

# Exploring the need for safe spaces for lesbian and gay students of the North-West University Potchefstroom Campus

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Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree *Master of Arts* in *Sociology* and Governance at the  
North-West University

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Graduation May 2018  
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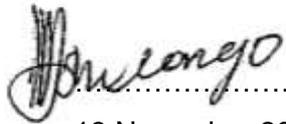
## DECLARATION

I, **Tshanduko Tshilongo**, declare that this dissertation as well as the work presented in it is my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I further declare that:

- i. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for the MA degree in Sociology at the North-West University (NWU), Potchefstroom;
- ii. Where any part of this dissertation has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at the NWU or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- iii. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed and referenced;
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- v. I have acknowledged all main sources of assistance;
- vi. Where the dissertation is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- vii. None of this work or its parts have been published or submitted before.

Signed:

  
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Dated:

13 November 2017

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was a major mission and would not have been possible without the selfless contribution of several people.

- Firstly, I give thanks to my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, for the inner strength and wisdom He provided to carry me along this journey.
- To my supervisor, Dr Jacques Rothmann. Thank you for your patience, support and encouragement. I will be forever thankful.
- To all the participants who took time off from their busy schedules to participate in my study. I wish to thank you for your willingness to share your life stories.
- My special gratitude to the National Research Foundation for funding my studies.
- Finally to my parents, Mr Thomas and Mrs Sannah Tshilongo, and my two sisters, Rendani and Madidimalo, my deepest gratitude for your support and for always encouraging me to work hard and stay focused. I love and appreciate all of you.

## ABSTRACT

The visibility of our issues and our bodies is said to present a double-edged sword: on the one hand that visibility serves the necessary purpose of de-mystifying LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) persons and their human rights concerns. Conversely it tends to create a backlash towards many of those bodies who put themselves out in the open (De Wet, Rothmann & Simmonds, 2016). This study provides an exploration of the need for safe spaces for lesbian and gay students on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University. This is a qualitative study informed by the meta-theoretical principles of social constructionism and features of interpretivism. Twenty (20) interviews were conducted with ten (10) students who were openly gay and the other ten (10) students were openly lesbian. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings in this study give an insight into the experiences of gay and lesbian students on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University, and discuss the favourable nature of safe spaces and their limitations.

**Key words:** Allies, assimilation, closet, explicit centralisation, explicit marginalisation, heteronormativity, homophobia, implicit centralisation, implicit marginalisation, interpretivism, qualitative, queer theory, safe spaces, sampling, social constructionism.

## ACRONYMS

GLSEN	Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network
ILGA	International Lesbian, Gay, Intersex and Transsexual Association
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning and others
OUT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Well-Being
PFLAG	Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
GSA	Gay-Straight Alliances
Wits	University of the Witwatersrand

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

In the most recent state-sponsored Homophobia Report, published by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Association (ILGA hereafter), Oluoch and Tabengwa (2017:150) note the following:

*The African lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movement has grown exponentially over the last decade...Many organizations [and] [n]umerous brave individuals across the continent have come out and stood up to the violence, stigma and discrimination faced by those of diverse sexual orientation or gender identity. Their voices for equality, and what its absence looks like, have become stronger and clearer. Concurrently, opposition to the existence of such African voices and the ideas they speak has become more strategic and frequently more violent.*

The report which annually chronicles, among others, the current stances on homosexual rights on an international level, provides cumbersome accounts of homophobic retaliation directed towards such individuals, particularly on the African continent. Homophobia refers to a gender-based form of discrimination directed towards individuals whose gender identity and sexual orientation contradicts the supposed centrality of heterosexuality (Smith, Oades & McCarthy, 2012:36). Homophobic actions may comprise different forms of prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and acts of violence and hatred (UNESCO, 2012). It is worth quoting their further views in this regard when they state:

*The visibility of our issues and our bodies presents a double-edged sword: on the one hand that visibility serves the necessary purpose of demystifying LGBT persons and their human rights concerns. On the other hand it creates a backlash towards many of those bodies who put themselves out in the open (Oluoch & Tabengwa, 2017:150; cf. De Wet et al., 2016).*

Regardless of laudable attempts at protecting sexual minorities in African countries, including the adoption of a '*Resolution on Protection against Violence and Other Human Rights Violations against Persons on the basis of their real or imputed Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity*' (Resolution 275) at the 55<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in Luanda, Angola, in 2014, reports of homophobic cases of violence, prejudice and discriminatory practices (e.g. murder, rape and imprisonment) towards non-heterosexual individuals have persisted on the continent (Oluoch & Tabengwa, 2017:150). Homosexuality to this day remains a controversial issue in contemporary society in general and, arguably, in a liberal South African context as well. Notwithstanding Nardi's (2002:45) argument in favour of sexual minorities' attempting to counteract the stereotypes and potential homophobia, such action may result in an exacerbation of discrimination directed towards them. Since South African society has progressed from an Apartheid state typified by forced divisions that characterised homosexuality as pathological and immoral, Reddy (2010:18) contends that the post-Apartheid landscape has brought the assurance of freedom through constitutional transformations. As a result of these transformations, sexual minorities are, in the Bill of Rights, afforded protection under the law. Given these Constitutional provisions, homosexual identities have become more visible, as opposed to being secretive and invisible under Apartheid.

Regardless of the positive efforts on the part of the noted provisions, Hames (2007) argues that a definite disjuncture exists in terms of the Constitutional Court's progressive ruling and its actual enactment in civil society, whether in South Africa or abroad. Particularly with regard to the university context, recent research has provided interesting insights into the subject matter. These foci range from studies on positive attitudes towards sexually minority students to negative views from individuals who attempt to limit any effort to accept, include or tolerate homosexuality as part of campus life (Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000:118; Msibi, 2012). Given this context, it has become necessary for universities to provide measures to curtail physical and verbal forms of homophobia towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and questioning students (LGBTIQ+ hereafter).

The research project was conducted to explore the experiences of self-identified lesbian and gay students on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University in order to ascertain the need and feasibility for so-called safe space or zone programmes on the campus. What follows is a background to the general experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals in South Africa and abroad, followed by a discussion of specific experiences on university campuses (with an emphasis on safe spaces). Embedded in this discussion are examples of studies by advocates of lesbians and gay studies on the African and South Africa's current

negative views on homosexuality, lived experiences of sexual minorities on campuses, and safe spaces. Further sections comprise a focus on the problem statement, research questions and objectives, methodological considerations and ethical principles for the study.

## 1.2 BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Consider the following quote:

*To support the presence of these people (homosexuals) in this country is to be an accomplice in promoting lechery. It means, if we support them, we want our nation to be vile. We want our nation to be unchaste. We want our people to be animal-like and immoral in behavior. In cultural terms, what it amounts to is that the homosexual is like a witch weed in Zimbabwe, which in Shona we call 'bise'. It is therefore supposed to be eradicated. The moment you see it you eradicate it. The whole body is far more important than any single dispensable part. When your finger starts festering and becomes a danger to the body, you cut it off (Mugabe, quoted in Moran, 2006:63).*

This statement by Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe asserts that it is despicable and unacceptable that homosexual individuals should have rights. Homosexuality, in this case, is described as a sickness imported by white settlers which poses a threat to the morality of society (Moran, 2006:472). Furthermore, the African negativity towards sexual minorities is reinforced by, among others, traditional cultural values and religion. Consider the fact that homosexuality is still deemed illegal in 32 African states at present (Carroll & Mendos, 2017:37). If a person was to be found guilty of engaging in homosexual acts, punishment, according to Gitari (2013:39), could vary from imprisonment to enforcement of the death penalty, depending on the African state. This leaves Africa as one of the most disproportionately represented areas in the world as it concerns discrimination based on sexual orientation. Notwithstanding the fact that certain African countries' legislation, including that of Uganda, is considered particularly "harsh" in terms of the treatment of homosexual persons, this country's Constitutional Court passed a ruling that President Yoweri Museveni's Anti-Gay Bill, which he sought to sign into law by early 2014, was illegally passed and should be regarded as un-Constitutional (News24, 2014). Baumann and Macaulay (2013:33) argue that the constitutions of other African countries provide a troubling picture of state-sponsored homophobic predispositions.

In contrast with other African countries, South Africa is different with regard to its more

progressive Constitution, since it explicitly prohibits discrimination against any persons based on their sexual orientation (as included in sections 9(3) and (4) of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, Act 108 of 1996). Several provisions concerning the protection of LGBTIQ+ rights have been made since the late 1990s. These include abolishing the crime of sodomy in 1998 and providing same-sex couples equal rights pertaining to immigration regulations (1999), pension benefits (2002), recovering funeral expenses (2003), adoption (2002) and marriage (2006), whether billed as civil union or marital union (Reddy, 2010:22). Negativity towards homosexuality has, however, also been evident in South Africa. Examples in this regard include, among others, arguments by The National House of Traditional Leaders (NHTL) and the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (Contralesa) on the legalisation of same-sex marriage (Mkhize, 2008:102), and actions by African National Congress (ANC) members as well as South African representatives at the United Nations, who have displayed behaviour which clearly juxtaposes the legal protection afforded to gay and lesbian individuals.

In addition, sexual minorities also face an undercurrent of extreme violence and trauma in their everyday lives. In the climate of pervasive crime and profound fear, hate crimes such as corrective rape and murders are hidden within broader statistics (De Vos, 2015; Smuts, 2011). The South African government does not preserve specific statistics on homophobic crimes. This results in the further invisibility of gay men and lesbian women as victims. Thus sexual orientation, according to Reid & Dirsuweit (2001), becomes the root and the justification of political and personal persecutions in both Africa and South African Context.

### **1.2.1 Challenges faced by homosexual students on university campuses**

In keeping with the previous section's focus on the manner in which homosexuality is viewed in Africa and South Africa from a legislation perspective, this subsection narrows the discussion to the focus of homosexuality in academic contexts. Alvarez and Schneider (2008:71) note that the increased visibility of homosexuality has arguably led to more acceptance, inclusion or tolerance in mainstream society. However, researchers such as Alvarez and Schneider (2008:71) and Athanases and Larrabee (2003:239) maintain that this does not necessarily translate into undeniable acceptance and non-discrimination for sexual minorities in the academic world. According to Isaacs & McKendrick (1992:xi), being homosexual in a potentially hostile heterosexual world brings about challenges, which may be associated with the *marginalisation* of homosexual students through *isolation* and *exclusion* which may result in both psychological and socio-political implications for these students. A discussion of these issues should be made a priority to be able to develop

programmes and support services for the sexual minorities on university campuses.

According to Evans (2000:85), the marginalisation of homosexual students may be attributed to the fact that students are subjected to explicit and/or implicit exclusion in the university context. In terms of the former, unrestrained homophobic remarks may be used by lecturers and fellow students whereas implicit forms manifest in covert attempts at prejudice through a lack of public acknowledgment of individuals or issues associated with their sexual orientation, which could (or should) warrant educational focus (Evans, 2000:85-86). This engenders fear on the part of the student to raise such issues during classes, since it may exacerbate further verbal or possibly physical discrimination (Evans, 2000:86; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010).

Contemporary studies have taken note of the challenges faced by the sexual minorities on university campuses (Newman, 2007). Research has cited exclusion and isolation through social, cognitive and emotional homophobic bullying (Athanasos & Larrabee, 2003:238) as the prominent factors which inhibit the overall well-being of the students. Other researchers have alluded to reports of homosexual students being subjected to verbal, physical and sexual assaults, which consequently lead to a decline in their physical and mental health. Homophobia may also result in fear, depression, lower life and occupational satisfaction, self-hatred, substance abuse and suicidal tendencies (Burn, Kadlec & Rexer, 2002; Cox, Dewaele, Van Houtte & Vincke, 2011; Francis & Msibi, 2011; Ratts, Kaloper, McReady, Tighe, Butler, Dempsey & McCullough, 2013). Butler, Alpaslan, Strümpher & Astbury (2003:13), in an attempt to examine the coming out experiences of eighteen gay and lesbian learners in South African secondary schools, conveyed that all the participants noted that they have been subjected prejudicial and discriminatory behaviour in their educational context.

Based on the findings of the 2012 UNESCO Report on homophobic bullying in education institutions, homophobia was posited as a worldwide problem in the academic institutions (Sears, 2002). Based on collaborative attempts on the part of various NGOs, academic institutions and education departments from twenty-five countries, recommendations were made to the governments to improve the circumstances of learners in educational contexts who may be subjected to homophobic bullying due to their sexual orientation (UNESCO, 2012:12). South African education institutions (mostly schools) were also mentioned as part of the findings from the UNESCO Report (2012:18). Based on the data acquired from learners, homophobic violence took various forms. These included gay men reporting the use of derogatory language, sexual assaults and eleven gay learners in a Johannesburg

private school who reflected on the consistent experiences of verbal and physical abuse from other learners. This report supported the South African studies of Butler et al. (2003), De Wet et al. (2016), Francis and Msibi (2011), Jagasser and Msibi (2015), Matthyse (2017), Rothmann (2016; 2017) and Rothmann and Simmonds (2015) on the nature of homophobia in South African education contexts.

These findings reflect those of American studies. This recalls the work of Rankin (2005:18) on the experiences of homosexual individuals in higher education. His participants indicated that 36 per cent of them had experienced harassment, including verbal homophobia (89 per cent), threats (48 per cent), written comments (33 per cent), physical homophobia (eleven students). Of these participants, seventy-nine per cent attributed homophobia to their fellow students as causes, whereas about 20 per cent expressed fear for their safety on their respective campuses (Rankin, 2005:19). Explanations for homophobia in the South African education contexts centre on the role of religiosity and the fact that homosexuality is viewed as a “taboo” and “un-African” topic in a predominantly heteronormative and patriarchal African context (Dlamini, 2006; Smith et al., 2012:36). In addition, peer harassment expressed in the use of offensive language such as “faggot” and “moffie” also instil pain, humiliation, fear and disapproval in its intended victim (Butler et al., 2003:11). These findings also correspond with those of Francis and Msibi’s (2011:13) work, whose research indicated examples of overt homophobia expressed by their teachers during classes. The patriarchal context of educational institutions may in fact be enforced through institutional customs and “beliefs”, and frequently through violent means which included religious and cultural beliefs (Department of Education, 2008:86).

Given this context in South Africa and abroad, homosexual students require help to manage the noted adversity in the face of rejection and campus harassments. One effort which has been considered feasible in addressing these issues is the development of so-called safe spaces or zones for such students on university campuses.

### **1.2.2 Developing safe spaces for sexual minorities**

A safe space or zone is a place where students are able to fully express themselves without fear of being made to feel uncomfortable, unwelcome or unsafe on account of their biological sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, cultural background, religious affiliation, age or physical or mental ability (Evans, 2002). It is where people "...can really be themselves" (Hind, 2004:27) away from the pressures that typically constrain them in the other arenas of their lives.

One of the first examples of university-based safe spaces was formed by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network's Safe Space Program (GLSEN) in the early 1990s in America (Fox, 2007:497). The focus of these spaces was to initiate feasible educational programmes on university campuses that are inclusive of the homosexual students. The purposes of these programmes are firstly to serve as an environment in which identified homosexual individuals are afforded the opportunity to interrelate with others similar to them or to talk to trained professionals about issues associated with their sexual orientation (Biegel, 2010:126; Evans, 2002:522). Secondly, safe zones attempt to facilitate an increase in the visibility of sexual minorities and provide an educational podium for heterosexual and homosexual individuals alike, who are either in need of information on or support in problematic issues faced by sexually dissident groups because of homophobia and heterosexism (Butler et al., 2003:21; Evans, 2002:522). Thirdly, safe spaces are created as an integrated attempt to create alliances among individuals who desire to protect the rights of the oppressed minorities (Fox, 2007:498) and to break down stereotypical beliefs held by a heterosexually dominant society (D'Emilio, 1992:131).

Given the background and related positive aspects of safe spaces other scholars, including Fox (2007:502) have, however, critiqued these spaces. These contexts, she argues, create an exclusive and segregated community for sexual minorities, potentially separate which does not reflect the diverse 'sexually orientated' (i.e. heterosexual individuals) nature of the campus. She bases her argument on the questionable and weak construction of the idea of a safe space. These constructions tend to categorise the homosexual students as passive victims of undesirable homophobic violence, not exhibiting any agency to challenge the unwarranted discrimination. It may create the impression that the safety afforded in the space may in fact be evident (or even guaranteed) when leaving it. In so doing, one tends to be at the risk of ignoring the risk associated with homophobia from the external public sphere which may be hostile towards sexual minorities (Fox, 2007:502). Safe zones are also critiqued, questioning (Fox, 2007:502) the performed rituals and rules (Ingraham, 2002)

which retain heterosexuality as the norm and may necessitate sexual minorities in current academic settings to assimilate into a heteronormative culture (Jagose, 1996:26; Stein & Plummer, 1996:130; Van den Berg, 2016:28).

### **1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Regardless of the cited UNESCO Report (2012) on school-based homophobia and statements which posit homosexuality as “un-African”, the experiences of South African sexual minority universities have not been studied as extensively as those in America, among others. Studies have mostly focused on the experiences of students in school settings (Msibi, 2012). In a recent review of studies on the latter focus, Francis (2017a) provides an overview of the laudable research on the significance of studying homosexuality, particularly in schools. He outlines findings from research which show that in certain South African schools certain teachers deny the existence of homosexual learners (Bhana, 2012; DePalma & Francis, 2014; Francis, 2017b; Msibi 2012), discriminate against gender-non-conforming learners (Butler et al., 2003; McArthur, 2015) and the uncritically ascribe a heterosexual label to their learner constituency as heterosexual (Francis, 2017b; Francis & Brown, 2017; Msibi 2012; Potgieter & Reygan, 2012). In addition, he also chronicles other studies that reflect the possibilities associated with attempts at the teaching and learning of themes on gender and sexual diversity (Francis 2017a; 2017b; Richardson 2008) which could benefit both heterosexual and homosexual individuals.

His detailed demarcation serves as a motivation to extend such foci to the higher education context. However, universities as social institutions have not been explored extensively in South African academia. The studies which have been undertaken include focus on the attitudes towards homosexual students (De Wet et al. 2016; Johnson 2014; Msibi 2015; Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015), prejudicial assumptions about homosexuality on university campuses (Jagessar & Msibi, 2015; Mattyse 2017) and the influence of subtle heterosexism (Rothmann, 2016; 2017). Sexual minorities tend to experience unique challenges owing to the difference in their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that often inhibits them from accomplishing their full academic potential or fully taking part in the campus community. This study seeks to provide an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of lesbian and gay students on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University, in order to assert the necessity and feasibility of safe spaces or safe zones. In terms of the latter, this study is significant because it informs the reader of the challenges that sexual minorities face and how universities can play an active role in the development of safe spaces that can support and help in the development of students' identities.

## 1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The **first general research objectives** are *theoretical* by nature and read as follows: “**To explore the broader academic theories and meta-theoretical bases on the experiences of gay and lesbian students in South Africa and abroad**”.

**Specific objectives** associated with the **first general theoretical research objective** include the following:

- To contextualise the contributions of proponents of the broader academic theories on homosexuality, including **lesbian and gay studies** and **queer theory** as part of **chapter 2 (Literature Review on theories)**.
- To contextualise the **positive experiences and possible challenges** of gay and lesbian students in South Africa and abroad as part of **chapter 3 (Literature Review)**.
- To contextualise **safe spaces** within these theories as part of **chapter 3 (Literature Review)**.
- To explain the relevant **research design and methodology** for the empirical study as part of **chapter 4 (Research Design and Methodology)**.

The **second general research objective** is *empirical* by nature and reads as follows: “**To explore the potential role of safe spaces according to an empirical study on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University**”.

The **specific objectives** associated with the **empirical research objective** include the following:

- To describe the **positive features** associated with a safe space on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University.
- To describe the **limitations** associated with a safe space on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University.
- To describe the **forms** a safe space could take on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University.
- To **explain** the reasons **in favour of** and/or **against** developing a safe space on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University.

- To provide **recommendations** on the implementation of safe spaces in order to address challenges faced by lesbian and gay students on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University.

Each of the above objectives is linked to a particular research question to be answered. The research questions provide the direction which the research should take.

## 1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The **first general theoretical research question** reads as follows: “**What are the broader academic theories and meta-theoretical bases on the experiences of gay and lesbian students in South Africa and abroad?**”

**Specific research questions** associated with the **first general theoretical research question** include the following:

- What are the contributions of proponents of the broader academic theories on homosexuality, including **lesbian and gay studies** and **queer theory**?
- What are the **positive experiences and possible challenges** of gay and lesbian students in South Africa and abroad?
- What is the relationship between **safe spaces** and these broader theories?
- What is the relevant **research design and methodology** for the empirical part of the study?

The **second general empirical research question** reads as follows: “**What is the potential role of safe spaces on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University?**”

The **specific research questions** associated with the **empirical research question** include the following:

- What are the **positive features** associated with a safe space or zone on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University?
- What are the **limitations** associated with a safe space or zone on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University?
- What **forms** could a safe space or zone take on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University?

- What are the reasons **in favour** and/or **against** developing a safe space or zone on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University?

## 1.6 CENTRAL THEORETICAL ARGUMENT

Given the background to the challenges faced by homosexual individuals, the theoretical argument of this study will be informed by *queer theoretical principles*. Queer theory is a post-modern theory that challenges arguments which favour uniform and rigid natural sexual categories, such as 'female', 'male', 'homosexual' or 'heterosexual', since it highlights the normative and discursive structure of heteronormativity (Green, 2002:521) which views heterosexuality as the dominant form of sexuality, as opposed to other forms on the periphery of acceptability (i.e. homosexuality) (Rubin, 1993:13). For queer theorists, every category of sexual identity is a cultural construction that signifies an enforced limitation, restraint and artificial opposition, or as Butler (1999) typifies it, performativity.

