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BEYOND ‘COMING OUT’: LESBIANS’ (ALTERNATIVE) STORIES OF SEXUAL IDENTITY TOLD IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades, the ‘coming out’[i] story has become entrenched as the central narrative with which lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people can narrate their experiences of claiming a sexual identity and storying their lives in general (Bacon, 1998; Blackburn, 2009). It has developed into a “canonical narrative” (Bruner, 1987, p. 15), or a culturally recognisable story for LGB people, in that it involves the recounting of a series of familiar events in moving from a place of shame to one of self-acceptance about one’s sexual identity (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Plummer, 1995). The ‘coming out’ canonical narrative additionally operates as a counter-narrative, which has enabled LGB people to voice their sexuality within heterosexist and heteronormative confines (Blackburn, 2009). Nevertheless, there are limitations (and limiting effects) to this narrative, and further refinement of how we understand sexual identity narratives is required. To illustrate this argument, we draw on a narrative-discursive study of eight lesbians’ stories of sexual identity in post-apartheid South Africa.

We argue that lesbians’ narratives of sexual identity are more contextualised and nuanced than the ‘coming out’ narrative suggests. We thus present a brief contextual background concerning LGB issues in South Africa, which provides the framework from which to understand the narratives that the participants in our study constructed (and the interpretative repertoires that resourced these narratives). We then illustrate how these women drew on the ‘coming out’ story to talk about their identity formation. However, the ‘coming out’ narrative can, at times, be seen as an impediment to lesbians’ lived experiences and/or to safe living. The ‘coming out’ story is thus counterbalanced by their actively challenging it and deploying alternative ways of constructing their sexual identities, through two counter-narratives: ‘Lesbian identity is part of normal life’ and ‘Lesbians need to manage/downplay their lesbian identity in relation to risk’. We argue that there is a plurality in LGB storytelling, and there are, therefore, multiple ways in which lesbians can story their sexual identities. Counter-narratives to ‘coming out’ not only offer lesbians alternative ways of storying their lives; they also enable them to place greater or lesser emphasis on their sexual identities at various junctures and, at times, to reject practices such as disclosure, which can have othering and dangerous, rather than emancipatory, effects on their lives. Finally, drawing on this analysis, we suggest that when this multiplicity is taken into account, sexual identity can be viewed as varied and dynamic, rather than set by one deterministic course. By seeing lesbian identity construction as variably resourced by canonical and counter-narratives we can understand this construction as open to change in relation to time and space, with restrictive spaces implying the negotiation, rather than the erasure, of lesbian identity.

THE ‘COMING OUT’ STORY: COUNTER- OR CANONICAL NARRATIVE?

Cohler and Hammack (2006) explain that sexual storytelling is "always historically situated and dependent on the cumulative social and political activity that transforms societal attitudes about homosexuality" (p. 154). The discursive act of narrating one's 'coming out' experience, for example, has been shaped by the LGB movement in North America in the 1970s and 1980s, which encouraged the acquisition and celebration of LGB identities (Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Jagose, 1996). Since then, telling one's 'coming out' story has become an integral feature in the lives of LGB people, particularly because it has worked as an effective counter-narrative to heteronormativity (Blackburn, 2009).

The 'coming out' story has a number of recognisable features, as outlined by Plummer (1995). The story begins in childhood, which is narrated as a time fraught with difficulty, when the child experiences feelings of difference. Plummer labels this narrative a "deterministic tale", in that being lesbian or gay is retrospectively narrated as the source of isolation (p. 83). A turning point occurs, generally in adolescence, when problems start to arise. This could include experiences of "secrecy, guilt/shame, fear of discovery, suicidal feeling", depression, and so forth, which cause the individual to '"discover" that s/he is lesbian or gay (p. 83). These problems are often partially alleviated by meeting other LGB people, with whom the person feels a sense of solidarity. Finally the individual gains an integrated identity, and is able to come out as lesbian/gay. Overall then, the 'coming out' story can be understood as a "narrative of struggle and success" (Hammack & Cohler, 2009, p. 4). Emulating the LGB movement, it is marked by the difficulty and stress related to living in a heterosexist society, but concludes with the "resilient triumph of self-actualisation" (Hammack & Cohler, 2009,

p. 4). This focus on sexual pride can be read within the context of a political movement that was aimed at overcoming the oppression and stigma attached to homosexuality and encouraged identification and community-building around a shared sexual identity (Shepard, 2009).

