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“INTO NJE – IT’S JUST A THING...”: BEING A LESBIAN IN A RURAL AREA

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ABSTRACT

The South African Constitution prohibits discrimination against individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation, yet the experiences of lesbians across various contexts is different. A thematic analysis of 10 in-depth qualitative interviews with lesbian students from rural areas expands the limited knowledge base on this issue. Although these students are studying in an urban area, this article explores the experience of lesbians in rural areas in the light of the prevailing discourses on homosexuality. The findings revealed that due to certain religious and traditional beliefs, lesbianism continues to be perceived by many, for example, as “just a thing”, unnatural, a passing phase, an embarrassment and a sin. These prevailing constructions often deterred lesbian youths from being themselves, thus forcing them to manage multiple identities between rural and urban contexts. Social workers as well as other human rights advocates should, through their research and practice, aim to make communities aware of human rights discourses that promote affirmation, safety and support for the LGBTQI population in rural areas.

Keywords: lesbian, rural, urban, culture, religion.

INTRODUCTION

Although South Africa has one of the most liberal constitutions in the world, sexual orientation and gender identity are still highly misunderstood (Malatji, 2016; Ramirez, 2020). Some people still perceive same-sex relations as unnatural, unbiblical, a Western culture import and

Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 2022: 58(4)

therefore un-African (Masuku, 2015; Naidu & Mutambara, 2017; Schaff, 2010). This is especially the case in conservative contexts where people are still deeply entrenched in traditional cultural and religious beliefs, and where non-conforming sexual identities are not common, such as in rural contexts (Boso, 2013; Dahl, Scott & Peace, 2015; Malatji, 2016; Masuku, 2015). Unlike the rural areas, urban areas are often perceived as spaces of freedom where gay and lesbian identities are constructed and made visible, and unsurprisingly they feature in most sexual minority studies (Boso, 2013; Butler & Astbury, 2005; Dahl *et al.*, 2015; Masuku, 2015).

This study is unique in exploring experiences of lesbian students who emanate from rural areas in two South African provinces, namely KwaZulu-Natal (N=8) and Eastern Cape (N=2). Although post 1994, the government has made noticeable accomplishments, life in rural areas remains beset by problems such as unemployment, lack of infrastructure and poor socio-economic conditions (Financial & Fiscal Commission, 2018). Individuals who come from rural areas are often categorised as disadvantaged, but the authors acknowledge that the notion of “rural” is not monolithic, but geographically, culturally and socially diverse. This article aligns with the claims of the Australian authors Lewis and Markwell (2021) that urban experiences provide social and economic liberation from the potentially constraining rural spaces. The way that lesbianism is experienced within the constraints of rural South Africa is the focus of this article. By presenting the experiences of lesbians in rural areas the authors are responding to the call by Lewis and Markwell (2021:261) to provide “a public space/time for LGBTQI individuals to be acknowledged as legitimate citizens”. This paper presents some of the findings of a larger Master’s study which aimed to:

- Explore and describe the transition experiences of lesbian students from rural areas to a university in the KwaZulu-Natal province;
- Explore the expectations that lesbian students had of university with respect to their lesbian identity;
- Explore whether these expectations were confirmed or not;
- Explore the support services offered by the university for lesbians as a part of the LGBTQI community.

Based on the first objective, this article deliberately devotes attention to participants’ “rural” experiences, which are less documented, especially in South Africa, a gap acknowledged by some scholars (Govender, Maotoana, & Nel, 2019; Mutambara, 2015; Naidu & Mutambara, 2017). Govender *et al.* (2019:139), for example, note how lesbians experience “social exclusion and isolation as their behaviours are not in line with social and moral norms in their communities.” Yet it is this diversity within and across rural contexts that provided insights into the multiple experiences of the participants in the study.

RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL NORMS

Cultural contexts can alter perceptions and understandings of sexuality in different times and places (Herdt cited in Patrick, 2014). Traditional beliefs and religious perceptions combined *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 2022: 58(4)

with homophobic stereotypes have resulted in traumatic experiences for lesbians and gays in South Africa and around the world (Barrington, 2012; Brikkels, 2014; Butler & Astbury 2005; Dahl *et al.*, 2015; Etcheverria, 2018; Kazyak, 2012; Khaxas & Frank, 2013; Nkosi & Masson, 2017; Patrick, 2014). A 2017 *Times Live* article entitled “If you’re gay, steer clear from the Eastern Cape” (Hosken, 2017) made headlines in South Africa. Not only is the Eastern Cape the most predominantly rural province, followed by KZN, it has been declared the province with the highest percentage of homophobic attacks in South Africa, while Gauteng and the Western Cape are the most tolerant of homosexuals (Hosken, 2017).

Sociocultural norms tend to naturalise and support heterosexuality at the expense of other forms of sexuality. As a result of societal expectations, individuals often find themselves forsaking their needs to achieve a desired normalcy. In his study of lesbian traditional healers from Inanda, Mkasi (2013) revealed how, out of fear, they chose to get married to men, while secretly dating other women, careful not to raise any suspicions. This secret performance of an identity, we argue, inadvertently reaffirms the construction of homosexuality as deviant identity and maintains the status quo of heterosexuality.

