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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 woman 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 woman 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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