Thus, the ‘coming out’ story is useful in that it operates as a counter-narrative to the heterosexual life narrative (Blackburn, 2009; Cohler & Hammack, 2006). It provides “a new set of symbolic meanings, rituals and social interactions distinct from a heterosexist normative culture”, with which LGB people can narrate their lives and identities (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 52). By disclosing their sexual identity or telling their ‘coming out’ story, LGB people can contest or avoid being automatically assumed to be heterosexual (Bacon, 1998), and can constitute and restore their identities within a climate of heteronormativity. The ‘coming out’ narrative has provided a familiar story, involving recognisable events and shared experiences, and has enabled community-building and opposition to negative constructions of homosexuality in the LGB subculture (Bacon, 1998).

Whilst keeping in mind the productive aspects of the ‘coming out’ story, it is vital to recognise how this narrative can also constrain sexual storytelling. As we outlined earlier, the ‘coming out’ story follows a predictable pattern of events and LGB people have learned to reproduce this recognisable, relatively formulaic story of describing the process they undertook to develop their sexual identities (Bacon, 1998). Canonical narratives are “expected connections of sequence and consequence which create narrative structure and trajectories” and, therefore, provide particular and familiar ways of storying a life (Taylor & Littleton, 2006, p. 26). This is clearly seen in the ‘coming out’ story, in that certain events are constructed as important, with a specific focus on the disclosure of one’s sexual identity. The sequence and consequence of the narrative is illustrated in Cass’s (1979) six-stage ‘coming out’ model, which is billed as representing the process people undergo to identify as gay or lesbian: (1) identity confusion, (2) identity comparison, (3) identity tolerance, (4) identity acceptance, (5) identity pride, and (6) identity synthesis. The ‘coming out’ story, thus, has the effect of positioning LGB people’s sexual identities as centrally important and places an expectation on people to disclose their sexuality to others.

Apart from having restrictive effects, the ‘coming out’ story is itself socio-historically specific. This story not only developed during a crucial moment in LGB history, but also emerged into circulation over thirty years ago predominantly in North America. Even in the American context storytelling has changed, according to Cohler and Hammack (2007), as some LGB people now draw on a “narrative of emancipation” (p. 47). This involves their questioning both the need to have a life narrative that is different from that of heterosexual persons (e.g., the ‘coming out’ story) and the separatist effects of being part of the LGB community (Cohler & Hammack, 2007). Such a shift in narrative is indicative of the move into what some theorists term a “postidentity phase”, where a fixed sexual identity may no longer be the central theme in LGB people’s narratives (Cohler & Hammack, 2009, p. 455). As we show later, this kind of postidentity talk was evident in the narratives told by some of the participants in our study.

Postidentity talk was supplemented with the participants' talk of contextual decisions of (non)disclosure. The decision not to disclose a lesbian identity could be read within the 'coming out' narrative as remaining 'in the closet', a key metaphor upon which the 'coming out' narrative centres (Bacon, 1998; Seidman, Meeks & Traschen, 1999). The closet has been consistently viewed as the site of secrecy, shame and repression – a place in which a person feels unable to disclose her/his sexuality to others (Seidman, 2004a, 2004b). Such a construction of living in denial has been used as motivation for LGB people to come out. However, according to Butler (1997), 'coming out' is founded on a polarity, in that being 'out' always depends to some extent on being 'in' (the closet), which grants meaning and import to the act of 'coming out'. She suggests that "being 'out' must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as 'out'" (p. 302). In addition, even if a person has come out to a number of significant people, as soon as she meets a new person she is back in the closet, negotiating her way out again (Sedgwick, 1990). The 'coming out' narrative does not sufficiently take into account the multiple contextual factors surrounding a person's decision to (not) disclose her/his sexual identity.

