understanding and beliefs that they have around cultural issues informs how they approach their day to day encounters and challenges. When my grandmother knew about my sexual orientation she summoned my uncle to come over so that he can talk me out of this taboo and save the family from the embarrassment that my newly found gender identity might cause. Power gets transferred to men and women are perceived as less capable in dealing with family matters”.

The myth that homosexuality is un-African seems to be debunked each day, among other things more and more homosexuals surface in different countries of this continent. With the Kingdom of Lesotho being famous for adherence to its Basotho traditions, it is currently perceived as a gay free country. Gay and lesbian people have surfaced in that country with a

short term goal of fighting for recognition, not only by society but also by the ruling kingdom (Tlhwale, 2009).

4.2.3 Religious Perspectives on Homosexuality

Literature reveals that the relationship between religion and attitudes towards homosexuality has not been largely studied empirically.

Religious differences may contribute to attitudinal differences (Lewis, 2003). Beliefs about homosexuality differ substantially by religion and by the intensity of religious feelings. These beliefs play a fundamental role in the formation of individual prejudices. Disapproval is the highest among black heterosexuals who attend religious services habitually, who pray frequently, and also say that religion plays a significant role in their lives. Noted in the literature are the religious people's tendencies to effect change in the way in which gay and lesbian people view themselves and how they choose to present themselves to others.

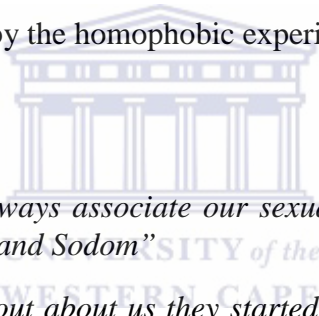
Findings from previous studies suggest that individuals who are more religious have more conservative religious beliefs and those that attend church frequently are more homophobic (Cameron & Ross, 1981; Glassner & Owen, 1976; Gray, Kramer, Minick, McGee, Thomas & Greiner, 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993).

Waldo (1998) conducted research on students from 12 religious groups and their perception about the degree to which the campus is accepting, supportive of lesbian and gay male students and their concerns. Findings from the study provided support for the claim that

heterosexual students with strong religious convictions demonstrated less favourable views towards lesbian and male students. These findings are supported by so the participants who claimed that high levels of homophobia were displayed by students who proclaimed to be born again Christians and were members of the SCO (Student Christian Organisation).

The increases in religious affiliation are associated with high levels of homophobia and negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. Kunkel and Temple (1992), also found that people who went to church almost weekly were extremely homophobic than those who never attended church.

The above literature is supported by the homophobic experiences that were shared by some of the participants.



“Some people judge us always associate our sexual orientation with biblical events that occurred in Gomorra and Sodom”

“When my parents found out about us they started praying and my girlfriend had to go through a ritual ...”

Individuals who identify themselves as religious understand homosexuality as an illness and hold a belief that the homosexuals could be cured through turning to God for help. To a greater extent heterosexual behaviour is associated with normality and abnormal behaviour with homosexuality. These types of understandings of lesbianism as abnormal are legitimised through religious discourses which construct homosexuality as a mental illness or a moral ‘sin’ Sanger (2001):70.

“A friend who was a member of the Jehova’s Witness church invited me to her church and asked me to wear a skirt. I did not have skirts and dresses and she offered to lend them to me.”

“One of the girls who was also squatting said we should go to church and I didn’t know why but then we went and they told me that it is against the will of God to have

feelings for the same sex because He invented a man and a woman not Adam and Adam and Eva and Eva. They said homosexuality was based on Satanism that is how they conceptualise same sex relationships. It is Satanism to be a lesbian. So I thought if it is to be a lesbian then I don't belong here. I got a second invitation from another girl...she told me about a lot of scriptures from the bible, what is wrong, what is right and if you go to the Lord, the Lord is going to help you, if you want this to go away you can pray a lot, you can fast..." "I sat down and thought if being a lesbian is Satanism, I would be characterised as a child of Satan, so if that is the case then I can't go with (lesbianism), I must try and find ways of changing myself and the way I feel... I prayed, fasted for 3 days I did not eat, I prayed almost each and hour and then she said I need to change the way I dress and the way I approach people".

4.2.4 Attitudes of Heterosexual Students

The narratives given by students reflected a lot of tolerance and acceptance of this minority group. These (findings) are contrary to the findings of previous studies which indicate high levels of homophobic attitudes towards non-heterosexual students.

