

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The geographies of heteronormativity: The source of symbolic homophobic violence at a South African university

Anthony Brown¹

Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg

ABSTRACT

This article examines how symbolic homophobic violence is produced from hegemonic and heteronormative institutional geographies. This study forms part of a larger project with Life Orientation student-teachers that investigated the strengthening of HIV and AIDS integration in the curriculum. Five student teachers from the class cohort used photovoice to illustrate how students with same-sex sexual identities were subjected to othering, discrimination, bigotry and overt forms of violent aggression emanating from their non-conforming gender expressions. Through photovoice-narrative interviews, I found that their transgression in spatial heterosexual norms resulted in intimidation, vilification and, in extreme cases, overt forms of violence by peers. This article focused on two themes, namely the physical geographies of symbolic homophobic violence and punishment, and discipline of geographies of the non-normative gendered body. Although symbolically homophobic violence can be linked to individual resistance to same-sex sexuality, this article shows that symbolic violence is largely reproduced by the contours of heteronormativity maintained by institutional geographies. If universities are committed to inclusive and safe learning spaces for diverse identities then they will have to interrogate how hegemonic cultures mobilise discourses that enforce systemic oppression.

Keywords: geographies, institutionalised heteronormativity, symbolic homophobic violence, same-sex sexualities

INTRODUCTION

Despite the South African Constitution's explicit protection and affirmation of the rights of people with same-sex sexual orientations (Department of Justice, 1996), 21 years later, society's responses to non-heteronormative sexual identities are still strongly disconnected from its constitutional ideals (Brown & de Wet, 2018; Sutherland, Roberts, Gabriel, Struwig, & Gordon, 2016). The South African Constitution was the first in the world to afford equal legal rights to people with same-sex sexual orientations in 1996. Focusing on institutions of higher learning, people with same-sex sexual identities and those who are perceived as such are subjected to overt and more subtle forms of aggression. They are typically ostracised and prevented from engaging in learning opportunities and are often coerced to follow obligatory hegemonic heterosexual scripts by their peers and educators (Brown & Diale, 2017; Jagessar & Msibi, 2015; Lesch, Brits, & Naidoo, 2017; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2017). These oppressive experiences for students with same-sex sexual desires emanates from the skewed transformation focus of race and gender in institutions of higher learning (Msibi, 2013). Msibi (2013) argues that the selective focus on converting South African universities from the legacy of oppression to a democratic and inclusive

¹ Please direct all correspondence to: Dr Anthony Brown, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, PO Box 524, University Road, Auckland Park, Johannesburg, 2006; E-mail: abrown@uj.ac.za



environment has done little to address some forms of discrimination, such as homophobia. Although there are remarkable advances in racial cohesion in South African institutions of higher learning, most of these spaces remain commonly heteronormative and oppressive to the same-sex desiring individuals (Msibi & Jagessar, 2015; Nzimande, 2017).

I wish to state, at the outset, that the aim of this article is not to delineate the lived experiences of young people with same-sex sexual identities as tragic tropes of victims, but to draw attention to the unexplored spatial and material dimensions of symbolic violence imbued in normalised heteronormative environments. Heteronormative spaces can be explained as geographies where presumptions are that all bodies are meant to be heterosexual and that this orientation is 'normal' and 'good' (Brown & Diale, 2017). Non-heterosexual expressions are branded as evil and deviant (Francis, 2018). As a result, they are effectively subjected, invisibilised and silenced (Francis, 2017). Heterosexuality means the sexual involvement with one who is from the other sex, man with a woman, woman with a man (Yep, 2003). It is the perfect fit between the penis and the vagina (Yep, 2003).

The construction of heteronormativity is not only sexual, but is also riddled with inscribed social values. The socially constructed rules regulate that those who transgress the patrolled borders of the heteronormative codes and norms are punished unequivocally through forms of symbolic violence that could lead to forms of overt violence (Valentine, Vanderbeck, Sadgrove, & Anderson, 2013). It is ironic how heterosexuality is valorised and deemed to be natural, but constantly needs to be affirmed and protected. Heteronormativity regulates individuals by imposing set social scripts onto them (Foucault, 1977). This "unfair or unequal treatment that intend to marginalise or subordinate individuals based on their real or perceived affiliation with socially constructed stigmatised [sexuality]" can be characterised as a form of homophobic violence (Ayala, Beck, Lauer, Reynolds, & Sundararaj, 2010, p. 2). Homophobia entails not only the hatred felt for individuals with same-sex sexual desires but it is also the discomfort and fear experienced in the face of such expressions (Vaccaro, August, & Kennedy, 2012).

