

STRANGERS “AT HOME”: GAY, LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL STUDENTS’ STRATEGIES FOR RESISTING HETERONORMATIVITY IN UNIVERSITY RESIDENCE LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Higher education in post-apartheid South Africa has been concerned with the establishment of non-discriminatory institutions. However, research continues to highlight various experiences of exclusionary practices across universities in South Africa. In this article, we demonstrate the various coping mechanisms that some students who self-identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual in the university residences adopt to deal with the exclusionary practices that the dominant heteronormative culture of the institution (re)produces which positions them as “sexual strangers” within the institutional “home”. We adopt Vangelisti and Crumley’s (1998) three categories of behaviour namely “acquiescence” which we term here as endeavours to “fit in”, “invulnerability” which we identify as “keeping one’s distance”, “verbal active” as “voicing” and a fourth category we identify as “turning the tables on heteronormativity” in our discussion. We also highlight the various forms of responses that the institution adopts in its attempts to create a conducive environment for all.

Keywords: LGBT rights, citizenship, South Africa, resistance, heteronormativity, higher education, homophobia

INTRODUCTION

The imperative of transforming South Africa’s higher education system is captured in the Department of Education White Paper 3 (1997), which sets out government’s vision of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist system of higher education that will:

“Promote equity of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress of past inequalities.”

As the report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions (Soudien 2008) showed however, the higher education transformation debate in South Africa has preponderantly focused on racial discrimination, and to some extent gender inequalities. Far less attention has been paid to other realms of exclusion and marginalization. While the colonial and apartheid heritage of South African universities, giving rise to cultures of whiteness and masculine domination, have been foregrounded, less discussed is the heteronormative character of these institutions which serves to perpetuate realms of marginalization that intersect with raced, classed and gendered experiences.

The term "heteronormativity" coined by Michael Warner in 1991 describes the normalization of heterosexual norms (Warner 1991). Schilt and Westbrook (2009, 441) define heteronormativity as the suite of cultural, legal, and institutional practices that maintain normative assumptions that there are two and only two genders in the world and that only sexual attraction between these "opposite" genders is natural or acceptable. Heteronormativity privileges heterosexuality as the "natural", correct and healthy way of being sexual and this privilege is reinforced by various institutions in society (Seidman 2010, 57). Heteronormativity manifests itself in norms, values and beliefs (Do Marco Castro Varela, Dhawan and Engel 2011, 12) and is present in social relations, people's language, belief systems and institutional practices.

Research on the experiences of homosexual students in higher education institutions finds that these students often experience campus environments as hostile and unaccommodating and that this leads to a failure to thrive both academically and personally (Negy and Eisenman 2005; Longerbeam et al. 2007; Beemyn and Rankin 2011; Woodford, Krentzman and Gattis 2012; Holland, Matthews and Schott 2013). In the South African context, there is a paucity of information about the experiences of gay and lesbian students at university (Msibi 2013). The research that does exist has largely taken the form of surveys and questionnaires that focus on attitudes towards homosexual students (see for example Arndt and De Bruin 2006). While the prevalence of heteronormative cultures that serves to marginalise and alienate those who do not conform to dominant expectations regarding sexual preference has been noted, there has been very little discussion of how those who experience marginalization on the grounds of their sexual preference negotiate, resist and/or accommodate heteronormativity in their day-to-day lives at university in South Africa. In this article, we give voice to the experiences of residence life of students who self-identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual focusing particularly on their strategies for coping with, resisting, accommodating themselves to, heteronormative cultures, practices, assumptions and prejudices.

THE STUDY

The study is based on the narratives of 18 students who self-identify as gay, lesbian and bisexual who have first-hand experience of residence life. Our focus was on residence life because South African university residences, are “homes away from home”, have been described as “social cauldrons” where young people from diverse backgrounds and with very different life experiences are thrown together and spend large amounts of their time (Soudien 2008, 75). University residences are therefore a particularly important site of social interaction for students. For this reason, the study is located at a largely residential South African university campus where some 45 per cent of the student body (70% of first years and 57% of all undergraduates) reside in the university’s residence system for at least part of their degree period.

