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Reflections from University Students in a South African Gay and Lesbian Society

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This exploratory study examines the experiences of 20 gay and lesbian students and their involvement in a gay and lesbian Society at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. This study occurred under the theoretical framework of McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) model of sexual minority identity formation. Participants ranged in age from 20–31 years old and included 17 men and three women. Eighteen were White, 1 was Colored, and 1 was Euro-Asian. Participants discussed positive and negative effects of belonging to the Society, counseling services available on campus, patterns of victimization, and cultural norms regarding gay men and lesbians in South Africa. Recommendations for counselors, staff, educators, and administrators are provided.

KEY WORDS: student affairs; counseling; gay and lesbian society; Stellenbosch University; South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Late adolescent and early adulthood years of college and university life are culturally scripted as a time for identity exploration. For college students who are gay or lesbian, normative expectations of identity exploration are more complex as they simultaneously confront the processes of gay or lesbian identity development (D'Augelli, 1993). The main purpose of this study is to examine the identity exploration of 20 gay and lesbian students at Stellenbosch University in South Africa and to examine their involvement and experiences in a gay and lesbian Society on campus.

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Research suggests that gay and lesbian students are victimized at a far higher rate than others on college and university campuses with rates four times higher than the rate of victimization reported for the general student population (Comstock, 1991). Comstock reveals that gay and lesbian students are often chased or followed; have objects thrown at them; are punched, hit, kicked or beaten; are victims of vandalism or arson; are spat at; and some are assaulted with weapons.

Using a 20-item questionnaire based on the *Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gay Men Scale* (Herek, 1988), D'Augelli (1989) found that all prospective students (55 women and 48 men) planning to work in university campus housing as resident assistants thought harassment of gay men and lesbians on campus was likely. Results from D'Augelli's study also reveal that most of the participants (67%) had made antigay or antilesbian remarks themselves.

In a survey conducted with first year university students' on their attitudes about gay men and lesbians, 29% of the participants (126 women and 123 men) felt that the university would be a better place without gay men and lesbians. Nearly half of the participants called same-sex behavior "wrong," called gay men "disgusting," or were indifferent to the problems of gay men and lesbians. Additionally, 85% said they would not attend an educational program on the subject (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990).

Such attitudes and harassment towards gay and lesbian students is not limited to college and university campuses. According to the Third Annual Report of The Safe Schools Anti-Violence Documentation Program (Reis, 1996), there were 77 reports of antigay, lesbian and bisexual harassment and violence in Washington schools in the United States. These incidences included gang rapes, physical assaults and harassment, sexual assault short of rape, on-going verbal and other harassment incidences, and a comedic reenactment of gay bashing.

Evans and Broido (1999) argue that campus environments have a significant effect on students' willingness to disclose their sexual orientation and on the reactions they receive when they do disclose. "People adapt their degree of self-disclosure to the circumstances in which they live" (Harry, 1993, p. 38). D'Augelli (1989) asserts that hostility expressed by peers prevents many students from "coming out," largely defined as a process of acknowledging one's sexual orientation to oneself and disclosing one's sexual orientation to others (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996).

Internalizing negative messages about one's sexual identity and negative behaviors towards gay men and lesbians is probably the major contributor to suicide attempts among gay and lesbian youth (Butler, 1994). Gibson (1989), in the Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide, reports that gay and lesbian youth may account for up to 30% of all completed youth suicides. Gay and lesbian youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people.

Whitam (1983) reminds us of cultural considerations that impinge on the acting out of same-sex behaviors. He argues that cultural considerations are especially important in the formation of attitudes, norms, and laws dealing with the treatment of gay men and lesbians.

In Africa, a culture of secrecy exists in which more is possible than in the West. The division between heterosexuality and same-sex behaviors is less sharply drawn (Luirink, 2000). Unlike western gay and lesbian identities where gay men and lesbians may repress same-sex desires and behaviors or accept a social outcast status, Murray and Roscoe (1998) argue that the social code in Africa does not require an individual to suppress same-sex desires or behavior but that she or he never allow such desires to overshadow or supplant procreation.

University Gay and Lesbian Support Systems in South Africa

As the following overview from Gevisser and Cameron's (1995) book, *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa,* indicates, higher education support networks for gay and lesbian students in South Africa have been limited and in some cases short-lived.

