


'Are there gay men in the mines?' Towards unsettling the heteronormative male occupational culture in mining

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Background: Available literature indicates that the male occupational culture of the South African mining industry marginalises and excludes women; however, limited attention has been given to the heteronormative element of this occupational culture and its implications on gay identities. There is a need to interrogate the heteronormative male occupational culture and how it hinders the visibility of gay men.

Objectives: This study aims to explore how the heteronormative occupational culture of the mining industry facilitates the visibility of gay male identities.

Method: This study is based on qualitative data that were collected through in-depth interviews with five black gay mineworkers who were based in small mining towns located in North West and Mpumalanga provinces.

Results: This study found that the heteronormative male occupational culture of the mining industry is maintained through the perpetuation of religious arguments and cultural traditions that validate heterosexuality as a central component of masculinity. The findings indicate that sexual diversity is not acknowledged in the mining industry, and this contributes to the invisibility of gay men because the fear of stigma and discrimination silences them.

Conclusion: A heteronormative male occupational culture undermines gay identities and informs the unequal distribution of power between heterosexual and gay men. As such, the mining industry should promote sexual diversity and develop safe working environments for gay men.

Contribution: The study brings forth the voices of a silenced sexual minority and interrogates the exclusive heteronormative mining occupational culture to encourage the development of inclusive mining workplaces.

Keywords: heteronormativity; gay identities; occupational culture; mining; mineworkers.

Introduction

In conceptualising my research, I mentioned to a friend that I was planning to conduct research on gay experiences in the mining industry, and their immediate response was: 'Are there gay men in the mines?' I was not shocked by the response, considering that the South African mining industry has long been constructed as a heterosexual male space (Mudimba, 2017). While some research has established that women are often excluded in mining workplaces because of patriarchy (Benya, 2013; Mangaroo-Pillay & Botha, 2020; Mudimba, 2017), little is known about the exclusion of gay men because of the heteronormative ideologies embodied in occupational cultures of the mines. While historical research provides evidence of same-sex relations in the South African mines (Edwards & Epprecht, 2020; Harries, 1994; Moodie & Ndatshe, 1994), gay identities have remained invisible post-1994, rendering the mining spaces heterosexual. Existing literature on gay men's experiences in the South African mines primarily focuses on events that occurred pre-1994, creating an impression that same-sex attractions in the mines ended with colonialism and apartheid (Harries, 1994; Moodie et al., 1988; Ndatshe, 1993). This study draws attention to gay men's experiences in the post-apartheid South African mining industry because of the legal transformation of 1994 that led to the constitutional protection of LGBTIQ+ identities. This study seeks to make gay identities visible in the South African mining industry by paying attention to the silenced voices of gay men.

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Male-dominated workplaces often embody masculinist occupational cultures that emphasise the role of men; however, research indicates that gay men are often met with intrusive heteronormative cultures that exalt hegemonic heterosexual masculinities (Pringle & Giddings, 2011; Priola et al., 2014; Reingardé, 2010). Gay men's urgency in male-dominated workplaces is limited by the fear of discrimination, leading to them concealing their sexual identities or passing as heterosexual to avoid the negative consequences of embodying a stigmatised sexual identity (Reingardé, 2010). The unintended consequence of the silence is that it creates an impression that gay people do not exist in such spaces, keeping the heterosexual male power intact and excluding and marginalising gay identities. Hence, it is necessary to study the experiences of gay mineworkers and shed light on their experiences in male-dominated mining workplaces.

As a point of departure, the introduction has provided some background on the nature of the South African mining industry and the rationale behind this study. In the following sections, I start by reviewing historical literature on gender and sexuality in the South African mining industry. This is followed by a systematic review of the literature on heteronormativity and the silencing of gay identities in heteronormative workplaces. I then discuss the theoretical framework and engage with the methodology used to achieve the goals of the study. Subsequent to the methodology is an analysis of the research findings, followed by the discussion and concluding arguments.

