

BEING LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX (LGBTI) STUDENTS AT A SOUTH AFRICAN RURAL UNIVERSITY: Implications for HIV prevention

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ABSTRACT

Negative attitudes towards Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) communities exist in South Africa, regardless of constitutional provision and anti-discriminatory policies. Cases of violence against LGBTI persons due to their sexual orientation have been reported in the media and scientific journals. This study focused on LGBTI students at a rural university. It explored and described their experiences in interacting with members and structures of the university community.

A qualitative descriptive, exploratory, and contextual design was used and data were collected through individual, face-to-face, in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted with 20 participants, who were selected through the snowballing technique. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data.

Stigma and discrimination were the main themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. Four subthemes and various categories were derived from the main theme. Despite the constitutional provisions and the core values guiding any university, LGBTI students are still being stigmatised and discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. Stigma and discrimination issues should be incorporated in all HIV-prevention activities in universities in South Africa.

Keywords: *homophobia, sexual orientation, stigma and discrimination, higher education*

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) communities are found in all countries. Estimating the number of LGBTIs in Africa is difficult as many countries

criminalise homosexuality, forcing LGBTIs to live in the closet for fear of being prosecuted. In countries such as Zimbabwe, homosexuality is criticised both by senior politicians and religious leaders (Mabvurira, Motsi & Chigondo, 2012:220). Currently, some African countries have laws, policies and constitutions which protect human rights based on sexual orientation and gender identity. South Africa's Constitution of 1996 was the first in the world to include provisions of non-discrimination of people based on sexual orientation. South African universities are compelled by law to protect the rights of all students including minority and vulnerable groups, such as the LGBTI student population (Cock, 2003:42). Despite these laws and commitments, people are still experiencing attacks and crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Hergarty, Pratto & Lemieux, 2004:7; Reading & Rubin, 2011:96).

Evidence (Arndt & De Bruin, 2006:65) has shown that negative attitudes towards LGBTIs individuals persist in university communities. These negative attitudes may lead to high level of stigma and social discrimination which compromise governments' responses to the HIV epidemic among LGBTIs. Although data in Africa is limited, existing studies have shown a high prevalence of HIV and sexually transmitted infections among men who have sex with men (MSM), lesbians, bisexuals and women who have sex with women. In a study of the expanding epidemics of HIV type 1 amongst MSM in low and middle-income countries, it was shown that MSM in 15 Latin American countries were 33.3 times more likely to be HIV-positive as the reproductive-age men in the general population. In Asia, MSM were 18.7 times more likely to have HIV infection than other men; while MSM in Africa were 3.8 times more likely to be HIV-positive than other men (Beyrer et al, 2010:1). In South Africa, 51% of MSM in Johannesburg were living with HIV and 28% in Durban were living with HIV (Sidibé, 2013:4).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

It is well known that stigma and discrimination compromise efforts to reduce the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (Brooks et al 2005:737). Despite anti-discriminatory laws and policies, LGBTIs are still severely stigmatised and discriminated against in South Africa and this situation is more acute in rural areas. Apart from an increased risk of contracting HIV and sexually transmitted infections, stigma and social discrimination might increase the likelihood of LGBTI students dropping out or failing. Those in rural universities might go to metropolitan universities where they can live their life freely without fear, but when they come back to their rural community, they still face the same challenges. How do LGBTIs students experience academic life in a South African rural university and what are the implications for HIV prevention?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the academic life experiences of LGBTI students in a rural university in South Africa with the view of formulating recommendations towards HIV prevention amongst LGBTIs students on campus.

DEFINITIONS OF KEYWORDS

A bisexual is a person who is capable of having romantic, sexual, intimate feelings for or a love relationship with someone of the same sex and/or with someone of the opposite sex. These feelings might not be present at the same time or with an equal amount of attraction to both sexes (Fish, 2010:305).

Gay refers to a man who has romantic, sexual, intimate feelings for or a love relationship with another man and identifies as gay (Fish, 2010:305).

Homophobia is a range of negative attitudes and feelings towards LGBTI people. It refers to antipathy, contempt, prejudice, aversion, and irrational fear. Homophobia is observable in critical and hostile behaviour such as discrimination and violence on the basis of a perceived non-heterosexual orientation (Human Rights Watch, 2011:2).