One attempt at establishing an equal rights movement in the early 1970s took place at the University of Natal in Durban when a member of the Students Representative Council announced the formation of the South African Gay Liberation Movement. The movement was disbanded after a visit from the police who explained that sodomy was a common law offense and the Movement was breaking the law by inciting people to illicit sexual activity (Gevisser & Cameron, 1995).

From the 1970s onward, consciousness-raising groups were also formed by various feminist organizations, notably the Women's Movement at the University of Cape Town. In 1983, South Africa's first lesbian-only organization, LILACS (Lesbians in Love and Compromising Situations) was formed. The meetings were a combination of socializing and discussion groups on issues affecting members' lives as lesbians. By the end of 1985, due to lack of enthusiasm and tension between members, LILACS ceased to exist.

Gay and lesbian organizations in South Africa emerged on two campuses in the early 1980s, the University of Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town. During this time, the Transvaal Organization for Gay Sport developed. More than 1,000 people turned out to watch an all-gay rugby match between Pretoria and Johannesburg at the Rand Afrikaans University. Support groups for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students during the 1990s continued to surface at the University of Durban-Westville, a large Indian university, and Stellenbosch University, where this study was conducted.

Theoretical Framework

This study occurred under the theoretical framework of McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) model of sexual minority identity formation. This model, applicable to both gay men and lesbians, incorporates but separates the process of an internal *individual sexual identity development* and a more contextual *group membership identity* development process into two parallel branches of a developmental sequence (Fassinger & Miller, 1996). Fassinger and Miller argue that this theoretical distinction allows for greater flexibility in gay and lesbian identity expression.

There are four phases in each branch of McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) model of sexual minority identity formation: awareness, exploration, deepening/commitment, and internalization/synthesis. McCarn and Fassinger argue it is not possible to proceed completely through either branch without to some degree addressing the other branch.

Individual Sexual Identity

In the awareness phase of individual sexual identity, individuals are aware of feeling different from the heterosexual norm; however, same-sex thoughts and feelings do not imply self-labeling. The affective state of the individual is likely to include confusion, fear, and/or bewilderment. In the exploration phase, individuals explore strong or erotic feelings about other same-sex people or a particular same-sex person, and wonder if unknown aspects of one's sexuality have been discovered. This phase does not necessarily involve exploration of sexual behaviors or a variety of partners (Fassinger & Miller, 1996).

Individuals in the deepening/commitment phase have sexual and emotional self-knowledge, crystallization of choices about sexuality, and recognize that preferred forms of intimacy imply certain things about identity. In the final phase of this branch, internalization/synthesis, individuals fully internalize same-sex desires and love as part of an overall identity and a sense of internal consistency is likely to be manifested. Individuals in this phase make choices about where and how to be open about their sexuality (Fassinger & Miller, 1996).

Group Membership Identity

The awareness phase of group membership identity involves a new awareness of different sexual orientations in people. This realization often forces the individual to acknowledge that heterosexism exists, and is likely to produce confusion and bewilderment. In the exploration phase, the individual seeks knowledge about gay men and lesbians and explores his or her own attitudes toward gay men and lesbians as a group, as well as possibility of membership in that group.

This exploration is likely to produce anger, anxiety, and guilt due to an increasing awareness of heterosexism. Many individuals exploring the existence of other gay men and lesbians will also experience a newfound excitement, curiosity, and joy (Fassinger & Miller, 1996).

In McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) deepening and commitment phase of group membership identity, individuals are committed to create a personal relationship to the gay and lesbian community, with increased awareness of the possible consequences that entails. Many have an intense identification with the gay and lesbian community and reject the heterosexual society. In the final phase, internalization/synthesis, individuals have fully internalized their identity as a member of an oppressed group into their overall self-concept. This synthesis is reflected in feelings of comfort, fulfillment, security, and an ability to maintain one's sense of self as a gay man or lesbian across contexts and it is likely that some identity disclosure will occur.

METHODS

Data was collected using individual structured interviews with 20 gay and lesbian students during fall 2000 semester at Stellenbosch University, the oldest Afrikaans university located in Stellenbosch, South Africa and second oldest university in South Africa. The average age of participants was 22.3 years old. Eighteen of the participants were undergraduate students and two of them were graduate students. Of the 20 participants, 17 were male and 3 were female. Eighteen were White, 1 was European, and 1 was Colored. Nineteen participants were South African and 1 was Euro-Asian. All participants identified as gay or lesbian except one who identified as bisexual.