Transgressing heterosexual norms is often viewed as a threat, with some even resorting to cultural remedies in pursuit of “normalcy” (Ryan, 2009). Rudwick’s (2010) study participants revealed how some of their families would slaughter livestock and perform rituals in with the hope of their becoming “real men”. After several failed attempts, it was often the women who accepted their family member’s gay identities (Ghosh, 2020; Khaxas & Frank, 2013; Ryan, 2009). For centuries the debate over the place of homosexuality in Christianity has been and still is an issue (Nkosi & Masson, 2017; Ravhuhali, Maluleke, Mboweni & Nendauni, 2019). While some believe that these two forms of expression can co-exist, others argue that homosexuality goes against biblical and Christian values. Khaxas and Frank (2013) asserted that South African LGBTQI people have been excluded from churches because of their sexual identity, and some pastors even vilify them in their sermons. The authors point out that as a result the spiritual needs of LGBTQI people are often disregarded. Consequences of transgressing sociocultural norms also include verbal and physical abuse, corrective rape and spoiled family relationships.

VERBAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE

Regardless of class, age, gender or ethnicity, homophobic violence is a reality for individuals perceived as not sexually conforming. Butler and Astbury (2005) highlighted some of the LGBTQI issues in South Africa. They stated that young gay males have been beaten to make them real men. Butler and Astbury also noted that isolation is one of the key issues confronting many LGBTQI youths, resulting in mental health ramifications such as internalised homophobia, suicidal ideation and lowered self-esteem (Breshears & Lubbe-de Beer, 2016; Letsoalo, 2016). Some LGBTQI people choose to remain invisible as a means of protecting themselves against all homophobic acts directed towards them, but that is not the case for all LGBTQI identifying individuals. Instead of resorting to remaining invisible, some adopt

coping mechanisms such as complying with the expected social behaviours (Brown & Diale, 2017).

CORRECTIVE RAPE

Corrective rape is one of the most common types of physical abuse experiences that the LGBTQI community faces, particularly lesbians. Rape in general is a common crime in South Africa, and instead of such criminal and brutal behaviours declining, they seem to be increasing. Rapes are occurring with the intention to “correct” instances where rapists believe they are correcting behaviour unbecoming of a woman, such as wearing pants, being butch in manner, or refusing to marry and have children (van der Schyff, 2018). According to Middleton (2011), lesbians are raped by men and sometimes the men are authorised to do this by the lesbian’s family members as a means of curing them of “masculine” behaviour, or of homosexuality. According to Swarr (2012) and Westman (2019), society perceives lesbians as both a threat to masculinity and as unavailable for men, and this perception unfortunately often leads to physical attacks and corrective rape (Sithole, 2015). Koraan and Geduld (2015) stated that on average 10 lesbians are raped each week in South Africa to “correct” their sexual orientation. Naidoo (2018) revealed that since 2000, nearly 40 lesbians have been killed and confirms that an average of about 10 lesbians are raped every week by men, with some justifying their actions as necessary to “correct” the sexual orientation of the women (Naidoo, 2018). Sadly, when these crimes are reported, they are less likely to receive the necessary attention when reported by lesbian women as opposed to women in heterosexual relationships.

FAMILY REJECTION

It is not uncommon for LGBTQI individuals to be rejected by their family members. However, being rejected affects people differently. Globally, at least 51% of LGBTI youth have experienced discrimination within their families, often through socio-emotional rejection along with economic sanctions (Ghosh, 2020). As noted by Abou-Chadi and Finnigan, (2019), because of their sociocultural beliefs, some families will not only disown the homosexual family member, but those who are seen to be supporting them also face possible rejection. Exposure to such accounts might prevent LGBTQI people from identifying family members who are genuinely supportive (Ramirez, 2020).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study used social constructionism as the theoretical framework to explore how a rural context shaped students’ experiences of being lesbian. As the first explicit proponents of the theory, Berger and Luckman (1991) posited that reality is socially constructed, and we share the reality of our everyday lives with others. The use of social constructionism is widely accepted in social work, as it embraces people’s diverse perceptions and constructions of reality, including sexual orientation, religion, cultural practices etc. (Schenck, 2019). This theoretical framework was relevant in examining the way that lesbian students narrated their diverse experiences in the rural areas.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study was carried out at a university in the KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. At least 75% of the student population is Black African from rural, disadvantaged backgrounds (UKZN, 2017). Across all campuses there are resources to assist students adapt to the university environment as well as to be themselves without discrimination. For example, students who self-identify as LGBTQI have access to the campus based LGBTQI forum – which was a significant recruitment site for the study participants. Moreover, the university as research site was geographically convenient as the intention was to have more than one interview with each participant, as qualitative depth was a priority.

Research approach

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. Babbie and Mouton (2010) described qualitative research as an approach that allows individuals to describe their life experiences in an in-depth manner. A qualitative approach assists researchers in exploring and understanding, rather than rushing to explain human experiences (Fouché & Schurink, 2011). This approach assisted the researchers not only to understand the life experiences of the students, but to gain insight into the contextual meanings that were attached to those experiences. With the researchers' social work experience of building rapport and conducting interviews in an empathic manner, a qualitative approach assisted in understanding the participants' experiences.

Research design

A descriptive-exploratory research design proved appropriate as it allowed for open-ended conversations with participants (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2011), thus yielding detailed contextual data. A descriptive research design allowed for the description of the lesbian experiences of rural participants, as narrated by them. Although there was some flexibility in the research process, this design assisted in narrowing the focus on what was being studied. The aim was not to “understand a broad social issue” (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:321), but merely to describe its occurrence within a certain group from a particular context. Because the context in question is fairly under-researched, an exploratory research design assisted in gaining a more in-depth understanding of how being a lesbian in rural areas was experienced.

