



Safely queer on the Urban Peripheries of Cape Town

A comparative study exploring how 'class' and space mediate sexual identities for gender non-conforming youth on the urban peripheries of Cape Town in South Africa

A SUMMARY by
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*“... persistently saying that
I’m still a lesbian - if we’re going to
argue now, in three months I’m
still going to be lesbian, nothing’s
going to change. The quicker you
accept it, the better it’s going to be on
yourself, ‘cause nothing is going
to change here.”*

Sarah, 22-year old, Bellville-South.



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Background to research on sexual identities and place

There has been little research conducted on the possibilities of expressing gender non-conforming identities (in this study, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons) in peripheral and predominantly 'coloured'¹ suburbs in the Western Cape of South Africa. Except for a few studies (see Moolman, 2004; Salo 2003, 2009, 2010), the paucity of research focused on 'coloured' communities suggests that there are many realities which remain unexplored, and undocumented in research. Most research in recent years (see ActionAid 2009; Gqola 2007; Mkhize, et al 2010; Nel & Judge 2008; Sanger 2010) has focused on discrimination and violence against gender non-conforming persons in South Africa's townships. In short, the studies cited above have centralised the ways that heterosexual norms and values give rise to, and sustain, violence against black African lesbian women residing in South Africa's townships. Even though similarities can arguably be drawn between the experiences of the women in the studies cited, and those residing on the Cape Flats, these studies have essentially excluded the specific experiences of 'coloured' persons living on the peripheral suburbs of Cape Town.

¹ The contentious term 'coloured' will refer to the racialised construction that saw people of 'mixed race' forced into the peripheral suburbs of Cape Town, as part of the 1950s Group Areas Act in South Africa.

The project and its aims

This study set out to compare the experiences of self-identifying gender non-conforming youth residing on the urban peripheries of Cape Town², against the realities of gender non-conforming youth in more affluent, resourced communities in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town, South Africa. Specifically, the aim of this study was to explore how various socio-economic stratifications, or class distinctions, within 10 predominantly ‘coloured’ communities across the Cape Flats and the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town, impact on the expression of, and opportunities for, gender non-conforming youth.

Over 13 months, 31 participants between 18 and 27 years old across 10 communities were interviewed. On the Cape Flats, these included Bellville-South, Bridgetown, Delft, Elsies River, Grassy Park, Kuils River, and Mitchell’s Plain. For the Southern Suburbs, the communities included Ottery, Rondebosch East, and Wetton.

The two primary questions this study asked were:

- 1 What are the various structural issues that affect gender non-conforming youth in these communities?
- 2 What kinds of opportunities are available for gender non-conforming youth to re-create their identities in contemporary South Africa?

Such research has not yet been conducted in the contemporary South African context. A comparative analysis of this type is useful for two reasons:

- 1 It provides a lens to explore how socio-economic status or ‘class’ (determined by access to resources and access to education and employment, for example) mediates the expression of gender non-conformity and opportunities for creating new identities;
- 2 It provides an opportunity to document the experiences of self-identifying gender non-conforming ‘coloured’ people in various spaces on the Cape Flats and Southern Suburbs in Cape Town, South Africa.

Methodology

An intersectional, social constructionist framework was utilised as a methodology for this study. This approach prioritised the specific ways in which intersections of gender, sexuality, race, space and class intersect in people’s lived realities. The work of Pattman and Bhana (2004) is particularly useful here, specifically in their approach to young people as ‘active agents’. They explain the importance of addressing young people ‘both as active agents constructing their identities, and, at the same time, constrained by the cultural resources available to them’ (2006: 4). Further, the authors articulate the usefulness of ‘a participatory methodology that focuses on race, gender and social class as influences constraining group identifications and the sorts of cultural practices associated with these’ (2004: 4). I discuss the two methods used below: qualitative, in-depth interviewing, and Photovoice.

2 ‘Cape Flats’ is used as a term to describe communities such as Bellville-South, Bridgetown, Delft, Elsies River, Grassy Park, Kuils River, and Mitchell’s Plain, among others. At points, I will use this term to describe these communities.