The understanding of symbolic violence in this article is a 'gentle violence,' which involves acts that ignore, trivialise and/or condemn queer identities (Bourdieu, 2001; Venzo & Hess, 2013). In this article, the terminologies are merged and coined as symbolic homophobic violence to illustrate the anxiety-ridden, guilt-producing, fear-inducing, shame-invoking and hate-deserving layers to be uncovered in symbolic homophobic violations (Yep, 2003). An extended discussion around symbolic violence is presented later in this article. De Craene (2017) argues that the creation of space is a social process and therefore the lived experiences of symbolic homophobic violence should be viewed as socio-spatial. There is a need to question normativities, their power relations and discursive processes in the production of space and sexuality (Browne, 2006). Geographies of sexualities are not necessarily the depiction of queer identities existing in opposition to heterosexual spaces, but how the reterritorialisation of heterosexual spaces produces the visibility of sexual subcultures (Oswin, 2008).

In this article, I ask the question, how do heteronormative geographies matter in the production of knowledge on sexual subcultures and homophobia? Following the introduction, I explore the intersection of symbolic violence and docility. I then present a brief description of the study's methodology. An examination of the everyday embodiment of the subculture of sexual identities in specific spaces and places is presented before concluding this discussion by exploring how discourses of transformation in institutions of higher learning should move beyond the obsession with race and consider the often invisible and silent 'isms' in order to ensure an inclusively safe environment for all students (Msibi, 2013).

SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE OF DOCILITY

Symbolic violence is a mode of discrimination constituted by common social conventions with unrecognised and imbalanced power relations that produce and sustain prejudice (Bourdieu, 1991). Symbolic violence is that



“invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164). It captures an active construction of systems classification where expressions are regulated (Fowler, 1997). Those with hegemonic powers within the porous contours in a specific social system develop and centralise forms of domination that legitimise and privilege the deserving existence of certain identities while disorientating and suppressing the unwanted ‘deviant’ (Bourdieu, 1984). Through the establishing of social scripts, these controlled spaces teach, produce and affirm a way of being and condemn the characterisation of the ‘othered’ (Wachs & Chase, 2013). The lives of the ‘othered’ are thus not considered as lives at all and cannot be humanised for they fit no dominant frame for the human within that particular border (Butler, 2004). Tautological instruments of communication within these classified geographies use surveillance to suitably privilege and subordinate the different identities within this social location (Bourdieu, 1991). These discursive forms of power are disguised in naturalised institutional practices, which present themselves through soft forms of violence (Bourdieu, 2001). The perpetrators of these gentle forms of violence habitually hide in ways of looking, sitting, standing, keeping silent, or even speaking (‘reproachful looks’ or ‘tones’, ‘disapproving glances’ and so on) (Bourdieu, 1991). Although invisible, subtle and disguised in shape and form, it is still a powerful form of violence for it is unfair, damaging, and manipulative in nature (Scott, 2012). Its ultimate function is to preserve a particular status quo and social order that coerce subordinate identities into accepting a redundant status. When left unattended, symbolic violence can change to overt violence (Malpass, Sales, & Feder, 2016) as will be presented later in this article.

Foucault (1995) cautions us not to get stuck on notions of how hegemonic powers repress, contain and control but rather on how it directs, shapes, and constitutes relationships and behaviours. Through the norms that govern reality, these constituted relations and behaviours are symbolic and create the understanding that one exists as a subject of some kind (Butler, 2004). Through applying Bourdieu’s constructs of symbolic violence, this article, at its centre, is concerned with heteronormative boundaries that tell the ‘other’ sexual identities what to do and reduce them gently to what they are from who they truly are. Notions of symbolic violence enable this article to illustrate how normative conditions within spaces discursively vet what must be fulfilled for one to become a validated and valued being. When these spaces where all bodies are to be affirmed remain silent and unresponsive to the discrimination of minority identities, they (re)produce and perpetuate legacies of oppression.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on a broader project with 86 first-year Life Orientation Education students to integrate HIV and AIDS in the teacher education programme. The initial discussion on HIV highlighted the intersection of discourses of HIV with those of class, gender, sexuality and religion. The Action Research approach (Brown & Wood, 2018) led to further investigations of transformation and social justice, which is a central focus in the Life Orientation subject area.