Population and sampling

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were utilised. Both these sampling strategies are widely used in qualitative research (Denscombe, 2010; Tracy, 2014), and were beneficial to this qualitative study as they assisted in recruiting participants who could provide in-depth information. Through the purposive sampling process, six participants were selected and consented to participate in the study. This recruitment was undertaken through posters posted around campus as well as the announcements made at the LGBTQI forum meetings. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and further informed that their willingness to participate was voluntary and that withdrawal from the study was permitted. Given the nature of the study, achieving the minimum sample proved difficult, thus requiring flexibility in the sampling techniques, hence the employment of snowball sampling.

Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 2022: 58(4)

Because interviews with the purposively sampled participants had commenced, participants were requested to assist with recruiting additional students with the experience of being lesbian and coming from rural areas. Consequently, four participants were selected through snowball sampling, making the total number of participants ten. Although a number of lesbian students were willing to participate, not all of them qualified to be part of the study. As Yin (2011) asserted, snowballing also needs to be purposeful and not undertaken simply for convenience. Therefore, the following inclusion criteria were applied for both purposive and snowball sampling:

- Full-time self-proclaimed lesbian registered student for any course at the selected university in the KwaZulu-Natal province in 2019/2020;
- Self-identifying as lesbian;
- Emanating from a rural area in South Africa;
- Consenting to participate in the study.

Through purposive and snowball sampling, 10 participants met the above inclusion criteria (see Demographics Table). Data from 10 participants were collected using a semi-structured interview guide, which facilitated the sharing of experiences in an unrestricted manner (Denscombe, 2010). Interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, and all participants agreed to be voice recorded. Participants were allowed to select their preferred venue for the interviews. Five interviews took place at the university premises; one interview took place at an off-campus university residence; and the last four were conducted online through video calls, where the participants were at their respective homes.¹ The researcher had to go back and ask some participants further questions for clarification. This improved the richness of the data and the trustworthiness of the findings.

Data collection

Due to the sensitive nature of the study, the data collection tool needed to be flexible to allow for in-depth conversations between the researcher and the participants (Denscombe, 2010; Tracy, 2014). The interviews were conducted in both IsiZulu (later translated) and English by the first author who is a young, black African female student, who also disclosed her rural background. Even then, there was a need to enter into the lives of lesbian students sensitively, which was consistently reflected upon during supervision as part of reflexivity in the process. This included the researcher acknowledging her role as a student, also from a rural area, and being aware in her language of not reinforcing normative discriminatory constructions. The data reflected here emerges from the experiences of lesbian students in rural areas, which responds to objective one of the larger study which aimed to: explore and describe the transition experiences of lesbian students from rural areas to a university in the KwaZulu-Natal province.

¹ The university issued revised protocols for conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 2022: 58(4)

Data analysis

Data were transcribed and thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcripts. The first step in analysing the data was reading and re-reading transcripts. The researcher did this to immerse herself in the data to the extent that she became familiar with the depth and breadth of the contents (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Once familiar with the data, the researcher then began to identify codes, which are the data features that seemed interesting and meaningful (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After colour-coding all the data from the transcriptions, the researcher kept these coded transcripts open and created a new document titled “Codes and themes”. There she created a heading in bold font for each research question and a heading in bold font for interesting or unfamiliar information, and then copied and pasted under each heading the data of the relevant colour, drawing them from all ten interview transcripts.

Neuman (2014) noted that after organising the data into categories, the researcher then needs to create themes. The researcher should then identify the relationship between codes, subthemes and themes (Maguire & Dalahunt, 2017). At the end of this step, the themes should describe patterns in the data relevant to the research questions. The researcher then reviewed the themes that had been identified and refined, improved and separated some as advised by Maguire and Delahunt (2017). This step was a back-and-forth process, and in the end four main themes were identified, with associated sub-themes.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness and avoid any biases that could affect the study, the researcher used a reflection journal, which assisted in ensuring a degree of objectivity in the research study. The credibility of the study was enhanced through the extended engagements with the study participants. This provided sufficient time to strengthen the researcher-participant relationship (Fouché & Schurink, 2011). Moreover, all participants were allowed to read the transcribed interviews to confirm that what has been transcribed reflects their own experiences and not the researcher’s preferences. In addition, the first author avoided basing findings on one interview, but sought to identify themes emerging in several interviews. A recurrent theme indicates that the issue is shared among a wider group (Denscombe, 2010), and therefore the researcher can refer to it with rather more confidence than any issue which stems from the words of a single participant.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by a university Ethics Committee (Reference: HSSREC/00000506/2019). Gatekeeper permission was obtained from the same university’s registrar in order to access registered university students. Participants were informed in advance about the purpose of the study, and their anonymity assured before they signed the consent form. The right to withdraw from the study was reiterated throughout, as well as the risks and benefits of participating in the research study, The researcher also made debriefing services available, however, no participants required these services.

Study limitations

The study was not without limitations. Setting up meetings was problematic because of exams, and for some being at home meant always being busy with house chores. The sampling size of the study was limited to only 10, and the researcher acknowledges that the experiences of lesbian students from rural areas in other campuses of the university and institutions may be different from those presented here. However, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth conversations for all the necessary information to be collected and for participants to also share subjects of interest to them.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Interestingly, even without being probed participants felt the need to categorise their sexual identity, thus proving how “lesbian” is also a diverse identity, with multiple sub-identities. Below is a table indicating participants’ demographic details, pseudonyms were used for the participants’ names.

