

Experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex students regarding sports participation in a South African rural based university

AZWIHANGWISI HELEN MAVHANDU-MUDZUSI

Department of Health Studies, University of South Africa, Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, Pretoria 0003, South Africa. E-mail: mmudza@unisa.ac.za

(Received: 19 November 2013; Revision Accepted: 12 April 2014)

Abstract

Though participating in sports has many health benefits which contribute to the improvement of quality of life for the individuals, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) students are unable to enjoy those benefits due to fear of stigma and discrimination which they experience during sport activities. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of LGBTI students regarding sports participation in a South African rural-based university. A qualitative exploratory descriptive study was conducted. The participants included 20 LGBTI students who were purposively recruited through purposive and snow-balling techniques. Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews and field notes. An inductive thematic approach was followed to analyse data. The findings indicated that LGBTI students are forced to behave as heterosexuals, excluded from participating in sports tournament, alienated from participating in sports by fellow students. They are unfairly labelled and called by derogatory names based on participation in specific sporting code. Stigma and discrimination experienced by LGBTI students regarding sport participation is negatively affecting their quality of life. The programmes for social behaviour change focusing on advocacy, education and support is recommended to ensure equal access of all qualifying students to university activities including sport and recreation without discrimination, and ensuring the adherence to Human rights of LGBTI students in a rural based university.

Keywords: Bisexual, gay, intersex, lesbian, sports participation, transgender.

How to cite this article:

Mavhandu-Mudzusi, A.H. (2014). Experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex students regarding sports participation in a South African rural based university. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, 20(2:2), 710-720.

Introduction

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) people are part of the community who need to enjoy the rights as every other citizen in the country. Some countries have laws, policies and/or constitutions which protect human rights based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Ellis, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2011). South Africa's constitution of 1996 was the first in the world to include provisions of non-discrimination of people based on sexual orientation. This includes equal access and non discrimination in sports and

recreation which has many health benefits for the individuals (Ortega, Ruiz, Castilo & Sjoström, 2008). McCauley et al. (2006) reported that participating in sports is believed to improve quality of life by improving self-efficacy, physical health and mental health status. Quality of life is defined by Diener (1984) as the conscious cognitive judgement of one's satisfaction on one's current life.

This issue of rights and equal access seems to be just on paper than in real practice, as people are still experiencing attacks and crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Hergarty, Pratto & Lemieux, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2011; Reading & Rubin, 2011; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Netshandama, 2013). Studies indicate that LGBTI students are unable to enjoy the benefits of participating in sports due to fear of stigma and discrimination which they experience during sport activities (Nelson & Gordon-Lasern, 2006). Some people associate poor individual performance in male dominated sports such as football as being gay, or being gay is also associated with poor performance (LGBT Youth North West, 2013).

Many LGBTI students are reluctant to participate in organised sport based on their previous experience of homophobia and transphobia (LGBT Youth North West, 2013). Lee, Burgeson, Futton and Spain (2007) study indicate that majority of LGBT students who participated in sports or physical education are harassed, bullied or assaulted based on their sexual orientation. Studies further shows that some LGBT students were formally or informally refused to participate in certain school sporting activities because their presence was viewed as disruptive (The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network: GLSEN, 2013). The same report further highlights that some LGBTI students were unable to participate in sports as the team members were not receptive to a gay member joining their team as they will "mess things up".

In contrast, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2011) reported that there are some LGBTI students who are enjoying participation in sports and they showed better academic performance, higher self esteem and improved sense of belonging. GLSEN (2013) further highlights that LGBTI students who are supported by coaches regarding their sexual orientation were more comfortable in participating in sport and they experience less stigma and discrimination than their unsupported counterparts.

Universities are obliged to adhere to the constitution for ensuring that LGBT students are afforded equal opportunities in the same way as ethnic minorities and other marginalized students (Epstein, Flynn & Telford, 2003). Griffin and Carroll (2010) have recommended the creation of the environment which prohibit name calling of LGBT students. The policy should also involve training of coaches and teachers on LGBTI issues. In response to that, some schools have developed policies which protect the LGBTI students against victimisation,

discrimination and bullying in order to promote respect and safety of LGBTI students (GLSEN, 2013). Unfortunately, negative attitudes towards LGBTI individuals persist in the university community (Arndt & de Bruin, 2006; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Netshandama, 2013). This discrimination is also occurring in the sport field compelling LGBTI students to hide their sexual orientation when participating in sport to avoid stigma and discrimination. Others completely avoid participating on sports with resultant negative impact on their health. The purpose of the study was to explore and describe the experiences of LGBTI students regarding sport participation in a rural based university.

