

Case study narrative accounts of gender and sexual orientation in young black women from an Eastern Cape township in South Africa

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Abstract

In South Africa, the experiences of gender non-conforming young women, as a population separate from adults, are understudied. This article explores what distresses young gender non-conforming females from a South African township. The challenges facing such women growing up in a township in the Eastern Cape province in South Africa are discussed and illuminated through case studies of participants' personal accounts. The sample was obtained through snowballing. One-on-one in-depth interviews were held and subjected to domain analysis. Domains discovered were: pressure to conform to a female gender identity to be like a lady; being misunderstood in their communities; and disapproval from peers, family and other members of society. The challenges young, black, gender non-conforming girls faced in growing up were based on familial, personal and social factors. Familial and social environments, such as the school, seemed to have a policing effect. Concerns about being isolated, ousted and alienated from society resulted in perceptions that their homes and schools were unsafe and insecure environments. Education and culturally competent support services are needed to educate families about the importance of offering protective support to adolescents, and for schools to create a comfortable environment for gender non-conforming female learners.

Keywords: Eastern Cape, gender non-conforming females, narrative accounts, South African township

Introduction

In South Africa, the daily lives of female-bodied persons who are seen to be gender non-conforming are interrupted. Gender non-conformity here refers to someone displaying gender traits, through their behaviour, that are not normatively associated with their biological sex; this includes (but is not limited to) lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LBTI) women, gay women and tomboys (Haas *et al.* 2010, Murray 2005; Salo *et al.* 2010; Van Dyk n.d.). In this article the term is used to refer to queer women – in particular those who may self-identify as lesbian or tomboys (Kritzinger and Van Aswegen 1992). In South African township spaces, gender non-conforming women live in fear of being ousted, blackmailed, attacked and murdered (Ndashe 2010; Reddy 2010; Salo

et al. 2010; Sanger 2010; Van Dyk n.d.). The term ‘township’ in South Africa refers to (often underdeveloped) urban living areas created for black migrant labour, usually beyond the town/city limits, where principally black Africans reside. As part of the architecture of the apartheid government, black people in various towns were relocated to the outskirts where many continue to live in different forms of dwelling – from shacks, one to four-roomed brick houses, hostels, or slightly bigger homes which are usually occupied by professionals. In townships, poverty and social problems stem from unemployment and alcohol abuse (see Swartz 2009). Generally, every town/city has one or several townships associated with it (Statistics South Africa: Census 2001, 2004). The existence of anti-homosexual rhetoric, along with repressive religion, culture and tradition continue to legitimise prejudice, harassment, discrimination, violence and the denial of the existence of lesbians in many African countries (Aken’Ova 2010; Epprecht 2010; Mkhize *et al.* 2010; Ndashe 2010; Salo *et al.* 2010; Van Dyk n.d.) and elsewhere (Cohn and Hastings 2010; Haas *et al.* 2010; Pendragon 2010; Robinson 2010). This article is very important coming from South Africa where, unlike in many other African countries, gender non-conformity (including lesbian same-sex conduct) has been decriminalised (Epprecht 2010).

There are a myriad challenges facing gender non-conforming female youths, such as family alienation, inadequate interpersonal relationships, risk of suicide and others (Bedard and Marks 2010; Haas *et al.* 2010; Kritzinger and Van Aswegen 1992; Llera and Katsirebas 2010; Pendragon 2010). A study of 18- to 24-year-olds from Cape Town shows that black urban spaces embody a moral attitude associated with exclusive and deeply entrenched heterosexuality – as a result, black lesbian women in townships trace their paths alone or in alternate places far from their homes, because their lesbian identity limits the spaces they can enter in comfort, security and safety (Cohn and Hastings 2010; Hames 2003; Llera and Katsirebas 2010; Robinson 2010; Salo *et al.* 2010). In rural communities the environment is similarly characterised by patriarchal, conservative, gender roles (Moses and Buchner in Cohn and Hastings 2010). Therefore, gender non-conforming women have difficulty connecting with a supportive reference group from where they live, and their concerns are rendered marginal and at times invisible (Bedard and Marks 2010; Hames 2003; Sanger 2010; Van Dyk in Cohn and Hastings 2010).

