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Negotiating and Managing Gay Identities in Multiple Heteronormative Spaces: The Experiences of Black Gay Mineworkers in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Sexual diversity is a contentious topic in South Africa because many people still hold the perception that sexual identity can only be understood in heteronormative terms. This article adopts a feminist research approach to investigate how black gay male identities are constructed and managed at home, within friendships and in mining workplaces, drawing on data collected from five black gay male mineworkers. It opens up discussion on gay mineworkers' experiences in a country where diversity is upheld and celebrated through a democratic constitution, yet gay men must often negotiate and manage their sexual identities to fit in with the dominant heteronormative discourses present in different spaces in society, including adopting false heterosexual identities in particular spaces, which limits their freedoms. The study argues that experiences of constructing and managing black gay identities in heteronormative spaces is guided by the level of acceptance and tolerance perceived by gay people.

KEYWORDS

Gay identity; heteronormativity; social space; masculinities; mineworkers; passing; identity construction; South Africa

Introduction

The South African mining industry has always been a masculine space, characterized by the exclusion of women through hiring processes that favor men (Benya, 2016). While it is vital to acknowledge that the industry is dominated by a hegemonic masculine culture, the distribution of power is not equal amongst men who work in mining spaces. Heterosexual identities are privileged due to heteronormative and patriarchal cultures within the mining workplace. As a result, gay men are disempowered and marginalized in such masculine spaces, and they choose not to challenge heteronormativity in these spaces because they fear discrimination. Historically, there were complex gendered and sexual dynamics at play within the South African mining industry, with male-male “marriages” being highly visible and culturally validated. The topic of mine wives amongst black male mineworkers during apartheid has been well documented in the works of Moodie and

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Ndatshe (1994), Harries (1994) and Maake (2019). However, the historical overview is too vast to include in this article. The focus here is on the contemporary, post-apartheid South African mining workplace as a locus of investigation to highlight the importance of space in the ways in which black gay male mineworkers construct their sexual identities. The study further draws attention to the role that intersecting identities play in shaping gay men's experiences in three heteronormative spaces, namely home, work and within friendships. The study demonstrates how spaces influence each other and in turn shapes the lifestyle decisions and experiences of black gay male mineworkers.

South African research demonstrates that homophobia and discrimination against sexual minorities are common in certain public social spaces to varying degrees (Francis & Msibi, 2011; Olney & Musabayana, 2016; Smuts, 2011; Van Zyl, 2015). Despite the democratic constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996) and the enactment of inclusive policies intended to acknowledge every person's human rights and uphold the highest levels of equality, heteronormativity in some South African spaces still denies sexual diversity and perpetuates homophobia (Reygan & Lynette, 2014). High levels of homophobia, as well as the refusal to accept gay identities in some South African communities, contribute significantly to acts of discrimination against gay people. Although legislation has given LGBTIQ+¹ people a voice and reduced the effects of heteronormativity in some spaces, acceptance of gay identities on a social level is lacking, and this is supported by research which demonstrates that there are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and other (LGBTIQ+) people in South Africa who experience discrimination in their communities, their homes, their schools, their universities, their workplaces and in the labor market (Francis & Msibi, 2011; Msibi, 2009; Olney & Musabayana, 2016; Rothmann, 2016; Thomas, 2013; Van Zyl, 2015). To cope with the constant discrimination, many LGBTIQ+ people reexamine these spaces and renegotiate their sexual identities, which are accepted in specific spaces at specific times (Kiguwa & Langa, 2017; Msibi, 2009; Rothmann, 2016; Smuts, 2011). The level at which LGBTIQ+ people experience discrimination in certain spaces is informed by the intersections of race, class, gender, religion and occupation, that afford power and privilege to some sexual minority individuals while disadvantaging others.

The prevalence of homophobia and discrimination in certain social spaces present difficulties for gay people as they are continuously silenced and forced to conceal their sexual identities. The stigma attached to a gay identity, and the fact that many people in heteronormative spaces are not willing to talk about and accept the fluidity of sexual identities, contribute negatively to the lives of gay people. While a significant body of research has been conducted on discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people in South African communities and workplaces (Benjamin, Twala, & Reygan, 2015; Dlamini, 2006; Msibi, 2009;

Mxhakaza, 2010; Olney & Musabayana, 2016), the mining industry has been a neglected space and the experiences of gay men in the industry have received little attention from researchers. Research in the mining industry has focused on visible discriminations, such as race and gender discrimination (Benya, 2009; Moraka & Jansen van Rensburg, 2015; Mxhakaza, 2010); issues about living conditions, trade unionism and mineworker strikes after the end of apartheid in 1994 (Alexander, Lekgowa, Mmope, Sinwell, & Xeswi, 2012; Bezuidenhout & Buhlungu, 2011; Crush, 1994; Marais, 2018); and the history of male sexual relations before 1994 (Moodie & Ndatshe, 1994). Little is known about the levels of discrimination based on sexual identity in the industry post-1994 and the impact that has on, in particular, black gay male mineworkers' construction and management of their identities in the spaces that they occupy. This study begins to address that gap by contributing to the body of knowledge about discrimination against black gay male workers in heteronormative spaces.

The section following theorizes the intersecting identities of sexual minorities, before demonstrating how Connell's (2003, 2005) masculinity theory is helpful in developing more nuanced understandings of black gay male experiences in their homes, workplaces and friendships within the South African context. The article then moves on to a discussion of the methods and findings of the study. We will argue that the experience of constructing and managing black gay identities in heteronormative spaces is guided by the level of acceptance and tolerance perceived by gay people.