Methodology

Design

A qualitative explorative, descriptive design was utilised to gain in-depth understanding of the experiences of LGBTI students regarding sports participation in a South African rural-based university.

Setting

The 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 which all have their own views, constitution and regulations towards LGBTI people ranging from acceptance to criminalisation of homosexuality. The university is situated in a rural community with low socio-economic status. The people living around the community adhere mainly to their culture and traditional ways of doing things. Any deviation from the norm, including aspect such as homosexuality is mainly associated with witchcraft.

Sample and sampling procedures

The university had an HIV/AIDS unit that offered testing service and psychological support to students. During their visits to this unit, students were requested to complete a Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) questionnaire developed by the Higher Education HIV/AIDS Programme (HEAIDS, 2005). This questionnaire had specific questions that assisted the researchers to identify non-heterosexual students, in order words, LGBTIs. Purposive and snow-balling techniques were used to select the participants. The sample consisted of 20 participants determined by data saturation. Participants consisted of five lesbians, three bisexual females, two transgender (female to male) lesbian, one

transgender (female to male) heterosexual, two bisexual males, five gays and two transgender (male to female) individuals. Five students were in their second year, 12 in their third level, and three in their fourth year. Their ages ranged between 19 and 25 years.

Data collection

Data were collected between January and March 2012. In-depth individual interviews were conducted in order to collect first-hand information from LGBTI individuals. All interviews stemmed from the following central question: “*What is your experience in this university regarding participation in sports?*” Probes, minimal encouragers and follow-up questions were used to enhance the richness of responses. The interviews were audio-taped. Each interview lasted for about 45 to 60 minutes. Field notes were compiled to capture and describe the non-verbal cues observed during interviews. Transcribed interviews were given back to the participants to verify the content and accuracy. Data collection continued until data saturation point. During data collection, the researcher bracketed her own existing views in order to capture authentic data. After coding, each participant was asked to review the emerged themes as well as relevance and accuracy of all the excerpts used to illustrate the respective themes. Participants confirmed that the transcription accurately represent their experiences as LGBTI students with regard to sports participation in the rural-based university.

Data analysis

Data analysis commenced during data collection. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim and transcription accuracy was verified by participants and an independent co-coder experienced in qualitative research. The analysis followed steps described by Tesch cited in Creswell (2009) and Lacey and Luff (2007) which include familiarisation with data, transcribing and organising data, coding data (which involves open coding, conceptual coding, categorising data and identifying themes) substantiated by direct participant’s statements and literature control. This process was repeated with each transcript and categories from each discussion were grouped together into themes.

Measures of trustworthiness

This study elects to adopt Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) framework of trustworthiness, as it fits in well with the qualitative world of multiple realities and ways of knowing. It includes five criteria; credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability and authenticity (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2008). Notes were taken during interviews to ensure dependability and confirmability. A sample of the audio recorded data was independently transcribed and analysed by the researcher and an independent coder, who is an

expert in qualitative research for confirmability reasons. The researcher and an independent coder agreed on the outcome of their analysis. Rigour was further enhanced by member checking and validity checks to enhance the credibility and dependability of the study outcomes. With regard to credibility, transcripts were sent to some participants to determine their accuracy and in all cases participants were satisfied. Validity checks on the master list of themes were carried out by an independent researcher to ensure that the themes were relevant and evidenced in the data.

Ethical measures

Ethical clearance to conduct research was obtained from the South African rural-based University's Research and Ethics Committee. The research purpose and the potential benefits of the research which includes the potential of advocacy and support for the participants were thoroughly explained. The possible impacts of participating which may include further stigmatization and discrimination to the participants was also explained. To reduce the risk, all interviews were conducted in the HIV/AIDS unit to ensure strict confidentiality. Anonymity was maintained throughout. Where it was unavoidable to use the name, pseudonyms were used. Participants were given written information which included their freedom to withdraw and issue of voluntary participation. Pseudonyms were used when signing consent forms in order to protect participants' identity. Follow-up and debriefing was done to participants after interviews.

