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Attitudes of students towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community: A case of a South African, rural-based university

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Abstract

People display different attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI). These attitudes are generally influenced by a range of factors such as religion, societal values and norms. The purpose of the study was to describe the attitudes of South African rural-based university students toward LGBTI communities. Questionnaires containing both closed and open ended questions were distributed to the students attending anti-stigma and discrimination campaign at rural based university in 2012. Two hundred and thirty-three (233) questionnaires were returned and the narratives were analysed using qualitative methods. The results indicate negative and positive attitudes toward LGBTI. Participants with negative attitudes advocate the use of punishment, withdrawal of rights and religious interventions to change LGBTI into heterosexuals. These participants' attitudes were influenced by religious, cultural and normative beliefs. Participants with positive attitudes advocate for LGBTI to be supported, accepted and treated as humans. Similarly, these attitudes were influenced by participants' religious beliefs and the South African Constitution. Recommendations are made on steps that can be taken to improve knowledge about LGBTI communities and how to promote an inclusive university community that is LGBT friendly.

Keywords: Attitudes, students, LGBTI, rural-based university.

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Introduction

The South African Constitution prohibits discrimination of people based on sexual orientation through the "equality clause" of the Bill of Rights (Republic of South Africa, 1996). In order to support constitutional democracy, the Constitution mandated the creation of six state institutions namely the i) the Public Protector or ombudsman, ii) the South African Human Rights Commission (HRC), iii) the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, iv) Religious and Linguistic Communities (the CRL Commission), v) the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE), and vi) the Auditor-General and the Electoral Commission (Murray, 2006). Furthermore, as

a means to undo the legacy of past discrimination, a legislative framework in the form of the Constitution and relevant legislation, particularly the Promotion of Equality and the Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (PEPUDA) and the Employment Equity Act, amongst others, were promulgated. As part of its constitutional mandate to promote respect for human rights, to promote protection for human rights and to monitor the observance of human rights in the country, the Human Rights Commission is obligated through PEPUDA, to provide a report to Parliament, providing an assessment of the state of equality in the country. The human rights commission is enjoined to consult with the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE), particularly given that one of the major aspects the Commission has to report on, is the state of gender equality in the country. Substantive equality is promoted which refers to the notion that individuals in different situations should be treated differently, focusing on the equality of results, and equality of opportunity. Unfair discrimination is prohibited in South Africa. The South African AIDS Council (SANAC, 2011) is also an organisation that advocates for reducing vulnerability among transsexuals and men who have sex with men (MSM), one of the priority activities to reduce the spread of HIV infection. Thus, universities are obliged to ensure that LGBTI students are afforded equality in the same way as ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups (Epistein, Flynn & Telford, 2003).

Despite the requirements of the Constitution, LGBTI students are still severely stigmatised and discriminated against at rural-based universities and their surrounding communities. To avoid stigmatisation and discrimination homosexuals would engage concurrently in sexual activities with multiple sexual partners; openly in a heterosexual relationship and privately in a homosexual relationship. This behaviour increases the risk of being infected with HIV. The purpose of the study is to explore and describe the attitude South-African rural-based university students towards LGBTI persons.

Methodology

Research design

A qualitative descriptive survey was utilized to gain understanding of the the attitudes of South African rural-based university students towards LGBTI community.

Setting

This study was conducted in one of the South African rural-based university which was established during 'apartheid era' to cater for the tertiary education needs of one of the former homelands. Majority of the students are from the

poorest provinces of South-Africa. However, the university also accommodates students from other countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Sampling

All participants were purposively selected among the students attending the anti-stigma and discrimination campaign and volunteered to participate. A total of 233 students comprising of 107 females, 105 males and 21 unspecified sex participated in the study. The sample was also diverse in terms of academic levels (1st year to doctoral level), age (from 18-45 years), ethnic groups religious beliefs and country of origin,

Data collection

Data was collected through the use of a self-administered questionnaire consisting of two sections. The first section focused on biographical data, while the second section focused on attitudes towards LGBTI persons using open-ended questions such as the following: What are your views of the LGBTI community at this university? An information document and informed concerns were attached to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was pilot tested and refined in consultation with the experts in the field. A total of 233 questionnaires were distributed with the assistance of peer educators.

Data analysis

Open coding was used guided by descriptive analysis method of Tesch in Creswell (2009) which includes description, analysis and interpretation. Description was done by reading and rereading the notes from the written narratives in order to gain the necessary background information (Burns & Grove, 2005). Essential features from the responses were identified and grouped together into similar topics and described. Negative attitude and positive attitudes towards LGBTI communities were identified as major themes and categories which were grouped together. The researchers held the consensus to agree on the information identified. Relevant literature was used to support the discussions.

Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance was obtained from a rural based university's Health, Safety and Research Ethics Committee. The consent of participants was obtained without coercion. The questionnaires did not contain any particulars which may reveal participants' identities. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time and that they may do so without having to give any reason. Participants placed the completed questionnaires in a sealed box to ensure that only the researcher will have access to the responses.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through the following measures: applicability (rich description and purposive sampling); authenticity (fairness, understating, action and empowerment); dependability (description of exact methodology), confirmability (data collection instrument checked by the experts in qualitative research, focus was related only to attitudes towards LGBTI community) and credibility (pretest of the interview guide) (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2008).

Results

There were 233 completed responses from 107 females and 105 males as well as 21 unspecified. Two main themes were evident from analysis of the responses (Table 1).

Table 1: Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-Themes
1. Negative attitudes toward LGBTI community	1. Negative attitudes associated with religion, culture, normative values and political background 2. Heterosexualisation
2. Positive attitude towards LGBTI community	1. Positive attitude Negative attitudes associated with religion, culture, normative values and political background 2. Support LGBTI community

Theme 1: Negative attitudes towards LGBTI community

The following sub-themes emerged among those who showed negative attitude towards LGBTI students. *Basis of negative attitude* and *Heterosexualisation* (intervention to change LGBTI individuals to heterosexuals)

Sub-theme 1.1 : Negative attitudes associated with religion, culture, normative values and political background

The student negative attitude was based on religion, culture, normative values and political background

Participants considered LGBTI a sin and an act against God. This is confirmed in the following statements:

"Very much disgusted because God planned a man to stay with a woman, they must be chased away before the younger ones can copy from them."

"I feel like they are demon possessed because this is against God's will. They need to stop this thing as it upsets God."

Some participants mentioned that through their lifestyle choice LGBTI persons are opposing the creation, as God has created male and female, not male or female only. This view was verified by the following statement:

"LGBTI should do something beneficial for themselves than playing dumb, God did not create Adam and Steve but Adam and Eve, they need to face reality."

Other participants consider homosexuality to be a choice against the community and its culture and morals.

"They are against our community morals, they cause disgrace to our culture even though they are given rights."

Other participants mentioned that to be a member of LGBTI community is abnormal. This was confirmed by the following statements:

"These people are crazy, how can you date same sex? That is disgusting. They are waste of human nature, they should be deregistered from our normal institution. This should never be promoted and encouraged."

Other participants blame the government for legalising LGBTI people.

"It's actually a disgrace and it's a shame that the government has legalized such evil things profound level beyond animosity because even animals can't do such."

Sub-theme 1.2: Heterosexualisation"

Participants mentioned that there is a need to ensure that LGBTI persons change their behaviour and become heterosexuals (heterosexualisation). They mention several ways in which they can be compelled to change their behaviour. The interventions include divine intervention and punishment and changing of the constitution.

Some participants feel that the LGBTI community needs divine intervention, because it is like they are demon possessed. This is how some participants put it:

"Our society is at stake and needs deliverance, it is against our culture as well as religion but it is a matter of different minds then it needs divine intervention."

Other participants felt that LGBTI persons need to be punished in order to force them to change into heterosexuals. The punishment suggested ranges from bodily harm to rape. The following are some of the statements written by male participants:

"They must be killed and destroyed as they promote same sex relationship, not good for the survival of the community. Corrective rape is the best way of correcting them so that they can change their behaviour."

Participants also felt that the government's decision to grant rights to the LGBTI community is wrong. The following statements attest to this:

"The government should revisit the constitution and remove this policy (LGBTI), it is unacceptable."

Theme 2: Positive attitudes towards the LGBTI community

In contrast to the negative attitudes discussed above, some participants showed positive attitudes towards LGBTI persons. This was sub categorised into origin of positive attitudes and approaches towards LGBTI community.

Sub-theme 2.1: Positive attitude Negative attitudes associated with religion, culture, normative values and political background

Aspects such as religion, biological factors and the constitutional rights were identified as source of positive attitudes towards LGBTI community. Some of the participants who displayed a positive attitude towards LGBTI persons understand that LGBTI persons are not able to control who they are as their sexuality has been determined by inherent factors. The following are some of the participant's statements to validate this:

"The gay/lesbian people must be accepted because some are in that situation because of their biological factors. It is in their nature it is just up to people to accept these people."

Some participants consider the sexual orientation of LGBTI persons as a matter of the individual's right to choose. These are attested by the following statements:

"The community in general should accept LGBT; I say this because our SA constitution promotes equality and a right to choice. This is a democratic country, meaning we are true to be whoever we wanna be or do whatever we want. If people want to practice this LGBTI thing so let it be."

Contrary to the participants who used religion to support their views against the LGBTI community, these participants used it to support LGBTI persons. The following statements were used to defend the existence and behaviour of LGBTI persons from a religious point of view:

"As for religion, let God be the one to judge since the authority is in his grasp. These people are still humans and God loves them so we should learn to live with them."