Research Methods

Three community research assistants were recruited with the task to identify potential respondents for this study. All research assistants were current or previous students in the Women's and Gender Studies department at the University of the Western Cape. The assistants were recruited on the basis that they were familiar with the communities where they were doing the recruiting, i.e. they had developed networks in order to make the process of finding participants easier. All three assistants therefore resided in or around the communities where they were working to find respondents. A snowball sampling method was employed to recruit participants. While one assistant focused on Bellville-South, Elsies River and Kuils River, another focused solely on Mitchell's Plain. The third assistant concentrated on Rondebosch-East and Wetton, but also managed to find participants outside the Southern Suburbs, such as in Bridgetown, Ottery and Grassy Park. It proved difficult to find a willing research assistant in Delft. With the assistance of a well-connected resident in this area, I took on the task of recruiting respondents in the Delft area.

Interviews

Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 31 participants, with some interviewed as a couple. The dominant languages spoken by participants were English and Afrikaans. Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the respondents.

Photovoice

Photovoice, as a participatory action research method where participants use photographs and storytelling to articulate their experiences, was employed as a second research method, to build on the in-depth interviews with participants. Only six participants partook in the Photovoice project, of which four participants attended the Photovoice discussion session. These four participants brought a friend along, so that eight people in total participated in the discussion.

Feminist research in practice

A discourse analytic approach was used to analyse the narratives of the participants in the study. Due to the relatively small sample, findings in this study are not generalisable. However, these findings do provide in-depth insight into the experiences of 31 gender non-conforming young people who live in predominantly 'coloured' communities around the city of Cape Town, providing a lens into their lived realities.

As a researcher engaging gender non-conforming young people across the Cape Flats and Southern Suburbs, I was both insider and outsider to the realities of the participants in this study. In keeping with feminist practice of self-reflexivity, I was constantly asking myself questions about how I conversed with respondents, and whether these techniques were useful to them. Developing relationships with the participants was significant in enabling trust in our relationship, and impacted on what participants felt safe relaying to me. My perception, based on conversations with some of the participants after the interviews and Photovoice discussion, is that they felt the interviews to be a useful space for working through issues related to their gender and sexual identities, and a place where they could work through concerns they were unable to articulate elsewhere.

As gender non-conforming subjects, the participants reflected on their experiences in multiple ways. My intention was to try to accurately reflect their narratives, and to avoid an analytic process that attempts to fit their narratives into pre-existing themes. This meant listening to each participant's story, paying particular attention to the ways in which sexual identity, class, space, and agency intersect and operate within their specific realities. Allowing the participants to speak for themselves is important in feminist qualitative research, and therefore listening closely to participants' words was prioritised in this study.

Findings

Five main themes emerged from the interviews and Photovoice discussion session:

- 1 Space, place, and sexuality
- 2 Family
- 3 Religion
- 4 Young people, racial and sexual politics, and
- 5 Agency and resistance.



An analysis of these themes revealed the diverse ways in which participants' experiences are shaped by heteronormative³ value systems within the family, in their communities, and in multiple social spaces and institutions. What was common across all the narratives is that heteronormative ways of being-in-the-world impact on how participants' experience being gender non-conforming subjects, and how they are able to express their identities, whether they lived in Mitchell's Plain, Delft, Rondebosch-East or Wetton.

In terms of 'Space, place, and sexuality', participants who reside in Rondebosch-East, Wetton, and Ottery appeared to have more options than participants who live in Delft, Mitchell's Plain, Elsies River and Bridgetown due to economic resources within their families, and resources accumulated through becoming self-sustainable due to formal education beyond high school. For participants who were less economically resourced, which was more than three-quarters of the participants in this study, they were more subjected to the value systems within their families and communities; it was harder for them to make independent decisions about how they want to live, and who they want to spend their time with as gender non-conforming subjects. Zakaria, a 24-year-old self-identified gay male participant from Rondebosch-East, summed this up as follows:

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Interviewer: | Do you think it's different when you are a middle class gay man? Do you think it's different for you compared to a working class gay man? |
| Zakaria: | It backs up what I was saying earlier. If I felt like I could not be financially independent with my parents, I couldn't be strong in my identity 'cause I was dependent on them. How can I assert my identity? My identity is now dependent on them because I'm dependent on their money. |

Family played a central role in participants' experiences of living as gender non-conforming subjects. Often, silence was the way in which families dealt with their child's gender and sexual identity. Where parents - or at least one parent - were/was accepting and supportive of their daughter's/son's sexual orientation, participants at least felt protected in a heteronormative society, to a certain extent. Some of the respondents articulated fear at revealing their sexual identities to their parents and families; some chose not to tell their parents until they were financially independent, and were able to move out of the family home. Where one or both parents were supportive, there always appeared to be a condition to this acceptance that involved not being 'too visible' or 'too obvious' as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered subject. A few participants noted that they felt pressurised to conform to their family's heteronormative expectations. As Natalie, a self-identified lesbian, stated:

I also know that I am eventually gonna have to get married... because they would want me to have like a husband and kids and a stable family like it should be ... traditionally.