Table 1: Participant’s demographics

Pseudonym	Hometown	Sexual identity (Self-described)	Age	Year of Study	Lives with:	Status (out/closeted)
Yandisa	Eastern Cape - Flagstaff. Deep rural area.	Lesbian/Queer	19	2 nd level	Maternal family; Grandmother, aunts, uncles, and cousins	Out but complicated
Sibani	Eshowe-Mbongolwane. Deep rural area.	Lesbian-stud	23	5 th Masters	Paternal family	Out
Lwandile	Mnambithi. Rural area.	Lesbian-butcht	18	1 st level	Mother and siblings	Out
Lihle	Eshowe-Mlalazi area. Deep rural area.	Lesbian-stud	20	3 rd level	Paternal family, uncles, aunts and cousins	Closeted to family. Out to friends.
Sinazo	Richmond-Nsikeneni area	Lesbian-soft butcht	20	2 nd level	Parents and one male sibling	Closeted to family. Out to friends.
Nontando	Pietermaritzburg-Mpolweni area	Lesbian-butcht	21	2 nd level	Parents and siblings	Closeted to family. Out to friends.
Samkele	Mzimkhulu-KwaMthwane. Deep rural area.	Lesbian	21	2 nd level	Maternal aunt and two brothers	Closeted

Kuhle	Lusikisiki Deep rural.	Lesbian-butch	20	3 rd year	Maternal grandmother, cousins and siblings	Out to some members of the family including her mother. Out to friends.
Zama	Mtubatuba. Semi-rural.	Lesbian-femme	22	4 th Honours	Parents and siblings	Closeted to family. Out to close friends.
Nolwazi	Ulundi. Semi-rural.	Lesbian	22	4 th Honours	Currently, maternal family. Growing up, paternal Family.	Out to maternal family and friends. Closeted to paternal family.

Ten self-proclaimed lesbian university students from rural areas met the criteria to participate in the study, as shown in the above table. Although all the participants self-identified as lesbian, they had different categories alongside the lesbian identity, even within the lesbian identity. Two participants identified as lesbian only; Yandisa identified as lesbian/Queer, but that she likes to identify as lesbian the most. Two other participants in this study identified as lesbian-studs, a category Kerr (2013) described as lesbians who possess feminine personality traits and present an appearance that is masculine at the same time. One participant identified as lesbian-soft butch, which is another term for studs (Ramirez, 2020), the difference between lesbian-stud and lesbian-butch being the masculine exterior. Three participants identified as lesbian-butch; Zama described butch as: “with butches, it’s when a woman has a muscular physical appearance”. One participant identified as lesbian-femme; they are described as lesbians who fit the traditional heteronormative ideal of femininity by dressing in women's clothing (Love, 2016; Ramirez, 2020).

All participants in this study came from different rural areas, as per the stipulated criteria in the methodology. Moreover, they were on different levels of study and Kerr (2013) makes the point that lesbians of different races, ages and classes have different life experiences; they are exposed to different environments, involved in different types of interactions, have access to different resources, and may therefore have different perspectives and experiences.

Out of the 10 participants interviewed, four reported to have disclosed their sexual identity to friends and at least one family member; they assumed that most of their family members were aware of their sexual identity, although they had never openly disclosed their sexual identity to them. Three participants reported to have disclosed their orientation to their families, one from the three had disclosed only to her maternal family, three participants indicated to have never shared anything about their sexual identity or practices to any family member. All the participants mentioned their family experiences, and this included both positive and negative experiences.

Key findings

Given how important context is in shaping one’s reality, all participants were asked to “paint a picture” of their rural contexts. This was to facilitate a greater understanding of their *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 2022: 58(4)*

backgrounds, the way their lesbian identities are perceived and understood, and to also understand the participants' personal perceptions of the rural contexts as far as their lesbian identities and homosexuality at large are concerned. Different cultures and societies' understandings of same-sex orientation differs widely, so does the way it is practised or performed (Academy of Science of South Africa, 2015). That is, the way in which same-sex orientation is understood and practised, and the concepts used to refer to it, are culturally relative (Burr, 1995) and context specific (Swan, 2018), which is consistent with the social constructionist lens adopted for this study.

Theme 1: “Into nje...” [It’s just a thing...]

Most participants' descriptions of their communities' take on their lesbian identities and homosexuality at large included the words not understood, suggesting that there is a lack of understanding and misinformation. Moreover, some participants stated that homosexuality is just a thing that (has) is given no meaning and has no place in society.

Uh, they don't understand it, they don't understand this thing.... another thing is that people don't come out because of the environment we live in uyang'thola [you get me]? They don't understand it. Even me, they don't understand me, but no one has ever confronted me and asked me what's happening. To them, it just something that a person does if they like. It's just something that they do not understand... it's just a thing; they don't pay attention to it, it is of no interest to them, they don't get involved, and they don't understand it. (Samkele)

Samkele persistently referred to her sexual orientation as “this thing”, as she was explaining that in her rural area lesbianism or homosexuality is taken or rather understood as “just a thing” that one “does or practises” if one likes. As mentioned above, the concepts that we use are culturally specific (Burr, 1995), so Samkele's reference to her sexuality as “this thing” is relative to how her community understands it. Samkele also mentioned that they do not understand her and her sexuality; she said the people in her rural area never address it as would be expected since it is so unfamiliar, implying that it is not understood or believed to be “real” like heterosexuality.