Greene (1997) questioned whether the heterosexual black South African community is as homophobic as some researchers have suggested. Is it a general view or are the incidences of homophobic attacks, attitudes and behaviours situational?

This is what the participants had to say about their experiences in the university environment:

"The university environment is quite fun, in the sense that nobody is judgemental, everyone lives in the open. You get to socialise with different people and you get different views. If you visit the different residences you can find 3 or 4 lesbians. You get to hang around with the people who are not part of our society, the gay society. They get to see how we think, what kind of people we are, 'these people are people they are the same as us, they are special as I am special in my own way. So there is nothing wrong with' it gives other students who are not gay or lesbians to see that. Sometimes you will find heterosexual girls hanging around with gay guys because they are fun. They talk a lot and they always have something to say".

This is what the participant had to say about the relationship she has with fellow students:

“It is okay, the students that I socialise with do not judge me. Recently I told someone that I was gay and she told me knew it all along I was surprised by that”.

“Most students like me. They relate very well with me. They know that I am Siviwe. They understand that I am a lesbian”.*

“I experienced a problem with my room-mate. I discovered that she was homophobic. She knew that I was a lesbian and she would come back from her friends very late. If she is in the room she will have minimal interactions with me. She also did not feel comfortable undressing in my presence...”

“Oh! I have great lesbian friends. When I came here from school, I did not know of anyone who was a lesbian. I would see some of the lesbian students but because I am a shy person I wouldn't go and approach them. Probably they would have thought that I was stupid. I just stayed with friends in class and whilst in their company, they will embark on a conversation around homosexuality issues. They would express their homophobic feelings about non-heterosexual people openly and that point they were not aware that I was a lesbian. They feared that lesbians would end up proposing love to them. It felt very awkward for me to comment but whenever I had to make a contribution, I would find myself making defensive comments. I once asked them what they would say if were to disclose that I was a lesbian. Different views and opinions came up but then they would ask me a lot of questions, displaying a lot of interest and eagerness in understanding and gaining insights into the concept of homosexuality. Sometimes I would feel overwhelmed and embarrassed by their nature of the questions that they would ask me. I would end up staying in my room alone. Later in the year I found a lesbian friend who introduced me who were lesbians too. I started playing soccer. I knew that I was going to find lesbian friends in the soccer team and now I am friends with them.”

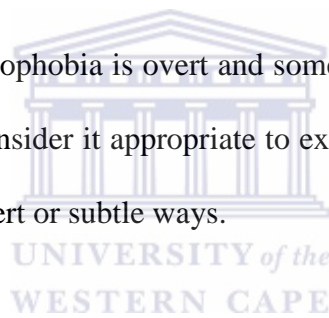
The abovementioned experiences mark a significant shift in the attitudes of South Africans as lesbians and gay men have historically been the victims of discriminatory laws and prejudices in South Africa. Such prejudices were filtered down to institutions of higher learning.

Luirink (2000) however, indicates that societal attitudes towards homosexuality are gradually shifting. Society is slowly coming to terms with homosexuality in South African communities as reflected among others tolerant social institutions. Individuals are even more tolerant if they are highly educated, do not conceive homosexuality as a 'white disease', do not hold traditional views concerning sex roles and do not perceive the violation of gender roles as problematic, deviant and abnormal.

Lack of contact with individuals with a non-heterosexual identity leads to negative perceptions and attitudes. Primarily the negative attitudes are due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the ‘othered’ minority group.

However, Aberson, et al., (1999) cautions about the increase in subtle prejudice against gay and lesbian whilst blatant prejudice is decreasing. According to Nakayama (1998) heterosexism is a prejudicial communication practice that condemns all of those who defy the heterosexual order.

Kantoor (1998) concurs that homophobia is overt and sometimes it can be covert. Given that most heterosexuals no longer consider it appropriate to express prejudice openly, people are likely to express prejudice in covert or subtle ways.



A research by O’Hara and Meyer (2005) focussed on heterosexism amongst university students. They found that heterosexual students can concurrently position themselves as not prejudiced yet prejudiced (for an example – the claim “I have lots of gay friends’). The non-heterosexual student wants to be perceived as liberal but on the contrary there is a wish to be identified with the dominant heterosexual order and still distinguish his or her friend as a homosexual. These findings are not surprising given the social desirability effect that surfaces in an era in which diversity, multiculturalism and acceptance of the other is highly valued.