Sexual minority identities in heteronormative spaces

Some social spaces in society, such as homes, schools, religious organizations and workplaces, may be dominated by heteronormative understandings of sexual identities which individuals are socialized into and are expected to conform to. Tamale (2011) defines heteronormativity as a "sociocultural system that assumes the existence of only two sexes/genders and views human sexual relations between a man and a woman as being natural and normal, with no other possibilities" (p. 640). Heteronormative views reject the fluidity of sexual identities and subscribe to a rigid understanding of heterosexuality as the only acceptable and desirable form of sexual identity. The heteronormative construction of gender denotes that women and men should view themselves as the opposite of each other and not desire those that fall within their own gender category (Martinsson, Reimers, Reingardé, & Lundgren, 2007). Accordingly, heteronormativity creates a form of compulsory heterosexuality in social spaces because every individual is expected to be attracted to members of the opposite sex (Rich, 1980). Heteronormativity in schools, homes and other social spaces renders vulnerable to discrimination those sexualities that do not conform to the heteronormatively defined gender roles, since these

sexualities are seen as “deviant” and “unnatural” by other people. Since a gay sexuality involves romantic and sexual relations between people of the same sex, it is commonly viewed as unacceptable by members of a society.

Violence against sexual minorities in the South African context continues to be publicly sanctioned. For example, incidences of sexual and physical violence against lesbian women in South African townships and rural communities have been reported, and many of their cases are still unresolved with little likelihood of successful convictions (Hlongwane, 2016; Mulaudzi, 2018; Naidoo & Karels, 2012). Similarly, cases of physical attacks and murders of gay men in public social spaces have also been reported (Collison, 2018; Davis, 2012). A recent and common strategy used by perpetrators is creating false gay profiles on dating sites and using them to identify gay men with whom they arrange private meetings and then attack or kill upon contact (Collison, 2018). These incidents of hate and discrimination foster feelings of fear within the LGBTIQ+ community and hinder sexual minorities from freely exploring their sexual identities in heteronormative spaces. Fear forces many gay people to refrain from challenging the hegemonic heterosexual discourse in spaces that they occupy and ultimately to pass as heterosexual in order to gain certain privileges (Colgan, Creegan, McKearney, & Wright, 2008; Croteau, Anderson, & VanderWal, 2008; Olney & Musabayana, 2016). Passing as heterosexual renders black gay men invisible and creates a false perception that they do not exist in these heteronormative spaces.

Many heteronormative workplaces exhibit forms of discrimination that silence sexual-minority employees (Olney & Musabayana, 2016). Studies report various forms of discrimination in heteronormative workplaces including sexual and verbal assault, name calling, harassment, unfair dismissals, rejection, exclusion and offensive comments about sexual-minority identities (Benjamin et al., 2015; Olney & Musabayana, 2016; Reingardè, 2010; Sheridan, Zolobczuk, Huynh, & Lee, 2017; Steffens, Niedlich, & Ehrke, 2016; Suriyasarn, 2016; Tebelo & Odeku, 2014). Sexual-minority employees experience discrimination from both their superiors and fellow colleagues and many do not feel protected in their workplaces. The discrimination is evident at different levels of employment, including the pre-employment stage when LGBTIQ+ people seek employment (Badgett, 2006; Drydakis, 2009; Mawambi, 2014). Research leads one to conclude that LGBTIQ+ employees withhold information about their sexual identities in heteronormative workplaces to protect themselves (Colgan & Rumens, 2015; Reingardè, 2010; Suriyasarn, 2016; Van Zyl, 2015). A study conducted by Ozeren, Ucar, and Duygulu (2016) in Turkey revealed that a common coping mechanism that sexual-minority employees use to protect themselves from discrimination in their workplaces is the public display of fictitious heterosexual identities. Suriyasarn's (2016) study in Thailand unveiled that workers initially hid their sexual identities in the early stages of employment and were only likely to disclose it when they felt a sense of job

security. Similar findings were discovered in a local qualitative study by Olney and Musabayana (2016) who concluded that, due to the heteronormative nature of the South African society, LGBTIQ+ workers choose not to disclose their sexual identities in their workplaces because they fear getting dismissed and finding themselves without employment.

Although discrimination is evident in various workplaces, some studies suggest that the levels of discrimination are higher in masculine or male-dominated workplaces and professions, especially toward gay men (Ozeren et al., 2016; Reingardé, 2007; Wright, 2008). The research shows that this is due to the highly heteronormative and patriarchal nature of male-dominated workplaces. Work that is considered masculine includes manual labor, technical work and blue-collar work (Van Zyl, 2015). Reingardé (2007) found Lithuanian male-dominated workplaces to be highly heteronormative since the professional identity in these spaces was linked to heterosexuality and used to suppress and silence gay identities. Similarly, Ozeren et al. (2016) found that gay men who disclosed their sexual identities in male-dominated workplaces experienced discrimination because their heterosexual male colleagues deliberately made the workplace uncomfortable for them through negative comments toward their appearance, their bodies and their physical differences. As a result, many gay men who work in masculine workplaces often choose silence and conform to the heteronormative requirements that are imposed on them by heteronormativity in their workplaces. This tactic is used to escape the heterosexual gaze and protect themselves from the negativity surrounding their sexual identities (Ozeren et al., 2016; Willis, 2012).