Another significant theme which arose from discussions with respondents was religion. Notions of homosexuality as 'sin' came up frequently across the interviews. Connecting to ideas of sin, was the role of the church in sustaining heteronormative ideas of gender and sexual orientation, and consequently, impacted on how some respondents in this study felt about their own sexual orientation. Shame and guilt, as a result of the power of such discourses, were expressed by some of the participants. Ideas of acceptable and normal gendered and sexual subjectivity in the family was very much tied to hegemonic religious discourse that defines heterosexuality as the only desirable way of being-in-the-world. As Maira, a self-identified lesbian in a Muslim family, narrated:

³ Norms around gender and sexuality that naturalise and centralise heterosexuality, while pathologising and demonising same-sex desire and homosexual identities.

This is what Muslims believe: in this lifetime it's always a test, man, every hardship, it's a test you must overcome to become like the 'best you'. But now, being gay obviously that's not real, it's like being gay is a test, it's like a sin, like a desire, you can overcome that urge, ja. So if you overcome it, if I marry a man and I make him happy and have children, try to live a good life even if I always have that urge, I like subsided and stuck to the book and be a good Muslim, I'll be rewarded in my next life.

Access to formal education more often than not impacted on how respondents in this study understood their sexual identities, i.e. as an identity that is personal and private, or as one that is political. In this sample of participants, it became clear that those who were formally educated beyond high school, were more likely to articulate their sexual identities as political, and therefore not disconnected from other forms of struggle. Self-identified lesbian, Sarah, a Law student, had the following to say:

Our rights are violated much more. In terms of the remarks, in terms of the rape, the abuse, physical abuse, the way they categorise us, in terms of fighting against this. I would say socially I don't think there's much more we can do. We can try and form more groups but I think forming more [groups] just shows other people or straight people that we are groups, we're different. That is wrong - that's why I enjoy being part of, or supporting any group, whether we're standing for feeding the cats on campus, support just to show that there is no difference. There are no differences between me and the next person, especially when it comes to sexual preference.

Although most of the participants across the Southern Suburbs and the Cape Flats were not always expressive about their resistance to heteronormative values and norms within their families or communities, or broader society, it was evident throughout the interviews that being a gender non-conforming subject is not essentially, and only, a position of victimhood within a heteronormative society. As Zakaria put it:

At the end of the day, I was thinking this is something that's not negotiable and I needed to set boundaries around myself to say you either accept this - not everything, they don't need to completely accept it - but they just need to keep quiet about it.

Participants regularly negotiated a range of value systems in their families, their communities, institutions, and wider society, in an effort to live out their identities in ways that make sense to themselves. This negotiation was always mediated by multiple factors, central among them being internal and external resources, such as education and socio-economic means.

Participants' recommendations during interviews centralised awareness-raising and education about non-conforming sexual identities, within families, communities, and schools. This education, they suggested, should serve to work towards accepting that multiple genders and sexualities exist, and are not confined to heterosexual desire and practice. Knowledge, it was mentioned, is pivotal to society's understanding of non-conforming sexual identities.

While some of the findings in this study echo Nell and Shapiro's (2011) case study on queer youth in South Africa today, it also offers a perspective on how place affects the experiences of gender non-conforming subjects. What is significant in this research study are the intersections between place, socio-economic realities, and sexuality, and how this works in communities on the Cape Flats and the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town. This study was not meant to reflect a particular 'truth' – instead, its intention was to bring to the fore the experiences of gender non-conforming young people who live on the urban peripheries of Cape Town, and to consider how socio-economic means and place matter in how gender non-conforming persons express and re-invent their identities. Localised and context-specific research is significant in the production of knowledge. This study has attempted to reveal narratives/stories which otherwise, might not have been told. Such research is necessary in contexts where high levels of marginalisation based on multiple constructions of identities continue to be a reality. The narratives presented by the respondents in this study reveal that living on the urban margins, however, does not necessary equate to a victimhood. Lives are lived in this space, and identities re-invented.

To access the full report for this study, please go to the HSRC website: http://www.hsrc.ac.za/Research_Publication-22769.phtml.

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