Despite the fact that South Africa officially adopted a constitution that guaranteed protection for lesbians and gay men, societal norms generally do not allow open discussions about homosexuality and this challenge renders the evaluation of the acceptance of the non-heterosexual group difficult. According to the human Rights Watch (2001) litigation has not filtered down to the level of everyday life in South Africa and prejudice against lesbian and gay men persists. Refer to Chapter 2 for the incidences of prejudiced behaviours and attitudes in South Africa.

4.2.5 Attitudes of the Academic staff

Diverse experiences were shared by the participants with regard to their relationships and interactions with the academic staff.

Lecturers contribute to the devaluation of lesbian and gay students when they ignore or omit them in their teaching. This omission suggests to lesbian and gay male students that they are 'abnormal', invisible and barely tolerable (Crumpacker & Van der Haegen, 1993).

"The lecturers are fine I have not experienced any negative attitudes. They seem to have a good grasp on homosexuality. There is also a gay lecturer he is cool. I also had a tutor who was a lesbian, we also ended up being good friends but she has since left the country to study abroad."

It was shocking to realise that some of the lecturers were more homophobic than the students in their campus. Some of the participants reported incidences of intolerance and humiliation.

These ranged from derogatory remarks to name calling.

"One of my lecturers would always pass homophobic remarks which implied that I should just stop it and become a girl. He is Islam apparently homosexuality is against

his religion. Lecturers should treat students equally He would sometimes make class jokes about my sexual orientation. He would make students laugh. The coloured students would laugh but the black students wouldn't. I am unable to react to it. I fear being victimised. I know for a fact if I say or do something my academic results would be affected".

It was also interesting to note the variety of responses with regards to how the students responded to the lecturers' behaviour and attitude towards non-heterosexual students. The black students were perceived as protective whilst the so-called coloured students were tolerant and open to the comments.

According to Klassen's (1974) findings white heterosexuals had significantly more negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay men than black heterosexuals. In a more recent research conducted by Waldo (1998) at an international university, black students were more supportive of policies affirming lesbian and gay male students and were more open to interpersonal contact with lesbian and gay male students. According to Waldo (1998), this was as a result of the black students' own status as minorities in the university community. These results could possibly explain the different responses that were displayed when homophobic results were made by the lecturer.

"One of my lecturers Ms Adam will always refer to me as 'he'. Whenever she make makes examples she would use my name and say 'he this' and "he that" and whole class would laugh. There was also Mr Hugo who did not seem to be sensitive about how he would refer to me in class. He would call me a 'tomboy' and I dislike being referred to as such. One day I became courageous and I asked Mr Hugo* to spare me a few minutes. I explained to him that there is something that I would like to convey to the class. I told my classmates that I do not appreciate it when they laugh whenever Ms Adam* refers to me as 'he'. And to Mr Hugo* I am not a 'tomboy' but a lesbian. I politely asked him to refer to me with my first name".*

This is a projection of gender stratification and an intolerance of a gender identity which is perceived to 'abnormal' and deviant to the dominant heterosexual framework norms. The literature reveals how sensitive the non-heterosexual individuals with regards to the terminology that the heterosexual individuals use when making reference to them.

While homosexuality is the common term for the broad category of sexual behaviour between members of the same gender, gay and lesbian people themselves increasingly reject the term homosexual as derogatory. This is because it suggests a narrow focus on action rather than on being, feeling or general orientation.

The gay and lesbian community therefore prefers the terms gay and lesbian to describe their orientation as terms that refer to a constellation of feelings, identity and lifestyle and not simply sex acts.

4.2.6 Support Networks and Intervention Programmes

“The Triangle Project usually sends agencies who occasionally visit our institution to provide talks on issues that are related homosexuality listen and attend to problems and also make us aware of the gay and lesbian activities and functions”.

“I would prefer an institution-based organisation which can be accessible and focus on addressing the needs of the non-heterosexual students. We (students) are planning to establish an organisation that will support students who are homosexual and this is a student driven project”.

“Safety measures should be in place. In every institution of higher learning there are gay and lesbian students sometimes it is not safe as there are male students who have an aversion to homosexuality”

“There is a Gender Unit somewhere. When I got here in my first year my tutor introduced me to their services. They were beneficial. I could go and speak to someone in times of distress...”

“I feel the Gender Unit is losing its primary focus. It is now having a food parcel project...we need a unit that will primarily serve the needs of homosexual students”.

“I sometimes see posters calling for the protection of black lesbians. Some people are being raped and they are silent about it”.

“There should be awareness campaigns in the form of talks, discussions and lectures workshops to introduce homosexuality...it is not an act we are not pretending it is who you are and how you were born. People should be open-minded about our sexual orientation. Yes it is something new, we are different but we do exist’.

