

Psychological well-being, Identity crisis and Resilience of sexual minority students in a
South African University.

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**Mini -Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Social Sciences in Clinical Psychology at the
North-West University, Mafikeng campus.**



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PREFACE

Article Format

For the purpose of this mini dissertation, which is part of the requirements for the award of the Masters of Arts (Social Science) degree in Clinical Psychology, the article format as described by General Regulation A. 7.5.1.b of the North-West University was chosen.

Selected Journal

The target journal to which the current manuscript would be submitted is the South African Journal of Community Psychology. For the purpose of examination, tables are included in the text.

Letter of Consent

The letter of consent from the co-authors in which they grant permission that the manuscript, “*Psychological Well-Being, Identity Crisis And Resilience Of Sexual Minority Students in a South African University*”, be submitted for the purposes of mini-dissertation, may be attached.

Page Numbering

In the mini-dissertation page numbering will be from the first page to the last. For the purpose of submitting the manuscript to the above mentioned journal, the manuscript will be numbered according to the requirements of the Journal Community Psychology. In other words, the numbering will start on the title page of the manuscript.

LETTER OF CONSENT

I, the undersigned, hereby give consent that Petunia Tsheole may submit the manuscript entitled “PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING, IDENTITY CRISIS AND RESILIENCE OF SEXUAL MINORITY STUDENTS IN A SOUTH AFRICA UNIVERSITY,” for the purpose of meeting the required standards of the partial fulfillment of the degree of Masters of Social Science in Clinical Psychology of the North West University.

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Prof Idemudia

Supervisor

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Summary

Psychological well-being, identity crisis and resilience of sexual minority students in a South African University.

Key words : Psychological wellbeing, homosexuals, resilience , identity crisis.



Even though homosexuality exists, it is apparent that it has not yet been widely accepted especially within the African culture. Culture is viewed as a way of life and it consists of customs and rituals. In the African culture homosexuality is seen as non-existent as it violates the gender roles. Culture consequently leads these homosexual students to end up hiding their sexual orientation from the larger community as they are afraid of being rejected and isolated. The psychological wellbeing of homosexual students within the university can be affected as they experience social isolation, rejection, prejudice, harassment. As a result, these students end up trying to become resilient by trying to master their environment and to cope with their stress or challenges. They end up hiding their sexual orientation from their counterparts. At this point homosexual students end up having multiple identities. Psychological well-being in this study is viewed as the absence of any mental disorder. The components that define psychological wellbeing are autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life and the ability to establish positive relations with others. It occurs when a person is satisfied with his or her life, is free from depression and feels hopeful and good about him- or herself. The literature indicates that gay and lesbian students are afraid of becoming open about their sexual orientation as they fear harassment and violence. Resilience refers to an individual's ability to cope with stress and adversity. This coping may either result in the individual 'bouncing back' to a previous state of functioning or simply not showing negative effects. This study consequently was aimed at exploring the psychological well-being and resilience of sexual minority students in the University.

The model of Cass identity formation was used as theoretical framework which has six stages. 1) identity confusion, (2) identity comparison, (3) identity tolerance, (4) identity acceptance, (5) identity pride and (6) identity synthesis. The theoretical perspectives used to explain and direct the focus of this study were Ryff's theory of psychological wellbeing, Shame resilience theory and Symbolic interaction theory. This study consequently was aimed at exploring the psychological wellbeing and resilience of sexual minority students in a South Africa University. The research was conducted with students from the North-West University (Mafikeng Campus) in the North-West Province, South Africa. The researcher used the snowball sampling technique to select the participants based on particular features or characteristics of individuals as observed by the researcher. Two focus group discussions were conducted and the data was analysed using narrative and thematic analysis in this study and the findings were integrated and presented as themes supported by theories.

The principal outcome of this study is that the students foresee rejection and discrimination in their future as professionals due to their sexual orientation. The Resilience of sexual minority group in the North-West University is neither high nor low but significantly moderate .The participants have shown two indicators of resilience, namely, friends as a source of resilience and the sexual minority group as a source of resilience.

Author's Guidelines

Journal of Community Psychology

The Journal of Community Psychology is a peer-reviewed journal devoted to research, evaluation, assessment and intervention. Although review articles that deal with human behaviour in community settings are occasionally accepted, the journal's primary emphasis is on empirical work that is based on or informs studies to understand community factors that influence, positively and negatively, human development, interaction, and functioning.

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The journal also publishes the results of projects that inform processes relevant to the design of community-based interventions including strategies for gaining entry, engaging a community in participatory action research, and creating sustainable interventions that remain after project development and empirical work are completed.

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Abstract

Historically, any stigma surrounding sexuality places a burden on individuals who do not self-identify as heterosexuals collectively referred to as “sexual minority”. Sexual minority university students possess multiple identities due to experiences of discrimination and victimization on university campuses (Mays & Cochran, 2000). These minority groups appear to have higher rates of anxiety, depression, substance use disorders and suicidal behaviour when compared to heterosexual students. This stigmatisation and victimisation has led to the current study focusing on the psychological wellbeing, identity crisis and resilience of sexual minority students in a South African University. The researcher followed a narrative oriented design within the qualitative research approach. Data was collected through a narrative oriented design that allowed the researcher to dig deeper into the life experiences of the students from both individual and collective perspectives. Data was analysed thematically and feelings, values and meanings were connected through ideas and personal view points. Snowball sampling was used. The sample consisted of 11 African students, 4 gays and 7 lesbians with an age range between 19 and 24 years were recruited from different faculties and levels of study. Three major themes were extracted during analysis and the principal outcome of the study was that homosexuals have a major challenge in their future in the work industry. The results also indicated a poor psychological wellbeing with the students, some identity crisis and moderate resilience.

Key words: Psychological wellbeing, homosexuals, resilience, identity crisis.

Introduction

Being psychologically healthy is as important as the university environment and the academic performance. The impact of poor psychological health on sexual minority university students can have serious consequences not only for them as individuals but also for the productivity of the university (Baumann and Muijen, 2010).

Attending university can be a huge life transition and, apart from studying, an individual needs to have a social life and trying to “fit in” can pose a challenge to students. The aim of this study is to critically assess the psychological well-being of sexual minority students, and their ability to bounce back (resilience) from all challenges experienced in the university environment. According to Momtaz, Hamid, Ibrahim, Yahaya and Chai (2011), psychological well-being is viewed as the absence of any mental disorder and the components that define psychological wellbeing are autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life and the ability to establish positive relations with others. It occurs when a person is satisfied with his or her life, is free from depression and feels hopeful and good about him or herself. Social isolation, on the other hand, can be defined as decreased interaction with other individuals. Research shows that social isolation can affect a person’s psychological well-being and increase suicidal risk.

Traseen, Marartinussen, Vitterso and Saini (2009) asserted that depression among sexual minorities can be due to stigma or related to traumatic life events which could manifest as fear, depression and anxiety. According to Whitley (2011), it is apparent that sexual minorities suffer higher rates of psychiatric disorders such as deliberate self-harm, substance abuse and suicide than their heterosexual peers. Common possible causal factors include stigma, social isolation, prejudice, discrimination due to cultural expectations.

Culture can be seen as a people's way of life and it may be examined at the level of observation, which might physically manifest through specific languages and specific knowledge of tribal origins, customs and rituals. Culture is thus seen as determining a way of life in the larger measure. In a general view, the African culture which is mostly the culture of African people depends upon the influence of how people reflect on things and put an analytical conclusion in their social world and day to day life (Nisbett, Choi, Peng & Norenzayan, 2001).

In other words, most of our African cultures are perceived as collectivist whereby an individual's actions, decisions and perceptions are influenced by the norms and values of the society and culture they are raised in (Paul, Luliana & Silvia, 2011). Therefore the African culture which is the background of African homosexuals in this study reflects a system of collectively held values, a collective programming of a human mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from those of another by using some common socializing elements (Lalwani, Shavitt & Timothy, 2006). These cultural elements can be conveyed from the cultural influences, the social environment, and family characteristics into the individual within a collective culture. This has led to negativity towards some phenomenon like homosexuality which is not found within the background of the African culture (Matthew, Douglas & Macdonalds, 2012).

Although it seems that African cultures claim that homosexuality is not part of them or is new, the practice has been part of the African culture for a while back; it started in mining compounds where migrant workers were forbidden to bring their families, leading to an escalation of homosexual relations (Dlamini, 2006). In the African culture identity is of significant importance, that is, self-knowledge in the African culture is of utmost importance as it is viewed through interpersonal relationships (Meyer, 2003). On the other hand, other

behaviours, such as homosexuality, are viewed as non-existent as the society has its own expectations. In this case, social pressures exist and young men are threatened to be disowned and forced to enter into marriage, in order not to violate gender roles and disrespect culture (Dlamini, 2006). In certain countries, like Kenya, sexual minority is viewed as morally evil and is seen as going against the African norms and traditions (Finerty, 2010).

