

Lesbians and the right to equality: Perceptions of people in a local Western Cape community

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Declaration

I declare that Lesbians and the right to equality: Perceptions of people in a local Western Cape community is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Nadia Sanger

7th November 2001

Signed: *Nadia Sanger*

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Introduction

An essentialist position on sexuality involves constructing a correspondence between gender and biological sex using reproduction as the link between the two. As Judith Butler (1990) argues in her discussion of gender as performance, sexuality according to the essentialist model is considered a universal and fixed category, conforming to the binary opposition of 'feminine' and 'masculine': all sexual beings are condemned to fit into either category. This sets a normative standard implying that the link between gender and biological sex is a natural one and that not conforming to this standard of normality is deviant, needing to be punished, corrected and censured.

Monique Wittig (1992) discussed how binary oppositions within the dominant discourse of sexuality (or heterosexuality) serve as 'natural' and given, defining women as gendered bodies and restricting us to the "compulsory reproduction" of heterosexual society (p. 6). This naturalness of reproduction appropriates women's social roles thus defining us as marginal subjects and rendering us inferior beings. Lesbian societies, she argues, destroy the notion of heterosexuality as the only 'natural' form of sexuality and reject the confines of a socially sanctioned heterosexuality.

Through challenging the notion that the link between gender and biological sex is natural, and that sexuality is a universal category, this study takes a social constructionist position on sexuality. This position is based on the view that sexuality is historically, culturally and subjectively constructed and that "cultures provide widely different categories, schema and labels for framing sexual acts and affective experiences" (Vance, 1995: 42).

While some constructionists take the position that object desire is not inborn or intrinsic but constructed, this study takes the position that lesbian desire for instance, is fixed and inherent but that lesbian behaviour would be constructed by the cultural and social meanings attached to it. Thus, lesbian identity has different social meanings dependent on the various historical and cultural contexts.

When lesbians, as women, divert from social norms and reject the compulsory heterosexual norm, they are either punished through legal systems for transgressing patriarchal structures or not recognised at all. As women, lesbians 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, homemakers and sexual partners to men. Because lesbians do not fit into this construct, their behaviour is socially and legally condemned for diverting from the “natural order.” As a whole, this study aims to identify and explore the various ways people construct and perceive lesbians and to reveal how sexuality, as a product of history and culture, determines the ways lesbians are treated in their own communities. This project attempts to explore how, despite the democratic stance of the new Constitution, South African lesbians still experience discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation.

¹ Weinberg (1944 in Shidlo, 1972: 177) defined homophobia as “the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals.”

In chapter one of this paper, I discuss how the illegality and criminalisation of male homosexuality² in many countries throughout the world acknowledges the existence of gay males while lesbians are generally marginalised and ignored through systems which don't recognise their existence at all. Where lesbianism is punished, these countries reflect a patriarchal culture where women are already discriminated against because of their gender. While Eastern countries generally appear more severe in their treatment of women and lesbians, Western countries seem more progressive in terms of their legal policies regarding equality and sexual orientation. But despite these anti-discriminative positions, a homosexual identity in the West is not treated as equal to a heterosexual one. Where homosexual partnerships are concerned, they are denied certain legal benefits extended to heterosexual partners. In some Eastern countries where lesbianism is punishable, communities are condemning and there are no lesbian subcultures, lesbians are often too poor to emigrate and live in isolation and fear.

Material discussing the laws surrounding homosexual identities in countries around the world was not difficult to come by. But discussions of social perceptions of lesbians were, in contrast, just about non-existent. In the second half of chapter one, I discuss how laws influence social constructions of lesbians and how social constructions in turn influence these laws. The role of social institutions and structures like the Church is discussed in terms of how religious constructions of homosexuality influence social views. The homophobic attitudes of some Southern African political leaders and the ways

² 'Homosexuality' will refer to both gay men and lesbian women. Where necessary, I will differentiate between the two by using 'gay' for homosexual men and 'lesbian' for homosexual women.

in which their views contribute to an antigay and lesbian atmosphere are considered. These views, rooted in the notion that homosexuality is alien to Africa, a Western import, echo Western biomedical discourse on sexuality which considered homosexuality as abnormal, a moral sin and deviance.

Chapter two explores the lack of research related to social perceptions of lesbians and highlights how the theoretical foundations of Western studies fail to fill this gap effectively. My study, on the other hand, attempts to reveal the complexity and contradictory nature of individuals' constructions and explores the various ways language creates these constructions. While the quantitative approaches of American studies fail to contextualise meanings of sexuality, they also fall short in terms of revealing individuals' responses and perceptions of lesbians exclusively. Attempting to fill these gaps, my research takes a feminist, qualitative, social constructionist position which aims at extracting the complexity of social constructions of lesbians by individuals in Mitchell's Plain.³ A consideration of the usefulness and applicability of a feminist approach to my study and the possibilities of qualitative research to empower rather than disempower and exploit participants are considered. Rather than using surveys assessing social perceptions, I make use of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews as a method of revealing individuals' multiple constructions of lesbians and providing space for exploration of meaning. I discuss how I contacted participants through snowball

³ Mitchell's Plain is the largest 'coloured' township in South Africa and was built in the 1970's as a settlement for 'coloureds' who were forcibly removed from District Six, Steenberg, Claremont, Newlands, Sea Point and Constantia for purposes of the Group Areas Act. See Lewis, J and Loots, F. 1994. "Moffies en Manvroue: Gay and Lesbian Life Histories in Contemporary Cape Town." Cameron, E and Gevisser, M (eds) Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa. Braamfontein: Raven Press. 140-157.

sampling, how many individuals refused to participate and how I attempted to create an atmosphere conducive to honesty and trust. My position and experiences as a black,⁴ heterosexual working class woman is taken into account in terms of how I formed a relationship with participants' and how this influenced the research process as a whole.

The lack of situated and comprehensive research relating to social perceptions of lesbians and the need to reveal the ways people still discriminate despite the new Constitution is discussed at the end of chapter two. As a first step in understanding people's prejudices in order to assist in social transformation, I discuss the necessity of undertaking a study which takes into account how sexual minorities⁵ such as lesbians are treated in their own communities.

In chapter three, I attempt to interpret individuals' discourses and explore the ways individuals' constructions of lesbians are influenced by binary oppositions both dictating roles for women and men and distinguishing between 'normal' and 'abnormal' behaviour. I also discuss how conformance to religious doctrine, particularly ideas of 'morality' and 'immorality', influence individuals' perceptions of lesbians. The different ways heterosexuality is normalised and homosexuality pathologised are explored through participants' discourses. I reveal how the subjective meanings people attach to sexuality influence their constructions of lesbians and are related to how lesbians are treated unequally in their communities. Through comparing American studies with my own, I

⁴ By 'black', I refer to those persons who are not white and have been discriminated against on the basis of skin colour.

⁵ Sexual minorities refer to lesbians, gays, bisexuals or any other group of persons who do not conform to the practice of heterosexuality.

attempt to highlight the differences and similarities in the ways individuals' in Mitchell's Plain and those in American studies construct lesbian identity and behaviour. Finally, in the conclusion, I discuss the limitations of my research in terms of the structured nature of this project and possibilities for future research in the area of sexual orientation and social perceptions.

Chapter 1

Legal Constructions of Lesbians

Most of the literature around the world in relation to homosexuality has been concerned with the legal status of homosexuals and the psychology of lesbian and gay identities. With regard to the legalities surrounding a homosexual identity, focus has been on male homosexuality at the expense of lesbianism. My search for studies related to social perceptions worldwide proved largely fruitless. Although I managed to find some information in relation to the legal frameworks which exist for both lesbians and gays in many parts of the world, situated and comprehensive studies exploring social perceptions regarding lesbians exclusively were just about non-existent. Where social perceptions were *studied*, these were based in the United States and clearly surveyed rather than explored how individuals perceived of homosexuality. In South Africa the only access to societal views has been through personal correspondence and daily newspaper articles. I have been unable to locate any situated analysis regarding social responses at all.

Because sexuality is a cultural production, gay and lesbian identities would be constructed in different and particular ways in different communities and at different times throughout the world. But social perceptions are also influenced by the law through its construction of 'normal' and 'abnormal' sexualities and the pathologisation and criminalisation of alternative sexualities. Except for the United States, there is no record of how individuals perceive lesbians (or gays) in particular countries. But my exploration of the legal status of lesbians revealed that discrimination against homosexuals is not unique to South Africa. As the literature will reveal, the oppression of lesbians and gays

is a worldwide phenomenon often legally sanctioned, and with severe consequences for those individuals who do not conform to the norm of heterosexuality. More than 50 countries in the world prohibit same-sex relations, but these are enforced primarily against male homosexuality (Rosenbloom, 1995). However, laws prohibiting lesbianism do exist. For instance, the *Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act* of 1989 in the Bahamas states that ‘Any female who has sexual intercourse with another female, whether with or without the consent of that female, is guilty of the offence of lesbianism and is liable to imprisonment for twenty years’ (Bunch in Rosenbloom, 1995: 13).

Because the values of Western capitalism permeate the world, United States’ laws and attitudes tend to influence laws and attitudes in other Western countries. One might expect United States’ laws to set an egalitarian standard encompassing a human rights agenda aimed at equalising homosexual identity with that of heterosexuals. However, this is not the case and a lot needs to be done before homosexuals can be considered equal citizens in the United States.

Lesbian and gay rights in contemporary United States

Although homosexuality is not illegal in most cities in the United States and there exist specific anti-discriminatory laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, lesbians and gays are still not treated as equal to heterosexual individuals (Le Vay and Nonas, 1995). Despite these anti-discriminatory laws, lesbians could still be committed to psychiatric institutions under the guise of ‘gender identity disorder’ as late

as 1995. The state played a fundamental role in allowing institutions to confine lesbians and 'treat' them through shock treatment and medication (Rosenbloom, 1995: 15).

Furthermore, as late as 1995, lesbian and gay couples living in America were still unable to legalise their relationships through marriage. A small number of states permitted same-sex couples to register as 'domestic partners' and allowed some benefits to legal spouses. However, due to the inability to marry, most lesbian and gay couples were denied the benefits extended to heterosexual couples (The Editors of the Harvard Law Review, 1990). These included property rights, health insurance, family leave, the right to make medical decisions regarding an incapacitated partner, and the right to bring one's non-United States citizen spouse into the country permanently (Minter, 1995). So while the past three decades have seen American gays and lesbians gain legal recognition of some of their rights, they continue to be discriminated against on the basis of gender as well as sexual orientation (Minter, 1995). Although the United States Constitution protects individual rights, these rights are subject to interpretation by judiciaries. As Le Vay and Nonas (1995: 275) clearly illustrate, homosexuality has generally not been accepted by the courts: "the prevailing legal notion is that homosexuality is simply a set of behaviours that anyone might show, not an intrinsic characteristic."

Thus, according to Minter (1995) hundreds of mothers in the United States have lost custody of their children because of judicial decisions deeming lesbians 'immoral', as exhibiting 'illegal' behaviour and defining them therefore, as 'unfit' parents. Most state courts discriminate against lesbians in cases involving custody of children and visitation

rights, and court rulings often reflect biases against lesbian mothers (Minter, 1995). Joint adoption by lesbians and gay couples has proved equally problematic. In most cases, only one partner becomes the legal parent while the non-biological or non-legal parent has no rights over the child (Minter, 1995). Although no state laws exist prohibiting lesbians from using donor insemination services, lesbians continuously face discrimination from health care providers in relation to fertility issues (Minter, 1995). These discriminatory laws, according to Herek and Berrill (1992) help normalise views of lesbians and gay men as criminals and deviants, and influence jurists' decisions in cases where lesbians and gays are involved. It appears that claiming a gay or lesbian identity is fraught with difficulties in contemporary America. Even so, it seems that substantial numbers of children are raised by non-heterosexual parents. An American family rights organisation called *Children Of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere* has even claimed that between six and ten million children are being raised by lesbian, gay and bisexual parents and that these numbers are on the increase.¹

Lesbian and gay rights around the world

Along with the lack of legal prohibition of same-sex sexual relations, broad terms such as 'public indecency' and 'public morality' are often used to criminalise homosexual behaviour around the world. Most laws are targeted at gay men specifically while lesbianism has largely been ignored and not criminalised at all in most countries. But laws criminalising lesbianism do exist (Rosenbloom, 1995: 13). Legal systems in the

¹ Sunday Argus, 19th June 2001.

Eastern countries appear to be particularly severe in their treatment of sexual minorities. In India for example, same-sex sexual relations are illegal under Section 377 of the Indian penal code:

OF UNNATURAL OFFENCES: Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life or imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend for ten years and shall be liable to a fine (Cath, 1995: 80).

Lesbians are largely invisible in India and are forced to “assimilate into heterosexual norms” through arranged marriages to men (Cath, 1995: 78). Subjected to battering, rape and murder by family members, lesbians are isolated and forced to hide their sexual orientation (Cath, 1995).

Japanese law on the other hand does not recognise same-sex relationships at all and many lesbians marry men in order to hide their sexuality (Ishino and Wakabayashi, 1995). While gay men have more access to resources, lesbians are extremely isolated and silenced, particularly as publicising one’s lesbianism and rejecting traditional gender roles often leads to harassment and discrimination (Ishino and Wakabayashi, 1995).

In Brazil, male homosexuality is regarded as illegal and considered a moral crime (Martinho, 1995). Although same-sex sexual relations between women are not prohibited

by Brazilian law, a number of laws such as *The Obscene Act*,² can be used to imprison lesbians for three months to a year. But there are also a few Brazilian cities like Rio de Janeiro for instance, which have anti-discrimination laws in place prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Overall Brazilian society is excessively oppressive towards lesbians and gays. Many lesbian mothers lose custody of their children and experience blackmail and/or extortion from their ex-husbands (Martinho, 1995).