>> Life Orientation is the study of the self in relation to others and to society. It addresses skills, knowledge, and values about the self, the environment, responsible citizenship, a healthy and productive life, social engagement, recreation and physical activity, careers and career choices. These include opportunities to engage in the development and practice of a variety of life skills to solve problems, to make informed decisions and choices and to take appropriate actions to live meaningfully and successfully in a rapidly changing society. It therefore not only focuses on knowledge but also emphasises the importance of the application of skills and values in real-life situations, participation in physical activity, community organisations and initiatives. (Department of Education, 2011, p. 6).

This discussion was more critical because the data collection site is an urban South African university that previously catered only for white Afrikaner students. The student population demographics predominantly remained the same with a small proportion of coloured and black students (Brown, 2017; Brown & Wood, 2018). A critical



consciousness approach (Wang & Burris, 1997) enabled a methodological space that linked conceptual knowledge of diversity and society with practical enquiry. Rodríguez and Brown (2009) point out that participatory pedagogy enables young people to “develop knowledge and skills that identify and confront challenges in their lives” (p. 22). This article focuses on the work of five student-teachers, who used the photovoice methodology to illustrate how students with same-sex sexual identities were subjected to othering and discrimination. It is important to note that all these students are self-identified gay men of Afrikaner descent. More so since the author identifies as a queer and black individual who normalised dialogues of diversity in the classroom. Students with diverse sexual orientations were comfortable to unsilence topics such as sexuality. Photovoice is a participatory approach that enables participants to express experiences of a particular phenomenon on their own terms (Mitchell, Stuart, Moletsane, & Nkwanyana, 2006). The first year Life Orientation student teachers took photos across the campus where they perceive how notions of diversity and transformation are either promoted or hampered. Images could include artwork, information boards, statues and names of buildings among others. They then wrote narratives that explain their understanding of transformation. Five students presented photographs of spaces where they experienced homophobic violence with written accounts to highlight sexuality as a transformational issue in this institution. Permission to conduct this study was granted through the institutional ethics board (NWU-00030-15-S2). I also sought permission from students to critically reflect on their photovoice narratives through interviews (Simmonds, Roux, & ter Avest, 2015). Students consented to participate and I informed them that they had the right to withdraw at any time and guaranteed their anonymity. I was conscious that the photos belonged to the students. For this reason I sought permission from all participants to use their photos in this article. I used thematic analysis (Francis, 2017) to identify broad themes that surfaced in the experience of the participants. I firstly developed broad categories of constructs related to students’ experiences and navigation of their non-normative sexuality expressions as extrapolated from their photovoice narratives and interviews. I then developed themes that are theoretically informed (Creswell, 2009).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This article identified two main themes: the first addresses the physical geography of symbolic homophobic violence, followed by the geography of punishment and discipline of the non-normative gendered body. I do not want to create an impression that homophobia in this study is inherent to individuals, but rather to argue that issues of the deviant sexual ‘other’ has been ignored and uninterrupted in hegemonic privileged spaces. The article therefore advocates for an undoing of these notions through a framework of anti-oppressive education.

PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF SYMBOLIC HOMOPHOBIC VIOLENCE

To comprehend the norms and regularities of heteronormativity, one has to understand the spaces through which it is constituted, practised and lived (Monro, 2010). Through the naturalisation of the space, the legitimacy of the body is contested. Andrew, a self-identified gay man, presented a picture of a bathroom that can be identified with the demarcation symbol of the male figure. It is important to point out that in what follows, the term ‘effeminate’ is not used in a stereotypical or derogatory manner. I align this discussion with Butler (1990) who argues that sexuality is invisible, however gender marks the individual as a dominant force. Through previous studies with queer students I found that some butch lesbians express masculine traits and some gay men express feminine traits to mark their sexuality (Brown & Diale, 2017).

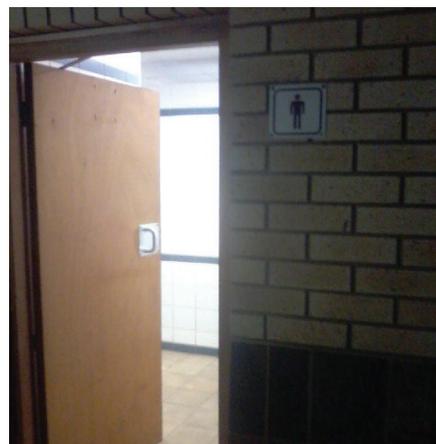


Figure 1: Bathroom



Gender segregated bathrooms are *innocently* permeated through notions of safety and dignity (Scherer, 2016). Through Andrew's narrative, we notice how conflation of sex and sexual orientation within gendered ecologies are implemented through bodily surveillance.