Sub-Theme 2.2: Support of the LGBTI community

Some participants showed great support for LGBTI persons. The following are some of the statements which show the support for LGBTI students:

"I think that people should stop misjudging these LGBTI community and we should stop violence and bad comments about them. I also think that these people should try to think positively about these people and how they live. These people need our support as they did not choose to be who they are,

Other participants mentioned the need for cultural change in order to be more inclusive of the LGBTI community. This was supported by the following statements:

"I feel the community is doing better maybe it can change our behaviour towards gays and lesbians. And I can stress that the problem is our culture, but culture change which means everything will be okay."

Discussion

The findings show that students at a South African rural-based university have diverse attitudes toward LGBTI students varying from negative to positive. Negative attitudes towards LGBTI community are mainly based on religion. These findings are in line with those of Ellis (2008), Hinrichs and Rosenberg's (2002) and De Vos (2007). Culture was also identified as a source of negative attitudes towards LGBTI concurring with report released by the Human Rights Watch (2003) report mentioning that several African leaders publicly declared that homosexuality is foreign to African culture and that it should not be condoned. Similar findings of negative attitude towards LGBTI were shared by several authors (Epprecht, 2007; Coyle & Kitzinger, 2002; De Vos, 2007). This gives a clear indication of lack of adequate information about LGBTI by religious and traditional leaders which highlights the need to conduct LGBTI awareness to those leaders as they are highly influential in the community.

Findings also show that students with negative attitudes towards LGBTI community have their views regarding the ways of changing the LGBTI into heterosexuals which include punishment, assault, rape, spiritual rituals and even forcing the government to remove the rights of LGBTI from the constitution attesting to the finding in a report by the Human Rights Watch (2009), as well as Pepper (2005), which mentions that LGBTI members are often victims of abuse, violence and discrimination. This is supported by a newspaper report by

Associated Press (2012) in Johannesburg which highlighted the types of attacks and killing of homosexual people, based on prejudice and myths about LGBTI individuals. These show the extent to which LGBTI are not considered as "complete human beings" entitled to live their lives freely and also enjoying basic human rights like all other citizens of South Africa. It also indicates ignorance of students by assuming that LGBTI is just a phase or a disease which can be cured by drastic intervention.

The notion that the LGBTI community is abnormal indicate a lack of understanding of the LGBTI community, which concur with the findings by De Vos (2007) who states that society still finds it difficult to understand LGBTI individuals due to a number of reasons.

Findings also show that there are some students with positive attitudes towards LGBTI students. Those who have a positive attitude based their arguments on the rights embedded in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (2006) which embraces the rights of every individual without discrimination. Results also show that other students support LGBTI on the basis of their religion which concur to those of Sumerau (2012) who stated that some churches such promotes an inclusive doctrine based on recognition of the value of each individual regardless of aspects such as sexual orientation, gender and gender identification. Students with positive attitudes showed support for and an understanding of LGBTI communities and advocated for cultural change and a willingness to accommodate the LGBTI community. Requiring cultural change to accommodate the LGBTI community is in line with Bernstein's (2008) concept of "identity deployment", which advocates for a transformation of the values, categories and practices of the dominant culture to accept the oppressed group. Ghaziani (2011) also talks about a post-gay culture, in which there is increasing assimilation of gays and other forms of diversity. These finding indicate that since the attitudes are largely influenced by religion and culture, programmes that advocate for making LGBTI community human should target church leaders and other influential community members with relevant LGBTI information as they can act as force to advocate for LGBTI community and also assist in transforming the attitude of other members in the community, this including student churches and political as well as social clubs on campus.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings and the suggestions made by the participants in order to improve understanding of the LGBTI community and to ensure that the LGBTI community is accommodated within the university community:

- Increased in information dissemination about LGBTI persons, starting at primary and secondary schools through by incorporating LGBTI aspects into the Life Orientation curriculum.
- Mainstreaming LGBTI issues by including it in some of the compulsory university modules
- Hosting of awareness campaigns, seminars and debates focusing on LGBTI persons by the university which involves university community and also religious and traditional leaders and other influential members in the community such as political leaders, and other advocacy organisations in the community.
- The university management should find ways to address stigma and discrimination against LGBTI persons on campus.
- Further studies need to be conducted regarding the attitudes of rural-based university staff on LGBTI persons, the impact of homophobia on LGBTI students and advocacy and support for LGBTI students at a rural-based university.

Conclusion

As much as some students embrace LGBTI students, negative attitudes exist among students towards LGBTI community which can endanger the lives of LGBTI students in a South African rural based university

Limitation

The limitation of this research is that participants were only the students who were attending the anti-stigma and discrimination campaign at a Rural based university. Therefore, the findings may not necessarily be applicable to other category of students. The findings should be interpreted with this limitation in mind.

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