As late as 1979, 26 lesbians and gay men were bloodily executed in Iran (Vahme-Sabz, 1995). Because the Iranian Constitution is rooted within Islamic law or *Sharia*, homosexuality is considered a criminal offence. While sodomy is punished by death, lesbianism or *mosahegeh* is punished by 100 lashes for the first three offences. A fourth offence results in death³ (Vahme-Sabz, 1995). Overall lesbians are forced into exile fearing violence from both the state and their families. But the limited economic resources available to Iranian women in general however, make it especially difficult for lesbians to escape the oppressive confines of their country.

Today, most European countries have decriminalised homosexuality with Norway, Sweden, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Israel banning discrimination on the basis of

² Article 233 (*The Obscene Act*) reads as follows: "The practice of an obscene act in a place that is public or openly exposed to the public." See Martinho, M. 1995. "Brazil." Rosenbloom, R (ed.) Unspoken Rules: Sexual Orientation and Women's Human Rights. United States of America: International Gay and Human Rights Commission: 17.

³ "Punishment for lesbianism is one hundred (100) lashes for each party" (Article 129 in Iranian Constitution). See Vahme-Sabz. 1995. "Iran." Rosenbloom, R (ed.) Unspoken Rules: Sexual Orientation and Women's Human Rights. United States of America: International Gay and Human Rights Commission: 91.

sexual orientation. An exception is Romania which has been labelled the “most homophobic country in the world” (Dunton and Palmberg, 1996: 34). Although (with the exception of Romania) these countries appear to be more progressive in terms of gay and lesbian rights, homosexuals still experience discrimination in areas related to the parenting of children. Despite legal prohibition of homosexuality then, same-sex sexual behaviour is nonetheless punished through discriminatory attitudes barring lesbians from rearing children (Dunton and Palmberg, 1996).

Although homosexuality between consenting adults was decriminalised in Britain as long ago as 1967, laws which outlaw discrimination do not exist and lesbian sex has never been criminalised.⁴ The absence of anti-discriminatory laws has meant that there is no recognition of same-sex partnerships and lesbians for instance, are excessively discriminated against in relation to pension schemes and immigration policies. Although there exists thousands of lesbian mothers in Britain, lesbians wishing to adopt face many barriers. Where lesbians do adopt children, they are often given children with severe disabilities while ‘normal’ children are reserved for ‘healthy’, heterosexual couples (Palmer, 1995).

Added to the absence of anti-discriminatory laws in Britain is another law known as Section 28 and passed in 1988 which prohibited local authorities from promoting homosexuality or promoting “the teaching...of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship” (Palmer, 1995: 29). Combined with no protection from

⁴ The Economist. 1997. “Gay Times: Homosexuality”, January 11, vol. 342 (7999): 52.

discrimination, this law has served to reinforce the notion of homosexuals as second-class citizens and contributed to the invisibility of lesbians in Britain.

Canadian law appears more progressive with reference to the large number of states prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Petersen, 1995). Employment benefits have been extended to same-sex partners and unconstitutional treatment of lesbians and gay men is being challenged. While Canadian courts have in many cases ruled that claiming a lesbian identity should not disable women from gaining custody of their children, lesbians who are open about their sexuality run the risk of losing custody of their children to heterosexual fathers (Petersen, 1995). Single lesbians are allowed to adopt children but as an adoptive couple, only one parent has legal rights over the child(ren). Increasingly though, lesbian mothers are being allowed to adopt their partner's biological children. Lesbians are allowed donor insemination but in most cases this is done privately as state hospital staff have been reported as being heterosexist⁵ (Petersen, 1995). In addition, same-sex marriage is not permitted in Canada, but this law is currently being challenged in Ontario and it appears that same-sex marriage will be recognised soon (Petersen, 1995). Overall, lesbians are still discriminated against despite a legal system prohibiting discrimination.

Male homosexual relations in Germany were criminalised until 1969, although

⁵ The term 'homophobia' has recently been contested as it serves to disguise the dominance of heterosexual practice and discourse within social and institutional settings. 'Heterosexism' implies that heterosexuality has socially and institutionally been defined as the 'norm' while homosexuality has been understood as a 'deviance' from this 'norm' (See Holmberg, C. B. 1998. Sexualities and Popular Culture. California: Sage Publications.

consensual sexual relations between women have never been prohibited by law (Herdt, 1997). Brandenburg is the only German city which holds anti-discrimination legislation. It appears that the country's release from the communist regime has led to new opportunities for both lesbians and gays in terms of equal rights. But despite possibility for equality, there is no legal recognition of lesbian partnerships in German law. Lesbians are often ignored and treated as exotic, sexualised objects and girls are pressurised to conform to heterosexual norms. Lesbians are unable to adopt children as couples, and based on the notion that lesbianism is 'immoral', lesbian mothers are regularly denied custody rights of their own children by the courts, reflecting the prejudiced views of upholders of the law (Duda and Wuch, 1997).

Norway's recent history is one of solidarity and striving toward equal rights for all members of society. Although the law offers same-sex couples many protections, they are still not treated on an equal par with heterosexual couples (Lindstad, 1995).

homosexuality was illegal until 1973 but same-sex sexual relations between women have never been restricted. In 1981, the Norwegian parliament added two clauses to the existing Penal code, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Section 35a reads that it is illegal to "threaten or deride, or to incite to hatred, persecution or contempt" on the basis of "homosexual inclination, lifestyle, or orientation" (Lindstad, 1995: 140). The maximum penalty is six months imprisonment, rendering Norway the first country in the world to provide lesbians and gay men with legal protection. In 1993, Norwegian lesbian and gay couples were given legal leeway to marry. This law is equivalent to that applying to heterosexual marriage laws. However, lesbians and gays cannot marry in church as the latter condemns sexual relations between homosexuals.

are also not allowed to adopt children. It appears then, that despite the legal recognition of same-sex marriages, homosexual unions are not seen as equal to heterosexual marriages. Lesbian partners also do not have equal legal rights in cases where donar insemination is used to conceive children (Lindstad, 1995).

The legal age for sexual contact in Poland is 15 years, which applies equally to heterosexuals and homosexuals (Garnier, 1995). Legislation regarding homosexuality is quite liberal: same-sex sexual relations have never been outlawed in Poland and article 22 of 1995 in the Polish constitution outlaws discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. However this may change, particularly as the Church is critical of the provision made for sexual orientation (Garnier, 1995). Despite the liberal legislation, Polish lesbians are nevertheless socially discriminated against both on the basis of their gender and sexual orientation, although women are legally guaranteed the same rights as men. The attitude that lesbians and gay men should not participate in the rearing of children is pervasive. Lesbians are not allowed to adopt children and donar insemination is only available to heterosexual couples. Heterosexuality is assumed in Poland, and women who do not marry are often ostracised and “treated with contempt” (Garnier,

157). Many lesbians marry to escape the condemnation from their communities in an attempt to live a ‘normal’ life. In addition, the Catholic church has a massive influence on social attitudes and homosexuality is, of course, condemned as a sin and deviation (Garnier, 1995).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, sexuality as a discourse has opened up in Russia (Herdt, 1997). Prior to 1993, gay male sex was criminalised in contrast to lesbian relations which were never criminalised. Psychiatric institutions rather than the legal system are the biggest threat to Russian lesbians, and the dominant belief is that lesbianism needs to be 'treated' (Gessen, 1995). Under current laws however, it has become more difficult to institutionalise a person without her consent. Overall, present day Russia has become more tolerant of lesbians. Consequently, a number of gay and lesbian groups have formed in the last five years, despite none of these being formally recognised by the government (Herdt, 1997).

Prior to the current constitution of 1978, same-sex sexual relations were punishable by imprisonment in Spain. In 1994, parliament legally recognised homosexual partnerships as equal to unmarried heterosexual partnerships specifically in relation to pension, inheritance and property rights (Hernandez, 1995). A lesbian couple cannot adopt children although a single lesbian can. The Catholic church in particular, has been severely opposed to lesbians and gays adopting children (Hernandez, 1995). Lesbians can obtain donor insemination but with only one parent having legal status – the other partner has no legal rights in relation to the child(ren). Overall, Spanish lesbians face rejection and condemnation from their families, forcing them to hide their sexual orientation. It appears that despite legal changes and the increasing visibility of lesbian organisations and publications, many Spanish lesbians remain isolated and hidden (Hernandez, 1995).

South Africa

South African law played a fundamental part in stigmatising non-heterosexual behaviour as 'different' in order to reinforce the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality (De Vos, 1996). But discriminatory laws were informed by religious and medical discourse, thereby constructing the homosexual as 'abhorrent' and 'beast-like' for defying the prescribed norm of heterosexuality (Retief, 1994). Because being different implied a need for psychiatric intervention (Potgieter, 1997) homosexuality was still believed to be mental disorder 'curable' through psychiatric intervention in 1973. Only in 1993 was homosexuality deleted from the list of diseases by the World Health Organisation (Dunton and Palmberg, 1996).

South Africa's history of apartheid renders this country unique in its oppression of minority groups. The combination of oppressions by race, class, sex and sexual orientation contributed to the discrimination experienced by minority groups.⁶ Forty years of iron-fisted rule by the Nationalist government was characterised by racial segregation and the policing of interracial relationships and sexual minorities.

With apartheid laws firmly in place since the mid 1950s, South African law played a significant role in constructing the homosexual as deviant, immoral and mentally ill.

⁶ 'Minority groups' refer to those groups of persons who, although in some cases the numerical majority, held little or no social power during South Africa's apartheid past. These groups include blacks, women, gays and lesbians.

Along with discrimination against blacks, women and other minority groups, any person who did not accept the hegemony of the white, heterosexual, middle-class, Afrikaans speaking male, was treated with contempt. Christian nationalist apartheid ideology was aimed at keeping the white nation sexually and morally pure through restrictive and oppressive legislation around an individual's choice of sexual partner. The criminalisation of homosexuality in the 1950s and 1960s clearly reflects that it was white males who were to be 'protected' from homosexuality (Retief, 1994). While gayness was denounced by the law as "a defilement and abomination of human nature" (Cameron, 1994: 93), gay conduct was perceived as a public nuisance, a threat to sexual purity and racial and moral solidarity which needed to be eradicated and attacked (Retief, 1994). Weitz (1989) argues that male homosexuality became severely stigmatised in South Africa in the late 1950s because of the general intolerance of 'feminised' men, based on the belief that by rejecting their privileged status, homosexuals threatened the superiority of 'real' men.

In contrast, sexual acts between South African women were generally ignored and only criminalised in 1988 when the existing prohibition on 'indecent' and 'immoral' acts was extended to include lesbians (Cameron, 1994; De Vos, 1996). Prior to this, lesbians were believed to exist in smaller numbers and were considered 'evil' for not producing children (Potgieter, 1997; Retief, 1994). The inactivity of the law in terms of lesbian relationships epitomises its failure to even consider the existence of these relationships. But Farlam (in De Gruchy and Germond, 1997:132) points out that despite the lack of recognition, "lesbians were still exposed to discrimination at the hands of both the

legislature and the judiciary.” According to Cameron (1994), the courts were doubtful whether sexual acts between women should be punishable by law. Potgieter (1997: 94) highlights the historical marginalisation of lesbians in this respect and describes the lack of recognition of lesbians as an “ideology of disbelief” by a patriarchal system unable to comprehend that women could possibly not need men, sexually or in any other way. In the past, South African lesbians have not only been ignored, but *excluded* from criminalisation not simply because they were oppressed as women but because they were denied existence as lesbians. Being a black lesbian was even more difficult within the South African context where racial stigmatisation played a fundamental role in the sustenance of a nationalist government.

The discriminatory laws of sodomy and “unnatural sexual offences” in the late 1950s and early 60s in South Africa were based on Roman-Dutch common law (Potgieter, 1997). These laws attempted to punish any sexual acts not directed towards procreation, thus sodomy between a man and woman was considered “contrary to the order of nature” and masturbation deemed criminal (Cameron and Gevisser, 1994: 91; Potgieter, 1997). Section 20A(1) of the Sexual Offences Act 23 of 1957, attempted to control homosexual activity by introducing the following law:

A male person who commits with another male person at a party any act, which is calculated to stimulate sexual passion or to give sexual gratification, shall be guilty of an offence.

A *party* constituted “any occasion where more than two persons are present” (Section 20A(2)).

The criminalisation of same-sex conduct between women thirty years later in 1988 indicates that lesbianism was at least being recognised by the law. The Sexual Offence Act (section. 14(b) and (c)) of 1988 read that any woman who “commits or attempts to commit an immoral or indecent act (with a girl of under 19 years)” is subject to punishment, suggesting that lesbian relationships between women over the age of 19 years were not criminalised. Despite this attempt at curtailing lesbian relationships, the law remained particularly concerned to police and control white male homosexual behaviour (Weitz, 1989).

Same-sex marriage, child custody, adoption and the legal system in the ‘new’ South Africa

The law's silence before 1994 regarding same-sex marriages in South Africa normalised heterosexual marriage, whilst at the same time denying the possibility of same-sex marriage. As argued by Calhoun in Wolhuter:

Contemporary heterosexual law requires that romantic love occur between women and men, not between women or between men. It requires that the basic social, economic and reproductive unit be the heterosexually married unit (1997: 391).