While all the participants were drawn from a single study site, the attempt was made to introduce as much diversity as possible into the sample of students interviewed. Seven of the participants were first year students, two were in second year, three were third year students, four in their fourth year of study and two were in their fifth year of study. Participants included eight women and 10 men, 15 black participants and three white participants. Four of the participants identified as bisexual. The number of interviews conducted was determined by the principle of “saturation” – the point at which it becomes apparent, during initial coding of the data, that no new themes are emergent (Guest, Bunce and Johnson 2006; Kuper, Lingard and Levinson 2008, 687; Bowen 2008, 140).

In common with many other South African universities, the university that was the study site has put in place a range of formal policies that express its commitment to creating an environment for students that is free of discrimination, and many of these policies explicitly mention sexual orientation. For example, the policy on Eradicating Unfair Discrimination and Harassment, Rule 15.27 states that:

“Any student who utters, distributes, displays, shows, screens or projects any disparaging or derogatory remarks or innuendos based on a person’s race, gender or sexual orientation, or any form of hate speech shall be guilty of a disciplinary offence.”

This was important as our interest was in how heteronormativity is (re)produced – ways in which exclusion is embedded in taken-for-granted everyday practices that continue to exist regardless of formal policy prescriptions. One set of themes that emerged inductively during coding of the data related to strategies that the participants described deploying to cope with living in a heteronormative culture/environment. They also described ways in which their

individual ability to cope with/resist heteronormativity is/is not supported by institutionalised practices and mechanisms. The narratives therefore provide insights into how institutions behave (sometimes unwittingly) to perpetuate the sense of exclusion felt by LGBTI students and, on the other hand, institutional mechanisms that make it possible for these students to thrive and feel supported and welcomed at university.

STRANGERS AT HOME

“We tend to get used to it and be like okay these things happen but that’s not ok. In as much as it bothers me, I’m not crumbling because of these little things.” (Thato).

While university residences are meant to be a place where students are made to feel “at home”, homes are not always comfortable places for all their occupants. Homes can become sites of exclusion for non-conforming members (see Bowlby, Gregory and McKie 1997, 343; Sibley 1995, 95). We conceptualise this sense of exclusion through the lens of Shane Phelan’s (2001) idea of the “stranger” which she raises in relation to the notion of sexual citizenship (see also Sandercock 2000). The idea of the “stranger” suggests those who occupy an ambiguous position as neither friends nor enemies (Bauman 1990, 143). Phelan (2001, 116). argues that the ambiguity of “they look like us” but are “not like us” is more threatening than mere difference and that what intensifies sexual minorities’ status as strangers is the fact that they do not constitute a population that has fixed territories or a unified national, ethnic or racial history that distinguishes them from their neighbours. Rather, they live amidst their heterosexual families and communities and are just like everyone else around them. Unlike women and racial minorities, sexual minorities have varying abilities to conceal or leave their differences “suppressed or uncertain” (Phelan 2001, 19).

As Wardhaugh (1999, 97) argues, when exclusion and rejection take place, the excluded individuals do not cease to exist. They remain visible in the home where they may be regarded as posing a threat and, as a result, the home can become a place of conflict because of the presence of individuals who are considered by those who do meet the inclusion criteria as breaching those criteria (Sibley 1995, 95). “Negotiating strangeness” thus has to do with how lesbian, gay and bisexual students deal with being “at home” in university residence life. The idea of being “at home” connotes, as a wide literature has shown, comfort, mutual recognition, support, intimacy, privacy, safety, being “oneself” and a sense of belonging. To be constructed as a “stranger” connotes the opposite of being at home – to experience oneself as a stranger is to experience discomfort, lack of recognition and support, misrecognition on the part of those

who one shares the home with, breaches of privacy and the absence of a safe environment in which to express and experience intimacy. In the discussion that follows we explore the strategies that participants described deploying in response to living in a heteronormative environment that results in their estrangement from the dominant cultures that pervade university residences.

STRATEGIES FOR NEGOTIATING STRANGENESS

“My friends have not really acknowledged that I am lesbian. Every time they refer to me as having someone it is always a ‘he’ and everything in me wants to say not ‘he’, but I can’t do that because I’m afraid that they will judge me and look at me differently. I don’t get annoyed with it anymore. I just ignore it.” (Lebo).