The South African mining industry is highly masculinized, involves mainly manual labor and blue-collar work, and has been consistently labeled a male-dominated workplace where heterosexual men enjoy privileges of patriarchy (Benya, 2016; Harries, 1994). The industry privileges heterosexuality, due to the pervasively heteronormative nature of South African society, and masculinity, due to the normalization of patriarchy, since women are considered incapable of the work that is carried out in the mining space (Benya, 2009; Callinicos, 1981; Harries, 1994). Gay identities in the industry are marginalized because gay men in African societies are not, according to the heteronormative standards, considered “real men” since they are not sexually attracted to women (Ratele, 2011). Consequently, gay men are excluded, undermined and placed in the bottom ranks of power structures in African societies (Epprecht, 2013).

Connell’s theory of masculinities and identity intersections

Perceptions of what constitutes a “real man” tie in closely with how gay black mineworkers shape and experience their gay identities. Connell’s (1998, 2003, 2005) work on masculinities demonstrates the importance of intersecting

identities in understanding different forms of masculinities, as she is of the view that there is an interplay among gender, race and class that leads to the construction of multiple and changing masculinities which are structured according to power relations between men and women and between men in different global contexts. Connell (1998, 2003, 2005) elaborates that at any point in time, one type of masculinity is culturally exalted rather than others. She termed this type of masculinity “hegemonic masculinity,” which affords certain men positions of power and dominance. Men who occupy a hegemonic masculine position are usually heterosexual and have legitimate power to position other men according to their subordinated, complicit and marginalized positions. The stigmatization and oppression of gay men in heteronormative societies encourages the dominance of heterosexual men over gay men and positions gay male identities at the lowest level of the gender hierarchy amongst men (Connell, 2005). This creates inequalities amongst different categories of men and hinders gay men from reaching the level of hegemonic masculinity.

South African scholars expanded on Connell’s theory by adopting her concept of hegemonic masculinity and applying it to the South African context by interrogating the tensions among men in South Africa, particularly black men. The research of Ratele (2011, 2013) and Morrell (1994, 1998) build on Connell’s theory by showing that African masculinities are unlimited and constructed around intersecting identity markers such as gender, status, class position, race, sexual identity and cultural traditions. Ratele (2011) extended this view by suggesting that the definition of African men’s masculinities is closely tied to the use of men’s genitals, where “*real men*” are seen as men who penetrate women’s vaginas. Men who penetrate other men or are penetrated by other men, are then not seen as “*real men*.” This stigmatization highlights the power that is afforded to heterosexual African masculinity, making it the dominant or hegemonic masculinity in relation to non-heterosexual masculinities.

The discussion has thus far illustrated that there are several intersecting identities and power dynamics that come into play in the construction of identities, especially with regard to gender and sexual identity. Crenshaw (1989) argues that there are various intersecting axes of social division that shape how different people experience discrimination in society. She further asserts that the main reason why many societies are unable to address different forms of discrimination is because they fail to consider these intersections when defining discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality thus helps us understand power relations in society more broadly through acknowledging the fundamental link between ideology and power which affords those who are dominant control over subordinates (Ritzer, 2011). Intersectionality, in the context of this study, allows for a critical examination of the relationship between heterosexual and non-heterosexual masculinities, and it led to an

understanding of the persistent domination of heterosexual masculinities and the subordination of non-heterosexual masculinities in the spaces concerned. The power relations of dominance and subordination allow heterosexual men opportunities to enforce heteronormativity and to police other men's sexualities. This is evident in various spaces, including homes, religious institutions and households, and continues to challenge the notions of sexual diversity, making it the responsibility of gay men to regulate their behaviors and align them to the heteronormative standards set by society. This study further sheds light on the intersections of gender and sexuality by demonstrating the intragroup power differentials amongst gay men who are sub-categorized by how they enact masculine and feminine qualities. Gay men whose behaviors are closely associated with the dominant heterosexual masculinity are more privileged and better positioned to negotiate a place in heteronormative spaces, as compared to gay men who portray socially defined "feminine" qualities and are stigmatized for how they behave and act.

Researching the experiences of black gay male mineworkers

The study used a feminist epistemological approach, as it foregrounded the silenced voices of black gay male mineworkers, an under-researched and sensitive topic in the South African context. Using a feminist epistemology, the study acknowledges the marginalized position of black gay men in the mining industry and attempts to give voice to these men who are generally silenced by fear and remain invisible in their workplaces. The participants' realities in their communities, at home, at work and within their friendship groups are largely shaped by the context in which they find themselves. The findings presented in this article reflect on black gay male mineworkers' narratives from their own positionality within these three identified spaces: the workplace, their homes or communities, and within their friendship groups. A qualitative research approach was adopted to develop an understanding of the participants' realities. Given the sensitive nature of the study, and that many gay people would rather remain silent about their sexual identities to avoid being exposed, a purposive sampling method was employed. The selection criteria were directed by the focus of the study: participants had to be black, self-identify as gay, male and formally employed in the mining industry. In collecting the data, in-depth interviews were conducted with five black gay male mineworkers from five different mines in North-West and Mpumalanga provinces during the months of January, February and March 2019. The sensitivity of the topic and the fact that black gay men in the identified heteronormative spaces hardly disclose or talk about their sexual identities made it difficult to easily identify participants, hence the small sample. All the interviews with participants were conducted in English. The participants resided in small

mining towns close to their workplaces. The youngest participant was 26 years old and the eldest participant was 36 years old. Their occupations ranged from a sanitation helper to a haul truck operator to a safety officer to a safety manager. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants.