This definition of marriage requires that marriage be a legal union between a woman and man to the exclusion of other persons and pervades the legal system today. The nuclear family is seen as “naturally given” and “morally desirable” while alternative family

structures are judged as unstable (Barret and McIntosh in Neophytou, 1994: 24). The 'naturalness' of heterosexuality is also rooted in its imagined capacity for reproduction. The inability of gay and lesbian couples to procreate is still used as a legal strategy to restrict them from claiming guardianship of their biological children, adopting children or utilising artificial insemination (Tallis, 1992; Wolhuter, 1997). In effect, this restriction results in extreme difficulties in cases of adoption. Although single lesbian women in South Africa have been granted access to child adoption agencies in recent years, and despite the fact that section 17 of The "Child Care Act" of 1983⁷ does not explicitly prohibit lesbians from adopting children, lesbian couples seldom attempt this because they cannot, as a couple, legally share custody of an adopted child. This means that only one parent has legal rights to the child while the other, although an equal caregiver, has no rights relating to the child's life. Heterosexuals of course, are not subject to this restriction.⁸

But overriding all of this is the enactment of the 1996 final Constitution, in particular section 9(1) in the Bill of Rights which stipulates that:

The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, *sexual orientation*, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.

⁷ Section 17 of The "Child Care Act" of 1983 reads: "A child may be adopted –

- a) by a husband and his wife jointly;
- b) by a widower or widow or unmarried or divorced person;
- c) by a married person whose spouse is the parent of the child;
- d) by the natural father of a child born out of wedlock."

⁸ Mail and Guardian, March 30th 2001.

This clause guarantees lesbians and gay men equality in the eyes of the law. The inclusion of sexual orientation as a non-discriminatory category means that South Africa is the first country in the world to provide lesbians and gays with equal legal protection (Koen and Terry, 1995; Farlam in De Gruchy and Germond, 1997; Potgieter, 1997). For lesbians and gays, this has meant that their voices can be heard: legal space has been provided for resistance to discrimination. The constitutional court ruled that the laws which had previously criminalised same-sex activity between consenting adults, were unconstitutional and deeply affected the dignity, personhood and identity of gays and lesbians. But despite these fine words, there exists much prejudice in South African law, particularly in relation to parent-child relations where the one parent is lesbian or gay (Clark, 1998). Lesbians who are visible still suffer at the hands of both a discriminating legal system and a homophobic society oppressing them on the basis of their gender and sexual orientation (Koen and Terry, 1995).

Law, Religion and Leadership in shaping the 'new' South Africa

The connection between legal constructions and social attitudes is complex and has been the subject of much debate. Vago (1981) discusses this reciprocal relationship between law and society. The first notion is that law is shaped by the social norms of society. Law would thus be dependent on and determined by social mores. Legal changes occur then as society changes. Atiyah (1983) adds that changes in moral and social beliefs can have an extreme influence on the law, forcing legal transformation. In South Africa for example,

the growing anti-apartheid struggle eventually compelled changes in the law. As minority groups, women, blacks and homosexuals fought to be recognised legally as equal human beings deserving of equal human rights. The 1996 Constitution is proof of forced legal transformation due to social resistance.

But the law can also be seen as a tool in bringing about social change (Vago, 1981). In this sense, the law is used to guide, establish and enforce social norms. Law is then understood as the *cause* of social change. The 1996 Constitution can then be interpreted as a guideline for a democratic and non-discriminatory society. This reciprocal and dialectical relationship between law and society is reflected in the law's treatment of same-sex relationships. The attempt by the law in the past to 'hide' male homosexual / lesbian affection and desire, helped construct a society in which 'alternative' sexualities were not easily accepted while, at the same time, prejudiced social views also influenced laws. Neophytou (1994: 25) explains how before the adoption of the new Constitution, "discriminatory legislation, the teachings of the church, educational policies and the media" have contributed to homophobic attitudes resulting in the marginalisation and oppression of lesbians in South Africa:

Homophobic acts in our society range from heterosexual men murdering and raping lesbians to the termination of employment upon disclosure to the loss of custody of children. Homophobic culture has a profound impact on lesbian mothers (Neophytou, 1994: 25).

Lesbian mothers continuously needed to prove to the courts that they were good mothers based on an ideology of motherhood which insists that women are naturally nurturing,

gentle, weak and supportive in contrast to the stereotypical belief that lesbians are oversexed, narcissistic, masculine and aggressive (Neophytou, 1994). Homophobics believe that the children of lesbian mothers will themselves become lesbians, that children of lesbian mothers will suffer from social stigmatisation by friends and teachers at their schools and that lesbian mothers sexually molest their daughters (Neophytou, 1994).

But even now, after the abolition of oppressive laws and the enactment of the new Constitution, lesbians still feel discriminated against: "I'm scared of being harassed. It's always important to check where we go. It's awful to live like this, but we don't want to get hurt. I just wish sexual differences could be tolerated in South Africa the way religious differences are."⁹ Another lesbian living in Kwa-Zulu Natal has postulated that although it is easier for lesbians and gays to be out today, "despite the fact that the post-apartheid government has promulgated a lot of progressive legislation, people still have decades to go before they accept us."¹⁰ The historical legacy today is twofold, firstly in society's support for strategies restricting open lesbian and gay behaviour and questioning the fitness of the parent(s) in cases of child custody. Secondly in terms of the legacy of the new Constitution which might be what Vago would identify as a tool to bring about social change.

Despite the anti-discriminatory nature of the final Constitution, the rulings of many judges, magistrates and persons serving the law often imply that in their minds, a child's

⁹ Lazarus, J. "Black lesbians still struggling for freedom." True Love, August 2001: 100.

¹⁰ Lazarus, J. "Black lesbians still struggling for freedom." True Love, August 2001: 100.

sexuality will be affected by the sexual orientation of the parent(s). This belief is based on assumptions and stereotypes which serve to restrict lesbian / gay parents from gaining access to their children. In many situations, gay / lesbian parents' access to their children is based on legal conditions which serve to allegedly 'protect' the child(ren) from 'wrong' signals (Clark, 1998). These conditions very often prevent lesbian / gay couples from demonstrating their affection for each other in front of the child(ren) as in the view of the Courts, this might lead to the child developing into a 'deviant' lesbian or gay. Although this stereotypical belief cannot be substantiated through research findings (Clark, 1998), such beliefs permeate back into society through the law and are internalised by ordinary people who are conditioned to believe that anything 'different' cannot possibly be 'moral' or 'normal.'

These homophobic attitudes are entrenched through the South African legal system when lesbian mothers are denied custody of their children and when a lesbian couple is not allowed to share joint custody of adopted children. It appears that the very upholders of the Constitution are uncomfortable with the provision of equality being extended to lesbians and gays in the South African Constitution. De Vos (1996: 280) emphasises how even with the new Constitution, the Courts maintain that homosexuality / lesbianism is "abnormal" and "damaging" to the child and in cases where visitation rights are granted, strict criteria are imposed involving gay / lesbian parents keeping a low profile with respect to their lifestyles.

Laws did not and do not operate in isolation and there are many social institutions, structures and practices that both shape and mediate the law in South Africa. Most religions today do not provide space for homosexual behaviour and religious fundamentalism for example, has played a significant part in constructing homosexuality as 'deviant' in South Africa. Despite the spread of Islam and Hinduism, Christianity appears to be the most widespread in South Africa today and has certainly been most influential in the past in terms of South African law (Dunton and Palmberg, 1996). Corbett (in De Gruchy and Germond, 1997) details how the Christian church (born into Greece and Rome), understood today as an institution which denied the 'moral' existence of homosexuality, had earlier acknowledged homosexuality as a set of behaviours morally no different from heterosexuality. The transformation occurred around 533 BC, when Europe experienced social and political change, and the Church was pressurised into finding scapegoats for the decline of the old order. Spencer (1996) and Corbett (1997) explains how particular groups became subject to marginalisation and male homosexuality was outlawed, punished through burning and castration. In South Africa this Judeo-Christian Biblical legacy has played a fundamental role in influencing both the law and social perceptions of gays and lesbians (*The Argus*, 1988 in Cameron and Gevisser, 1994). Conservative churches played a significant part in how the law was constructed and what the Church considered 'moral' in relation to gay and lesbian existence was often reflected in South African law (Dunton and Palmberg, 1996; Farlam in De Gruchy and Germond, 1997).

Although the new Constitution aims to introduce a culture of human rights in South Africa through the inclusion of sexual orientation as a non-discriminatory category, changing law does not automatically alter the views of certain groups of people who use the Bible and other religious texts to condemn homosexual behaviour. One member of the Christian Citizenship Committee of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa even claimed that “the conviction that homosexual acts are sinful and condemned by God as such, is virtually universal to the Christian community.”¹¹ He argued that homosexual behaviour was “destructive to their spiritual welfare.”

In Cape Town at least, numbers of people still hold discriminatory attitudes in relation to the existence of lesbian and gay lifestyles and the constitutional provision for these lifestyles. A relatively new interdenominational organisation called Africa Christian Action in Cape Town has vigorously criticised the new Constitution in terms of its human rights agenda for homosexuals and distributed a document calling for a strategy to “deal with the homosexual movement.”¹² Their claims (based on American studies) are rooted in the notion that homosexuality is a disease, that nuclear families are the only acceptable family form, that homosexual relationships are short-lived and violent and that homosexuality is related to crime.¹³ Where children are concerned, the organisation claims that homosexual parenting results in ‘problem’ children who are less sociable and less successful at school. They also argued that children of homosexual parents are likely

¹¹ *Cape Times*, 30th May 2001.

¹² *Saturday Weekend Argus*, 24th/25th February.

¹³ Africa Christian Action. 2001. “What About the Children? Should Children in Homosexual or Lesbian Relationships be Allowed to Adopt Children?” Unpublished seminar delivered at the University of the Western Cape, 21 August.

to become homosexuals themselves. This is not very different from the claims of the Muslim Judicial Council in Athlone, Cape Town who cling to the idea that male homosexuality/lesbianism is “non-acceptable...abnormal behaviour ... an immoral act.”¹⁴

But not all South African denominations condemn homosexual behaviour. Reid (1994) documents the brief history of the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Church (HUMCC) in Hilbrow, Johannesburg. Since 1994, this church has played an essential role in the struggle against homophobia. Established to provide a spiritual home for lesbians and gay men, the HUMCC claimed that homosexuality was God-given and needed to be accepted and protected. According to Reid (1998) the HUMCC started small, consisting of a few lesbians and gay men and then transformed into a fully-fledged church. Their aims were to place the struggle for lesbian and gay rights within the broader liberation struggle in South Africa. The campaign to include sexual orientation in the final Constitution was however met with condemnation from the conservative African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) who claimed homosexuality to be both un-African and un-Christian. Member of parliament and one of the ACDP party leaders, Cheryllyn Dudley, has claimed that:

homosexuals are entitled to respect. But this respect does not require the provision of special privileges that infringe the rights and liberties of others - special rights, such as those entrenched in our Constitution, which constitutes blatant rebellion to the Almighty God. Acceptance and promotion of homosexual behaviour is not loving homosexuals, it is callously aiding them in their destruction.¹⁵

¹⁴ Saturday Weekend Argus, 24th/25th February 2001

¹⁵ Cape Argus, 28th February 2001.

Alongside laws and religion, the tone set by political leaders and opinion-makers all contribute to the atmosphere of tolerance or intolerance in particular societies. Leaders within the African National Congress like Winnie Madikizela Mandela (chairperson of the ANC Women's League) and Cheryl Carolus (then ANC Deputy Secretary-General) have voiced opposing but influential opinions. During Madikizela Mandela's trial in 1991, she expressed the view that homosexuality was a foreign influence, a result of the western colonisation of black Africa (Holmes, 1994). Madikizela Mandela has been described as the most prominent advocate in South Africa of the argument that homosexuality is un-African (Dunton and Palmberg, 1996).

Cheryl Carolus on the other hand, appears to condemn homophobia in the same vein as racism and sexism but warns that "the ANC is made up of very ordinary South Africans who bring with them many of the misinformed views, perspectives and prejudices that exist in society as a whole" (in Dunton and Palmberg, 1996: 28). She adds that homophobic discourses need to be challenged within our families and debated with our friends in order to produce social change and construct a truly democratic society. In addition, she has rejected the notion of homosexuality as un-African and suggested that this "myth" feeds into the idea that there exists no lesbians and gays in black communities (Dunton and Palmberg, 1996).

But the stance of leaders from our neighbours, Zimbabwe and Namibia influence the ideal of a human rights' culture both in their own countries and in South Africa and feed the anti-gay sentiments of individuals who condemn homosexuality. The nationalist

discourses of political leaders in post-colonial Zimbabwe and Namibia have expressed increased resistance to the newly emerging lesbian and gay identities in their countries (Openshaw in De Gruchy and Germond, 1997). Added to this is their objections to the notion that lesbians and gays should have any human rights and dismay at women having reproductive freedom (Bennet, 2000).

The notion of homosexuality as un-African and imported from the West, as posited by certain prominent African state leaders, legitimises perceptions of gays and lesbians as deviant (Antonio in De Gruchy and Germond, 1997; Epprecht in O. Murray and Roscoe, 1998). This position is upheld by the fact that homosexuality is illegal in most African countries including Mozambique, Malawi, Angola, Tanzania and Zambia (Dunton and Palmberg, 1996). In Zimbabwe, Uganda and Namibia leading politicians have exhibited the most violent homophobic attitudes towards lesbians and gays (Bennet, 2000). In 1999 in Durban, South Africa, President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, described gays' behaviour as worse than "pigs and dogs" (Hoad, 1998; Luirink, 2000), claiming that homosexual behaviour was no different from that of "organised drug addicts" or "even those given to bestiality."¹⁶ Earlier, at an interdenominational conference in Harare in 1996, Mugabe publicly condemned lesbians and gays, declaring that homosexuality "threatened to pervade the nation." His condemnation was supported by the Church and other sectors of Zimbabwean society, who claimed that only Christian norms and values were "authentically African" (Hoad, 1998: 36).

¹⁶ The New York Times, August 2, 1995 in Dunton and Palmberg, 1996: 9-10.