Queer theorists attempt to critique what Ingraham (2002:77) refers to as the “heterosexual imaginary”, thus a social constructionist critique of the supposed centrality of heterosexuality and heteronormativity (Jackson & Scott, 2010:73). Gender and sexuality are entrenched in and conveyed through these heteronormative ideologies, through the different responses, values, expectations, roles and responsibilities given to individuals and groups according to their biological sex (Johnson, Greaves & Repta, 2007:5). In keeping with the study’s focus on the experiences of lesbian and gay students on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University, queer theory is applicable for the following three reasons:

Firstly, proponents of queer theory attempt to critique the dominance of heterosexuality in contemporary society. As such, the research attempts to uncover the underlying reasons for the potential *marginalisation* of lesbian and gay students, based on their sexual orientation. Queer proponents challenge the heteronormative conventions in the mainstream (Warner, 1991). In other words, queer rhetoric insists that there is nothing necessarily “normal” about being heterosexual. The reason for the marginalisation of lesbians and gay students is associated with the fact that heterosexuality is seen as the normal and natural identity and homosexuality as abnormal and deviant (McIntosh, 1968; Rubin, 1993). Secondly, queer theoretical proponents adamantly contend that sexual minorities should not merely be assimilated into an unchanged mainstream context (Seidman, 1993; Tierney, 1993). Queer critics maintain that individual sexual differences should be regarded as significant and unique, and that these differences should not be used to justify oppression (Slagle, 2008:137). Here, the social constructionist contributions of, among others, Plummer (1998; 2003; 2015) is of particular significance. He refers to the importance of “cosmopolitan

sexualities”, which emphasise the importance of acknowledging gender and sexual multiplicity, fluidity and plurality, due to an adoption of an intersectional view (Plummer, 2015:14). Plummer (2015:11) thus argues in favour of using a “cosmopolitan imagination” in order to encourage an attitude of openness toward gender and sexual difference. Thirdly, proponents also comment on the creation and maintenance of ‘the closet’, as a means to posit homosexuality as a subordinate form of sexuality in relation to heterosexuality. A closet, as defined by Brown (2008:7), is a representation for spatial arrangements which highlights the underlying power dynamics of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, because its location and distance suggest a relationship between those who identify as heterosexual and those who are homosexual. Our social structure is grounded on insides and outsides: “...any identity is founded relationally, constituted in reference to an outside that defines the subject's own interior boundaries and physical surfaces” (Fuss, 1995:234). This study will seek to uncover the manner in which the position of homosexuality (as potentially on the outside) in relation to heterosexuality (as on the inside) is organised on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University, and how this may reinforce the difficulty associated with ‘coming out’ of the closet for sexual minority students, given their potentially subordinate sexual identity status.

## **1.7 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This subsection provides a concise focus on the meta-theory, explorative qualitative design and research methods of in-depth interviews used in the study. In addition, the researcher also elucidates the sampling procedures of purposive and snowball sampling, the use of data analysis and the ethical considerations. An in-depth discussion of the research design and methodological considerations is provided as part of chapter 4.

The research topic encouraged the use of social constructionism as an ontological approach and the epistemological approach of interpretivism. With roots in phenomenology, both seek to “...replace the objectivist ideal with a broad tradition of on-going criticism in which all productions of the human mind are concerned” (Hoffman, 1990:1) and is inseparably associated with the central theoretical argument’s queer theoretical focus, since it adopts a set of lenses that imposes an awareness of the way in which we perceive, experience and actively (and socially) construct (and possibly reconstruct) the world. Both approaches basically argue that the nature (and structure) of our social (and sexual) realities are constantly constructed and reconstructed through interaction (Creswell, 2009:8).

In keeping with these meta-theoretical foci, a qualitative research design was adopted for the study to provide an in-depth and “thick descriptive” (Geertz, 1973) explanation of the gay

and lesbian student participants' subjective views on the need for safe spaces or zones on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University. While quantitative researchers seek clarifications of few narrowly defined variables that have an impact on phenomena, the objective of qualitative research centres on the accumulation of in-depth descriptions and the emphasis on the researcher's ability to understand, explain and explore phenomena (Jarbandhan & Schutte, 2006:672). Bazeley (2007:2) notes that a qualitative research design is preferred in conditions where a thorough understanding of a process or experience and evidence are needed to determine the particular nature of the issues being explored and where the data available is not in numeric form.

In keeping with the focus of the study, the participants included ten (10) self-identified gay and ten (10) self-identified lesbian students registered as undergraduate or postgraduate students of the North-West University Potchefstroom campus. Their fields of study, age, socio-economic class, ethnic origins, gender-identification and/or race were not regarded as exhaustive criteria in the selection process, particularly given the importance of gaining an intersectional understanding of their views. This study adopted the use of the non-probability sampling method through purposive and snowball sampling. The study employed the use of in-depth interviews to obtain the data through conversing with the participants based on an interview schedule. This comprised three subsections: The first section included the biographical and academic background of gay and lesbian students, whereas the second and third sections comprised the opinion-related questions (based on themes from the literature) (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:237). The narratives from the interviews were transcribed and analysed through a thematic analysis. Open and selective coding was used in order to code both the existing themes (which have been theoretically engaged as part of chapters 2 and 3) as well as new themes from the data. These themes included the following: **Defining homosexuality, views on homosexuality, positive experiences of gay and lesbian students on the North-West University Potchefstroom campus, challenges experienced by gay and lesbian students on the North-West University's Potchefstroom campus and the need for safe zones/spaces on the campus.**

With regard to ethical issues, adherence to the strict ethical code of conduct set by the North-West University's ethical practices protocol on participants' treatment in the research procedure was fundamental to this study. The University's ethical codes include, among others, voluntary participation, no physical or emotional harm to the participants, and the protection of the participants' identity, in this case, the protection of lesbian and gay students' identity in interviews. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, ethical issues relevant to conducting research with populations regarded as vulnerable are primarily

associated with whether or not the research constitutes a risk to participants and whether or not they may experience harm during the research process (cf. Bryman, 2016). The researcher was committed to upholding ethical principles by adhering to the approved ethical clearance, courtesy of the North-West University's Faculty of Arts Ethics Committee's guidelines and prescriptions (these are clearly outlined in chapter 4). Of the utmost importance (and, as was included as part of the Informed Consent Statement) was the information on the protection of the participants' interests and well-being. The principles associated with confidentiality, privacy and no harm to participants, were observed throughout the duration of the study (cf. Bryman, 2016:362).

## **1.8 CHAPTER LAYOUT**

Following on chapter 1, the chapter layout of the dissertation comprises the following:

### **Chapter 2: Queer theory: Moving past identity politics to questioning the logics of heteronormativity: A literature review**

Here the relevant theories and literature review on homosexuality, in general, are provided. This was done by examining existing literature which took into account written books, articles and journal published which relate to homosexuality in South Africa and abroad. In addition, the chapter also engages the critical theoretical assumptions associated with queer theory as a central theoretical argument.

### **Chapter 3: The experiences of gay and lesbian students on university campuses: A literature view**

The content of this chapter centres on the provision of literature on the experiences of sexual minority students on university campuses, both in South Africa and abroad. Here primary emphasis is afforded to the positive experiences and challenges faced by these students on various university campuses as well as the need to establish safe spaces or zones to facilitate attempts at observing their human rights.

#### **Chapter 4: Research design and methodology**

This chapter chronicles the use of the specific meta-theoretical bases of the study, the research design and methodological principles and components used during the research (i.e. sampling procedures, data collection methods, data analysis and ethical considerations).

#### **Chapter 5: Findings**

This chapter presents an in-depth report on the research findings of the study.

#### **Chapter 6: Discussion of findings**

The researcher uses this chapter to critically engage the research findings through an integration of the verbatim narratives of the participants and the central theoretical argument and sources discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

#### **Chapter 7: Conclusion and recommendations**

This chapter provides concluding remarks and recommendations.

## CHAPTER 2

# QUEER THEORY: MOVING PAST IDENTITY POLITICS TO QUESTIONING THE LOGICS OF HETERONORMATIVITY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Berger (2009:40), the term 'queer' has a vast history in the gender and sexuality studies framework. It has been used, among others, as a derogatory concept directed towards sexual minorities as a homophobic and abusive term. Ever since the 1990s, lesbian and gay activists started to reclaim the concept 'queer' and used it as a convening term for any non-heterosexual (non-heteronormative) sexualities. Although rooted in the history of activism, queer has also become a term for academic theories (Berger, 2009:40). According to Halperin (1995:62), queer theory is a radical theory rooted in a post-structuralist and post-modern school of thought. Currently the theory is used to refer to a body of theory that critiques views which favour essentialist identities, identities viewed as normal and heteronormative and its proponents seek to establish a politics of inclusion for all sexual dissidents in society (Halperin, 1995:62). Chapter 2 provides a discussion on the theoretical basis of this study (which also informs chapter 3's focus on education contexts as sites for potential heterosexism). The theoretical basis is informed by queer theoretical principles. Firstly, this chapter addresses **sociological views on the issues of identity, sexuality and gender** and provides an **overview of the history of homosexuality in South Africa**. Secondly, specific **queer theoretical principles** are demarcated. In the discussion of the latter, the researcher wishes to foreground the applicability of queer theory in relation to this study, and how its proponents, by adopting a post-structural stance, attempt to critique the dominance of heterosexuality in contemporary society and adamantly contend that sexual minorities should not merely be seamlessly assimilated into an unchanged mainstream context (Epprecht, 2010; Francis, 2017b; Seidman, 1993; Tierney, 1993; Van den Berg, 2016). In addition, the chapter also highlights **queer theory's critique on the creation and maintenance of 'the closet'** as a potential means to posit homosexuality as a subordinate form of sexuality in relation to heterosexuality.

## 2.2 HOMOSEXUALITY AS ‘UN-AFRICAN’: HOMOSEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA

Section 9(3) and (4) of the Equality Clause (1996) in the South African Bill of Rights states the following:

*The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.*

The South African Constitution, noted as part of the preceding chapter, is the most progressive in the African context with regard to the rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals. Notwithstanding the enviable provisions of this clause, in South Africa very little has been done regarding the mobilisation of gay men and lesbian women to attain same-sex equality, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s in addition to potential movements since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1998 (Croucher, 2002:315). There are still examples of stigmatisation of homosexuality, or any sexuality that does not conform to the heterosexual spectrum (Brown, 2012), regardless of the country’s democratic dispensation with regard to the progress made in terms of transformation and protection of individuals, irrespective of a person’s sexual orientation (Eslen-Ziya, McGarry, Potgieter & Reygan, 2015; Reid, 2013). This echoes the sentiment of chapter 1 that there may in fact be an incongruence between the Constitution and the actual living worlds of LGBTIQ+ people in civil society. Such protection may even be the cause of victimisation based on gender prejudice towards gender and sexually diverse people in the form of discrimination, exclusion or hate crimes (De Wet et al., 2016; Reid, 2013:13). These actions occur possibly because of the perceived threat equality might pose to the centrality of heterosexuality in contemporary society (Judge, 2014:69). Hate crimes, which are perpetuated as a form of violence against LGBTIQ+ people on a daily basis, are said to reveal the noted disconnection between lived experiences of gender and sexually diverse people in relation to the allowances made by the South African Constitution (Lewin, Williams & Kylie, 2013:3). This might be a reflection on the promise of equality regarding gender and sexual minority groups which has not been fully realised since 1994 (Lewin, et al., 2013:3).

The annual publication of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex’s *State Sponsored Homophobia* report (Oluoch & Tabengwa, 2017), highlights the persecution sexual minorities face due to the conservative views about gender and sexual identity of African leaders (Msibi, 2014), hence the reference to homosexuality as “unAfrican”

(Reddy, 2001:83). The President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe did not only mock the Supreme Court's ruling on gay marriage, he also expressed himself through his religious belief by saying "our Lord prohibited mankind from sodomy" (Hickford, 2015) and that homosexual men cannot even be compared to dogs and pigs (Croucher, 2002). Yoweri Museveni, President of Uganda has gone so far as to order police to arrest gay men and imprison them (Reddy, 2001:85).

Even within an enviably democratic South African context, the country is not necessarily, as noted, more tolerant towards same-sex attraction in relation to its neighbouring states (McAdams-Mahmoud, Stephenson, Rentsch, Cooper, Arriola & Jobson, 2014:849; Sigamoney & Epprecht, 2013). Corrective rape is one example to show how lesbians are treated in South Africa owing to, among others, gender disparities which may result in hate crimes, violence, discrimination, oppression, marginalisation, stereotyping of and prejudice toward LGBTIQ+ individuals (Human Rights Watch, 2011:26; Wells & Polders, 2006). If one were to look at legislation, for example, determining how South Africa as a democratic country has progressed in protecting and promoting the lives of LGBTIQ+ people, several examples of such milestones exist (ILGA, 2016; Isaack & Judge, 2004:71). With that being said, the Constitution is there to protect South African citizens in terms of gender, sex and sexual orientation among other forms of diversity. Regardless of this, some LGBTIQ+ individuals remain victims of heteronormative and patriarchal prescriptions which discriminate against them owing to their gender and sexual non-conformity (Victor, Nel, Lynch & Mbatha, 2014:292).

This prevailing heteronormative view of relationships has led to an 'othering' of same-sex couples and families. Lesbian and gay relationships are thus assumed to be inferior to heterosexual relationships and are weighed down by stereotypes and misconceptions (Ochse, 2011:3). Early attempts at addressing discrimination against sexual minorities, included the Law Reform Movement in the late 1960s. These attempts were met with hostility under the Apartheid rule. These movements were initiated by gay and lesbian activists in an attempt to oppose the proposed criminalisation of homosexuality under the Apartheid regime's amendments to the *Immorality Act* of 1957 which was later renamed the *Sexual Offences Act* in 1968 (Gevisser & Cameron, 1995:31). The Apartheid government sought to criminalise homosexuality as an "alien import", punishable by imprisonment of up to three years (Gevisser, 1995:31). Since the Law Reform Movement was mostly supported by white middle class members under the Apartheid regime, there were no visible political initiatives among the black gay populations or collaboration between White and Black gay men (Croucher, 2002:318). It was only in 1982 that the first national gay organisation,

entitled GASA (Gay Association of South Africa) emerged. This was followed by GLOW (Gays and Lesbians of the Witwatersrand) which was more racially diverse. This was due to the fact that homosexuality, in the 1970-1980s, was viewed as both a sin and a crime, and therefore being visible was a transgressive and politically risky act. According to Reddy (2010), these organisations attempted to democratise sexual and homosexual identities in order to provide for equal rights for sexual minorities in South African society. Since the movement of South Africa from the Apartheid state which characterised homosexuality as an illness, the post-Apartheid landscape sought to liberate gender and sexual diversity under Constitutional reforms preserved in the Bill of Rights and facilitated the protection of these rights. Therefore, in the wake of South Africa's political transition to democracy in 1994, gay and lesbian rights movements have become increasingly vocal and visible in their struggle for recognition of same-sex sexualities (Reddy, 2010:18; Reid, 2013:15).

Reddy's argument is supported by writers including Murray (2012:87) and Ndashe (2010:6). Both of these writers identified challenges faced by sexual minorities and their allies in Africa and South Africa. Ndashe argues that while Africa is working towards establishing equal LGBTIQ rights, with 33 countries still invoking anti-gay laws (News24, 2016a; 2016b), ongoing violence directed at South African sexual minorities, reinforces the division between Constitutional provisions and the lived experiences of sexual minorities in civil society. African countries, according to a recently published news article on News24 (2016a; 2016b), sought to revive a bid at the United Nations (UN) in order to block the appointment of the UN expert, whom they criticised after he attempted to address the decriminalisation of homosexuality and investigate violence and discrimination levelled against sexual minorities worldwide. However, this bid or their request for amendment was defeated as the number of gay rights advocates outnumbered those opposing gay rights (News24, 2016a; 2016b). Murray (2012:87) argues that this may create the impression that the decriminalisation of homosexuality may not necessarily be regarded as a priority in South African society because homophobia continues to manifest in popular discourses, statements by politicians, as well as in the lived experiences of gay men and lesbians (Murray, 2012:87). These sexual minorities are considered still to suffer from the violence, in the form of corrective rape, harassment and murder. Decriminalisation may, however, redress some of the challenges faced by sexual minorities who deal with homophobia (Ndashe, 2010:6).

Furthermore, while growing up, most South African boys and girls are socialised into conforming to certain roles to guide how they should behave as gendered beings. While men are perceived as weak when they tend not to adapt to the social roles assigned to them, lesbian women's behaviour may in fact be likened to that of presumed heterosexual male

roles in society. This can be seen from the way they are categorised and labelled according to so-called food brands (Francis & Msibi, 2011:164-165). Such categorisation encourages further discrimination against homosexual people through the enactment of heterosexism (Blumenfeld, 2000, cited in Francis & Msibi, 2011:164). Francis and Msibi (2011:164), for example, note in this regard, that African homosexual males may be seen as effeminate and frail and are, as such, given names such as *rama* (a margarine brand). Rooted in these labels is a sexist notion that women are soft and tend to demonstrate feminine personae (Bradley, 2013:48) now emulated by these gay men. In South African townships, for example, dairy substances, such as cheese, are considered as food eaten mainly by women. Men are expected to exude more aggressive and competitive masculine behaviour and are usually not concerned with supposed fine eating. This, according to Francis and Msibi (2011:160) can be clarified by Kimmel's (2000:214) idea that the "...fear of being perceived as a sissy" informs men's behaviour. According to Connell (2005:78), this is referred to as "hegemonic masculinity". This entails that one form of masculinity is considered as being the dominant form of gendered and sexual behaviour which men are expected to emulate. Connell (2005) states that the concept of hegemonic masculinity clarifies how men occupy more powerful positions in relation to their female counterparts in society. This dominant form of masculinity also marginalises so-called subordinated men (Segal, 2007) who do not conform to the principles associated with hegemonic masculinity (e.g. gay men). As such, men who display so-called subordinated forms of masculinity, are discriminated against and face marginalisation (Namaste, 1994).

Owing to these widely held patriarchal beliefs, Wells and Polders (2006) argue that this may elucidate the escalation in homophobic violence, mostly directed at black lesbian women (Judge, 2014:70; Ochse, 2011:4) through 'corrective rape' and murder (Rothmann, 2012:42), since homophobic violence is grounded on the view that "...effeminate gay men betray and threaten the dominance of masculinity and masculine lesbian women challenge and try to assume male dominance and therefore these individuals need to be punished for not conforming to the 'natural' social order" of society (Judge, 2014:69; Msibi, 2009:51). According to Judge (2014:70), gay men continue to be bashed for not being 'man enough'. The gay man gets chastised for not conforming to practices that legitimises men's dominant positions and justifies the subordination of women and other gender identities that are seen as feminine in society. Thus both the 'shortfalls' and the 'overflows' of sexuality and gender tend to be controlled through violence. And violence is considered a disciplinary approach used against all social subjects, because it determines the standards to which 'real men' and 'real women' should conform to, and what the consequences would be if they fail to do so (Judge, 2014:70). These views on homosexuality, violence and the prevailing harsh climate

of heteronormativity (Ochse, 2011:4) may have a major influence on how lesbian women and gay men (regardless of race) construct their sexual identities, and these views are factors which limit the freedom of black lesbians and gay men to reveal their identities (Smuts, 2011:26). Swarr and Nagar (2004:497) assert that the violence and homophobic harassment confronted by many black lesbians living in townships, including those in Soweto in Gauteng, are directly linked to their poverty. Along with their means of transport and their insecure housing, the degree to which some are known to be lesbians in their communities makes them susceptible to attack (Smuts, 2011:26). This highlights the importance and role of intersectionality, in which Davis (2008:67) argues that social actors experience different forms of privilege or subordination/exclusion resulting from the interaction of multiple identities, including their race, class, gender, sexuality and nationality (Richardson & Monro, 2012). Since these identities are socially constructed and not given as fixed, they may be contested, resisted and continually renegotiated depending on their social context (Ferreira, 2011:37). Moreover, according to Ochse (2011:4), the struggles which lesbian women face, are not solely based on their internal conflicts, but are also linked to the broader cultural scenarios of the specific society. As such, the homosexuals' subjection to a patriarchal society affects their lives in different domains (including their family life, work environment and other social settings) or any heterosexual space in which they may find themselves. Another reason for the escalating violence towards women and sexual minorities can be deduced from the work of Reid and Walker (2005:161), where they infer that, owing to the enhanced status of women and the liberation of sexual minorities, which brings about equality between heterosexual men, women and homosexuals, men tend to become apprehensive as their dominance and privilege become undermined. Traditional perceptions and representations of masculinity therefore become "disturbed and destabilised" (Reid & Walker, 2005:161), as women are now negotiating power restrictions that separated the two sexes in South African society for a long period owing to constitutional provisions. As noted above, according to Section 9(4) of the Bill of Rights entitled "Equality", it states that the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including their sexual orientation. An example of the legislative provision that affords women equal rights in South African include the *Employment Equity Act*, 55 of 1998, which aims to provide equality in the workplace through promoting equal opportunities and fair treatment of gender and sexual minorities through the elimination of any undue discrimination in order to ensure the equitable inclusion of women in all occupational categories and on different levels in the workplace. South Africa has, as noted, provided an exemplary foundation to encourage gay and lesbian liberation in comparison to the rest of Africa. Epprecht (2012:226) does, however, argue that homophobia on the African continent is not a "uniformly continental issue". He refers to

studies which indicate that in many African countries, there exists a "...culture of tolerance or indifference towards same-sex sexualities", however in countries which face homophobia there is a turn to "traditional closets" or "closets of discretion" (Epprecht, 2012:225). This notwithstanding, South Africa remains the only country on the continent where coming out of the closet is actively endorsed and potentially encouraged at a constitutional level.

This change in the balance of power between heterosexual men and women has triggered diverse responses from men (Reid & Walker, 2005). Therefore to display their opposition, some men respond aggressively and tend to be resistant to any changes which might weaken or cause a decline in their patriarchal power, while others may display an accepting and embracing attitude towards the equally shared power. This resistance of men may be seen where lesbian women in South Africa are currently being singled out for violence to such an extent that terms such as "curative" or "corrective" rape have become recognisable parts of the South African vocabulary. According to the Human Rights Watch (2011:2), corrective rape is a phenomenon through which self-identified heterosexual men rape women they assume or know to be lesbians in order to "convert" them to heterosexuality; this is viewed as some kind of sexual punishment by men towards black women for having a lesbian identity and being sacrilegious to the assumed traditional gender presentation (Ochse, 2011:4; Rothmann, 2012:42). According to Smuts (2011:26), this conveys the view that identities are concomitant to social spaces or place, and that social status is important in the struggle to construct lesbian identities, especially as it relates to black lesbian women. Smuts further argues that a space is of significance as it can either enable or limit an individual's identity, and as a result identities are in essence spatialized. This statement highlights the fact that it is impossible to isolate identities from social spaces and *vice versa* (Smuts, 2011:26). This means that lesbian women have to constantly maintain different sexual identities in various spaces, depending on the level of agency they are allowed within these spaces, which proposes that the process of coming out becomes complex (Acosta, 2008:639; Ferreira, 2011; Francis, 2017b; Valentine, 1993:246). This complexity of the process of coming out is claimed to may have been caused by homophobic inclinations and hate speech endorsed through cultural sanctions which may, as a result, inflict mental, emotional and physical harm on lesbian women. Furthermore, corrective rape has been associated with patriarchal systems of control which seeks to maintain power over women through the subordination of women and their bodies, which may particularly be the reason for lesbian women's vulnerability, as they may be viewed to have violated the cultural gender ideals associated with the view that women's bodies belong to men (Mkhize, Bennett, Reddy & Moletsane, 2010; Rich, 2003:11). Thus corrective rape is argued to have originated from the notion that homosexuality is "un-African" and, as a result, tend to be in conflict with

cultural normative standards and practices, hence its occurrence in black communities. Consequently, corrective rape has become a widespread phenomenon of violence that threatens the lives and safety of women. While lesbian women experience violence through curative/corrective rape, gay men are being beaten up, verbally harassed (usage of derogatory language) and murdered. One may deduce that these developments of targeting lesbians and gay men from townships arise as a result of cultural sanctions and traditional influences. Regardless of the progressive Constitution, which deplors all forms of discrimination, sexual minorities seem to be having limited success with regard to the improvement of their lives both socially and materially (Msibi, 2013:106). Additionally, a heteronormative context tends to become hostile towards sexual minorities as a means of enhancing their identity as heterosexuals. This may mean that heterosexuality, or as Rich (2003:11) refers to it, “compulsory heterosexuality”, is considered as a significant informant of hegemonic masculinity and the only permitted sexual identity; thus, through the subordination and disapproval of homosexual men, a declaration of affiliation to the dominant masculinity is conveyed.