Gender and sexuality in the South African mining industry: A historical overview

Historically, same-sex sexual practices occurred within mining compounds and became part of the occupational culture in the mines. Black mineworkers' patterns of sexuality were merely a component of the multiple cultural expressions that were highly guided by the social context of the mines. The practice of mine marriages emerged during the early 20th century, originating among the Mozambican migrant mineworkers, and spread rapidly to other ethnic groups (Edwards & Epprecht, 2020; Harries, 1994). *Bukhontxana* is a term that was used to refer to mine marriages that encompassed romantic and sexual relations between young and older men and were strictly governed by *Umteto ka Sokisi*, a strict code of etiquette that directly translates to Sokisi's rules, named after a man who was believed to have invented the practice (Edwards & Epprecht, 2020; Harries, 1994; Moodie et al., 1988). Gender ratios in the urban spaces were skewed as the mines almost exclusively employed men (Delius & Glaser, 2002), and while it can be argued that *bukhontxana* was a product of enforced celibacy as the men were seldom exposed to women and lived in single-sex compounds, Harries' (1994) historical research provides evidence of shared deep emotions that sometimes caused suicides, murders and beatings in cases where a young mine wife broke off their marriage with their mine husband to start a new one with another man.

Harries (1994) was supported by Ndatshe (1993) and Niehaus (2002), who argued against the notion of enforced celibacy and emphasised mineworkers' agency and the enjoyment and love connections derived from mine marriages.

The practice of *bukhontxana* was visible, and it was generally known that mineworkers engaged in sexual intercourse with each other. However, Christian missionaries frowned upon sexual activities amongst men (Harries, 1994). In 1906, Swiss missionaries within the Transvaal Missionary Association believed that sexual intercourse between mineworkers was immoral and called upon government officials to condemn such practices (Harries, 1994). Consequently, the mineworkers kept information regarding their sexual relationships among themselves and denied engaging in sexual intercourse with other men when outside the mines (Edwards & Epprecht, 2020; Moodie et al., 1988). This brief historical overview documents the experiences of oppressed black migrant mineworkers who stayed in highly regulated mining compounds. It was imperative to consider this historical overview as this study considers the experiences of gay men in post-apartheid South Africa with more freedoms and the abolished compound system. It is necessary to consider how same-sex desires were visible and acceptable among male mineworkers during a time when they were strictly prohibited through legislation. Yet, they have become invisible and intolerable at a time when legislation is in place to protect them and promote the rights of sexual minorities. In the following section, I provide a review of the literature on heteronormativity and how it operates in male-dominated workplaces.

Heteronormativity in male-dominated workplaces

Butler (1997) taught us that in any context, heteronormativity is initiated and naturalised through the continued and sustained performance of heterosexuality. Butler's (1997) notion of performance was supported by Reingardé (2010), who argued that heterosexuality in workplaces is visible, repetitive and ritualistic. It is performed through heterosexual colleagues' portrayal of wedding rings, engagements about heterosexual spouses and heterosexual coupling at work gatherings. Thus, sexual identity is relevant to the workplace as the behavioural displays of normative gender roles within spaces of work emphasise and secure the dominant position of heterosexuality (Pringle & Giddings, 2011). The division of work based on gender affirms heterosexuality as it is borne from the heteronormative organisation of the heterosexual family, which dictates the roles that men and women can and cannot occupy at home. Work involving manual labour, bravery and aggression is often considered masculine, while nursing, cleaning, teaching and beauty are considered feminine and socially assigned to women (Collins, 2015; Van Zyl, 2015).

Heteronormativity in the workplace inhibits the recognition of sexual identities that fall outside the heterosexual norm and renders them questionable and strange to heterosexual colleagues. The lack of recognition consequently results in

sexual minority identities becoming invisible in workplaces as they are rarely spoken about and may sometimes be considered by heterosexuals as a private matter with no place at work (Pringle & Giddings, 2011; Priola et al., 2014). However, Reingardè (2010) argued that this notion of sexual identities as irrelevant to workplaces is flawed because heteronorms are produced and reproduced in most social spaces and explains that the mere relegation of sexual minority identities to private spheres is an expression of dominant heterosexuality.

Studies have found that male-dominated workplaces are more heteronormative and aggressive towards gay men than female-dominated workplaces (Collins, 2015; Ozeren et al., 2016; Reingardè, 2010). Benya (2013) argued that traditionally male-dominated workplaces, such as the South African mining industry, embody masculine occupational cultures. Her argument is supported by various international and South African studies, which have found that the masculine occupational culture of male-dominated workplaces is not only exclusive to women but also excludes gay men because they do not conform to heteronormative ways of being a man (Carey et al., 2022; Collins, 2015). Heteronormativity within male-dominated workplaces affords heterosexual men more social power because they embody an ideal masculinity established as a standard when its value is assessed compared to femininity and gay men's masculinities (Speice, 2020). Despite their capabilities to perform the work, gay men are emasculated in the eyes of heterosexual men because of the heteronormative ideologies evident in male-dominated workplaces (Collins, 2015; Covin, 2015; Mennicke et al., 2018).