The experiences of gender non-conforming young women, as a population separate from adults, continue to be understudied. Only one study of sexual minority status and alternative gender identification in young, black, urban township women was found at the time of writing this report (see Salo *et al.* 2010). Reports of older lesbians, including mothers and grandmothers, may not represent young people’s lives (Kritzinger and Van Aswegen 1992; Van Dyk n.d.). Lesbians receive token attention in research, law, and advocacy and activism against homophobia, as noted by many authors (Hames 2003; Ndashe 2010; Reddy 2010; Sanger 2010). Reasons for this phenomenon vary: there is relatively little research coming from rural provinces; there is a lack of interest amongst researchers; there are complex ethical requirements in researching young, vulnerable participants; and the heteronormative nature of studies of sexuality, sexual and reproductive health exclude alternative sexualities and discourage researchers from focusing on the subject. And though gender is understood as encompassing ‘women’s problems’, violence against lesbians is understood as a problem which lesbians must solve (Hames 2003; Sanger 2010). However,

these reasons should not justify such a continued oversight. This article explores experiences of being gender non-conforming in a township in South Africa. Here, the term 'lesbian' refers to a participant who self-identifies as such, otherwise 'gender non-conforming' is the preferred term throughout the discussion.

Method

The two case studies presented here are extracted from a large, qualitative phenomenological study conducted in 2009. The purpose of the study was to explore sources of distress for young people in an urban community in the Eastern Cape. Forty male and female Xhosa-speaking participants, including the two case studies presented here, were recruited through snowballing from Butterworth, a town with a relatively low socio-economic status. Butterworth, situated between the Kei River and Idutywa, is under the administration of Mnquma Municipality (Jaffer 2008). It is a small town with six townships, four large informal settlements and a number of villages. Few villages near the town, the townships and the informal settlements have access to basic services such as tap water, electricity and sanitation (Jaffer 2008). Religious dualism is common, with people mainly following both Christianity and African traditional beliefs. More details about this study and other findings have been published elsewhere (Nduna 2010; Nduna and Jewkes 2011a and b, 2012a and b). Finding two gender non-conforming volunteers can be regarded as a success, given the difficulty in recruiting for studies on sexual minorities. This is documented in reports (Kritzinger and Van Aswegen 1992; Van Dyk n.d.). The two participants whose case studies are presented here were studying in the same high school at the time of the interview. Studying the sexual identities of young high school youths is important, as this can be a difficult time for questioning¹ female adolescents (Bedard and Marks 2010), and because black, lesbian youth between the ages of 12 and 24 are often overlooked in research (Robinson 2010; Van Dyk n.d.). The researchers felt an ethical responsibility to extract the narratives of these two participants, in order to highlight the experiences of lesbians in this black township through first-hand accounts, so as not to further neglect and marginalise the interests of gender non-conforming women.

Using a phenomenological approach to the study of lives of gender non-conforming women is acceptable (Van Dyk n.d.). The main purpose was to understand what distress is experienced by young, gender non-conforming females in a relatively small black urban township located in a rural province. Participants were asked during in-depth interviews to recall and tell of distressing experiences in their lives; current or past. Conversational-style interviews were used, guided by open-ended questions. The interviewees were articulate and confident, and clearly it was the first time they could share intimate and painful details of their lives with strangers. One reported that the interview allowed her '*to talk ... and lay issues in general ...*' which '*fulfils a feeling that I had always had from time to time ...*'. This mirrors the researchers' conviction that memory or narrative research can be therapeutic and valuable to participants. The names of the respondents have been changed to protect them from victimisation, and for ethical considerations.

The research data were collected in isiXhosa, and recorded using a tape recorder, before being translated and transcribed simultaneously by the same person. Manual analysis was conducted. For this article the authors inductively elicited themes representing the meanings social situations had

for the participants. The authors then drew semantic relationships between the social situations and cultural patterns pertaining to gender non-conforming women, as described in the introduction, and the narratives of the participants. All ethical considerations were taken into account, and the study was approved by the University of the Witwatersrand's ethics committee for research with human subjects.

Findings

The findings, presented in two cases, show that although there were different storylines in the narratives, the social policing of gender norms and sexuality was a common thread.

