

# STUDYING SEXUALITY: LGBTI EXPERIENCES IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

Although there are several studies internationally on gender and sexual orientation diversity, these are limited in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). This special issue contains articles written from different Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) in the SADC region on experiences of LGBTI individuals covering sexual health, teaching and training, advocacy and interventions. The aim of publishing this research is to disseminate information for broader advocacy to destabilise hetero- and cis-normativity. The study sites included rural and metropolitan-based institutions and diverse research designs were used. Most of the research findings presented here indicate that the institutions of higher education in SADC are still heteronormative and LGBTI staff and students are marginalized, prejudiced and discriminated

against. Some studies report that there are activities in a few institutions harnessed in order to create conducive teaching and learning environments for and about sexual orientation and gender identity in the SADC.

**Key words:** gender identity, heteronormativity, institutions of higher education, LGBTI, SADC, sexual orientation, sexuality, stigmatisation

## INTRODUCTION

This special issue is part of a bigger project in collaboration with the AIDS Accountability International (AAI) and the DST/NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development (CoE-HUMAN). The aim of the project is to increase knowledge production in the African continent about diverse sexual orientation and gender identity. This publication focuses on experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) persons in institutions of higher learning. This Special Issue journal contributes to a broader conversation about the importance of creating platforms for locally produced knowledge to be visible and available globally. It is not until the past two decades that the South Africa higher education sector institutionalised some reforms on their gender policies and practice. The South African higher education pre-1994 served the Apartheid government. The financial state of South African universities depended on them having good relations with the State, academic freedom was dead (Bunting 2006). For instance, intellectual agendas of universities in South Africa were largely determined by the perception that they had a duty to preserve Apartheid's status quo (Bunting 2006) and homosexuality was outlawed through the *Immorality Amendment Act* hence research to normalise sexual orientation and gender identity would have been difficult.

There is increasing research that addresses sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) in the higher education sector globally, albeit this is predominantly in the global North (Taulke-Johnson 2010; Joule 2015; Crowhurst and Emslie 2014). This has resulted in a call for academics and researchers to increase studies of sexuality that include narratives of sexual minorities (De Vos 2015). When conducted in the South such research is sometimes undertaken by international researchers and written from an 'outsider' perspective. This raises concerns of ownership and credibility locally. Hence, a call for more research that includes the broader categories of university members across all race groups is made (Graziano 2004). The dearth of published research on sexual orientation and gender identity from Southern Africa by African researchers from an insider and emic perspective was a reason for the compilation of this special issue.

Most countries in Southern Africa, with the exception of Madagascar and South Africa, have criminalised homosexual relations (Human Rights Campaign Foundation and Human

Rights First 2014). Homophobic attacks are equally on the increase in communities and students tend to emulate behaviours that are reflective of the society that they come from. Though experiences of LGBTIQ identifying staff and students are underrepresented in publications on SOGI from the global South, there is some evidence that university students hold homophobic views (Mwaba 2009; Abaver et al. 2014; Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Sandy 2015). Evidence from other studies suggests negative attitudes, prejudice and discrimination against LGBTI identifying students (Arndt and De Bruin 2006; Hames 2007).

In this special issue, we present articles that are based on empirical research, advocacy and interventions undertaken in higher education settings across the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Institutions of higher learning represented in this publication include universities, further education and training institutions (FETs), and training and vocational education and training institutions (TVETs). The authors who contributed to this special issue are affiliated to the following institutions: Universities of the Witwatersrand, KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape, South Africa, Durban University of Technology, Venda, Stellenbosch, Rhodes and Namibia.

The articles published here made use of qualitative research methodologies to get to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. A variety of research designs such as participatory action research, auto ethnographic methods, interpretative phenomenological, appreciative inquiry and SWOT (the strength, weaknesses, opportunity and threats) analysis were used. There is a need to extend this work beyond qualitative study designs to include quantitative research so as to answer questions that advanced statistical methods can answer. The dominance of humanities and social sciences is noted in research on sexual minorities (Nel 2009), this was the case in the response to our call for manuscripts for this special issue. Research on SOGI needs to be extended to other disciplines as well as the study findings here clearly demonstrated the intersectionality with aspects that can be answered in other faculties such as health, the built environment, law and commerce.