Having now discussed homosexuality in an African context, what follows is a discussion on the conceptualisation of queer theory which will start with a brief discussion on sociological issues of identity, sexuality and gender. The discussion also encompasses a discussion on queer theory’s critical views of heteronormativity as it relates to the binary logic, the closet and the role of assimilation.

### **2.3 QUEER THEORY: A CONCEPTUALISATION AND CRITIQUE**

According to Plummer (2003:516):

*...Sexuality, for humans, is not simply a free floating ‘desire’ but is always grounded in wider material and cultural forces. There is no essential ‘sexuality’ with a strictly biological base that is cut off from the social. From the social acts of rape to the social processes surrounding reproduction, sexuality for humans has no reality sui generis. Any concern with ‘it’ must always harbour wider social issues, for human sexualities have to be socially produced (no human can ever just ‘do it’), socially organized, socially maintained and socially transformed.*

This subsection explores the sociological contributions expressed by, among others, Ken Plummer, through an exemplification of the reflexivity and plurality of sexualities with regard to sexual minorities in the modern society. The subsection firstly focuses on the contributions

of sociology and its views on issues concerning identity, sexuality and gender, which will also incorporate Plummer's (2015) work on what he terms, "reflexive sexualities". This discussion is linked with Francis's (2017b) work on the positioning of sexual minorities on the agent-victim continuum. Secondly, the reader is provided with a general conceptualisation of queer theory to provide an understanding of the characteristics and the philosophies that are imbedded in it. Lastly, this section serves to further explain the queer theoretical stance pertaining to sexual identity in contemporary society. This last subsection focuses on the queer theoretical critique of heteronormativity. Imbedded in this subsection are four parts: (a) The delineation of heteronormativity, (b) how the perpetuation of the heterosexual/homosexual binary divide may uphold heteronormativity, (c) how the creation and the maintenance of the 'closet' is used as a means to posit homosexuality as subordinate sexuality in relation to heterosexuality and lastly (d) why queer theory should be considered as anti-assimilation and as liberationist.

### **2.3.1 Sociology: Issues of identity, sexuality and gender**

According to Lorber (1996), sociologists consider sex, gender and sexuality to be distinct variables with separate features defined in binary terms: The human body/physique is either male or female (Bhana, 2012:310) whereas one's gender presentation, behavioural temperaments and social roles are either masculine or feminine and a social actor's sexuality is based on an essentialist and binarised division between heterosexuality or homosexuality (Lorber, 1996:144). Each of these variables is understood as indications of imperative social dynamics that may have an impact on attitudes, behaviour as well as an individual's life chances. These dynamics may be seen as identities, a group of norms, as also as roles and interests which may serve as indicators of the social (and gendered or sexual) self. As a result, there are men and women, who are either masculine or feminine and homosexual or heterosexual. And unquestionably, sociologists tend to concede that these dynamics are socially constructed; and they are social constructions with concerns (Brickell, 2006:98; McIntosh, 1968).

Sociologists further recognise the normative link between these variables. Lorber (1996:144) notes that not all sociologists necessarily assume "...that each individual has one sex, one sexuality, and one gender to which the individual was assigned at birth and are said to be consistent and fixed for life" (also see Schilt & Westbrook, 2009:458). According to Schilt and Westbrook's recent work (2009), they argue that the sex/gender/sexuality system rests on the belief that there is a definite link between gendered behaviour, (hetero)sexual identity and social roles and one's biological sex, which results in attraction between two opposite

personalities. This belief, however, upholds gender inequality as opposites, since bodies, genders and sexes cannot be expected to fulfil the same social roles and, as such, cannot receive the same resources. According to Schilt and Westbrook (2009:451) the cisgender ideology tends to perpetuate the belief that a heterosexual gender and sexual identity is valued more than sexual minority identities and expression and creates an inherent system of associated power and privileges, thus enforcing hierarchy (rigid beliefs, rules about issues concerning gender, expressions and roles) to which people are expected to conform. The failure to conform to these prescriptions may then be viewed as deviant and immoral behaviour that threatens the existing norms that may lead to the preceding reference to sexual violence in order to 'correct' a perceived deviant gender or sexual identity. For example, a woman may be expected to exude an expressive role (akin to a Structural Functionalist view) of emphasised femininity (the subordinate party) (Connell, 1987:61; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009:443), and a man is expected to be a hegemonic masculine male typified by an instrumental demeanour (the more dominant of the two). Heterosexuality thus remains an un-interrogated norm.

These binaries tend to exert supremacy over individuals, particularly for those who do not adhere the existing heteronormative arrangements. Queer theory opposes this notion or idea by means of critiquing these heteronormatively constructed binaries, foregrounding the constructed nature of the sex, gender and sexuality ordering structures and contesting the inclination of some individuals who wish to solidify these classifications into societal identities (Hennessy, 1993:964; Valocchi, 2005:752). These classifications are considered to be social constructions or ideological narratives, the authenticity of sexed bodies, gender as well as sexual identities are fraught with inconsistency and uncertainty. This means that the binaries somewhat or defectively signify wide-ranging and complex social practices which surround the meaning of the social cues, and biases related to gender and sexuality (Jagose, 1996:130). This centre/midpoint concerning the ideological concept and the lived or actual experiences of lesbian and gay students in this instance is one contribution of queer enquiry. The focal point of queer theory, according to Corber & Valocchi (2003) is based on "deviant" cases, structures, sexual categories, sexual behaviours and identities that do not adhere to any category of the binaries or that is said to disrupt how gender, sex and sexuality are normatively arranged. Proponents of queer theory also emphasise how the governing classifications fail to capture the intricacy of gender and sexual prejudices as well as practices even among those who describe their sexuality in relation to those dominant arrangements (Delaney, 1999; Halperin, 2002).

This assertion is supported by the work of Plummer (2015:74) on “cosmopolitan sexualities”, where he reminds us of the importance associated with the multiplicity, fluidity and plurality associated with an intersectionality of gender and sexual identities at a global level (Rothmann, 2014:8). Plummer argues that rather than viewing gender and sexuality as autonomous, one should rather focus on constructing, what he terms, a “cosmopolitan imagination”, which suggests an attitude of openness and tolerance towards gender and sexual difference. Plummer (2015:11) advocates “cosmopolitan sexualities” as a way forward through the dense field of difference, conceptualising such sexual identities as those configurations which exist convivially and reciprocally with a variety of the diverse genders and sexualities of others, both within and across cultures. It attempts to evade outright disapproval, adopting an appreciative stance of difference. It further asserts the importance of a grounded, shared humanity and that it is through everyday minor actions that people get to accept and live with the differences of others (Plummer, 2015:74). In order to progress with the appreciative stance of difference, Plummer proposes an adoption of a cosmopolitan sexuality stance towards gender and sexual identity in contemporary society. Such a view determines an agenda for legal and political transformation as well as a “Utopian imaginary” and critical way of thinking. It provides one with a number of Utopian ideas for “forward dreaming” to assist in creating a better sexual and gender world for all. He maintains that this approach may encourage the construction (and potentially deconstruction) of a world which fosters a wider willingness to live with, through and across differences (Plummer, 2015:75). According to him, these inclinations are dependent on the development of social structures that allow diversities, autonomy and freedom to flourish (for example, new global social movements and new global media and technologies, all of which may foster global intercommunication). These social movements and approaches, according to Plummer (2015:76), question the existing orders by inventing new worlds, mobilising resources, setting up new practices, tactics and strategies through activist performance, and using the media to enable its messages to diffuse into varied cultures and potentially challenge and change the social order. Like Plummer, Van den Berg (2016:26) asserts that it is a queer thinker’s task to interrogate existing unjust principles that uphold disciplinary structures of conformity, and visions of heterosexuality which intimidate and constrain people’s identities and life choices. However, with such an increase in the awareness of differences in sexualities, there will possibly arise some conflict in human values. These attacks or conflicts can, according to Plummer, be primarily motivated by money, religion, nation and power which are mostly linked to gender and masculinity. He argues that in order to have a development in having universally shared values, we need not look at norms regarding sexuality negatively; he suggests looking at norms positively (Plummer, 2015:3).

Plummer (2015:65) further highlights that, as all societies consist of individuals living their own lives, it is under the capitalist modernity settings that this individual, with its reflexivity, comes into existence and that eccentricity becomes the organising standard. This contemporary world also conveys the fading of the traditional approach of group thinking and biases and this is due to the emerging forms of reflexive and personalised lives. He maintains that it is the rise of this sacred being that shapes modern civilisation and a human rights culture. Plummer (2015:66) mentions that as contemporary worlds bring with them individualised subjectivities (Giddens, 1992), they also bring well individualised sexualities or reflexive sexualities. This in turn leads to individuals having choices as to how they wish to live their personal lives, with whom they want to live their lives and what these individuals will do with their lives. Viewed positively, these choices may be associated with the individual's improved empathy, individual choices and courtesy, however, it may also, negatively, be regarded as an individual exercising egocentrism, disconnection, commodification and struggle for existence. In reality Plummer alludes to the fact that these choices may be viewed both negatively and positively.

Plummer (2015) furthermore associates individualism with the notion of "informalised sexualities", in which the older (or existing) rules and laws of order are confronted and people are becoming more informal in their daily ventures. These informal relations displace the conventionality of sexual emotions, conducts, language, groups and orders found in many societies in the past. Formal rules, in terms of gender and sexuality, have given way to more fluid rules and, on the face of it, a need for immediate transformation, self-reinvention and short-term living. All these denote the liquidity or fluidity of society and in turn "fluid sexualities" (Plummer, 2015:66). Plummer's assertions can be linked to the recent work of Francis (2017b) on the teaching and learning of gender and sexual diversity in South African secondary schools. In his work, he highlights the use of sexuality as an agentic feature of the sexual actor and thus underlining the significance of sexual fluidity and plurality. Francis (2017b:90) maintains that recent explorations and literature have moved away from positioning gender and sexual minorities as deficit and passive recipients or victims, and emphasis has been directed on positioning LGB (his use of the acronym) people as agents. This focus directed at sexual minorities as agents has been viewed as the individual having agency or choice to resist, contest and select between existing discourses, and exercise power. The exclusive emphasis on the negative experiences or victimhood of LGB people may cause them to be viewed as a helpless and powerless group therefore eliminating agency from them.

Francis (2017b:90) moreover indicated that positioning LGB individuals as either victims and/or agents is counterproductive. He refers to four issues that need to be addressed to highlight the diverse experiences of sexual minorities. Firstly, he contends that this positioning of sexual minorities as either agent and/or victim leads to what he calls a “cul-de-sac” or “dead end”. Positioning LGB<sup>1</sup> people on a continuum of agency and victimhood refutes the intricacies of their experiences. What is of greater concern is the attribution and application of the agency of LGB individuals, without the questioning of particular histories and policies of colonialism and apartheid inherent in laws on sexual immorality and institutional racism (Francis, 2017b:91). Secondly, he notes that it diminishes an understanding of heterosexism to the individual level, therefore failing to justify the systematic nature of oppression. By this he argues that an over-emphasis on the agent-victimhood dichotomy focuses the impact of heterosexism only on the individual level and fails to take account of the systematic nature of oppression and, specifically, the role of an interaction between institutions, society and the individual. Directing the focus only on LGB oppression may lessen prejudice and discrimination at a personal level; however, overlooking the daily exclusions enforced by institutions towards those who do not consider themselves heterosexual (Francis, 2017b:96). Thirdly, this positioning disregards the plurality of identities held by LGB individuals. Although agency is claimed to be significant in understanding LGB people’s experiences, focusing exclusively on these facets deters the understanding of sexual minorities’ experiences in totality. Francis (2017b) maintains that, by regarding people entirely as agents and victims in terms of their sexual orientation discounts the variety of identities held by these people, such as their race and class (Francis, 2017b:100). Lastly, this positioning compromises an emphasis on same-sex relationships, intimacy, desires and the dreams and ambitions of LGB individuals. Focus directed only on the agency-victim binary is said to compromise the focus on LGB relationships, intimacy and their desires and thus missing out these individuals’ dreams and goals (Francis, 2017b:102).

Having discussed major issues with regard to how sociology/a sociologist explains issues of sexuality and gender, the next subsection considers the contributions of queer theorists in order to assert the usefulness and consequences, positive features and limitations associated with gay and lesbian categorisation in contemporary South Africa and abroad as well as the need to establish safe spaces as a means to safeguard gay and lesbian students on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University (as will be discussed as part of chapter 3).

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<sup>1</sup> This is the abbreviation used by Francis (2017b), since his study primarily focused on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual youth.

### **2.3.2 Queer theory: A general conceptualisation**

Queer theory was first introduced by Teresa de Lauretis (1991) in her work entitled 'Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities'. De Lauretis indicated that queer theory emerged during the 1990s as an attempt to understand "...an already deeply rooted set of questionings and abrasions of normality" (Hall, 2003:54) with regard to gender and sexual identity. For several theorists, there was a necessity to understand why some differences are more prioritised than other differences (Butler, 1993). Notions about identity had started to develop in several strands of philosophical theorising. For instance, throughout the 1940s and 1950s a critique arose regarding the "...naturalised explanations of human identity in terms of nature or biology" (Turner, 2000:37) and during those years an unrelenting evaluation of the constitution of the rational self (as a collective identity) had arisen. Queer theory has been understood to have made a critical intervention in Lesbian and Gay Studies by moving past identity politics to question the logics of heteronormativity. According to Michael Warner (1991), the inclination for 'queer' denotes, among other things, a critique towards the generalisation of normality. Its proponents further discard a minoritising notion of tolerance of sexual minorities within a mainstream heterosexual context or modest radical interest-representation in support of a more systematic confrontation of heteronormative systems and what is considered normal (Smith, 2010:41). For that reason, the main principles of queer theory is associated with liberal concepts such as egalitarianism, adding onto liberation movements, such as radical feminist movements, which pursued problems concerning identity classifications and the way in which power is disseminated based on these particular classifications. Edwards (1998:472) notes in this regard that queer theory should be regarded as "...an attempt to undermine an overall discourse of sexual categorization and, more particularly, the limitations of the heterosexual-homosexual divide as an identity".

According to Watson (2005:69), activism around lesbian and gay constitutional rights arose in the course of late 1980s and 1990s, introducing new themes associated with queer theory which distinguished it from earlier liberal political approaches (e.g. assimilationist strategies). As a result, like any other theory, queer theory has a history in which arguments arose over what queer is or should be (Watson, 2005:69) as well as a critical disposition towards arguments which may favour further assimilation and/or essentialism (akin to feminist thought and/or Lesbian and Gay Studies) (Jagose, 1996:160). Queer studies developed based on its critique of the argument forwarded by proponents of Lesbian and Gay Studies regarding assimilation on the part of sexual minorities, an essentialised construction of homosexual identity and a view of coming out of 'the closet' as only being redeeming and

liberating, among others (Jagose, 1996; Van den Berg, 2016). Queer theorists refute "...the entire concept of identity politics as falsely constructing a unitary entity or person" (Edwards, 1998:472). The field of Lesbian and Gay Studies developed from the gay liberation movement in the 1970s. Through the emergence of gay liberation movements, gay and lesbian people and their supporters developed an interest in studying homosexuality and how it was viewed historically and culturally, which later directed them to an investigation of the construction and theorisation of gender and sexual orientation (Kaczorowski, 2015:2). Many of these studies focused on the significance placed on the positioning of gender and sexual orientation, based on historical and cultural influences. It explored (and continues to do so) varieties of social arrangements as well as concepts that inform arguments about how sexuality is seen as an expressive performance, as well as an identity. Its proponents further examine how different cultures have imposed beliefs on individuals as to which gendered and sexual categories are considered 'normal' and which are considered 'abnormal' and those that are 'moral' and those that are 'immoral' (Fuss, 1991; Halperin, 1993; McIntosh, 1968; Plummer, 2003). The particular actions that are confined within those categorisations are associated with other processes of social practices and systems of social control. These proponents of lesbian and gay studies attempt to understand the importance associated with such categorisation and homogenisation and the way in which these categories are created and imposed in order to change or eradicate them (Kaczorowski, 2015:2).

According to Adam (2002:18), by the 1990s liberation had given way to transgression as a leading mission, and gay and lesbian studies had developed a different course. Much of queer theoretical thinking emerged from the progressive contributions of Judith Butler (1999) and Eve Sedgwick (1990), among others, in their revolutionary contributions associated with gender and sexuality studies. Queer theory, according to their contributions, transgressed the contributions of Lesbian and Gay Studies, insofar as it sought to underline the inclusiveness of other sexual minorities and also critique the inherent assimilationist tendencies of its predecessor within existing heterosexual regulatory norms. While Lesbian and Gay Studies sought to use contemporary disciplinary literature, such as social sciences and English literature to investigate these lived experiences of homosexuals and the construction of sexual orientation (Kaczorowski, 2015:3), queer theory focuses on the interrogation of how people and desires tend to be divided into classifications of a hierarchically based power relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Queer theory aims to transcend a minoritising logic which posits a so-called homogenised gay and lesbian subculture as subordinate in relation to heteronormativity, which may discard and dismiss those people who do not conform to its prescriptions (Adam, 2002:19).

In terms of its original emphasis, according to Halperin (1995:62), the concept of queer may be defined, "...whatsoever is at odds with the normal, whatsoever is at odds with what is considered appropriate and dominant in terms of gender and sexual identity". Queer theory is, however, quite ambiguous as it relates to its precise meaning. For some, it may refer to "...an identity without an essence" (Halperin, 1995:62). This means that queer represents the opposite of whatever is dominant and there is nothing to categorise queer, which makes it transgressive, challenging and subversive. By lacking any essence, queer does not marginalise those whose sexuality is outside any gay or lesbian or heterosexual norm. Since specific conceptualisations of sexuality are avoided, and hence not put at the centre of any definition of queer, it allows more freedom for self-identification. Proponents of queer theory are further concerned about how classifications such as, for instance, 'heterosexual', 'gay' and 'lesbian' came to be viewed as unchanging individualities and, in the process, seek to reveal them as social constructs, constantly subject to the gendered and sexualised performance of social actors, thus highlighting and/or interrogating heteronormativity's normative and discursive structure (Green, 2002:521) which views heterosexual identity as the central and unquestioned practice of sexuality on different societal levels (Herz & Johansson, 2015:5), as opposed to other forms on the periphery of acceptability (i.e. homosexuality) (Rubin, 1993:13).

To queer theorists, every category of sexual identity is a social and cultural construction that signifies an enforced limitation, restraint and artificial opposition, or as Butler (1999) typifies it, performativity. This, according to Butler (1999), refers to the fact that gender identities are constructed through the repetitive performance of gender, whereby gender is a "stylized" repetition of actions. This, according to her, creates the illusion of an internally stable identity, while negating a focus on how these performances are, as Watson (2005:72) argues, "...mediated through categories already culturally available...[since] there is no such thing as the 'pre-cultural' body". Furthermore, to say gender is performative is to assume that gender only becomes real to the extent that it is performed and subsequently interpreted by its intended audience (Butler, 1999:173). Thus power may be regarded as constitutive of the self whereby the actor is established through the meaning systems, heteronormative arrangements and traditionally pre-arranged classifications that are considered acceptable in society. People internalise norms created through discourses of sexual identities as they are dispersed by social institutions including schools, medical institutions, and even social movements. In doing so, individuals come to be 'self-regulating' subjects (Foucault, 1977, 1980), in which, according to Boucher (2006:112), rather than being mere cultural victims, individuals possess an agency and reflexive subjectivity akin to Francis's (2017b) and Plummer's (2015) work. This in fact implies the potential for deviation from regulatory

gendered and sexualised norms. The notion is best represented in Butler's (1999:174) work on the performativity of gender and sexual identity. In keeping with queer theory, Butler's (1999) contributions to gender studies and queer theory have been significant in that she introduced an understanding of how binaries such as male-female can be reversed, re-oriented and revised to new meanings. Butler (1999) also used her work on performativity to consider how gender is created, rather than only being a pre-existing category. Again consider Watson's (2005:72) reading of Butler in this regard:

*...it is possible to challenge the status quo by producing reverse-discourses – using the explanatory modes that produce us as particular subjects in order to resist that categorization; and by producing competing discourses (i.e. collections of stories from experience that challenge the 'truth' of the discourse), exposing the falsehood of the idea that an original gender (or heterosexuality) exists.*

Corber and Valocchi (2003:4) argue, in this regard, that sexual and gender identities are "...performatively established by the very expressions of gender and sexuality thought to produce them" (Corber & Valocchi, 2003:4). The so-called "obedience to the norms and cultural signifiers of sexuality and gender" basically creates the social and sexual subject and contradictorily limits the performances of that particular social and sexual subject (Butler, 1999). From Butler's (1999) viewpoint, performativity seeks to explain how the subversion of power arises within a dialectical relation between constraint and agency (Boucher, 2006:113).