Case study 1: Thandiwe

Thandiwe (17 years old) came from a family of two children and was in grade 12 at the time. She identified herself as a tomboy and used this term interchangeably with 'lesbian' to express who she felt she was throughout the interview. Thandiwe described herself as a shy person, but at the same time she belonged to a conspicuous crowd at school and she danced in community shows. She was popular and well known among her peers. In many ways she thought she drew attention. She was associated with 'male' sports such as soccer, softball and rugby, and preferred to wear a tracksuit to school. Some of her friends at primary school began copying her 'style' because they admired it. When she spoke about her upbringing she said: '*I was treated like a boy...*'. She did not own up to behaving like a boy, but suggested that '*people*' in her neighborhood treated her like one. She explained that she walked, played and behaved like a boy, and that her mother did not have a problem with this. When she was growing up people called her names such as 'Tsotsi', which she seems to have embraced. In South Africa, the word typically refers to a male thug. Thandiwe felt accepted by her mother, with whom she lived for most of her life until the year when we met during her interview. Although she maintained throughout that she was not pressured by her mother, she did admit that she '*tried to change*' but failed to '*learn to be a lady*'. She opined that her mother's only worry was that tomboys become lesbians. She expressed a wish to test the waters and disclose who she really felt she was, but anticipated a harsh response and rejection from her aunt, with whom she lived. She described her plan to leave home when she passed high school, to live her life on her own.

Thandiwe had moved from her home – a township adjacent to the one where her aunt lived – to stay with her aunt who worked as an educator in the same high school she attended (and where the interview was conducted). Thandiwe's aunt was, in actual fact, her cousin's sister, but being much older she insisted on being called thus. The narrative clearly suggested that Thandiwe had tried to change at different times, but failed. She interpreted her aunt's anti-lesbian stance as a call on her to change; to which she said she had tried several times but would always revert back. Her failures were unintentional, unconscious and not deliberate: '*I would realise that I stopped walking properly ...*' (i.e., like a lady). Disapproval stemmed mainly from her aunt, and Thandiwe would be especially cautious in the presence of her little cousin (her aunt's daughter) not to dress or behave like a boy, lest this attracted negative criticism from her aunt.

Thandiwe's identity had implications for her choice of friends, her personal choice in clothes and her lifestyle. Some of her choices were met with disapproval. Thandiwe was unsure how people would react if her tomboyish ways '*turned out to be more than a phase*'. This compelled her to constantly check (self-monitor) her ways, and to ensure that she did not cross the 'dividing' line unwittingly; as her aunt cautioned her to watch out. Thandiwe's aunt once asked: '*Why are you walking like Anne?*' (a character in the popular local television soap opera, *Generations*,² who was known to be a man in real life but acted a woman's role in the soapie). Thandiwe admitted to being very hurt when her aunt likened her to a 'tomboy', although she admitted during the interview to being one. It hurt and distressed her that her aunt said this in a disapproving manner. Thandiwe emphasised that her aunt's insinuations (that she must not be like Anne) '*continued*' and this persistence made her feel insecure. As a result, even though she was sometimes tempted to 'come out', she was deeply concerned and worried about what '*she would say...*' that '*she would not be interested*' or that she would '*do something as she is against lesbian people*'. Thandiwe's worst fear was that her aunt would hate and shun her. For her, the pressure continued when another cousin randomly conversed with her about dating and boys. She felt this was her cousin's way of getting her to speak about her suitors – a conversation that irritated Thandiwe and caused her to subsequently avoid her cousin. Thandiwe was aware that the disapproving social context for other young, gender non-conforming girls was volatile and aggressive, as they were '*scolded*' for '*joining this*' in their homes: the discourse of 'joining' lesbianism and tomboy behaviour was reflected in her mother's worry but also in her peers' behaviour. Her schoolmates copied her tomboyish behavior, as in her narrative she stated that her friends '*envied her*' and started dressing in tracksuits and rolling up one pant leg. They stopped wearing long socks in favour of shorter socks. She explained that they '*joined*' her – having such a following reinforced parents' concerns that their children would copy her behaviour.