There were a variety of methods used to recruit participants of this study. Information about the study was distributed at a Les-Be-Gay Society campus meeting. Additionally, all members of the Society received information about the study by e-mail. Postings were hung around campus, which explained the nature of the study and asked for volunteers, and an advertisement was placed in the campus newspaper. A snowball sampling was also used in which participants were asked to recommend other possible members of the Society.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria: undergraduate or graduate student at Stellenbosch University, involved as an active or non-active member of the Les-Be-Gay Society, and self-identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

Data collection began with students being briefed about the purpose of the study, its methods and procedures for ensuring confidentiality. Participants were then asked to complete a demographic information questionnaire. Interviews were held in a private room in the campus library and lasted between 1 and 1-$^{1}/_{2}$ hours. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed.

The data was analyzed through what Strauss and Corbin (1990) term "open coding." During open coding, "data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data. Through this process, one's own and other's assumptions about phenomena are questioned or explored, leading to new discoveries" (p. 62). After coding the transcripts, themes were then extracted from the data.

RESULTS

Six major themes emerged from the data. These themes related to coming out of the closet, positive and negative effects of belonging to a gay and lesbian society, and cultural norms that define same-sex behaviors in South Africa.

Participants' Support System Consisted of Oneself, Friends, Family, and the Society

All of the participants acknowledged their sexual orientation to themselves. Participants agreed that the community where they lived and attended school was overwhelmingly conservative which made it extremely difficult to disclose their sexual orientation to others. As a result, nine of the participants remained in the closet and had learned to adjust and cope with living separate lives. One participant explained, "If my parents found out I am gay, I would be asked to leave the house and they would no longer pay for my studies at the university." Another participant stated, "The gay community in and around Stellenbosch is 'underground."' Aside from the Society, which all participants agreed they rely on for support, meeting other gay men and lesbians occurred by word of mouth, private house parties, and visiting gay and lesbian bars in Cape Town, the closest metropolitan city to Stellenbosch.

Five participants revealed their sexual orientation to heterosexual friends. "Unfortunately, people establish characteristics of ones personality based on their sexuality not as a person," a male participant said, "I choose not to tell anyone." Four participants disclosed their sexual orientation to their family, including a mother, father, sister, brother, or cousin. No one disclosed his or her sexual orientation to a grandparent. "It's actually brought me and my dad closer," reflected one participant. "I am able to discuss gay issues with him . . . He is very supportive."

Being a Member of a Gay and Lesbian Society had Positive and Negative Effects on Participants

All participants admitted having a stronger self-image and higher self-esteem and were able to identify other gay and lesbian students on campus and in town as a result of being a member of the Society. For example, one participant said,

"It feels good to walk around campus or see a familiar face in class and know there are others like me." All participants agreed that the Society is a place where they can be themselves without censorship. "I always have to put up a front around others and must be discreet about my sexuality," one participant explained. "The Society allows me to let myself go. I can be myself and don't have to screen my words. I like the Society because there is a closeness with its members, a sense of family."

Some relied on the Society for support more than others. "The Society is the only chance I get to be with other gay people on campus and in Stellenbosch," said a male participant. "I depend on the Society to discuss personal issues and appreciate their honesty and advice." A second year student reflected, "it is important for first year students to see that there are other gay and lesbian students on campus and it's nothing to be embarrassed about . . . The Society is a way of bringing forward gay and lesbian awareness on campus."

Eight participants argued that they are deeply concerned about how others will identify them if seen in public with other gay and lesbian students. One participant stated, "Stellenbosch is a small town and people talk. If this [my sexuality] every got back to my family I would be ostracized by the entire town." Another participant reflected that he would not greet his gay and lesbian friends in the hallway because he imagined that others would automatically assume he was a gay man. "I would lose all my first year friends if they knew I was gay," he stated.

The Environment on and around Campus had a Strong Influence on Participants' Involvement in the Society

Twelve participants would not attend events, workshops, or meetings held in public by the Society. Participants discussed how heterosexual students once attended a Society meeting to identify later gay and lesbian students on campus. One male participant explained, "I am afraid of being bashed if seen attending a Society meeting."