Queer theory continues to challenge the modern system of sexuality as a body of knowledge that structures and organises the personal, institutional, and cultural life of individuals in Western societies. Intrinsically, it shifts the emphasis from an exclusive concern with the oppression and liberation of the homosexual subject to an analysis and critique "...of the institutional practices and discourses generating sexual knowledge and the way in which they organise social life, attending precisely to the way these knowledge and social practices repress differences" (Seidman, 1996:13). It further becomes a course of problematising the origin of these categories and highlights the limitations of binary discrepancies as referents of experience (Watson, 2005:74). According to Fuss (1991:1), the philosophical opposition between heterosexual and homosexual, has been created on the basis of another related opposition: the pair 'inside' and 'outside'. For instance, one could pronounce oneself to be an 'out' lesbian or gay, and gays or lesbians who are not out, that is, the ones who are "in the closet". This means that an effort to assert oneself to be out of the closet characterises

non-heterosexuals who are seemingly inside. In an attempt to delineate a sexual identity outside the norm, one needs first to place oneself inside dominant classifications of sexuality. According to Fuss (1991:3), these signs denote "...a transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such". For that reason, queer theory suggests that instead of proclaiming oneself to be exclusively outside heterosexuality, nor exclusively inside, because each of the meanings ascribed to each of these terms, is dependent on the other, the solution is to negotiate these limits and think of how of these boundaries, not only the fact that they exist, but also how they are generated, structured, and disputed (Namaste, 1994:224).

Furthermore, queer theory functions as an indicator representing interpretive work that rejects what has been called the "heterosexual bribe" (Sumara & Davis, 1999:192); that is, the cultural rewards given to those whose public presentations of self are limited under the umbrella of behaviours considered appropriate to a heterosexual identity. This is akin to what Butler (1999) terms "the heterosexual matrix" and Ingraham (1996) typifies as the "heterosexual imaginary". Both constructions reaffirm the taken-for-granted centrality associated with gender and sexuality as informed by patriarchal and heteronormative prescriptions (Ingraham, 1996:169) and one should, as noted by Plummer (1998:594), question the supposed "...unity, stability [and] viability...of sexual identities" within a heteronormative order. In so doing, the complexity of possibilities for what might be considered as knowledge about gender and sexual desire, is highlighted. Furthermore, rather than outlining queer identities in strict reference to particular bodily acts and lifestyles, proponents of queer theory advocate for the continued critique of the supposed static and central category of the "heterosexual". This thought is supported by Halperin's (1995:62) view of queer theory:

*Queer...does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions; rather, it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance. It is from the eccentric positionality occupied by the queer subject that it may become possible to envision a variety of possibilities for reordering the relations among sexual behaviours, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of enunciation, logics of representation, modes of self-construction, and practices of community – for restructuring, that is, the relations among power, truth and desire.*

Queer theorists attempt to critique the noted “heterosexual imaginary”; thus, a social constructionist critique of the supposed centrality of heterosexuality and heteronormativity (Jackson & Scott, 2010:73) which is rooted in and expressed through heteronormative ideologies in the form of different responses, values, expectations, roles and responsibilities given to individuals and groups according to their biological sex (Johnson et al., 2007:5). In keeping with the study’s focus on the experiences of lesbian and gay students on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University, the subsections to follow provide a justification for the use of a queer theoretical focus. The researcher firstly provides a discussion on the **dominance of the heterosexual/homosexual binary**, secondly, its impact on **the closet as the creator of subordinate sexualities**, and finally a focus on critique of an **assimilationist** view of sexual identity.

### **2.3.3 A queer theoretical critique of heteronormativity**

For queer theorists, heteronormativity means the set of cultural, legal standards and institutional practices that make heterosexuality appear natural and which concurrently systematises homosexuality as its binary opposite (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009:441). These sets of standards function to preserve the domination of heterosexuality, thus inhibiting homosexuality from being equated with heterosexuality (Corber & Valocchi, 2003:4). Consequently, the supposed supremacy of heterosexuality often operates unconsciously or in ways that make it difficult for individuals to identify (Butler, 1999). Rich (2004:10), in contemplating her work on “compulsory heterosexuality”, argues that what is still regarded as important for gender and sexuality researchers, is the “...critique of the presumption that heterosexuality is ‘beyond question’”. What follows are queer theory’s critics levelled against the hetero/homosexual binary, the closet and assimilation.

#### **(a) Defining heteronormativity**

Herz and Johansson (2015:1) note that, from the early 1990s, heteronormativity became one of the key concepts within gender and queer studies.. It has been defined in various ways. For example, Kitzinger (2005:478) describes heteronormativity as “...the myriad ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted phenomenon” which sets up unconscious and automatic assumptions about heterosexuality as the norm and all other types of sexual experience as abnormal. According to Russell, McGuire and Russell (2012:188), heteronormativity may be considered as “...a societal hierarchical system that privileges and sanctions individuals based on assumed binaries of gender and sexuality; as a system it defines and enforces beliefs and practices about what is “normal” in everyday life” (cf. Ingraham, 2006:309) concerning gendered and sexual

identities. These sets of norms and beliefs work to maintain the dominance of heterosexuality by constraining and subordinating homosexuality (Corber & Valocchi, 2003:4). Like Corber and Valocchi, Matamala (2014:1) argues that heteronormativity creates a set of oppositional relations between femininity and masculinity that supports men's greater power and status in relation to women and sexual minorities. According to Herz and Johansson (2015:3), concepts such as hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity, though generally similar, work as a tool to examine systems of oppression and contribute to an understanding of how more general gender structures and hierarchies are constructed in society. But when it is applied directly to everyday life, there is sometimes an inclination to include more aspects of gender and lifestyle issues under the heading of heteronormativity. As such, the concept works as a critique not only of gender divisions and hierarchies but also of more specific ways of organising family, sexuality, and one's life (Herz & Johansson, 2015:3). Herz and Johansson (2015:5) argue that heteronormativity condemns those individuals who do not conform to the (heterosexually) "acceptable" value system of society. Heterosexuality then becomes what Rich (2003) calls, as noted before, "compulsory heterosexuality". It also points to the strong interconnection between sexuality and gender. This therefore explains how heteronormativity *per se* both affects and is affected by our view of gender and sexuality. However, such beliefs are subject to criticism, largely by queer scholars.

**(b) *Perpetuation of the binary divide: Serving to uphold heteronormativity***

Firstly, proponents of queer theory attempt to critique the dominance of heterosexuality in contemporary society. As such, this research attempts to uncover the underlying reasons for the potential *marginalisation* of lesbian and gay individuals (such as, potentially, the gay and lesbian students on South African university campuses), based on their sexual orientation. Proponents of queer theory challenge the heteronormative assumptions in the mainstream of modern culture (Warner, 1991). In other words, queer rhetoric insists that there is nothing necessarily "normal" about being heterosexual. The reason for the marginalisation of lesbians and gay students (as it relates to this study, for example) may be associated with the fact that heterosexuality is seen as the normal and natural identity and, homosexuality, as abnormal and deviant (McIntosh, 1968; Rubin, 1993). Bhana (2012:310), writing from a South African perspective, argues that there is currently developing a body of work which seeks to explicate the reasons why heterosexuality has become hegemonic in contemporary society (Butler et al., 2003; Francis, 2017b; Francis & Msibi, 2011; Msibi, 2012) in order to reveal the dominant heteronormative discourses. Such studies emphasise the fact that heterosexuality is based on power relations, and its supposed centrality and privilege is

evident in various institutions. The centrality of heteronormativity is upheld through a sex/gender and heterosexual/homosexual binary logic which reinforces the idea that sexual desire should occur only between women and men, and other forms of sexuality are seen to be “deviant” and non-conforming (Bhana, 2012:310). Heterosexuality, as such, thus become what Allen (2010:159) describes as, “social air we breathe” (cf. Bhana, 2012:310).

A queer approach views the social and sexual self as a “human subject,” in other words, it is derived from the various social, cultural and economic forces that create the false idea of the self-governing and rational self (Valocchi, 2005:755). According to this, there exists a reciprocal relationship between agency and structure, insofar as agency itself is a social construction, and in those instances where social actors resist or question the status quo, their agency results from the very social forces and structures that inform the social actor’s life which, reciprocally, may be critiqued by the same social actor (Valocchi, 2005:755), as was argued in the work of Francis (2017b), Plummer (1998; 2015) and Smuts (2011), among others. For instance, the gay liberation movement did not eradicate the category homosexual; it basically “reversed the discourse” (Foucault, 1980:101) by changing the connotation of the category from pathological and immoral to healthy and normal. The category was still constructed as binary opposite to heterosexuality and continued to hold power as the only signifier of sexuality and as a central component of the self. According to Plummer (2003:516), sexuality for individuals is not merely a free floating ‘desire’; it is, however, always grounded in wider material and cultural forces. There is no essential sexual identity, but rather human sexualities which are “conducted at an angle” (Plummer, 2003:516).

Queer theorists interrogate the supposed stability of the heterosexual/homosexual binary order, proposing that sexual identities should no longer be understood in terms of the inside/outside dialectic (Fuss, 1991:1). Proponents of queer theory echoes other poststructuralist views on how the binary divide exacerbates further exclusion and regulation of individuals based on their sexual orientation. Queer theorists thus discard arguments in favour of a cohesive homosexual identity, and view the construction of sexual identities around the hierarchically structured binary opposition of heterosexual/homosexual as inherently problematic (Roseneil, 2002:29). Queer theorists have largely been concerned with scrutinising the cultural texts (liberationist philosophy and identity conscious politics of the Lesbian and Gay Movement) and the processes through which the heterosexual/homosexual binary is produced and reproduced with questions on *how* and *why* heterosexuality is repeatedly re-centralised as the ideal gender and sexual identity configuration and how heteronormativity constantly regulates the enactment of gender and

sexual identities in society (Valocchi, 2005:753).

Although the appearances and effects vary, hegemonic heterosexuality is also imposed and enforced on homosexual men (Connell, 2005:78). This manifests in an oppression which, according to Connell (2005:78), "...positions homosexual masculinities [for example] at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men [thus] symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity". As a patriarchal and heteronormative institution, heterosexuality mainly privileges the dominance of particularly men in society, at the expense of women and sexual minorities. Heterosexual men, as such, display less of an inclination to challenge the inherent prejudice and violence associated with heteronormativity. Ramazanoglu (1993:60) notes in this regard that "...men have much less reason to struggle and go on struggling than women". Nevertheless, heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy are also harmful to men in perhaps less noticeable ways (Thomas & MacGillivray, 2000). In order for heterosexual men to be considered as "real" men, Kimmel (2000:277) comments on the daunting expectations associated with such a performance which he describes as a "...nightmare from which we never seem to awaken". Homophobia and the fear of being perceived as gay become the central organising principle associated with regulation of manhood. The dread of humiliation and the loss of a man's role keeps "real" men anxious, ashamed to be afraid, and they are silent about their own fears (Kimmel, 2000). This notion is best captured by Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) work on hegemonic masculinities. According to them,

*Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue. Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:832).*

It personified the presently most revered way of being a man, it obliged all the other heterosexual men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the worldwide subordination of women and homosexuals to heterosexual men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:832). They note that "... men who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing a

complicit masculinity...Hegemony [according to them] did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force; it meant ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005:832). Classifications which posit certain groups as opposed to and dominant over others tend to exert power over individuals, exclusively for those who are considered as not having a perfect fit within their normative arrangements. Queer theory opposes this emphasis (the normative classifications as normal) by analysing these binaries, and in turn focusing on the constructed nature of the sex, gender and sexuality ordering systems and resisting the inclination to solidify these groupings into social identities. Bhana (2012:310) comments on how Msibi (2012), in his South African study on homosexuality in schools, uses a queer theoretical lens in order to emphasise the way in which gender and sexual identities are constructed along the binary divide of the ‘us’ versus ‘them’-typology. In keeping with the focus of the study, it is worth noting Bhana’s (2012:310) question in this regard: “How can teachers [and educators in general] resist discourses that make heterosexuality the norm?”, for, as she argues, “[i]t must also be noted...that the power of heterosexuality is very pervasive, and even if there are instabilities there are also attempts to reinscribe its power” (Bhana, 2012:310).

Having discussed the heterosexual/homosexual binaries, the next subsection focuses on how these binaries may, through stigmatisation of the subordinate (homosexual identity), tend to have an effect on the coming out process of lesbian and gay individuals.

### **(c) *The closet***

Queer theorists also comment on the creation and maintenance of ‘the closet’, as a means to posit homosexuality as a subordinate form of sexuality in relation to heterosexuality. Seidman (2002:8) defines the closet as “[a] state of gay oppression produced by a condition of heterosexual domination” and a “... life-shaping pattern of homosexual concealment”. A more recent definition of the closet, provided by Brown (2008:7), is a representation for spatial arrangements which highlights the underlying power dynamics of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, because its location and distance suggest a relationship between those who identify as heterosexual and those who are homosexual. According to Calhoun (2000:82), one of the most severe effects of lesbian and gay subservience is the movement of lesbian and gay identities from the public domain to the private domain (the closet). In other words, the closet, as a condition arranging lesbian and gay involvement in civil society is central to, and distinctive of, subordination on the grounds of sexual orientation (Sedgwick, 1990).

Research has shown that in "...a heteronormative culture, lesbian and gay (LG) persons cannot always safely presume that the person he or she meets has a positive attitude to their sexual orientation" (Malterud & Bjorkman, 2016:1339). They need to constantly reflect on whether 'passing' as heterosexual or disclosing their sexual orientation, will be more beneficial. "Coming out of the closet" entails disclosing one's sexual orientation to others (Adams, 2011:36; Malterud & Bjorkman, 2016:1339). The opposite, "to be in the closet", is to hide one's sexual orientation from others. "Closeting" then, according to Malterud and Bjorkman (2016:1339) "...implies a dividing line between private and public identity with sexual orientation as pivotal". Regardless of safeguarding sexual minorities, who wish to not disclose their sexual orientation to others, the closet "...also constitutes oppression by framing identity, sexuality and gender in private and public" terms (Malterud & Bjorkman, 2016:1340). Butler (1997:93) supports this point by arguing that coming out of the closet is strenuous because whatever one says or does is "perceived as an elusive manifestation of one's essential homosexuality".

This framing resonates with Fuss' (1995:234) reference to being on the inside or outside, depending on your gender and sexual identity, since "...any identity is founded relationally, constituted in reference to an outside that defines the subject's own interior boundaries and physical surfaces" (Fuss, 1995:234). By critiquing this binary, queer theorists seek to explore and critique hegemonic power relations. Valocchi (2005:762) argues that not "...only do state-sponsored homophobia and cultural depictions limit sexual independence, but the language of the movement – the idea that sexual identity defined by sex of object choice is a main component of self – also limits sexual independence and any sexual politics to realise that independence". As such, queer theory emphasises the role power on a structural and material and discursive level, as noted above (Valocchi, 2005:762). It is worth quoting Valocchi (2005:753) at length here pertaining to a queer theoretical critique of the binary logic and how it upholds the closet as central heteronormative structure:

*...Because the binaries are revealed to be cultural constructions or ideological fictions, the reality of sexed bodies and gender and sexual identities are fraught with incoherence and instability. In other words, these binaries incompletely or imperfectly represent a broad range of complicated social processes surrounding the meaning of bodies and the social cues, practices, and subjectivities associated with gender and sexuality.*

With homophobia and cultural depictions limiting sexual independence according to queer theory, De Wet et al. (2016) argue against the affordance of human rights to sexual

minorities solely based on legal protection. De Wet et al. (2016) maintain that human rights, though they were meant to protect and provide sexual independence to sexual minorities, tend to provide yet another binary that reinforces the “othering” of sexual minorities and thus referring to these rights as a “double-edged sword”. However, equality and protection from discrimination are not always apparent in the lived experiences of sexual minorities. As a double-edged sword, human rights furthermore prolong the intricacies facing sexual minorities who envisage ‘coming out’ of the closet. Based on their research on the perceptions of fourth year education students in South Africa, De Wet et al. (2016) argue that education needs to pay particular consideration to preparing teachers for dealing appropriately with issues of sexuality, while at the same time promoting critical thinking of and reflection on the possibilities (or even impossibilities) of human rights.

For the most part, coming out is viewed as an affirmative step in the process of being gay, lesbian or bisexual; to some, it is the “...most crucial act in the life of any gay and lesbian person” (Plummer, 1995:82). The significance of coming out is strengthened by the narratives that record the stories of those who have come out as gay, lesbian and bisexual, and about the challenging, but worthwhile, process of coming out. Such stories encourage others to come out, regardless of the pain of doing so, in order to live an ‘honest’ life. Plummer (1995:83) maintains that gay and lesbian coming-out narratives are stories of a journey that articulate the path from an ‘unexplored shore’ to ‘progressively arriving home’. Referring to these stories, Plummer (1995:85) also notes that by coming out, sexual minorities may be able to experience a greater degree of comfort, both individually and potentially in the larger societal context, in order to construct and potentially realise a more fulfilled sense of self. Rust (1993:53) supports this argument when he notes that coming out of the closet is associated with recognising one’s true identity which indicates that “...coming out is a process of discovery in which the individual sheds a false heterosexual identity and comes to correctly identify and label her own true essence, which is homosexual”.

Corrigan and Matthews (2003:240) argue that ‘coming out of the closet’ presents its own advantages and disadvantages. Perhaps the most alarming disadvantage, according to Corrigan and Matthews (2003:240), is the harm they implicate to their bodies. Though there might be disadvantages that seem less violent, they can, however, prove to be punitive and consequential to the disclosure of one’s sexual orientation. Other consequences of coming out as gay or lesbian may include being avoided by members of the general public, experiencing social disapproval which may, as a result, negatively impact on the self-esteem of people who have disclosed their sexual orientation. Notwithstanding the disadvantages, there are benefits to disclosing one’s stigmatised status. The advantages of coming out as

gay or lesbian include the removal of the stress that resulted from hiding one's sexual identity. Thus one's diminished stress may lead to better relationships. Equally important, the coming out or the visibility of gays and lesbians is beneficial for their communities' political and socio-economic needs (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003:241).

According Taylor (1999:521), notions of what is 'natural' and 'normal' sexuality permeate society. Fundamental to these views is the system of heterosexuality. Homosexual self-labelling thus involves assigning to oneself a negative attribute which is culturally devalued and represents admission of deviance. Homo-negativity in other and internalised homophobia have an impact on the coming out process of gays and lesbians by lowering self-acceptance and negatively influencing the individual's ability to disclose both to heterosexual and to other homosexuals. Internalised homophobia impacts sexual minorities uniquely, and is defined as the "...acceptance of negative feelings and attitudes about homosexuals or homosexuality by gay men and lesbians" (Sears, 1997:15). According to Flebus (2009:23), almost all homosexual people have experienced or are experiencing negative emotions regarding homosexuality. Internalised homophobia therefore develops from the learning and acceptance of negative feelings, attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, prejudices and stereotypes typical of a homophobic and heterosexual environment. With gays and lesbians this may lead to internalisation of the social stigma and rejection of their own sexual identity. They can also transform these feelings into fear of facing their own sexuality and may not be able to accept their own diversity. Often homophobic violence becomes ingrained as normal in various institutions (Jagessar & Msibi, 2015:67). In keeping with the research objective of the study, Jagessar and Msibi (2015) have, for example, in a study conducted at a university in KwaZulu-Natal, found that although students experience hurtful homophobic violence, they tend to internalise it and begin to excuse homophobic actions as normal.

These feelings may result in negative repercussions for gay and lesbian individuals. The most frequently reported risks pertaining to coming out of the closet for sexual minorities are associated with physical harm. The news media frequently report on hate crimes based on sexual orientation. Many members of the general public may indicate some form of avoidance towards people who disclose their sexuality as gay and therefore the sexual minority tends to feel isolated and marginalised. Because of the fear of rejection, for example, lesbian women may thus not disclose their sexual identity to health care professionals (Taylor, 1999:521). Experiences of social disapproval may negatively impact on the self-esteem of people who have decided to disclose their sexuality.

**(d) Critiquing assimilation**

Owing to the noted fears which may result in internalised homophobia, sexual minorities may thus opt to be assimilated into mainstream heterosexual society. This, according to proponents of queer theory, should not occur, insofar as these members of the LGBTIQ+ community should not merely be assimilated seamlessly (and seemingly in an unproblematic way) into an unchanged mainstream context (Seidman, 1993; Tierney, 1993). These dualistic views are interrogated in the subsections to follow: Arguments in favour of assimilation and those who regard transgression as the more viable option.

**(i) Gay Assimilationists**

Since the mid-1990s there has been a dispute between gay and lesbian assimilationist lesbians and that of queer activism in America. Earlier queer activists pursued neither separatism nor assimilation, but the restructuring of the public and private domains so as to give presence and meaning to non-heterosexual desires. Assimilationists seek to gain equal access to the rights afforded to their heterosexual counterparts (Epstein, 1987; Van den Berg, 2016). Examples include marriage, an inclusion in the military and the right to adopt children. Queer activists, however, do not wish to retain such a *status quo*, instead arguing in favour of opposing the normative societal expectations which dictate gender and sexual arrangements. Van den Berg (2016:28) asserts that it is because of their need for equality that gay assimilationists consider homosexual individuals as not necessarily being that much different from heterosexuals and that they, because of this, deserve the same rights and treatment by heteronormative society and, further, that working within the heteronormative systems proves to be a suitable approach for bringing about social and political change. This societal change, according to Van den Berg (2016:28), may be characterised, for example, by the right to marry which could guarantee further equality and societal worth for gay men and lesbians. Additionally lesbians and gay men's access to the institution of marriage is seen as an approach to interrogate and undo traditional gender roles and normalise gays who are considered to have been impacted by equality practice and thus offering better ways of combating homophobia than liberal approaches. Robinson (2012:334), for example, argues that equal rights in the form of, among others, same-sex marriage, may contribute to a critique of sexual and gender discrimination, insofar as it highlights the position of so-called non-normative sexualities in the public domain. In this regard, marriage equality may, according to gay and lesbian liberationists, pressure people to "be normal" (Robinson, 2012:334).

Assimilationists, wish to conform to heteronormative ideals rather than critiquing the

heterosexual hegemony which informs the way in which society is structured. Proponents of assimilation mainly attempt to gain access to similar rights and privileges afforded to their heterosexual counterparts. As such, they want merely to be allowed a “place at the table” (Walsh-Haines, 2012:15). Contrary to assimilationist views on how homosexuals and heterosexuals are no different, questions may be raised as to how such integrations into heteronormative practices guarantee that lesbian and gay men will have access to equal citizenship and guaranteed worth in society? And equally important, does the legalisation of gay marriage (or other rights), for example, offer a better strategy for ‘coming out of the closet’ and challenge homophobia than liberal approaches? (Van den Berg, 2016:28). To say that gay people are just like heterosexuals disregards the uniqueness of homosexual people. Again in contradiction to the assimilationist viewpoints, according to Van den Berg (2016:30), gay liberalists, such as Card (2007), De Vos (2015) and Walters (2014), among others, have asserted that the assimilationist quest for the recognition of same-sex marriage tends to uphold and adhere to a heterosexist model of heterosexual marriage which is maintained by the mainstream culture. Critics of the assimilationist view argue that the legalisation of gay marriage does not interrogate the power of the discursive heterosexual regime, which assumes the right to define the ideal citizen. As opposed to assimilationists, queer theorists argue in favour of acknowledging individual sexual differences as significant, rather than conforming to predetermined gender and sexual expectations which, in their view, justify the oppression sexual minorities (Slagle, 2008:137). Hatting (2005:214) argues that some homosexual individuals pretend, through covert strategies of concealing their homosexuality, to represent themselves as heterosexual and associate with specific accepted groups in an effort to avoid being stigmatised.