For example, Reingardè (2010) conducted a qualitative study in Lithuanian male-dominated workplaces and found that within these workplaces, traditional heterosexual masculinity is hegemonic and promoted, while gay men are excluded because of their lack of conformity to the ruling heteronormative expectations that emphasise heterosexuality. Similarly, a qualitative study conducted by Ozeren et al. (2016) in Turkey found that gay men who portrayed gay identities in male-dominated workplaces were most likely to experience exclusion and hostility because of dominant heteronormative workplace cultures. A similar study was conducted in the United States (US) with a specific focus on the experiences of police officers and discovered that gay male criminal justice officers often experienced harassment and discrimination from heterosexual colleagues in their workplaces (Mennicke et al., 2018). These studies demonstrate how heteronormativity operates in male-dominated workplaces, rendering these spaces unsafe for sexual minority individuals. This brings us to our next section which reviews the literature on how heteronormativity-related stigma operates as a silencing tool in male-dominated workplaces.

Silencing gay identities in heteronormative male-dominated workplaces

Various studies found that heteronormativity and fear of stigma in male-dominated workplaces often silence gay men,

forcing them to hide personal aspects of their sexual identities and sometimes *pass* to fit in (Collins & Callahan, 2012; Reingardè, 2010; Willis, 2011). Male-dominated workplaces embody what Rich (1980) termed compulsory heterosexuality, where every individual is expected to be innately heterosexual, and as a result, gay identities are automatically rendered deviant when they become visible. Francis (2023) stated that compulsory heterosexuality informs how we understand gendered behaviour, leading to the perception that LGBTIQ+ bodies negate the possibility of 'proper' heterosexuality. Thus, Reingardè (2010) argued that the dominant discourse of heterosexuality in organisations places the dominated sexual minority identities under pressure to be suppressed, silenced and eliminated, crediting them with limited protection and legitimacy. Thus, the heteronormative discourse informs the unequal power relationships between sexual minorities and the heterosexual majority and acts as a control mechanism that limits the ability of gay and lesbian people to talk freely and construct their identities at work (Collins & Callahan, 2012; Reingardè, 2010).

Based on their research in the gas and oil industry, Collins and Callahan (2012) argued that gay workers in male-dominated organisations and industries are exposed to some form of compulsory heterosexuality, which informs the policing of gay identities and restricts the extent to which gay men can safely disclose their sexual identities. Cavalier (2011) and Collins (2015) concurred with Collins and Callahan (2012) as their research in the US male-dominated workplaces found that the presence of heteronormative ideologies and the possibilities of discrimination in male-dominated workplaces suppress and force gay men into silence and conformity to the heterosexual male occupational culture. Similarly, Willis' (2011) qualitative study on young LGBTIQ+ people's experiences in Australian workplaces discovered that young men who were hired in male-dominated workplaces felt enormous pressure to construct fictitious heterosexual identities and signify a heterosexual status to their male colleagues to keep their sexual identities invisible and escape the heteronormative gaze. A similar qualitative study by Ozeren et al. (2016) in Turkey found that LGBTIQ+ employees were the most silenced in Turkish workplaces and often tried to fit in with the dominant heterosexual norm evident in their organisations' occupational cultures. While there is very limited literature on the experiences of gay men in South African male-dominated workplaces, available research in other workplaces found that heteronormativity often informs discriminatory practices against gay men (Olney & Musabayana, 2016; Van Zyl, 2015). This study contributes to the literature by focusing on gay identities in a male-dominated industry and shedding light on how heteronormativity informs an exclusionary occupational culture that favours heterosexuals while marginalising and rendering gay men invisible. The following section draws from the scholarly contributions of Connell (2000, 2005) and Goffman (1963) in theorising gay male experiences in the heteronormative mining industry.