Intersex is a term referring to a variety of conditions in which a person's sexual and/or reproductive features and organs do not conform to dominant and typical definitions of 'female' or 'male' (Cárdenas, Barrientos, Gómez, & Frias-Navarro, 2012:227).

A lesbian is a woman who has romantic, sexual, intimate feelings for or a love relationship with another woman and identifies as lesbian (Fish, 2010:305).

LGBTI is an inclusive abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons or those whose gender presentation does not conform to the norm or who are convinced that their gender identity does not conform to the biological characteristics of their sex (Human Rights Watch, 2011:8).

Transgender is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity, expression or behaviour is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth, including but not limited to transsexuals, cross-dressers, androgynous people, and gender non-conforming people (Human Rights Watch, 2011:3).

Sexual orientation is one of the four components of sexuality and refers to the natural attraction of one human being to another and how this is expressed sexually in relation to the lasting mental, physical, spiritual, emotional, romantic, sexual or intimate feelings they have (Cárdenas et al, 2012:224).

Social discrimination is defined as an unfair or an unequal treatment (including acts of verbal or physical violence) intended to marginalise or subordinate or individuals or communities based on their real or perceived affiliation with socially constructed stigmatised attributes (Ayala et al, 2010:2).

Stigma is described as a dynamic process of devaluation that significantly discredits an individual in the eyes of others (Ayala et al, 2010:2).

DESIGN

A qualitative, exploratory and descriptive design was used to address the research question. The purpose of a descriptive design is to ‘explore and describe a phenomenon in a real life situation’ and to ‘generate new knowledge’ about a research topic where limited or no research has been conducted (Bryman, 2012:380).

Study setting

The study was conducted in a rural university in South Africa. The university was established to cater for the tertiary education needs of one of the former homelands of the Republic of South Africa. Most of the students were from the poorest provinces of South Africa.

Population and sampling

Participants were drawn from the LGBTI student population who were pursuing various academic programmes at the university during the 2012 academic year. The study used the snowballing sampling technique (Polit & Beck, 2012:517) to select the participants. The first participant was identified from the record of the Voluntary Counselling and Testing service of the University’s HIV and Aids unit. The final sample consisted of 20 participants.

Data collection

Data were collected using in-depth individual interviews. These interviews took place between January and March 2012. All interviews stemmed from the following central question: ‘what is your academic life experience as a LGBTI student in this university?’ Probing questions were used when appropriate to enhance the richness of data. The researchers used field notes to capture the body language and facial expression of the interviewees. All interviews were digitally recorded, checked for quality, transcribed, and key findings were discussed among the researchers within 48 hours. Written consent and biographical data (age, level of study, and sexual orientation) were obtained before

each interview. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Data collection ceased after 20 interviews when a saturation of themes was reached.

Measures to ensure trustworthiness

The strategies described in Polit and Beck (2012:582–583) to ensure trustworthiness were applied. Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement, reflexivity and triangulation of data, using independent coding and peer evaluation. To ensure dependability, raw data were given to an independent coder. The coding process was evaluated at different phases by an independent coder. Neutrality was ensured through the strategy of conformability by keeping an appropriate distance between the researchers and informants to avoid influencing the findings. Data was coded and recoded several times and compared with the themes and categories identified by the independent coder. Inconsistencies were discussed to reach consensus.

Data management and analysis

Data were processed through thematic comparative content analysis method (Creswell, 2013:179–188). The researchers developed a coding scheme in which the theme and subthemes were labelled, categorised and summarised, followed by charting, which involved rearranging the data within subthemes. The emerged subthemes were organised and interpreted to draw relationships between codes to aid easy presentation.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study received ethical approval from the Ethical Clearance Committee of a South African rural university and the researchers adhered to all ethical issues related to human research. Participants were informed about the study (aim, objectives, significance, data collection process and implications of the results), their rights to free participation, confidentiality, privacy, and to withdraw from the study at any time. A consent form was read and signed by each participant before the interview. Data collected were treated with confidentiality and anonymity throughout the management and analysis processes. The time and place of the interviews were determined by the participants. The recorded interviews were strictly handled by the researchers. The transcribed interviews did not have any form of identification that could be traced back to the participants. The researchers used alphabet letters and numbers to code the transcripts.