According to Robson (2002:712) and Van den Berg (2016:28), debates on the assimilation of lesbian and gay identities have recently arisen. The debate among gay and lesbian activists in America on assimilationism demonstrates the uncertainties inherent in an effort to resist and change current practices of dominance, as well as highlighting the inconsistencies of what it means to be an agent when there is a recognition of the constituted character of subjectivity. The debate revolves around the assertions advanced by radical gays and lesbians who propose that assimilation into the mainstream arguably implicates a “domestication” of gay identity, an abandonment of gays’ and lesbians’ self-definition in terms of desire and its substitutions by one based on public status. According to Robson (2002:712), the desire of being recognised as a normal couple, involves a “normalisation” of gay identity. It forces the construction and experience of gay identity from being one grounded in desire and on unstable, non-rational and multiple grounds that escape the practices of classification, to one that embraces and makes mainstream categorisation of

power its own.

This assimilationist view is not without contradictions which will be informed by the queer liberationist view in the subsection to follow.

(ii) *The Queer Liberationist View*

The origin of the liberationist view is mainly associated with the Stonewall Riots on 27 June 1969, when a police raid at the New York gay and drag bar, the Stonewall Inn, led to a resistance and a weekend of riots in which its transgender and working class gay male patrons were involved (Abraham, 2009:230; Castells, 1983:138; Jagose 1996:30; Seidman, 2003:64). This, according to D'Emilio (1983:233) saw the rise of an unusual form of protest which rose above the so-called "...quietest position...[in] favour of a dedication] to improving situations for homosexuals" (Jagose 1996:30). Homosexuals sought to create their own community and culture as an assertion against perceived hostile society and therefore challenge sexual, gender and other social inequalities (Seidman, 2003:65). According to Jagose (1996), several different features appeared as a result of the three-day riots. These comprised a central setting, thus a specific cultural site of conflict suggestive of an emerging gay culture; it stressed a sense of self-determination; it confronted the *status quo* through revolutionary action compared to the homophile movement's more assimilationist approach; and lastly, scandalised mainstream heterosexual society through a propagation of ideas on difference rather than similarity (Jagose, 1996:31).

According to Robson (2002:711), in contrast to the gay assimilationists, this ideology interprets gender and sexuality in a non-conforming manner through an emphasis on the differences between homosexuality and heterosexuality, rather than the similarities. It emphasises the need to critique heteronormative structures in favour of a societal change concerning the perspectives towards sexuality, rather than advocating for legal reform and rights-based activism, which mainly informs the assimilationist view (Sender 2001:77; Yep, Lovaas & Elia, 2003:50). While assimilationists typically embrace a rights-based standpoint, work within the wider framework of liberal, pluralistic democracy, are more likely to accept that progress will have to be incremental and that gradual change is built into the framework of the governments, the opposing liberationist perspective, on the other hand, is in support of a more radical, cultural change, a change that is by nature transformational and which often arises from outside the political mainstream (Van den Berg, 2016).

As noted, queer liberationists emphasise the differences between sexual actors rather than

attempting to conform to societal expectations. In 1990 Queer Nation<sup>2</sup> and affiliated groups like the Pink Panthers<sup>3</sup> mobilised their members through street patrols in New York City to critique gay-bashing and facilitated anti-homophobic education sessions in local heterosexual bars (Spargo, 1999:37). Members of these organisations are prone to embrace the anthem, “We're Here, We're Queer, Get Used to it!”, and believe that the overall cultural scenario concerning views on gender and sexuality should adapt to the diversity of its constituents, rather than expecting supposed sexual minorities to conform to heteronormative prescriptions. According to The Broken Rifle <sup>4</sup>(2012:1), militarism is a system, a logic and a set of norms that propagates and reconstructs our societies and our daily lives. Queer enquiry of power is a radical tool that can help in challenging these norms. Queer liberation is not about equality within a patriarchal and militarist system, it is concerned about going beyond the politics of inclusion and creating a future for societies that do not just restructure systems of power under different names. Militarism preserves rigid gender norms, and is imbedded in heterosexist notions of gender that express masculinity as physically powerful and aggressive and femininity as submissive and passive. Queer liberals and activists, challenge the legitimacy of these norms, and thus challenge the basis and philosophies of heteronormativity. Queer liberationists do not conceal their sexuality and gender identity, but rather embrace it with pride. Like essentialists, liberationists argue that a certain category of people (homosexuals) has features that are exclusive to the members of another category (heterosexuals). Therefore the queer liberationists define themselves using their own criteria and consider themselves different and are against any idea that fosters heteronormative standards of normality (Eide, 2010:66). Sexual minorities may be said to dis-assimilate through the coming out process by which they proclaim their differences from the presumed heterosexual majority. The other danger that is thought to exist in the very essence of assimilation is the renunciation of the acceptability of any difference, even among those who supposedly share one’s sexual orientation (Robson, 2002:711).

With noted differences between the assimilationist and liberationist perspectives, however, both these camps are considered significant in understanding the dominant strains within the lesbian and gay movements.

## **2.4 A CRITIQUE OF QUEER THEORY**

Notwithstanding its contributions, queer theory is not without its own complications. Watson

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<sup>2</sup> Described by activist scholars Allan Bérubé and Jeffrey Escoffier as the first "retro-future/postmodern" activist group to address gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender concerns (Stryker, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Pink Panther Movement is “an LGBTQ non-profit Civil Rights movement and Activist Group to protect the interests and rights of all LGBTQ youth and adults from defamation” ([www.thepinkpanthermovement.com](http://www.thepinkpanthermovement.com)).

<sup>4</sup> The Broken Rifle is a newsletter of War Resisters’ International (<http://wri-irg.org/webshop>).

(2005:77) argues that one of the central points of critique directed towards queer theory is that it "...represents elitist, ivory tower, high theorizing characterised...[an approach which is] apolitical and anti-empiricist". Green's (2002:525) critique is one approach to queer theory that leans towards a sociological stance on the issue of sexuality, primarily and rather exclusively, focusing on gay or lesbian subjects. Green (2002) argues that queer theorists ignore the lived experiences of gay and lesbian individuals, particularly as it relates to structural and ideological inequality (based on heteronormativity), a view shared with Eves (2004:480). The other critique is on the issues of the "normalisation" of queer. Here Watson (2005:77) poses the question as to whether "...'queer' [has] become a product name or a commodity and thus certainly linked to patterns of consumption? Does the mainstreaming of queer mean the normalisation of queer? Or does an idea of queer essentially shape-shift according to the changing restrictions of normal?" In this regard, Watson (2005) engages the work of Kirsch (2000) and Tierney (1997). Pertaining to latter, it is argued that queer theory may in fact only 'revitalise' academic theorisation, whereas Kirsch (2000) is of the opinion that "...queer theory is apathy-encouraging and agency-deflating" insofar as it does not engage with the importance of community and collectivist action, but merely seeks to address individual needs (Watson, 2005:75).

Despite the fact that 'queer' is helpful in capturing the wide-ranging and multiple forms of sexual performances among individuals, it may be regarded as being too much informed by a western history, which may negate a much needed focus on its applicability to the African and South African context (Msibi, 2013). Including concepts such as gay, lesbian and homosexual, the concept queer resulted from western theorisation. Although it may contribute to a better understanding .of the complex, diverse and reflexive agency associated with sexual actors' attempts to construct and deconstruct their gender and sexual identities, everyday people may not necessarily understand how the concept 'queer' is conceptualised and used (Msibi, 2013:107). This notwithstanding, in keeping with the primary focus of the study, the use of a queer theoretical analysis is imperative for the following reasons. Its use does not merely assume an exploration and understanding of the experiences of gay and lesbian students as distinct and homogeneous identity categories (cf. Judge, 2017:124-125; Reid, 2013:39), but rather requires a critical investigation of the way in which their identities and experiences result along intersectional lines of ethnic, racial and gender identities in different South African institutions (e.g. educational contexts, religious institutions and the family, among others) (cf. Bhana, 2012; Francis, 2017; Judge, 2017; Milani, 2015; Msibi, 2013; 2015; Oswin, 2007; Rothmann, 2017; Smuts, 2011), regardless of its enviable Constitution. Consider, for example, Bhana (2013:116) and Msibi's (2015:389) critique of "...exclusionary" South African discourse on mainly race and gender,

to the detriment of sexual orientation. The latter draws on Bhana's (2013:116) reference to the fact that "...male violence and homophobia...draw from longstanding notions of moral traditions premised upon heteropatriarchy, religion and culture and are steeped in South Africa's historical trajectories". In keeping with this, Msibi (2015:389) argues that "[t]hese intersections are often ignored in higher education transformation discourse, and reactions of horror and disgust are often aired when homophobia occurs, without asking what it is that institutions have done to curb this". Another reason for adopting a queer theoretical lens overlaps with the first, insofar as it focuses on the analysis of the implications associated with the creation of normative identity categories (e.g. heterosexuality and homosexuality). Here proponents of queer theory do not only focus on the influence of heteronormativity, but also on its interplay with *homonormativity*, which may "...*naturalise, normalise and legitimise* some expressions of same-sex desire, at the expense of others" (Milani & Wolff, 2015:167). This assumes that certain forms of homosexual (gay or lesbian) expression inadvertently conform to particular expectations associated with the binary divide between the two forms of sexual identity, by *assimilating* into the mainstream heterosexual culture (e.g. university campus context) or *distinguishing* itself through the creation of separate spaces (e.g. safe spaces). This may reinforce Rubin's (1993) reference to the "sex hierarchy", which posits heterosexuality as the dominant and preferred form of sexual expression and homosexuality as is peripheral subordinate 'other' (cf. Rothmann, 2014; Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015). This, according to Duggan (2002:179), emphasises a "...politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, [creating] a privatized, depoliticized gay culture". By taking these two points into account, this study wishes to foreground how safe spaces contribute to and/or challenge heteronormativity *and* homonormativity along the noted intersectional lines of, among others, race and gender identity, organised on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University, redressing a focus on homosexuality as mainly constituted by a predominant global view of homosexuality as homogeneous (Oswin, 2007) by decentring solely Western analyses "...if we are to get beyond the mere derision of the purported importation of a Western-style queerness" (Oswin, 2007:658). Oswin (2007:658) quotes the contributions of Rofel (1999) who notes that "...what gay identity ends up looking like in any one place in the world today is not a foregone conclusion; certainly, it is not a straightforward matter of joining the global gay human race".

## **2.5 CONCLUSION**

This chapter highlighted views on how African countries view homosexuality as "un-African" and the need to still mobilise sexual minorities together with working towards the elimination

of violence against sexual minorities. South Africa, although having decriminalised homosexuality and regardless of the law that embraces equality, is still characterised by the prevalence of discrimination based on the person's sexuality and identity and this is due to the heteronormative structures and norms that tend to play a role in governing how individuals should and should not behave. This means that those who do not conform to the norms set by the heteronormative system tend to be subjected to subordination and exclusion by society overall and imprisonment (Ndashe, 2010:6) in other African countries.

With sexuality being explained in binary terms (e.g. homosexual and heterosexual, feminine and masculine), it creates and maintains certain identities as privileged based on particular norms that indicate or define the social self. In contrast to these views, queer theorists on the other hand critique and interrogate these binaries and the heteronormative structures and notions that indicate that which is normal and abnormal. Queer theory further interrogates heteronormative structures of the closet as furthering the subordination of homosexual identities in relation to heterosexuality, which in short means that the closet maintains the domination of heterosexuality. Queer theory also focuses on how it is anti-assimilationist and disagrees with conforming to the heteronormative way of life. Although queer theory is subject to criticism for its textual focus and lack of attention to the structural and everyday social practices and accused of being another form of identity, queer studies tend to highlight the importance of developing analyses that go beyond identity and representational politics. The contribution of a number of academics substantiate why a detailed exploration of heteronormativity is essential. Evidence from these queer explorations was the manner in which hetero-normative taxonomies prevail as dominant sexualised variations in late modern society.

In keeping with the exploration of the need for safe spaces in higher education, the chapter that follows discusses the applicability of a queer theoretical focus on the experiences of gay and lesbian students on university campuses.

## CHAPTER 3

# THE EXPERIENCES OF GAY AND LESBIAN STUDENTS ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES: A LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Consider the following quote as an introductory thought to the chapter:

*...Little is known about the campus lives of gay and lesbian students, and this lack of knowledge of collegiate experiences of lesbian and gay students form a significant gap in the higher education literature (Rhoads, 1997:276).*

In keeping with this quote, Fox (2007:501) argues that the absence of voices of these students may be associated with the way in which sexual identities are constructed. According to her, sexuality is constructed through a heterosexual and homosexual opposition, whereby heterosexuality is considered, from a heteronormative stance, to be normal, natural and inevitable, whereas homosexuality is constructed as its binary opposite, being abnormal and deviant – a thought foregrounded in the preceding chapter. Historically, gay and lesbian people have been severely stigmatised and as a result were and remain subjected to harassment and discrimination. Nonetheless, recently, most Western countries, as evident from chapters 1 and 2, have made considerable effort to afford legal rights to individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Notwithstanding the fact that it may be a challenge to identify noticeable evidence that education institutions are more inclusive of LGBTIQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and Questioning) people, contemporary research (Ellis, 2002; 2009; Hegarty, Pratto & Lemieux, 2004) suggests that, at least in principle, equal rights for LGBTIQ+ people are reinforced through institutional practices and policies.

This notwithstanding, homophobic hate crimes are still evident. Such examples of homophobia may include any form of behaviour (verbal and/or physical) that originates from prejudice, discrimination, stigmatisation or heterosexism which is expressed towards self-identified homosexual persons, or those individuals who are presumed to be homosexual (Theron & Bezuidenhout, 1995:2). Regardless of studies undertaken on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ students in Canada, America and Europe (which are outlined and discussed in the subsections to follow), only a few exist in South Africa (Francis, 2017a; Rothmann, 2014:9). These studies have mainly centred on the violence, prejudice and harassment faced by LGBTIQ+ students in education contexts (Francis, 2012; 2017b; Francis & Msibi, 2011;

McArthur, 2015; Msibi, 2012; Richardson, 2004, 2008; Sithole, 2015), exclusion of LGBTQ+ voices in university policies and curricula (Balfour, 2016; Francis, 2017b; Msibi, 2015, 2016), perceptions about lesbian, gay and bisexual students (Bhana, 2014; Butler et al., 2003; De Wet et al., 2016; Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015) and the lived experiences of such students on campuses across the country (Hames, 2007; Jagessar & Msibi, 2015; Rothmann, 2014). In keeping with this, only a few studies explore the need for support at an institutional level of universities to develop policies and implementation support services and safe space programmes for sexual minorities (Biaggio, Orchard, Larson, Petrino & Mihara, 2003; Evans, 2002; Finkel, Storaasli, Bandele & Schaefer, 2003; Messinger, 2002; Neumann, 2005) as a possible solution to address the issues of homophobia on university campuses.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a background, based on literature on previous research of the possible challenges and positive experiences lesbian and gay students face on South African university campuses and abroad, and to address the creation and the need of safe spaces to create an environment that is inclusive of lesbian and gay students in higher institutions.

### **3.2 POSSIBLE CHALLENGES AND POSITIVE EXPERIENCES OF LESBIAN AND GAY STUDENTS**

According to Uconn Rainbow Centre (2015:4), colleges and universities, like any other social institution and society, may be very oppressive places for gay and lesbian students. They argue that there are two problematic forms of injustices in universities. These include, firstly, oppression in which students are restricted from self-expression and secondly, the domination in which students are restricted from participating in social decision making. Gay and lesbian students are often marginalised, which negatively impacts on their ability to participate in the classroom or university in general. This subsection provides a conceptualisation of the term homophobia, a demarcation of the particular factors associated with the marginalisation of lesbian and gay students on university campuses as well as a discussion of the forms in which homophobia may manifest as a consequence owing to the marginalisation imposed on these students.

#### **3.2.1 Defining homophobia and its manifestations**

Jenkins, Lambert and Baker (2009), writing from an American perspective, argue that homophobia remains a pre-eminent factor and challenge in the current daily lives of non-heterosexual individuals. In particular, verbal harassment and threats of physical violence have been found to be common for gay and lesbian students (Bhana, 2014; Butler et al., 2003; Francis, 2017b; Taulke-Johnson & Rivers, 1999). For these students, their identity

formation process may be complex because of the potentially negative experiences of humiliation and homophobia based on heterosexist and/or heteronormative inclinations, since they do not conform to the accepted gender and sexual roles of the larger heterosexual society (Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Harper & Schneider, 2003). The experiences of sexual minorities is further problematized by an emphasis on messages which posit homosexuality as unacceptable which may result in a lack of emotional support and even internalised homophobia (Butler et al., 2003:5; Ryan & Futterman, 1998).

Homophobia is typified by different views. Homophobia, according to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (2002), may be defined as the hatred or fear of, or discrimination towards homosexuals or homosexuality. In the formulation of the term, Weinberg (1972:4) defined homophobia as the “fear” of being in a close vicinity to homosexual individuals. Kitzinger (2001:277) alludes to the fact that this form of discrimination results from what is called heteronormativity, which promotes a strict adherence to heterosexual gender role stereotypes (Warner, 1991). Contemporary definitions theorise homophobia as a “...gender-specific type of bullying that is grounded on actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity” (UNESCO, 2012:11). Examples may include physical, sexual or verbally abusive harassment, discrimination or other forms of behaviours, as well as the usage of offensive nicknames directed towards homosexuals, seeking to intimidate them (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker & Robinson-Keilig, 2004:8). The term is generally used to represent negative attitudes, prejudices, a dislike and intolerance of gay men and lesbian women. Farley (2005) argues that in contemporary society homophobia is one of the most openly expressed forms of discrimination. He argues that it may be one of the few kinds of prejudice that is considered as socially acceptable to express in certain contexts. An example of this was cited in the South African study of Francis (2017b) on the experiences of LGB learners in schools in the Free State Province. He argues that, regardless of South African education policies enshrined in the *South African Schools Act* of 1996, the Revised National Curriculum Statement of 2002 and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement drafted in 2011, very little attention is afforded to the acknowledgement of gender and sexual diversity in curricula directed towards the training of teachers and their subsequent pedagogical approach in their classes. Francis (2017b:113) states in this regard that a “...preferential mention [is given] to race, culture, and language and not to gender and sexuality diversity in the teaching of human rights and social justice”. One teacher who participated in his study echoes this point by noting:

*...Sjoe, Sjoe, Sjoe, if it is racism, the newspapers will be here, the minister will be here, and there will be a human rights investigation. Who cares*

*about the Lesbians and Gays? Who cares whether we teach about sexual orientation?...Why can't the curriculum policy documents list suggested topics to be covered and then we don't have to worry as we will have evidence that we can teach about homosexuality? Why can't they do it like they have done for racism, multiculturalism, apartheid?*

In this sense, prejudice against homosexuals is ingrained in culture in the same way that prejudice against other minorities (racial and religious minorities, for example) once was, but no longer to the same extent (Farley, 2005), as is evident from the preceding quote. Bristow (cited in Reddy, 2002:167) argues that the perpetuation of homophobia lies in the comprehension of gender roles (e.g. masculine and/or feminine) by the dominant heteronormative ethos. Homosexual behaviour is perceived as a threat to the hegemony of institutions such as the traditional family, marital relationships and the state in which heterosexuality, as opposed to homosexuality, is regarded as natural.

As such, heterosexism is "...the assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that heterosexuality is inherently superior to and preferable to homosexuality or bisexuality" (Horowitz & Loehnig, 2005:39) or "an ideological system", according to Herek (2000:19), "...that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship, or community". Heterosexism denotes an ideologically structured arrangement which refrains from providing equal human rights and protection to sexual minorities (Athanasos & Larrabee, 2003:238). According to Pharr (1997:16), this orientates individuals into accepting that the world should be considered as a heterosexual domain (Francis & Msibi, 2011:159; Jayakumar, 2009:675; Macgillivray, 2000:304). As consequence, privileges and benefits are mostly awarded to members of the dominant heterosexual group rather than those who form part of the homosexual subordinate group (Griffin et al., 2007).

Furthermore, notwithstanding a much publicised American online campaign entitled, "It Gets Better", which focuses on reaching out to the youth and providing them with hope and optimism in the face of bullying when they enter higher education, according to Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld and Frazer (2010), colleges and universities continue to exhibit examples of homophobia towards homosexual students. According to Juvonen, Nishina and Graham (2000), most institutions are rooted in heteronormative value systems. Thus, as a result, a stigma is attached to being gay or lesbian in many institutions, including universities. Factors associated with homosexual students being stigmatised on campus may include peer harassment, which have been linked to feelings of loneliness, depression and low self-worth (Juvonen et al., 2000) on the part of the homosexual student. According to the South African study by Butler et al. (2003:76-82), there is also evidence which links

the stigma of being gay (e.g. based on internalised homophobia and expectations of rejection) to stress and other mental health complications, including depression (Meyer, 1995; 2003).

After having defined homophobia and heterosexism, the next subsection provides a concise discussion on the specific manifestations of homophobia: **institutional** and **internalised** homophobia and its respective practical examples.

**(a) *Institutional homophobia and internalised homophobia***

According to Butler (2007:72), **institutional homophobia** is defined as “...the multiple levels and layers of oppression and discrimination gay and lesbian youth may experience as they interact and interface with various South African social institutions, at group, family, community, and social levels”. According to the report released by the Gender Equity Resource Centre (2010:01) on homophobia and heterosexism, institutional homophobia may be defined as those attitudes and formal organisational policies that discriminate against people on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. This may, for example, include the lack of provision of funding, information or support for events which concern sexual minorities and an absence of positive representation of homosexual students on campuses. Institutional homophobia is intertwined with the very structure of our organisations. Education institutions may propagate this type of homophobia by refusing to establish a homosexually affirmative university environment and by refusing to eliminate prejudice, discrimination and abuse against lesbians and gays in the same way they protect other oppressed groups. According to a study conducted by McKinney (2005) in 61 universities across the United States, students reported that their universities did not have enough information and resources for gay and lesbian students on their campuses. In addition, students may often not be aware that support services for homosexual students exist and may not know who to talk to when they face an issue related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

A study conducted by Butler et al. (2003:15), found that owing to fear by educators in South Africa about potentially “promoting homosexuality”, gay and lesbian students are not presented with the necessary detailed information about sexual and gender diversity (cf. Francis, 2017b). Teachers, counsellors, and school administrators also do not have enough information on homosexuality or an understanding of gay and lesbian issues; they may be unwilling to become involved when gay students face physical or emotional abuse by their fellow students. By allowing such behaviour, the institution fails to educate its students about homophobia and it this may result in further homophobic violence due to the lack of a safe learning environment for such students. Thus, in a world that tells gay and lesbian students

that they are to be considered as deviant and sinners, the potential for developing a positive self-esteem becomes all the less likely (Schneider, 1989:116). An agonising experience of being considered different, accompanied by continuous verbal and physical abuse, may lead the students to experience what is referred to as **internalised homophobia**. This results in self-hatred, self-devaluation, acting out, isolation, self-destructiveness and aggression (Black & Underwood, 1998:16; Butler et al., 2003:5; Nel et al., 2007:284).