Referring to her rural community's understanding of being lesbian, Zama stated that she does not think being a lesbian or homosexuality is taken seriously in her rural area. She also added that most homosexual people in her area have not come out because of the fear of being judged and discriminated against.

At Mtuba I don't think they take gay, lesbian and transgendered people seriously, as a result, most people stay in the closet...if we were to disclose our sexualities to maybe our families, they would discriminate us, you know how it is in rural areas... they have that mentality or perspective that if you're gay or lesbian, there is something wrong with you, something is not right, you need a traditional ritual or something. So, they really don't accept it even now. (Zama)

Zama suspected that if they were to come out in their rural areas, that there would be a possibility that their families would not accept them. However, despite her beliefs and *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 2022: 58(4)

suspicious, there was also a possibility that their families were waiting for them to disclose their sexuality. Zama's account suggests that the people in her rural area are traditional and they believe that homosexuality/lesbianism is not natural, and can thus be rectified through traditional rituals. The child being lesbian/gay means there is a ritual that might have gone wrong or, there is a ritual that was not done for the child. Zama's account is consistent with the findings in Rudwick's (2010) study, where a few participants pointed out that their parents and family members would perform Zulu rituals and slaughter livestock hoping to turn them into a straight person. Similarly, Mthembu (2014) found that in some traditional African communities they believe that having a gay or lesbian child is the doing of the ancestors, that they failed to protect them if they allowed such a thing to happen; and this is a punishment for their less desirable actions taken in the course of their lives.

Lwandile noted that her community is not welcoming of lesbians, and lesbian relationships are seen as a curse.

Eh, they don't understand it uyang'thola? [Do you get me?] Because even though there are gays in our rural area, what I've realised when I go there is that you do find others like me, but then they are scared to come out because of the environment surrounding them. A girl dating another girl is a curse... (Lwandile)

Correspondingly, Kuhle also shared that lesbian relationships are seen as disgusting in her rural area. She explained that when she started dating her girlfriend publicly, the people in her rural area used to say things like:

Haybo! What are these two doing in front of us, what nonsense is this? Such disgust!
(Kuhle)

The accounts presented above shed light on some of the intolerant practices inflicted upon lesbians in some communities. Moreover, it is also evident that the beliefs, perceptions and language used in the communities has implications for the way that some of the participants view and refer to their sexual orientation. It is clear that most lesbians in rural areas find it challenging to come out and be their true selves.

Theme 2: It is a passing phase

Ryan (2009) and Caitlin (2019) suggest that many assume that being gay is a passing phase that youths will grow out of as they grow older. Some think that youths may decide to be gay as a result of the influence of their friends, or if they read or hear about homosexuality from others.

They believe that it's some fashion that I took from the streets, they think it's a phase. It's just that I really took long to come out of the closet, so I don't blame them. So, they believe that it's some style that I'm going to get tired of someday, they think I'm pretending... (Lihle)

Lihle suspected that her being in the closet for too long might have contributed to the perception of her lesbian identity being a phase. Sinazo also shared that in her rural area there are lesbian and gay people, and people often make remarks like:

Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 2022: 58(4)

This one went to the suburbs and came back dating other girls. (Sinazo)

Just like the dominant African belief that homosexuality is a European and American negative influence and thus un-African (Epprecht, 2008; Khaxas & Frank, 2013), Sinazo's account suggests that some people in her village think of being a lesbian as a style or some "fashion" that can be adopted like Lihle stated, and in this case it comes from urban areas. They have the perception of homosexuality as an urban import with what girls "come back" to their rural area, which then suggests that there are particular understandings that people associate with certain contexts. In addition, people use their knowledge to explain why and how people's sexualities are manifested, as asserted by Kuhle:

*Some people in my rural area think when you're lesbian you're just passing a stage or a teenage stage, like 'nooo man it's just a phase it will pass'. They have this mentality that one is a lesbian because she was hurt by boys, or she has a bad experience with boys... they say things like you see this one just needs a di** [penis] so that she can change this thing that she is. (Kuhle)*

Kuhle's account suggests that some people in her village also do not think of homosexuality as "real" because of the perception that one becomes a lesbian because of a bad experience in a heterosexual relationship. Kuhle's account also emphasises the values of a heteronormative society. Khoir (2020) stated that in a heteronormative society heterosexuality is the human default sexual orientation, and as a result being lesbian is taken as a choice that can be rectified by having sex with a man. Moreover, Kuhle's assertion suggests that in her community they believe that it is a "must" for a woman to have sexual relations with men; sexual relations with another woman should and can be corrected. Such perceptions are not surprising considering that four years ago the Eastern Cape Province, where Kuhle is from, was reported as one of the most homophobic provinces in the country (Hosken, 2017).

Similarly, Lihle shared how during her high school years there were lesbians at her school (in her rural area) who were called derogatory names and discriminated against especially by male learners who used to pass remarks like:

Ay ay, this one is just a bitch, she's now tired of men and has resorted to dating girls. (Lihle)

Here, similar to Kuhle's earlier assertion, lesbianism is seen as a result of a bad heterosexual relationship experience. Moreover, not only is being a lesbian seen as being the result of a bad experience with men, but it also means having to deal with derogatory remarks and insults too.