In other African countries like Uganda an anti homosexual act, 2014 has been passed. This law was previously called “the kill the gay bill. The death penalty proposal against homosexual behavior was dropped in favor of life imprisonment. The legislature proposes criminalization of same sex relations. Like many African countries sexual minority individuals in Uganda currently face an atmosphere of physical abuse, vandalism to their property, blackmail, death threats and correctional rape (Reed, 2013).



Anti-homosexual behaviours aim at controlling sexual minorities from coming out of the closet, however, this does not mean that there is no homosexuality in the country, but that it happens guardedly in these and other African countries where it is not allowed. Similarly, sexual minority people have not been a visible group in Los Angeles’ historic African American communities (Moore, 2010). There are a few institutions in these environments that openly cater to sexual minority students. When in social spaces, many gay and lesbian people do not express a public homosexual identity. Instead, they seek to minimize what they believe is a stigmatized status by practicing “covering” which can have an impact on the psychological wellbeing and resilience of homosexuals (Yoshino, 2006).

It is important to note the argument surrounding good indicators of psychological and social development when resilience is studied across different cultures and contexts (Broyden & Mann, 2005; Castro & Murray, 2010). According to the American Psychological Association’s Task Force (2008), Young people and families may possess special skills that

enable them to cope with discrimination and resist prejudice. Researchers of indigenous health have indicated that, indigenous communities have indicated the effects of culture on resilience based on what the community values and geographical settings. Sexual minorities may show hidden resilience they do not confirm to societal expectations on how to behave (Ungar, 2004).

Ellemrs, Spears and Doosje (2002) asserted that humans are uniquely social beings and, accordingly, the concept of social identity focuses on individuals in terms of their collective social self. They argued that different social contexts could lead to the silencing of group membership. Group members could then be encouraged to protect their self-worth and accomplish an optimistic but different social identity and once the social identity becomes significant, intergroup differences may arise again giving rise to intergroup discrimination (Ellemrs, Spears & Doosje, 2002). Individuals in a group might categorize or be categorized by what is called in-group bias. For example, when homosexuals are challenged, they can withdraw or isolate themselves in a group or behave in a specific manner in order to fit in a group, which might enable the homosexual individual to develop multiple identities (Miles & Kivlighan, 2012). The person might end up being a heterosexual in some contexts or environment and a homosexual in other contexts which may end up affecting the psychological wellbeing of such individual because of not being who they want to be and hence identity crisis as stated by Cass (1979) model of Identity formation.

Homosexuality is seen to be culturally wrong in the African society and should not be integrated in society (Dlamini, 2006). Many believe that it was not around until white people came to South Africa and, accordingly, they see it as a more European phenomenon than African. This kind of behaviour is further explained by Smuth (2011) even after the legalization of same sex marriage, racial marginalization and exclusion gays by identifying

them as being “white man’s disease”. Studies have shown that homosexuals are often rejected, isolated, stigmatized and discriminated against, resulting in them being socially excluded, even from their families. Negative experiences of lesbian women and gay men are widespread. In South Africa collective gang rape of lesbians is very common in other provinces like Western Cape. Lesbians are getting raped by men trying to convey a message of masculinity and gender violation.

According to Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Lamis and Malone (2011), risk factors such as discrimination, stigma and rejection are strongly associated with homosexuality. These include possibility for greater isolation, lack of cultural access and family rejection by being socially excluded by their families. Furthermore, the misuse of drugs and alcohol among homosexuals is often the result of an internalized sense of shame about their sexuality. According to Smuth (2011), South African homosexuals report having experienced discrimination in public spaces such as taxi ranks, main roads, bus stops, parks or even railway stations. Balsom and Mohr (2007) also report that stigma sensitivity is believed to increase these crimes.

According to Hall and La France (2007), being a confident disclosed gay man in a university or college society is extremely dangerous and difficult. Schmidt, Miles and Welsh (2011) noted that lesbian college students have reported experiencing harassment on campus and that sexual minority students report experiencing fear for their lives on campus due to their sexual orientation, in this case they might hide their gender identity to avoid feeling scared on campus which might lead to poor psychological well-being in some cases” (Schmidt, Miles & Welsh, 2011).

Psychological well-being of sexual minority students

Historically, the stigma towards sexuality has placed a burden on people who are not heterosexuals or who do not identify themselves as heterosexuals collectively referred to as “sexual minority” (Meyer, 2003). Sexual minority students experience psychological distress than heterosexuals in universities (Meyer, Dietrich & Schwartz, 2007). Furthermore, sexual minority students who hide their sexual identity may delay the development of a positive self-concept (Bos, Sandfort, Bruyn & Hakvoort, 2008), which could encourage discomfort with, or rejection of, their sexual identity. These individuals experiencing difficulty with internalized homophobia or low self-esteem often experience high levels of anxiety and depression (Bos *et al.*, 2008). The psychological distress experienced by these individuals may decrease or disappear if they have good interpersonal ties that offer social support (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007).



Sexual minority university students possess multiple identities (Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black & Burkholder, 2003; Bowleg *et al.*, 2004; Graziano, 2004) due to experiences of discrimination and victimization on university campuses (Mays & Cochran, 2000). These minority groups seem to have high rates of depression, substance use disorders suicidal behaviour and anxiety when compared to heterosexual students (Lock & Steiner, 1999; Mays & Cochran, 2000).

Mays and Cochran (2000) assert that sexuality and gender identity discrimination impacts on the psychological well-being of sexual minority people and can lead to reduced self-esteem, social withdrawal and isolation. Results from a study conducted by King, Mckeown, Warner, Ramsay, Johnson, Cort, Wright, Blizzard & Davidson (2003) on the psychological well-being of lesbians and gays indicated that gays and lesbians recorded

significantly higher scores on indicators of psychological distress than heterosexuals, even though they have similar levels of social support and good physical health .

With most of sexual minority students, mental health difficulties arise when they internalize or try to act against or disprove stereotypes of sexuality, and lesbian and gay orientation. In fact, some women expend much psychological and emotional energy trying to dispel stereotypes or to appear “normal” within a society that pathologises lesbian identities (Greene, 2000).

Although there are sexual minorities who bring effective adaptive strategies to managing their multiple identities (Gibson, Schlosser & Brock- Murray, 2007), it has been noted that lesbians have a greater likelihood of experiencing loneliness, social isolation and tension, but are less likely to seek professional help (Mays & Cochran, 1988). Research findings suggest that lesbians may be more vulnerable to the effects of chronic stressors and may experience an elevated rate of negative psychological outcomes by the time professional help is finally sought.

Research indicates that being a homosexual individual is compatible with healthy mental health and social adjustment. However, possible rejection and discrimination by family and friends and others, signify that several sexual minority students could experience mental health and substance misuse problems a greater than expected (King *et al.*, 2003; Gilman , Cochran, Mays, Hughest, Ostrow & Kessler, 2001).

Prejudice and discrimination against sexual minority persons have a social and an individual impact. On the societal level, discrimination and prejudice towards sexual minorities are reflected in the everyday stereotypes of members of these individuals. These stereotypes continue even though they are not supported by any facts, and very often they are

used to excuse unfair treatment of sexual minorities. On a personal level discrimination and stigma may also have harmful consequences, especially if sexual minorities attempt to hide or deny their sexual orientation. Although many sexual minorities learn to cope with the stigma, this poses a serious and negative effects on their psychological well-being (American Psychological Association task force, 2008).

The development of gay and lesbian sexual identity is also a complex and most difficult process that may cause homosexual individuals to be isolated distinct from members of other minority groups (e.g., ethnic and racial minorities), mainly sexual minorities are not raised in communities where there are other disclosed homosexuals from where they can learn about their sexual identity from and who support their identity. Instead, these individuals are often from communities where members are either ignorant of, or hostile toward, homosexuals (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter & Braun, 2006). The development process of sexual identity is at times a complex process which is mostly unsupported and stigmatized, it is characterized by a discrepancy among its affective, cognitive and behavioural components, in such a way that behaviour may not always correspond with affect and/or identity (Rosarion *et al.*, 2006). However, the psychological theory has maintained that people seek to attain congruence among affect, cognitions and behaviours since incongruity generate psychological tension (Devos & Banaji, 2003).

Identity crisis of sexual minority university students

The nature of multiple identities in universities is usually an important aspect of sexual minorities' lives (Rhoads, 1997). These individual's sexual development seems to occur in combination with their race, gender and religious identity and it seems to be prominent within their university experience.

Being a sexual minority student in a university is said to imply two roles for some, example on campus, most of women (lesbians) would dress and present themselves as they wish by wearing masculine attire. However, when it comes to their families, they would choose to wear feminine clothing. They are aware of their personal self-images, yet also painfully aware of the expectations and perceptions of themselves as women as seen by their families (Patton & Simmons, 2008). For some students, it may be challenging to deal with men on campus, especially in relationships, as many are at times disrespected based on their gender and sexual identity. Patton and Simmons (2008) asserted that most sexual minorities recognise the presence of their multiple oppressed identities. Some sexual minority students are more likely to experience some conflict towards their sexual identity and racial identity. In their quest to finding some sense of belonging within the campus that did not acknowledge their sexuality homosexuals might make their sexuality seem less important. One particular way in which they do this is through refusal to associate themselves with blatant identities of being homosexual. These authors add that, students in universities have issues of homophobia, where race is expressed as a salient aspect of their identity, gender as a salient aspect of lesbians when they have to deal with people, men in particular who harass or insult them. These statements about lesbians allude to the notion that because of their gender, men feel as if they could physically overpower them, a situation that might not be the same had the women been men.