“Well at the beginning of my second year there was a support group for non-heterosexual students and after that no other resources were available. There is a

Student Counselling Institute where you can seek help but there nothing that is available for non-heterosexual students”.

“...they should make the university gay friendly. I think homosexuality is being swept under the carpet, they can see that it is there but they choose to turn a blind eye. The university should open a safe space for non-heterosexual students”.

While the students appreciate the resources that are available on campus the above comments suggest that there is a need for visible on campus resources that can deal broadly with gay and lesbian student issues and concerns.

*Pseudonyms’ have been used to conceal the identity of the participants and the information provided by them.



CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This chapter summarises the findings of this study and provides with recommendations and limitations.

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study explored the experiences of lesbian students in institutions of higher learning in the Western Cape. The results of this study provide the academic literature with a different perspective if a comparison can be made to the results that were revealed by previous empirical studies conducted on the attitudes that the heterosexual students have towards their non-heterosexual counterparts. These studies were highlighted in the literature review (Chapter 2). The majority of the results from the previous studies suggest a high proportion of homophobic behaviours i.e. discrimination, harassment and prejudice in the university campuses. The discrepancy in these results could probably be due to the nature of the studies that were conducted with particular reference to the samples that were used for such studies. As it was mentioned earlier in this chapter the focus of the previous studies was more on the attitudes and perceptions that heterosexual students have towards GLB students. For this study the focus was more on the personal experiences of lesbian students and the meanings that they make based on such experiences through narratives. The current status of research on LGB students offers an incomplete picture of their overall experiences (ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, 2001).

The significant themes that emerged were mentioned in the previous chapter (Chapter 4), however, for the discussion purposes in this chapter, will be expanded upon particularly those

that relate to their experiences in institutions of higher learning as it is the pivotal focus of this study i.e. attitudes of heterosexual students, attitudes of the academic staff as well as the support networks and intervention programmes.

This study revealed that the heterosexual community in South African institutions of higher learning is not as homophobic as some researchers have suggested. The personal narratives that were shared by the participants of this study highlighted that the university was open to diverse identities and was non-judgemental. In most residences there are students who are out about their sexual identity and this kind of openness gave the participants a supportive social context and a social group that they can identify with. Due to the openness that the non-heterosexuals have, they are even eager to understand and make sense of the homosexual behaviour and interactions from the LGB students' perspectives. The non-heterosexual students display a lot of understanding with regard to lesbianism as a phenomenon despite its perception as a deviation from heterosexual norms, roles and expectations. However, the participants indicated that coming out to their roommates was awkward and challenging, irrespective of the roommates' sexual identity.

Such attitudinal shifts concur with the indications made by Luirink (2000), about the societal attitudes towards homosexuality that are gradually shifting, The author that was mentioned previously, contends that society is slowly coming to terms with homosexuality and this is reflected among others, by tolerant social institutions in South African communities. Some of the participants pointed out the possibility of the increase in subtle prejudices against gay and lesbian students whilst there is a decrease in the blatant prejudice levels.

Despite the positive and conducive social environment that is facilitated by the heterosexual students on the university campus, diverse experiences were shared by the participants with regard to their relationships and social interaction with the academic staff in the lecture rooms. Positive comments were made about some of the lecturers who demonstrated tolerance and acceptance towards homosexuality. In some they found role models, reference was made to the lecturers and tutors who share a similar sexual identity. The positive attitude and a feeling of acceptance was reported to have created a conducive learning environment.

As it was mentioned in chapter 4, it was shocking to realise that some of the lecturers were more homophobic than the students. Some of the participants reported incidences of intolerance and humiliation. These ranged from derogatory remarks to name calling (refer to Chapter 4 for transcripts).

The participants highlighted the scarcity of resources that could provide them with support within the university campus. One of the participants indicated that the Triangle Project is their only source of support and is based outside of campus. On campus it was mentioned, there is Student counselling services that GLB students can visit voluntarily should a need arise. Preferences were communicated about the kinds of resources namely an institution-based organisation which can be accessible, with issues and needs of non-heterosexual students as its primary focus. Concerns were also raised about an institution-based organisation which seems to be losing primary focus.

5.2 Recommendations

Some of the recommendations were made by the participants. A conducive climate should be established and one of the strategies could be awareness campaigns through posters and pamphlets that can be distributed to the campus community members (students and staff).