The 'coming out' story has been vital in serving as a narrative form that LGB people can utilise to story their lives. It is, however, essential to recognise the limiting effects of this narrative, particularly for the importance (and subsequent requirement) that is placed on self-disclosure. It is questionable whether such a narrative is useful or feasible to LGB people in all circumstances. We argue instead that telling one's story of sexual identity is a far more contextualised and nuanced process than the 'coming out' story allows.

FREEDOM AND REPRESSION IN SOUTH AFRICA

In South Africa, homosexuality has a history of repression that began during the period of colonisation and extended through apartheid rule (Christiansen, 2000; Ratele, 2009). Public LGB identities and practices (both in private and public spheres, e.g. private parties) were heavily scrutinised and prohibited by the apartheid government (Retief, 1994), until the transition to democracy in 1994 (Christiansen, 2000). Along with various legal changes, this was most significantly achieved through the inclusion of an anti-discrimination clause in the constitution in 1994 and the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2006 (Reddy, 2009).

Despite these recent and significant changes, the legislative protection of LGB people does not always equate to positive changes in the everyday context of this country. For instance, heterosexism and violence against LGB people is still pervasive, even post apartheid (Cock, 2003; Hames, 2007), in that they frequently experience “shaming, harassment, discrimination and violence” (Cock, 2003, p. 41). ‘Corrective rape’ presents a significant problem, particularly for black lesbians and gay men living in South Africa[ii] (Britton, 2006; Hames, 2007). For example, in a narrative study conducted in South Africa, one black lesbian described how, once her sexuality became known to others, she was sexually abused by her grandfather, and was then raped repeatedly by men in her community, while another young woman reported being raped by her cousin for the same reason (Kheswa & Wieringa, 2005). Homosexuality is very often silenced in this country and across the African continent – a practice that is supported through a discourse of homosexuality as ‘unAfrican’ (Reddy, 2001). It is therefore questionable whether a lesbian, gay man or bisexual person will unquestioningly draw on a narrative of triumphantly ‘coming out’ of the closet, amidst shifting levels of (non)acceptance across South Africa and the threat of violence frequently encountered.

The current study was conducted at a historically white university from 2008 to 2009. Four of the participants were white (Ashleigh, Kate, Caroline, Linda), one woman identified as Indian/white (Delilah), and three were black (Neo, Sarah, Shane). The interviewer (AG) is white and openly lesbian, and was, at the time, a Masters student. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Initial interviews began with the question, “Please tell me about how you came to see yourself as lesbian and your experiences while developing this identity”, and took the unique direction of each participant’s personal narrative[iii]. Second interviews consisted of follow-up questions and the space for further elaboration by participants.

Data were analysed using Taylor and Littleton’s (2006) narrative-discursive approach, which allows for an analysis of speakers’ identity work. From this perspective, identity work is seen to be shaped and constrained by discursive resources (e.g., canonical narratives, as defined earlier, and interpretative repertoires) (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Interpretative repertoires were identified as “patterns [that can be found] across different people’s talk, particular images, metaphors or figures of speech” (Edley, 2001, p. 199) and are consistently tied to a subject. In the analysis, we examine what narratives (including canonical and counter-narratives) participants drew upon to construct their sexual identities. In order to do so, we explore the participants’ use of interpretative repertoires that make up these different narratives (see Gibson, 2010; and Gibson & Macleod, 2012, for further details on methodology).