The articles in this special issue present and form a dialogue among authors and with the broader society on SOGI in the region. Some of the articles presented here cover research with students and academics in fields such as education, social work, health, and development studies (Lees 2017; Nzimande 2017; Matthews, Clemons and Avery 2017). There is already some work in the higher education sector aimed at challenging heteronormativity in the curriculum (Nzimande 2015). Challenging heteronormativity in pre-service teacher and social work training is critical as these are helping professions and, more often than not, members of the LGBTIQ community and their families, friends and supporters seek help from these

professionals. Lees (2017) offered a stand-alone course on sexual diversity and the role of educators to teacher-trainees who were in their final year of training. An account of the participatory way in which the course was offered is given in the article, *Sexual diversity and the role of educators: Reflections on a South African Teacher Education module*. These two articles present pedagogical strategies to training and education about sexual diversity in the classroom (Nzimande 2017; Lees 2017). Similar methods can be used with school learners and in other disciplines as well to sensitize students in the helping professions about sexual orientation and diversity. Findings from these studies on teacher and the study on social work training from Namibia suggest that resources and a political will are needed to transform the university curriculum so that it is inclusive.

Four of the articles presented here explore various aspects of sexual health and identity. In their article, *Constructing our identities: Identity expression amongst lesbian women attending university*, Prado-Castro and Graham (2017) report on intersections in identities of young lesbians. This makes an intriguing contribution in the politics of identity, in particular in South African universities that have a diverse community in terms of race, religion, culture, language group etc. (Abaver et al. 2014; Mdepa and Tshiwula 2012). Some of the categories that are critical points of intersection and division include age, class, race, culture, career, gender and location. These four articles demonstrate how fluid identities are and problematize the boxes and categorisations on a single characteristic such as the sexual orientation of a person.

The legal contexts concerning LGBTI individuals in SADC differ (Higginbotham and Collis-Buthelezi 2015). Colleagues in countries other than South Africa, where the Constitution and laws do not yet protect the rights of LGBTI persons and the freedom of expression have not yet been realised, have started to support the destabilisation of heteronormativity and cisgender ideologies (Matthews, Clemons and Avery 2017). This is an important academic move aimed at providing support to the socially relevant research questions in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Two of the articles in here address concerns of men who have sex with men and HIV risk (Brink 2017; Scheibe et al. 2017). Whilst South Africa faces a generally heterosexual HIV epidemic, results of a study by Brink entitled, *Considerations for South African higher education: A 'National student men who have sex with men' sexual behaviour survey*, reports factors for elevated vulnerability and risk for HIV infection for male university students. Factors such as multiple and concurrent sexual partnering, forced sex, inconsistent condom use and substance abuse are reported. These findings are in agreement with the qualitative findings

in the article by Nduna and Kiguwa (2017) titled, '*Why do we have sex?*' *Reflections from a Stepping Stones participatory action research with youth LGBTI in Johannesburg*, which reports findings from a Stepping Stones workshop with LGBTI youth at a university in Johannesburg.

There are also articles published here which are based on advocacy and action research that reflects on efforts to raise awareness and advocate for minority rights in South Africa. This research seems to take the form of implementation science whereby interventions are delivered at various campuses and their influence is documented (see, Mudzusi-Mavhudu and Sandy 2017; Matthyse 2017; Nduna and Kiguwa 2017). Matthyse's (2017) article that reports ways in which the Gender Equity Unit of a university challenges the status quo, brings attention to intersectionality based on gender, race, class and (dis)ability and how these affect marginalised identities. The complex intersectionality is similar to those reported in Prado-Castro and Graham (2017) as experienced by lesbian participants in their study. Matthyse's (2017) article titled, *Heteronormative higher education: Challenging the status quo through LGBTIQ awareness raising*, recommends that to challenge the status quo requires a simultaneous dual approach: top-down and bottom up. 'Top-down' refers to institutional policy transformation and 'bottom up' refers to awareness raising and implementation of policy where it already exists. It is clear that a marriage of these two will be more useful than doing one without the other. Advocacy efforts would include awareness raising through education interventions (Ngidi and Dlamini 2017). Three of the articles in this theme are based on action research that is conducted at a rural university in the Limpopo province to combat stigma and discrimination against LGBTI students. This study is conducted and led by researchers who are insiders in this culture. From this university, intervention efforts are underway to deconstruct what the researchers identified as '*matula*', a Venda word for taboo (Netshandama, Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Matshidze 2017). Their article titled, *Deconstructing matula (taboo), a multi-stakeholder narrative about LGBTI*, reports research findings of a university and its broader community that denies existence of homosexuality and problematized diversity in sexual orientation. The article further makes recommendations about how to deconstruct taboos around sexuality in the African community. The recommended interventions are based on an interdisciplinary community-based research using appreciative inquiry (Netshandama, Mavhandu-Mudzusi, and Matshidze 2017). This study from Venda and another study (Scheibe et al. 2017) are nested within a bigger national MSM study in South Africa (Louwrens et al. 2016; HEAIDS and NACOSA 2014).