Thandiwe admitted she liked to hang out with male friends, but also had a good and close girlfriend whom she described as a tomboy. She was, however, aware of rumours that her friend '*is known to be a lesbian*' and she seemed careful not to verify this rumour, stating that her friend '*was a virgin*'. This did not confirm or deny that she was a lesbian. It was apparent during the interview that Thandiwe was cautious about going public with a lesbian identity. At school, her friend was known to be having sexual relations with other girls. Thandiwe noted that she had not dated before. In her capacity as her cousin and her teacher, Thandiwe's aunt expressed overt disapproval of '*girls who want to be boys*' in the way they walk. Disgusted, she confronted Thandiwe to question her about her friend, saying how a '*girl with breasts who menstruates, wears a bra can think that she is a man*'. Her aunt would rant about her friend's boyish walk. Once she prompted Thandiwe to look at the person she had been talking about, and it turned out to be Thandiwe's friend, who subsequently came to realise she was not liked by the aunt. The situation limited Thandiwe's choice of friends, and impressed on her that her aunt would '*hate*' her if she knew the person she really was. This she safely assumed because her aunt was vocal about things she did not like about her friend, and used strong words such as '*I hate her*'. Thandiwe admitted she was distressed because the venom directed at her best friend sent a strong message to her of her aunt's prejudice towards such girls. She was frustrated by this.

Thandiwe admitted to being uncomfortable about wearing a girl's tunic at school – she preferred a boy's uniform or tracksuit. At her primary school a tracksuit was acceptable, and she wore it all the time, but in high school tracksuits were not allowed for girls.

Thandiwe noted that she preferred being at home and indoors, which made people talk about her in ways that she suggested was gossip. She said some people (boys in particular) questioned her lack of interest in boys. Thandiwe confessed that the boys in her neighbourhood knew about her and her tomboyish behaviour and ganged up against her; they would proposition her on her way to the local shops and ask her out. Thandiwe appeared to be quite aware that the boys' 'moves' on her was planned behaviour on their part. She suggested that they would sit and conspire to send someone to approach her. She felt that *'everybody (boys) knows about me ... and bla bla bla ...'*. One boy in particular would offer to accompany her to the shop – a trap meant to create an opportunity to proposition her.

Case study 2: Babalwa

Babalwa (16 years old) came from a family of four, they all lived with her single mother and she was in grade 12. Throughout the interview Babalwa spoke of herself as a woman loving other women. She spoke about this as a conflict that bothered her, as she sometimes felt she was *'80% lesbian and maybe 20% other'*. However, being a lesbian was an identity she stuck with throughout the interview. Babalwa said she was a virgin. She had dated another girl who was lesbian and tried dating a boy, but it did not work for her. Babalwa's narrative spoke to her feelings that she was going through an identity crisis in *'my personal life'*. As she spoke about this identity crisis she giggled, saying she needed to ascertain *'whether I'm straight or lesbian ... I like girls quite a lot.'* She was fourteen when she kissed her lesbian girlfriend for the first time and felt an affirmation that she was interested in girls. Babalwa seemed to have accepted the fact that she was attracted to women, though she was far less certain whether *'people will accept'* her as such. She suspected that the people around her might not be as open-minded as she thought they were or would like them to be, and that they might be disappointed by who she was, compared to who they would like her to be.

Although Babalwa said she felt comfortable, she harbored a sense that among her family she lived a lie and it bothered her *'that the people that I care about do not know about my situation'*. The motivation behind her living 'in the closet' was that her grandmother would be disappointed to find out, but she hoped that *'maybe they will accept'*. She maintained that she could communicate to them that *'I see myself living with my girl'*. Social norms and expectations of her as a woman, as seen by her family, were what concerned Babalwa, yet this did not frighten her. She stated: *'I am kind of worried of disappointing my grandmother, who will be disappointed to hell'* She recalled the jokes that sometimes went around in her family about fetching good *lobola* for her, and believed they would be disappointed to learn (if she came out) that there would no bride price for her after all. *Lobola* is a traditional southern African custom whereby the man pays the family of his fiancée for her hand in marriage, just like in typical bride wealth societies men pay for 'access right' to their wives and children (Moore 1991). Babalwa described her family as *'ancient ...'*

conservative and having *old minds*, and felt it would take them some time and lots of questions before they accepted her choice. She did not believe she would be rejected, or that her mother would have a problem with it. Babalwa had not experienced any threats to her safety. She had friends at school (both boys and girls) and they accepted her, though one of her friends told her that *she did not like this lesbian thing of mine*. Despite this, Babalwa still felt accepted by her. Babalwa had spoken to her teacher about being lesbian, which was triggered when she shaved her head. She said when the teacher made a joke insinuating that she was lesbian, she did not deny it and they both laughed – an indication to her that the teacher accepted it.