RESULTS

Participants

Of the 20 participants, 5 (25%) were in their second year of their studies, 12 (60%) were in the third year of their studies, and 3 (15%) in the fourth year of their studies at the university; 5 (25%) were lesbian, 5 (25%) were gay, 3 (15%) were bisexual females, 2 (10%) were transgender (female to male) lesbian, 2 (10%) were bisexual males, 2 (10%) were transgender (male to female) gay, and 1 (5%) was a transgender (female to male) heterosexual. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 25 years.

Themes

Stigma and discrimination emerged as the main theme of the academic life experiences of LGBTI students. Stigma refers to the social process of devaluation that significantly discredits LGBTI students in the eyes of others. Discrimination refers to actions directed at LGBTI students as the results of stigma. The theme was beautifully summarised by the following participant: 'This University is a homophobic institution. We experience stigma and discrimination everyday'.

Categories and subcategories

Four categories were derived from the main theme: sources of stigma and discrimination, sites of stigma and discrimination, forms of stigma, and forms of discrimination. A summary of the categories and related subcategories is presented in table 1. Extracts from the transcribed interviews were used to support the thematic statements.

Table 1: Summary of categories and subcategories derived from the interviews

Categories	Subcategories
Source of stigma and discrimination	Religious belief system
	Cultural gender belief system
Sites of stigma and discrimination	Physical environment
	Online social network platform
	Organisational structures

Forms of stigma	Name-calling
	Stigma by look
	Stigma by ignorance
Forms of discrimination	Restriction/denial of basic rights
	Social exclusion
	Hate crime

A. Sources of stigma and discrimination

This category referred to the ideas and values that underlined the stigmatisation and discrimination behaviour towards LGBTI students. As indicated in table 1, two categories were identified from the subtheme: the religious belief system, and cultural gender belief system. These sources of stigma and discrimination were mentioned by all 20 participants.

Religious belief system

The high level of stigma and discrimination towards LGBTI students was attributed to religious belief systems. Being LGBTI was viewed as an act of disobedience to God, a sinful act, an evil possession, madness, etc. One interviewee said: ‘People are just having demons which should be casted away. One day she called me and said, I should go with her in the office, she wants to pray for me so that I should leave all the madness’.

This belief system was more pronounced among followers of certain religions as illustrated by this lesbian participant: ‘But if you want to really understand how students think about LGBTI, share the room with a Zionist woman. She will pray for you and even give you their teas and sprinkle you with water saying that you are bewitched or evil possessed’.

Cultural gender belief system

A set of beliefs about cultural gender role expectations and sexual orientation emerged as sources of stigma and discrimination from the interviews. Dress code, sport codes and body movement were associated with femininity and masculinity among the university community. Failure to adhere to these expectations resulted in one being classified as LGBTI and treated differently from others.

If you are a female and you play soccer or rugby, you are automatically labelled as lesbians and you are called all the names. Whether you are straight or not, they don't care, they don't even ask.

One day my friend 'Thomas' [pseudonym of a transgender female to male] requested a colleague to take her to a nearby college to collect her bags. The moment my friend walks to this colleague's car, he said, you are not going to enter my car dressed like this (pointing to her clothes)...borrowed a bath towel to wrap herself in order to hide the boyish trousers she was putting on.

B. Sites of stigma and discrimination

This category refers to the environments or places where stigma and discrimination against LGBTI students commonly occurred. As indicated in table 1, three subcategories derived from this category: physical environment, online social network platform, and organisational structure.

Physical environment

The physical environment included: teaching and learning venues, student residences, cafeteria, sports and recreational facilities, health facility and open spaces. All 20 participants indicated having experienced stigma and discrimination at each of the above places. 'We are discriminated [against] everywhere. Even in residences, your best roommate will change her attitude toward you as soon as he realizes that you are a lesbian or gay'.

Online social network platforms

Online social network platforms, specifically Facebook was mentioned by few participants as one of the sites of stigma and discrimination. This platform was mainly used by members of student organisation bodies. 'We wanted to be registered as a formal SRC [student representative council] organisation. This provoked a lot of negative comments on the face book'.

Organisational structures

Organisational structures such as student bodies, senior management, sports and recreational committees were identified as a platform for stigma and discrimination against LGBTI students. 'We thought the SRC is there to protect the rights of all students, instead, it is more suppressive than other structures on campus'.