Vangelisti and Crumley (1998) identify three distinct categories of behaviours deployed by individuals in reaction to exclusion: “acquiescence” – or what we refer to here as endeavouring to “fit in”; “invulnerability” – which may include for example ignoring or distancing oneself from the source of hurt; and “verbal active” responses – various ways in which a person may overtly verbally confront a source of hurt – what we refer to here as “voicing”. We describe here a fourth category of resistance which involves the recognition that there is a material dimension to institutional cultures – that space and the material objects that occupy it are not neutral. Drawing on one particular story told by a participant who drew attention to the (hetero) politics of space, we call this “turning the tables on heteronormativity”.

Fitting in

One way in which those whose sexual identity does not conform to the hegemonic norm can find safe passage is by “fitting in” as Kirsty explains:

“This has been a safe place for me because I act in a certain way. I identify as extremely feminine. I like lipstick and I love wearing high heels so basically there’s not really much difference between me and most straight girls.” (Kirsty).

By performing her gender “correctly”, Kirsty is able to experience residence life as safe and comfortable. As Kudzai explains, strategies adopted by gay students in overwhelmingly heteronormative environments range from “trying to fit in” to complete concealment, which may include shunning other gay students for fear of being identified.

“You have the choice to be yourself or to make friends with a bunch of very masculine guys who always talk about girls and so your life becomes all about trying to fit in with those guys. Some

people are gay but they are friends with these straight guys and they don’t want to interact with other gay guys.” (Kudzai).

Concealment of one’s own sexuality, associating with those who conform to dominant expectations of masculinity or femininity and eschewing those who are seen as deviant are painful mechanisms for negotiating an identity that Goffman (1963) might have termed “spoiled”.

Keeping one’s distance

“When I get to my room I know I will scream [but] I won’t do it in front of them, I’m not big on confrontation. I’ve actually kind of distanced myself a little bit from them this term. I’ve just broken up from them a little bit It’s hard though ’cause they were the first friends I made in the res who welcomed me.” (Lebo).

“Distancing” is a mechanism employed to avoid sources of rejection (MacDonald and Leary 2005, 204). The idea of creating a distance between oneself and other occupants of a “home” suggests the antithesis of the intimacy and closeness that we often associated with the idea of feeling “at home”.

“I keep to myself a lot ... I’m not in people’s faces a lot so they don’t have much to say or talk about. I don’t put myself out there to be talked about because it’s inevitable it will happen. ... if someone has homophobic tendencies you stay away from them – that’s just survival of the fittest.” (Thato).

“I stick to my circle of friends ... I never got involved in their lives and they never got involved in mine. So my introverted nature I guess protects me in that way.” (Mpho).

“Guys who I know who are gay are very quiet and only hang out with other gays. I know one of the guys ... he only really hangs out with other gay people or people in his department. He is very shy and keeps to himself.” (Kirsty).

MacDonald and Leary (2005, 204) argue that people are highly attuned to social cues that indicate that social pain is likely to occur, and individuals will take all possible precautionary measures to avoid the occurrence of such incidences when these cues become apparent. Social cues are a way of gauging whether the social climate is friendly or hostile towards one. Avoidance behaviours shield individuals from possible harms and social threat (Murray et al. 1998). Evincing what Phelan (2001, 32) calls a “retreat into strangerhood”, these students maintain a small circle of friends in whom they confide, which in a sense confirms their estrangement from everyone else. The alternative is to overtly confront heterosexism.

Voicing

“She was drunk and she said: ‘Where is your girlfriend?’ in front of everybody. And I told her, ‘look here stop going around shouting out about my love life’.” (Lebo).

Scourfield, Roen and McDermott (2008, 332) argue that fighting back can help to bolster one’s sexual identity. As Mandla describes, though, there are social costs associated with publically pushing back against heteronormativity.

“I voiced out my concerns publicly at house meetings. I would always be the person who was seen as the wild one, even though everyone knew in that room that I was actually fighting for my democratic rights. I do not care if you are the Warden or the Sub-Warden, I will call you to order if you are not doing things right.” (Mandla).

LGBT students may find themselves constantly having to “take on” assumptions about their sexuality. Never comfortably “in” the conversation but rather always having to interrupt its comfortable conventions, while usefully unmasking prejudice, confirms their status as outsiders.