Antonio (in De Gruchy and Germond, 1997) has explored the roots of this intense homophobia and attributes these kinds of prejudices to patriarchal culture. Mugabe's denunciation of homosexuality as 'repulsive', 'animalistic' and 'abnormal' is rooted in the notion that heterosexuality is 'normal' and 'moral.' But as Dunton and Palmberg (1996) argue, homophobic attitudes of prominent political leaders are for the most part misinformed: "There have been, and to a large extent still are, many more preconceived ideas and ideologically tainted assertions and prejudices about sex and sexuality than there is knowledge" (p.32).

Despite holding one of the most progressive constitutions in the world Namibian president Sam Njoma has led anti-gay opinion and threatened the arrest, imprisonment and deportation of Namibian gays and lesbians (Frank, 2000). Njoma articulates and leads the escalating homophobia in Namibia at present, describing homosexuality as a 'foreign' European influence which has no place in Africa. The 'Father of the Nation' even warned on national television that lesbians and gays would continuously be rejected in Namibia and their behaviour would be classified as criminal.¹⁷ Another high ranking public official, Home Affairs minister Jerry Ekando, equated gay and lesbian behaviour to "unnatural acts" and ordered police recruits to "eliminate them from the face of Namibia" (Frank, 2000: 3). When challenged on his homophobic remarks, Ekando claimed that he did not discriminate against lesbians and gays, because none existed in Namibia (Frank, 2000). Currently, there are no laws prohibiting homosexuality or protecting homosexual rights in Namibia.

¹⁷ Special Assignment broadcast on SABC3 at 21h30 on the 5th June 2001

Homophobia of such intensity is surprising, considering Njoma's role as icon of African liberation and leader in the fight against apartheid during the late 1970s and 80s. It appears that the project of nation building in these African states is based on exclusion of certain minority groups. But according to Hoad (1998: 37), these attitudes toward homosexuality involve much more than simple homophobia. He posits that there may exist a "regional contest around the authenticity of African identity" based on questions around sexual identity. Moreover, a *perceived* absence of homosexuality in one culture has been homogenised to the whole of Africa, a problematic assumption to pose, particularly because the area of sexuality has been so under-researched within Africa (De Gruchy and Germond, 1997; Herdt, 1997). Overall though, the perceptions of ordinary people are likely to be influenced by the homophobic views of prominent leaders and decision-makers like Madikizela Mandela, Njoma and Mugabe. These types of views contribute to an atmosphere where anti-gay positions are acceptable thus limiting the growth of a human rights culture in Southern Africa.

In this chapter, I have attempted to illustrate how the illegality of male homosexuality in most countries throughout the world tends to visibilise gay males while at the same time condemning lesbians to a life of solitude and invisibility. Where lesbianism is punishable in some countries (particularly where the laws are rooted within religious doctrine) lesbians often fear violence from both the state, their families and their communities at large. Despite the cultural and historical constructions of homosexuality, there appears to be similarities in the ways women as gendered subjects are legally treated for threatening

the maintenance of patriarchal structures. Although the anti-discriminatory laws in many Western countries means that lesbians are provided legal protection in some spheres, they are nevertheless discriminated against in areas related to parenting in particular. In South Africa, the democratic nature of our Constitution is an attempt to eradicate the injustices of the past and provide equality for all citizens. But South African lesbians, like lesbians elsewhere, are still discriminated against through a legal system which continues to problematise lesbian identities.

While laws both influence and are influenced by societal norms and values, religious doctrine also appears to play a fundamental role in how lesbian behaviour is constructed legally and socially. Despite the anti-discriminatory stance of the South African Constitution, the violently homophobic views of some political leaders in our own and neighbouring countries also influence and decelerate the growth of a human rights' culture in Africa. While these discriminatory views may partially be based on a lack of knowledge - since homosexuality has been mostly under-researched within Africa - they also appear to echo Western biomedical discourse claiming that homosexuality is a 'pathology' and moral 'sin.' Although the opinions of these leaders have been made public, social perceptions of gays, and more specifically lesbians, have not been documented at all. The following chapter explores the paucity of research in the field of lesbians and social perceptions worldwide. In an attempt to begin to fill these gaps, I discuss how I began researching social perceptions in a local Western Cape community, outlining my research procedures.

Chapter 2

Literature survey and Research Procedures

The following section focuses on the lack of research in relation to perceptions and constructions of lesbians both internationally and locally. In my discussion of American studies, I attempt to highlight the shortcomings of research claimed to be representative of heterosexuals' attitudes towards lesbians and reveal how studies of this type fail to take into account the complex nature of individuals' perceptions of homosexuals. In an attempt to begin to fill these gaps in the academy, I discuss the theoretical foundations shaping my study on social perceptions of lesbians. An explanation of why and how I began this research follows thereafter.

In 1987, Herek conducted an American study of how religious orientation influenced heterosexuals' attitudes towards lesbians and gay males. The sample consisted of 126 respondents (80 women and 46 men) from 4 universities across the United States. Like most of the studies I discuss below, reports on attitudes towards homosexuality reveal that the majority of the respondents were white, undergraduate university students with few studies using black heterosexual respondents as part of the sample. For this study, questionnaires consisting of multiple-choice items were used as a method to evaluate respondents' attitudes, and revealed that conservatism of religious beliefs played a fundamental role in individuals' prejudice.

In 1992, Kite conducted an experiment including American heterosexual men who identified themselves as tolerant and intolerant of homosexuals. These men were expected to interact with a lesbian, a gay male and an individual of unknown sexual orientation. The sample consisted of 121 males who were undergraduate psychology students from Ball State University in the United States. Most of the respondents were white (93.5%) while the rest were African-American, Asian and Hispanic. Respondents were, on average, 19 years old. Attitudes were assessed through the manner in which heterosexual men reacted to the lesbian woman, the gay male and individual of unknown sexual orientation. Kite reported that both tolerant and intolerant men held more negative attitudes towards gay men than lesbians, which she claimed was supported by Herek (1984) and Whitley (1988). Negative attitudes were associated with lack of education, authoritarianism, prejudice towards underrepresented groups, lack of contact with homosexual individuals and traditional views of gender roles. The notion of Aids as a 'gay' disease also resulted in negative attitudes towards gay men. Most respondents used the term 'homosexual' to refer to gay men rather than lesbians.

In 1995, Herek and Capitanio conducted a study aimed at assessing black heterosexuals' attitudes towards lesbians and gay men in the United States. The sample consisted of 391 respondents consulted through a list of telephone numbers from an American survey corporation. In effect, only black individuals living in urban areas were included in the sample while blacks residing in rural areas were excluded from this study. The telephonic conversations led to Herek and Capitanio concluding that black heterosexual males held more negative attitudes towards gay men than lesbians, and that both heterosexual men

and women who believed homosexuality to be a choice were more negative and intolerant in their attitudes than respondents who believed homosexuality to be inherent. The researchers also claimed that individuals were more tolerant in their attitudes if they were highly educated, not religious, politically liberal, unmarried, did not conceive of homosexuality as a 'white' disease and included blacks in their conception of gay men. Overall, Herek and Capitanio believed that no substantial differences between white and black heterosexuals existed in terms of their attitudes towards lesbians and gay men.

Kite and Whitley (1995) conducted another American study focussing broadly on attitudes towards homosexuality. Their study involved reviewing psychology journal articles concerning heterosexuals' attitudes towards homosexuals using two computer databases. From their literature search, Kite and Whitley reported that heterosexuals' attitudes towards homosexuals cannot be separated from their perceptions of gender appropriate roles for women and men. Added to this was the notion that individuals holding traditional views concerning sex roles, would exhibit negative attitudes towards homosexuals. The violation of conventional gender roles was understood as more problematic for heterosexual men than women and gay males were seen as more 'deviant' and 'abnormal' than lesbians. Negative attitudes towards homosexuals by heterosexual men were found to be related to the pressure men feel to conform to appropriate social roles.

In a national survey consisting of 1400 African American gay and lesbian respondents Cochran, Mays and Peplau (1997) reported that lesbians and gays were virtually invisible

in the United States. This could be due to the fact that most research on homosexuality in America has focussed primarily on white, middle class individuals in same-sex relationships, ignoring the existence of black lesbians and gays who constitute a diverse group of individuals with various cultural origins shaping their experiences in different ways (Capitaniao and Herek, 1995; Greene, 1997). Greene and Boyd-Franklin (in Greene, 1997) in their discussion of African-American lesbians argue that homophobia in African-American communities has resulted from the internalisation of stereotypes of 'abnormal' sexuality and that lesbians and gays have been discriminated against because they do not conform to traditional gender roles. Smith (1982) and Erlichman (1989) add that religion and heterosexual privilege are two of the primary reasons for homophobic reactions to lesbian and gay existence in African-American communities. But overall research on social responses to homosexuality in black, Latin-American, Asian-American, Chicano and Indian-American communities in the United States is extremely limited (Greene, 1997).

Weitz (1989) argues that intolerance towards lesbianism is relatively new since negative social reactions to lesbianism only became a serious concern in the second half of the nineteenth century in America when the combination of male migration, growth of the first wave feminist movement and industrialisation allowed women some economic independence. Weitz attributes the emergence of this intolerance toward lesbians to the threat lesbianism posed and still poses to male power: lesbians undermine the sanctity of traditional gender roles presenting an alternative to hegemonic heterosexuality. Thus in the United States, lesbianism only became stigmatised legally and socially in the modern

before this, same-sex relationships between women were quite commonplace (Weitz, 1989). Similarly, male homosexuality became severely stigmatised because of the general intolerance of 'feminised' men based on the belief that homosexuals were rejecting their privileged status and threatening the superiority of 'real' men.

Research within this context generally reflects similar results: in the United States at least, research reporting on negative social attitudes towards male homosexuality is pervasive. Although we have some idea of individuals' attitudes towards homosexuality, we still are unaware of how and why individuals discriminate. Because attitudes were analysed using psychological tests, surveys and experiments, social perceptions of homosexuals have generally been oversimplified and the complex, contradictory and inconsistent nature of individuals' attitudes have not been taken into account. In other words, the context in which individuals are located and the frame of reference shaping their understandings of the world cannot be comprehended solely through quantitative methods of this type. In addition, in the majority of these studies, samples consisted of white university students who are not representative of the general American population.

views of older, uneducated individuals have not been assessed at all. Black individuals who reside in rural areas have not been included in any of the above-mentioned samples. Moreover, there is a paucity of research concerning heterosexuals' reactions to lesbians specifically. It is clear from all these studies that heterosexual males

hold more negative attitudes towards gay males than lesbians but how do heterosexual men and women feel about lesbians? How does race and class shape individuals' perceptions and constructions of lesbians? In which ways have these

individuals constructed lesbian identity and behaviour? None of the studies conducted in this area have been able to answer these questions.

Recently a few local studies have focussed on the experiences of black South African lesbians, noting that as elsewhere they have largely been ignored both in terms of their gender and sexual orientation by the academy. In South Africa, feminist researchers have barely taken cognisance of the fact that as a minority group, lesbians have been severely oppressed and that black lesbians in particular have been further marginalised through lack of recognition. Hence in the late 1990s there were only a few studies focussed on the experiences of black lesbians in South Africa (see Chan Sam, 1994 and Potgieter, 1997) but studies concerned with social perceptions of lesbians have not been documented in South Africa at all.

Relevance of study

American studies are certainly not reflective of South African gay and lesbian experiences. As early as 1975, Plummer postulated the need for situated analyses in relation to social attitudes towards homosexuality: "research is required which depicts the ways in which members actually perceive, respond to and reflect upon homosexuality in face to face encounters" (Plummer, 1975: 113). The lack of situated and comprehensive research related to individuals' perceptions of lesbians creates a need to explore how ordinary people in South Africa construct lesbians. Although considerable transformation has occurred within the South African legal and social system with regards to the new

Constitution and the shift to majority rule, a gap appears to exist between the ideal of equality as enshrined in the Constitution and the attitudes and perceptions of ordinary South Africans. In order for our government and our society to develop a democracy where everyone is equal before the law, we need to find out the ways in which people are not equal in their own communities despite the law. We cannot change things effectively without finding out the ways people perceive lesbians. This project hopes to contribute towards change by revealing the ways in which certain groups remain discriminated against despite the fine words of the Constitution.

Not only have most foreign and local studies excluded lesbianism as a form of homosexuality and disregarded black lesbians altogether, they have failed to recognise that lesbians have further been discriminated against through research which has claimed to be gay-affirmative. At present, as the available literature reveals, this is still the case. A detailed, contextual analysis of social attitudes towards homosexuality is sorely lacking, both in South Africa and much of the rest of the world, and it is hoped that this study will start to fill this gap in the South African academy.

Kitzinger (1987) argues that paradoxically most allegedly gay-affirmative research concerning lesbians has aided in their oppression, despite the shift from a 'pathological' to 'lifestyle' approach. Through gay-affirmative research, some Western researchers have claimed to discover the 'true nature' of lesbians, which Kitzinger claims, has merely served to conform with the characteristics of a patriarchal social order. But lesbian studies are constructed across a variety of discourses, occupy spaces beyond traditional

disciplinary boundaries and exist outside the characteristics of a patriarchal social order within a space which does not aim to 'fit' lesbianism into specific, recognisable categories (Wilton, 1995). Moreover, Wilton describes sexual identity as "a reflexive self-narrative profoundly dependent on cultural, economic and social factors" (1995: 3). Hence, identity cannot be understood as fixed and unchanging, but as constructed and reconstructed by individuals, located within conditions that are neither static nor unchanging.