This research was guided by and adhered to the research standards and ethical principles as outlined by the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Humanities Research Committee and was granted permission for ethics clearance by this committee. The interviews began with biographical questions where participants were asked to identify their sex, occupation, age, race, current geographical location, sexual identity and place of origin—which allowed for an intersectional analysis to take place. The interviews were structured according to a narrative approach, and the participants were asked to describe their childhood experiences and their perceptions of how their individual backgrounds influenced the kind of men they are today. Further questions were aimed at finding out how the men, identified here as Sibusiso, Philly, Katlego, Mthabisi and Temba, constructed and managed their gay identities in their workplaces (mines), at home with their families, and with their heterosexual and gay friends. The interviews lasted between 40 and 92 minutes. Some interviews were conducted in restaurants and others in participants' places of residence, which included rented cottages and houses that were located in small mining towns based in Mpumalanga, North-West provinces. An intersectional data analysis was relevant to developing understandings of the unique realities of black gay mineworkers in spaces where gay identities are not accepted. A thematic analysis method was used for data analysis and it was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of analyses. Themes were derived through an intense reading of the transcribed interviews and the identification of similar responses which were listed under relevant sub-questions. Important themes that emerged from the analysis was the participants' experiences of growing up gay in rural communities; the construction of a gay identity at home, with friends and at work; and constructing multiple lives as a result of enacting contradictory sexual identities in different spaces.

Growing up in heteronormative rural communities: Narratives of black gay male mineworkers

Space is a crucial element in the construction and management of black gay identities. This is indicated by the participants' difficulties with passing, and their constant switching of identities to adhere to the requirements of the public social spaces that they found themselves in. The participants often indicated that they had to negotiate their gay identities privately and embrace

fabricated heterosexual identities in heteronormative social spaces. Some of the participants explained the challenges of identity passing to their lifestyles and behaviors:

It restricts you from living your life to the fullest. I mean you want to do the stuff you want to do, when you want to do them, but there's always those constraints in that environment, and it becomes very hard. So, you are living that dreaded reality every day, where you have to constantly be aware of what you do, and which environments allows you to do whatever you want to do. I mean you can't even tell a friend that they are hot, even if you want to, because that becomes suspicious. Basically, your outward appearance is fake, and your inward appearance, your thoughts, you're . . . that's the real thing. Basically, your world is inside out. Instead of you living your life, you are constrained within your life itself. (26-year-old Sibusiso)

Sibusiso's comment demonstrates a loss of control over his decisions regarding the life that he can live. He has to portray behaviors that are associated with a particular sexual identity and perform them at a particular time in a particular social space. Passing entails adopting certain physical or non-verbal and verbal qualities in order to make the outer appear as if it falls within the dominantly accepted "identity." Katlego, 28 years old, raises similar concerns when he says:

When I am with my friends I am that kind of shy . . . When I am with them I keep quiet. I say as little as I can, but when I am with bae² I am this bubble person. But it is the opposite [. . .] at home, of which I want to act this macho man guy which I do not know. Even the tone of my voice changes.

Sibusiso is faced with a dilemma because his sexual and gendered identities are under strict surveillance leaving him to constantly be aware of the space that he is in so that he does not give away any identity or behaviors that are not consistent with the space. This is indicative of the unwritten "rules" within heteronormative spaces.

Sibusiso, Philly, Katlego and Mthabisi grew up in rural communities, while Temba grew up in a township.³ Growing up in tightknit communities was not easy for them as they often experienced bullying and discrimination at the hands of community members. The bullying was based on how they behaved: they remembered community members stating that their behaviors resembled those of girls and not of boys. The bullying was a form of "corrective" measure that sought to change their behaviors. They described their communities as highly traditional, religious and conservative. This form of bullying affected their own perceptions of their sexual identities, as well as lifestyle choices that they made. For instance, Sibusiso, who grew up in a rural area in Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal province, explained that the negative views about gay people in his community hindered him from disclosing his gay identity:

It was very hard, especially growing up in rural KZN [KwaZulu-Natal], you know, because there's always these old men who are just rules, rules, rules, enforcement, enforcement, teaching us to hang with the guys, 'Don't do that', 'Don't do that', 'Do

this'. So it was very hard, because you grow up in an environment whereby from a young age you are particularly told that 'You know what? You must just be this. Be this', force, 'Do that', 'Do that', and yeah. It restricts you from living your life to the fullest. (26-year-old Sibusiso)

The restrictions that Sibusiso refers to were reinforced by the conservative nature of the community he grew up in, further reinforcing feelings of helplessness when it came to claiming his individuality and behaving in ways that would destabilize the dominant heteronormative discourse that community members held in high regard. He realized, from the negative perceptions of gay people within the community, that he could not disclose his sexual identity, since he believed that community members would never understand or accept him. Philly, a 32-year-old man who was raised in a small rural village in Limpopo province, was confronted with a similar reality as he grew up in a community where people believed that being gay was not natural. He exclaimed, "No no no no! If you say you are a gay, they will perceive you in a negative way," and cited this as the reason he always chose not to disclose his sexual identity. His worst fear was being ostracized by community members and treated as an outcast. Katlego (a 28-year-old born in a rural village) experienced both urban and rural life since his parents moved to Gauteng province from rural North West province when he was a teenager. He spent most of his childhood in a rural community and his experiences were not pleasant. He described the North West community as very homophobic compared to the urban community of Pretoria where he stayed with his parents:

North West people are homophobic, and the government is not doing much to educate people. It is not every time that you can come out and say "I am gay". They still think it is a demonic thing or maybe he has demons and can be cleansed, and they do not understand that it was actually something that you were born with. It is not something that you chose. (28-year-old Katlego)