“There were people debating that bisexual people cheat. I said actually I take offence because I’m bisexual and what you are saying is not true and opinions like that are quite hurtful and actually false. It’s just a stupid stereotype.” (Megan).

Expressing oneself in the way that Megan, Lebo and Mandla do, can be empowering instances of what Phelan (2001, 32) refers to as the subversion of the “hierarchies of the hegemonic order”. But the need to constantly do this is at the same time an indicator of one’s estrangement from the comfortable routines of intimate exchange that we normally associated with being at home. As a result, while someone like Mandla is willing to openly confront heterosexism wherever he encounters it, “home” ends up becoming an impoverished place only to shower and sleep as opposed to being associated with all the warmth, comfort and identity confirming experiences that those who conform to the dominant norms are privileged to take for granted.

“It’s a guy res but you can’t always do things based on what the majority prefers. And I would ask why we were not included. They would say the majority decided. Decisions on the hoodie design or your t-shirt design or your braai – all the social things we were never consulted on. I ended up not buying anything. So I decided to move out. And I told them from the word go to not expect me to get involved because I’m only there to shower and sleep that’s it.” (Mandla).

In the same way as minority languages are always fragile in monolingual cultures, Mandla

speaks out against clothing and forms of social interaction that exclude him, but his voice is crowded out by what “the majority decided”. Yet to be “at home” is typically to speak the same language as everyone else around you – both literally and figuratively. To be at home is also to be in a place where everyday stories are swapped and intimacies are shared. For those who occupy the position of sexual minority to enter these conversations is always to interrupt their comfortably normalcy. Rather than just being able to interact easily then, every contribution is something that one has to be conscious of.

“... when they talk about their boyfriends I talk about my girlfriend. If you have a boyfriend that’s fine, I have a girlfriend.” (Olwetu).

“I don’t try to actively hide it and I’m not ashamed ... I will see people talking about their crushes and I’d be like: oh yes ... me too there is this cute girl I like.” (Megan).

Thus while, as Donaldson argues, interjections such as those that Olwetu and Megan make, serve the purpose of helping to normalise sexual orientations that are often seen as “abnormal” and “taboo” (Donaldson 2015, 131–132), their participation in the conversation is more like doing the cultural “work” of decentring heterosexuality than being relaxed and “at home”. There is very little room to manoeuvre for the gay person finding themselves in the midst of a conversation that is comfortably heteronormative in its assumptions. To insist, as Kudzai does, on “making the conversation relevant to me as well” is one possible response.

“If I sit at the dining table with straight guys who are talking about girls I usually make contributions of my own experiences and make comments about how ridiculous they are with girls. I make the conversation relevant to me as well.” (Kudzai).

But, as Lungile’s remarks make clear, to do so is in fact to make one’s sexuality the subject of conversation rather than simply entering the conversation.

“It was a very cold day and for some reason everyone at the dining table was saying they needed a girlfriend over. I just thought it was such an odd conversation to have at the dining table. I also said I needed a guy over too and then people just laughed and said they had seen the signs that I was gay.” (Lungile).

Homes are typically places that include both areas of privacy and areas of sociality (Massey 1994, 137). In university residence life, dining halls are places where people conduct some of the various domestic activities associated with being at home: eating together and socialising with others. But rather than being neutral territory for the enactment of the mundane business of life, dining halls are places where heteronormativity is (re) enforced precisely through the

enactment of the routine and the mundane. It is the everyday normalcy of conversations that take place during meal times that homosexual students threaten to interrupt. Faced with the heteronormativity of the dining hall space, participants described differing responses ranging from an insistence on inclusion, to self-exclusion, to the creation of alternative spaces constructed as exclusively gay.

For Tom, insisting on being included in talk experienced as heterosexual male is not a comfortable option. His alternative is to “sit with the girls” – a course of action which he must then publicly account for.

“All the guys from my res sit at one table every day in the dining hall. There is this huge gender divide. I sit with all my friends in the middle and I’m basically the only guy in the group of girls. There’s this kind of social barrier between me and the guys in my res. It’s mainly because of the conversations about sport, women, sex and cheating that drove me away from their table.” (Tom).