As a result of developing and being in a campus environment of hostility towards homosexuality, homosexual students tend to internalise anti-homosexual views. Internalised homophobia impacts sexual minority students uniquely, and is defined as "...the conscious or subconscious adoption or internalisation of the contempt and acceptance of negative feelings and attitudes about homosexuals or homosexuality by gay men and lesbians" (Sears, 1997:15, also see Allen & Oleson, 1999:34). Little (2001:101) defines internalised homophobia as "...absorption of society's anti-gay messages...a pervasive self-hate which can take many forms of self-harm". These feelings may present negative consequences for students, insofar as they may develop internalised homophobia and experience low levels of self-esteem and be more prone to social isolation and negativity towards other openly homosexual individuals (Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Sears, 1997:15). This notion of internalised homophobia resulted from an object relations framework in which the process of introspection causes harmful homophobic views to be internalised and incorporated into the self-representation of LGBTIQ+ persons (Allen & Oleson, 1999:34). Furthermore, internalised homophobia has been seen as the hindrance to the adjustment to a positive homosexual identity (Allen & Oleson, 1999:34). The discord between an internal negative view of homosexuality and an emerging homosexual identity tends to create tremendous internal conflict. Instead of accepting their homosexuality, some lesbian and gay students may delay the process and may attempt to 'pass' as heterosexual (Allen & Oleson, 1999:34).

According to Troiden (1988:266), the reason for the attempt to pass as heterosexual instead of enacting their homosexuality, may be due to the idea that lesbians and gay males have not gone through what is termed a "sensitisation stage"; thus they do not regard homosexuality as significant and therefore assume that they are heterosexual. Sensitisation, according to Troiden (1998:266), is "...characterised by generalised feelings of marginality [and] perceptions of being different from same-sex peers". Furthermore, after the sensitisation process through childhood experiences and having defined themselves as homosexual, lesbians and gay males begin to personalise homosexuality after realising that their behaviour could be regarded as homosexual. Thus the development of perception about the self and identity confusion emerges. Identity development of lesbians and gay males may be delayed by the stigma surrounding homosexuality, which may consequentially

discourage them from discussing the emergence of their sexual desires (Troiden, 1988:268). Furthermore, with the stigma surrounding homosexuality, these persons tend to develop fear/anxiety and shame and may therefore tend to limit their exposure to information about their sexuality, thus attempting to negate the emerging homosexual reality in favour of passing as heterosexual (Butler, 2007:82; Jagessar & Msibi, 2015:65; Troiden, 1988:269).

According to Evans and Broido (1999), the campus climate for gay and lesbian students has an impact on the process of homosexual identity development. Nonetheless, research about gay and lesbian college students may not at all times be focused on how sexual identity development relates to gay and lesbian students' experiences on college or university campuses (Sanlo, 2004). This is, however, very significant, since the university context often becomes the primary setting for students to disclose their sexual orientation to others (Evans & Broido, 1999:666). This process, according to Rhoads (1995:72), is associated with several themes that are considered developmental by nature, including students' personal struggles associated with their same sex attractions and societal expectations, self-realisation, self-acknowledgment, self-disclosure (coming-out to significant others such as family or friends) and their disclosure to other members of the gay and heterosexual community and establishing a commitment to a group sense of identity. Furthermore, some of these themes may be to a certain degree inconsistent, strengthened or weakened at various points and settings by personal, social or professional factors (Troiden, 1988:276). Proponents of the student development theory argue that sexual identity development is a progressive task during the individual's college years (D'Augelli, 1991; Evans et al., 1998). The process of developing a homosexual identity is perceived to be multifaceted: It is psychological (Cass, 1979), social and age-related (Allen & Oleson, 1999). It is likely that gay and lesbian students in different phases of sexual identity development have varying campus associations with others and corresponding divergent experiences, owing to the fact that coming out is influenced by the particular social context (Evans & Broido, 1999:663) in which students find themselves. Moreover, according to Bieschke, Eberz and Wilson (2000:52), this process "...appears to begin with a period of self-acknowledgement followed by careful disclosure to others". However, they believe that gay and lesbian students may attempt to hide their homosexuality, particularly during those instances when they experience threats, prejudice and potential discrimination on their campuses. In order to avoid homophobia, LGBTIQ+ students often attempt to 'pass' as heterosexuals (Baker, 1991, Hames, 2007:67). In so doing, the student inhibits any attempts to develop a positive sexual or gender identity (Leck, 1998). D'Augelli (1994) adds that because our culture provides no efficient socialisation for sexual minorities, they tend to determine their own developmental direction.

These experiences or challenges faced by gay and lesbian students may be associated with the implicit and/or explicit marginalisation of homosexual students through isolation and exclusion which may result in both psychological and socio-political implications for them (Evans, 2002:82). Such a discussion should be prioritised to be able to develop programmes and support services, such as safe spaces for the sexual minorities on university campuses. Having defined homophobia and its manifestations, the next subsection centres on the definition of marginalisation and examples associated with homophobia and marginalisation of gay and lesbian students.

### **3.2.2 Demarcating marginalisation: explicit and implicit marginalisation and its implications**

According to Alvarez and Schneider (2008:71), the fact that the increased visibility of homosexuality has arguably led to more acceptance, inclusion or tolerance in mainstream society, it does not, however, necessarily translate into acceptance and non-discrimination for sexual minorities in the academic context (Athanasos & Larrabee, 2003:239). According to Isaacs and McKendrick (1992:xi), being homosexual in a potentially hostile heterosexual world presents certain challenges. These encounters turn out to be much more challenging when the person is a college student who makes the decision to identify openly on campus as lesbian, gay or bisexual (Evans & D'Augelli, 1996; Sanlo, 1998). According to Zapata (2000), this hostile environment may influence the students who experience it. As a result gay and lesbian students tend to report less of a sense of community on campuses as opposed to heterosexual students and are more prone to experience uncertainty about the possible responses from others when they decide to disclose their sexual orientation (Taulke-Johnson, 2008:126).

Herek (1989) argues that anti-gay harassment comprises verbal or physical behaviour that hurts, interferes with or threatens gay and lesbian individuals. Medical professionals have expressed concern about anti-gay harassment since it may impede the physical and psychological well-being of individuals (Herek, 1989). Similar to other forms of sexual harassment, anti-gay harassment may not necessarily be noticeable. For example, gay and lesbian students may experience an unfriendly social environment on campus settings when, on learning of their sexual orientation, heterosexual students and lecturers may choose to avoid and exclude them from various activities. Harassment of gay and lesbian students is assumed to be especially harmful for homosexual students at university level and may be associated with remarkably high suicide rates among these students (D'Augelli, 1992; Ratts et al., 2013:388), since these individuals are particularly conscious of and focused on developing personal identities as part of the formative or developmental stage at this time,

during which young lesbians and gay men are usually coming out to themselves and to others for the first time. Nevertheless D'Augelli (1989:320) states that it is the feeling of dread in particular that characterised much of their reality, since complete exposure, the discovery by someone else, or simple conjectures of one's sexual orientation could result in physical and verbal harassment, harm or ill-treatment. For instance, a study conducted more recently by D'Augelli et al. (2010) among homosexual youth in New York City, showed that those whose sexual identity was discovered by their parents, experienced victimisation and rejection from them compared to the youth whose identity was already known to parents.

What follows is a discussion on examples of explicit and implicit marginalisation of gay and lesbian students in relation to their experiences of homophobia in an educational context.

**(a) *Explicit marginalisation***

Evans (2002:85) notes that in classrooms or lecture halls, homosexual students experience **explicit marginalisation** through faculty or fellow students who tend to make homophobic comments or use derogatory language that often go unopposed, in which gay and lesbian college students are often exposed to verbal teasing which seeks to reaffirm the fact that being homosexual is regarded as unacceptable in the dominant heterosexual society (Russell, Kosciw, Horn & Saewyc, 2010). Some students, according to Renn's (2000:129-130) American study, engaged with the demeaning and condescending atmosphere on their campus which was exacerbated by pejorative jokes, the ignorance of contributions made by homosexual people to society or overt mocking of the relevance of homosexual artists, academics and historical figures alike (Renn, 2000:129-130). This in turn may result in what Burn et al. (2002:25) consider to be psychosocial stress for some individuals or even suicide for others. This, according to the scholars (and instructors in this case), was greatly challenging since such a view would only further establish the ideology of heterosexism and pathologise homosexuality, based on the accompanying isolation and resulting silence it engenders for the marginalised groups (Francis & Msibi, 2011:164).

Compared to the overt animosity and possible violence that gay and lesbian students may experience, the use of derogatory language directed toward gay and lesbian individuals by others may, for some, seem inoffensive and inconsequential. This may be because, historically, the term gay was used differently compared to how it is used in contemporary society. According to Chauncey (cited in Brontsema, 2004:3), it initially denoted simply things which were considered as pleasant. Yet, by the seventeenth century, the emergence of what Foucault (1980) refers to as the category of "the homosexual", had come to refer to or was socially labelled more specifically to represent a life of immoral pleasures and intemperance, a meaning that could easily have been drawn on to refer to contemporary

homosexual life. Foucault's category of "the homosexual" can be linked back to McIntosh's (1968) work on "the homosexual role". In her work, McIntosh (1968:183) argues that the practice of social labelling of people as deviant, works in two ways. She alluded to the fact that, firstly, social labelling is useful in providing a definite differentiation between what is considered "permissible" and "impermissible" behaviour. Thus it is difficult, she assumed, for one to simply behave in an unruly manner. Secondly, McIntosh maintains that social labelling becomes a segregation factor between the deviants and supposed law-abiders. This means that the homosexuals' deviant behaviours, practices and their justifications for such practices become narrowed or subordinated and thus punishable with the aim of keeping "the bulk of society pure" in the same way the other criminals are treated (McIntosh, 1968:183-184). Nevertheless, these behaviours may propagate anti-gay prejudice and violence by suggesting that it is socially acceptable to exhibit prejudice against homosexuals. The use of terms such as "fag" or "queer" by heterosexual individuals may be regarded, in certain instances, as normative and part of the overarching culture. Therefore, if the individual desires to be acknowledged and included as a group member, he or she must participate in the normative ways of the group. By using such language, individuals disassociate themselves from the stigmatised group. Heterosexual men, in particular, according to Burn (2000:4), may be prone to impose negative sanctions on homosexual men in order to reassert their commitment to hegemonic masculinity in order to avoid other people getting the "wrong idea" about their masculinity. This kind of behaviour may reinforce homophobic inclinations and encourage violence by implying that it is permissible to display such a predisposition towards homosexual individuals.

Such behaviour may reinforce the idea that homosexual individuals are members of a supposed lower hierarchical social (and sexual) status group (Rubin, 1993:13) and may, most likely, reduce the chances of their "coming out" (Renn, 2000:131). For example, more than two-thirds of the college students in D'Augelli's study (1992) conducted in the United Kingdom concealed their sexual orientation in order to avoid harassment, even though the majority of these participants considered it important to disclose their sexual orientation. Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995) reported that 33 per cent of their youth participants on British university campuses had been verbally abused and 10 per cent had been physically battered. Similarly Fine's (2011) study undertaken in two American universities located in the Rust Belt and the Midwest of the United States, showed that gay and lesbian students hid their sexuality to preserve their family's reputation and avoid social sanctions insofar as such 'inappropriate' behaviour would possibly result in negative behaviour from their families, friends and significant others. Furthermore, hiding one's sexual identity and coping with identity-based victimisation has been associated with suicidal tendencies, depression and

high-risk behaviour. Students also tend to report feeling socially and emotionally isolated in their lives and in their experiences in the education system (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Blackburn & McCready, 2009:225; Dietz, 1997; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Kosciw, Diaz & Greytak, 2008; Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006; Troiden, 1988:269). According to Athanases and Larrabee (2003:328), gay and lesbian students may also report being subjected to verbal offences, physical assaults along with sexual assaults, which consequentially lead to the deterioration of their physical and mental health, an overall deterioration in health, intensified levels of angst and fear (Evans, 2001), lower life, self-hatred, a tendency to cause harm to themselves, along with being prone to suffer from substance abuse and leading to greater isolation (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003:238). A study conducted by Sithole (2015) at the University of Limpopo in South Africa, showed that 45 per cent of students were subjected to or exposed to sexual abuse and 25 per cent of lesbian students reported being raped while thirty-three per cent reported harassment. Of Rankin's (2003) sample of sexual minority students in the United Kingdom, 74 per cent described their school campus as "homophobic." Physical victimisation took place at high rates among sexually dissident learners in secondary schools (GLSEN, 2014; Walls, Freedenthal & Wineski, 2008) and is similarly fairly commonplace in universities in the United States (D'Augelli, 1989). Other students, however, experienced a gradual decline in academic performance and career aspirations because of either homophobia from other social actors or their own assumed homophobia (Blackburn & McCready, 2009:225; Butler et al., 2003:12; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card & Russell, 2010). In terms of the latter, a lesbian student, in the study conducted in several cities and states in America (including San Francisco, California, New York, among others), recalled her experience of depression and ultimately withdrawing from interacting with friends and fellow students, resulting in the decline in her excellent credentials (Blackburn & McCready, 2009:225). For instance, other studies likewise have shown that lesbian, gay and bisexual students reported a decline in marks due to the uncertainty they have about their sexual orientation along with the other challenges they face (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011:1275; Rankin, 2005; Rankin et al., 2010).

Rankin (2005:18) and Rankin et al. (2010) undertook research on fourteen campuses across America. Their findings reported that 36 per cent of the undergraduate students had experienced harassment, whether through offensive statements (89 per cent), threats (48 per cent), written comments (33 per cent), physical assaults (eleven students) as well as demands to hide their non-heterosexual gender and sexual identities, of which 51 per cent did so (Rankin, 2005:18). Seventy-nine per cent of the participants identified their fellow students as sources of homophobia whereas 20 per cent expressed fear and concern for their physical safety on their campuses (Rankin, 2005:19). Also evident from the findings

was the fact that 73 per cent of faculty members, 74 per cent of students, 81 per cent of administrators and 73 per cent of other staff members, regarded their campus climate as homophobic (Rankin, 2005:19). According to Cramer (2002:4), homophobia and heterosexism, as noted before, can potentially create an unsafe environment. Anti-gay harassment and violence are quite common on American college campuses.

According to Evans (2002:85) explicit marginalisation is also apparent in the absence of study material on homosexual themes in courses that warrant its inclusion. In such classrooms and lecture halls, non-heterosexual students may feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. According to the noted South African study conducted by Sithole (2015), 67 per cent of students reported feelings of being deliberately isolated and marginalised by lecturers. This marginalisation took a form of exclusion from class discussions, which meant that their ideas in the classes are most likely to be rejected or ignored (Sithole, 2015:197). As a consequence of the marginalisation, students tend to lose interest in and cancel that particular module in order to escape the unfriendly environment.

According the most recent report of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (2014:24), LGBTIQ+ students may be subjected to homophobia for reasons that may not necessarily be associated with their sexual orientation or gender identity. These experiences include relational aggression, through which students are purposely excluded by their peers based on malicious rumours or lies. In the 2013 National School Climate Survey in America, the majority of these students (87.7 per cent) who participated in the survey reported that they had felt purposely excluded by their fellow students, and nearly half (48.2 per cent) experienced this on a regular basis. The majority of these students (79.3 per cent) were the victims of malevolent rumours told about them at school, and about a third of them (34.9 per cent) experienced this on a regular basis. The inability to resolve the issue of isolation of sexual minorities may lead to challenges of alienation and demoralisation even in their later adult lives (D'Augelli et al., 2010:179; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Subhrajit, 2014:320).

**(b) *Implicit marginalisation***

On the other hand, **implicit marginalisation** entails indirect and covert messages that non-heterosexual students' sexual orientation is, as noted before, abnormal and not worthy of consideration. Heterosexist language pervades discussion, and students tend to be discouraged from critically engaging topics that relate to their sexual orientation. Although students may express less fear than in the case of explicit marginalisation, they may feel disrespected and isolated if they were to raise issues concerning sexual orientation (Evans, 2002:86; Sithole, 2015:197). What is more, D'Augelli (1989; 2010) maintains that the

emotional stress created by the actual and anticipated homophobia may inhibit personal development on the part of the sexual minority individual (Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006). Based on a critical reading of D'Augelli's work, Friedman and Downey (1995) propose that this occurs because homosexual students tend to internalise the societal message that homosexuals are immoral and since they often do not know to whom they might turn for support and continue to internalise the stigma associated with being homosexual, thoughts echoed in the contributions of Miceli (2005). As a result, sexual minorities experience lower self-esteem, humiliation and guilt about upholding a false image to heterosexuals. According to Meyer (1995), the psychosocial stress experienced by homosexual individuals, refers to "minority stress". Meyer (1995) argues that homosexual people may be exposed to chronic stress which relates to the stigmatisation they experience. For homosexuals, this happens because the fear of experiencing discrimination or rejection, may result in heightened levels of self-reflexivity through constantly monitoring their behaviour in particular contexts in order to avoid the discovery of their homosexuality by others (Jackson & Scott, 2010:54). It is also worth noting that the oppression of members of marginalised groups encompasses more consequences than just negative individual experiences. It also serves to control their access to public spaces (Burrington, 1998:108; Rodo-de-Zarate, 2015:420) and equal human rights.

Consequently they disengage from their classes or may opt to display, what Rivers (2000) calls, a "premature exit" and are likely to perform poorly in their academic work. The term "premature exit" refers to leaving a place before the set time. In this case, gay and lesbian students, owing to the challenges such as homophobia, isolation and being disengaged from classes, tend to drop out of universities or education institutions before the set time they intended to finish their studies. Kosciw (2004:23), in focusing on university contexts, found that such students were twice as likely not to attend university, because "...[h]igher frequencies of verbal harassment because of their sexual orientation, damage to or their property being stolen and sexual harassment were concomitant with youth's plans not to continue their education after secondary school" (also see Walls & Kane., 2010:309).

Victimisation has both immediate effects along with undesirable long-term educational and mental health consequences. As with several types of victimisation, homophobic crimes are largely underreported (California Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2010:6). This is often because victims fear further revenge, stigmatisation and of having their sexual orientation being publicly disclosed to others – thus experiencing so-called "secondary victimisation" (Collision, 2016). Moreover, Taulke-Johnson and Rivers (1999) argue that lesbian and gay students may also believe that if they decide to report cases of victimisation or harassment, little or no action will be taken by the relevant authorities for the reason that those who are

considered to be the relevant authorities may regard heterosexuality as the normal sexuality and any other sexuality that differs as abnormal, and thus hold negative perception towards the “other”.

In research undertaken by Griffin et al. (2007), they sought to explore how students and lecturers can address homophobia and heterosexism in educational contexts. In many instances lecturers were hesitant to confront homophobia and heterosexism, choosing to be cautious rather than risk controversy and conflict. Most common costs associated with challenging homophobia and heterosexism included either students being reluctant when they have to mention phrases that relate to sexual minority, lesbian for example, because it might be held against them and with lecturers being afraid of losing their jobs (D’Emilio, 1992; Francis & Msibi, 2011; Grace & Benson, 2000).

### **3.3 SOUTH AFRICAN STUDIES ON THE EXPERIENCE OF HOMOSEXUAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

South African studies are quite limited on the experiences of gay and lesbian students on university campuses, particularly in relation to how these experiences may be similar to or differ from heterosexual students in academic contexts. Those studies which have been done include, among others, a focus on the sexual identity of homosexual students and transformation at a South African university (Hames, 2007); research which advocated for teaching about gender and sexual diversity as well as heterosexism at a postgraduate level at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Francis & Msibi, 2011); studies on attitudes and perceptions of particularly pre-service teachers towards homosexuality (De Wet et al., 2016; Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015); the negotiation of self-identified gay male academics and students on whether to foreclose or disclose their sexual orientation on their respective university campuses (Rothmann, 2014; 2016); and homophobia experienced by homosexual residency students (Jagasser & Msibi, 2015). The majority of studies in education contexts have mainly centred on primary and secondary schools. Here foci included empirical research on the experiences of gay and lesbian youth in post-apartheid South African secondary schools (Bhana, 2014; Butler et al., 2003; Francis, 2017a; 2017b; Msibi, 2012; Richardson, 2004; 2008).

In South Africa and other African countries, discrimination against homosexuals has escalated from mere ideological condemnation of homosexuality to the enactment of physical violence. In some instances, homosexuals have been publicly humiliated, assaulted, raped, imprisoned or killed (Msibi, 2009:50). The Equity Clause 9(3) in the *South African Constitution* (Government Gazette of South Africa, 1996), noted in chapter 2, prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. With the introduction of democracy

there was the pledge that people who identify as non-heterosexual would benefit from the Constitutional provisions, including the freedom of sexual affiliation, movement and access to information (DePalma & Francis, 2014). Regardless of this, many South African institutions, including those of education (schools and universities), continue to display forms of heterosexism (Francis, 2017b; Richardson, 2008; Wells & Polders, 2006). This thought was exemplified in chapter 1's reference to Ndashe's (2010:6) work, which alluded to the fact that while Africa is working towards establishing equal rights for people regardless of their sexual orientation, on-going violence directed towards South African gay men and lesbian women, intensifies the division between constitutional provisions and the actual experiences of sexual dissidents in civil society. The impression may be created that decriminalisation seems to have no priority in South Africa because violence against the sexually dissident still exists in the form of corrective rape, harassment and murder (Ndashe, 2010:6).