Babalwa seemed to have a sense that her society was *quite open* to the idea that some people were lesbian. She spoke of her desire to have a child, because she *loved children and do not know how to deal with that* because *a girl makes me extraordinary happy*. She did not seem to face prejudice, judgement or threats in any way, which allowed her the opportunity to rather focus on her personal identity and feelings. She wanted to *be completely aware of who I am and what I want [so that] I can move on and move forward, with no blinkers and move to one direction*. Although Babalwa felt her society was open-minded and that she was not *scared of coming out*, she did expect that, if some people were told she was a lesbian, they *would give me an advice that they will give me words of perfection* (i.e., tell her it was wrong). Because of this she did not look forward to broaching the discussion with friends and family. This, according to her, was because people *do not expect a beautiful girl to be dating girls* – they think it is a *waste*. It would seem that her social circle was less judgemental and less punitive than Thandiwe's. In her interview she expressed a *need to know 100% clearly where I stand in my life*, and spoke a lot about *this lesbian thing of mine*, which gave the interviewer a sense that she and her reference group had accepted that she was lesbian.

Discussion

This study reports subjective descriptions of sources of distress for young, gender non-conforming women from the small rural town of Butterworth. Among various sources of distress discussed in this study, and reported elsewhere (Nduna and Jewkes 2011a and b, 2012 a and b), the two selected case studies bring these findings to the fore, so as not to marginalise the narrative of gender of non-conforming females, and to create a platform for prioritising these discussions – particularly in predominantly heterosexual societies. The case studies exposed differences as well as points of convergence. The participants grew up in the same township and went to local schools, but had different perceptions about whether or not it was acceptable to be lesbian. For example, Thandiwe communicated a sense of insecurity and was overly concerned about the social environment, negative responses and bigotry expressed towards lesbians, whereas Babalwa communicated a personal concern about finding her true identity. Thandiwe worried about the gaze of the other, and was tense during the interview. This sense of not being accepted, where it exists, could arguably inhibit the self-actualisation of young women. Babalwa spoke more about herself, her personal conflict and her inner struggle in terms of identity – an observation reported in previous studies of lesbian experiences (Cohn and Hastings 2010). Babalwa had a sense of social acceptance among

her peers; she felt people in her society were open. This finding suggests that changes in legal frameworks may have a positive impact in terms of shifting certain societal attitudes but, as in other contexts, liberal values and respect for sexual orientation are not upheld by all (Bedard and Marks 2010; Hames 2003). Living without the stigma of illegality makes a world of difference as Ndashe (2010) argues, and this is evident in Babalwa's narrative where stigmatisation operates as a mechanism of social control. Nonetheless, both participants faced some sort of heterosexual gaze from their community. What they also had in common was the way they presented themselves: both had a preference for men's clothing; an interest in 'traditionally' male sports such as football; and were disinterested in boys at school. Claiming one's sense of being and identity through self-styling has become an identity marker in contemporary South Africa – a theme prevalent in the narratives of many young people in the post-apartheid order, and shared by gender non-conforming females in Pretoria townships (Van Dyk n.d.).