The other articles published in the special issue present research on citizenship for student

and staff members at various institutions of higher learning. Institutions of higher learning enrol a diverse population of students and staff not only in terms of race, creed, socioeconomic status and religion but also in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation. Though in minority, there are students and staff in African universities who self-identify under the acronym LGBTIQ: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer. In a study from Walter Sisulu University 3.2 per cent of the sampled students identified under this acronym and in Nigeria about 5 per cent (Mapayi et al. 2015; Abaver et al. 2014). University campuses are a microcosm of the broader society. Lectures, administration, residences, sport, campus health services, social clubs etc. are reported to be uncomfortably heteronormative and cisgender (Graziano 2004). Mixed experiences and confirmation of negative campus life, residences and fellow students are reported in the article, *'It's tough being gay': Gay, lesbian and bisexual students' experiences of being 'at home' in a South African university residence life* by (Munyuki and Vincent 2017). Male residents seem to be hot spots for homophobia in some South African universities (Graziano 2004). Evidently, 12 years later this remains unchanged and in their article Kiguwa and Langa (2017), describe how research participants negotiate this environment whilst making attempts to challenge it. Three of these articles reflect on lesbian identities and experiences (Prado-Castro and Graham 2017; Naidu and Mutambara 2017; Munyuki and Vincent 2017).

The article by Naidu and Mutambara (2017) based on a sample of Black African lesbians from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) reports the *Questioning heteronormative higher education spaces: Experiences of lesbian women at a South African University*. Naidu and Mutambara make a call that if UKZN is truly an African premier institution it should take the experiences of all its citizens, including lesbians, seriously. Religion forms a big part of the policing of sexuality with homosexuality being highly policed and sanctioned in many religions regardless of Constitutional rights. In their article, Nkosi and Masson (2017) explore being a Christian and a homosexual university student. These articles remind us that with increasing diversity in terms of rural/urban background, cultural diversity and other kinds of 'difference' university spaces could increasingly become contested spaces. If knowledge suggests that rural communities are conservative, students from these backgrounds may bring with them right-wing attitudes to the urban-based campuses and therefore students who think that they will leave hometowns to be safer and to be able to express themselves might be disappointed to find homophobia in these campuses. During the Fees Must Fall (FMF) and the Rhodes must Fall (RMF) protests, chauvinistic and homophobic attitudes and sexism became a dividing fault lines of the movements. University is a space where young people explore many of their

multiple identities including sexual identity; they may take this to the next level and be involved in romantic relationships. Campus space seems to police sexualities to the extent that students find themselves self-policing; this is captured by Lesch, Brits, and Naidoo (2017) in their article, *‘Walking on egg shells not to offend people’: Experiences of same-sex student couples at a South African university* which reports findings of a study conducted at the university of Stellenbosch.

As editors, we spent a lot of time interrogating the use of language and terms such as ‘heteronormative’, ‘corrective rape’, ‘LGBTI issues’, ‘destabilise heteronormativity’. These terms appear to be labelling and sometimes lacked specificity. These concepts are deconstructed in some of the articles. Some of the authors disagreed with the title of the project as they challenged it to assume that heteronormativity was stable and yet evidence suggest otherwise.

The rural- urban difference in Southern Africa is a reflection of class difference; with the elite universities in South Africa, notoriously referred to as the ‘big five’ located in the major cities of Johannesburg (WITS), Pretoria (UP), Cape Town (UCT and Stellenbosch) and Durban (UKZN) (Boshoff 2009). Similarly, the only article that is from an institution of higher learning outside South Africa is from the University of Namibia urban-based campus, despite this having eleven campuses in both urban and rural settings. Although this special issue makes a strong contribution to the LGBTI debates; the geographical location of research on sexual orientation and gender identity seems to be biased toward the cities, with an exception of very few. These are the universities that generally have more senior and research active staff, higher research outputs and so this urban bias in studies of sexual orientation and gender identity in South Africa could be, to some extent, correlated to the location of the ‘big five’ in the metropole. This bias points to the need to open boundaries of knowledge production beyond the urban. Most of the articles were from universities and a few from technical and vocational education training (TVET) and nothing from FETs. The inclusion of TVETs and FETs is important considering that the term Higher Education is all inclusive. Disciplinary backgrounds also differed for the authors where some worked as academics and others worked in units of transformation, gender studies and student services. This is reflected in the epistemological diversity in the orientation and approach to writing. Some articles are reflective pieces whilst others followed systematic scientific methods.

One of the challenges in efforts to destabilise heteronormativity in Africa is the constant reference to homosexuality as ‘western’, ‘imperialist’, ‘outsider imposition’ ‘urban’ and a ‘lifestyle’ (Boswell 2015; De Vos 2015). Hence, some youth chose to migrate away from rural hometowns when they complete high school to more urban towns that are perceived to be more

accepting, tolerant and supportive of sexual orientation and gender diversity (Taulke-Johnson 2010; Nduna and Jewkes 2014). This rural-urban migration could inadvertently result in some of the biases such as research coming mostly from the urban locations. The experience of rural hometowns as conservative and right wing is reported in international studies as well, suggesting that it is not unique to the South (Taulke-Johnson 2010). A lot more work needs to be done in rural-based institutions to circumvent the forced rural-urban migration because it feeds into the very stereotypes about homosexuality as unAfrican.