Hegemonic masculinities and stigma in male-dominated workplaces: A theoretical framework

Connell's (2000, 2005) seminal work on masculinities, in conjunction with Goffman's stigma theory, helps us understand the realities of black gay men and some strategies they employ to cope with stigmas and navigate heteronormativity in mining workplaces. Connell (2005) argued that a particular masculinity gains dominance because of the dominant conceptions and understandings of manhood in a certain space at a particular time. She termed this masculinity the hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is an arrangement of gender practice that embodies acceptable answers to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominance of men over women (Connell, 2005). As such, hegemonic masculinity is representative of the dominant cultural stereotype of a 'real man' in a community or workplace. Connell (2003) provided extensive evidence which indicates that in different contexts and times in history, hegemonic masculinity has always been associated with heterosexuality.

In many African societies, hegemonic masculinity is often constructed in line with the heterosexual gender normative stereotype that prescribes that men marry women, have biological children and grow their family names (Khunou, 2006; Ratele, 2011, 2013). The common understanding of a 'real man' in many South African communities is that he is heterosexual, assertive, aggressive, brave and a leader (Khunou, 2006; Langa, 2020; Siswana & Kiguwa, 2018). Manual labour requiring physical strength is performed in the mines, and manhood is measured according to a man's ability and strength to carry out such heavy tasks. Connell (2005) argued that while masculinities are vast, their access to power and privilege is not equal at any given time or in every context. Conceptions of a 'real man' are exclusively heterosexual in various cultures and communities, and its hegemony is validated by questioning the legitimacy of gay identities as natural because they are seen to disrupt the 'order of nature'. Gay men in mining workplaces occupy subordinate positions on the masculinity power hierarchy because of their sexual identities. Their sexual identities are used to discredit their masculinity and question their abilities to perform the labour required in their workplaces.

Goffman's (1963) stigma theory is essential to developing understandings of gay identities in heteronormative male-dominated mining workplaces and why they are rendered invisible. Goffman (1963) argued that social spaces reflect categories of people likely to be encountered in them and render those different from the expected categories vulnerable to criticism or lack of acceptance. Problems may arise in cases where an individual possesses an attribute that is different from members in a particular space because they do not fit into the normatively defined categories of persons available for them to be. Goffman (1963) referred to these attributes as stigma, particularly when they are extremely discrediting to the person who possesses them. Gay identities do not

conform to heteronormative gender roles, making those possessing them undesirable in workplaces where everyone is expected to be heterosexual. Because of the heteronormative discourse in the mines, heterosexual male identities are expected to exist, while the presence of gay identities in mining spaces is seen as peculiar. Because of the dominant heteronormative ideologies, an explicit gay identity may be stigmatised and encourage animosity and resentment from the heterosexual majority.

Black gay mineworkers are under pressure to conform to the hegemonic heterosexual masculinity or deliberately conceal information about their gay identities to escape the stigmas associated with a gay identity. Someone who explicitly identifies themselves as gay within these workplaces may be stigmatised. The heteronormative stigmatisation of gay identities in the mines informs the unequal treatment of gay men because identifying as gay may bear negative responses from heterosexual colleagues who may question gay men's belonging in mining workplaces. Black gay men's masculinities in the mining workplaces are excluded by maintaining and enforcing heteronormative workplace practices that are reinforced daily through social interactions that affirm heterosexuality and stigmatise gay identities. The heteronormative stigma silences gay men's masculinities and renders mining workplaces heterosexual male spaces. In the subsequent section, the methodology is outlined to demonstrate how the aims and objectives of the study were achieved.

Research methods and design

In its attempt to interrogate the heteronormative barriers that silence gay identities in the South African mining industry, the study employed a feminist epistemology to bring the voices of marginalised gay men to the forefront. A feminist epistemology seeks to develop knowledge from the point of view of the marginalised groups in society while liberating them from various forms of oppression and empowering them (Ashton & McKenna, 2020; Sprague, 2018). While feminist research is famous for 'visibilising' the experiences of women and advocating for their emancipation, Harding (1991) argued that women cannot be the only producers of feminist knowledge and that men who occupy oppressed positions also need to understand themselves and contribute to an understanding of their experiences from a feminist viewpoint. It was, therefore, imperative to employ feminist epistemology to understand the marginalised position of gay men in the mining industry from their point of view and unearth some of the challenges they encounter so that the silence can be broken, and sexual minority identities can be made visible.