Research indicates that there is also traditional religious undercurrents which inform the oppositional and homophobic stances against homosexuality. Thus, although homosexual people in South Africa are protected by the law, traditional beliefs by many divisions of the population continue to exacerbate homophobia and acts of retaliation against them. Butler et al. (2003:10) note that the atmosphere in secondary schools is rife with homophobic behaviour, whether verbal or physical, from both students and teachers. Reasons for this are associated with conventional religious beliefs and principles which characterised homosexuality as taboo, prohibited and "un-African", and made it easier for gay and lesbian students to not reveal their sexual orientation and consequently fit in the best they could (quoted in Butler et al., 2003:12). Findings from studies conducted by Reid and Dirsuweit (2001), Theron (1994) and Theunick (2000) point out that gay bashing and the prominence of rape is not uncommon. Recent research (Francis & Msibi, 2011; Jagessar & Msibi, 2015; Richardson, 2008; Rothmann, 2016) has commented on positive and negative views about gay men and lesbian women on university campuses. Given the focus on the North-West University Potchefstroom campus, according to the NWU's Annual Performance and Strategic Plan (NWU, 2017:2), the university will continually strive to achieve greater social cohesion, inclusiveness and diversity among students and, inspired by the Constitution values, the institution is committed to embracing diversity. With regard to the North-West University's Human Rights Policy (NWU, 2016:2), the policy states that the university will represent the university community and will be cognisant of concerns associated with race, gender and disability and will enact their responsibilities "...with good faith and without fear, favour, bias or prejudice". Although some faculties have curricula which comprise modules dealing with gender and sexual diversity issues, the policy's exclusion of explicit reference to

sexual orientation is significant. According to Grace (2015:202) "...education is a political process that is essential to cultural action for social transformation"; students therefore need to have the desire for transformation of disenfranchising heteronormative cultural practices and social relations. In order for this goal to be achieved, students must start learning and teaching others how to interrogate language and omissions (such as in the NWU Policy) in the university policies and practice to cater for different sexualities and minorities in general (Grace, 2015:202). Furthermore, according to the Department of Education (2008:46), little has been done or is being done to address issues related to heterosexism and homophobia in academic institutions (Francis, 2017b). The Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions, according to the Department of Education (2008), states that "[in] the area of sexism and homophobia there are no higher academic institutions among those inspected that can assert to have completely resolved these concerns" (Department of Education, 2008:46). The report further notes that patriarchy reinforces overt and covert ways in which homophobia and heterosexism are enacted by students and staff in higher education. These behaviours include enforced heterosexuality which may be communicated through institutional traditions and "cultures," and often through various implicit and explicit means. This thought is supported by the work of Alvarez and Schneider (2008:73) in which they allude to the fact that universities tend to proudly proclaim their promises to a diverse community of students, yet contradictorily tend to offer very limited prospects for meaningful inclusion. Most of these initiatives are based on an assertion that every marginalised group can generate an inclusive space in university settings. If one of the main academic responsibilities is understood as the creation of a diverse cultural and sexual identity, then the presence of particular groups challenges those spaces (Alvarez & Schneider, 2008:73). According to Balfour (2016:155), the focus on race and gender in South African society in general, rather than sexual orientation, has dominated the discussions on transformation, equity and social and economic change. Thus there is an evident absence of role models for communities in relation to homosexual persons. Alvarez and Schneider (2008:73) contend that "...another threat in the current economic climate – especially for publicly supported institutions – is a conservative backlash that has placed increasing pressure from reactionary homophobic and heterosexist groups on fundamental academic rights and beliefs. When institutions find themselves unable to maintain working balances between conflicting forces, it becomes apparent that certain disenfranchised people have little or no space for inclusion". They argue that for instance, in order to address the LGBTIQ+ community's demands for access to academic inclusion and privilege, diversity initiatives are usually introduced with the "...promise that with increased presence comes increased access", inclusion and acceptance (Alvarez & Schneider, 2008:73).

### 3.3.1 Negative experiences of gay and lesbian students in higher education

In South Africa, an example of negative experiences includes the suspension of more than 300 girls at Mthwalume High School in KwaZulu-Natal, based on suspicion of being lesbian (Shangase, 2010). One student from Rhodes University also recalled that "...our thugs have beaten up gay men, beaten up and raped female students, raped lesbian women to 'cure' them, ridiculed and denigrated all homosexual people" (Department of Education, 2008:86). Butler et al. (2003:11), in examining the coming out experiences of eighteen South African gay and lesbian youth, reported that all the participants experienced some form of homophobia in their school contexts. Furr et al. (2001) also comment on how homosexual college students are more likely than heterosexual college students to feel lonely and depressed. Their work supports earlier research by D'Augelli (1989:320) who regarded the feeling of fear, anger, frustration and sadness, in particular, as the central factors which characterise the experiences of sexual minorities. This may be because coming out of the closet, being discovered by someone else or assumptions of one's sexual orientation could lead to physical and verbal harassment. Most people tend to be shocked and infuriated once they learn about the reality of homophobic hate crimes. Nevertheless, there is far less comprehension of the injury and threat of the more subtle form of homophobia that is prevalent across the nation. Most students, faculty and staff do not have an understanding how these seemingly inoffensive comments are in fact powerfully oppressive tools which may create and strengthen fear and hatred toward gay and lesbian students and tend to remind everyone of the undesirable consequences for those who cross over socially approved gender behaviour. According to the study by Msibi (2012) in KwaZulu-Natal among homosexual students, some male students reported that words like 'isitabane', 'moffie' and 'ongqingili', which refer to derogatory and homophobic isiZulu and Afrikaans words similar to the use of the concept 'faggot', were used to refer to them. Other students noted that their peers regarded them as displaying what Connell (1987) would refer to as "emphasised femininity", since they seemingly displayed behaviours traditionally associated with girls. In such cases, they were called 'osis-bhuti', which is an isiZulu word meaning 'sister-brothers', thus exemplifying a combination of male and female attributes. Some of the female learners also recalled that teachers regularly told them to refrain from acting like "tomboys" (Msibi, 2012).

Important in this regard is that Msibi (2012:523) comments on the way in which references to being a 'tomboy', should not only be regarded as indicator of appropriate gender behaviour on the part of these female learners. It is, rather, also indicative of the way in which the teachers (and arguably society in general), are prone to conflate gender with sexual

orientation (e.g. homosexuality). Students clearly learn the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour on campus when they hear the faculty and administrators confront racist jokes and sexist comments but not homophobic insults. Thus language then becomes a powerful tool in which homophobia and heterosexism are embedded (Msibi, 2012:523). Furthermore in Msibi's (2012) findings, often it is not that lecturers or educators are deliberately being homophobic, but it is the lack of information or that they are misinformed about what homosexuality entails or is.

Drawing on data from a joint research project entitled "Human rights literacy: A quest for meaning" (Roux & Du Preez, 2013), De Wet et al. (2016) and Rothmann and Simmonds (2016) explored the perceptions of fourth year pre-service teachers on homosexuality at South African universities. The latter study employed a queer theoretical analysis of focus groups with these pre-service teachers and concluded that their narratives displayed a heteronormative bias which may aggravate discrimination and objectification towards homosexual individuals as the so-called "other" (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015:8-9). The study found that the participants objectified and 'othered' homosexual individuals by referring to them as "it", "them", "they" and "this thing". In so doing, the researchers argued that these students "...portray non-normative sexualities and genders as objects. As objects, 'the homosexual' comes to be regarded as 'the other', and this reinforces a binary logic that stigmatises individuals that do not conform to heterosexual norms" (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015:4). Furthermore, their participants reflected an inclination to merely "accommodate" or integrate homosexual individuals and themes based on the necessity to uphold constitutional provisions. Consider the following quotes of the participants in this regard, "Being anti-gay that doesn't mean I will fight *you*. I just don't like what you do but after all you are human" and "You might not like *them* but remember they are still human like you". In so doing, the researchers argue that "...through the binary logic of 'othering' by referring to 'you', 'they' and 'them' as human implies the dehumanised objectification of the other...it is evident that 'othering' of 'the homosexual'...reinforces the binary logic" (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015:5). This assimilationist tendency was also evident in Francis's (2017b:72) research on the teaching and learning of sexual diversity in South African schools. He argued that certain teachers argued in favour of including themes on gender and sexual diversity in the curriculum based on a human rights perspective. One teacher, for example, noted that, "We don't see differences...as they [their students] are all treated equally, all gender, all sexual beings. They are equal like colours in our rainbow, rainbow country. They are all treated fairly; all treated equally". Although progressive, Francis argued that this may in fact subsume the diverse experiences of LGB learners insofar as they are rendered as similar or the 'same' as their heterosexual counterparts before the law which, in addition, obscures

differences and may "...distort the power differentials and privilege regarding sexual orientation...Such a view deepens the binary between heterosexuals and sexual minorities and upholds the dividends of heterosexuality" (Francis, 2017b:78).

Furthermore, De Wet et al. (2016) explored human rights and the "[im]possibilities" of human rights to combat discrimination in the form of heterosexism and homophobia. The researchers argued that 'othering' or the creation of binary categories highlight the incongruence between what the law offers and the actual experiences of sexual minorities. The study found that, what the researchers termed as "the invisible closet" and "the visible closet", have implications for the coming out of sexual minorities. The invisible closet tends to further marginalise and isolate them because of the fear to disclose their sexuality. This fear to disclose is argued to be a result of the conflict between protection by the law and the actual experiences of gays and lesbians in society. Although sexual minorities know that they can get out of the closet to liberate themselves, they chose not to because of their inability to live up to the standard of prescription offered by heterosexuals. This was also evident in the study conducted by Rothmann (2014) which focused on the identity construction of gay male academics and students in South African higher education. The study found that sexual minorities chose to remain closeted because of the fear of intolerance of students by lecturers and fear of alienation or isolation (Rothmann, 2014:366). Also regarding the visible closet, De Wet et al.'s (2016) findings indicate that regardless of persons' disclosure, they may be subjected to some forms of homophobia; the human rights have therefore been argued to be a "double-edged sword" in that they tend to create binaries and reinforce the 'othering' of sexual minorities and further perpetuate the complexities facing sexual minorities who contemplate disclosing their sexuality (De Wet et al., 2016:106).

Moreover, Msibi's (2016) research that was aimed at exploring the concept of "bitter knowledge", based on his experiences of teaching queer material to pre-service teachers in South Africa, indicated that given all the experiences of homophobia and racial discrimination, there was a quest in trying to understand the reason behind the students' continuous harbouring of negative ideas. The study found that students tend to carry what is called "bitter knowledge" that they were socialised into through religious institutions, social spaces and academic institutions (Msibi, 2016:25). Bitter knowledge is argued to be knowledge that is troubling and often predicated on stereotypical thinking. Msibi (2016:28) argues that students possess knowledge which is not compatible with new information. This means that students possess bitter knowledge, and if this knowledge is left unchallenged it may lead to violence, bigotry and discrimination to homosexual students. Therefore, if students are given an opportunity to challenge their current knowledge, they would then be

exposed to different types of texts that differ from the knowledge embedded in them by their religious and family institutions (Msibi, 2016:28).

### **3.3.2 Positive experiences of gay and lesbian students in higher education**

While there is a variety of studies and literature on the possible challenges faced by lesbian and gay students, there seems to be less literature on positive experiences (Rhoads, 1995). Rhoads (1995) notes that the positive experiences of homosexual students may be attributed to their 'coming-out' decision, a thought which may contradict what D'Augelli (1989:320) alluded to before, because of fear of physical abuse. Evans and Broido (1999) identify factors which may encourage lesbian and gay students to come out of the closet. These include having supportive people around you, perceiving the overall educational climate as supportive and having lesbian and gay role models in their immediate environment. Evans (2002:86) furthermore argues that, in contrast to explicit or implicit marginalisation, students may experience **explicit** or **implicit centralisation**, whereby an implicitly centralised lecture hall provides a friendlier environment for homosexual students. Here, lecturers challenge and critically engage homophobic or heterosexist comments and behaviours expressed by other students. Evans (2002:86) argues that lecturers may also identify heteronormative assumptions in the course reading material and support homosexual students' statements that relate to sexual orientation matters. Moreover, implicit centralisation may be characterised by lecture halls where gay and lesbian students are often appreciative when they experience support for their positions. They are more likely to feel part of their fellow students in class and they may develop the desire to participate more actively, which may further encourage their potential for learning, as opposed to those educational contexts that are less supportive of their sexual orientation (Evans, 2002).

Lesbian and gay students may consequently experience progressive personal changes, such as enhanced self-confidence (McCormack, 2012:10; Rivers, 2011). In addition, they could also gain a sense of identity and personal pride. These positive advances, according to Weeks (2007:7), may be attributed to the increase in gay visibility through the democratisation of gender and sexual identity expression in contemporary society though, among others, the Internet and the advances made by gay and lesbian liberationist movements. With regard to explicit centralisation, the lecturers actively support gay and lesbian students by purposely including material that focuses on homosexual themes. The language and examples that are used in lectures are inclusive (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015). The lecturer also creates and models a climate in which students' views are heard and valued, an approach in keeping with similar progressive attempts abroad (Grace, 2006; 2015). Since such classes are not evident everywhere, gay and lesbian students may tend

to search for opportunities to learn more about homosexual themes. Such classes provide “safe spaces” for students where they can openly address issues, explore themes of interest to them, and be themselves without the fear of retribution (Evans, 2002:86). In order to create such classroom contexts, lecturers and other interested parties, need to be sensitised and empowered in order to recognise, respect and accommodate sexuality differences. According to Grace (2006:827), there always exists an intersection between lecturers’ personal histories (autobiographies) and their professional practices. This, according to Grace (2006:827), establishes an undeniable link between the lecturer’s personal dispositions, in terms of his or her values, beliefs and relationships and his or her role as teaching professional. Lecturers may also use autobiographies in class as spaces for disclosing issues that have been disregarded, ignored or denied in the larger cultural scenario of his or her education institution (Grace, 2006:831). As a possible means of limiting the effect of, for instance, prejudiced objectification by homophobic lecturers, who may be obligated to teach a class on gender and sexual identity, it is worth considering how the first-hand accounts of homosexual lecturers or guest lecturers would enable a more positive learning environment (Grace & Benson, 2000:91). Disclosure of one’s homosexuality in this context could, nevertheless, have potential threats. Rothmann (2014) and Warren (2008) argue that anxiety over potential institutional homophobia or fears of stigmatisation, social exclusion, ridicule or physical and verbal threats, tend to make such disclosure all the more challenging. Regardless of such risks, benefits can be noted when self-identified homosexual lecturers decide to take part in a critical exploration of their own autobiographies. Some studies have noted that having a homosexual lecturer present these themes may be considered as best practice since they may be able to provide a more nuanced and balanced descriptive account of the experiences of sexual minorities (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015:8).

Based on the findings of the most recent UNESCO Report on Homophobic Bullying in Education Institutions (2016), it was clear that homophobia is a global problem in academia and that LGBTIQ+ students who are perceived not to conform to dominant sexual and gender norms, are more vulnerable. Given this context in South Africa and abroad, homosexual students require assistance to manage the noted adversity in the face of rejection and campus harassments.

One such effort which has been considered feasible in addressing these issues is the development of so-called **safe spaces** for LGBTIQ+ identified students (Biegel, 2010; Evans, 2002).

### 3.4 SAFE SPACES: A CONCEPTUALISATION

This section's focal point is the discussion of the creation of the so-called "safe spaces" on university campuses as a means to protect those who do not necessarily conform to heteronormativity.

Concepts that are relevant to this discussion include **safe spaces** and **allies**. The first part of this subsection provides a definition and discussion of the key concepts, after which practical examples of such programmes serve to elucidate the conceptualisations. Some themes that may be considered in the creation of a safer environment may include inclusive programmes, support groups (such as Gay-Straight Alliances), teacher training programmes and community or student diversity training policies (which include anti-discrimination policies for both students and a faculty) and anti-harassment policies that are both clear and enforceable. In addition, themes may also encompass a supportive environment which is created by enforcement of safe campus policies, university/campus board support through an inclusive curriculum, supportive staff who make themselves available for consultation by sexual minority students, inclusive class discussions about LGBTIQ+ issues and peer acceptance (whether the latter identifies as heterosexual or homosexual).

#### 3.4.1 Defining a 'safe space'

Consider the following quote:

*It takes a brave person to 'create, rather than wait for, opportunities' to challenge heterosexism and homophobia in education (Colleary, 1999:155).*

In keeping with this quote, research indicates that some college and university campuses around the world have been unreceptive and opposed, toward their LGBTIQ+ members, as is evident from the preceding discussion. This emphasises the need to develop new initiatives of support for gay and lesbians students on university campuses (Payne & Smith, 2011; Rothmann, 2014; Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015). Moreover, safe spaces and ally programmes, as will become clear in the discussion to follow, may also be apparent in the form of individuals (e.g. faculty staff, students, parents and siblings, counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists) (Evans, 2000:81; Nel et al., 2007:289). Safe spaces, according to Fox (2007:498), are designed as a unified attempt to create alliances among people who wish to defend the rights of the sexual minorities and to limit or challenge stereotypical views held by a heterosexually dominant community (D'Emilio, 1992:131). This statement is echoed in the recent contributions of Macgillivray (2004) and Payne and Smith (2011:391). The latter researchers cite the work of Kose (2009) and Szalacha (2003) which

indicate that the necessary training of personnel working in education contexts such as schools, may lead to an increased sensitisation towards issues related to the experiences of LGBTIQ+ persons and even more positive attitudes towards homosexuality in general.

Macgillivray's (2004) American study suggests that increased sensitisation and consciousness among students and staff of a school, based on the testimonials by homosexual learners on their everyday lived experiences, informed the school's management to amend their policies in such a way as to protect homosexual learners from discrimination. As such, these initiatives may encourage staff members and students of universities as well as their families and friends who want to participate in thorough training sessions to become a so-called "safe space" and/or "allies" for potentially victimised minority students (Alvarez & Schneider, 2008:71; Athanases & Larrabee, 2003:240; Evans, 2002:522; Grace & Wells, 2004:292; San Diego State University, 2009:2). An ally may be defined as "...a person who is a member of the dominant or majority group who works to eradicate oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an activist for the oppressed minorities" (Washington & Evans, 1991:195). With regard to allies, heterosexual students are often asked to be activists for lesbian and gay students on campuses and they may be instrumental in encouraging positive change in a heteronormative campus culture (Washington & Evans, 1991:195). In doing this, the allies need to be aware of and sensitive to the presence of these sexual minorities on campus; that they may in fact face opposition and adversity based on their supposed incongruent sexual orientation within the territory of heterosexuality; and familiarise themselves with the necessary resources, including the noted comprehensive terminological guide and symbols used within this community (University of the Witwatersrand Ally Training Manual, 2011:5).

A safe space is a place where support and understanding of the challenges of sexual minorities are important. This is where bigotry and discrimination against such individuals are not tolerated. It is where people "can really be themselves" (Hind, 2004:27) away from the pressures that may typically constrain them in the other arenas of their lives. For example, a safe space may take the form of a room, a person or a programme. These spaces serve as safe networking contexts or environments in which gender variant individuals and supposed sexual minorities are provided with an opportunity to interact or relate with others similar to them and also communicate with trained professionals about issues which concern their sexual orientation (Evans, 2002:522). A safe space may also serve as a safe environment for homosexual individuals, where they can meet and interact with other sexual minorities and talk to trained professionals, such as counsellors and psychiatrists, about their issues (Evans, 2002:522).

Evans (2000:81) argues that a student's learning capability may be dependent on his or her levels of self-confidence, the perceived importance of learning and the social context, whether or not the learning environment is encouraging and supportive. Learning may be enhanced when students feel supported, validated and engage in uplifting interactions with peers and other faculty members. Boostrom (1998:407) claims that students are able to learn and flourish in the classroom environment because they feel empowered to take risks by expressing their unique insights and disagreeing with others' points of view. Consider Poynter and Tubbs' (2008:128) argument on the importance of creating a visible space which validates the existence and safety of these students. They note that,

*...[p]rejudice and discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity often...goes unchallenged and because a person may not be recognizable as LGBT, she or he may hear heterosexist or homophobic comments from people who are not aware of whom they offend. Furthermore, potential LGBT mentors may be hidden within a hostile climate.*

Understanding the unique factors which inform the development of a gay or lesbian identity, may sensitise university management to the challenges faced by homosexual students in order for them to create positive and inclusive learning environments (Evans, 2000:81) in order to resist the negative effects of heterosexist and homophobic environments (Cohen, 2005). It is worth quoting Ratts et al.'s (2013:388) view in this regard. Advocating for the implementation of safe spaces in American schools, they note the following:

*...Creating a discernible existence of visible LGBTQ competent allies helps transform a school's culture. Transforming a school's culture and climate may significantly improve school learning environments for all students. If appropriately implemented, [Safe Space Programs] may also empower school administration to be competent LGBTQ allies. Owing to their power and influence, appropriately trained...personnel are positioned to improve their school's climate in meaningful ways; they wield power to determine a school's policy, decide the extent to which LGBTQ programming is implemented, and influence curricula and extracurricular activities.*

Rankin (2003) suggests that these interventions may fall into three categories: institutional support and commitment to an LGBTQ+ friendly campus, recruiting and retaining self-identified homosexual students and providing social opportunities, support and safety to sexual minorities on campuses. An attempt to improve the experience of homosexual youth

and young adults in schools and universities may thus be facilitated through the establishment of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs hereafter).

These are "...student-led clubs open to individuals of diverse sexual orientations with the purpose of supporting sexual minority students and their heterosexual and homosexual allies and also eradicating prejudice, discrimination and harassment within the campus" (Goodenow, Szalacha & Westheimer, 2006:575). Some of the benefits of GSAs include its support and empowerment of students on an individual and collective level in order to encourage a sense of belonging and assertiveness (Garcia-Alonso, 2004). Such support may manifest in various forms: providing information on themes such as coming out or affiliations, meeting with supportive faculty and staff members and teaching the students particular coping strategies when confronted with homophobia or other challenges associated with their sexual identity. Lee (2002), for instance, notes that GSAs play an essential role by providing a safe space for the development of positive relationships between sexual minorities and allies.

Often these willing allies have few skills or resources available to them and no personal experiences to monitor their development as LGBTIQ+ advocates. The failure to provide training and to prepare allies to challenge homophobia and heterosexism in group settings, may have a negative impact on the progress of the safe space and ally programmes. For instance, a lack of training for allies may result in the programmes being unstable and dysfunctional (Draughn, Elkins & Roy, 2002:17). The potential exists, however, to offer such training. For some, the idea of discussing LGBTIQ+ matters or challenging heterosexism in a group setting, may be frightening. Fear of conflict, speaking up (and 'out') in groups, aversion for calling attention to themselves (and their own sexual orientation) and fear of not having accurate information, are some of the reasons why allies often remain silent in situations where homophobia is elicited (Draughn et al., 2002:17). One should attempt to encouraging members, regardless of their sexual orientation, to determine their personal comfort with group interactions as a first step in preparing them to make a constructive contribution within a bigger group (Draughn et al., 2002:17). Thus, with sufficient resources and training, heterosexual staff, faculty members and students may be able to initiate positive change on university campuses which may result in a safer campus climate.