Sinazo described her rural area's perception of lesbians:

... [They think] it's like it's a choice, you can't wake up and say ok today I'm gonna be straight; yabo this is deep, it comes from within. But then in the community they believe you are possessed, or it's a stage. (Sinazo)

Adding to the perception that being lesbian is a stage or a choice, some of Sinazo's community members associate being lesbians with demon possession, which could be influenced by their religious beliefs. Interestingly, three participants (Lihle, Samkele and Sinazo) said that they *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 2022: 58(4)*

knew people who were “lesbian” or rather experienced “being lesbian as a phase” and “changed to being straight” as they grew up. The dominance of the construction of being a lesbian as passing phase was thus not uncommon, even for the participants.

Information that someone is lesbian may be shocking in many rural areas, as mentioned earlier, particularly because of the relatively few openly lesbian or gay people in most small communities (Boso, 2013). As a result of limited exposure to same-sex attraction and lifestyles, seeing a self-proclaimed gay or lesbian person “changing” to being “straight” is highly likely to contribute to the development of a perception of homosexuality as a “passing phase”. This is even more likely if people do not understand sexual diversity, as participants noted in their accounts.

Yet on the other hand, some participants reported that there are people who are accepting of their lesbian identities, even though the majority of the community are not. Kuhle stated:

...Ya there are those who accept you, they tell you that they saw you early in your childhood, they say things like ‘noo man I’m really not surprised that this one is lesbian now’... (Kuhle)

Kuhle’s comment illustrates that rural people are not “completely in the dark” about homosexuality, and that not everyone in rural areas is homophobic or intolerant (Patrick, 2014), as suggested in other participants’ narratives. The idea that homosexuality is expected to pass soon suggests that it is seen as an embarrassment (with a desire to minimise it), which the participants confirmed in their experiences in some rural places.

Theme 3: “...ihlazo nje...” (“...it’s an embarrassment...”)

Yandisa described her rural area as very traditional *basadla ngesidala*, meaning they are traditional and highly conservative. In her rural area it is believed that being lesbian means one is a hermaphrodite.

I guess they have that mentality that if you are like this, and dressing like a boy, for them, they think that there is something boyish in you, like literally having a penis...I was kinda like surprised when they asked me if I have both a vagina and a penis [laughing], that was last year [2018]. (Yandisa)

Yandisa was surprised that they do not comprehend the extent of her sexuality. Mkasi (2013) shed some light on this, explaining that hermaphrodites are called *uncukumbili* in Zulu contexts. In her study Mkasi (2013) found that having a hermaphrodite child is taken as the same as giving birth to a disabled child, which is often perceived as a curse (or disgrace). Moreover, the birth of such children is interpreted as a punishment by the ancestors for disobedience on the part of the parents. The stigma attached to this belief “results in negative attitudes towards the child and the parents by the society” (Mkasi, 2013:33). From Mkasi’s (2013) findings and Yandisa’s experiences, it is not surprising that some people think she had two sexual organs, which is an aberration, and this is an embarrassment.

Nolwazi described her rural area as a place that holds traditions to the highest regard, and homosexuality is an embarrassment.

Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 2022: 58(4)

It's just an unfamiliar thing, but in most, uhm it's just not been a conversation and when it is, it's a negative conversation... it's an embarrassment that people should not focus on. Uhm, quite honestly, it's not a well-accepted thing, there'll always be some form of bullying, some form of homophobia against them, some form of uncomfotability. So, I can just say that some of the community is ok, let people be, but there's not complete acceptance, it's just tolerance cause really, they don't chase away or harm people just cause they are gay. So, I'd say it's in between. (Nolwazi)

The concepts of sexuality and sexual orientation are unfamiliar in many African traditional cultures (Butler & Astbury, 2005; Boso, 2013; Epprecht, 2008). Nolwazi asserted that the existence of gays and lesbians is not something that is usually or openly talked about, and there is no space for it even to be discussed. In her study, Patrick (2014) noted that one participant recounted how the idea of homosexuality was not spoken about in his rural area, just as in Samkele's community. Sbani shared a similar experience. Sbani described her community as homophobic "to such an extent that they ignore that there is ever such a thing". On the other hand, as much as Samkele expressed how her lesbian identity is not addressed by the locals in her area, it seems as though people do talk about it among themselves, even though some do not have the words to describe what they sense/see. They do know, however, that she is not acting the way women are "supposed" to act, and they associate stepping out of a gender role with being non-heterosexual (Lo, Kim, Small, & Chan, 2019).

For example, Samkele shared that she once overheard two males from her rural area talking. The other one asked:

What is happening with this girl? The other one replied, ey, I also don't know, cause when other girls are in their traditional clothing, you see her wearing it together with them, after that you see her like this and playing football, I don't understand what's going on.

Moreover, she said that there was a guy from her village who was trying to court her, and when she turned him down he responded and said, "Ay, I already heard that *uyi stabane* [you're gay], I came to you already aware of that". *Istabane* is an Nguni word for homosexual (Sithole, 2015).

Based on the above excerpts, it appears that Samkele's lesbian identity is confusing to some people in her rural area. Clearly, a female playing soccer is not an everyday occurrence in Samkele's rural area. What confuses people is that she has been seen wearing traditional clothes with other girls, which is normal and expected of girls in their area, and so to them seeing her participating in both confused them. Perhaps it is not that people do not address her lesbian identity; they just do not know how to address it directly with her, since is it not "normal" and thus an embarrassing conversation to have. On the other hand, the guy that came to approach her knew that she is a *stabane* and even with that understanding, he still continued to ridicule her. This illustrates some of the intolerant practices inflicted upon lesbians in various communities.