As Plummer (1975) states, homosexuality like heterosexuality, is a social construct. Homosexuals' experiences in relation to their sexual orientation cannot be separated from the social context. In other words, societal reactions shape homosexuals' experiences. Hence the need for situated analyses which investigate individual reactions to homosexuality. The ways in which people perceive same-sex relationships would surely influence the ways that homosexuals are treated.

Qualitative vs. Quantitative research

For this study, a feminist qualitative methodology informed by discourse analysis and located within a social constructionist paradigm, appeared to be most suitable in terms of its ability to acknowledge the social construction of identities. A feminist analysis would also provide a basis for exploring how individuals construct their realities, while attempting to contribute to emancipation and transformation (Harding, 1987; Banister, 1994). It is important to note however, that no one feminist 'method' exists. Feminist

research should be considered as a process, rather than a particular way of 'doing' research. Stanley and Wise (1990) argue that feminist research is a focus on women carried out by feminist women, for women. Others argue that studies of men can be feminist but as Burman (1994) states, it is the particular goals one wishes to achieve through the research process, which constitutes a feminist study. Any research method can be employed, as long as its goals are political (Mies, 1991).

In particular (but not exclusively), feminist qualitative social research focuses on women's experiences and attempts to "correct both the *invisibility* and *distortion* of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position" (Lather, 1988: 571). In other words, feminist research should be understood as political in its purposes and goals and should be committed to the transformation of women's lives. With regard to this study, which explores social constructions of lesbians, a feminist approach is political in its attempt to acknowledge the existence of a largely invisibilised minority group within the community, and transformative in creating space for people to voice their views.

Bless and Higson-Smith (1995) explain how research of an exploratory nature serves the purpose of gaining insight into a phenomenon, situation, community or person. Similarly, Dingwall and Miller (1997: 3) point out that qualitative research constitutes the methodological investigation of "socially organised settings." A study exploring the understandings of individuals in a specific community would thus benefit from a qualitative method, in that communities are usually 'organised' in such a manner where

residents relate to each other in particular ways. Perceptions, attitudes, feelings and views are then contextualised in accordance with the social realities which are partially constructed and exist as a result of living in a particular community.

Traditional social science methods, mostly quantitative and based within a positivist framework, have been rigorously criticised by feminist researchers. In particular, a distinction has been made between 'male' quantitative and feminist qualitative methods (Harding, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1990; Burman, 1994). The validity and reliability of research material within quantitative methods has been questioned as well as the interrogation of what, indeed, constitutes 'validity' and 'reliability' (Acker, 1991; Banister, 1994; Lather, 1988; Wolf, 1996). As Tindall (1994: 157) points out, completely valid research as representative of an ultimate 'truth' is impossible when working within a feminist paradigm which posits that all knowledge is socially constructed: "We must recognise that *all* research is constructed, that no knowledge is certain, whatever the claims, but is rather a particular understanding in process, and that different understandings, different ways of knowing, exist."

Furthermore, Bloor (1997) explains how the validation of results emanating from qualitative studies cannot (as in the natural sciences) be 'tested' through replication since social circumstances cannot be recreated. The manner in which researcher and participants understand and construct their realities at a particular point is dependent on context. 'Testing' findings of studies conducted within a qualitative paradigm cannot possibly render the same results since "all research findings are shaped by the circumstances of their production" (Bloor, 1997: 39).

Moreover, feminist research entails the acknowledgement that researchers' understandings are politically, intellectually and emotionally grounded and just "as contextually specific as those of *the researched*" (Stanley and Wise, 1990: 23). A feminist methodology acknowledges that power always exists in the research process and attempts to shift this power from the researcher to the participants (Burman, Hence, inter-subjectivity, as partial identification with participants, is a fundamental aspect of feminist research. As Gergen (1985) posits:

Virtually any methodology can be employed so long as it enables the analyst to develop a more compelling case. Although some methods may hold the allure of large samples, others can attract because of their purity, their sensitivity to nuance, or their ability to probe in depth. Such assets do not thereby increase the 'objective validity' of the resulting constructions. However...when well wrought they may add vital power to the pen (in Kitzinger, 1987: 189).

Reflexivity has been characterised as the most distinctive aspect of qualitative research, particularly as an alternative method of validation. Tindall (1994: 151) 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. While acknowledging that knowledges and findings are continuous constructions, this method of validation also encompasses a degree of self-reflection and evaluation of the research process as well as the role of the researcher. Because reflexivity allows for identification with participants through exploration of the self, the notion of 'value-free' research (common in quantitative processes) is difficult to adhere to (Mies, 1991). Reflexivity would also aid in decreasing power dynamics between researcher and

participants (Burr, 1995). Linking the findings to similar work and “checking theoretical assumptions” has also been considered as an alternative method of validation (Potgieter, 1997: 107).

As a result of the power imbalances and biases inherent in quantitative methods, women, blacks, lesbians, gays and other minority groups’ experiences have often been distorted in order to fit into pre-existing categories as defined by male-dominated society. Subject-object hierarchies within research have thus resulted in further oppression of the marginalised (Schrijvers, 1997). A feminist epistemology takes into account who can be the ‘knower’, what can be ‘known’ and what validates knowledge (Stanley and Wise, 1990). According to Schrijvers, the distance between subject/object, expert/target group will be increased by the dichotomisation of the researcher and participants under traditional quantitative methods. The notion of ‘power-over’, typical of these methods, must thus be replaced with researchers’ efforts to give ‘power-to’ those in a marginalised position in order to fulfil the requirements of feminist epistemology. Said’s position (1989) summarises the critique of quantitative research approaches clearly:

The silence is thunderous...you will begin perhaps suddenly to note how someone, an authoritative, explorative, elegant, learned voice, speaks and analyses, amasses evidence, theorises, speculates about everything – except itself. Who speaks? For what and to whom? (in Nelson and Wright, 1997: 20).

Discourse analysis, Social Constructionism and Feminism

Discourse analysis implies that meanings are inseparable from context in the social world and informs the analysis presented later in this study. So if discourse is socially constructed, this suggests that multiple meanings exist (Wood and Kroger, 2000). Discourse analysis considers the role of language as a tool in how people understand the world and how subjects have been constructed in relation to their attitudes (Potter in Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Discourse analysis as a research tool aims to reveal the ways in which individuals challenge and / or conform to hegemonic discourses.

Furthermore, discourse is understood as not only spoken language, but includes written language and language use above the level of the sentence. As Potter explains:

[Discourse Analysis] has an analytic commitment to studying discourse as *texts and talk in social practices*. That is, the focus is not on language as an abstract entity... Instead, it is the medium for interaction; analysis of discourse becomes, then, analysis of what people do (in Wood and Kroger, 2000: 3).

Language then, is seen as a performative social practice and discourse represents the meanings that we attach to objects/subjects in our social worlds. Potter (in Wood and Kroger, 2000) further posits that as discourse analysts, we need to develop an appreciation of variability within and between people. In other words, variability in

individuals' discourse (which may appear as inconsistency) is more the rule than the exception. Meaning is thus not static, but continually changing. Contradictory ways of speaking serve to 'govern' what people do (Parker, 1994). Moreover, discourse analysis implies that a relation exists between an individual's discourse and the person's beliefs and psychological constructs (Harre, 1995). Hence, as Burr (1995) states, each individual's account serves a purpose for them at a particular point in time.

Linked to discourse analysis, another understanding shaping the theoretical foundations of this study is that of social constructionism which views all knowledge as culturally and historically specific (Burr, 1995). Individuals' understandings of their worlds involve the construction of realities through interaction with each other within a particular context. Language therefore plays a fundamental role in how these realities are constructed: "This means that the way people think, the very categories and concepts that provide a framework of meaning for them, are provided by the language that they use. Language therefore, is a necessary precondition for thought as we know it" (Burr, 1995: 7).

Kitzinger (1987) discusses how social constructionist theory has attempted to deconstruct language, notions of science, sexual orientation and biological sex. The argument that recent terms such as male 'homosexuality' and 'lesbianism' have been socially and historically constructed, and the questioning of taken-for-granted categories, such as gender, masculinity and femininity emerge partly from social constructionist theory (Kitzinger, 1987; Burr, 1995). Furthermore, within a social constructionist approach, no

universal theory about people exists and there is an emphasis on multiple truths including people as active players in their social contexts (Farganis, 1994).

A social constructionist approach challenges conventional ways of understanding and constructing the world; it aims to include a diverse range of voices and represent multiple truths. The emphasis is on 'difference' - how social beings are not individual entities, but representative of heterogeneous realities based on multiple positionalities, differing experiences and thus, different understandings of the world (Fuss in Farganis, 1994). Emphasis is placed on individuals' experiences, particularly on the meanings they attach to these experiences. People are viewed as active agents and constructors of their social worlds, linked to others through a variety of discourses (Acker, 1991). In fact, a feminist postmodernist epistemology rejects all universalising claims, problematises the notion of a 'more authentic self' and rejects the idea of all women sharing experiences (Stanley and Wise, 1990).

There are thus no grand theories and no generalised explanations of understanding experience within social constructionist thought. Instead, social life is understood as constructed; embedded within a series of discourses which shape how an individual views the world (Dingwall and Miller, 1997). Individuals are thus both shaped by, and shape social reality for themselves. In other words individuals, "the social practices in which they engage, the social structure within which they live and the discourses which frame their thought and experience become aspects of a single phenomenon" (Burr, 1995:

111). Hence, discourse is a fundamental representation of how individuals understand the world.

A feminist utilisation of discourse analysis set within a social constructionist position takes into account different perspectives of the world and emphasises the role of context in 'knowing' the world. I begin this study with the premise that individual subjects in a particular community have been constructed both socially and historically, and through discursively constructing knowledges for themselves, effectively shape the meanings and experiences of their worlds. My view is also that object desire (i.e. attraction to the opposite sex, same sex or both) is fixed and inherent but constructed by the particular cultural and social meanings attached to it. I am thus inserting myself into their worlds through for example, interviews, with the notion that knowledges about lesbianism are socially interpreted and created. In addition, it is my view that South Africa's history of segregation has led to certain groups creating knowledges in particular ways, which would influence their attitudes regarding 'alternative' sexualities.

As a black ('coloured'), working class woman living in Mitchell's Plain for 24 years, my particular world overlaps in a variety of ways with those of the participants in this study. I believe that this has, to a certain degree, contributed to the development of trust and cooperation in the relationships between the participants and As Spradley suggests, a basic foundation of trust allows for "the free flow of information" (in May, 1993: 98). Participants must feel valued in the process in order for research to be successful.

As a part of the community, I was familiar with the people, the culture(s) and the ways in which people relate to each other. This has shaped my research in particular ways, which as I will explain below, was helpful to the process as a whole. I also realised that I am privileged in my position as 'academic' and researcher, which has, at points, led to my being 'othered' by participants. However, I attempted to utilise my experiences as a community member to minimise discomfort and blur the boundaries between myself, as the researcher and participants, as the researched.

Community-based projects such as this have been encouraged by several analysts as they are "less exploitative" and contributive to the community (Gordon in Wolf, 1996: 37). A number of researchers have claimed that 'insiders', ('native' or 'indigenous' researchers) have a privileged view of the people or society under study. Others argue for "multiple perspectives, in that each researcher, because of her positionality vis-à-vis the community study, received important but different information" (Wolf, 1995:15). My proximity and familiarity with the Mitchell's Plain community placed me in an advantageous position, in that as I am part of the community, I seemed to be perceived as threatening and less exploitative by the participants. Although I was at times challenged regarding my own sexual orientation, I believe this indicated that participants felt comfortable enough to challenge my position. This also suggests that power hierarchies between the participants and I were minimised. 'You must be a lesbian if you are doing a study like this,' observed several participants. In response I explained that I believed myself to be 'heterosexual' and that my interest was in women's empowerment. I also explained that as women, lesbians in Mitchell's Plain have been under-represented.

Aims

The aim of this study was to elicit the views of people in a working class community in relation to lesbians and equality to attempt to identify and understand their constructions of lesbians. Although the study hoped to produce meaningful and useful information in order to contribute to social change and the building of democracy and equality, the primary aim was to identify and explore what ordinary people think: how they feel about the existence of lesbians in Mitchell's Plain. For this study, this involved establishing their views on the Equality clause in the new Constitution which allows for lesbians to exercise their right to equality in relation to lesbian partnerships, the possibility of same-sex marriage, partner benefits and child adoption and custody in particular. Issues related to artificial insemination were also explored in minor detail.

Participants and selection criteria

Due to the nature of this study (as part of a taught Master's degree) and my emphasis on how language reflects people's understandings of their worlds, I believed a smaller sample size to be more appropriate. As discussed earlier, it is the ability to extract the richness of the various discourses of social beings and the attempt at corroboration which renders a study well-grounded, not the number of participants forming part of the sample.

In order to access the views of the community in general, the first sample (group A) consisted of 8 self-identified, heterosexual women and men. This group was divided into two: the first were younger and the second older participants, which served to provide a range of viewpoints across different generations representative of varied discourses concerning lesbians. A complimentary sample (group B) included a Christian priest and Islamic Hagi for the sake of exploring the role religion plays in individuals' constructions, and taking into consideration that the dominant religions practiced in the targeted community are Islam and Christianity.

Because Mitchell's Plain is a working class township where the average monthly income is between R1 001 and R2 500 and grade 8² is the average school qualification, most participants displayed these characteristics. For purposes of accessibility, participants were members of the parent-teachers association (PTA) at a predominantly 'coloured' school in the targeted area. Group A was drawn from the association through referrals from the school.

A technique known as snowball sampling was used as a method to access participants. Neuman (2000: 199) describes the process as "a multistage technique" which begins with few people and spreads out through links to other people. These people need not be directly connected to each other but are in fact linked to one another through the initial

¹ A 'Hagi' is a Muslim woman who has undertaken pilgrimage to the holy land, Mecca. Although not regarded as equivalent to a Muslim Imam (male priest), she lives her life exclusively according to the teachings of the Koran and is respected as an authority on Islam in the community.