Turning the tables on heteronormativity

Smith (1994, 33) describes personalisation as a “way in which individuals express themselves and their identity”. Lawrence (in Smith 1994) argues that personal objects are used to communicate the identity of their owner(s) and their self-esteem. Some participants described adopting a strategy that might be termed “turning the tables on heteronormativity” – the deliberate and public announcement of a space that is exclusively gay. Here Kirsty describes the way in which the “gay table” is reserved for people that members of the group “like” and how unwelcome intruders are repelled.

“I have a couple of gay friends who are the resident gays in their res. They have a table outside the dining hall – they call it the pink table. They sit there to smoke cigarettes and hang out with each other. And if somebody they don’t like sits at the table, they will all look at him and ask them if they are lost. At one time they even bought a pink tablecloth and draped it over, that was them being able to express themselves” (Kirsty).

The object of the pink tablecloth can be seen as a defiant public announcement of the nature of the space that has been created and how it ought to be interpreted by outsiders (Bryan 2014; Axelrod 2008, 2011). In this way, the pink table participants can be seen to disturb the prevailing power dynamics, challenging the heterosexual status quo by marking particular territories as their own.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR RESISTING HETERONORMATIVITY

While universities frequently have formal policies in place to declare their commitment to

inclusion and non-discrimination, there are a number of ways in which institutional practices do not support the espoused policies. In residence systems, the focus on racial inclusion and non-discrimination mirrors the wider exclusion of sexual orientation from the higher education transformation debate – not only in South Africa (Obear 1991, 95; UNESCO 2012, 23).

“When we got there we were told about racial integration but not about homosexuality. It’s not discussed I think there is an automatic expectation that people will accept that because we are at a liberal university but it’s not the case really.” (Thabo).

When individuals experience a lack of commitment to building non-homophobic cultures in practice they learn to distrust institutional mechanisms and to turn instead to rely on a selection of the individualised strategies described above. This can have very significant repercussions. Donaldson (2015, 143) for instance argues that homosexual students who are assaulted are less likely to report the cases due to the response from administration that might be unsympathetic and unhelpful. As Olwetu commented, “procedures and protocols” are simply not enough and what is needed is “just to make us feel safer”.

“I reported it [a homophobic attack] but it wasn’t really followed up on. The university works with procedure and protocols way too much when it comes to issues like that. I think they need to throw protocol out of the window sometimes just to make us feel safer For me I feel like if I keep going to the Dean of Students Office with small things which are huge battles for me I will annoy them and nothing is gonna come out you know.” (Olwetu).

“I don’t even have the energy because the leadership in that res is so incompetent. It’s like speaking to a brick wall with the head student, speaking to the dead cow when you speaking to the Sub Warden. They will just give you a smile and say okay and that’s it.” (Mandla).

A lack of concrete, in-practice institutional support leaves people feeling fatigued at the thought of having to take up the issue yet again. Everyday life becomes a constant process of having to decide whether to resist, accommodate, ignore or report heterosexism rather than simply being able to get on with living. Institutional transformation requires that the individual ought not to be burdened with the duty to transform the environment – the duty is an institutional one to create an environment in which all are equally at home.

When homosexual students experience hostility, the presence or absence of institutional support rather than merely having to rely on their own individual resilience or self-built peer networks, is important. Support, moreover, needs to be understood as multifaceted, incorporating, firstly, social support, or what Kaplan, Cassel and Gore (1977, 50) called “metness” – the sense that a person has all of their needs being met in an environment including the need for approval (Kaplan et al. 1977, 50). Secondly, social support needs to be concrete

and functional as Glazer (2006) argues, incorporating instrumental dimensions such as access to information, and emotional dimensions such as empathy, being listened to and being treated with compassion (see also Gottlieb and Bergen 2010, 512). Support is often derived from social networks but institutional mechanisms need to be put in place to facilitate the development of these networks and students’ access to them, rather than simply expecting them to emerge organically and for all students to have equal access to organic networks. The social stigma attached to being gay means that not all gay students will be equally in a position to take the public step of finding and building their own social support system. This should rather, be understood as a duty of the institution arising from its commitment to non-discrimination and inclusion.