A qualitative approach was employed to achieve the goal of feminist epistemology by gaining deeper meanings that participants attach to their experiences and how they shape their views on working in male-dominated spaces that embody a heterosexual male occupational culture. Given the

sensitive nature of the study, accessing participants became a challenge, and personal contacts were utilised to identify suitable research participants. Thus, purposive sampling was used to identify black gay men formally employed in the South African mining industry. Five self-identifying black gay men were selected to participate in the study. Participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the study's objectives, and written consent to participate was provided. Because of the heteronormative nature of the mining industry and the widespread discrimination towards gay people, some gay people would rather keep information about their sexual identities private to avoid unintended disclosure, and this made access difficult, hence the small sample. The participants' ages ranged between 25 and 37 years, and they were based in small mining towns in the North West and Mpumalanga provinces.

Data were collected through a series of in-depth interviews over three months. One interview was conducted in a restaurant, while the rest were conducted in the participants' places of residence, which were rented backrooms and houses. Interview questions were focused on participants' childhood experiences in rural communities and how they shaped their perceptions of masculinity. Furthermore, attention was given to how participants negotiated their sexual identities in their homes, workplaces and within friendships. Issues of disclosure and visibility were addressed in questions centred around the negotiation of gay identities in the three spaces. However, for this article, particular focus is given to participants' narratives of experiences in their workplaces to explore how the heteronormative occupational culture of the mining industry facilitates the visibility of sexual minority identities. All interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 40 and 92 min.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six thematic analysis phases were followed for data analysis. A thematic analysis method requires the researcher to identify and categorise themes or patterns according to similarities and differences that emanate from the participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, Braun and Clarke (2019) suggested that themes do not passively emerge from the data but are actively created by the researcher at the intersection of data, analytic process and positionality. Thus, multiple themes were identified from my critical analysis of and engagement with the data. The visibility of gay men in the contemporary South African mining industry was one of the important themes to emerge from this thematic analysis process. This theme was informed by the participants' narratives of stigma based on gay identities and the unwillingness of gay men to disrupt heteronormative ideologies that continue to marginalise them in the mining spaces. In the following sections, the research findings are discussed with a focus on how the heteronormative male occupational culture of the mining industry informs perceptions of gay men's masculinities and the visibility of gay identities in the mining workplaces. The discussions will demonstrate how heteronormative ideologies in the mines facilitate gay men's

decisions to pass as heterosexual and subsequently push them into silence.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (No. REC-02-0052-2918).

Findings

The heteronormative workplace 'closet': Silencing and invisibility

One of the key findings of this research was that the heteronormative ideologies in the mining industry contribute to marginalising and silencing black gay identities. The participants expressed that the heteronormative constraints in their workplaces limit their agency. From the participants' narratives, it was gathered that heteronormative ideologies in the mining workplaces are encouraged by religious beliefs and traditional cultural ideologies that mineworkers widely hold. These heteronormative ideologies emphasise the dominant position of heterosexual men within the mining space and suppress the voices of black gay mineworkers:

'I think around men, they do not have nice things to say about homosexual men or homosexuality in general. They condemn it, and they use the Bible for that. They do not want their children or sons to be homosexual. Some things are hurtful, they will tell you that animals cannot be gay and human being is gay. Some would use their Christianity to hate you, saying that God does not want homosexuals; they will leave everything out and tell you that God does not want homosexuals. So those things are very hurtful, and the best way to deal with that is just to keep quiet and never react.' (Temba, male, 36 years old, safety officer)

'A lot of people don't want to be led by a gay person, especially men, because they are patriachs. Men who are very closed-minded in their thinking would not agree to be led by a woman, and then here is a gay man who is associated with woman, not really seen as a man man man. They would never really accept that. I mean, if you are traditional and engaged in cultural things and very strict at home, then you wouldn't want to get to work and be controlled by a "half-man". That is what they would think.' (Sibusiso, male, 26 year old, safety officer)

In his narration, Temba indicates how religious arguments around gay identities inform the negative perceptions that heterosexual men hold about gay men. These religious arguments serve to protect the hegemony of heterosexuality in the mining workplaces by delegitimising gay identities. From Sibusiso's narrative, it is evident that traditional arguments against sexual minority identities are used in the mining spaces to question gay men's leadership. Undermining gay men's leadership capacity is indicative of the fact that the patriarchy that is used to exclude women does not benefit all men because sexual identity is used as a weapon to exclude men that do not conform to heteronormative ideologies that dictate what a 'real man' is. In line with Ratele (2014), homophobia and heteronormative ideologies are used to

marginalise and silence gay masculinities while keeping the hegemony of heterosexual masculinities in the mining environments intact. The lack of acceptance and intolerance creates a culture of fear amongst gay men, putting them under pressure to conceal their sexual identities and conform to the heteronormative expectations in their workplaces:

'Around straight colleagues, there is that fear of being discriminated against. I have to be a straight man, be a straight actor, for me to be accepted.' (Mthabisi, male, 30 years old, haul truck operator)

'I act normal, normal as in like a guy, my voice, tone twisted, the way I walk, [*the way*] I address them, the way I speak to them. When I look at myself, especially when a call comes from a girl or a gay guy – may be such things as screaming at them, but I need to tame myself, you know.' (Katlego, male, 28 years old, safety manager)

'I am just a gay guy, and no one knows, so I'm just a guy literally at work. If I had to be out, it would be a problem in my work environment because it's one thing to just be gay, and it is another thing to be straight, and suddenly you are gay. So, I think it is better if you just come as you are, but once you become straight, then gay ... yoooh ... I think you are opening another issue on its own.' (Sibusiso, male, 26 year old, safety officer)

'I have to act straight so that I do not put attention or suspicion on myself. By pretending to be straight, I do not discuss my sexuality or my relationship with them [*colleagues*]. Most of the time, I have to pretend to be like them, like normal. Also, to feel respected by them, I have to act normal.' (Temba, male, 26 year old, safety officer)

As the participants know that their behaviours are being policed in their workplaces, they all indicated that they conceal their identities and behave in a manner described as heterosexual. Mthabisi explains that his fear of discrimination pushes him to 'act' straight, indicating how passing operates as a response to possible harm because of the heteronormative context of the mining spaces. Similarly, Katlego highlights some examples of behaviours that he has to change to create a heterosexual image, including changing his voice, the way he walks and how he speaks to his colleagues. It is worth noting that as a manager, Katlego holds a position of authority, and yet, his power to exercise authority is limited by the need to pass and keep his sexual identity hidden. Thus, passing is necessary to be accepted by colleagues, but it is at the expense of the participants' fulfilment. The participants are under pressure to adjust their behaviours, so they do not signal the possibility of being gay. In their narratives, the participants are unconsciously perpetrating the stereotype that gay identities are not normal by referring to heterosexuality as 'normal', an indication that they have internalised and accepted to some extent the hegemony of heterosexuality in their workplaces.

While passing protects the participants from discrimination and exclusion, it maintains the status quo, creating the false impression that mining workplaces are inherently heterosexual male spaces and that gay men do not exist in these spaces. Passing keeps gay identities invisible and leaves the heteronormative male occupational culture of the mining industry unchallenged. I asked the participants how they felt

about their position as gay men working in the mining industry, and they expressed discontent with the inability to express themselves in ways that are not limited by heteronormative beliefs in their workplaces:

'Well, I am not proud because I am not out; I am still trapped I cannot be myself. Even though the government educates people in the country where I work, it is not as free. Maybe if I can move to another working environment, not in the mines, corporate or business, where I am acceptable and tolerated, maybe I will be proud of myself because I will not be judged on whom I am but on my work ethic that I am bringing to the company, so it's a bit difficult for me.' (Katlego, male, 28 year old, safety manager)

Although Katlego acknowledges that something is being done nationally to educate society about sexual diversity, he is experiencing his workplace as unwelcoming for gay men. Katlego is unsettled by this lack of acceptance and tolerance in the mine and hopes to gain employment in a space where he would not have to pass as heterosexual or be restricted by a heteronormative male occupational culture. Mthabisi shared similar sentiments and narrated the pain that he experienced from pretending to be heterosexual and confining his gay identity to private spaces outside the mines:

'If it were up to me, I would have preferred to work in an environment where there are gay people and where I could express myself because it has been a painful life having to pretend to be someone else just for the next person's right. For me not to be able to talk about the type of day I am having to the next person because I do not want them to move on to the next questions and ask about my sexuality hurts me.' (Mthabisi, male, 30 years old, haul truck operator)

It is evident from Katlego and Mthabisi's narratives that the lack of acceptance, as informed by heteronormative ideologies in their workplaces, affects their psychological well-being. Both participants are troubled by hiding their sexual identities and having to pass as heterosexual at work. Temba shared similar experiences and further explained that his life at work has become lonely as he converses less with his colleagues and spends most of his time by himself to avoid possible disclosure of his sexual identity.