Pressure to conform to a gender identity and role

In this study, family was presented as important. A sense of belonging is valued by young people and this is a two-way process: young people feel accepted by their family and the family in return expresses a sense of *ownership* of the child. Extended families are the norm here, and the extended family's views are taken very seriously by young people who may sometimes hold back how they feel in order to appease their families (Nduna and Jewkes 2011a and b). For both participants it was the extended family members they were worried about. The aunt's constant negative valuing of the girl's friend strengthened Thandiwe's belief that her gender non-conforming identity was not acceptable at home, and this was a source of her distress. The tendency to speak with prejudice about others is widely reported in research and does worry lesbians when they consider disclosure (Kritzinger and Van Aswegen 1992). Observing prejudice and other negative attitudes within the family and amongst close significant others may make lesbians feel unsafe and rejected, and rejection becomes a powerful stressor and risk factor for suicide in young gender-non confirming individuals (Haas *et al.* 2010). Vasu Reddy (2010) argues that there is a more complex set of social relations affecting identity formation in young lesbians, and these case studies confirm this. At the centre of young lesbians' lives, as evidenced here, are notions of what is traditionally acceptable (e.g., *lobola*) and constructions and conceptions of the traditional gender roles of marriage and child-rearing (Kritzinger and Van Aswegen 1992). The pressure to conform to cultural norms is evident outside the African traditional setting, as well as in the developed world (Cohn and Hastings 2010; Haas *et al.* 2010; Pendragon 2010). Family and significant others may fail to understand non-heterosexual women, which may aggravate their distress (Bedard and Marks 2010; Cohn and Hastings 2010; Diamond *et al.* 2011; Llera and Katsirebas 2010; Pendragon 2010; Robinson 2010; Van Dyk n.d.). As Sanger (2010) points out, there is a possibility that a woman who transgresses social and cultural norms can be accused of being a lesbian, as is evident in Thandiwe's narrative referring to her friend. However, this may have negative repercussions in the form of a paralysing effect on the expression of a woman's sexuality (Robinson 2010; Sanger 2010). The choice of clothing as a means of self-identification is reported by young lesbians in the US and in a South African study (Bedard and Marks 2010; Van Dyk n.d.) and is evident in both case studies here.

Thandiwe's attempts at changing her tomboyish garb, it would seem, were motivated by her conscience, i.e., not wanting to be a *bad* role model for her young cousin. This, it seems, was a sign that she took the blame for modelling wrong behaviour in the house, by dressing the way she likes.

Concerns about prejudiced family members should be taken seriously, as these relations may be characterised by financial dependence; economic dependence on its own creates vulnerability. Where biological parents are unable to provide for their children this may compromise them and expose them to extended yet resourced family members who may not feel sympathetic towards them (Nduna and Jewkes 2011a and b, 2012b). It appears to be more difficult for extended family to accept gender non-conforming behaviour when the child is *not* their own (biologically speaking), whereas biological parents seem less likely to persecute their own child and may, in time, come to accept the child (Kritzinger and Van Aswegen 1992). This raises a question about the protective role of living with a biological parent and resonates with evidence that biological mothers may be more accepting (Kritzinger and Van Aswegen 1992). Both participants pretended to conform to expectations of who they should be, and such pretense aimed at managing stigma by concealing one's true identity is reported in other studies (Kritzinger and Van Aswegen 1992). The difference here was that Babalwa was motivated by her caring and her sense of responsibility to protect the family, while Thandiwe was motivated by a sense of insecurity.

Both participants were mindful of others' responses to them if they came out. This was reflected in previous South African studies, where participants felt unable to confront the challenge of disclosure and opted to protect self and others (Kritzinger and Van Aswegen 1992; Van Dyk n.d.). The homophobic rhetoric, backed up with religion and custodianship over culture, contains high potential for backlash, vigilantism and extortion, as described in previous studies (Diamond *et al.* 2011; Epprecht 2010). Here, silence and staying 'in the closet' are strategies used for self-protection against attack or disapproval from conservative family members, despite the wish to reveal everything. This is congruent with young people with other identity questions using silence as a calculated strategy to protect self and loved ones (Nduna and Jewkes 2011a and b). In black lower-class communities, young girls tend to make a calculated decision about a time and place for disclosure, and may decide to postpone such disclosure until they are able to handle it.

It is true that young people in this setting greatly appreciate and respect their parents and families, to the extent where they would not want to go against family values and aspirations. This is true not only as regards sexuality but also other personal identity questions, where children could (and should) be questioning and expressing themselves (Nduna and Jewkes, 2011a and b, Nduna and Sikweyiya, under review). This expected unquestioning respect fosters silence in families, and such children would rather wait until they are adults to explore identity questions. The same strategy was clearly considered by the participants in these case studies. This begs the question whether gender non-conforming girls are safe in their homes. Negative reactions to gender non-conforming identity have implications; they create superficial relations as well as self-modified and censored interaction in the home. For instance, Thandiwe retreated into her own space (her bedroom), and spent most of her time there. Home is the first social apparatus that introduces gender non-conforming children to censorship, followed by the school and other milieus. Perhaps the strategies of silence, denial and deferment should be supported, as these have been shown to be