C. Forms of stigma

As shown in table 1, three forms of stigma emerged from the interviews: name-calling, stigma by look, and stigma by ignorance.

Name-calling

This form of social devaluation involved the use of stereotypical labels and derogatory terms to describe LGBTI students. Name-calling was experienced by all 20 participants everywhere on campus. It was expressed by fellow students, faculty members, and support and administrative personnel. LGBTI students were viewed as sinners and predestined to go to hell. ‘She says people are opposing God as God has created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. She even says that all homosexuals will go to hell’.

They were called different derogatory names as captured in the following excerpt: ‘Double adaptor, Sis buti, Mofie, That girl, Wrong turn, Dukana, female’s demon, Adam and Steve, Eve and Eve, Jason and Senzo, matrice six (666), Stabane, Mom Ruby, Khapela, sister, dude, buti, Thomas & Henry’.

Stigma by look

All 20 participants indicated that they had experienced this form of stigma on daily basis. ‘When you enter the class, other students look at you like as if you are dirt or something. Others will even turn their backs and look at you in a funny manner’.

Stigma by ignorance

Stigma by ignorance was perpetuated by health care professionals who were not aware of their discriminatory behaviour. ‘When they give information, they talk only about male and female having sex not us, so you can’t even ask for condoms or ask about the risk of having finger sex, oral sex or dry humping’.

D. Forms of discrimination

As indicated in table 1, restriction/denial of basic rights, social prejudice, and hate crimes were the common forms of discrimination identified from the interviews.

Restriction/denial of basic rights

LGBTI students do not fully enjoy the freedom of association, freedom of expression and the rights to safety and protection at the same level as other groups of students

on campus. These views were expressed by all 20 participants. They quoted several examples to demonstrate how these basic rights were violated not only by fellow students, but also by university management.

Denial of the freedom of association was best illustrated by the following account:

We wanted our LGBTI organization to be registered as a formal student organization on campus. We followed the guidelines and submitted our application to the Student Representatives Council (SRC). Our application was declined. We were told that they cannot recognise or register our organization because it is a sexist organization.

Restriction of the freedom of expression by the senior university management was best captured by the following participant:

We wanted to have LGBTI pride on campus, it was refused. We were told that we better start with a small event. We then requested to have a seminar targeting the SRC students and university staff. After all the plans and discussion of the programme and setting the date, we were told that the management refused as it will be like we are marketing LGBTI.

LGBTI students' right to protection was denied by those who were tasked with the responsibility for safety and protection on campus.

I called the campus safety and protection services' desk for assistance following an incident of assault against LGBTI students and the officer who attended to my call told me that he cannot assist because he also does not understand these things of man having sex with man.

Social exclusion

This form of discrimination was expressed by rejection and avoidance. Participants acknowledged a high level of rejection on the sport fields. For example, 'If you enter the sport ground wanting to play tennis or netball, other people who are straight just leave the sport ground. Sometimes the person who is acting as a referee will just refuse you to participate'.

Avoidance was common at venues such as lecture halls, cafeterias, and television rooms.

'People do not want us to be next to them. If you sit next to them, they will just stand up and leave you alone. If they find you seated, they will leave a free chair next to you. If it is the only chair left, other people can even stand'.

Hate crimes

This category involves threats, harassment or physical harm and is motivated by prejudice against someone's race, colour, religion, national origin, ethnicity, sexual orientation or physical or mental disability (Human Rights Watch, 2011:6). This form of discrimination is characterised by verbal threats (sexual and death threats), and physical assault. Sexual threats were in most cases made by male students against lesbians. They often threaten to rape them in order to 'correct' their sexual orientation as illustrated by the following account:

Boys threatened to rape us to make us straight. They say that if they find me alone at night, they will gang rape me. They say this will make me a real lady. Some give comments like we are creating a shortage of females as we are taking their girlfriends.

The occurrence of death threats emerged from interviews with all participants. This kind of threat was perpetrated by fellow students through online social network platforms: '...I got this message in my face book stating that if it was in Uganda I would have beheaded you'.

Two participants reported cases of physical assault by a group of fellow students on campus because of their sexual orientation. 'Last year, my partner and I were assaulted by a group of students because of our sexual orientation'.