When I asked the participants about their knowledge of sexual diversity education in the mining industry, they all indicated that issues of sexual identity are not discussed in their workplaces. Katlego said, 'Nothing is being done about gay awareness'. He was supported by Sibusiso, who argued that sexual diversity is not a point of engagement in his workplace because it unsettles heterosexual men. This silence on sexual diversity in the mining workplaces contributes significantly to the marginalisation and invisibility of gay identities.

Whose masculinity matters? The hegemony of male heterosexuality in mining workplaces

This study's findings indicate that dominant notions of masculinity in the mining workplaces are informed by broader heteropatriarchal arguments that stem from religious and cultural traditions that define normative gender

expectations for men and women. The participants are confronted with these heteronormative expectations that bring their masculine identities under scrutiny in their workplaces:

'Your masculinity plays a significant role. For instance, people tend to think that you are not man enough to actually pick up something. So sometimes you find that I have been doing work and they said to pick up this thing or they will be like let me help you because it will be heavy on you, or they say let me pick it up, and they will be judging you based on your masculinity thinking that I am less of a man.' (Katlego, Male, 28 years old, safety manager)

The act of offering assistance to Katlego when he is supposed to carry heavy objects at work has negative connotations as it suggests that he does not possess the strength necessary to carry out the task at hand. Katlego further alluded to the notion that gay men are not 'real men' by stating that as a gay man, he is not considered man enough to carry heavy objects, a task that is part of his job. While heterosexual and gay men are employed to do the same jobs in the mining workplaces, there are perceptions that gay men are incapable of possessing the necessary strength. This finding is in line with Collins (2015) and Mennicke et al. (2018), whose research findings confirmed that gay men are often perceived by heterosexual men as incapable of performing their duties in male-dominated workplaces. Mthabisi, Philly and Sibusiso shared similar views and demonstrated how gay identities discredit the masculinity of gay men in the eyes of their heterosexual colleagues:

'Okay, there are no openly gay colleagues at work because of the mining environment and its nature; it is perceived to be for tough guys, and nobody is brave enough to show their sexuality.' (Mthabisi, Male, 30 years old, haul truck operator)

'You know how they think. They think you are dating men, even if they are unsure what kind of men you are dating. They think you are a woman, like a girl, because you date other men. Like when I have to carry something that is heavy, they come and help me carry it because they take me as a woman. They always help me.' (Philly, male, 32 years old, sanitation helper)

While Katlego mentions that colleagues offer to help him carry heavy objects because they do not consider him a 'real man', Philly argues that his heterosexual colleagues assist him because they see him as a woman and not a man. Philly is supported by Temba, who explained: 'Okay, heterosexual man sees gay people as women, so it is always about saying you are a woman, so their belief is that a gay man is a woman'. Sibusiso explained that heteropatriarchal cultural traditions evident in heterosexual men's perceptions of masculinity would not allow them to accept being led by a gay man. The commonality in these narratives is that gay men's masculinities are stigmatised and undermined, limiting their access to the heterosexual privilege embodied in the heteronormative occupational culture of mining workplaces.

While literature established that the male occupational culture of the South African mining industry continues to privilege men and excludes women post-1994 (Benya, 2013;

Mangaroo-Pillay & Botha, 2020; Mudimba, 2017), the findings of this study indicate that the male occupational culture of the post-apartheid mining industry is also heterosexual, and it marginalises and excludes black gay men. Thus, black gay men's masculinities are not treated in the same manner as heterosexual masculinities because of the stereotypical association of gay identities with femininity. The unwarranted association of gay identities with femininity highlights the patriarchal notion that women are weak and cannot work in mining spaces. In the discussion section that follows, I make an argument that the visibility of gay bodies in the South African mining industry challenges the heteronormative male occupational culture that hinders the acknowledgement of sexual diversity.