As Levine and Evans (1991, 8) argue, the presence of a positive support network is central to the ability of a person to develop a positive identity. Troiden (in Cohen and Savin-Williams 1996, 144) argued that there are various “facilitating factors” that ease the transition to a non-heterosexual identity for gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals and the presence of supportive social network is prominent among these. Social support is considered a coping resource, which is a social “fund” from which people may draw when handling stressors (Thoits 1995, 64). Evans and D’Augelli (1996) argue that campus organisations that cater for gay, lesbian and bisexual students play an extremely important role in determining how homosexual students experience the institutional environment. They argue that involvement with such organisations opens up new opportunities for homosexual students to increase their friendship networks and gain access to valuable sources of support (Evans and D’Augelli 1996, 212). For those who identify as LGBT, the educational function of support groups can play a significant role in the provision of instrumental support. Support groups can also facilitate a learning environment for homosexual students about issues relating to homosexuality in contexts where a person may have had few prior opportunities to openly ask questions related to their sexuality, including for example practical, function support such as sex education which is routinely provided at school and university but takes a form that almost always excludes homosexuality, focusing on reproductive sex and such issues as avoiding pregnancy (Quinlivan and Town 1999, 515). The institution therefore has a role to play in building these support structures and networks which have the potential to provide a matrix within which individualised resistance to, and interruption of, heteronormative cultures become less fatiguing and lonely and which provide valuable, practical resources.

The support of friends and partners takes the form of affirming that, as Thato puts it, being gay is “okay” which is of great significance in a context in which heterosexuality is regarded as the norm. In a heteronormative environment, heterosexual people encounter fewer challenges with openly seeking and building intimate friendships and relationships which can act as a

significant resource for overcoming daily challenges (Cohen and Syme 1985, 7) Significant actors in social networks who have, for one reason or another, developed a sense of confidence about their sexual identity can perform the function of affirming gay identity as acceptable and being valuable role models for demanding acceptance in everyday life. Male participants described experiencing particular difficulties with finding a support network among other men, echoing findings by scholars such as Hinrichs and Rossenberg (2002, 68), Arndt and De Bruin (2006, 23) and Jenkins, Lambert and Baker (2009, 602) that straight men are more likely to be hostile to homosexuality than straight women. Tom described himself as being "a bit afraid of guys". Similarly, Thabo is able to be openly gay with his women friends but has to hide his sexuality in his all male residence.

"Well, most of [the girls I'm friends with] know I am gay. I told them because I'm good friends with them. The girls have been amazing They are the reason why I stay here, really. I haven't told my straight male friends though. I don't think I can ever get to a point of telling them because of their comments." (Thabo).

Arndt and De Bruin (2006, 23) argue that one of the reasons why that women might display more empathy for gay men is as a result of their own experiences of sexism. These findings suggest that there is room for work at an institutional level which focuses specifically on the cultures, practices and social relations in male residences.

The institutionalisation of support becomes all the more indispensable in contexts where individuals are not able to fall back on family support. For many gay, lesbian and bisexual students this is the case. While some participants reported having family support many had either not revealed their sexuality to their families or had experienced rejection of their sexual identity from members of their family. Students bring to campus with them diverse prior experiences which place them in different positions regarding their ability to feel confident about expressing their identity. Approval and acceptance from family members prior to arriving at university are a resource that some participants reported being able to draw from when having to negotiate their entry into the higher education environment, in turn influencing how experienced residence life and their ability to find friends and intimate partners (Hames 2007). For those who lack such family support, university becomes the place where they hope to be less isolated, less lonely, to be able to experience intimacy and acceptance – in short, to feel "at home" for the first time given a hostile family environment (see Nardi 1992; Weston 1991). As Siyabonga puts it, it is simply "just nice to be with people and not isolating yourself".

Kudzai's comments suggest however, that rather than being able to point to an institutional culture that is or is not gay-friendly, how someone experiences the institutional culture depends to some extent on happenstance – having or not having supportive social networks that make it

possible or impossible to experience the “atmosphere” as “friendly”.

“My gay friends [in res] have really helped a lot. And one of the things that you can very easily underestimate is how much your friends can influence your experiences. I have a close network of gay friends who are always around me. My second year was a huge turning point because that’s when I had more gay friends. ... we’re all different but we are also on the same journey because we are all out. So the atmosphere just became very friendly.” (Kudzai).

