

South African psychology can and should provide leadership in advancing understanding of sexual and gender diversity on the African continent

Juan A Nel

Internationally, there have been significant advancements in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) rights, for instance, in relation to equality and marriage. In stark contrast, many African countries, however, continue to actively discriminate against, persecute, and even prosecute LGBTI individuals. Criminalisation constitutes the most blatant form of state-sponsored homophobia. In this regard, 36 African countries had laws criminalising same-sex sexual acts in 2013, some with the death penalty and many with sentences of imprisonment of 10 years and more (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association [ILGA], 2013).

By far, Africa is the continent with the most severe laws against sexual and gender non-conforming minorities, a phenomenon which is understood to be rooted, in part, in outdated colonial-era laws, scapegoating during political conflicts, religiosity, rigid beliefs in cultural and family values, and a patriarchal mindset. Recent developments suggest that, instead of abating, attitudes in Africa may, in fact, be hardening against LGBTI and other non-conforming minorities. Two examples are Nigeria's enactment of stringent anti-homosexual legislation in January 2014 and in February 2014 Uganda's passing of its Anti-Homosexuality Bill into law, previous versions of which included death penalty and life imprisonment clauses.

South Africa differs significantly from other African countries in that it has one of the most progressive constitutional and legal frameworks worldwide for the protection of the rights of LGBTI individuals. The South African Constitution, and its associated Bill of Rights, has in the last two decades guided legal reform to prevent discrimination and promote equality, among others, on the basis of gender, sex, or sexual orientation. The related constitutional victories and protections for LGBTI people are very progressive, a 'rainbow' that, indeed, is visible on the world stage. As earlier indicated, these views are, however, also glaringly out of step with the rest of the continent. Despite the South African promise of non-discrimination and equality, there is

Department of Psychology, University of South Africa, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Juan A Nel, Department of Psychology, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 0003, South Africa.
Email: nelja@unisa.ac.za

increasing evidence that the South African government is reticent to speak out against other African countries with respect to their related views which, of course, sends out mixed signals to those affected, in South Africa and elsewhere. Similarly, the struggle in everyday life against patriarchy and heteronormativity in South Africa, itself, remains a key issue.

Sexually and gender diverse people in South Africa continue to be exposed to significant risks, such as vulnerability to stigma, discrimination, and victimisation. This is reflected in practices in mainstream mental healthcare, which often include a lack of an affirmative approach and instances of secondary victimisation. Sexual orientation and gender identity related inequalities, and the associated increased risks, have been recognised by, among others, the South African National Department of Justice and Constitutional Development. Currently, this department is in the process of developing a national intervention strategy to mitigate such inequalities and risks. It is in this context that South African psychology has similarly begun a process of transformation from its historical complicity in oppressive systems to current efforts to increasingly contribute to social justice for and well-being of all, inclusive of the sexually and gender diverse. This is evident in the growing interest in research and applied explorations in related areas that challenge the often implicit heteronormative assumptions of psychology. In this regard, note the extent of sexuality- and gender-related programming included in annual South African psychology congresses since 2007. Also, the International Congress of Psychology (ICP, 2012) programme that was hosted by South Africa in Cape Town from 22 to 27 July 2012 featured in the region of 122 sexuality- and 175 gender-related abstracts, a majority authored by South Africans. Inclusion in the psychology curriculum at some universities of sexuality and gender and of human diversity, more broadly, has similarly begun to contribute to increased awareness of oppressive systems based on sexual and gender hierarchies.

The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA), in particular, has taken the lead in addressing transformation and redressing related silences in South African psychology. PsySSA in its quest to develop the discipline of psychology nationally and internationally as a means of enhancing human well-being of all, including LGBTI, queer, and asexual persons, has since 2007 been a member of the International Psychology Network for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Issues (IPsyNET), housed at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Concerns Office of the American Psychological Association. This network facilitates and supports the contributions of psychological organisations to the improved health, well-being, and enjoyment of human rights by people of all sexual orientations and gender identities (IPsyNET, 2013).

Several documents highlighting the detrimental effects of LGBTI-related prejudice were informed by PsySSA's participation in IPsyNET. Borne from this involvement was a letter in 2008 to the editor of a prominent Jewish newspaper, discouraging the use of reparative therapy; a 2009 position statement addressed to Ugandan President Museveni, opposing the Anti-Homosexuality Bill; an open statement in 2010 against the stand of South African representatives who voted to remove a reference to sexual orientation from a United Nations (UN) resolution on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions, and other killings; and an amicus brief in 2013 on the negative effects of homophobic hate speech in the *South African Human Rights Commission v. Jon Qwelane* case that will serve before the court in 2014. The Arcus-funded PsySSA African LGBTI Human Rights Project, that similarly originated from involvement in IPsyNET, became the vehicle for the establishment of the PsySSA Sexuality and Gender Division in 2013. A further product of the PsySSA African LGBTI Human Rights Project was the development of a sexual and gender diversity position statement (PsySSA, 2013) adopted by the Society's Council on 24 September 2013.