Participants agreed that gay and lesbian issues were occasionally discussed in the classroom during a psychology lecture or in the music or art departments, but not enough to rely on the department or faculty for support. Overall, participants explained that they did not feel welcome by administrators, staff, faculty, and other students as gays and lesbians at the university, and relied heavily on the Society for support and comfort. In contrast, one student argued, "the fact our Society exists on campus shows that we are welcome. This never would have happened ten years ago."

Participants Explored Some Form of Counseling During their Early Stages of Sexual Identity Development

Many participants felt alone and isolated when they began to recognize their same-sex attractions towards others. One male participant phoned unanswered help

lines from a gay and lesbian resource guide. "Most numbers had been disconnected or I was told that all operators were busy assisting other customers that if this were an emergency to call the police for help," he recalled.

Participants discussed visiting the university counseling center to cope with feelings of loneliness and depression associated with their sexual orientation. Nineteen participants either visited the counseling center themselves or knew of someone who relied on support from the counseling center. One participant stated:

> I went to counseling services on campus during my first year and was asked if I was happy with my sexuality. After saying "no," the counselor carried on and asked other questions but never addressed my sexuality. I went again during my second year because I was still very depressed and once again we discussed side issues but not my sexuality. I was told "we will deal with that later."

The participant said the counselor avoided discussing issues of sexual orientation because he did not know how to handle it. He concluded, "I felt ashamed, embarrassed and frustrated and eventually realized how to deal with it alone by withdrawing from society."

Another participant, who attended three sessions with a Master's counseling student doing her practicum, explained, "I had to pay a fortune to see a professional psychologist because the counseling center was not properly trained to handle gay-related issues." Another participant discussed his sexuality with a faculty member from the Psychology Department. He recalled:

> The psychologist scared me of the gay lifestyle. He told me of a promiscuous gay colleague of his as a warning. It felt as if he was waiving a red flag in my face. I was impersonally told that my sexuality was my problem and I should pray for a change.

Levels of Victimization on and around Campus Influenced Participants' Willingness to Remain in the Closet

Victimization involved verbal harassment, graffiti on dormitory doors, death threats, physical abuse, and as highlighted below, a lack of support for gay men in male residential dorms. Reflecting back on his experiences living in university residential housing, a male participant stated:

> It was hell on earth. I only lasted one year because I didn't feel welcome and I was afraid for my life. From the word "go" in the morning when I woke up, I was constantly looking over my shoulder all day long. I never went back to the dormitory to eat lunch and I returned home after 10 p.m. and went directly to bed.

He also stated that when a heterosexual student living in the dorm permitted a gay man to visit him, other students beat his friend, shaved his head, tied his hands behind his back, and wrote the word "faggot" on his head.

Another male participant discussed how male students must pledge their residency during their first year. Pledging involves, among other things, singing, chanting, and yelling a song around campus to other residencies with the word

moffie (faggot) in its lyrics. "I had to sing the song when I lived in the residential dorms. If students do not participate in such events within their residencies, they will end up alone and considered an outcast." All of the participants except one, who lived in residential dorms, did not come out of the closet to other students while living in the dorms.

Cultural Norms and Family Values Conflicted with Participants' Sexual Identity Development

In South Africa, if one does not conform to the country's standards he or she is often marginalized. South Africa harbors a culture that prohibits nonconformity and dictates rigid rules on what is acceptable and what is not. For example, one participant summed it best by stating what his father told him:

> All men in South Africa must play rugby and enjoy watching the sport. Men are the breadwinners and must do male things. Women are passive caretakers. Men must not wear a shirt too tight or carry a bag and women must not be masculine.

All participants mentioned religion as a strong family value that often interfered with disclosing their sexual orientation to other family members. A male student said, "my mom goes to church every day and when she is not in church, she listens to a church radio station or reads the Bible." He argued that he remains in the closet because of his family's religious beliefs.

Participants also agreed that many South Africans posses a mentality that gay men and lesbians do not exist in South Africa. One participant said, "in the eyes of university administrators and the country as a whole, we [gay men and lesbians] do not exist therefore, there is no need to address the victimization and problems that we encounter on campus." Contradicting participants' statements on how South Africans view gay men and lesbians, one participant explained how in 1999 gay men were not encouraged to donate blood during the university blood drive. A question on the form asked if individuals had same-sex sex partners. "The mere fact this question appeared on the form indicates that we [gay men and lesbians] do exist in South Africa," he argued.