² Information gathered from www.statssa.gov.za.

individuals and the common factor of belonging to a particular organization, which created the links initially. The two participants in group B were accessed through referrals from group A.

All individuals were telephoned using the numbers I had received from the school principal. This was not a pleasant experience, particularly as most of the participants were unfamiliar to me and I them. I introduced myself as a university student completing a Master's degree who lived in Mitchell's Plain. They were then informed of the topic I wished to investigate, and were made aware of the areas I wanted to discuss. It really was quite a struggle locating people who would be interested in partaking. Many people (mostly those over 35 years old) refused to participate on the basis that they 'didn't want to be part of that' or didn't have time. Many people claimed that they wouldn't be able to talk about issues they didn't know much about. I believe this response was in part a reflection of the discomfort people feel when discussing issues related to sexual orientation, especially with strangers. My identity as a black Mitchell's Plain woman didn't seem to be helpful here. In fact, younger participants were more eager to participate. I believe this was due to their being more able to identify with me in terms of age and their ability to more easily relate to contemporary issues such as identity and sexual orientation.

People who eventually agreed to participate in the study were encouraged to voice their queries, goals and expectations in relation to the project. I also was as open as possible about the aims of the study (which I discussed on page 52 in this chapter).

The following table provides details of the 10 participants involved in the study.

Age Range	
18 – 20	2
21 – 25	2
26 – 30	1
31 – 35	1
36 – 40	1
41 – 45	0
46 – 50	1
51 – 55	1
56 – 60	1
Home Language	
English	7
Afrikaans	3
Educational Level	
None	0
Primary	2
Secondary	4
Tertiary	4

Methods

Interviews rather than surveys or questionnaires were used to elicit interviewee's responses. Interviews are also more enabling than surveys for instance, in exploring

people's feelings, perceptions, opinions and experiences. As Burman (1994) posits, interviews also allow for exploration of issues that may be too complicated to probe through quantitative measures such as questionnaires or surveys.

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were preferred because of their flexibility, open-ended character and the possibilities for qualitative depth (May, 1993; Burman, 1994; Wood and Kroger, 2000). Harre (1995) posits that semi-structured interviews and qualitative analysis are a suitable combination when the goal is to explore personal or controversial issues. These types of interviews are particularly useful when the idea is to gain a detailed account of individuals' beliefs and perceptions concerning a particular topic. One-on-one interviews are also more private and minimise the chances of conflicts which are inevitable within group interviews.

May (1993) elaborates on how semi-structured interviews provide for flexibility and the discovery of meaning, rather than the generalisation and standardisation of typical quantitative methods. Also, these types of interviews allow people to respond on their own terms, from their own frames of reference. Questions are adapted to the position of the interviewee and not bound by standardisation. Burman (1994) explains how in semi-structured interviews, participants' points of view are given priority and space is provided for perspectives not usually represented. Although questions are planned in advanced, the interviewer is free to probe the responses, taking up issues raised by interviewees and exploring in depth areas defined by the interviewees as significant.

Context, engagement and an interventionist approach by the researcher are considered fundamental elements in interviews within a discourse analytic framework (Wood and Kroger, 2000). Imagining the interviewer as detached, neutral and uninvolved in such a framework is clearly problematic. As Harding (1987) and Said (in Nelson and Wright, 1997) points out, it is virtually impossible to view the world from no position at all. Instead, interviews are seen as conversational encounters, where both interviewer and interviewee are understood as equal partners in the process. Wood and Kroger suggest that the role of the interviewer is to make the interview challenging through responses to contributions which would allow interviewees to consider alternatives. Potter and Wetherell (in Harre, 1995) encourage researchers to express their own views during interviews and even argue with interviewees at points, although one needs to be careful not to construct oneself as the authority. Interviews within a discourse analytic framework are understood as a piece of social interaction in their own right – both parties construct versions of reality and this is brought to the interview context.

Semi-structured interviews may then be more empowering for participants through formally validating their views. Moreover, as the interviewer, this sort of interviewing process compels one to confront one's own role as *participant* in the research process: how one goes about setting up interviews and how one enters the research context with the acknowledgement that assumptions shape the manner in which research is approached. For example, my familiarity with individuals in Mitchell's Plain and my experience as a Mitchell's Plain resident for instance, led to the assumption that participants would respond to the questions in particular ways. I had to confront this

assumption throughout the research process as some participants in fact, challenged the dominant discourses I had expected them to adhere to.

Although interview questions were laid out in advance, I decided to rearrange and often change the questions in relation to the particular inquiry. For instance, while talking to the priest (who was part of the second sample), I felt it was important to ask questions that acknowledged his position as a priest. Similarly, while interviewing the teacher (who was part of the first sample), I considered it necessary to acknowledge his position as an educator at a primary school. I entered each research context with a specific focus on the areas I wanted to cover but shaped this to the specific individual concerned. As Burman (1994) postulates, it is often inappropriate to ask all participants similar questions. Due to the variety of discourses one wants to extract, it is important to orient questions in particular ways in relation to particular participants. Parker (1994) points out that the role of the interviewer involves drawing 'accounts' from individuals through interviews: each person's account should be comprehended as a 'piece of the whole.'

Procedures

Because English and Afrikaans are the dominant languages within Mitchell's Plain communities, interviewees were offered either as the language medium of the interviews. Most participants chose English. A venue comfortable for the participants was used for their convenience. In most cases, these included the interviewee's homes, my own home and the school staff room. I believe interviewees felt more comfortable in their own

environments as most of them preferred my coming to their homes. Most meetings were held from 1,5 to 2.5 hours.

My intention was to keep the interviews as informal as possible. I intended to create an environment conducive to comfort, where participants felt free to express their views and speak to me openly and honestly. In many cases privacy was minimised because most participants lived with their families. This meant that family or friends were often in and out of the space where the interviews took place. I believe this lack of privacy was beneficial as it assisted in creating a 'normal' environment to the participant, and decreased the formality of the interviews. Interviews thus became less conservative and created a relaxed atmosphere allowing participants more freedom to air their views. This, of course, had an impact on the way participants responded to the questions I asked. But the informality of some of the interviews also allowed participants to relax and not feel 'on-the-spot.'

Ethical issues

Because sexuality was a sensitive topic for some individuals, I needed to clarify my position concerning sexual orientation. Being honest with participants created an atmosphere of trust and contributed to the success and outcome of this study. Participants were free to refuse participation if they felt uncomfortable at any point during the interview process. I also guaranteed confidentiality and privacy of any conversations to all individuals. While many participants preferred anonymity, others felt comfortable

having their names and opinions recorded for the purposes of this study. As discussed below, use of a tape-recorder was discussed with participants prior to the interviews. Finally, all participants were made aware that the research has been permitted by the registrar of the University of the Western Cape.

Data analysis

I preferred tape-recorded interviews because it would have assisted in transcription, especially in its ability to pick up silences in responses. However, many participants felt uncomfortable about having their responses recorded. They preferred my taking notes, which made recording every utterance impossible. After I explained the advantages of tape-recording and that I didn't want to miss any details leading to misinterpretation of their opinions, most agreed to be recorded. Analysis of transcripts was in itself a tedious but interesting task. I decided to analyse the data myself because I was the interviewer and would be interpreting participants' dialogues. I read and re-read the transcripts over and over again in order to grasp the meanings, searching for recurring themes and patterns of consistency and variance. I did not set out to do a detailed language analysis but instead wanted to utilise participants' discourses in order to elicit their perceptions of lesbians. It is important to note that this data could have been interpreted in different ways by different researchers. The interpretation that follows in the next chapter is only one way of understanding individuals' constructions.

Chapter 3

Analysis

The research revealed that constructions of lesbians in Mitchell's Plain were complex, multifaceted and at times contradictory. Altogether, individuals who were interviewed self-identified as coloured, were diverse in their histories and resided in different suburbs of Mitchell's Plain. Ranging from eighteen to sixty years old, the participants were ordinary working women and men, housewives, students, mothers, fathers as well as religious leaders. In order to maintain the anonymity of those involved, all the names used here are pseudonyms. Despite the differences between these individuals, lesbians were constructed mostly in terms of the dominant discourse which established women as heterosexual, although one or two participants challenged these discourses through the critique and questioning of prescribed social norms and values. But the contradictory nature of participants' discourses revealed that individuals' experience conflict as a result of the tensions between their religious beliefs and changes in the law as well as the tensions between 'traditional' views and changing notions of what constitutes 'morality.'

Overall though, there were similarities in the ways lesbians were constructed as invisible, sexually 'deviant', defiant of conventional gender roles, 'mentally ill', 'incapable' and 'unfit' parents, 'masculine', religiously 'immoral', 'abnormal' and 'unstable.' Through identifying lesbian behaviour as nonnormative, participants represented lesbians as 'others', 'deviants' who did not conform to the compulsory heterosexuality which most participants implied was the 'norm.' In accepting the binary oppositions of nature /

nurture, good / bad, normal / abnormal, right / wrong, participants were most likely to construct lesbian identity as 'bad', 'abnormal' and 'wrong.'

Even though this study aimed at eliciting perceptions of lesbians, it appeared that participants did not always make a distinction between male homosexual and lesbian behaviour, which were both understood as a deviance from the heterosexual norm. It is therefore unclear whether there were any particular differences between participants' perceptions of lesbians and those of gay males, except that the latter have sexual relations with other males.

Participants' views about lesbians as a group were strong despite their admissions that they were not familiar with any lesbians on a personal level. An American study conducted by Kite in 1992 revealed that lack of contact with homosexuals was associated with negative attitudes towards lesbians and gay males. She found that where individuals had personal contact with homosexuals, they tended to be less prejudiced towards homosexuals as a group. In this study, only two participants (Donna¹ and Cheryl²) claimed to be acquainted with lesbians and their views did not seem to differ substantially

Donna was a twenty-three year old single female who lived on her own in Mitchell's Plain. She moved out of her parents' home approximately two years ago. She described her parents as Christians, but said that she was not religious although she attended Church with them on occasion. At the time of the study she had been working at a hairdresser in Mitchell's Plain.

Cheryl was a nineteen year old single female residing in Mitchell's Plain with her parents. After completing matric, she began working at a restaurant in Claremont. She identified herself as a recently saved Christian and described her family as highly religiously motivated.

from those of most of the participants who did not know any lesbians on a personal level. Because Kite's study did not explore the reasons for lack of contact being related to discriminatory attitudes, it is difficult to assume from this study that individuals would be less prejudiced towards lesbians were they to have had more contact with them. Although the existence of lesbians was acknowledged, lesbians as a group were generally perceived as invisible. In contrast, male homosexuals were imagined to be more numerous, said to be more visible and open about their sexuality and thus more easily identifiable within and without their communities. While Wendall³ explained this invisibility in terms of the second-class status and general marginalisation of women, other participants attributed this invisibility to lesbians' fear of 'coming out' in an environment where alternative sexualities would not be easily accepted. During his discussion of the Church's efforts at condemning male homosexuality, Wendall claimed that "lesbianism has been more acceptable to society rather than gays because I think that women are still being discriminated against and always second to everything else." Wendall appeared to make a connection between the invisibility of lesbians and social acceptance implying that in his view, the Church's condemnation of male homosexuality invisibilised lesbianism while at the same time making the latter *appear* more acceptable. Abdul on the other hand suggested that male homosexuals are *more* discriminated against than lesbians because there were "fewer of them in society compared to gay males." On the other hand,

³ Wendall was a twenty-two year old single male who had lived in Mitchell's Plain all his life and was at the time of this study completing a Marketing course. He did not identify with any religious doctrine.

Michael⁴ explained that lesbians were responsible for their own invisibility because they hid themselves.

Other participants believed that lesbians were less visible because of the Mitchell's Plain community's response to 'deviant' behaviour. These participants associated a 'coloured' identity with negative characteristics such as *gam*,⁵ narrow-mindedness and intolerance, claiming that 'coloured' people were much more prejudiced than white people, thus lesbians would be more tolerated in white areas than in Mitchell's Plain. Cheryl for instance suggested that "because we are coloured and that's our mentality. It's wrong when you a gay, it's wrong when you are a lesbian because you shouldn't be like that." Donna appeared to agree with this idea stating that in her view white lesbians would be more open in their communities because their behaviour would not be rejected or condemned. In contrast to Mitchell's Plain, Donna said "whities, they accept people, they walk, there are bars, if you are in a gay bar, you'll see the majority are whities. They

⁴ Michael was a twenty-six year old single male living in Mitchell's Plain. Although his parents were Christians attending Church regularly, he claimed to be non-religious. After studying at a technicon for an Engineering certificate, he began working full-time in the motor industry where he has been employed for five years.

⁵ Stereotype referring to 'coloured' mentality and behaviour portrayed as typical of only coloured individuals.

don't worry, they walk hand in hand, vry⁶ if they want." Abdul⁷ appeared to have a similar view postulating that "people in Mitchell's Plain on the whole are very narrow-minded where gay people are concerned specifically." Sandra⁸ added that she thought the community would treat lesbians very unfairly because "people are still very narrow-minded about things like that." Father Wesson's⁹ views reflected a similar understanding. In his view Mitchell's Plain society would perhaps be "sympathetic and understanding when finding that someone is homosexual but wouldn't be tolerant of their own child." Generally, the prevailing attitude was that all 'coloured' people felt the same way about lesbians. Participants appeared to believe that being 'coloured' automatically meant that discriminatory attitudes towards lesbians were inherent. They also however seemed to remove themselves from this category, claiming to be unlike typical 'coloureds' because they were liberal and more accommodating of differences.

⁶ Being intimate.