The position statement provides psychology professionals in South Africa and elsewhere with a framework for understanding the challenges that individuals face in societies that are patriarchal and heteronormative and which discriminate on the basis of sexuality and gender. Through

adopting an affirmative stance (see Milton, Coyle, & Legg, 2002; Ritter & Terndrup, 2002) towards sexual and gender diversity, psychology professionals can play a pivotal role in the transformation of unjust sexual and gender systems, the harmful effects of which extend beyond their influence on LGBTI, queer, and asexual individuals, to all persons. The position statement that can be accessed on the PsySSA website at <http://www.psyssa.com> recognises the harm that has been done in the past to individuals and groups by the prejudice against sexual and gender diversity in South African society as well as in the profession of psychology. It encompasses the intricacies and complexities of human lived experience understood from an affirmative stance that is consciously inclusive of a broad sexual and gender diversity spectrum. This is a stance of openness, acceptance, and affirmation of such diversity and respect for the unique and fluid lived experience of others. The document includes an extensive glossary of terms which psychology professionals, and others, may find useful when engaging with issues of sexual and gender diversity.

While the position statement—a first for the African continent—is focused on South African psychology professionals and mental health service providers, professionals from four other African countries (Cameroon, Nigeria, Tanzania, and, notably, also Uganda) were involved in its development. This inclusive approach increases the future utility of the statement for associations in other African countries in developing statements and related practice guidelines suited to their unique contexts. In light of the mentioned recent related developments in other African countries, South African psychology may, in fact, have a moral obligation to contribute to moving the continent closer to a vision of a just society.

The theme of ICP 2012 that was held for the first time on African soil was *Psychology Serving Humanity*. During the opening ceremony, thought leaders, such as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Dr Navi Pillay, and Prof Saths Cooper, current President of the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS), drew definite links between human rights and health and well-being. It was furthermore stated that psychology has a greater role to play in moving our society to where it ought to or could be. Prilleltensky (2013), likewise, purports that to promote human welfare psychology professionals must advance two important goals in their work: well-being and social justice. The relationship between justice or injustice and flourishing in life ought to also be made more apparent in what we do. The creation of the Pan-African Psychology Union was first announced at ICP 2012 and will officially be launched at the 20th Annual Congress of South African Psychology in September 2014. Under these auspices, member organisations, including South Africa, Nigeria, and Uganda, have set out to cooperate towards promoting the development of psychology as a science and practice in their respective countries, Africa as a continent, and the world.

In this regard, given PsySSA's involvement in human rights and sexuality- and gender-related areas of work indicated above, two strategic opportunities present themselves. First, the South African government and other decision-makers ought to be re-invited, as was done in the earlier mentioned 2010 open statement to South African representatives to the UN, to make use of PsySSA as a resource to turn to when issues arise for which it may be uniquely qualified to provide council, such as in that instance where greater understanding of the concept 'sexual orientation' was sought. Second, it ought to be noted that President Museveni, prior to signing the Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Bill into law in February 2014, appealed to 'scientific evidence' on the 'causes' of homosexuality to influence his decision on whether or not to support the proposed law. A letter by the IPsyNET, endorsed by PsySSA as well as psychological bodies of numerous other countries, was sent to President Museveni in response. The letter outlined psychological evidence around sexual orientation and appealed to the President to reject the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, and thereby affirm Uganda's commitment to human rights. The letter furthermore expressed appreciation for Uganda's liberatory ideology, for instance, demonstrated in the recent past in fighting against

discrimination on the basis of race in apartheid South Africa. In addition, the letter appealed to President Museveni to extend the spirit of *Ubuntu* that promotes celebration of diversity in context, as well as that 'I am and that through you I become', to others who similarly are vulnerable to the detrimental effects of discrimination. Regardless, he did not heed the call and ultimately enacted this Bill that severely threatens the health and well-being of LGBTI Ugandans. These developments illustrate the need for psychology to remain engaged on this issue and continue to actively support efforts aimed at securing social justice for all, including LGBTI Africans in Uganda and elsewhere.

As we know, psychology has the knowledge and tools to address identity development, conflict management, and dealing with trauma. Psychology professionals, both in research and in therapeutic interventions, specialise in communication and the facilitation of change; thus in being change agents. We create contexts, in our various fields of expertise, in which our clients can begin to explore optional patterns of interaction, thereby setting the stage for attitudinal and behavioural change. By not condemning, but by facilitating psycho-educative engagements with, for instance, Uganda, South African psychology can and should play a significant role in forging strong international links in dealing appropriately with the concerns at hand.

Continuing to emphasise human diversity in our work and by making apparent the linkages between health and well-being and social justice, South African psychology may contribute to bringing about harmony, tolerance, and the appreciation of, among others, sexual and gender diversity on the African continent.

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