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2012-02-08
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/11257

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Lesbians' coming-out stories as confessional practices: liberatory politics or an incitement to discourse?

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities,

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts (Community-based Counselling Psychology)

Abstract

For homosexuals, "coming out" or disclosing one's sexual orientation has come to be seen as a marker of self-acceptance, actualisation and the imperative first step in the authentication of a liberated subjectivity and social identity. This popular construction of "coming out" has been supported by a range of feminist and queer theory. However, other critical schools of thought, largely informed by Foucault's middle writings, have argued that "coming-out" is merely a confessional response to an incitement to discourse about sex. Confessions of this kind form important relays in modern forms of power. Thus while homosexual subjects may experience "coming-out" as a form of liberatory identity politics that challenges the repressive power of the heteronormative, this rite of passage may also be viewed as forming an insidious entry into nets of self and social surveillance that are characteristic of disciplinary and biopower in modern societies. Against this backdrop, this study aimed to explore constructions of coming-out by a group of self-identified lesbians in South Africa. Data was collected via eight semi-structured interviews and then subjected to a discourse analysis. While coming-out stories appear to conform to some of the discursive practices characterising confessional modes of response to incitements to speak, they are also de-emphasised as central to the constitution of selfhood. The changing conditions of possibility for the production of sexual subjectivity in contemporary South Africa thus seem to disrupt understandings of coming-out as either solely a confessional or liberatory practice. Ultimately, the study holds important implications for the way that coming-out stories are understood and activated by both homosexual subjects and a sexually "liberated" society in general.