employed by lesbians (Kritzinger and Van Aswegen 1992; Llera and Katsirebas 2010; Robinson 2010). However, this needs to be balanced with a need for interventions, as non-disclosure-related stress may manifest (Diamond *et al.* 2011). The plan to live an authentic life after completing high school and leaving home reflects the notion that young (in particular black) lesbians ‘get out before they come out’ due to prejudice experienced in the home (Hames 2003; Pendragon 2010,). This explains why gender non-conforming girls leave their (small) home towns to look for freedom away from family and a culture that pathologises their identity. Paradoxically, an exodus of lesbians and other gender non-conforming females inadvertently creates the impression that homosexuality is rare in the countryside (Murray 2005), thus feeding into the stereotype that queer identities are un-African. However, given that attacks against lesbians in bigger townships are rife, one might argue that leaving their home towns does not provide the sought-after safety.

Thandiwe’s narrative shows the constant struggle for recognition, the fear of being ousted and the fear of potential violence, which mirrors the findings of a San Diego, California study (Pendragon 2010). Here, tendencies of insecurity were observed which give credence to the argument that decriminalisation does not remove the persistent threat of homophobia in South African societies (Ndashe 2010, Reddy 2010). Fear of being ousted is a reality in this country, because as argued by Ndashe (2010), the rights of sexual minorities cannot be won in parliament and in the courts only. However, decriminalisation is critical and important in reinforcing citizenship (Reddy 2010): in Babalwa’s case, she has confidence in the fact that she lives in an open society free from discrimination. Being exposed to negative messages about lesbians and other gender non-comforting practices presents an unsafe environment, particularly for Thandiwe. It seems that this is a familiar situation which is also common in other settings (Pendragon 2010).

Are gender non-confirming girls safe at school and among boys?

As noted by Haas *et al.* (2010), schools are key in young people’s lives, because the school environment plays an important defining role in the lives of adolescent lesbians and can sometimes be a source of societal homophobia which may cause distress (Bedard and Marks 2010, Diamond *et al.* 2011). The school setting may inhibit young people’s sense of identity and expression, or marginalise difference. Sometimes school regulations and public policies create inequities or fail to protect lesbians against sexual-orientation-based discrimination. For instance, school uniform regulations seemed to foster a culture of intolerance of difference. Neither participant liked wearing dresses, which is similar to the preferences of other gender non-conforming girls (Van Dyk n.d.). The participants went to the same school. Low-income area-based schools, it would seem, tend to be stricter in controlling the gender and sexual identities of learners. It appears that parents do not mind their children wearing pants and tracksuits to school, but a refusal by school authorities to allow girls to wear tracksuits may reproduce disguised homophobia and can potentially feed intolerance. Further to such institutionalised practices is the possibility of an individual teacher in the school being prejudiced. This should not be taken lightly, as being expelled from school for wearing trousers is a possibility and has been reported in a study of lesbian identities in Pretoria townships (Van Dyk n.d.).

The safety (or lack thereof) of gender non-conforming youths is paramount. In townships it is possible to spot women who are not interested in males (Van Dyk n.d.), but of course males respond differently to lesbians. In her narrative Thandiwe described boys approaching her as a group, before one offers to walk her to the shops – walking girls to shops is a sexual script commonly used to proposition girls in this community. But the group element may mean that they are scared of her or do not want to be individually accountable for their actions, should they be caught, hence their organised approach to her as a ‘lesbian’. Their behaviour could be interpreted as aimed at ‘correcting’ her, under the guise of culturally sanctioning her disinterest in the opposite sex. Boys’ display of hatred towards gender non-conforming girls has been reported (Van Dyk n.d.). This is a dangerous sign of harassment and violence towards gender non-conforming girls. The public sexual harassment of lesbian girls by men is reported in a study from Detroit (Robinson 2010). In Thandiwe’s case, the boys acting as a group do not want to be identified, and this breeds an environment of group crime – a *modus operandi* common in hate crimes against black lesbians in townships. Boys’ group behaviour speaks to social attitudes that are organised and to the mob nature of violence against lesbian-identified women. When boys know of a woman as a ‘lesbian’ and nevertheless play dating games with her it speaks to elementary practices of corrective behaviour. This is critical, as young men are invariably the perpetrators of hate crimes against lesbians in black townships. Reddy (2010) argues that this is the case as the bodies of young women generate incredible meanings around what is acceptable and what is not. In a way, when boys proposition a lesbian this communicates a ‘corrective measure’ towards her and her behavior, and should be viewed as a first step in boys’ engagement with homophobic attitudes. Lesbian women themselves seem helpless in their acceptance that ‘boys won’t care if you are gay or not’ (Van Dyk n.d.). Mob behaviour is more prevalent in bigger townships than in smaller, rural environments where everybody knows everybody else, and it becomes easier to identify the alleged perpetrator of a crime.