Katlego is religious and used to be an active member of the church until he realized that his sexual identity would not be accepted. He since decided to withdraw from church activities to limit his engagement with church members. This was his way of making sure that his sexual identity remains hidden because he feared the stigma surrounding gay identities within his community. Katlego's narrative of the different reactions of rural and urban communities demonstrates the participants' understandings that certain geographical spaces in South Africa allow them to be themselves while others are inhibitive. Mthabisi is a 30-year-old gay man who grew up in Ladysmith, KwaZulu-Natal province. He was open about his sexual identity to his mother and close siblings, who accepted and supported him. That, however, did not prevent the discrimination that he endured as a child due to his feminine characteristics and preference for playing with girls and not boys. He said, "Growing up I used

to be teased for being gay, so they used to tease me because I used to spend my time with girls, and they gave me a name because of that.” The bullying resulted from his lack of conformity to the heteronormative gender construction of a male identity and was used by community members to unsettle him about the kind of person he was by making him aware that there was something “wrong” with him. He further explained the religious and traditionalist arguments that were used to discredit gay people in his community:

There are Christian groups who believed that you are cursed in the community and that you are going straight to hell and you should not be around any of their children, because you are a bad influence. Then you find people that are traditionalist, you know, that will tell you that you are gay, you have a disease, you need help, you need to be treated [for] that disease. It is something that you can lose. So, the community believes, being gay, you have brought it to yourself and it is something that they can change. It’s either through beating or through being discriminated or discarded from the entire community. They believe that will change your sexuality. (30-year-old Mthabisi)

Similar to Sibusiso, Katlego and Philly, religion and cultural traditions emerge as the powerful driving forces behind discrimination in rural communities. Community members believed that being gay was a choice and corrective measures such as violence and assault could be used to convert gays into becoming heterosexual. These violent reactions instilled fear in the participants and forced them to remain silent and comply with the heteronormative standards set by their communities and behave in ways that a typical heterosexual man would.

Like Mthabisi, Temba’s family knew about his sexual identity and accepted him as he was. He explained the ease with which his family accepted his sexual identity without him having to come out and say it to them. He said: “They know. I did not have to come out to them. I think they concluded to themselves. [...] My grandmother, she was the one who actually saw that I was gay, and she accepted me, and all of my siblings felt obliged to accept me.” While there were no difficulties with being accepted at home, his experiences with community members in the township were similar to those of Sibusiso, Katlego, Philly and Mthabisi, since he also refrained from disclosing his sexual identity to community members owing to the lack of tolerance and fear of rejection:

Homosexuality was not accepted within the community. [...] I could feel that it was something that they will not accept, because if you were to say you were gay, they would have not accepted you. [...] I think they did not understand it, and it goes against the norms, because if people did not understand something, they tend to view it somehow, even if they do not understand it. (36-year-old Temba)

Temba attributes the community’s low levels of acceptance to a lack of understanding demonstrated by people’s emphasis on their strongly held fundamentalist religious beliefs, which they refuse to question. This is consistent

with the other four participants' observations and demonstrates that the biggest challenge for the participants in their rural communities had to do with the community members' conservative heteronormative outlook on sexual identity, and the lack of willingness to learn about sexual diversity which would possibly lead to an understanding of gay identities and other sexual-minority identities.

The participants' narratives of their childhood experiences in rural communities are, to a large extent, similar with regards to the hardships of growing up in fundamentalist religious and traditional communities that seek to protect the "natural" heterosexual discourse. Past research (Dlamini, 2006; Msibi, 2009; Mulaudzi, 2018; Munyuki & Vincent, 2018; Olney & Musabayana, 2016; Tebelo & Odeku, 2014), support the notion that despite the legal framework that seeks to protect gay people in South Africa, acceptance and tolerance on a social level is still limited. Participants grew up in small rural communities where they could easily be observed and scrutinized by others, and this inhibited them from exploring their sexual identities fully because they always had to be cognizant of other people's reactions to their behaviors. The prevalent stigma toward gay identities in participants' communities rendered the space unsafe for them, and that led to them constructing their lifestyles in ways that were aligned with the heteronormative requirements of their communities. Hiding their gay identities and adopting heterosexual identities was a feasible coping mechanism that they carried throughout their lives as they grew up and entered other heteronormative spaces.

The experiences of constructing multiple identities and the inability to develop consistent identities are discussed in the next section.

Triple identities and multiple lives: Surviving the heteronormative bias

Though it is never as simplistic as grouping individuals into set identity categories, for the purposes of this study we present the realities of the participants according to the (sexual) identity labels they give themselves in certain spaces. In this way, it becomes possible to see the complexities of identity constructions, and more so, the multiple ways in which they construct identities. The first identity category that emerged from the interviews is the heterosexual identity that they perform at home. The second is referred to as the gay-heterosexual identity which they perform in their friendships. The third identity is the professional identity which is performed at work. The findings illustrate how participants' workplace experiences of discrimination are also informed by their realities in other spaces outside their workplaces, leading to the construction of multiple lives. In analyzing these identities, it was especially important to consider the significant role played by heteronormative spaces in the participants' performance of their different selves, real and fictitious.