Lihle narrated that in her rural area, heterosexuality is the only definition of sexuality: *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 2022: 58(4)*

...their definition of gender involves what a woman should do for a man, in order to be woman enough or what a man should have, to be man enough. Uhh, the society does not find it normal that one may be attracted to people of the same gender. They believe that it is an embarrassment, and that it is something that can be rectified you see. They believe that there are remedies to homosexuality, and that is totally wrong. (Lihle)

As in most societies, gender norms seem to be the determining factor for sexuality in Lihle's rural area, which social construction theorists (Berger & Luckmann, 1991) refer to as dominant (and often damaging) ideologies of femininity and masculinity. Marcus and Harper (2015) define gender norms as a set of informal rules and shared social expectations that distinguish expected behaviours on the basis of gender. As Lihle stated, a woman being attracted to another woman is not seen as normal, because it automatically means that she is deviating from what is expected of her, which is "what she can do for a man". In traditional societies like Lihle's, heterosexual attraction is assumed to occur naturally and, in contrast, homosexual attraction is then seen as unnatural, deviant and an embarrassment (Lo *et al.*, 2019); a woman's value lies in her use-value for men (Westman, 2019). As result, "being a lesbian means you are not 'woman enough' and that is an embarrassment... Not only to the society's expectation but to yourself as well", Lihle added. These beliefs are the consequence of the high normalisation of heterosexuality (Lo *et al.*, 2019; Msibi, 2013).

Sbani also shared that when she was explaining her sexuality to her mother, she mentioned:

Me being attracted to the same sex doesn't mean I'm not a girl anymore, and it doesn't mean that when at home I will not do things like cleaning and cooking.

Sbani having to explain that to her mother shows how much weight gender roles carry in some contexts, especially so in some rural areas (Love, 2016; Swan, 2018). Sbani's account also suggests that Sbani's mother might have had an idea that Sbani being a lesbian might mean she will change and fully adopt the exclusive gender roles of males. Gender roles often stipulate that males do not do housework or the house chores, which are often taken as women's work, as mentioned by Sbani. In fact, Swarr (2012) found that butches were often exempt from housework, laundry and cooking, and attributed this to their masculine appearance. Sbani identified as a soft butch (stud), and hence her mother's comments reflect the specific context.

Francis and Msibi (2011) observed that lesbian women are perceived as assuming men's role in society. Correspondingly, Kuhle stated that not only are lesbians seen as wanting to behave like men and abandoning household duties "meant" for women, but they – more especially masculine lesbians – are also seen as a threat to the masculinity of heterosexual men (Lo *et al.*, 2019).

Most people here, more especially males, think we as lesbians, butches, are trying to be men. They come to you with that mentality that you're trying to be a man but it's really not like that. (Kuhle)

Lesbians pose a major threat to heteronormative values by being unavailable for men as sexual partners; moreover, they also challenge gender expectations through their expression of masculinities (Ramirez, 2020; Westman, 2019).

Nontando described her rural area as very conservative.

They don't accept something like this, others do accept it, but it takes time. Yes, we do exist, but we don't like to be out in the open because our families do not like that, we usually just stay in our homes. (Nontando)

Nontando asserts that some people in her rural area do accept homosexual people even though it takes time, which perhaps emphasises the need for educational empowerment on sexuality in rural areas. Like Nontando, the majority of participants reported that there are other lesbians and gay people in their communities; however they choose to stay in the closet because they fear being judged and discriminated against. The general social climate is usually hostile to homosexual people (Ramirez, 2020). Nontando asserting that they do not like being visible suggests that they are uncomfortable because of the conservative values of the community. There is also an assumption that gender non-conforming lesbians and gays flaunt their sexuality. Moreover, Nontando mentioned that their families do not like them to be visible; “they stay at home”, and this might be for a number of reasons. These include that they are trying to protect themselves from the hostile social climate, or they perceive that their sexuality is an embarrassment that other people should not know about; and even if the neighbours know, they should not “flaunt” it.

Lihle reported that her family members sometimes tell her that “You’re a bad example to your siblings”, because she practises her sexuality openly. She added that there is a perception that her siblings could “learn” homosexuality from her because she is the eldest, and she is supposed be “showing them the right way”. Burr (2003:44) noted that lesbians can be seen as a potentially corrupting influence upon children. Yandisa also pointed out that there was a girl whom she once had a crush on in her neighbourhood, but she never really approached her because she feared the girl’s parents finding out and thinking she is trying to “change their daughter to be a lesbian”. Similarly, Lwandile said some of her neighbours are homophobic to a point that they tell their children that “you should not play with that one anymore, she will mislead you”. In some contexts, homosexuality is perceived as contagious, and it is believed that sharing spaces or objects with lesbian or gay people will make others gay too (SAFAIDS, 2011). This applies to Yandisa’s and Lihle’s contexts. These stories as well as the disgrace imposed on lesbians/homosexuals therefore become what Schenck (2019) refers to as a collectively constructed reality, such as the reality of bringing shame to the ancestors and to God.