In the following section, we discuss the interpretative repertoires that participants deployed when they drew upon the ‘coming out’ canonical narrative. The ‘coming out’ story is an established and recognisable narrative of sexuality, and participants sometimes utilised it in their identity work. Nevertheless, in reading participants’ stories it was clear that, owing to the surrounding contexts of their lives and the discursive resources that were available, they did not simply adhere to the ‘coming out’ story while discursively constructing their sexual identities. Instead, they drew on other interpretative repertoires to manage the disclosure of their sexual identities and narrate these identities. These interpretative repertoires thus resourced the participants’ postidentity talk and their ability to take up counter-narratives. In deploying a ‘lesbian identity is part of normal life’ narrative, participants drew on the ‘normalisation of sexuality’ repertoire (in which they constructed their sexuality as normal, rejected canonical ‘coming out’ events, and communicated their sexual identities in subtle ways) and on the ‘routinisation of sexuality’ repertoire (in which they constructed the acceptance and support of others as further normalising their sexual identities). In the ‘lesbians need to manage/downplay their lesbian identity in relation to risk’ narrative, participants drew on two interpretative repertoires, namely the ‘disallowance of lesbian identity in particular racialised and class-based spaces’ repertoire and the ‘disjuncture of the (heterosexual) family and lesbian identity’ repertoire to justify their decisions related to non- or partial disclosure. These two interpretative repertoires offered opportunities for the participants to construct their sexual identities as entities that needed to be managed around the risk that they faced in being openly lesbian in certain contexts of their lives. In utilising these repertoires, the participants not only resisted the ‘coming out’ narrative but also constructed disclosure as unnecessary or even dangerous.

DEPLOYING THE ‘COMING OUT’ CANONICAL NARRATIVE: DEVELOPING A SEXUAL IDENTITY

It was evident in participants’ narratives that the ‘coming out’ story continues to be used as a familiar pattern of (homo)sexual identity development. This is not surprising, given the social and historical endurance of this story and how it facilitates identity construction. During the interviews all of the participants deployed repertoires that form part of this canonical narrative of lesbian identity, albeit to varying degrees.

When drawing on the ‘coming out’ narrative, participants constructed their sexual identity as a product of a developmental process and spoke of their sexual identity as a ‘true’ part of themselves. They deployed a number of interpretative repertoires (gay since young, distress and loneliness, supportive gay community, realisation, naturalness, confession) to construct events or milestones in developing a (homo)sexual identity that mimic the sequence and consequence described by ‘coming out’ theorists’ understandings of sexual identity development (see Cass, 1979).

Most of the participants utilised the repertoire, ‘gay since young’, by drawing on the familiar image of the ‘tomboy’. In doing so, they constructed their sexuality as something that was there all along. Periods of childhood and adolescence were constructed by all of the participants as interspersed with times of despair and isolation. This repertoire was highlighted in the narratives of participants who described growing up in restrictive religious contexts. For example, a black woman, Shane constructs religion as a central part of her younger life, whilst Linda, an older white woman, frames most of her life in relation to her strict Christian upbringing. Only half of the participants utilised the repertoire of ‘supportive gay community’ and even then modified it in certain ways. As we will discuss later, the counter-narrative of ‘lesbian identity is part of normal life’ allowed participants (specifically, Linda, Neo, and Sarah) to challenge the benefits of being part of the LGB community. However, participants, such as Shane and Delilah, positioned themselves within the LGB community, but modified this repertoire by constructing their racial identities as points of difference from other members of the society (see *the normalisation of sexuality*). Nevertheless, by positioning themselves in this way (as previously isolated), the participants were able to emphasise the positive experience of ‘finding’ an LGB community. When participants drew on this repertoire, they constructed this space being made possible by positioning the surrounding university context as inclusive of LGB students (see *routinisation of sexuality*).

Participants’ use of the ‘realisation’ repertoire was particularly important as this marks a central moment in the ‘coming out’ story and process, when a lesbian ‘discovers’ her sexual identity. Although some participants resisted the importance placed on this moment, by utilising the ‘normalisation of sexuality’ repertoire, all of the participants made reference to a moment of realisation in their lives. This is augmented by most of the participants additionally constructing their sexual identity as natural. ‘Realisation’ and ‘naturalness’ were depicted as leading to a significant part of ‘coming out’, namely the ‘confession’ of one’s sexual identity. Participants all spoke about how they willingly disclosed to select people in their lives and the positive effects of having done so. In doing this, participants positioned themselves as being self-accepting and having achieved a major milestone in the development of a lesbian identity.