>> There was an incident close to the male bathrooms. This experience was horrible. A group of males was nearby. I could hear them saying, 'there he is. Let's see which bathroom door he enters'. I was instantly aware that my sexuality became an issue again. Then, one loudly asked if I don't want to give them a fun night so that they could fix me. I was scared for what can happen to me.

The material architecture of the bathroom site is wrapped around social matrices of the heteronormative identity and reduces the body to an object. This taken-for-granted gender marker becomes an enactor of disciplinary power that regulates the body and divides space (Bender-Baird, 2016). The excerpt from Andrew's interview illustrates how the bathroom becomes a contested space that creates and names the body. His peers assumed a '*panoptic*' duty that invalidated his effeminate expression from its biological sex through a single readable gaze. The punishment for this deviation was to subject the body to discrimination and violence through verbal assaults and words that injured. Notice how the notion of (symbolic) violence through threats and assaults moves beyond docility to that of fixing, compliance and ultimately re-establishing norms. The geography of the bathroom is more than a (safe) space for relief and comfort – it is a gendered, policed zone where people are forced to choose between the heteronormative binaries, which denies the existence of non-normative expressions. The violence experienced by Andrew emanating from his gender non-conforming expressions juxtaposes the very reason for gender-divided bathrooms that are more often conscripted in safety and comfort.



Figure 2: Access gate

Another participant, Max, presented a very interesting picture of a gate that is controlled by an access card. This small gate provides access to spaces within the borders of the campus and is not regulated by security guards like many of the major entrances. The presumption is that access gates provide safety to students, staff and institutional property, but one cannot deny the surveillance that is hidden in this process. The movement through the gate transports the individual to different spaces within the same campus that are regulated by multiple forms of values and meanings.

Max narrated that,

>> 'I was grabbed by the arm as I was about to go through the turning gate and told that gay people do not belong here – they belong in hell. He then punched me. It must have been my clothes that gave away that I am gay'.

This violence and shame at the gate is more than the confinement and exclusion of Max's access to the university premises – it is an act to eliminate him from personhood. The religious connotation of hell is very significant in this



conversation as this destination can only be reached through the passage of death. It will be an extreme interpretation that the gate is a threat to enact the passage to death. This article confines the analysis to the overt religious intolerance of the non-heterosexual 'other'. The South African apartheid regime promoted and maintained a religious schema that severely policed sexuality (Francis & Reygan, 2016). Same-sex sexual orientations were branded as evil (Francis & Msibi, 2011; Msibi, 2012a) and criminalised (Barnard, 2003). The remnants of these values are deep-seated and are perpetuated in post-colonial South African society. It is constantly being reproduced (Sutherland et al., 2016). It appears again in Max's narrative and seems to be a reference that legitimises the violence. For the sake of this discussion, it is necessary to highlight that this everlasting doomed space is scripturally regulated by gates, a destination for those who fail to repent from sin or, rather, who do not conform to certain religious scripts. The 'inability' of Max to adhere to heterosexual norms guarantees his permanent condemnation. The gate reiterates the regulation of heterosexuality as the master access card, and the deviant sexual 'other' on the other side of the gate, be it the university premises or the after-life, will not be tolerated.

Geographies of symbolic violence are not necessarily confined in spatial terms, but imbued in values of who we are and who is to be included and excluded (Bohle, 2007). The access gate in Max's experience became a geographical point at which heteronormative power was exercised. The narrative from Max yet again underscores that space and society are inextricably related (Radil, Flint, & Tita, 2010). Drawing back on Max's narrative, the perpetrator did not exclusively use symbolic violence to express his radicalism for heteronormativity, but coupled it with physical violence to actively reproduce heterosexuality. The incident at the gate did not simply happen, but it was a moment that activated a world of conflicting proximities. The reflection on the incident at the access gate provides a new understanding of how to challenge the spatial conditions of domination.

Daniel presented a photograph of a food outlet at the student centre. The student centre is a social hub with food outlets, a gym, bookshops, banking facilities and other amenities. One can anticipate that the nature of this space could 'invite' the student to return more than once a week. In this photograph, I interrogate how the space of basic human (student) needs becomes a contested space along the lines of sexuality.