Different expressions and identifications of sexualities are associated with particular behaviors due to the normative gender roles that determine how bodies designated female or a male should behave. The participants usually found themselves in situations that required them to switch between certain behaviors, resulting in the performance of conflicting identities. This, however, was a strategy that they defined as difficult but necessary for their own well-being. Sibusiso, Philly and Katlego actively constructed a heterosexual identity at home, and their family members believe them to be heterosexual. They consciously conceal their gay identities and monitor their behaviors when they are with close family members. Katlego explained that he is “completely” heterosexual at home and that he behaves in ways that he believes a typical heterosexual man would. The three participants started adopting a heterosexual identity at a young age, and they explained that this is due to them growing up in staunch Christian families who regularly attended church services where they were exposed to religious teachings that did not favor gay people. Even though their family members did not overtly express their feelings toward gay people, the participants envisioned that they would be treated negatively, based on the reactions that they observed in their communities and their family members’ high levels of religiosity. For example, Sibusiso indicated that the reason he finds it difficult to disclose his gay identity to family members is his fear that they hold perceptions similar to those of other community members who are against gay identities. Similarly, Philly stated that no one in his family knows about his gay identity and he does not intend to disclose it anytime soon, since disclosing it to one family member would lead to other people knowing, and he was trying to avoid that. When they were young, the participants did not express major concerns with hiding their gay identities, but as adults it is an issue because they have a desire to live their lives freely without fear of discrimination. Sibusiso explained the hardships of committing himself fully to a relationship with a man, because his sexual identity is not known by his family members and he fears rejection:

It’s still very hard, because you sort of wish to bring your friend or boyfriend over, all my part-time boyfriends, and just make it official, but also you have to think about their side, how they feel about this whole thing. You have to always think about this thing of . . . sort of love half-heartedly. So, it’s not a real thing where I come from. Like, how do you explain it to your parents, grandparents, siblings? Yeah. [. . .]

The thing is you can never make things permanent. Yeah, I guess if you open up and become this force that no one can mess with, then you can do whatever you like, but if you still holding back, it becomes very hard to even think like: ‘You know what? I am going to be in a relationship with someone’, and then that means you must do what, you know, people in a relationship do, like hold hands, cuddle and be lovey-dovey [laughs]. But it’s very hard. (26-year-old Sibusiso)

It becomes obvious that concealing and managing a gay identity at home is not easy, and it impacts negatively on the participants as their expressions and development of their gay identities are interrupted. This finding is congruent with various studies (Barefoot, Rickard, Smalley, & Warren, 2015; Cohn & Hastings, 2010; Edwards, 2005; Reingardé, 2010; Rickard & Yancey, 2018) that have reported how having to “pass” as heterosexual may, in fact, impact negatively on a gay person’s life, in so far as their well-being is concerned.

The participants’ friendships outside of the workplace were mainly categorized according to the sexual identities of their friends. While their heterosexual friends only knew their fictitious heterosexual identities, their gay friends knew about the participants’ shifting sexual identities. The participants sometimes kept to themselves and avoided forming too many friendships:

Pretense, pretense. I mean you’ve been living this life for all your life. You know what’s acceptable to the other part, and you know what’s acceptable to the other part. When I mean acceptability, like, for instance, if you are with your family or straight friends, you do whatever they do, but particularly . . . I would say my behavior has been consistent with both groups. So yeah, it’s very hard to balance the two, because you[‘re] like, “Now I can go here, now I can go there.” So I have to be careful, because once my straight friends see me with my out gay friend, who happens to be feminine and out, they will ask what I am doing with that one. (26-year-old Sibusiso)

OK, being gay does have an impact on friendships that I would have had rather. I prefer to be alone mostly rather, because it is very hard to trust someone. Not everybody is accepting of that lifestyle, and it is very difficult to be open to everybody. So I prefer my own space. Friendships that I have are mostly friendships that I started from childhood. (30-year-old Mthabisi)

It is evident from Sibusiso and Mthabisi’s responses that in order for them to successfully maintain hidden gay identities, they must be cautious about how they behave around their friends. They police their actions and words around their friends and keep their heterosexual and gay friends apart. This serves to ensure that they are protected from exposure since they seek to portray a socially acceptable heterosexual identity that is in harmony with society’s expectations. Heterosexual friendships provide them with some form of anonymity, but also freedom, since their sexual identities are unlikely to be questioned as a result of their association with heterosexual friends. Philly and Mthabisi recalled that some of their heterosexual friends were aware of their gay identities. For Philly, this included some female colleagues at work; however, he was clear that he did not engage in conversations with them about certain aspects of his sexual identity, including information about his romantic relationships. Mthabisi only disclosed to heterosexual friends that he grew up with and did not intend to form friendships at work because he did not want to explain himself to other people. While their heterosexual friends are aware

of their sexual identities, they still do not find it easy to open up to them completely to discuss personal aspects of their gay identity with them. The struggle to trust their heterosexual friends is indicative of the privatization of their sexual identities and their concern about exposure to other people.

For the most part, the participants explained that their workplaces were very heteronormative and that most of their heterosexual colleagues shared the belief that being gay is unnatural and against the religious order. They reflected that they work mostly with men, as is the nature of the mining industry, and that their heterosexual male colleagues associated being gay with femininity and viewed it as a form of weakness. The nature and experiences of discrimination and the effects of it on the construction of gay identities emerged during the interviews with participants:

They will say remarks that are jokes, but sometimes when you sit down and reflect on those jokes, they tend to work on you psychologically. (28-year-old Katlego)

I think around men they do not have nice things to say about homosexual man, 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. (36-year-old Temba)

Religion and cultural traditions were cited by heterosexual mineworkers to delegitimize gay identities in the workplace. Some of the participants disclosed that many of their male colleagues held traditional beliefs which had a significant bearing on their negative understandings of gay identities:

Most of them are traditional men. Mostly they will disrespect me for being gay. (36-year-old Temba)