RESISTING ‘COMING OUT’: ‘LESBIAN IDENTITY IS PART OF NORMAL LIFE’

Within the ‘coming out’ canonical narrative, the development of a person’s sexual identity is constructed as central and highly significant, and originally as a source of distress (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Plummer, 1995). However, by deploying a counter-narrative in which lesbian identity is viewed as a normal and accepted part of life, the participants challenged this identity construction. This narrative required participants to construct a story of personal normalisation in conjunction with routinisation within the social context. These interpretative repertoires are discussed in more depth below.

The normalisation of sexuality

The term ‘normalisation’ is taken from Seidman and colleagues (1999) to indicate both a person’s acceptance of her own sexuality and the way in which she minimises this identity position in her life. This is storied through postidentity talk, in which a speaker constructs her sexual identity in a fluid way and as normal, rather than as disruptive or upsetting (Cohler & Hammack, 2007).

Participants used the repertoire in three ways. Firstly, they constructed their sexuality as unproblematic or minor; secondly, they resisted iconic events or aspects of the ‘coming out’ story; and thirdly, they communicated their sexual identity in muted ways. The first is evidenced in the extract below, in which Sarah minimises her sexual identity:

Sarah: To a degree it was exciting because it was finding out a lot more about (1) um (2) I don’t know, how do I say it? Like that part (1) of myself? (1) But I actually don’t really see it as (1) something that defines all of me. So it was just (1) you know something that I happened to be, just in the same way that heterosexuals just (1) don’t necessarily define themselves, solely by (1) their sexuality.

Throughout her narrative, Sarah constructed her sexuality as only one part of who she was and she rejected the notion that her sexuality was her core identity. This challenges the way in which a lesbian’s sexual identity is constructed in the ‘coming out’ story, that is, as her ‘true’, essential identity (Seidman, 2004b). In using this repertoire, Sarah questioned the need to centralise her sexual identity, which would result in her being positioned as different to heterosexual people – although she did still place heterosexuals in a normative position by making a comparison with them. As she pointed out, however, heterosexual people rarely (if ever?) construct their sexuality as a central part of who they are.

While minimising the importance of their sexuality, some of the participants additionally utilised the repertoire of ‘normalisation of sexuality’, in order to resist iconic elements of the ‘coming out’ narrative:

Sarah: My way of dealing with that [the ‘realisation’ that she was lesbian] was kind of go, ‘Alright (1) fair enough (1) so now do I have to do anything about it?’ and I actually said to myself, ‘No actually you really don’t (1) you don’t have to do anything about it’. I mean (2) it’s not like you have to go out there and start meeting people and have to start doing anything, I mean I did speak to a few friends and I did kind of (1) you know (1) go to the library, pick up a few books just to find out about it, but it wasn’t (1) like I felt I had to go out at night and meet all these interesting like creatures called lesbians.

Shane: I think it just (1) I was a bit naïve at first. I came into first year thinking, ‘The gays, yay, place where I’ll be accepted!’. Fuck no. (1) I walked into the first party and it was awkward. **[...]** OUTRhodes showed me just how cliquey the gay community was **[...]** That (1) race does play a game. **[...]** It felt like a culture shock for me.

Sarah clearly challenged the ‘coming out’ canonical narrative by rejecting the need to ‘start meeting [other LGB] people’ and the need to ‘do’ something about her sexuality. This did entail Sarah having to engage in some discursive work, which is evident in her frequent hesitations and repeatedly using clarifying statements, such as ‘I mean’. Given the established nature of this narrative, she was not able to resist it entirely, and quickly cited speaking to friends and reading books to learn more about her sexuality. Nevertheless, she ultimately resisted the ‘coming out’ story by indicating that she did not feel the need to meet those ‘creatures called lesbians’. Shane also resisted assumptions surrounding the LGB community by challenging the sense of comfort and belonging that LGB people are expected to feel in each other’s company. She explicitly constructed ‘race’ as the point of difference to other LGB people and thus highlighted how LGB spaces do not automatically signal inclusivity or acceptance.