Daniel shared how,

>> "it is always crowded inside and outside the student centre. A gay person cannot walk freely because people make jokes that mock you and laugh at you because you look different. I know my hairstyles are different and the way I dress is feminine, but that makes me happy. Because of that I am called names and when the others laugh at me, a person feels like nothing. It happens all the time. This is where I normally buy my food and do many other things. I often think twice if I should go there or would rather consider going outside campus to get something to eat".

Daniel's undignified experiences within the public space in this university are characterised by discrimination and (symbolic) violence. The laughter and derogatory name-calling intentionally reinforce feelings of 'othering' and displacement within the self. Daniel's awareness of the 'other' emanates from his difference in expression from mainstream hegemonic heterosexuality. He refers to markers that reify same-sex sexualities as the 'other'. The affirmation of an identity is important for positive feelings and a sense of belonging that eventually provide a state of positive wellbeing (Ghavami, Fingerhut, Peplau, Grant & Wittig, 2011). In the case of Daniel, one can



Figure 3: Cafeteria in the Student Centre



sense the unhappiness from his experiences. My concern is how these discriminatory responses from his peers may lead to depressive symptoms and low self-esteem as has been demonstrated in other studies (Zeiders, Umaña-Taylor, & Derlan, 2013). In a study of school youth, the results of name-calling, subtle bullying, rejection and discrimination showed an increase in school dropouts (Msibi, 2012a). A recent study found that the persistent embarrassment, stigma, rejection and teasing from peers and teachers led to stress, depression, violence, dissonance and dropping out of school as early as grade 8 (the first year of secondary schooling) (Brown, 2017).

This theme helps to understand the intersections of physical space and symbolic violence when troubling the constrictive heteronormative representational systems and oppressive practices of the 'other'. It shows how the material world shapes the relationships and regulates the hierarchies of who we are. The unintentional space, with its socially attached meanings, becomes a catalyst that enables symbolic violence to keep things straight (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014).

PUNISHMENT AND DISCIPLINE OF GEOGRAPHIES OF THE NON-NORMATIVE GENDERED BODY.

In the previous theme, I showed how bodies and their presentations within certain tangible spaces are central to the validations of recognised (heteronormative) sexuality that ultimately assign status and value. Sexuality is an act and is not necessarily what you have (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In this theme, I extend the discussion to how symbolic violence scrutinises and polices the materiality of the body to ensure that it adheres to the rules and regulations of the (heteronormative) environment. The constant heteronormative embodiment of the sexualised man is through the materiality of the penis, and for the woman it is the vagina (Yep, 2003). By locating gender and sexuality in a biological construct, the body becomes a site where the geography of power is evident.

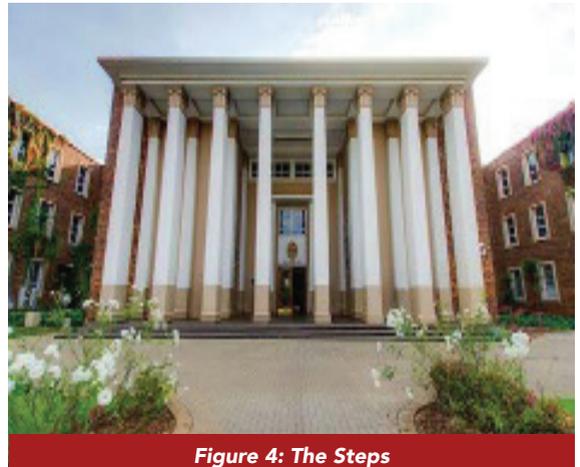


Figure 4: The Steps

Tony is a self-disclosed gay man with a soft demeanour and long hair that is coloured. He wears very flamboyant clothes and all of these expressions are conflated with effeminate traits (Brown & Diale, 2017). Tony presented a photo of the main entrance of the faculty. This space is commonly known as 'The Steps'. It attracts groups of students from the faculty who do not have scheduled classes at any given time during the day. The steps allow for a wide-angled gaze over this part of the campus. It is from this space that Tony shared an experience of being surveyed.

>> I was on my way to the labs when I overheard a couple of guys making comments about me. They were sitting on the steps of the main building. The one kept saying "Oh my soul" in a very feminine voice tone whilst the other one commented on the shoes I was wearing that day. He asked are those "vellies"? And the others replied, no, it's only straight guys who wear "vellies".²

² Vellies refers to veldskoen, a shoe that is popular in Southern Africa, especially among men from farming backgrounds. Vellies are made from soft, tanned leather and have rubber soles.