It's very hard, because . . . especially in mines, most of the men in the mine tend to think you are targeting them when you are gay. It's even harder when you see gay people living their lives freely, a life you can never really have in the mine. You also get very traditionalist people in the mines, who would make stupid comments. (26-year-old Sibusiso)

A lot of people don't want to be led by a gay person, especially men, because they are patriarchs. Men who are very closed-minded in their thinking would not agree to be led by a woman, and then here's 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. (26-year-old Sibusiso)

"real" man as heterosexual, marginalized and silenced gay men in the mining industry. This aligns with Ratele's (2011) argument that real men in South African society are considered to be men who have a sexual attraction toward women, allowing heterosexual men power over gay men whose masculinity is scrutinized and questioned due to their desire to form sexual relationships with other men. In line with Reingarde's (2007) argument, as

a heteronormative workplace, the mining workplace is not a safe space for black gay men as it is characterized by discrimination which is used to silence and suppress them. Black gay male mineworkers remain particularly helpless because the majority of their colleagues hold strong heteronormative values and have no regard or respect for men who identify as gay. They constructed what they label as a professional (heterosexual) identity at work in order to avoid persecution in their daily lives at work. Participants described this professional identity in heteronormative terms with great emphasis placed on choosing particular dress codes, hairstyles and behaviors that were in line with heteronormative constructions of gender. In their narratives it appeared that they did not consider their sexual identity relevant to the workplace, as they indicated that, when they are at work, their only priority is performing their occupational functions. This finding is congruent with Rothmann's (2016) study where he found that gay employees excluded information about their gay identities at work and placed great emphasis on their professional selves as relevant to the workplace. Private aspects of participants' lives, such as their same-sex partners, were not spoken about at work and they lived very isolated lives at work, with minimal interactions with fellow colleagues:

You can't be free at work. You can't be. You just have to do your function, perform your job and leave. Whether you are gay or not, male or female, does not matter. Perform your job to the best of your ability and move on. (26-year-old Sibusiso)

It makes me to be cautious of actually whom do I interact with. Since I am an introverted person, I just want to keep to myself most of the time, since I am a reserved person. Avoiding to actually get to form a conversation with those people. (36-year-old Temba)

While some participants could successfully "pass" without being noticed, Philly struggled with maintaining a heterosexual male image since colleagues could gather from his "feminine" traits and association with female friends that he could possibly be gay and used that to humiliate him:

Like when I have to carry something that is heavy, they come and help me carry, because they take me as a woman. They always help me . . . sometimes we have safety meetings, and they call me the *stabane*⁴ safety rep, and I just look at them and laugh, because I am trying to hide that thing, since I don't want some of the people to know about me. Some of the jokes I take them seriously, and they sometimes hurt, but some of them I don't take seriously (32-year-old Philly).

Philly's narration highlights the patriarchal notion that "femininity" is a weakness and remains subordinated even amongst non-heterosexual masculinities. Despite colleagues' assumptions based on his "feminine" traits, Philly still denied being gay and insisted on passing. However, in comparison to other participants, his narration demonstrates how

particular masculine attributes in gay men are more privileged than others, making it easier for gay men who successfully enact socially acceptable masculine behaviors to pass.

It is evident from these narratives that the adoption of a professional identity was a coping strategy that helped participants to avoid interactions that required them to speak about their sexual identities. The participants further indicated that adopting a professional heterosexual image at work was necessary for them to comply with the heteropatriarchal nature of mining workplaces. A professional identity served to protect black gay male mineworkers from experiencing workplace discrimination at the hands of their heterosexual colleagues. According to their observations at work, mining workplaces are not friendly spaces for gay men since most of the male colleagues perceive gay identities negatively, and it was therefore important to manage a gay identity in ways that would not lead to it being disclosed and known. This finding is congruent with Van Zyl's (2015) argument that gay employees are unlikely to disclose their sexual identities at work if they understand their workplaces to be unsafe. They explore their gay identities in their private spaces and perform heterosexuality at work:

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. (30-year-old Mthabisi)

I have to act straight, so that I do not put attention or suspicion on myself. I feel like most of the times I have to pretend to be like them, like normal. Also, to be respected by them I have to act normal. (36-year-old Temba)

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 - maybe such things as screaming at them, but I tend to tame myself, you know, such things. (28-year-old Katlego)

“Normal” in these narratives is closely linked to heterosexuality, which highlights an internalization of the dominant heteronormative understanding of sexual identity in the workplaces. This supports Connell's (2005) argument that heteronormative spaces are pervaded with cultures that embrace heterosexual masculinity. Heteronormativity and discrimination in the three spaces discussed in this study continuously affect participants' lifestyle choices. While “passing” assisted the participants in escaping the negative implications of identifying as gay in a heteronormative context, it enforces and maintains the broader societal heteronormative notions on sexuality. Thus, “passing” has the unintentional consequence of retaining the status quo that gay people do not exist in these South African heteronormative spaces and inhibits the disruption of heteronormative norms which entrench notions that being gay is not normal, is unnatural and un-African.

Discussion: Non-acceptance complicates construction of gay identities

The findings of this study show that gay identities are still not accepted by many people in various spaces of South African society, which complicates the construction of gay identities among black gay mineworkers. Similar to previous South African studies (Olney & Musabayana, 2016; Reygan & Lynette, 2014; Van Zyl, 2015), this study found that the fear of discrimination against gay men was pervasive at home, at work and within friendships. The findings reflect how heteronormative discourses are still used to discredit and silence black gay men. The mineworkers themselves also fall into this heteronormative trap because they do not have any other choice but to conform.