Bridges, Selvidge and Matthews (2003) contend that lesbianism is viewed as incongruent with expectations of women. Most sexual minorities are insiders in the campus environment because of their race. However, when either race or gendered experiences conflict with their homosexuality, they become outsiders where being female and male translated into being heterosexuals. In addition, there is a general consensus that gender

discrimination may reflect the belief that the natural world requires men and women to have unique but different social roles. This statement is validated by the research findings of Whitley (2011) that gender-role beliefs are directly correlated to men's attitude towards sexual minorities.

According to Herek and Capitanio (1995), the ability to be accepted with their sexual identity within their racial groups can be complex, especially if they are expected to hide their sexuality. Members of their racial group who have problems accepting homosexuality may end up labelling them as "race traitors". In addition, their racial identities might be dismissed in contexts where their sexual orientation has value. It has also been noted that many institutions do not have campus sexual minority services, such as safe-zone projects (Evans, 2000) or support centres and offices to address oppressive sexualised forces. Currently same-sex relations in communities are acknowledged as "open secrets" as long as they are not labelled "homosexuals" or given attention by the public (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1998).

According to Cole and Guy-Sheftall (2003),



There is considerable evidence... of negative attitudes towards sexual minority within... communities that have complex origins and manifestations (p. 168).

Thus, brings a negative attitude regarding same-sex relationships and a decision to disclose one's lesbian identity which might lead to loss of support, both social and economic, and loss of community support. (Bridges, Selvidge & Matthews, 2003). This was reflected during an interview conducted by Patton and Simmons (2008) with students from Alpha College, where female students were expected to wear dresses during an annual induction ceremony. One male (gay) student shared his experiences of that ceremony:

On campus you might have a little issue. You might hear every now and then something like “ Oh, gay people”, or whatever. You might get little comments. Even during orientation, they gave a fashion show and showed how to do things and conduct yourself as a woman. I thought I was in the wrong room or something. At the end of the whole session, the lady that was doing it tried to say something politically correct, but it ended up coming off wrong. She said “For the girls who try to sneak up guy friends”, and then had a little talk about that. And then she said, “And for those who have gay roommates”, and then someone asked about seeing girls in other girls’ dorms. She said “same rules apply to heterosexuals and sexual minorities. Don’t sneak people in your rooms”. She said “nobody wants to wake up seeing two girls in bed where a man is supposed to be”. That was the only time where I felt like everybody was staring at me. I felt like they kind of beat me down. It is already hard enough to be gay, then you’ve got people around you that offend you, and then they have higher authorities that agree (p. 209).

While most men would count the family and church among their support systems (Herndon & Hirt, 2004 & Stewart, 2000), gays view their families and churches as presenting a multitude of challenges and obstacles for them to overcome when negotiating their multiple social identities (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Resilience of sexual minority students

Resilience refers to an individual’s capacity to cope with stress and adversity. This may either result in the individual ‘bouncing back’ to a previous state of functioning or

simply without any negative effects (Masten, 2009). Recently, evidence indicated that resilience can show the ability of an individual to resist a decline in other harm even though the situation seems to worsen (Ungar, 2004a; Werner & Smith, 2001). Research findings indicate that resilience is the outcome of people's ability to interact positively with their environments in the processes that promote well-being or serve as a protective factor against the overwhelming influence of risk factors (Zautra, Hall & Murray, 2010). These processes can either involve individual style of coping, or assistance by supportive family members, University communities and social policies that can be helpful in fostering resilience.

Although findings of many studies strongly suggest that the lives of sexual minority people are continuously under varying degrees of adversity, it would be incorrect to construe these adversities as the only important characteristics, of the lives of most sexual minority individuals. Quantitative findings from surveys based on measures of subjective well-being suggest that homosexual individuals, particularly in Ireland are, more happy with their lives than they are unhappy (Mayock, Bryan, Carr & Kitching, 2009). In support of the above statement, one participant in a narrative interview conducted by Mayock *et al.* (2009) said:

I am happy to conclude by saying that I am now a very content, confident, well-adjusted gay man, fully out and very happy to be gay. I have grown and thrived with the love and support of my friends and two of my sisters...being gay was never my problem but how people reacted to me being gay was certainly part of what made life very hard in the past (p. 24)

Mayock *et al.*, (2009) proposed four (4) key sources of social support as were identified by the sexual minority students from the narratives of interview participants. The key sources are identified as follows:

Friends as a source of resilience

Support from friends is the strongest amongst other forms of social support. Friends may contribute positively to the well-being of lesbian and gay students as they provide them with guidance and support during times of particular stress or need. Friends emerge as key people during times of change, mostly during the coming out process. In general, friendships appear as key sources of resilience, assisting sexual minorities to cope with experiences that evoked sadness, fear or distress.

Family as a source of resilience

Positive family relationships have been reported by other sexual minority students while others indicated that they were experiencing difficulties due lack of family support. Some homosexuals indicated that their family members became more accepting over time. Homosexual individuals who were supported by their family members benefited and experienced heightened levels of self confidence and it had a positive impact on their well-being.

Sexual minority community as a source of resilience

Connected themes of safety and unity featured significantly in the responses of respondents on benefits of participating in the sexual minority community. Interaction with other homosexuals enabled individuals to share detailed and sometimes difficult life experiences, as well as fostering a sense of belonging. The sexual minority community venues are perceived as 'safe spaces' that enable individuals to gather and interact without feeling fearful or intimidated:

It was really a stage of my life in my early twenties and I came through the other side. I am so glad I didn't do anything foolish.

It was totally 100% to do with me not accepting my sexuality and

thinking I was some sort of freak. I think meeting other sexual minority people of my age really helped me and I think for that to happen people need to be able to be open about them. I think a lot has changed even since I started college and it is increasingly better for young sexual minority people to come out earlier and start to develop relationships, sexual and otherwise (p. 25).

University as supportive environments

A limited number of participants indicated lecturers being empathetic and supportive, showing positive effects of tertiary-based affirmation. Based on these reports it can be concluded that strong evidence exists suggesting that resilience is on-going rather than simply a quality held by some sexual minority people and not other people. It can be argued that some sexual minority individuals focus on their personal development and, in order to improved self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. While the study focuses on addressing the psychological well-being, identity crisis and resilience of sexual minority students' acceptance in universities, it has also been anchored by some theories.

Conceptualisation of the study

Symbolic interaction theory (1969)

The study used the symbolic interaction theory of sociology, which focuses on the analysis of the patterns of communication, interpretation and adjustment between individuals (Blumer, 1969). The theory provided a framework for understanding how individual homosexuals interact with each other as well as with their campus society. This was done through the meanings of symbols together with both verbal and nonverbal responses. The theory asserts that people do not respond to reality directly, but rather to the social

understanding of reality, which in most cases is found in the African context. Humans therefore exist in three realities: a physical objective reality, a social reality, and a unique reality. Blumer's theory sets out three basic premises of the perspective and these are: Firstly, Human beings take an action or decision towards situations on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those situations: any of these situations do not have an inherent or unvarying meaning, rather, their meanings differ depending on how one defines and responds towards them. An individual's action is then shaped by how one defines, or gives meaning to the things they encounter. Therefore, human behaviour can be understood through the knowledge of how they define the things they encounter in their environment. Secondly, meanings of situations are derived from the social interaction that one has with others from their society. The theory states that people are not born knowing the meaning of things around them; they do not learn the meanings through individual experiences, but rather through the interactions with others. Thirdly, situational meanings are handled and modified through an interpretative process used by the individual in dealing with any experience they come across. However, the individual's understanding will at the end alter the meaning of the situations they encounter. An individual's interpretation of the meaning will there after guide and determine action. In this case, the homosexual individuals may take decisions and actions of their experiences based on what their society interprets the meaning of homosexuality.



Blumer's theory uses the following seven (7) major assumptions about human actions:

- People are unique creatures in their ability to use symbols.
- People become distinctively human through their interaction with others.
- People are conscious and self-reflective beings who actively shape their own behaviour.
- People are purposeful creatures who act in and toward situations.

- Human society consists of people engaging in symbolic interaction.
- The 'social act' should be the fundamental unit of social psychological analysis.
- To understand people's social acts, we need to use the methods that enable us to discern the meanings they attribute to these acts (Blumer, 1969).

Drawing from this model, which is the conceptual framework of the study, the following theoretical perspectives were used to explain and direct the focus and understanding of this study: Cass model of identity formation (1979); Ryff's theory of psychological wellbeing, and Shame's resilience theory (Brown, 2006).