DISCUSSION

The finding of this study is that stigma and social discrimination were the main feature of the academic life experiences of the LGBTI students at a South African rural university. The attitude displayed by the community of this university towards LGBTI students was not different from the general South African population. For the LGBTI community, the right to non-discrimination based on sexual orientation, which is guaranteed by the 1996 Constitution (Cock, 2003: 37), seems to be more in policy than in practice. Previous studies (Russo, 2006:118–120) have shown that the existence of laws protecting the rights of LGBTIs does not stop stigma and discrimination against them.

It is evident from the finding that the stigma and discrimination experienced by LGBTI students is rooted in two belief systems: the religious belief system and the cultural gender belief system. This implies that the social interaction between LGBTI students and the rest of the university community is based on religious and cultural values, and not on values entrenched in the South African Constitution.

Religious beliefs are often wrongly used to stigmatise or to discriminate against people with different sexual orientations, even in countries where the laws prohibit such practices. Religions that are more conservative appeared to be less accepting of LGBTI

than those that are more liberal (Afshar, 2006:65–66). This argument corroborates with the finding of this study which linked some religions to a high level of stigma and discrimination against LGBTI students.

The cultural gender belief system maintains that masculine and feminine gender roles are distinct, stable, and associated with biological sex (Rees-Turyn, Doyle, Holland & Root, 2008:22). In this study, stigma and discrimination against LGBTI students on the basis of a cultural gender belief system was exemplified by the dress and sport codes. It is argued that people are often labelled as LGBTI for failing to meet certain cultural gender-expected norms related to dress and sport codes (Cárdenas et al, 2012:230–234).

This study indicated that stigma and discrimination against LGBTI students occur almost everywhere on campus. This finding is supported by a study on the extent of public education non-discrimination policy protections for LGBTIs, which showed a wide spread of stigma and discrimination against LGBTI despite legislation (Russo, 2006:117–118). The fact that LGBTI students are socially devaluated everywhere on campus may have far-reaching implications for their academic performance. The use of online social platforms as a site of stigma and discrimination is similar to the findings of the study conducted by Mustanki, Lyons, and Garcia (2011:230).

As shown in this study, LGBTI students are subjected to various forms of stigma and discrimination due to their sexual orientation. The feeling of being excluded from the HIV prevention programme offered at the health facility of the university, as expressed by the participants, is in line with the stigma by ignorance that is often perpetrated by healthcare professionals (Keepnews, 2011:71). Similar kinds of stigma were also described by Fish (2010:310) in a study looking at the policy implications for promoting equity in nursing policy and practice within the social exclusion of LGBTI.

The forms of discrimination derived from this study are supported by previous studies. The restriction/denial of basic rights as expressed by the participants is well-documented in the literature. Dwyer (2011:210–212) ascertained that LGBTIs are often denied their basic rights, ill-treated by people who are supposed to protect them, and socially excluded because of their sexual orientation. Verbal threats and physical assaults against LGBTIs due to their sexual orientation are a common occurrence in South Africa and elsewhere (Meyer, 2010:983).

CONCLUSION

The findings highlighted a number of issues affecting LGBTI students in a South African rural university. It is evident that sexual orientation plays an important role in the quality of social interaction among members of the university community. LGBTIs students are being stigmatised and discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. This

social devaluation is happening despite the legal provisions protecting people against any form of discriminations on the bases of race, gender and sexual orientation. As with the general public, the university community still views LGBTI from the standpoint of religious and cultural belief systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the findings of this study that any effort towards the prevention of the spread of HIV amongst the university community should address the issues related to stigma and discrimination. Special interventions aimed at reinforcing the traditional values of a university, promoting basic human rights and creating a social supportive environment for vulnerable groups should be implemented. Future studies should look at the impacts of stigma and discrimination on the academic performance and the sexual behaviours of LGBTI students.

As universities are supposed to be agents of transformation and centres which should ensure equal access to all qualifying students without discrimination, there is a need for programmes that specifically address challenges experienced by LGBTIs on campus. The programmes should address issues of stigma and discrimination. Workshops and seminars should be held to sensitise staff about LGBTIs and to make our universities LGBTI-friendly. This will assist in ensuring that LGBTIs are able to continue their education, access information related to HIV prevention and live their lives freely.

LIMITATION

Although the study provided an insight into the academic life experiences of LGBTI students, its results cannot be generalised to other universities.

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