The University should be made gay friendly as this will promote visibility and acknowledge the presence of the non-heterosexual minority group. This will further increase the number of research participants when issues of homosexuality are studied. Training can be provided to academic and non-academic staff members i.e. lecturers, residence co-ordinators administrative personnel.

Universities should increase student awareness and sensitivity towards differences and sexual preferences. Discussions around sexuality issues should occur in and outside of the classroom environment in the university campuses.

Stable institution-based organisations can be established to provide support to GLB students. These can serve as a safe space where any member of the university community can visit to and possibly expand their existing knowledge on homosexuality and be assured of confidentiality and tolerance around sexual identity issues.

The academic staff should be encouraged to conduct extensive research on issues pertaining to homosexuality.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. Due to the nature of the sample and the topic for this study a snowball sampling method was utilised to access the participants. As mentioned in chapter 3 participants must be directly connected to each other and the possibility is that even with the group that openly self-identify as lesbians could not be selected for the study as they were not connected to the primary contact persons. It goes without doubt that their

personal narratives could have yielded a different perspective to what was presented by those who volunteered to be part of this study.

The only black lesbian students included in the sample were those who have an open identity with regard to their sexual orientation. It is unknown how lesbian students who did not identify themselves as such may have experienced the university environment. Therefore the results of this study are not representative of the black lesbian students in the institutions of higher learning.

CONCLUSION

A study of gay, lesbian and bisexual students in university campuses poses a lot of challenges and this has been confirmed by most researchers who have conducted empirical studies on homosexuality issues, it is a difficult task and can be time consuming. Despite the challenges a lot of empirical work still needs to be done with a variety of populations, education levels, different settings in the university campuses i.e. residences and classrooms so as to get a clearer picture of the homophobic experiences of the GLB students in South Africa.

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APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Researcher: Nomasango Tati

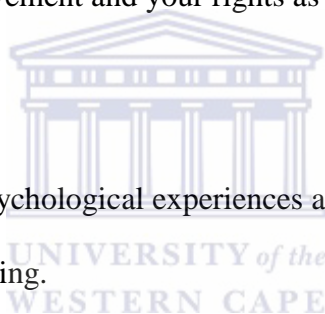
Participant's Name:

Contact Details:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. This form outlines the intent of the study, a description of your involvement and your rights as a participant.

The purposes of this study are:

- To gain insight into the psychological experiences and histories of lesbian students in institutions of higher learning.
- To complete the thesis portion of the M PSYCH Degree at the University of the Western Cape.



PROCEDURES

If you decide to participate in this study, I will ask you to spend some time in an interview which will give you an opportunity to narrate a story of your own life. This will be followed by an in-depth interview which will specifically explore the research questions and key concepts. The interviews will be recorded and the tapes will be discarded as soon as the study is completed.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

.....

.....

Name of Participant

Name of Researcher

.....

.....

Signature

Signature

Date:

Date:



APPENDIX B

Tell me about your life–story from birth to the present moment.

Life as a book as adapted from Crossely, (2000).

Think of your life as if it were a book. Each part of your life as a chapter in the book, give each chapter a name and describe the chapter.

Key events - these are specific critical events that lie in the past for each individual.

I want you to describe in detail each event; what happened; where you were; who was involved; what you did; what you thought; how you felt.

Peak experience - high point in your life

Nadir experience – low point in your life

Turning point – significant change in your life

Earliest memory – a detailed account of what you remember (setting, scene, characteristics,

Feelings and thoughts)

Important childhood memory - can be positive or negative

Important adolescence memory – can be positive or negative

Important adult memory – can be positive or negative

Other important memories

APPENDIX C

Identity

1. What were your dreams and aspirations as a child?
 - a. Have those changed?
 - b. How have they changed?
 - c. How has your sexual orientation changed your life/?
 - d. What are your dreams now?
 - e. What are your dreams for the future?
2. Did you have friends during your childhood years?
 - a. Who was your best friend?
 - b. What made them special?
 - c. Are you still in touch with any of your friends?
3. Have you ever been in love or married?
 - a. Tell me about that relationship.
 - b. What does a marriage or an intimate relationship mean to you?
 - c. Do you see yourself married or intimately involved one day? Why?

Home and family

1. Describe your relationship with your family.

Cultural Beliefs

1. What are your views on cultural values and societal norms?

Life at Varsity

1. How can you describe the university environment as a non-heterosexual student?

Please comment on your relationship with fellow students and the academic staff..

2. Are there any support networks that are available on campus?
3. If any, are they beneficial and congruent to your needs?
4. What role would you like the university to play in protecting and providing support to non-heterosexual students?