In order to understand human identity development especially with the homosexuals, Cass model of identity formation (1979) was considered in this study. The six stages of the model, developed from a psychological perspective based on interpersonal congruency, the stages are as follows: (1) identity confusion, (2) identity comparison, (3) identity tolerance, (4) identity acceptance, (5) identity pride and (6) identity synthesis. The motivation for the development of this theory was aimed at improving the incongruence that homosexuals might experience creates interpersonally and in reference with society. Homosexuals at this stage might remain at a certain stage and choose to experience identity foreclosure terminating or moving forward with the homosexual process. Cass's theory asserts that the first stage of identity formation is identity confusion whereby it is characterised by first conscious awareness that homosexuality is part one-self in terms of one's behaviour, thoughts or feelings. At this stage one is aware that one's feeling and behaviour is defined as homosexual. The homosexual individual is confronted with inner turmoil and personal isolation which characterise this stage. If the homosexual individual decides to disclose their identity, they will naturally move into the second stage without experiencing any confusion.

The second stage, identity comparison, is marked by true commitment to the homosexual self. The key task of this stage is the ability to handle social alienation that results from becoming strongly aware of the differences between one and others. The individual becomes more accepting of the possibilities that being gay or lesbian and examines the broader consequences of that commitment. "Maybe it does not apply to me". The self-alienation becomes isolation.

Identity tolerance, is the third stage, where isolation is intensified and other sexual minorities are wanted by the homosexual individual to minimize the feeling of being isolated. The important factor in this stage for the development of the homosexual individual is the emotional quality of the contact with other gay or lesbian people. During this stage, homosexual individual come to understand that they are "not the only one". The individual admits the fact that they are probably gay or lesbian and look for other gay and lesbian people to combat feelings of isolation.

The fourth stage is characterised by an almost complete acceptance of one's gay or lesbian self, and being aware of the rejection of homosexuals by society. During this stage, one's homosexual identity is the primary identity, at this stage disclosure of one's sexuality to significant others is likely to increase. Identity acceptance stage asserts that the individuals accept themselves, feeling "I will be okay". They attach an optimistic meaning to their sexual identity and accept, instead of tolerating it. The individual continues to interact with other lesbians and gays. The reason for this is that the individuals deal with the inner conflicting feelings that they might be experiencing including society's norm, and attempts to bring congruence between private and public view of self.

The fifth stage is identity pride. As the coming out process advances, the main thinking is "I've got to let people know who I am!" The individual divides the world into

heterosexuals and homosexuals, and is absorbed in homosexual culture while reducing contact with heterosexuals. An 'us-them' quality to political/social viewpoints may emerge. This stage is reached when the homosexual individual is able to assimilate their homosexual self with other aspects of their identity development.

The sixth and last stage of the model is identity synthesis. The homosexual individuals integrate their sexual identity with all other aspects of self, and sexual orientation becomes only one aspect of the self rather than the entire identity. The importance of this task is to assimilate gay and lesbian identity so that instead of being the identity, it is seen as a feature of the self (Cass, 1979).

This model highlights that, during the identity formation process, unless one understands who they are, tolerates it, accepts it and becomes proud of it, they will still live within a hidden identity, which may challenge the wellbeing of an individual, which in this study is the homosexual. Therefore, this model serves as an integrated approach to understanding behaviour, feelings, experiences and human interactions, as well as the role that identity acceptance plays in the homosexual individual's wellbeing and resilience.

Theoretical perspectives

Ryff's theory of psychological wellbeing

According to Compton (2005), when Ryff (1989) developed the concept of interpersonal flourish, she was referring to positive relationships with other people as an important element of psychological wellbeing. The author is of the view that relationships should involve loving, intimate and enjoyable ties with significant others and core interpersonal emotions like love and desire. It also includes jealousy, hate and shame. Ryff

proposed a six dimensional model of psychological well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self-acceptance.

Autonomy is described as the ability to be an individual in society and be self-determined. The homosexual individual can be part of society whilst still being unique with his or her own goals and personal authority which reflect the way they want to live their lives. Environmental mastery refers to the individual's ability to be in control of his or her own life and to manage their environment to satisfy their needs. In this study, environmental mastery is seen as the ability of the homosexual individual to be able to fit in with the campus environment and be able to perform academically. Personal growth means that individuals are experiencing continuous growth and development, which includes making use of their talents and capabilities. Building positive relations with others refers to the ability to nurture satisfactory and meaningful relationships on which the individual can rely. These relationships are based on caring and mutual empathy and can facilitate psychological well-being. Self-acceptance is when the individual has the ability to evaluate themselves, acknowledge and accept the positive and negative aspects of the self.

Shame resilience theory (Brown, 2006)

Brown's theory (Brown, 2006), asserted that the more a person keeps a secret the more shame they will experience. He maintained that shame is linked with issues like addiction, violence and depression. Brown (2006) defined shame as an intense, painful feeling that the individual experiences when believing that they are imperfect. Consequently, they do not feel good enough for connection and belonging. Homosexuality might be seen by others as an illness or an imperfection and the individual might therefore lack a sense of belonging and experience an inability to connect with anyone besides other homosexuals. If a person develops resilience to shame, the individual will recognize and accept personal

vulnerability, raising critical awareness regarding social and cultural expectations, forming mutually empathetic relationships that facilitate reaching to others and speaking shame. If homosexual individuals are able to accept their imperfections and uniqueness, they are therefore able to develop resilience, being aware of the social and cultural expectations, for example, a lesbian woman who is expected to get married and have children. Forming relationships with other homosexuals or having intimate relationships can be important as it helps the individual to speak about their experiences and how they overcame them, helping others to speak about their shame. Brown (2006) explained that empathy and shame are on the opposite ends of a continuum. Individuals can therefore experience shame because of societal expectations that they experience as conflicting and diverse. The theory is applicable to this study as it explains that if homosexuals keep their sexuality a secret from their significant others, it might lead to the experience of shame. In relation to this research, homosexuals might experience stigma and discrimination and the use of substances as a coping mechanism, or become violent as they might need to protect themselves from homophobic behaviour which could result in depression.



In summary, from the literature, conceptualisation of the study and the perspectives reviewed above, it is expected that sexual minority students in the university will experience difficulties throughout their academic years due to different multiple identities and being labelled by their heterosexual counterparts, placing them at risk for poor psychological well-being. These difficulties may cause the homosexual individual to deny their sexuality, which will cause psychological distress and impact negatively upon their psychological-wellbeing, self-esteem and self-worth.

Sexual minority students, defined as those identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual or those who are involved in sexual relations with people of the same or both sexes, they exist in

all communities and all walks of life. They represent all races, ethnicities, socio-economic statuses and they are parts of the diverse, country (Kann, Olsen, Macmanus, Kinchen, Chyen, Harris & Wechsler, 2011).

While majority sexual minority students manage the transition from childhood to adulthood without major problems and turn out to be healthy and very productive adults, while others face challenges such as stigma, discrimination, family rejection, social rejection and violence. Sexual minority students are at risk of negative health outcomes in therefore leading to psychological well-being in particular (Kann *et al.*, 2011).

According to Brown and Anderson (in press), homophobia on campuses poses a major problem. The minority group can experience verbal harassment, threats and physical violence, which have been commonly found. Brown and Anderson (in press) stated that heterosexual men have a very hostile attitude towards homosexuals and often use insults to mock them. This can be because homosexuals are often viewed by heterosexual men as people who violate gender roles. According to Cirakoglu (2006), people who have negative attitude towards sexual minorities are less likely to have social contact with sexual minority individuals. Sexual minority individuals who have experienced some form of victimisation or witnessed discrimination such as verbal harassment, name calling, mockery and rejection are at a greater risk of depression, anxiety, substance abuse and suicide threats (Zubernis & Snyder 2007).

Aim of study

This study consequently aimed at exploring the psychological wellbeing and resilience of sexual minority students in a South African University.

The objectives of the study were

- To explore the psychological wellbeing of sexual minority students in a South African University.
- To investigate the experiences of identity crises of these sexual minority students.
- To investigate the sexual minority students' resilience, both individually and as a group, in relation to their experiences.

The study was guided by the following questions in order to reach focus and arrive at a deeper understanding of the participants' narrations:

- How can the psychological well-being of these sexual minority students be described?
- What are the identity crisis experiences of the sexual minority students in a South African University?
- To what extent do the students from this minority group demonstrate resilience in their experiences in relation to their group?

Significance of the study

The study has both practical and theoretical significance. Conclusions made from this study on sexual minority students will help to advance the understanding of the psychological well-being of sexual minority students in universities and the challenges they face in dealing with heterosexual students on campuses. This understanding could facilitate the development of effective policies and practices to reduce behavioural problems that drive heterosexuals to being homophobic towards sexual minorities, and come up with alternatives for future sexual minority students at risk. This could also benefit professionals, mainly social workers and psychologists, working with sexual minorities to make decisions that will make

a real difference in the lives of sexual minorities without discriminating against them.

Theoretically, it will add to the body of knowledge on the existing theories used in this study.

The study will also present different perspectives about sexual minority students and their cultural values.