The view of Tony's body did not just become a site of sexual identity but a site to exercise power. The manner in which the body is covered by clothing and is behaviourally expressed "makes it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly" (Foucault, 1977, p. 173). The rendered mockery of the 'vellies' associated with (hetero)sexuality of 'straight guys' reinforces the sexing and demarcation of the body through clothing. Tony's effeminate bodily gestures do not represent the heteronormative 'straight guy' threshold and invalidate the masculine values attached to his 'vellies'. The discursive utterance in a feminine tone of voice buttresses the subjugation of Tony to something less than the 'straight guy' (heterosexual) trajectory and legitimises the symbolic violence. In order to govern heterosexuality, symbolic violence is enforced to vilify the misalignment of the body's communication of its gender identity through the socially attached meanings of dress and gesture.



Figure 5: Lawn close to main building of Education Faculty

Another participant, Robert, shared similar experiences. He presented a picture of a lawn close to the main building of the Faculty of Education where he was tormented because of his love of tight clothes.

Msibi (2012b), in a study of gender and clothing in schools, found that learners refused to be taught by a male student teacher who wore tight clothes. The learners perceived tight clothes as un-African for males and a subtle marker that expresses same-sex sexual desires. Robert narrated an account of this type of conflation within the intersections of clothing and gender-making.

Robert narrated,

>> "I walked across the lawn when some guys called me a moffie³ in tights because of my skinny jeans. I felt very bad and I kept on asking myself why these gay feelings should be in my body. Ever since, I have decided to have a suitcase for the weekdays that makes me blend in with the rest of the guys and a suitcase for the weekend to wear what I like."

The regulatory disciplinary power does not only act externally, but proceeds to internalise tensions of self-acceptance. The social attachments to gendered clothing serve as a gatekeeper to heterosexuality (Butler, 1990). Similar to Tony's experience, the denigration of Robert's sense of dress devalued his identity to what is the (heterosexual) norm. Subsequently, Robert opted to self-regulate the body's expression in order to avoid visibility of sexual difference, all in an attempt to be 'certified' as normal and 'become' acceptable. Conforming to the dominant hegemonic expressions at times is used to resist and disrupt the persistent homophobia and rejection in hegemonic, heterosexually-regulated spaces (Brown & Diale, 2017). Again, the body and subsequently the self is subjected to suffering under the pressure and violence of prestigious heteronormative contours.

While considered deviant, the social and cultural processes linked to the non-heterosexual body serve as a structure of power. Symbolic violence serves as a tool to produce and maintain these structures. All of this pressure shapes, regulates, and normalises one's body in order to fit a normative standard (Ahlvik-Harju, 2016).

³ Moffie is a derogatory term for effeminate gay men.



CONCLUSION

This article illustrates the increasingly complex dynamics of symbolic violence and oppression in heterosexual geographies. Bourdieu's (2001) framing of symbolic violence allowed for the articulation of the daily experience of discrimination and to show how it proceeds by shaping bodies, which shape the environments in which they emerge. Symbolic violence exerted through space functions as a tactical move to (re)produce and maintain a hidden heterosexual power structure, where those with non-normative sexual orientations are relegated to inferior ranks within the university space. The gender-based and sexuality-related violence in higher education is perpetuated because societal, and subsequently institutional norms have gone unchallenged (Kiguwa & Langa, 2017). The experiences of the students through their stories in this study expose and challenge the narratives of normalcy and ultimately open up an opportunity to undo the disciplinary practices that are legitimised and accepted. Narratives from students have shown how the body is a contested terrain of sexuality within the space where physiology and sociology intersect. The inability to conform to heteronormative expressions by the body that need subjugation to correction creates a battlefield when the self meets with society. Understanding the forms of symbolic violence in certain spaces of power, privilege and oppression (Kumashiro, 2000) allows for more practical and overt forms of intervention that could refute violence emanating directly from compulsory heteronormativity.

Institutions of higher learning will have to expand their transformation education and communication programmes to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the diverse identities that are converging within these spaces in order to create a safe and inclusive learning environment for all. This is a direct call from Education White Paper 3 (Department of Education, 1997) that advocates for equity of access and fair chances of success for all who want to develop through higher education. One way of disrupting the narrow heteronormative landscape in institutions of higher learning is engagement with a framework of anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000). It promotes an education for sexual non-conforming identities, education about the sexual non-conforming identities, education that critiques privileging and othering, and education that changes the status quo. An understanding of diverse (sexual) identities will empower individuals and institutions to question systems of oppression, how they work, how they are sustained and how they can be contested (Muthukrishna, 2008).

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