⁷ Abdul was a thirty-five year old married man with one daughter who had been living in Mitchell's Plain for four years. He had matric and steady employment with an Engineering company. Although Abdul's mother was Muslim and his father Christian, he converted to Islam in his twenties but did not associate with any religious doctrine at the time of this study.

⁸ Sandra was a nineteen year old single female student at the University of the Western Cape at the time of this study. Sandra described her parents as Christians who attended Church regularly. She believed herself to be Christian too but stated that she was "forced" on most occasions to attend Church with her family.

⁹ Father Wesson was a fifty-three year old Catholic priest who had been serving and living in Mitchell's Plain for the last five years. He is unmarried (Catholic priests are not allowed to marry according to their religion) and does not have any children.

Although participants acknowledged that they did not know any lesbians on a personal level, most described lesbian relationships as primarily sexual, imagining lesbianism to be synonymous with sexual relations between women. Because lesbians were believed (by my informants at least) to have lots of sex, intimate relationships between women were seen as both temporary and 'deviant', incapable of being long-lasting or meaningful. Ebrahim¹⁰ for example observed that when you hear the term 'lesbian', "you don't think of a long-lasting relationship or friendship – you think of sexual relations between two women being together and so on." Michael appeared to agree with this emphasis on sex stating that a lesbian was a "woman who is sexually attracted to other women." Women had a similar understanding noting that a lesbian was "a woman having a sexual relationship with another woman" (Shanaaz).¹¹ Cheryl reiterated that her first thoughts about lesbians involved two women having sex "orally." Contrary to the American study conducted by Kite and Whitley in 1995, who claimed that heterosexual males would comprehend the violation of conventional gender roles as more problematic, both male and female respondents in this study understood lesbian behaviour as a 'deviance' from the heterosexual norm. Male participants' views on lesbians did not appear to differ from the views of female respondents in this study. But because the focus

¹⁰ Ebrahim was a thirty-eight year old married male with two children. He was living in Mitchell's Plain for twenty-four years before moving to Fairways. He has taught at a primary school in Mitchell's Plain for ten years.

¹¹ Shanaaz was fifty year old woman who had been separated (divorced in Islamic terms) from her husband for six years. She has two grown children and a few grandchildren. Shanaaz left school in standard four and worked at Red Cross hospital for many years before going into real estate. As a Hagi, she plays an important role in the community.

of this study was perceptions of lesbians, it is unclear whether Kite and Whitley's (1995) argument that gay males would be seen as more 'deviant' and 'abnormal' than lesbians can be substantiated.

Some participants associated lesbians with terms such as "masculine" and "butch" and felt that lesbians were men trapped inside female bodies. A distinction was frequently made between 'normal' masculine and feminine behaviour, suggesting that for these individuals, lesbians were not as 'feminine' as heterosexual women and that lesbians in Mitchell's Plain are more 'butch' than lesbians elsewhere. This notion of 'appropriate' gender roles for men and women has long been associated with negative attitudes towards homosexuals. As Kite (1992), Kite and Whitley (1995) and Greene and Boyd-Franklin (1997) have argued, nonconformity to traditional gender roles was understood by the participants in their studies as deviant. For this study, there appears to be a strong relation between individuals' perceptions of lesbians and their views of what constitutes proper masculine and feminine behaviour. Lesbians were believed to look and 'feel' like men. Participants believed that they would be able to identify lesbians on the basis of the 'masculine' way they behaved and dressed. Donna for example, explained that "you just look or hear and you think of a woman who wants to be a man or whatever." Abdul seemed to agree with the idea of lesbians as 'masculine' claiming that "they have a very (not all of them, but from our society) macho dress about them, they tend to look more manly than what they should." He also claimed that "as mothers they may still have feminine instincts but the male instinct is more inside of them compared to the female instinct."

Despite some participants' descriptions of lesbian identity as ultimately no different from a heterosexual identity, the construction of lesbian behaviour as 'abnormal' suggested that women who entered same-sex relationships were being 'othered.' While some participants saw lesbian behaviour as a single aspect of individuals' identities, others believed lesbian behaviour to be an all-encompassing characteristic that defined one's identity, but these two views often overlapped in contradictory ways. For example, while Ebrahim defined homosexual orientation as a defining characteristic, he also explained that lesbians should not be given special privileges because of their sexuality, that lesbians "are part of society" and should be treated equally, not receiving special treatment "because you have lesbian tendencies." On the other hand, while Sandra postulated that lesbianism was only a single aspect of the individual personality stating that "they can still do the same stuff as we do in terms of work and stuff", she later stated that lesbians should not express their preference for women publicly. But Wendall appeared to believe that lesbianism was only one aspect of the personality claiming that "the only difference is their sexual orientation and that doesn't deem them different from anyone else." He also recognised that society in general is unaccepting of homosexuality precisely because having a gay or lesbian identity is so often understood as an all-encompassing characteristic of an individual's personality. His understanding of lesbians was informed by his acknowledgement that in his view contemporary society 'cringes' at discovering that someone they are familiar with is lesbian or gay, and that "this basically changes the person's perspective of the person who is gay or lesbian."

As suggested by studies in America, religious doctrine appeared to influence the participants' constructions of lesbians in this study. Religious leaders such as Father Wesson and Shanaaz confirmed that their attitudes were shaped by the teachings of Christianity and Islam through their condemnation of lesbian behaviour as 'abnormal' and 'sinful.' While claiming that lesbians were no different from heterosexuals, these religious leaders were particularly insistent that lesbian behaviour was not 'normal', was religiously immoral and typified deviance. Shanaaz admitted that her attitude towards lesbians was informed by Islam: "My religion teaches that gays are not accepted and they are there so I cannot say that they are not accepted. I'm not accepting it, I'm not saying that it's right because my beliefs say that it is not right." But she also claimed that she would not, despite the fact that "it's morally or religiously wrong", reject any of her children were they gay or lesbian. Based on the teachings of the Bible, Father Wesson condemned lesbian sex which he claimed was "not in the plan of God", was "taking it a wee bit too far" and was "not what God intended for creation." He also labelled lesbian sex as "abnormal sexual behaviour." Cheryl was another participant who identified herself as religious and believed that lesbianism was a "sin" against God. According to these participants, religious beliefs did not provide space for 'alternative' sexualities. Shanaaz appeared to condemn lesbian identity in terms of both religion and social ideas of morality, making a distinction between the two and claiming that her attitude towards homosexuality was not solely based on religious doctrine. But Father Wesson's attitude appeared to be rooted in a Catholicism that was intolerant and condemning of homosexual practices.

The religious views of these participants appeared to support the results of some American studies surveying the influence of religious orientation on individuals' perceptions of homosexuals. The results of two studies conducted by Herek in 1987 and Capitanio and Herek in 1995 for example, revealed that conservative religious beliefs played a significant role in constructing individuals' prejudices. It was suggested that persons who were intrinsically religiously motivated (where religion provided them with a framework for understanding life) were more prejudiced against gays and lesbians than extrinsically religiously motivated persons (where religion was a self-serving instrument conforming to social norms). In this study, the discourses of Father Wesson, Shanaaz and Cheryl who exhibited intrinsic orientations, appeared to be more extreme in their prejudices than that of participants who did not affiliate themselves with religion at all. Because there appeared to be no extrinsics in this study, it is not clear whether their perceptions of lesbians were less prejudiced than that of intrinsics.

While all the participants who identified themselves as religious understood homosexuality as an 'illness', believing that these individuals could be 'cured' through turning to God for help or consulting a counsellor, others who did not necessarily identify as religious perceived same-sex attraction as a temporary phase. Father Wesson, Shanaaz, Cheryl and Abdul associated heterosexual behaviour with 'normality' and 'abnormal' behaviour with homosexuality. Abdul for instance claimed that homosexuals could "just as easily pull away from it and go into a normal, straight relationship." These types of understandings of lesbianism as 'abnormal' are legitimised through religious discourse which constructs homosexuality as a 'mental illness' and a moral 'sin.' With relation to

the participants in this study, it appears that social attitudes have been and still are influenced by the dominant religious discourses constructing homosexuality as 'deviant' 'abnormal' behaviour.

Cheryl believed that lesbianism could be cured through turning to God; being 'saved' meant that lesbianism was "a life that you leave behind because then she's taking a man instead of a woman." Similarly, Shanaaz felt that homosexuality was a 'mental condition' requiring therapy. Father Wesson appeared to agree with this, comparing homosexuality to cancer, and suggesting psychological treatment. He also added that "Aids is associated with homosexuality and lesbianism. Sodom and Gomorra - the whole place was destroyed and this weakens the fibre of society." Father Wesson may have meant male homosexuality in this case as the events surrounding Sodom and Gomorra are related to male homosexual behaviour. However, he also claimed that lesbianism was a "disease" which not only destroys the individual but "harms the community" as a whole because it breeds "immorality."

Homosexual orientation was also understood by several participants as a negative response to 'unhealthy' childhood experiences leading to psychological damage, as a reaction to being hurt by men or as an innate biological defect. Participants generally felt that all 'normal' human beings were born heterosexual and that being homosexual meant

that one was 'abnormal.' Farzana¹² who also claimed that homosexuals were merely "different but not bad," said that she would be disappointed to find that any of her children were homosexual: "What happened to my child if the others are not lesbian or gay? There are no gay or lesbian tendencies in my family." Abdul had a similar understanding claiming that homosexuals were 'victims' who needed to be accepted by society "because at the end of the day they are plain, pure and simple human beings born with a hormonal defect, to put it as such." Shanaaz on the other hand, felt that lesbianism was probably the fault of the parents, that being a lesbian was "the negative way of reacting to the way they were treated." She also argued that people were not lesbians out of choice: it's either a "medical" or "psychological" problem, the latter due to problems experienced in the home during childhood. Ebrahim seemed to agree with this, describing his meeting with a counsellor visiting at the primary school where he taught in order to 'counsel' a young girl who was found in the school toilet allegedly attempting to sexually "manipulate" and "intimidate" another girl believed to be heterosexual:

But when she went deeper into finding out what could be the causes of this, it's fairly amazing in that the Aunt she grew up had a girlfriend she was staying with and the child had a problem with the family. Not because of the Aunt's practices, but because of the domineering situation at home. The counsellor assumed that was the only reason why the girl was behaving like this.

He continued by telling another story of a young girl he believed "was raped" and "subsequently heard that she was a lesbian." Like Shanaaz, Abdul and Faranaaz,

¹² Farzana was a fifty-eight year old twice married woman with four children. She is a housewife and has a standard five education. She considers herself a political activist and converted to Islam six years ago when

Ebrahim's use of words such as "behaving like this" and "what could be the causes of this" implied that Ebrahim regards lesbian behaviour as a result of a problem within the home, not as a form of sexuality which individuals express naturally. Furthermore, the perceived need for counselling suggests once more that lesbian identity was constructed as a problem; as abnormal nonconformist sexual behaviour.

Other participants revealed that in their view lesbianism resulted from some sort of betrayal by men, that lesbians were not born homosexual. Donna for instance, claimed that "women turn into lesbians because they were hurt. They are provoked lesbianism." Cheryl seemed to agree with this idea adding that "it can drive you" explaining how a friend who divorced her husband had been "disappointed" and then met a woman and became a lesbian. Overall though, many participants felt that lesbianism was not a sexual orientation one was born with but the result of negative and damaging experiences such as rape, abuse, or even a family structure not conforming to 'normal' values and patriarchal systems. In contrast to Herek and Capitano's study in 1995 that individuals who believed homosexuality to be inborn were more tolerant than those who believed homosexuality to be a choice, participants in this study understood lesbianism as both negative and deviant whether or not they saw homosexual orientation as inborn or as a choice.

The kind of sex that was imagined to take place in lesbian relationships was conceived of as 'different' adding to the 'othering' of lesbians. This difference was defined through the

she married her second husband.

portrayal of lesbian sex as 'barbaric', 'animalistic' and 'unnatural.' While heterosexual sex was normalised, lesbian sex was described as 'abnormal', 'short-lived' and 'cheap'. The 'abnormality' of homosexuality has been suggested by some American studies (see Herek, 1984; Whitley, 1984; Kite and Whitley, 1988). But the ways in which lesbian sex was constructed as 'abnormal' was not explored in these Western studies at all. The link with American studies does however reveal that the perceived 'abnormality' of lesbian behaviour is not an exclusively 'coloured' construction but one based on Western biomedical discourse. Ebrahim, a self-identified Muslim male teacher defined lesbian sex as "something to do with unhumanly-like, animal-like. We never look beyond that it could be more meaningful than just two females having sex." His attitude suggests that in his mind lesbians are not the same as heterosexuals simply because they have sex with persons of the same gender. But added to this is his idea that lesbian relationships are not as meaningful, caring and faithful as heterosexual relationships; that heterosexuality, besides being the norm, is the *ideal* form for relationships. Through objectifying lesbian sex as contrary to the 'natural' order, Ebrahim constructed heterosex as 'normal.'

This emphasis on sexual behaviour between women by heterosexual participants in this study reflected a preoccupation and fascination with the sexual aspects of lesbian relationships. Related to this description of lesbianism as primarily sexual was the notion of eroticisation of lesbian sex by men. As Michael postulated, "if you hear lesbian you think, like, aah, a woman with another woman. Some men fantasise about it." Participants did not seem to make a distinction between lesbians as *human beings* who perform ordinary daily tasks and lesbians as women who prefer having intimate relationships with

other women. Instead lesbians were fundamentally imagined to be nymphomaniacs. This preoccupation with lesbian sex suggests heterosexual fascination with sexual behaviour different from what they have constructed in their minds as 'normal' and 'acceptable' human conduct. Additionally, the idea that women could possibly not need men sexually does not fit into the heterosexual norm where women and men as gendered subjects have separate and distinct roles to play.