“When I was ready to come out as gay, I had to make sure I had the right group of friends that supported me until I was strong because one has to understand that if you do come out as gay you need some people to stand by you. Even if I had a rough day, I would go back to tell them that this is what happened and we would laugh about it. They created an environment for me that I could come back and debrief them everything when I felt I wasn’t coping.” (Lungile).

As Heather suggests, feeling “at home” is about more than having a roof over one’s head and a door that locks. Home is about support, companionship, feeling looked after.

“I have made amazing friends. Our friendship group is basically like a family. I’m surrounded by people who will look after me and people who will look out for me. Obviously, I’ve got a roof over my head, a door that locks but it kind of comes down to the people more than the actual structural safety. Because they offer a support system for someone to talk to. They are like family.” (Heather).

The instrumental and emotional support that individuals receive from friends helps to ameliorate the social exclusion and isolation that is a well-documented feature of homosexual students’ experience at schools and universities (Savin-Williams and Cohen 1996, 184–185). Belonging to a social group helps individuals to feel that they are not the “only one” (Dietz and Dettlaff 1997, 60). Flowers and Buston (2001, 52) argue that the presence of other identifiable minority group members is a particularly important feature in the amelioration of what Smith and Ingram (2004, 57) call “minority stress” – the stress that is experienced by individuals who are members of a marginalised minority group. Support helps with the development of a sense of universality amongst on the part of members of such groups as they begin to understand that there are others on the same journey as themselves (Dietz and Dettlaff 1997, 60). But finding these supportive networks is more of a challenge for gay than for heterosexual students given evidence in literature that some gay, lesbian and bisexual college students lose friends upon disclosure of their sexual orientation (Evans and D’Augelli 1996, 211). The question from an institutional point of view then becomes one of what the institution might do to facilitate such positive experiences, so that whether or not a person is “looked after” rather than merely having their basic needs met is not left to chance or luck but is viewed as an institutional obligation.

While peers are important, as Olwetu and Mpho pointed out, being accepted by those who are identified formally with the institution is of critical importance, suggesting that staff

members have a significant leadership role to play in providing the structural support which is essential to making the institution a home for all.

“The one thing I really feel good about is seeing a few of the staff who belong to the LGBT community which is really cool. It makes me feel like I’m at home ... My lecturer you know. It takes away the shame.” (Olwetu).

“I don’t see how else I would have been myself outside of res. There was just a safety net there. They told us about counsellors. They told us we could go to the Warden and that we could communicate with our head students. The House Comm. also encouraged us to talk to the senior students if we had any problems. It was just like a family system.” (Mpho).

“The Sub-Wardens and the Warden are very clear at the beginning of the year when first years arrive. They are given the talk and the house rules and the residence’s expectations from them. But you know the things that people actually do in reality and the way they act with you is different. It just depends on the people I’m around and the kind of culture that is cultivated in that year.” (Kudzai).

Rather than the positive “organised support structure” that Mpho and Olwetu experienced, arising out of an institutional commitment that guarantees this experience for all who enter the residence system, its existence relies on the goodwill of individuals. The result is that experiences, as Kudzai reports, are mixed rather than students being able to rely on policies being put into practice to create an environment of equality for everyone.

CONCLUSION

The participants in our study spoke of the many ways in which they challenge heteronormative assumptions and practices on a daily basis and how these struggles make it difficult to experience the privilege of feeling “at home” in residence life. While conflicts are not uncommon in any home – even the most comfortable of homes – central to experiencing a space as “home” is the presence or absence of mechanisms of support in times of hardship. It is important, then, to ask what forms of support are available to LGB students in an institutional context which may serve to ameliorate experiences of encountering rejection or hostility. While informal networks typically provide various forms of support, in the context of an institutional commitment to equality and transformation, it is particularly important to examine experiences of ways in which the structures and practices of the institution do or do not provide a supportive environment for those who are sexual minorities. Our argument is that there is much that institutions can do to infuse their non-discrimination and inclusion policies into day-to-day practice and that those who are in formal positions of leadership and authority associated with the institution have an enormous role to play in creating institutional environments in which it is possible for all to feel equally welcomed. The responsibility for interrupting heteronormativity cannot be that of the individual gay, lesbian or bisexual student alone but

must be seen as an institutional imperative that places specific obligations on those institutional office bearers and employees at every level.

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