When asked if participants could identify a positive gay or lesbian South African role model, all participants except two were unable to identify anyone. The two participants who identified gay or lesbian South African role models identified a close or sincere friend.

DISCUSSION

This study sheds light on the social context of Stellenboach University for the development of gay and lesbian students and emphasizes the importance of

visible support structures for students who are coming to grips with their newly founded sexuality.

As a result of the Les-Be-Gay Society, participants of this study demonstrated higher self-esteem, a sense of belonging, and an increased authenticity. Although a few participants were cautious about being identified as gay or lesbian in public, participants no longer felt a sense of isolation and were able to identify other gay or lesbian students on campus and in town. As one participant explained, the Society has a sense of closeness and family between its members. This finding is consistent with characteristics of McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) Group Membership Identity branch of their sexual minority identity formation model.

This study shows how a lack of training and resources on issues of differing sexualities by counselors and staff can lead to confusion and anger among gay and lesbian students. Participants of this study felt distrust and discomfort seeking support and guidance from anyone on campus other than the Society. Student affairs professionals, faculty, and staff should be more sensitive and aware of gay and lesbian issues and understand that students may remain silent about their sexuality due to fear of being discriminated against and/or victimized (Evans & Broido, 1999). Ignoring gay and lesbian students leaves them wondering to whom they can divulge their identity and discuss related concerns (Kato, 1999).

Because of the number of concerns voiced about homophobia occurring in residential dormitories and the number of students who remain in the closet while living on campus, residential life professionals should make it a top priority to create living spaces free of harassment and victimization. Evans and Broido (1999) argue that interventions to address negative situations in student housing should be rapid, and room changes to remove students from hostile and physically dangerous situations should be facilitated quickly. Further, being alert to the indirect ways in which students come out of the closet should be stressed in training programs for residential life staff.

It is exceedingly important, argues D'Augelli (1993), that gay and lesbian students perceive campus mental health facilities as accessible and helpful. In addition to providing unbiased and affirmative counseling, campus mental health facilities should provide outreach to gay and lesbian students. Understanding the mental health needs of gay and lesbian students will not only improve the services for these populations but also serve to affirm the lesbian and gay experience as a model for positive mental health (Rothblum, 1994).

Campus centers should offer coming-out support groups and provide educational mental health workshops. D'Augelli (1993) suggests that gay and lesbian students be trained as facilitators of these support groups and supervised by staff who participate in training experiences that expose them to contemporary views of sexual orientation and to affirmative modes of counseling and psychotherapy.

It is also important that gay and lesbian issues be discussed across the curriculum. At a minimum, the forbidding of name-calling is the beginning of curriculum

development as it implies the teaching of tolerance (Lipkin, 1993, 1994). Lipkin argues, to hear words such as "gay" or "lesbian" in an accepting context send a powerful message and creates the potential for a tolerant environment. When teachers are willing and able to discuss some basic facts of gay and lesbian lives, that potential is greatly increased. Such efforts not only help gay and lesbian students find their lives addressed in the classroom, but it also educates heterosexually identified students and helps them consider and modify their heterosexist assumptions and acts (D'Augelli, 1993).

By including sexual orientation in policy statements, argues D'Augelli (1993), institutions break the pattern of invisibility. A statement that harassment based on sexual orientation will not be tolerated not only speaks to the issue of verbal and physical abuse; it also implicitly conveys the idea that lesbians and gay men are part of the campus community (D'Augelli).

CONCLUSION

Iasenza (1989) notes that education is a socialization process, which imparts the values of the dominant culture. Unfortunately, institutions of higher education too often harbor homophobic attitudes and beliefs and make little effort to confront harassment and discrimination aimed at gay and lesbian students. Such behavior is unacceptable. Schools should include gay and lesbian issues in their definition of multiculturalism and should encourage and nurture the self worth of all their students (Graziano, 2003). Evans and Broido (1999) passionately argue that student affairs professionals need to take the lead in changing the norms and values of higher education to support and demonstrate that homophobic attitudes and heterosexism will not be tolerated. Student affairs professionals in South Africa should also live up to this responsibility without excuses or exceptions.

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