Passing becomes a way in which they can avoid rejection and fit into these heteronormative spaces. At the same time, to pass as heterosexual meant that they had to constantly police their own behaviors and manner of speaking. While adopting fictitious heterosexual identities helped them escape the gaze of heteronormative policing structures, it had negative implications on their lifestyles and well-being. Suffice to say, the mere act of passing or hiding one's sexual identity, inadvertently perpetuates the status quo and dampens the process of normalizing homosexual identities. While the participants chose these strategies as coping mechanisms to avoid any form of discrimination, it at once also feeds into a problematic system that favors heterosexuality and renders homosexuality invisible. This heteronormative trap—as we alluded to earlier—is one that can be avoided pending serious systemic changes within the culture of the mining industry. In order to challenge and transform the inequalities that exist in the lives of gay mineworkers, the South African mining industry should proactively acknowledge the presence of sexual minorities in mining workplaces and prioritize structures that will protect the rights.

This study reveals that heteronormativity is not only prevalent in workplaces, but originates and is located within their communities and families. Throughout their lives, they had to devise strategies that would help them cope in heteronormative spaces. They hide their stigmatized gay identities and, in some spaces, adopt false heterosexual identities to counter the negative consequences that come with identifying as gay. Heteronormative views in these three spaces and the fear of discrimination, hindered the participants from fully expressing their sexual identities. This is a reality aligned with several studies that have highlighted the struggles to navigate and negotiate a place in heteronormative spaces for gay people (Reingarde, 2007; Rothmann, 2016; Smuts, 2011), and further shows that the exclusion of gay people in heteronormative spaces is an endemic problem irrespective of supportive legislation.

Working in masculine workplaces proved to be a struggle for black gay male mineworkers since they are continuously exposed to a hetero-patriarchal culture that seeks to preserve the dominant position of heterosexual men. Similar to what Ratele (2011, 2013) found, black gay male mineworkers are

excluded from the normative definition of a “real” man and punished through discriminatory workplace practices. The participants have found a safe haven in “silence” as they generally try to achieve the set standards or requirements of a heterosexual masculinity, and suppress their sexual identities. They dress, talk and behave like their heterosexual male colleagues and they avoid any behaviors that might potentially expose their gay identities. Their sexualities are policed, and their behaviors are regulated by powerful heteronormative structures that seek to maintain the exclusion of black gay men in heteronormative spaces.

This highlights the power differentials in mining workplaces, where gay men are oppressed on the basis of their gender, sexual identity, occupation and social backgrounds. However, the participants’ experiences were not all the same, and they differed depending on the different spaces that they lived in: to some extent, their experiences with family were different, since Mthabisi and Temba’s gay identities were known at home while those of the other three participants were not. Power dynamics in all three spaces reflected the importance of using intersectionality in developing understandings of black gay male mineworkers’ experiences of oppression and exclusion in rural communities, their homes, and in mining workplaces.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, it has been argued that discrimination against sexual minorities in South African society is persistent and continues to shape the experiences of gay individuals. This study demonstrates that the South African mining industry is not an exception, because black gay men in mining workplaces are stigmatized and emphasis is placed on heteronormative ideals. Since identities are not constructed in a vacuum, the study considered how other spaces intersect in shaping the participants’ gay identities. Gay identities are rendered invisible in the three heteronormative spaces since it is hardly spoken about and perceived negatively by heterosexual family members, friends and colleagues. Black gay men are thus silenced by the heteronormative and masculine nature of these spaces, which impedes their agency.

Initially we wanted to employ a life-history approach to collecting data, which would have allowed for an in-depth investigation into how intersecting factors shaped black gay mineworkers’ throughout their lives. As a result of the struggles with accessing participants, the data collection method was changed to in-depth interviews which allowed us to secure at least one interview with each participant. Ultimately, the sensitivity of the topic in itself was a limitation since some of the potential participants who were not comfortable discussing private aspects of their sexual identities. Regardless, the wealth of information gained from interviewing these five participants provides a glimpse into the hidden work of gay mineworkers. It also reminds us that even with one of the most progressive constitutions in

the world, the interrelatedness between macro- and micro-level risk factors, may impede the resilience of individuals who do not conform to traditional; patriarchal and heteronormative standards.

Future research can extend the focus from mine workplaces to other masculine workplaces such as construction, the military and the police, which will allow for larger samples and more extensive understandings of gay workers' experiences within male-dominated working spaces. Future studies on LGBTIQ+ identities should adopt an intersectional framework to develop nuanced understandings of the inter- and intra-groups in the community since the realities and struggles of sexual minority individuals differ in various spaces and stages in their lives. It is only when we consider intersecting identity markers that shape the unique lived experiences of sexual minorities that we can produce knowledge that is representative of multiple categories of non-heterosexual bodies.

Notes

1. The abbreviation "LGBTIQ+" and the term "sexual minority" are used interchangeably in this article to refer to individuals whose sexual identities do not conform to the heteronormative definitions of sexuality.
2. The colloquial term "bae" is used to refer to a person's romantic partner.
3. A township, in the South African context, refers to an underdeveloped urban area that is situated on the periphery of a town or city. Townships were historically reserved for black people under apartheid laws. While South Africa has moved to democracy and abandoned laws that enforced the racial segregation of whites and non-whites (black african, Indian and\coloreds), these areas remain predominantly black.
4. *Stabane* is a derogatory Isi-Zulu word that directly translates to "a gay person." It has negative connotations and is usually used to attack or degrade gay men and women in some South African townships and rural areas.

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