As discussed earlier, the repertoire of ‘confession’ forms part of the ‘coming out’ canonical narrative and historically self-disclosure has been constructed as central to LGB people’s lives and identities. Counter to this, by utilising the repertoire of ‘normalisation’, the participants discussed various ways in which they negotiated the (non)disclosure of their sexuality. Some spoke of normalising this disclosure by ‘slipping’ reference to it into the conversation, without drawing significant attention to it. This is indicated in the following extracts:

AG: Is it the same at work like it is with your class that you just don’t (2) you don’t like openly=

Delilah: =I’ve never actually said it (2) to anyone here like out loud, but I do mention if I’m talking to one of the lecturers or something and we get onto the, the topic of (1) I dunno (1) the dog and I’ll say ‘My girlfriend and I’s dog’ and like I try to slip it into conversation like especially in the beginning I tried to slip it into the conversation so that they did know (1) where I was coming from (2) ‘cause I think that's important 'cause like I like the people I work with (2) so it's important that they do know (1) who I am.

Sarah: I've never actually (1) had to explicitly explain it, or say it (1), but I mean they [friends] just kinda picked up. And I mean I will, I will talk normally, how I would, 'Oh no that's a really pretty girl'. And they kinda just picked up on it.

Unlike the other participants, Delilah worked and studied at the university, and narrated experiences of managing her sexual identity in relation to her identity as a student and as a staff member. By choosing not to say it 'out loud', Delilah rejected the imperative to disclose her sexuality to others in a momentous way and, rather, constructed her sexuality as something that was a normal part of her life. Similarly, Sarah indicated that she would speak 'normally' and that through this process, her friends, who were never told explicitly that she was lesbian, knew about her sexual identity.

The routinisation of sexuality

The 'routinisation of sexuality' repertoire complements the 'normalisation of sexuality' repertoire. Seidman (2004a) defines routinisation as other people's acceptance and support of a person's sexual identity, which can take place at the interpersonal and/or institutional level(s). Routinisation was evident in the talk of participants about experiences with people they knew and within the university environment.

Ashleigh: I just I did settle down a little bit, knowing that (1) it's more sort of accepted at (1) Rhodes [University] here, so (2) I dunno I felt like safe.

Kate: My department has always been very supportive (1) Um ja, so (1) very supportive of like um, gay rights or OUTRhodes.

Neo: I was sitting in the common room one, one, one girl. I had a movie and she wanted me to come watch it **[…]** So I was chilling there **[…]** and then (1) this one girl was like, ‘Hey, Neo, have you got a girlfriend yet?’ **[…]** But they actually fitted me into the conversation.

Ashleigh and Kate constructed the university as a safe space as LGB students were made to feel ‘accepted’. Participants drew attention to the LGB society, OUTRhodes, and various policies and prominent activists on campus as ‘routinising’ LGB identity (although there were also ruptures in this, as explored in Gibson and Macleod, 2012). Conversely, Neo spoke about routinisation on an interpersonal level, when she described a conversation with others in which her sexual identity was acknowledged, without any labour on her part. This repertoire therefore enabled participants to construct the university as a place of acceptance, but did so in order to highlight contextual differences in their lives. When participants drew on the repertoire of ‘routinisation’, they did not construct the acceptance as something that could be taken for granted, but as something out of the ordinary. Several participants described themselves as being ‘lucky’ with regard to the support and acceptance that they received.

Delilah: I think luckily (1) I haven't experienced a lot of homophobia (2) luckily like compared to some of the people I know (1) I have (1) a wonderful family and I've surrounded myself with friends who (1) are cool like that and you know (1) love me for me.

Delilah's intimation of her being lucky and reference to others as not so lucky speaks to the difficulty that many LGB people experience in managing their sexual identities in light of continued levels of heterosexism. Contrastingly, in the following section, we speak to how lesbian identities are disallowed in particular racialised and class-based spaces, and how this required participants to negotiate their identity within potentially dangerous spaces.