In terms of the Equality clause of the new Constitution with regard to lesbian parenting, nearly all the participants appeared to be concerned with the adverse effects they anticipated children of lesbian parents would 'suffer' and did not feel comfortable with lesbians parenting children at all. Concerns about children included their subjection to the 'abnormal behaviour' of lesbians and the 'risks' of children becoming lesbians themselves. Mostly participants felt that such children would be affected negatively, that lesbianism was something children should not be 'subjected' to, but 'protected' from. Whereas some participants felt that lesbians should not be allowed to rear children at all, others thought that the family should be scrutinized to ensure that the child is placed in a 'healthy' environment. Shanaaz for example felt that all single parent families were 'problematic' and that "it's important to have a male and a female figure because I feel that this is important for a child psychologically." Sandra agreed with the importance of having a father figure in children's lives and said that having a male figure in the home was essential to the well-being of the child. Donna and Cheryl explored this idea with Donna arguing that "it's not made for two cookies to make a child or two penises to make a child." Cheryl added that lesbians should not parent because this would "confuse"

children and result in children suffering “an identity crisis.” Donna had the following to say:

What is going on in that child’s mind? And at school, what’s going to happen? The children are going to tell you. Children don’t think like we do. I’m going to say “Jou ma’s a moffie of jou pa’s a moffie.”¹³ Personally, think that if you want to be a lesbian and you want to be a couple, and want to get married, don’t know but I think that they mustn’t adopt then because it’s going to confuse a child. Or if you want to adopt, adopt a big child who’s mind is clear about what’s wrong or right and who knows that she’s a lesbian.

This notion of children of lesbian parents being victimised was quite common with Father Wesson claiming that “a child out of marriage will be a little embarrassed. They will go through life with an obstacle. The child will be loved and supported, but there will be an embarrassed moment when saying that he / she has a mother and a mother. Children can be mean.” Abdul on the other hand, stated that lesbian parents should merely attempt to raise their children “as normally as possible,” implying that children reared in nuclear families are “normal” while children reared by homosexual parents would probably be ‘abnormal’ if parents didn’t make a special effort to ‘normalise’ the child(ren). Participants expressed their antipathy to lesbianism through words of caring for the child suggesting that the child would be subjected to harassment, discrimination and victimisation due to the sexual orientation of the parents. As Father Wesson argued, it is not considered religiously ‘moral’ for lesbian couples to rear children, that “God’s intention” is for children to be reared in an environment where both the mother and father are present: lesbianism “does not fit into God’s plans.” These constructions of lesbian

mothers as 'unfit' and 'immoral' parents are legitimised through South African legal discourse which has problematised lesbian parenting. Prior to the new Constitution for instance, the law discriminated against lesbian mothers by limiting access to their children.¹⁴ Currently, despite the new Constitution, lesbian couples are still fighting the battle for equal custody of their adopted children.¹⁵ These legal constructions of lesbian parents as 'inadequate' help legitimise and reinforce social views that lesbians are 'bad' mothers, and that only heterosexual couples should be permitted to raise children. In the views of these participants, the nuclear family is the only acceptable and 'normal' family structure while alternative forms of family such as single parenting or same-sex parenting are considered psychologically 'damaging' and unhealthy to the welfare of the child(ren). These views confirm Neophytou's (1994) argument that lesbian mothers are marginalised because of stereotypical beliefs that they are 'oversexed', 'masculine' and 'aggressive.' Thus the children of lesbian mothers should not be permitted to witness lesbian desire as this could lead to children developing lesbian identities and 'suffering' as victims of an 'abnormal' family.

While only three participants (all male) claimed that lesbianism should not deter women from parenting, they implied that women were 'naturally' better caretakers of children and that motherhood was an expected and 'normal' aspect of being a woman. Michael for instance believed that lesbian couples would be better equipped to rear children because

¹³ "Your mother's a lesbian or your father's gay."

¹⁴ De Vos. 1996. "On the Legal Construction of Gay and Lesbian Rights and South Africa's Transitional Constitution." *The South African Journal on Human Rights*, vol. 12 (2): 265-290.

¹⁵ *Mail and Guardian*, March 30th 2001.

“women are the best carers for children by nature’s law.” Wendall was the only participant who claimed that children of lesbian parents would not be affected negatively in any way, arguing that a father figure was not essential and that in his view “it’s purely genetic. That’s why I don’t think that child being raised by a homosexual family will actually end up being a lesbian. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with it. I mean, why do you need a father in the house anyway?” Wendall also appeared to challenge the dominant conventional norms by questioning the naturality of heterosexuality and claiming that alternative family structures are not inherently unhealthy for the child.

Many participants felt that the legal system in South Africa was ineffective. When asked about equal legal rights being extended to lesbians through the new Constitution, many participants felt that although the laws have been implemented, these laws are not being applied effectively to have made changes in the lives of lesbians. Abdul for instance felt that the law was “hypocritical” in its extension of equal rights to lesbians in that “equal rights means that they must be allowed to get married but it’s got another meaning totally, because gay couples in our country are not allowed to get married legally.” Similarly, Ebrahim felt that although the law was in place “to protect individual rights” society often determines the norm and “what is acceptable or not.” The law thus cannot implement equal rights when society creates norms and values for themselves. Shanaaz however felt that these laws should not have been implemented at all because “the children growing up must know that according to religion, it is not accepted in the religion and it must not be encouraged because it encourages more and more children.” She also added that “now they’ve got a choice and the parents can lead them to go onto

the wrong path because it's accepted." Although Donna did not have a particular problem with the law granting equal rights to lesbians, she did believe that this law should be limited in cases where children were involved. She claimed that lesbian couples especially needed to be observed because in her view, lesbian relationships were far more 'complicated' than other types of relationships. Other participants argued that the law should play a stronger role in limiting lesbians' rights to parent. Shanaaz for example, argued that the law has condoned lesbian behaviour through the Equality Clause in the new Constitution and encouraged homosexual behaviour where the "children could have been normal." Donna felt similarly and suggested that the law play a stricter role in limiting the rights of lesbians to adopt children through "giving each couple a period of time" in order to be thoroughly surveyed. Overall though, the Equality Clause was not understood to be particularly beneficial for lesbians. Either participants felt the law was ineffective, too lenient or should not be enforced at all.

While a few participants' diverged from the portrayal of lesbianism as 'abnormal', 'deviant', an 'illness' and religiously 'immoral', as a whole there were similarities in the ways lesbian identity and behaviour were constructed by the informants in this study. The common trend was that lesbians needed psychological help or religious conversion in order to help them conform to the heterosexual norm. Participants suggested that the link between biological sex and gender needed to be adhered to and that gender performance contrary to the 'natural' order was 'pathological.' Throughout their discourses, a lesbian identity was 'othered', described as 'unstable' and 'unnatural'; a *condition* rendering lesbian mothers incapable of parenting children, thus obligating the law to limit lesbian

rights to equality. In interpreting respondents' discourses, I found a few similarities between this study and American studies relating to social perceptions of homosexuals. While these similarities were mostly in terms of general descriptions of lesbian behaviour as 'deviant', religiously 'immoral' and 'nonnormative', the qualitative nature of my study enabled the exploration of the various ways people perceive of lesbians as 'deviant', religiously 'immoral' and 'nonnormative.' Through contextualising individuals' constructions, I have attempted to reveal the different ways lesbians, as a minority group, are perceived in contemporary Mitchell's Plain. It is clear that in order to legitimise a lesbian identity and fill the gaps in our 'democratic' society, there is much work to be done but this is beyond the scope of this study. What is within the scope of this study is an attempt to outline suggestions for future research in the field of sexuality and social perceptions. This I do in the conclusion, which as well as summarising my main findings, also identifies the limitations and restrictions surrounding this project.

Conclusion

While this study has attempted to explore social perceptions of lesbians in Mitchell's Plain, it has certainly not been reflective of the views of the Mitchell's Plain community at large. The limited scope of this paper – as part of a taught Master's degree – has not allowed space needed for a more detailed, comprehensive analysis of the perceptions and constructions of individuals in the community.

Although the theoretical foundations of this study seemed appropriate for the exploration of social perceptions of lesbians, the qualitative approaches used here are limited in several respects. In particular, a qualitative, in-depth analysis required a small sample. My sample of ten Mitchell's Plain heterosexual women and men, is only a fraction of the Mitchell's Plain population and it would have been interesting to illustrate the views of black ('coloured') lesbians themselves. Thus the views of the participants in this study cannot be generalised to the whole community. Were the sample larger, a mixed method of both qualitative and quantitative approaches would have been more suited to the study. For one, multivariate analysis within quantitative approaches does have its advantages in providing a thorough contextual analysis of individuals' experiences and attitudes. A study of this nature might have benefited from a larger sample in its ability to elicit the diversity of individuals' constructions in Mitchell's Plain, but at the same time might have lost some of the detail and complexity obtainable through in-depth qualitative work.

Because participants were located through a snowball sampling method, I was not familiar with any of the individuals and this initially created barriers in terms of trust and confidentiality. While these obstacles were soon overcome as the research process progressed, approaching and asking individuals to partake in the study was quite a tedious and frustrating task at times. For these reasons, combined with the sensitive nature of issues regarding sexuality, group interviews may have been more helpful in creating an atmosphere of trust, allowing individuals to feel more comfortable and less isolated than one-on-one interviews. At the same time, participants may have found group interviews restrictive and oppressive in some ways than the one-on-one interviews I used.

In order to build on my analysis, I suggest that future research in the field of social perceptions and sexuality be undertaken among other social groups of heterosexual women and men in different communities of different races and classes. In terms of this study's exploration of the perceptions of only 'coloured' Mitchell's Plain residents, the opportunity to compare and contrast the views of other groups in different contexts is not possible. Future studies of this nature would benefit from comparative-type research investigating how different racial and ethnic groups perceive lesbianism. By comparing the perceptions of white and black individuals for example, we gain knowledge into how issues of race and class shape their constructions of lesbians.

Another possible area for future research is a comparison of how men and women as separate groups perceive of lesbianism. Although some of these differences and

similarities could be elicited from my study, a more focussed study of this type would be beneficial in understanding how gender and perceptions play a role in constructing individuals' understandings of their worlds and experiences.

Due to the paucity of research concerned with lesbian experiences (internationally and locally) in particular communities, there is a lack of knowledge concerning the ways specific societies feel about and treat lesbians and gays. Because communities offer different forms of support or no support at all for lesbians in their communities, it would be interesting to explore how 'coloured' or black lesbians experience expressing their sexuality in different contexts, and how this compares with the experiences of white lesbians. My informants clearly believed that black and white lesbian and gay lives were experienced differently.

Despite these limitations, this study has hopefully achieved a great deal. The feminist, social constructionist position of this study has above all, enabled a nuanced discussion of individuals' perceptions in order to explore the reasons lesbians are still discriminated against despite the existence of the new Constitution. Informed by discourse analysis, this study has highlighted how individuals, despite subjective differences, constructed lesbians in similar ways. Their constructions suggested that in their views the binary oppositions of 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviour needed to be adhered to, thus rendering lesbianism 'abnormal' and 'deviant.' In tune with Monique Wittig's (1992) discussion on women as 'compulsory reproducer's' of heterosexual society, participants in this study mostly considered lesbians as 'others' for rejecting the confines of

heterosexuality. Defined as 'masculine' and 'butch', lesbians as a group were believed to be invisible, marginal figures in Mitchell's Plain, despite the strong views participants held about them. Perceived as religiously 'immoral', lesbian behaviour was constructed as 'deviant', 'nonnormative' and all-encompassing of lesbian identity. Lesbian sex, in particular, was suggested to be the most distinctive characteristic of a lesbian identity and defined as both 'barbaric' and 'abnormal.' Through labelling lesbianism as a sexual category, participants pathologised lesbianism and construed lesbian behaviour as a 'condition' needing to be psychologically 'treated.' Religious doctrine also appeared to play an important and sometimes central role in how participants in this study perceived of sexuality in general. Because religious doctrine was understood as defining reproductive roles for women, lesbians were seen as 'bad' and 'deviant' for rejecting the 'natural' order. These essentialist perceptions of lesbian behaviour as 'unnatural' confirms Judith Butler's (1990) notion that not *performing* one's gendered role according to the heterosexual standard, is understood as 'nonnormative' and thus deserving of condemnation.

Because lesbian behaviour was constructed as 'unnatural' and 'destructive', lesbian parenting was understood as problematic and needed to be avoided. Most participants in this study felt that children should not be permitted to witness lesbian behaviour. Although most individuals believed lesbianism to be a choice, they also suggested that children of lesbian parents could themselves develop a lesbian identity. It was considered a 'risk' to place children in the care of lesbian couples and thus flying in the face of the

new Constitution, participants considered it to be the law's responsibility to curtail lesbians' rights to the parenting of both biological and adopted children.

Overall it is knowledge gained through research and exploratory studies of the type I have undertaken, that have the possibilities of creating awareness and breaking the silences around the area of 'alternative' sexualities. Constitutional education at school level is vital in creating awareness of what it means to invest in a human rights culture. In Mitchell's Plain, support structures for lesbians are just about non-existent: there are no formal or informal structures where lesbians can feel free to express their sexuality. My study has suggested that the perceptions of some individuals in Mitchell's Plain are based on ideas of 'normality', 'abnormality', 'morality' and 'immorality' and that these dichotomies influence their perceptions of lesbians. Although the possibility exists that these types of constructions are based on a lack of knowledge about sexuality, it is only through exploring individuals' perceptions of differences as 'abnormal' that can we aid in building a culture of human rights and true democracy both in South Africa and the rest of the world. It's hoped that this study has made a contribution to the building of a democratic human rights' culture in South Africa by exploring some of the ways in which black lesbians remain marginalised in contemporary Mitchell's Plain.

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