Methodology

Design:



The researcher followed a narrative oriented design within the qualitative research approach. Two aspects that served as the main focus of the study were the psychological well-being and resilience of sexual minority university students. The qualitative approach was used to discover meanings and feelings attached to the experiences of the sexual minority group of students (Creswell, 2007).

Data was collected through a narrative oriented design. The design allowed the researcher to dig deeper into the life experiences of the students from both individual and collective narrations (Creswell, 2007). This approach enabled a better understanding of the experiences, psychological well-being and resilience of this minority group of students.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Feelings, values and meanings were connected through ideas and personal view points. The researcher thereafter analysed, identified and reported these patterns as themes from the collected data (Maree, 2007) using the procedure below.

Research context and participants Sample:

The research was conducted with students from the North-West University (Mafikeng Campus) in the North-West Province of South Africa. The researcher used snowball

sampling technique to recruit the participants. A poster was put up to recruit participants, other participants invited more participants. Snowball sampling is a technique for finding research subjects using another subject whereby the researcher accesses participants through contact information provided by other informants (McLean & Campbell, 2003). In this research, the researcher identified and contacted one respondent purposefully, after which the first participant referred the researcher to the second participant who later referred her to another participant, and so on, until the sample size was reached (Noy, 2008).

The study was intended to have multicultural participants but snowballing led to an exclusively African students sample with an age range between 19 and 24 years, from different faculties and levels of study. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative samples are usually small in size. Initially the participants of the study had to be a sample of ten participants, 5 of which were gay and 5 of which were lesbians. The researcher ended up with a sample of eleven participants of which 4 were gay and 7 were lesbians.

Procedure and data gathering:

Data collection

A letter of permission to conduct the study was granted from the university. The researcher contacted one participant who referred her to others until the sample number was reached. The researcher set an appointment for the group interview with the whole group. The purpose and aims of the study, as well as issues of confidentiality and flexibility of participation were communicated clearly to the participants who later signed the consent forms.

Focus group interviews

One focus group interview was conducted for both lesbian and gay participants. The member checking technique was used throughout the group discussions to establish the validity of a given interpretation. The technique allows the researcher the opportunity to understand the participant's explanations by giving other participants some opportunity to correct errors and challenge what they perceived as incorrect interpretations. Other participants volunteered to give additional information which might be stimulated by the playing back process of questioning, providing the researcher with an opportunity to summarize the preliminary findings and results as well as confirming particular aspects of the data (Angen, 2000). This gave each member of the group the opportunity to give a wider variety of responses and explanations of their experiences as part of the sexual minority at the university.

Field notes

Polit and Beck (2010) stated that field notes are taken by the researcher to document the unstructured observations made in the field as well as the interpretation of those observations. The field notes were immediately jotted down after each interview and they were descriptive accounts which the researcher objectively records about all the proceedings of the interview. The field notes were taken to help the researcher to remember and explore the process of the interviews. These are critical points that must be followed; they include empirical (observation) and the researcher's interpretation, emotions, perceptions and prejudices. They assisted the researcher to turn them into the final product. Observations were also used as a way of gathering information during the interview. This provided the researcher with an opportunity to clarify complex issues that might be controversial or personal.

Data capturing

A tape recorder was essential to capture the information provided by the participants. Data was transcribed, translated and coded in themes. Data was organised into file folders and index cards or computer files, there was reading of the transcripts in their entirety several times, so as to try and get a sense of the interview as a whole, before attempting to break it into parts. The data was generated into categories, themes and patterns.

The researcher identified salient themes, recurring ideas or language and patterns of belief that link people and situations together and the categories of meaning held by participants in the setting. The data was then evaluated for its usefulness and centrality and useful data was identified. The final phase was to report the results of the research.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using narrative and thematic analysis in this study and the findings were integrated and presented as themes.

Narrative analysis

The researcher used narrative analysis to break down the text into segments and various interpretive procedures used to present the raw data. A three dimensional space approach was used. Data were analysed in three elements: interaction (personal and social), continuity (which is the past, present, future), and situation (physical places or the storyteller's places) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narrative analysis was carried out by collecting stories of personal and collective experiences during the interviews.



Thematic analysis

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis means capturing identifying key ideas from the data that give answers to the research questions. This analysis was used to yield knowledge and new insights about facts and themes. The researcher went on to link the participants' feelings, beliefs and experiences to create meaning and understanding through thematic analysis.

Table 1

Trustworthiness of the study

Crystallisation

Principles	Strategies	Applications
Complex interpretations	Data collection	A variety of qualitative research methods were used: focus group interviews, individual in-depth interviews and observational field notes.
Data collection	Member conformation, in-depth individual interviews and focus group interviews	During the focus group interviews the researcher used member checking with the participants in order to discuss details for confirmation from other members.
Analysis	Variety of methods	Thematic analysis of textual data, narrative oriented inquiry and analysis of observational field notes were done. These methods allowed the researcher to access rich data to create a holistic picture of the findings in multiple ways.
	Paradigms	The findings were constructed as themes and patterns to enable the researcher to interpret the participants' account on multiple levels

Variety of presentation	Multiple text	<p>and thus reveal multiple ways of understanding the research problem.</p> <p>The data were collected through observational field notes and conversations; the researcher integrated the findings of each collection strategy and thereafter elaborated on the story in an interlinking manner.</p>
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6. Ethical Considerations

In this study, ethical approval was obtained from the university's highest degree committee. A letter of consent for participants was signed. The participants were made aware of their right not to participate and to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process without penalisation. No monetary incentives were offered to participants. The researcher ensured that the questions were understandable to the participants. All findings were treated confidentially and anonymity was assured during the interviews. The recorded and transcribed data was to be destroyed after six months and it would not be linked to participants.

Findings

Although the researcher had planned to include 10 participants (5 gay and 5 lesbian students), in the end the focus group consisted of 11 participants, whereby 4 were gay students and 7 were lesbian students. The age range of the interviewed participants was between 18 and 21 years.

Table 2**Demographic information**

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Age	19	23	23	20	22	21	24	24	24	23	25
Year	1 st	1 st	4 th	1 st	2 nd	2 nd	4 th	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th

Themes

Four themes were identified in the data, including: (a) experiences of homosexual students, (b) the challenges, (c) Psychological pressure and (d) Resilience. These themes emerged together with their subthemes from the data as tabulated below.

Table 3

	Sub-Theme
Experiences of the homosexuals	First time experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Denial (defence mechanism) <i>Excitement, Confusion and Isolation</i>
	Personal Feelings around the sexual identity crisis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “It’s not a choice” <i>Despised it; hated it; did not like it; prayed about it.</i> Painful, confusing, depressing and abnormal. Embarrassment, shame Frustrating, Stressful.
	Social reality verses unique reality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parental rejection <i>Identity confusion / crisis.</i> Societal judgment and discrimination <i>Disgrace, Spit on the face, shame</i>
The challenges	Life on campus <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejection. <i>Harassment</i> • Discrimination as student
Psychological stress	Fear of rejection as a future professional Multiple Identities (Identity Crisis) <i>Risky</i> Drugs as de-stressor (females) Sex as a de- stressor (Males) Suicide
Resilience	Self-Acceptance. Sexual minority community Identity tolerance

Experiences of homosexuals

The participants' discussions which were based on the first research question which was [What are the experiences of sexual minority students in a South African University?], led to two categories of experiences being; (i) First time experiences and (ii) Personal feelings.

First time experience

Although the majority of participants remembered themselves having feelings for the opposite sex at a very early age of about six, some did not even realise what was happening since they were too young, "*People who visited our family would realise that hey, something is wrong with this one ... with me I had not realised anything about myself since I was young and staying in a rural area.*" [P8]. Most of the participants came to the reality of their being through time, different first time feelings came. In response to the question; [How did you feel the first time you realised that you were gay, or you were lesbian?] the following experiences were mentioned, denial, excitement, fear, confusion and isolation.

Denial. Almost all the participants were in denial when they realised for the first time that they were interested in people of the same sex. Bowins (2004) defines denial as one of the defense mechanisms commonly used by people to protect themselves from situations which are difficult to face, in order to avoid their reality as it is overwhelming. Denial is an outright refusal to admit or recognize that something has occurred or is currently occurring leading to different emotions and feelings to most of the participants. *“The first time I kissed her, I developed feelings for her, I was like...okay, this is...what am I feeling, I’m not supposed to be falling in love with another girl she has breasts (laughing) like...what’s going on with me?”. I even tried pushing her to this other butch friend of mine who wanted her... like... okay, you want her..., now here is her number... this was real denial for me”* [P5].

Excitement. Some participants had a feeling of excitement the first time they came to reality with their real feelings of homosexuality, *“It starts with excitement and from there you ask yourself questions like...is it normal or what is happening with me... is it normal...”* [P8]. Some of them had fear, *“For me it was fear it started as fear”* [7].

Confusion. One participant responded, *“I was confused, I started praying* [P1]. Another added *“I have been praying for a long time since it confused me... I prayed against it, yes, I would pray about this confusion every time I went to church”* [P11].