RESISTING 'COMING OUT': 'LESBIANS NEED TO MANAGE/DOWNPLAY THEIR LESBIAN IDENTITY IN RELATION TO RISK'

Participants spoke to the requirements of managing identity around 'risk' and making strategic decisions around how and where to reveal a particular identity (in sexual versus familial relationships, for example). The narrative that lesbians need to manage or downplay their lesbian identity in relation to risk drew from two interpretative repertoires, which are discussed in more depth in Gibson and Macleod (2012). In this paper we report on how lesbian identity construction is facilitated and constrained by the raced, classed, gendered, familial, and geographical spaces that women occupy. We show how the black participants drew on a repertoire of the 'disallowance of lesbian identity in particular racialised and class-based spaces' to account for their de-emphasis of a lesbian identity in townships (historically disadvantaged socio-economic areas designated for black people) or in rural areas by invoking a threat of danger and stereotyping. In addition, the 'disjuncture of the (heterosexual) family and lesbian identity' repertoire emphasised how the expectation of support and care within a family does not necessarily extend to acceptance of a lesbian identity. This repertoire was used to justify emphasis on familial rather than lesbian identity, participants' management of their emotions in relation to the family, and timing of their disclosure to relatives.

The 'disallowance of lesbian identity in particular racialised and class-based spaces' repertoire was utilised by the black participants (Neo, Shane, Sarah) to describe the intersection of sexual, racial, class and location identity and how this leads to varying levels of (non)acceptance across South Africa. Within this repertoire, participants illustrated how a lesbian identity was disallowed and silenced in different ways, much of which centred on danger. This required management of movement, dress and, in particular, overt lesbian sexual identity.

Shane: I don't walk around in my home town after 4 o'clock (1) I don't=

AG: =After 4?

Shane: I don't (2) that's just asking for trouble.

AG: Do you mean um (1) it's not safe for you because (1) you're lesbian or because you're a woman or=

Shane: =Because I'm a lesbian. (2) Because I'm a lesbian that looks good in a skirt, which makes it even worse. (1) Which is why I don't actually wear a skirt that often as well. (1) Because, the thing is=

AG: =So it would be more dangerous for you to wear a skirt even?

Shane: Yeah (1) not really, but yes, because (1) not really in that you would fit in like every woman.

AG: Oh (1) ja, ja=

Shane: =But, yes (1) in that you now firstly look like a woman (1) but you're into other women.

Shane constructed her sexual identity as a source of 'trouble' in her home town. By pointing to the threat of danger alongside heterosexism, she constructed her sexual identity as strictly disallowed in this context. This required her to manage her movements and ensure that her way of dressing did not disrupt gendered and heteronormative relations. Although she did not explicate what 'trouble' she would face, in her broader narrative Shane described instances when she risked facing physical violence in the township and within her family on the basis of her sexuality.

All of the participants mentioned incidents involving either themselves or friends facing heterosexism in their family relationships. These statements were never simple expressions of discrimination. Rather, they were couched in terms that showed disjuncture between the support expected of, and that experienced in, a family and the (non)acceptance of lesbian identity. In drawing on the 'disjuncture of the (heterosexual) family and lesbian identity' repertoire, participants indicated how they had to manage disclosure and, at times, chose to emphasise their familial identity above their sexual identity.

Shane: I think my cousins have been (1) very, very civilised, but I mean there's one or two of them that I, that I know (1) 'cause like for instance one of my cousins who's (1) almost two, he's two years older than me (1) he said before I, when I was aware (1) okay I had accepted myself you know and he kept on saying stuff like 'Cuz, if you're gay bra[iv]. Yo I'm going to fuck you up. I hate gay people so much'. Like he could say shit like that all the time so (1) when I told him I was I, I specifically (1) had to get him drunk and get myself drunk so I knew I could take whatever. Because I was ready I was, 'We will fuck each other up! That is how we will be but we are still family at the end of it'.

Shane referred in this extract to the potential for violent heterosexism in her family. However, she chose to minimise her cousin's heterosexism, in order to construct her position within her family as secure (most cousins have been 'very civilised'; 'we are still family in the end'). She employed the strategy of drinking to manage the risk of her disclosure, and emphasised her familial identity as a counterbalance to her sexual identity.