Two of the articles were a reflection, drawn from the personal experiences of working with students who identify as LGBTIQ persons but also a reflection on the dissemination of courses on sexual diversity. An article by Matthews, Clemons and Avery (2017) from research conducted in Namibia on *Social work students' attitudes towards gay men and lesbians in Namibia: Results from an exploratory study*, makes a recommendation that perhaps increased exposure to sexual minority populations could circumvent high levels of negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians. This is fitting with the contact hypothesis theory for reducing intergroup conflict but is risky in a situation where the law does not protect the rights of sexual minorities. At the University of Namibia the Destabilise heteronormativity project exists and the Dean of students works with the LGBTI community, though visibility is still a challenge for students.

Knowledge production on this controversial topic that discusses sexual minorities is challenging. Scientists in conservative repressive places fear stigma. For instance, it was only during the process of working on this publication that in Botswana the civic society organisation, Legabibo, working on advocacy and in defence of LGBTIQ persons was allowed to officially register as a non-profit organisation. Only, in June 2015, Mozambique decriminalised homosexuality. In other SADC countries, homosexuality remains criminalised to date. We hope that with these changes in the region more research work will be forthcoming. The identity of the researchers plays a role in attracting a particular profile of research respondents. White academics might find research respondents who are White willing to speak with them rather than Black African students (Graziano 2004). The same is true for gender identity and sexual orientation where prospective participants may gravitate towards researchers that they feel represent them and their interest. This means that we need more Black Queer African academics to conduct research so as to reach out to diverse research samples. By so doing, more knowledge to debunk the myth about homosexuality as unAfrican will populate research (Mapayi et al. 2015).

The ethical responsibility to protect the identity of research sites was observed in some



articles. In this kind of work excluding the name of the place where the study took place carries a potential to fuel the misconceptions that homosexuality is unAfrican and somewhat make LGBTIQ identities to be hypothetical and mysterious. Further excluding the name of the research site takes away the context which is important in qualitative research to understand and locate the phenomenon. We did not enforce the inclusion of site names on authors for their own safety and out of respect of their decision to adhere to this principle. In two of the articles, the research site name was excluded.

Findings presented here advance knowledge in various and intersecting areas of the lives of LGBTIQ identifying members of the higher education community. It is worth noting that the samples of students that participated in the studies also reflected the class differences as students in rural provinces tend to come from working class backgrounds compared to largely middle-class students at urban based universities (Mdepa and Tshiwula 2012). This difference needs to be taken into account when learning about research findings from places such as UNIVEN in Thohoyandou (Mavhudu-Mudzusi and Sandy 2017; Netshandama, Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Matshidze 2017). The more traditional, intolerant and repressive views reported in the studies from there mirror those reported from other rural provinces such as the Eastern Cape (Rule and Mncwango 2006; Abaver et al. 2014)

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Four major themes are prominent in this special issue: education and training, sexual health, awareness raising and advocacy, and citizenship. Policy directives, interventions to counteract stigma, subjective experiences and expressions of LGBTIQ+ individuals are represented in the different studies. The scholarship on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) expression receives support in South Africa and there is less stigma and fear from academics to write about these topics. Researchers in countries where scientists could potentially face persecution for research that is deemed to be against the law may be intimidated to conduct such research. Where research is conducted, it is presented under other topics such as public health and quality of life studies (Mapayi et al. 2015). The low response to the call for articles from countries other than South Africa in the SADC region suggests that active engagement with scholars in the region is necessary to provide peer support, exchange of information and skills, and open opportunities for publication. Most of the evidence on SOGI in South Africa comes from urban-based and historically advantaged universities. There is a need to reach out and actively seek scholarships for SOGI in rural-based and teaching-intensive universities to broaden the knowledge base, otherwise tarmac bias will discredit the wider application of this knowledge.

This special issue highlights that encouragement and support needs to be extended to colleagues who work in institutions of higher learning in SADC and in particular rural areas to conduct research about sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) topics and publish from their contexts.

In general, the documentation of unsafe spaces for lesbian students on campuses was missing. Although we know dissertations have been done on the topic but not submitted for this special issue. In addition, there were no manuscripts on policies of different institutions, lecturer attitudes, and access to campus clinic services for LGBTI students and staff and there was also nothing specifically on transgenderism. It would have been valuable to read research in these areas as well. All the manuscripts received and reviewed for publication were from public universities. This leaves a knowledge gap in terms of the state of SOGI research, staff and student experiences in private institutions of higher learning.

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