Isolation. After all the uncomfortable feelings about the experience, some participants isolated themselves, *“I was even one of the shy people in my class. The truth is I was the most quiet and isolated person in the whole school... I was very quiet”* [P10].

It was not an easy thing for the participants as they realised for the first time that they were falling for the same sex. According to Troiden (1989), *“As people realise they are falling for an opposite sex, the individual will be characterised by subsequent feelings of confusion regarding how one’s own attraction is not similar to other peer members”*. Mays

and Cochran (2000) confirm these feelings by stating that sexuality and gender identity discrimination which may include stigmatisation, labelling and acts of psychological and physical abuse may lead to reduced self-esteem, social withdrawal and thus causing isolation and psychological disturbances.

Personal Feelings around the sexual identity crisis

There have been some common personal feelings around the participants' sexuality. The fact that it is not their choice to be homosexuals has led to different feelings which, above all, is lack of self-acceptance. Almost all the participants indicated that it was not a choice to become homosexual.

“It’s not a choice”. One of the participants stated, *“Yeah if sexuality was a choice, I would not be lesbian (yes... yes... [Others agreed in a emphasizing way])”* [P2]. More participants added, *“If I had a choice, I would be straight because why choose to be something that people are going to see as being deviant from society... it is painful”* [P1]. Another added, *“It’s not... (With some pain in the voice) it’s not a choice, why wake up in the morning and feel like “oh my gosh, I want to be so gay today?”* [P6]. *“You know you might get killed, you might get raped, how can you choose it? Yea? It is like when I’m born, when I grow up I find myself being black and not white, did I ever choose it or it chose me it’s not your choice! (Emphasizing the point)”* [P4]. *“Even after realising I was gay, I did not accept myself; I did not want to be gay... I did not like it at all (Emphasizing the point hard) that’s why we say it is not a choice”* [P9]. *“It is not... a... choice, not at all! People think you just wake up one day and say “I want to be lesbian”, it’s not! It just hurts! [Showing feelings of hurt on the face]”* [P7].

More responses, *“The first time me and her kissed, and then I developed feelings for her, I was like...okay, this is...what the hell am I my feeling, I’m not supposed to be falling in love with another girl... what is going on... I even tried pushing her to this other butch friend of mine that wanted her, like okay sharp, you want her, here’s her numbers,”* [P5]. One added, *“You see it goes back to [it’s not a choice]”* [P10].



Although the literature does not clearly state it, it has been realised that all the participants did not choose to be homosexual, according to them, if they were given some chance to choose they would be straight, that is they would be heterosexual individuals.

Despised it; hated it; prayed about it. The participants stated that it was not their choice to be homosexuals; they were left with different negative feelings. *“Yeah I despised it, it made me cry, I did not like it... I despised it... (Pauses and voice trembling) I didn’t even want to think about it or see anything about it... I hated it... I hated other girls because I did not want to love them”* [P6]. Some participants would even pray to God about it because they did not like it, *“If I understood why I’m homosexual, I could not have prayed to God... I have prayed, used anointing oils asking God to change me, it didn’t work because here I am, I am still gay... I’m still gay”* [P2]. Another added, *prayed, I fasted, you know what, I tried everything saying please God change me because I wanted to be out of this mess, it did not work”* [P1]. *“I also went through that route... I was confused and praying... I was praying hard”* [P10]. *With me I prayed all the time... I would go to church and pray”* [P1]. The fact that the participants did not like or accept their sexuality has led to experiences of feelings of inner turmoil and personal alienation. According to the theory of Cass (1979), this indicates that the participants went through identity confusion which later led to identity crisis and poor psychological well-being (Meyer et al., 2007).

Painful, confusing, depressing, abnormal. To the participants, being homosexual is painful, *“It’s painful... (Long pause, a big sigh and trembling voice) very painful, it’s confusing and depressing. Yes... that is why some end up killing themselves”* [P7]. Another participant added, *“Yeah...it is something which is very abnormal. Yes... It’s not right because even the way we have been raised up, it does not agree with it”* [P6]. Another added, *“one statement that really pains me all the time is what my brother once said to me, he said [Peggy, (not Real name) may you please stop depriving me of having a little sister, I have a sister not a brother...] It is painful to hear your brother begging you like that mostly when you are the only sister like me...”* [P10].

Embarrassment, shame. Some reported feeling ashamed, especially when they were with people whom they respected. One gay participant stated, *“Once somebody said ‘hi, girl’ to me in front of my grandmother, I felt so embarrassed and very ashamed because I never want my grandmother to believe I am gay, never”* [P10].

Frustrating, Stressful. To some, the feeling is frustrating and very stressful, *“this thing frustrates me like I am not able to accept myself while with other people, I am always in the company of straight people and when I am with them, I don’t feel any comfort because I feel very different from them... it is very stressful”* [P11]. *“... I am always stressing because of this issue”* [P10].

The challenges

Social reality verses unique reality.

The participants in this study have feelings of inner turmoil and personal alienation they want to condone to the society but at the same time not oppressing their unique reality (Meyer, 2003). *“Yeah, in the society we grow up seeing you on television, it’s your mother*

and your father... on television it's a girlfriend and a boyfriend, never girlfriend and a girlfriend...! At church, it's never a woman and the woman...so why do I live in opposition with the society... the family expects this and says that and on the other side the society expects another thing and because you fear your family and the society... your fear is what are they going to say, you don't have a choice except to go along with the society. You know it is painful because the family expects kids from you but you are gay, they need some bride prize and you are a lesbian... [P4].

The findings have highlighted that despite their feelings, the participants have to condone to collective cultural background and, thus, the psychological distress (Meyer et al., 2007; King et al., 2003). This is due to the fact that they want to fit and be part of their collective society. The society as a collective cultural society does not make an individual who wants to live an individualist kind of life within to be free and comfortable as in agreement with Ungar (2004) and Schmidt (2011). To add vigour to the findings of this study, some studies have indicated that since the African human society consists of people who engage in symbolic interaction, the 'social act' will always be the fundamental unit of social and psychological analysis of every individual in that society (Brown, 2006; Schmidt, 2011; Ellemrs et al., 2002).

Parental rejection.. Most of the participants who disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents were disowned, *"My mother chased me from home... I stayed away from home for about eight months... it was the most painful months of my life"* [P8]. Another added, *"I will never tell my dad, he can disown me... he is capable of doing that, he did that with my elder brother."* [P5].

Identity confusion / crisis. To some of the participants, being gay was something they really did not like or want to be identified with “*When I realized that I’m “Sque” (not straight)... I did not want to be called gay at all...at all by anyone...*” [P6].

Societal judgment and discrimination

In numerous cases some have been negatively judged, “*Something is wrong, very wrong about this one...*” [P9]. Some would even be told they are human beings, “*People will be telling you that you don’t have a soul... you’re lost! ... You should change now you are not a human being because of what you do... it builds up to a certain point where it creates a scar, a permanent scar on the person...*” [P7].

Disgrace, Spit on the face, shame, violence. Some participants felt, “*Talking about things such as homosexuality, and being that, is a disgrace to the society, (others agree) it is like a spit on the face*” [P7]. To some the negative comments are, “*Why don’t you take this rubbish and lock it up... they need to be locked up, and beaten the hell out of their heads and this thing will come out*” [P4]. Because of the way people see them; some participants feel they have brought shame to their families “*I was raised according to the bible, so it was like where you are going Patience? (Not her real name) More especially at home they chase you away because you are a disgrace to them..., and have brought shame to their family*” [P3].

Life on campus

Loss. The participants have lost their uniqueness and identity, respect and friendship due to their sexuality, “*It is more difficult because, you lose everything as a guy. You lose respect, you lose your status, you lose, especially more when you are” top” ... if you are the dominant guy, you lose so many things... You lose your friends because none of them would want to be your friends anymore...*” [P8]. “*... Because it’s a stigma, we lose your dignity... is*

a stigma that if you're lesbian, you're up for every girl, yeah... and if you are a guy, you are after every guy. So even if you'd say "hello" to a guy, according to the campus society and that individual, you want him [P6]. Another participant reveals that, *"I've realised with guys that they are really hated... painfully... and more than us."* [P9]. The results agree with some other studies that found that participants never revealed their status as people belonging to the social group in order to avoid loneliness (Ellerns et al., 2002)

Rejection. Rejection by other students is also one of the experiences. *"You never really know when to conduct your real self in case you go beyond those boundaries. There is an easy influence against homosexuality around the campus. You cannot say somebody is a friend or not because they just change any time... as soon as the third party comes into picture, they get easily influenced and embarrass you and reject you"* [P4]. Some of the participants' straight friends would try to convince them at first and thereafter reject them if they refused to change their sexuality. *"Okay, most of my guy friends or classmates, when they found out I'm dating another girl they were like baby what a waste... Don't you, like to taste reality and I'm like "okay, there's nothing wow about it"(mm). it is like, they can change you... if you refuse to change they reject you"* [P5].