Theme 4: “...making a mockery of the ancestors” and God

Christianity and ancestral beliefs often coexist to create meaning for most people in African rural settings. Essentially, religion and spirituality feature predominantly in constructions of homosexuality as an immoral act and a sin against nature (Abou-Chadi & Finnigan, 2019; Boso, 2013; Butler & Astbury, 2005; Dahl *et. al.*, 2015; Mkasi, 2013;). The perceptions of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 2022: 58(4)

LGBTQI revolve around these two beliefs and are said to have resulted in traumatic experiences for lesbians and gays in South Africa and around the world (Etcheverria, 2018; Nkosi & Masson, 2017; Ramirez, 2020).

Although there are many Christian converts in South Africa, ancestral beliefs have not disappeared; instead there has been a combination of traditional beliefs and Christianity (Mbeje, 2017). Religion and culture still play profoundly important roles in shaping ideas about love and sexuality, and it is through both the accommodation and challenging of social norms that same-sex love is constructed and experienced in South Africa (Abou-Chad & Finnigan, 2019; Adamczyk & Cheng, 2015; Msibi, 2013). In this context, children who show signs of homosexuality are taken to traditional healers or to a church for prayers because of a belief that homosexuality can be healed through prayers and traditional medicine (Mkasi, 2013). For example, Lwandile shared how both Christianity and ancestral beliefs are used to challenge her lesbian identity:

So, with my family, they are divided into two, others are born again Christians they do not believe in ancestors, but when they criticize me for being a lesbian they use the bible, they tell me that God does not support this, they quote those Gomora and Sodom verses. Then there are those who believe in the ancestors, they tell you that the ancestors do not recognise such unions, it never existed when they were still alive, they do not know it... they won't approve it, how are they going to burn incense on your behalf when you are in a relationship with another girl? Should you get married, what will happen, who will take whose surname? How will you tell the ancestors about your relationship? (Lwandile)

As Lwandile stated, some of her family members subscribe to cultural beliefs, while some are staunch Christians; both consider homosexuality a taboo and making a mockery of the ancestors (Abou-Chadi & Finnigan, 2019), and God (Khoir, 2020; Nkosi & Masson, 2017). The question of the co-existence of homosexuality and Christianity has always been an issue, as some Christians argue that homosexuality goes against biblical and Christian values (Nkosi & Masson, 2017).

Kuhle and Sinazo also referred to religious constructions:

The people here in [naming the area] are very stereotyped... they have the same mentality, they think the same way, and they have this mentality that a homosexual person has demons or has satanism. So, I can't really say they are welcoming and accepting of this, I really don't know what to say... (Kuhle)

They believe that you are possessed and you have demons, they bore me shame 'cause they are not educated about these things... (Sinazo)

Kuhle stated that the people in her rural area perceive homosexuality in the same way. People share knowledge and are therefore bound to have the same beliefs as they construct knowledge between them, and the daily interactions in close-knit societies mean that people share their understandings (Burr, 1995). The lack of knowledge about lesbians and homosexuality

Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 2022: 58(4)

generally adds to this collective understanding. Swan (2018) and Jordan (2015) stated that in rural places, the dominant view still likens sexual minorities to sinners, because the culture is highly conservative. Anti-gay sentiment is compounded by a strong patriarchal Christian belief that views same-sex sexual relations as sinful and wrong. In this context, negative reaction against homosexual rights is commonplace for many, as upholding religious beliefs is something to be proud of and actively encouraged (Abou-Chadi, & Finnigan, 2019; Nkosi & Masson, 2017; Swan, 2018).

Sbani, who described her community as homophobic, said that the neighbours questioned how her father could allow her to wear pants and look like a guy, knowing very well that *Inkosi ayiwathandi* (“the Chief hates them”); fortunately for her, her father had accepted her sexual orientation so he did not address those questions. In societies, Sibani’s parents or families that accept their LGBTQI child are likely to face substantial community pressure, more so if they try to defend or advocate for their child (Ghosh, 2020).

In my village there are still traditional leaders, meaning there is still this thing whereby they expect a person to live a certain way, their way; deviating from their way of living is not allowed... (Zama)

Zama asserted that where she comes from, doing what is not socially constructed as acceptable of a female is out of question. Each geographical context constructs its own meaning of what is considered right or wrong (Idang, 2015; Kae-Smith, 2001), and in Zama’s rural area being a lesbian is considered wrong.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

South Africa’s constitutional directive on non-discriminatory treatment of the LGBTQI population is indisputable, yet homophobia continues to prevail in certain contexts, such as the rural areas. From the participants’ narratives, it is clear that lesbian identities and homosexuality are misunderstood, and there is a lack of information that results in unwelcoming attitudes, and mostly unpleasant experiences of being a lesbian in a rural area.

The shared understanding and perceptions about homosexuality are deeply shaped by religious and traditional beliefs, but according to social constructionist theory, they are not unchangeable. The narratives in this article therefore point to the need to challenge sociocultural constructions that force lesbians to hide their identities. Social workers alongside other human rights advocates should, through research and practice, aim to expose conservative communities to human rights discourses that promote affirmation, safety and support for the LGBTQI population in rural areas. Importantly, cultural sensitivity and humility are needed to foreground these interventions.

Although degrading treatments by family members were described by most participants, a few were supportive and did not consider being a lesbian “an embarrassment”. Future research might benefit from exploring the role played by families of lesbians to protect them from discriminatory community practices. Also beneficial, could be research delving into the

experiences of heterogeneous student populations, such as those emanating from other rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa and studies at South Africa urban universities.

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