Results

One main theme, 'stigma and discrimination' emerged from the data analysis. This theme contained four sub-themes. Extracts from participants' narratives were used to support the discussions of identified sub-themes. For the sake of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used instead of participants' real names.

Theme 1: Stigma and discrimination

Experience of stigma and discrimination regarding sports participation was a common theme alluded to by all participants. LGBTI students reported that the stigmatisation and discrimination they experienced were not only from the fellow students but also from the university employees involved in different sporting codes. Stigma and discrimination were further categorised into four sub-themes namely: 'forced to behave as heterosexual people', 'exclusion from sports tournaments', 'alienation by fellow students' and 'unfair labelling'.

Sub-Theme 1.1: Alienation from participating in sports by fellow students

All participants talked about issues of eligibility to partake in sport activities. They unanimously reported that being LGBTI student is like a criterion for *exclusion from participating in sport activities* with heterosexual students. LGBTI students who wanted to participate in different sports in which heterosexual students were involved, were treated with hostility. In some instances, if an LGBTI person tries to join other players for a specific sporting code, the heterosexual students discontinued to play or just leave the playground. If they decide to remain in the game, such as netball, the heterosexual students would not even pass the ball to the LGBTI team members. Queen, a 20 year old third year lesbian student described the situation as follows:

If you enter the ground wanting to play tennis or netball, other people who are straight just leave the sport ground. Sometimes the person who is acting as a referee will just refuse you to participate. But this is not surprising, do you remember what happened to Castor Semenya (a transgender female to man) who was refused to participate in female athletics because people were saying she is not a female. This is what is happening to us here.

Sub-Theme 1.2: Unfair labelling

To avoid the situation of being alienated, some participants mentioned that they end up participating in sporting code such as female soccer or rugby game where majority of these team members are non-heterosexual students. But this also had its negative consequence such as ‘being automatically labelled as homosexual’ without any proof of an individual’s sexual orientation. The following excerpt from Lindiwe, a 20 year old third year transgender (female to male) student attest to the experience of labelling:

“If you are a female and you play soccer or rugby, you are automatically labelled as lesbians. Whether you are straight or not, they don’t care, they don’t even ask.”

Apart from being automatically labeled as homosexuals, participants also mentioned that they were called with all different derogatory names. The derogatory names used towards LGBTI students when they were playing sports ranged from being called by the names of opposite sex, being judged as sinners, immoral or even as ‘in- correct or mistaken human beings’. The following are some of the names they were called with as highlighted from different participants’ interviews:

“Double adaptor, Sus buti, Mofie, That girl, Wrong turn, Dukana, female demon, Adam and Steve, Eve and Eve, Jonson and Senzo, matriple six (666),

Stabane, Mom Ruby, Khapela, sister, dude, buti, Thomas and Henry. Brother-sister.”

Sub-Theme 1.3: Forced to behave like heterosexual people

For those who were tolerated, or accommodated in specific sporting codes predominately for a specific gender such as such as netball, which is considered as female sport, the transgender (female to male) were forced to behave and adhere to a specific ‘gender expectations’. Participants mentioned that they experienced stigma and discrimination on the sports fields by coaches based on the way they dress, walk or behave which is different from ‘specific gender expectation’. They were sometimes forced to change their dress code and also their gaits in order to get permission to participate in certain sport activities as stated in the following excerpt by Jacky, a 22 year old third year transgender (female to male) student:

We are discriminated everywhere. This university is homophobic. The coach of a ... will send you back if you enter the sport ground ‘walking like a boy’. He will say it openly that he hates females who walk, talk and dress like men. One day he was supposed to take ‘Thomas’ (pseudo name of a transgender female to male) to a nearby Further Education and Training College to collect her bags as we were going to play a ‘specific sporting code’ in another university. The moment she walks towards his car, he said, “you are not going to enter my car dressed like this”. She ended up going to a friend’s room and borrowed a bath towel to wrap herself in order to hide the ‘boyish trousers’ she was putting on.