The black participants each narrated instances when they experienced their sexual identity as being silenced, denied or denigrated in certain contexts. In drawing on the repertoires referred to above, these women constructed their sexual identities as occasionally incompatible with their racial, class-based and familial identities. The participants could present a strong argument for having to carefully manage their sexual identities, including a decision of non-disclosure, by pointing to the ways in which a lesbian identity was silenced or elicited some sort of risk. In these women's accounts, it was evident that ‘coming out’ in the canonical narrative sense within such contexts seemed unhelpful and even risked serious negative consequences.

CONCLUSION

The ‘coming out’ story has served as an effective canonical narrative with which lesbians can story their sexual identity. It portrays a familiar sequence of milestones through which a lesbian can move in order to take up a sexual identity, which she can construct as natural and enduring. This is narrated against a backdrop of heterosexism and heteronormativity, which a lesbian is seen to resist in various ways, particularly by disclosing her sexual identity to others. The consequence of this canonical narrative is that a lesbian’s sexuality is positioned as central to her identity, and self-disclosure is a visible sign of her self-acceptance. Given its socio-historical significance, the participants did utilise the ‘coming out’ story as a way of narrating the development of their sexual identity, which involved moving through canonical events.

Whilst the ‘coming out’ narrative undoubtedly still operates as a story of sexual identity, it is no longer the only narrative available to LGB people. In the participants’ identity work it was clear that in particular times and spaces their sexual storytelling was infused with postidentity talk (Cohler & Hammack, 2009), which involved their resisting the need to construct their sexuality as a fixed or central aspect of their identity. The ‘lesbian identity is part of normal life’ and the ‘lesbians need to manage/downplay their lesbian identity in relation to risk’ narratives operated as counter-stories to that of ‘coming out’, in that they offered participants alternative ways to construct their sexuality through various interpretative repertoires. The 'normalisation of sexuality' and 'routinisation' repertoires allowed participants to decentralise their sexuality identity and to resist their sexuality being seen as non-normative. The 'disallowance of lesbian identity in particular racialised and class-based spaces' and the 'disjuncture of the (heterosexual) family and lesbian identity' repertoires allowed participants to emphasise other identity positions and cast disclosure of their lesbian identities as unnecessary or dangerous.

The stories of these eight lesbians cannot simply be extended to explain the lives of other women who identify as lesbian, either in South Africa or globally. Instead, our intention is to illustrate how the 'coming out' story is no longer the only – much less always the most useful – narrative in offering lesbians a way of constructing their sexual identities. Lesbians can, at times, draw on alternative narratives, which enable them to minimise the importance of their sexuality and problematise self-disclosure. Taking a pluralistic view of sexual storytelling enables greater insight into how lesbians discursively negotiate and manage their sexuality, and how this shifts in different contexts. Although restrictive contexts can deny opportunities for lesbians to articulate their sexual identities, lesbians do not simply retreat into 'the closet', but rather manage their sexuality in varied, strategic ways.

This argument has implications in terms of the practices of LGB activist groups. Importantly, lesbians should not be encouraged simply to 'come out'. Instead, their contexts and multiple identity positions should be considered, as well as their own meanings of (not) taking up a sexual identity. Maintaining a lesbian identity, especially through participation in the LGB community, can sometimes further a lesbian’s sense of ‘otherness’. That is, LGB spaces can reproduce other divisions (gender, racial, classed), as well as construct a lesbian identity as different to the hetero-norm. Therefore, if attempts are made at creating LGB-friendly spaces, such as on university campuses, they should be constructed in ways that minimise this otherness (e.g., making it a space of inclusivity, rather than specifically an ‘LGB space’) in culturally inclusive ways (e.g., offering varied activities with which people can identify). By doing so, greater opportunities can be provided for LGB people to express their sexual identities and manage them in ways that vary from simply ‘coming out’.

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[i] We place the term ‘coming out’ in quotes as we problematise the way in which this experience is taken for granted as ‘normal’ for LGB people.

[ii] Reference to this practice risks perpetuating racial stereotypes; however, it is necessary, in understanding how heterosexism can occur in this particular context.

[iii] Transcription conventions were: (( )) non-spoken action/information changed for anonymity; (1) pause (1 = 1 second); (text underlined) emphasis added; = run-on line; **[…]** break in extract for space limitations.

[iv] A South African slang word for ‘brother’.