Discussion

Gay visibility unsettles the heteronormative male occupational culture in the mines

Although historical evidence proves that same-sex relations were evident in mining compounds and formed part of the mining occupational culture (Edwards & Epprecht, 2020; Harries, 1994; Ndatshé, 1993; Niehaus, 2002), this study found that the occupational culture of the mining industry post-1994 is heteronormative and continually excludes gay male identities. Historically, same-sex relations were acceptable and tolerated among mineworkers, even amidst contestations from religious missionaries, but we learn from the findings of this study that post-1994 mineworkers hold strong beliefs against same-sex relations and condemn gay identities. The intolerance and lack of acceptance of gay identities are an indication that the progressive democratic legislation of South Africa has not been successful in transforming the mining industry into an inclusive space for all men despite their sexual identities. While the mining industry has been active and explicit in its attempt to change the male occupational culture by including women, it has been silent on transforming the heteronormative occupational culture that excludes gay men. The industry's silence on sexual diversity contributes to the invisibility of gay men in mining workplaces.

This study found that heteronormativity is prevalent in mining workplaces and informs the everyday lives of gay men at work. Similar to previous research on heteronormative silence in male-dominated workplaces (Collins & Callahan, 2012; Reingardé, 2010; Speice, 2020), this study found that the dominant heteronormative male occupational culture of the mining industry silences and renders black gay mineworkers invisible. The participants in this study expressed fear of disclosing their gay identities because of the prevalent stigmatisation of gay identities and religious beliefs and cultural traditions used to condemn same-sex desires. This finding is in accordance with Speice (2020) and Ozeren et al. (2016), whose research findings support the notion that heteronormative ideologies in workplaces inform the continued stigmatisation of gay identities, forcing gay men to conceal their sexual identities. In line with Reingardé (2010), participants in this study are suppressed and silenced by the

dominant heterosexual discourse that affords heterosexual men power and marginalises gay men. Gay men are therefore left with little space to incorporate their sexual identities into their everyday lives at work and have limited power to negotiate a place in a working environment that favours heterosexual men.

From the findings of this study, I argue that the visibility of gay men in the mining industry threatens the hegemony of heterosexual masculinities, hence the perpetration and promotion of heteronormative ideologies by the heterosexual male majority. In accordance with Mennicke et al. (2018), Ratele (2014) and Speice (2020), homophobia and the perpetration of heteronormative ideologies are tools that heterosexual men use to protect the hegemony of heterosexual masculinity because the presence of gay men in the mining workplace may destabilise this hegemony. The heteronormative male occupational culture of the mining industry entrenches inequalities, where heterosexual men are continually privileged while gay men continue to be oppressed, and there is a need to unsettle this occupational culture to ensure that the rights of gay men, as a sexual minority, are protected. This study confirms that gay men exist in the post-apartheid mining industry, and bringing the voices of gay mineworkers to the forefront is a crucial step to unsettling the heteronormative male occupational culture that erases the possibility that gay men form part of the mining workforce. Future research can explore ways in which the exclusive heteronormative male occupational cultures can be unsettled and suggest recommendations towards creating inclusive working environments for sexual minorities.

Conclusion

Heteronormativity manifests in various social spaces in South Africa, and this study focused on the mining industry to investigate how heteronormative male occupational cultures facilitate the visibility of gay identities. This study demonstrates that sexuality matters in mining workplaces because it can either privilege or oppress various groups of men based on how they identify their sexual identities. However, sexuality does not control men's access to privilege and power in itself, but when it is used as a power mechanism informed by heteronormative ideals that support the existence of heterosexual identities and seek to erase gay identities. We learn from this research that gay men do exist in the post-apartheid South African mining industry, and their invisibility is significantly because of the heteronormative male occupational culture that stigmatises gay identities. This occupational culture continually produces and reproduces an exclusionary heterosexual discourse that assumes that only heterosexual men are fit to perform work in the mines and gay men are not. The assumption is closely linked to the notion that gay men are not 'real men' because they are sexually attracted to and engage in sexual intercourse with other men. Questioning the capabilities of gay men and excluding gay identities

from dominant conceptions of masculinity in the mining industry serve to protect the patriarchal privilege that heterosexual men enjoy in these male-dominated workplaces. It is only when sexual diversity is embraced and gay identities are acknowledged in the mining industry that the exclusive heteronormative male occupational culture can be unsettled to allow for an occupational culture that fosters inclusivity and tolerance.

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Author's contributions

T.B.M., is the sole author of this article.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available because of the sensitivity of the topic under research and are available from the corresponding author, T.B.M., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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