Sexual violence . In some instances, some female participants reported that they experienced sexual violence from fellow students, *"Some of the male students pretend to be friends and even pretend they support and understand us, giving you one drink after the other so that you become drunk and then they start harassing you... most of those kind of males end up raping lesbians"* [P10].

At times, there seems to be safety concerns among lesbian students on campus, *"...there was a party on campus, I went to the ladies and I was alone, I don't know if that guy*

followed me or what, when I looked on top of the wall there, he is peeping at me from the other toilet from the top... imagine, in a female toilet, I don't even know what he wanted to see... maybe to check if I am a real girl... I never panicked, I relaxed, did what I did, finished and stood up, imagine... he is up there and sees everything ... I mean that is totally wrong... I was not secured because it was late at night" [P3].

According to the participants, life is sometimes unsafe on campus for lesbian students who experience harassment from male students. Most of them reported experiences of feeling being disrespected at times because of their sexuality. Many come across situations whereby men get jealous of their girlfriends socialising with their lesbian peers, attributing this to the male students' insecurity. Hall and La France (2007) emphasised that being a homosexual student in a university society is extremely painful and dangerous. Schmidt, Miles and Welsh (2011) also affirmed that lesbian students at times experience harassment on campus. More studies have confirmed that sexual minorities have complained about their safety in universities and that they felt that hiding their sexuality is always the best thing to do to avoid intimidation, harassment and insecurity (Schmidt , Miles & Welsh , 2011). The results therefore lead to the fact that homosexual students experience some stress while on campus because of fear of harassment, thus placing them at risk of poor psychological wellbeing.

Discrimination as a student. The participants indicated that they experienced discrimination around the school on different occasions. *"We are being discriminated, at times being bad mouthed, being told this and that, that you simply walk away and never respond to all these painful remarks" [P3].* Some have felt despised by others, *"... when we told this lady to give us venue and told her that the seminar was about, that it was for homosexual international day and against homophobia. She asked us, [Oh, it's for homosexuals?] so we were like... yes. And then she continued by saying [oh, are you guys*

going to cross dressing and start behaving funny?] and we are like, huh are we acting like people of the opposite sex ?” she said [yes you are barbaric, you are going to wear your things] and we were all like, what! [P7]. One added, “it’s like they do not have a clue of how the gays and lesbians live... they would say I know that you are a lesbian and you use drugs... we are associated with drugs...that is why we live on drugs and alcohol” [P4].

With some of the participants, the discrimination comes from some lecturers, “...we were dealing with a case of sexuality, I am a law student... she gave an example and said, [Imagine you’re a lesbian, representing someone in to court what will people think about you?” [P7]. Another participant added, “Sex-talk is everywhere, on television, it is everywhere but what people fail to understand is that not only heterosexuals are at risk, we are also at risk of contracting diseases, which means that we need the sex-talk as well at least on campus during the love life campaigns, they never cater for us, all I see is heterosexual condoms, what about our condoms, What about our condoms...? we are being discrimination (Stressing the point) We’ve got our specialized condoms but they are in no clinic! [P7].

Fear of rejection as a future professional.



Most of the participants in this study indicated that they were more concerned with their future in the working industry. “I’m a law student, and the thing is, I want to be an attorney. But, what I’m afraid of is my sexuality around that because I wish to see myself wearing suits, men’ suits! (Lesbian). And I don’t think it will be allowed” [P3]. One participant remarked, “Imagine you’re going to court wearing man’ suit and you are a woman, is the judge going to take you serious?” [P2.] Another added, “Even the people in court, what will they think of you?” [P10]. Another commented, “With me, the worst thing is I want to be a prosecutor, so you can imagine, I’m going to stand at the high court and

represent the state, not only an individual but the state, are they going to allow me go to court being myself, wearing men' suit?" [P4].

The participants also feared that they would not progress in the working industry because of their sexual status. *"The thing is, even if I can pass my masters with distinctions, am I not going to be promoted like any other person who is not homosexual...? I will be stuck in one position for the rest of my life... I won't be respected, because I'm lesbian. This is also challenging in our careers and everything that's why I'm saying being out is a risk that you are taking, you want to accept yourself and it's not easy... you look at yourself, your family, your future... your whole life! it is all a mess... how do you go out to reveal your sexuality... for you to be a failure in life? It's painful" [P7].* One participant added, *"I don't want to be homosexual, who is going to hire you? You can have your masters, you can be the best! But the fact that you are homosexual and you are proud about it, you are not even willing to change for the company... you will never progress" [P10].* *"Imagine the way corruption is in our country already and think of how it will be now that you are a lesbian?" [P4].* Another concluded, *"last time I was talking to P3 that I want to be the best accountant and end up a financial whatever... but I have made up my mind that I will live a doubled identity kind of life, when I go to work, I will wear dresses, skirts, nice lady suits and high heeled shoes because I want to go far with my career" [P10].*

The participants in this study reported experiencing discrimination around campus leading to pain, it was already hard enough for them being homosexual on campus, and it was still going to be hard enough for them in their chosen professions. The findings have also revealed that people around these lesbians and gay people would just offend them, and instead of the higher authority intervening, they rather agreed with the discrimination. The results of this study have shown that these university minority groups of homosexual students

experience hardships and discrimination that makes it difficult for them to manage their environment that is, environmental mastery is a challenge to them and they have not achieved it.

The participants also felt that even after they had finished school, the work industry would still be a real challenge to them because of their sexuality. Cole and Guy-Sheftall (2003) stated that even people in higher positions for example lecturers, have their way of embarrassing and saying things in public that offend and humiliate the homosexuals leaving them with painful self-judgment of being gay or lesbian. According to Compton (2005), if the participants' needs are not satisfied, they are not able to control their lives, and they feel they do not fit in within the campus environment and work industry. In this case, according to Ryff's theory of psychological wellbeing, the individual's failure to master their environment is one of the indicators of poor psychological-wellbeing, which is the case with the participants in this study as they are not able to cope and fit into their environment.

Multiple Identities.

The participants' beliefs and culture also play another role in making them display different identities when they are around their communities in order to be accepted.

"... whenever I make my presentations at church, I have to be male, and my hair should be combed to the back... you understand? Because I am in church and I do not want people to see me as gay" [P1]. According to some studies, the experience of discrimination from society indicates that while most homosexuals want their families and churches to be their support systems, gays experience a multitude of challenges from these, leading to multiple social identities (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Stewart, 2000), reflecting problems of identity crisis. The results are also in agreement with Yoshino (2006)

that, homosexuals try to minimise stigmatisation towards their sexuality by not coming out in the open unless they feel it is safe for them to do so.

The problem of multiple identities does not only reveal itself through clothing and resemblance but also through the participants not disclosing to the family and in order to keep the identity of their sexuality a secret in the family, the identity they reveal at home is not the one they reveal when they are out on campus with their friends. *"I don't tell my grandfather, I would never! I feel that immediately I tell my grandfather that this is what is going on with me I will kill him [P10].* Another one added, *"With my grandmother, even though she does not know about my sexuality... since she raised me up in a Christian way, every day when I arrive she opens the Bible to me and start teaching me how to behave, my best friend from is super butch and I grew as a tomboy so it is like, Lorraine (not her real name), do not be like this girl. What if I tell her, she will drop dead... I will never reveal my sexually identity to her, not if she is still alive she even packs my church uniform for me when I leave for school"* [P10]. Patton and Simmons (2008) affirm that sexual minorities in universities have multiple identities with some university students. Despite the fact that most lesbians dress the way they like and show their masculine bodies, when they get home, they wear feminine clothing. They are aware of their personal self-images, yet also aware of the pain they will cause once their families come to the truth of their sexuality (Blumer, 1969; Brown, 2006).

Risky. In most cases, the participants display multiple identities because they feel they will not be safe in some places indicating that one has identity crisis. *"We were walking pass these two men and my girlfriend said... [...and you know baby] I said hei! Watch out... don't call me baby in public... It's not a matter of being shy, but it is for security... There is a lot of harassment and killing and everything out there for homosexuals it is risky."* [P6]. The other participant said, *"I feel this place is much safer than other places, where I come from, I cannot just walk freely, they will kill me"* (emphasizing the killing) [P10]. Another added, "...

most lesbian killings and rapes are out there" [P4]. The issue of lesbians and gay people's identity crisis is known everywhere. Two major reasons for their disguise are to feel safe in their community as well as to show respect to their community and their culture as people. This is affirmed by Bridges, Selvidge and Matthews (2003), that homosexuals are seen as incongruent to the expectations of what people should behave and thus they can be beaten up or even raped and killed in some places to teach them to respect their culture.



Psychologically, the theory maintains that incongruence generates psychological tension; individuals who seek to achieve congruence affect their cognitive thinking and end up displaying behaviours of stress since incongruity generates psychological tension and stress (Devos & Banaji, 2003). Some studies also agree with the fact that theoretically, adolescents are at the stage of critically trying to identify who they are, that is, the university students are in their late adolescence stage whereby they are in the process of establishing the choices they have made about themselves. It is therefore during this process that the adolescents become keenly aware and sensitive to their external presentation to their families and community, and consequently to other people's perceptions (Casey, Tottenham, Liston & Durston, 2005; Jamil, 2010) As a result, during this stage, they gradually develop a greater understanding of their identity and the tension it causes due to lack of acceptance by their community (Brown, 2006). It is through the process of internal hypothetical thinking, among other cognitive changes in the adolescence, that the homosexual adolescents begin to question and have a deeper understanding of who they are. The homosexuals in this case experience lack of self-acceptance and environmental mastery, leading to poor psychological well-being.