Sub-Theme 1.4: Exclusion from participating in sports tournament

Apart from being forced to adhere to specific gender norms and also behaving as ‘heterosexuals’ LGBTI who were participating in sports were not offered complete freedom and rights to participate as their heterosexual team mates. Some of their rights were limited such as participating in sports tournaments held in other universities especially when the students were expected to share the rooms with teammates. The reason given for denying the LGBTI students was based on the aspect that the heterosexual members, even though they were of the same sex with the LGBTI student, would not be safe when sharing a room with an LGBTI student. The lack of safety was based on the ‘speculation’ that the LGBTI students would ‘rape’ the heterosexual students of same sex, for example, a gay student would rape a male heterosexual student if they were sharing the rooms. This assumptions undermines the integrity of LGBTI students degrading them from ‘being a complete human being’ to just a ‘sexual beings’ who cannot control their sexual drive. The following statement by Joy, a 23 year old fourth year transgender (male to female) confirms the exclusion:

Last time they refused me to go on trip to play the game because people were going to share the room. The coach said that because I am a gay, he won't take me along as the person I will be sharing the room with will be uncomfortable. He said I may rape that male because I have sex with males. I was so disturbed. People at this university they do not understand homosexuality.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that LGBTI students are stigmatised and discriminated against during sport activity by coaches and fellow students. This attests to the findings by Nelson and Gordon-Lasern (2006) who argues that LGBT students do not participate in sport due to fear of stigma and discrimination which they experience during sport activities. This was also confirmed by Lee, Burgeson, Futton and Spain (2007] and LGBT Youth North West (2013). The exclusion of GLBTI students from attending sport tournament by the coach and also fellow students attest to report by GLSEN (2013) mentioning that LGBT students were formally or informally refused to participate in certain school sporting activities because their presence were viewed as disruptive. Stigma and discrimination experienced by LGBTI based on their movement, dress code or sporting code is in line with Reading and Rubin (2011) which indicated that people who violate sexual or gender norm in appearance and conduct are discriminated.

Unfair labelling, name-calling and use of all derogatory words towards LGBTI students participating in sports concur with Ellis' (2008) finding that the most common forms of discrimination or harassment are comprised derogatory remarks. This was also confirmed by Mabvurira, Motsi, Masuke and Chigondo (2012) indicating that any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality is treated with scorn in most of African Societies.

These findings suggest that LGBTI students in a South African rural based university do not enjoy the benefit of participating in sports; this is alluded to by Ortega and colleagues (2008) as they are excluded from participating, harassed, bullied or stigmatised. All those negative experiences of LGBTI in sport on the basis of sexual orientation constitutes violation of their right to freedom of participation in sports and recreation and also the right to equality which is embodied South African 2006 constitution (Ellis, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2011). This discrimination of LGBTI students by the coaches and fellow students is in line with Human Rights Watch (2009) report mentioning that even in countries where persecution is prohibited by law, LGBTI are still experiencing abuse, violence and discrimination from various sources. This also confirms what is widely documented in literature that the issue of equal rights seems to be more on paper than in real practice (Hergarty, Pratto & Lemieux, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2011; Reading & Rubin, 2011). Living under this situation will

negatively affect the health and quality of life of LGBTI students participating in sports in a rural based university.

Limitations

The limitation of this research is that participants were only LGBTI students who were purposively selected and those referred by fellow participants using snowballing technique. The possibility is that only a specific group of LGBTI students who are friends, who may have similar experience participated while leaving out other LGBTI students in the university who may have dissimilar experience. This makes it difficult to generalise the findings to all LGBTI students in the South African rural-based university and other similar settings. The findings should be interpreted with this limitation view.

Recommendations

As universities are supposed to be agents of transformation and centres which should ensure equal access of all qualifying students to university activities including sport and recreation without discrimination, and ensuring the adherence to Human rights of every students including LGBTI students in the rural based university, there is a need to have the programmes for social behaviour change focusing on Advocacy, education and support. The programmes should target the following people:

- University community including management to improve awareness and to address issues of stigma and discrimination.
- LGBTI community to improve their knowledge regarding their rights and empowering them to deal with stigma and discrimination.
- Rural based community focusing mainly on traditional, religious and political leaders in order to level the ground for LGBTI students when they are out of the universities.

Conclusion

LGBTI students in the rural-based university faced challenges regarding participating in sports as they were forced to behave as heterosexual individuals, excluded from sports tournament, alienated by fellow students and unfairly labelled. Unless there is a formulation of social behaviour change programme focusing on advocacy, education and support LGBTI students in a South African rural based will continue to experience stigma and discrimination in the sport field from coaches and fellow students.

Acknowledgements

The author is thankful to the South African rural based university for granting permission to conduct this study. Special appreciation is extended to the LGBTI students in the rural-based university for participating in this study.

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