

***Living in and out the closet: An exploration of lesbian
identity in the workplace***

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Abstract

In 1996 South Africa was the first country in the world to protect sexual minorities from discrimination in its Constitution. The benefits of a liberal constitution cannot go unacknowledged, however, negotiating lesbian identity within the work context is still a challenge due to the pervasive stigma attached to homosexuality, as well as the remnants of South Africa's stormy, oppressive political history. Lesbian women in South Africa grow up in a society which remains predominantly patriarchal and conservatively religious and where the heterosexual assumption, the idea that one is 'straight' unless otherwise stated, is continually confirmed and perpetuated in a variety of contexts, including the occupational environment.

It is within this setting that lesbian women must attempt to negotiate and continually, in varying degrees, and not always by choice, take part in the coming out process in different social spaces. In interviews with seven self-identified lesbian women, the dynamic process of coming out within the occupational environment, was explored in relation to and within relevant cultural, historical, familial and social contexts. All participants had disclosed their sexual identity within the work place, in varying degrees. Key aims of the research were exploring the negotiation of lesbian identity in various occupational contexts as well as identifying strategies used to negotiate the work environment and lesbian identity

Keywords: lesbian, lesbian identity, identity, workplace, South African workplace, homosexuality, heteronormativity

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Research aims	2
1.2 Research rationale	2
Chapter 2: Literature Review	4
2.1 Introduction	4
2.2 Essentialist constructs of identity	5
2.3 Social constructionist constructs of identity	7
2.4 Relational narrative theoretical approaches to identity	9
2.5 Language, performativity and sexual identity	10
2.6 Lesbian identity, the coming out process, and identity negotiation	14
2.6.1 The six stages of homosexual identity development	16
2.6.2 Critique of the stage model of homosexual identity development	21
2.7 Institutional contexts of heteronormativity	24
2.7.1 Introduction	24
2.7.2 A brief history of sexuality in South Africa	25
2.7.3 Homosexuality is “unAfrican”	28
2.7.4 Religious institutions and homosexuality	29
2.7.5 The South African education system and homosexuality	31
2.8 The coming out process and the work environment	32
Chapter 3: Methodology	35
3.1 Research Design	35
3.2 Sampling	40
3.3 Participants	40
3.4 Method of data collection	41
3.5 Data analysis	41
3.6 Ethics	45
Chapter 4: Discussion	47
4.1 Introduction	47
4.2 Themes	49
a. The heterosexual assumption	49
b. Language and the coming out narrative	53

LIVING IN AND OUT OF THE CLOSET: AN EXPLORATION OF LESBIAN IDENTITY IN THE WORKPLACE

c. Coming out in the South African context	57
d. Being out at work is nice, but not necessarily important.....	66
e. Discrimination has become closeted.....	69
f. Being considerate of heteronormative sensibilities	73
g. Discrimination is a fickle beast.....	78
h. Gender and sexuality.....	81
4.3 Conclusion	86
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	88
5.1 Limitations	93
5.2 Recommendations.....	94
Reference List	95
Appendix A: Participant information sheet	100
Appendix B: Consent form (Interview)	102
Appendix C: Consent form (Audio recording)	103
Appendix D: Interview Schedule.....	104