Psychological stress

The highlighted feelings stated earlier as those that result from all the experiences of being homosexual have led to some chronic stressors that leave the individuals with negative thoughts about their lives and risky behaviour including thoughts of suicide.

Self medicating (Females). It has been emphasized from this study that substance misuse and sexual dependence are common practices among homosexual students because of the stressors faced by them. Almost all the participants have gone or are still going through one of the problems. *“You don’t know the reason behind some of the abuse of alcohol and drugs... ([Yes] from all the participants) I was one of those people ... I used to drink myself to death (yes) because... (Laughing) because I didn’t accept who I am since I was telling myself that it was wrong... no it is wrong to be attracted to another woman... I’m not lesbian, I’m not...”* [P4]. One participant emphasized that, *“I think where the misconception lies are that we are lesbians because we turned to drugs... It’s actually because we are lesbians that it is too much to deal with... (All agree by saying yes) then we resort to drugs to try to balance the stress”* [P3]. One added, *“It’s not just to accept who we are, yeah, Psychologically we are not well at all because of the mixed feelings, so confused, so hurt, so everything... the truth to me is, when you drink or use drugs, it starts healing (it’s like you stabilize it [somebody intervened]) it’s like when you say you are in pain, when you drunk, you don’t feel that pain at that time...”* [P5] *“We use drugs due to some kind of psychological pressure”* [P10].

Sexual needs /Abuse (Males)

The findings specified that, in most cases, the lesbian participants turned to drugs and alcohol while the gay participants used sex. One gay participant highlighted, *“...but then gay people are different, because we have sex addicts, that’s why most of the people will tell that*

gay people are sex addicts... they love sex only, you know... Because as men, naturally we are sex animals... so whatever the pressure we are feeling, we project it to sex... ” [P8]. Another one added, “... if they think they are happy, its sex... that’s why if you can check, the issue of sex partners is really dominant with gay people. That is, no, we are not dating; he is just my sex partner... why can’t you just date him... Because sex is our de-stressor, we are addicted to it, okay fine, we drink, but then sex is like the ultimate one (mm) and it’s not like girls... girls drink” [P1].

The findings of this study about alcohol, drugs and sexual addiction are asserted by other researchers. According to King *et al.* (2003) and Gilman *et al.* (2001), all the stress and the pains caused by society through discrimination, rejection and confusion means that some sexual minority students experience a greater than expected prevalence of psychological health problems. Therefore, according to the participants, to ease this psychological stress, drugs and sex become the common de-stressors (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2011).

Suicide

The participants indicated that they also experience situations whereby some of them end up with suicidal thoughts and attempts to commit suicide. One participant commented, “...that’s why others end up killing themselves, it’s because they don’t know how to handle themselves and it becomes too heavy for them, it’s the family this side, the society say this, the friends also say their own things that side, you end up being so confused and you hate yourself... what will you do? So the only way for you is to just rest... is to just take your life” [P3]. Another added, “...it is so depressing... yes, that’s why some of them end up killing themselves...” [P7]

The findings have revealed that the homosexual students experience a lot of stress that leads to a high rate of substance use and sex addiction, which may later lead to suicide with some, aligning with other studies (Bowleg *et al.*, 2004; Lock & Steiner, 1999; Mays & Cochran, 2000). With reference to Ryff's theory of psychological wellbeing, the participants would have a desire to be somebody in society (Meyer, 2003) and thus they continuously go through some stress and depression because of trying to live a life approved by society whilst at the same time being what their society rejects. In this case, their self determination to be part of society brings confusion and stress which are indicators of psychological well-being. .

Furthermore, the findings have shown that there are challenges to personal growth with most of the participants since they continuously move back and forth due to these challenges they experience in society. The participants feel if they try to make use of their talents and capabilities in society, they are restricted by the issue of their uniqueness as a sexual minority group.

Further, the participants seem unable to have steady relationships with others who are not within their sexual minority group, since they want to avoid discrimination and betrayal. By applying Ryff's theory in analysing the data, the findings also reveal that the majority of the participants do not experience self-acceptance. When they evaluate themselves, they are unable to accept themselves due to the fact that the environment around them is rejecting their uniqueness. In this case they have displayed an element of self-rejection and negativity towards the self.

Resilience

Resilience in this study has been facilitated by participants through self-acceptance, sexual minority groups.

Self-Acceptance. Although it may still be hard for them, at least a few of the participants have accepted who they are. *“I was there... that’s why I say I’m happier here... I’m happier than that because I was trying so hard, yeah, so hard to be something that’s not me, I feel like a survivor, a warrior... Although I just went to a next stage it’s still not easy because I now just have to fight a bigger demon of opposition but I feel strong”* [P7]. Another one added, *“... You beat me up, you rape me, you know what, and it’s not going to change me! (Beating the table) when I wake up I am still the same lesbian you have tortured. ”* [P3].

Sexual minority community

The findings have shown that some, although very few, individual homosexual students are able to cope due to the support they get from their minority group. One of the participants stated that, *“after going to a tertiary school in Rustenburg, found out that these things are there when I came to the university that’s when I came to the reality that I am gay... I feel a bit comfortable and I am accepting it because this group (pointing at the participants, are always trying to help me”* [P9]. Another stated, *“I will rather say because you see a lot of people who are like you... then we say it is a build-up to what you thought you are, exactly unlike when they are all straight”* [P6].

Some studies also asserted that the experiences of psychological distress among an individual may diminish or disappear while in the presence of interpersonal ties that offer social support and display same characteristics (Bos *et al.*, 2008; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). The sexual minority community represents, to some participants although not all, an element of identity tolerance and hope.

Identity tolerance

Identity tolerance refers to the individual's ability to live with what they have identified about themselves despite the rejection (Cass, 1979). In this study, the participants have managed Identity tolerance which is the third stage of identity formation through their sexual minority group as it has helped them to lessen the feeling of isolation from the broader campus society.

Conclusion



The principal outcome of this study which is also a new contribution to the field of research on this topic is that, the students foresee rejection and discrimination in their future as professionals due to their sexual orientation. The fear of not being accepted by their society, colleagues and those above them in their workplaces in the future leads to thinking of hiding their identity in order to get employment and move up in the hierarchy of their work and also to protect their loved ones, for example, their family members which leads to multiple identities. This phenomenon contributes to the participant's identity crisis that is leaving them more vulnerable to some chronic stressors. These stressors later affect the psychological well-being of participants. It is then that resilience becomes a concern.

The emotional quality of the contact with other gay or lesbian people within the campus is the one that keeps the participants going as they realise they are not alone. Support from friends within the group seems to be beneficial to some of the individuals. These friends contribute positively to the well-being of each member of the group as they provide them with emotional support. Based on the four indicators of resilience stated earlier in this research, the resilience of the sexual minority group in a South African University is moderate, that is, it is neither high nor low. The participants have shown only two indicators

of resilience, namely: a) friends as a source of resilience and b) the sexual minority community as a source of resilience. The individual participants have had positive contact with members of the gay and lesbian community on campus and are able to accept and integrate their sexual orientation with that of the group (Troiden, 1989). The other two indicators of resilience, a) family as a supportive environment and b) societal support, were not found to be present among the participants.

Recommendations

It has become clear that there is the need for support from healthcare providers, for example, student councillors on campus which can help enhance psychological wellbeing of homosexual students through education and a supportive attitude to the homosexual orientation. This will help individuals who struggle with prejudice and discrimination from families or other sources. This, in turn, may facilitate self-acceptance and psychological wellbeing. Further studies should contribute to the development of effective coping strategies and facilitate ways in which individuals can disclose their sexual orientation to increase possibilities of positive feedback.

Practical recommendations:

- Facilitating homosexual students' adjustment at university would entail helping them to build a positive self-esteem which, in turn, could enable help in mastering their environment and improving their psychological well-being.
- There is a need to educate the sexual minority students about the possible negative outcomes of using substances as a way of coping with discrimination and prejudice and involving healthcare professionals.

- Professionals such as campus counsellors and nurses can facilitate group discussions, explore individual coping resources and nurture sexual minority confidence.
- Sensitivity training for staff members, for example, lecturers.
- There is less research done qualitatively than quantitatively on the topic and therefore there is limited literature.
- Due to the limited number of research work done under the topic, resilience and sexual minority, the researcher recommends more research done under the topic.

Limitations of the study.

- The limitation of using qualitative research in this study is that the findings cannot be generalised as it is only applicable to a certain group of people and their way of life.
- It was challenging to get gay participants as some of them were not willing to participate in the study due to the fear of being identified by other people.

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