Study strengths and limitations

These case studies are reflective of the lives of gender non-conforming girls from a particular township. Although they may not represent the totality of experiences, much of the information offers useful insights. There were no male participants with narratives of gender non-conforming identities. These findings speak to the context of lower-class townships, and there may well be differences in the experiences of young, white, middle-class gender non-conforming females in South African suburbs. As Reddy (2010; Salo *et al.* 2010) points out, structural factors of class, race, ethnicity, generation, networks, resources and opportunities have relevance for how people claim their citizenship in the townships, and these aspects may impact the findings. In these communities, it would seem, gender non-conforming girls are assumed to be lesbian and this may bring stigma and disapproval of them and may impact their daily lives. Research and anecdotal evidence from LGBT organisations in South Africa show that many LGBT youths leave school early because of marginalisation.

A limitation often found in narrative studies is that memory is social – it can be caught up in context and time. When a person is in a new context at a different time, he or she may remember

differently or recreate their memory. The strength of these narratives is that they are situated in the now, both in terms of time and place. The participants were narrating current experiences, rather than distant memories. Hence unreliability due to recall bias should not be a concern in these findings. Of course there may have been some suppression of certain aspects of memory – especially the most distressing memories – as many people employ this as a protective mechanism. What is reported here is what participants felt they could speak about.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study sought to contribute to our understanding of the challenges faced by youth with gender non-confirming identities in a South African township. The two narratives show the diversity of experiences in this community. Such diversity suggests that there may be something intriguing taking place in this setting, and therefore future studies should extend the sample.

The findings present the family and school environments as critical in the lives of young gender non-confirming women. The authors suggest, as scholars such as Reddy (2010), Ndeshe (2010), Salo *et al.* (2010) and others have done, that extensive work is needed to contribute to the security of gender non-confirming women – and black lesbians in particular – in South African townships. Education on gender that counters strong religious messages against gender non-confirming identities should be strengthened. Education needs to focus on increasing public understanding of the gender continuum and its variations. There is a need to strengthen families and to educate them about the importance of offering children protective support during adolescence. Perhaps, to assist schools, the South African Department of Basic Education should clearly communicate that it is not departmental policy to refuse girls permission to wear tracksuits to school. This will create a comfortable environment for gender non-confirming female learners who prefer to wear a uniform of tracksuits or pants. Right now this regulation is at the discretion of the school, and more conservative institutions will probably not be flexible when it comes to the uniform.

There is a need for continued studies of gender non-confirming girls, so as to strengthen culturally competent support services. It seems from this study that there are boys at school who are friends to these girls: what is needed is an understanding of the type of males who reject tomboys and gender-non conforming girls, and what can be done to influence them and change their attitudes. A study of different boys' reactions to gender non-confirming girls is necessary with a view to understanding the conditions that enable some to be accepting while others are not, and give in to hatred and hate crimes against lesbians. Mob killing behaviour needs to be prevented, therefore evaluation studies of interventions, aimed at changing prejudice, are needed. More research is needed to identify those conditions that are conducive to the outbreak and concentration of hate crimes in townships. Perhaps the issue of violence against lesbians can be linked to the issue of violence against women more generally, or other kinds of violence motivated by an intolerance of people considered 'different', for one reason or another.

Notes

- 1 Questioning here refers to someone who feels they do not conform to a hetero-normative society or agrees that they live a lifestyle that is different/outside the societal norm, therefore they may be

‘questioning’ their sexuality.

2. The South African Broadcasting Authority (SABC) 1 soap opera, *Generations*, depicts a modern South African middle-class lifestyle. The character, Anne, was introduced as a female but later changed to male as part of the plot.

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