The noted training may assist prospective allies to engage constructively with LGBTIQ+ students and reduce the anticipated anxiety about future interactions with such students (Mohr & Sedlacek, 2000), because there may be fear of inadvertently demonstrating homophobic or prejudiced behaviour towards these students if one appears to be uninformed of their particular challenges (Mohr & Sedlacek, 2000). Providing educational

interventions, such as required training, validates encouraging conversation techniques, and provides skills to help ease discomfort and fear before members could become advocates or allies for lesbian and gay students. Providing required training may ensure knowing that the participants have been equipped with the necessary skills to constructively engage with homophobia and implicit and/or explicit marginalisation.

Education policy makers and programme organisers moreover need to recognise the potential of developing heterosexual allies in making the university environment more accommodating towards lesbian and gay students (Bullard, 2004). Of great importance during these training sessions is the emphasis placed on concrete strategies and guiding principles in assisting these students in “coming out”, problems which different racial minorities may further face their sexual orientation along with possible questions-and-answer sets, which in fact prepares an ally for the questions a gay male student may perhaps ask (Francis, 2017b; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001; San Diego State University, 2009). Such in-depth training is essential, since many of these potential allies may be ignorant of issues concerning sexual minorities (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003:240). Students are nevertheless likely to believe that their friends have negative perceptions about homosexual students on their campuses, which may result in change of behaviour to follow this misperception (Worthington, Savoy, Dillon & Vernaglia, 2002). Heterosexual males, in particular, often feel the necessity to fit in and be accepted by others who hold negative perceptions about lesbian and gay students, thus imitating their friends (Franklin, 1998). The public identification of heterosexual allies through a safe space and ally programme may assist in the reduction of previously held misperceptions, encourage the support of group identification and encourage others to participate, therefore creating a more accommodating campus (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008:122).

While many universities in America have progressed in the development of policies for addressing such discrimination, the implementation and enforcement of these policies in South African education contexts, still require attention (Rothmann, 2014:368). In order for this to occur, the university managements needs to consider the importance of issues faced by homosexual students and staff (Rankin, 2003). Universities should strongly act against anti-gay victimisation and should train staff (including security personnel) to recognise anti-gay bias and to act against it. Any instances of anti-gay harassment or victimisation should be reprimanded, and this response should be publicised throughout the campus community. Institutions should also include sexual orientation in their anti-discrimination policies and should actively seek openly gay or lesbian faculty members, staff and students (UNESCO, 2012:34).

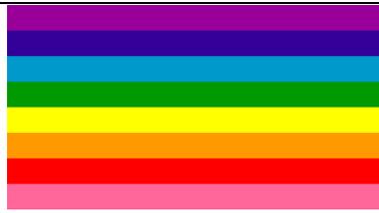
As was evident from the preceding sections on the implications of implicit and/or explicit homophobia and marginalisation, lesbian and gay victims of hate crimes often require psychological counselling, advocacy programmes for assistance in dealing with the criminal justice and healthcare systems, and legal support for securing reimbursement for property damage and personal injury. Thus, training for mental health professionals and social service providers should consist of explicit attention to the necessities of homosexual victims of bias crimes (Harper, Omar Bashir Jamil & Wilson, 2007:104). Furthermore, these medical professionals should be required to explore the current challenges faced by the gay and lesbian students on their respective campuses in order to address the ways in which they could assist in redressing the potential social and structural limitations of the larger culture which is imposed on sexual minorities on campuses (Harper et al., 2007:104). Rhoads (1995) further suggests that academic institutions have an important duty to facilitate the creation of a campus context homophobia is not tolerated. Universities should thus be legitimately obliged to make sure that these students are afforded equality in the same way that other marginalised students (e.g. based on their race or ethnicity) are (Balfour, 2016; Msibi, 2013). For all these reasons, it is important to ensure that the university environment is a 'safer' environment for gay and lesbian students (National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education, 2004).

An initiative which may create such a safe environment includes placing a "safe" sign or symbol on one's door or in a particular building or office to communicate support for homosexual students on campus. Examples of such signs or symbols incorporate a pink triangle or rainbow flags or the word "ally" or a grouping of all three on office doors or within living spaces. According to the Wits Ally Training Manual (2011:15), which is based on the manual of the San Diego State University (2009:15), the pink triangle was invented in the 1970s and was adopted by lesbian and gay culture in commemoration of those homosexual individuals who were forced to wear pink triangles in Nazi concentration camps. Lesbians often wore the red and black triangles. An example appears below in Figure 1.



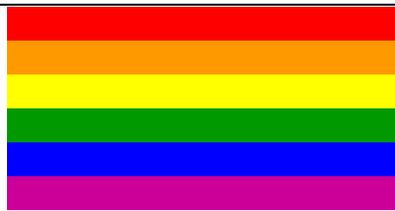
Another symbol may be the use of the rainbow flag which was designed in 1978 by an artist named Gilbert Baker. The flag signifies the diversity and unity of the homosexual movement.

Originally, there were eight colours in the flag: pink for sexuality, red for light, orange for healing, yellow for the sun, green for natural serenity, turquoise for art, indigo for harmony, and violet for spirit. This is depicted in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: The Rainbow Flag (1) (Rapp, 2015:1)**

However, in 1979 the flag was modified to its current six-stripe format. The pink colour was excluded and blue was replaced with turquoise and indigo, and violet became a rich purple (Rapp, 2015:1).



**Figure 3: The Rainbow Flag (2) (Rapp, 2015:1)**

The next subsection is the discussion of the practical examples of safe spaces that have been developed abroad and in South Africa.

### **3.4.2 Practical examples of ‘safe spaces’**

According to Evans (2000), Iowa State University established the first safe space programme to increase visible support for homosexual individuals on campus. A number of institutions or universities, both abroad and in South Africa, have developed such safe space and ally programmes (Evans, 2002; Poynter & Wang, 2003; Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenberg, 2002). In the United States these programmes take on a number of forms [for example, Internet projects such as the “It Gets Better” campaign, the Parent-Teacher group in America and Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)]. In South Africa, for example, there are OUT Well-being and LGBTIQ+ university student organisations across the country. The main or common objectives of these initiatives include improving the campus climate and environment, increasing awareness of homophobia and/or sexual-orientation-based crime, encouraging conversations around LGBTIQ+ matters, providing safe environments for homosexual students, educating and providing skills to members to

challenge homophobia and heterosexism (Kaleidoscope, 2012). Following this discussion are detailed examples of safe space and ally programmes.

The *“It Gets Better”* Project: In September 2010, author Dan Savage created a YouTube video with his partner Terry Miller. This was done in order to encourage hope for young people experiencing homophobia. In response to a number of students taking their own lives after being bullied on campuses, the video was produced to create a personal way for allies and supporters from across the world to inform the lesbian and gay youth that it does indeed get better with time. An example was a message from the former American President Barack Obama who declared,

*...I don't know what it's like to be picked on for being gay, but I do know what it's like to grow up feeling like sometimes you don't belong. It's tough. But what I want to say is this: you are not alone (YouTube, 2010a).*

ItGetsBetter.org is an online project where young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, are able to see how they are able to thrive and experience and experience a fulfilling future. It is a place where heterosexual allies can visit and support their friends and family members. According to Grace (2015:33), the ongoing project is about keeping gay and lesbian youth alive. It is about interrogating and eliminating homo-/bi-/transphobic bullying and preventing it from continuing to be a “...silent and unnoticed killer”. It further helps sexual minorities overcome the pain that is part of living with sexuality differences that are still perceived to be cancerous anomalies of the human condition. It is about youth who are able to imagine and to think about possible and desired futures. It is about breaking the heteronormative rules, heterosexism, sexism, genderism and homo-/bi-/transphobia in all their exclusionary complexities. It is about being there for every gay and lesbian youth when they feel vulnerable and isolated (Grace, 2015:33). It is a space where lesbian and gay people are given the platform to share their stories, take the “It Gets Better” pledge and watch videos of love and support. Examples of excerpts from the “It Gets Better” videos include:

*... Growing up as a gay boy in Venezuela wasn't easy. Even though it wasn't violent, I was always the subject of laughs and I was made fun of for years, just for being obviously different. Today those differences set me apart and make me unique. The secret is to recognise that even when it's tough it always gets better (YouTube, 2011).*

*...it gets better, it seems hard, u know... I think being different is always gonna be a tough climb, there's going to be people that are scared of it. But at the end of the day, if you give those bullies and people that are so*

*ignorant and fearful of your lifestyle, if you give them the power to affect you, you are letting them win and they don't deserve it...* (YouTube, 2011).

The openly lesbian American comedian Ellen DeGeneres (YouTube, 2010b) stated:

*[Homophobia] needs to be a wake-up call to everyone, that teenage bullying and teasing is an epidemic...and the death rate is climbing, one life lost in a senseless way is tragic, four lives lost is a crisis...how many other teens have we lost and how many are suffering in silence, being a teenager and figuring who you are is hard enough without someone attacking you...these kids needed us and we have an obligation to change this...we have to make it stop, we can't let intolerance and ignorance take another kid's life, things will get easier people's minds will change and you should be alive to see it...*

Having discussed how it gets better with regard to the victimisation of sexual minorities, the following subsection discusses another form of a safe space or organisation that aims to unite LGBTQ people with families and friends, the *Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)*. This programme was established in 1972 in America. It is regarded as one of the largest and most influential ally organisations in the world (PFLAG, 2016). With the aim of uniting people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) with families, friends, and allies, members of PFLAG are committed to encouraging initiatives in favour of equality and full societal affirmation of LGBTIQ+ people. Its vision centres on envisioning "...a world where diversity is celebrated and all people are respected, valued, and affirmed inclusive of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression" (PFLAG, 2016). They seek to realise this vision through their threefold mission of support, education and advocacy. Members of PFLAG work realise its vision through the support they provide to families, allies and people who identify as LGBTIQ+, the education of others about the challenges facing sexual minorities and advocating for changed "...attitudes and [creating] policies and laws that achieve full equality for people who are LGBTQ (PFLAG, 2016).

In keeping with the exploration of the need of safe spaces in the North-West University Potchefstroom campus the next section explores safe spaces in South Africa and inclusive spaces in mainly South African universities.

### **3.4.3 Safe space in South Africa**

The safe space model was first adopted by the Transformation and Employment Equity Office, Wits Pride 2011 and the Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU) of the

University of the Witwatersrand (WITS hereafter). The project involves the training of faculty members and students as Safe Zone allies for the support of students and staff members, and the families and friends of those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual, queer or any other sexual orientation and gender identity. The project is aimed at increasing the university's community understanding and being aware of LGBTIQ+ issues, to provide a sense of safety for these students on campus and to offer information to heterosexual and cisgender allies in positions where they may be in contact with homosexual students (roommates, friends, students, staff, faculty members, etc.) (Wits, 2011).

In addition, some South African institutions (WITS for example) have launched LGBTIQ+ inclusive educational initiatives (safezones@Wits) in staff orientation and sensitivity training and have incorporated these issues into syllabi. These include, among others, CTRL ALT GENDER (a Gauteng-based safe space for transgender and gender non-conforming people to find support and a community), healthcare systems that do not discriminate against students based on their sexual orientation and courses which incorporate theory and literature on lesbian and gay studies, such as those in linguistics curricula (National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education, 2004). In 2008 gay students were led out of residences by a group of heterosexual males at the University of Zululand because of heterosexual males' perception of emasculation which enhances their likelihood to assert their masculinities through violence, and thus normalising homophobia (Msibi, 2009:52). In order to address this, Msibi (2009:53) argues that universities should be required to introduce specific modules in order to sensitise students on gender and sexual diversity. Rothmann and Simmonds (2015:7) support this recommendation insofar as they argue that such courses could "...create an opportunity for students to discover the negative consequences of homophobia for homosexual individuals in South Africa and abroad, [which include] a decline in academic achievement, an increase in school dropout rates, substance abuse and suicidal tendencies among homosexual learners".

This highlights the fact that, regardless of potentially inclusive and redemptive spaces, the climate on certain university campuses remain less welcoming which leaves the lesbian and gay students fearing for their safety, keeping their identities undisclosed, experiencing harassment, and feeling that their universities are unaccommodating to homosexual minorities (Beemyn & Ranking, 2016:24). Campuses without such initiatives may exacerbate gay and lesbian students' feelings of anxiety, fear, isolation or lack of support or protection (National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education, 2004). These concerns may be addressed through the creation of LGBTIQ+ programmes in order to redress homophobic harassment and violence and ensuring the creation of a relatively safer

and more supportive place academic community, where homosexual students are able to reach their full potential (National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education, 2004).

Examples of safe spaces and/or ally programmes from the South African context include 'OUT' (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Wellbeing) and the Kaleidoscope Youth Network, among others. Nel et al. (2007:289) traced the beginning of OUT to 2000.

**(a) *OUT***

As a non-profit organisation located in Pretoria, OUT focuses on challenges faced by LGBTQ individuals and provides greatly needed psychological and psychiatric services delivered by qualified individuals and volunteers. The organisation's main vision centres on the empowerment of members of the LGBTQ community in South Africa and internationally through an organised effort to ensure the realisation of their human rights, their mental and physical well-being and the reduction or elimination of heterosexism and homophobia in society (OUT, 2012:2). The main objective of OUT is to provide a non-discriminatory and inclusive context for all individuals. OUT provides general health and mental health services to LGBTIQ+ people through their HIV/AIDS work, services at its TEN81 Centre clinic, through a telephone counselling and information service, a community centre, face-to-face counselling, therapeutic services and support groups. These support groups were created to deal primarily with issues associated with lesbian and gay lives, including coming out, identity and relationships. Initially members met in Pretoria once a week for 90 minutes and people with the desire to join the group were requested to make a commitment to attend for at least six weeks. People mainly join the group based questions concerning their sexual orientation; based on challenges in coming out to friends and family whereas others expressed the need to collaborate with peers on issues relating to homosexual lifestyles (Nel et al., 2007:290).

**(b) *Homosexual student organisations***

The Kaleidoscope Youth Network, during the period of its existence (it no longer exists), served as a convening body for LGBTIQ+ student groups situated at several university campuses across South Africa. The aims of this organisation were to develop and implement strategies that seek to eradicate discrimination and hate crimes in all forms at universities and in the broader community. Similar to OUT, the main focus centred on uniting the students on these campuses to encourage the protection of human rights and promoting awareness and wellness as it relates to homosexuality (Kaleidoscope, 2011). The

Kaleidoscope Youth Network comprised seventeen (17) student solidarity societies within universities in South Africa. These students' societies included, Flamboyant (TUT) at Tshwane University of Technology and the surrounding community. It provides a platform where issues that are often perceived as taboo are discussed and further cross-examined to establish a society that is accepting of diversity. The group originated, though no longer in existence owing to confidential reasons, when a group of students identified the need to create an environment where different individuals from different cultural, religious and social backgrounds would come together to learn about one another's sexual orientation (ILGA, 2011). Other organisations include: *UP and OUT* (University of Pretoria), *ACTIVATE* (Wits), *Liberati APK* (University of Johannesburg), *Liberati DFC* (University of Johannesburg), *OUT n PROUD* (North-West University, Mafikeng campus), *Campus Pride* (North-West University, Potchefstroom campus), *OUT@Kovsies* (Free State University), *MOVE* (University of Kwazulu-Natal), *GLOSCput* (Cape Peninsula University of Technology), *Rainbow Blood* (University of Fort Hare), *Eloquor Knights* (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University), *LOUDEnuf* (University of the Western Cape), *Rainbow UCT* (University of Cape Town) and *OUT Rhodes* (Rhodes University). The latter is an organisation that works towards making Rhodes University an open, safe and socially accepting environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered students by providing support, information and opportunities for homosexual students to interact with others who experience similar circumstances pertaining to their gender and sexual identity. *Rainbow UCT* was established for all people who appreciate sexual diversity and celebrate the individual right to freely express their sexuality. *Rainbow UCT* offers support to people coming to terms with their own sexuality and strives to create an environment that is accepting, tolerant and free of homophobia both on campus and in the wider community (Kaleidoscope, 2011).

Included above are other such institutions which were recently established on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University such as *Campus Pride* and *OUT n Proud* on the Mafikeng campus. These student organisations comprise mainly self-identified sexual minority students on the campus, and owes its origin to the need to address the basic human rights of sexual minorities in tertiary education. *Campus Pride* was established in 2015. Its main objective is directed at providing a safe space for all students regardless of their sexual orientation, characterised by the principles of inclusivity, support and critical academic debate. This organisation was preceded by *POUT* (Potch OUT), which was established to provide an inclusive context for LGBTIQ+ students and to eliminate negative perceptions of and attitudes to these sexual minorities on campus. One of the reasons which led to the demise of *POUT* was an article published by the university's newspaper, *WaPad* (Botha, 2012), which sought to provide information on the existence of the organisation.

The subsequent edition of the newspaper included an article in which a professor of Theology, argued that it was unacceptable for the university to allow the existence of such organisations which, according to him, promoted promiscuity on the university campuses (Rothmann, 2014:203). Following a prolonged dispute among the POUT council and the Theology department, student members of the organisation opted to disassociate themselves from it (Rothmann, 2014:203). *Campus pride*, according to the Potch Campus Pride Constitution (2015:3), posits itself as a humanistic movement which seeks to establish a cultural and academic environment for *Campus Pride* members. Although this movement is mainly focused on the needs of homosexual students, its membership is open to all students, regardless of sexual orientation, race and gender, among others. Their motives are to oppose manifestations of homophobia, prejudice and discrimination on campus through building a sense of community, friendship and solidarity among LGBTIQ+ students and allies through social activities and events. They also want to educate against discrimination against homosexuality, bisexuality and interracial relationships; to foster tolerance, understanding and acceptance of sexual minority students and issues in the wider NWU-Pukke community, for these topics to be openly discussed without the fear of public, workspace and/or social discrimination. Their mission includes supporting students/personnel during their transition stage in realising their sexual orientation and helping those in need of guidance and support. Membership to *Campus Pride* is open to all registered students at the North-West University on the Potchefstroom campus (Campus Pride Constitution, 2015:5). Their language policy includes English as the primary mode of communicating, but Afrikaans and Setswana will be used when necessary.

Notwithstanding the argued positive impacts of safe spaces, such safe spaces have been under scrutiny and criticism; the next section will therefore discuss the criticism of these spaces in detail.

#### **3.4.4 Critical reflection on safe spaces**

The positive features of safe spaces notwithstanding, Fox (2007:502) criticises these spaces for creating an exclusionary and segregated community for sexual minority students. This, according to her, inhibits attempts at establishing a reciprocally beneficial relationship between homosexual students and the broader campus community, in order to address the challenges associated with homophobia (Fox, 2007:502). She also states that such spaces may create the idea that all homosexuals are homogeneous and that they are passive victims of unjustified heterosexist attitudes and behaviour. According to Levine, these exclusive spaces (1998:194) may create what is called “gay ghettos”. A gay ghetto, according to Levine, is defined as a context “...that is characterised by marked tolerance of

homosexuality and a clustering of gay spaces". Like Fox (2007:502), Levine (1998:195) argues that these spaces create an isolated community for sexual minorities, and like ethnic minorities, sexual minorities are considered to be segregated from larger society and considered to be bearers of a distinctive culture. This segregation of homosexual students on campus may become an indicator of how inferior they are compared to heterosexual students. It may also create an idea that the safety afforded in the space may in fact be evident (or even guaranteed) when leaving it. In so doing, one tends to be in danger of disregarding the risk associated with homophobia from the external public sphere which may be hostile towards sexual minorities (Fox, 2007:502). Safe spaces are also critiqued on the questioning (Fox, 2007:502) of the performed rituals and rules (Ingraham, 2002) which retain heterosexuality as a norm and may necessitate sexual minorities in current academic settings to assimilate into a heteronormative culture (Jagose, 1996:26; Stein & Plummer, 1996:130).

There may be some further confrontation of placing a sign/sticker that is only in representation of LGBTIQ+ people. Some people, mainly faculty members or staff, may argue that this is a "distinctive" programme and should be inclusive of all people in a "safe" space. Others may further question whether racial minorities are or should be part of a "safe space" programme (Fox & Ore, 2010:632). Consider, for example, the argument of Francis (2017b:100) and Robinson and Ferfolja (2001:124) in favour of creating a more intersectional space. They note that an individual's sexuality is always intertwined with the "...whole subject". Francis's (2017b:100) study on the lived experiences of what he describes as "LGB youth" serve as a testament to the preceding statement. He argues that in "...giving account of lives, the LGBT youth described their life worlds as the sum of many parts, which included but was not limited to their sexual orientation". In keeping with this, D'Emilio (in Fox & Ore, 2010:632) believes that one's sex, gender, race and sexuality are not mutually exclusive categories existing in distinct ways. This notwithstanding, safe spaces have historically not necessarily always succeeded in recognising or incorporating this diversity. The discourse on safe spaces fails to justify this intersectionality because it relies on a binary logic that places emphasis on the eradication of homophobia/heterosexism, thus creating a singular, marginalised identity around which the spaces are structured.

A safe space programme that defends gay and lesbian students should therefore be designed to integrate other '-isms' through coalitions and partnerships with other groups on campus. Such an approach suggests that "other" identities are experienced in additive ways (e.g., experiencing "Asianness" and "gayness" as two dispersed experiences rather than an intricate and dynamic relationship to sexuality and ethnicity). The notion that other "-isms"

are the work of “other groups” brings about a certain kind of social actor, one whose gender or race or ethnicity is not essential to her/his experience of subjugation and violence in society (Fox & Ore, 2010:633). Through the insinuation that all gay people encounter heterosexism and homophobia in the same way, one may inadvertently sanction a universalised and normalised gendered and raced subject in safe(r) spaces. This imagined unity imposes a “premature solidarity” that does not take into consideration the strategic significance of the connotations attached to sex, gender and race (Fox & Ore, 2010:634).

Thus, although safe zones may be “nurturing spaces” for a restricted time, they tend to eventually allow a misconception of community based on what is called the “freezing of difference” (Fox & Ore, 2010:634). Moreover, the effect of such false universals is the elimination of the realities of members of the queer community, overlooking their different experiences. Undeniably there is no universal “gay” experience. The discourse of these safe spaces fails to acknowledge how our experiences in relation to our sexuality are intensely coupled with our gendered and raced experiences (Fox & Ore, 2010:634). Therefore it is this binary and universal logic entrenched in discourses of LGBTIQ+ safe spaces which may produce and further perpetuate marginalisation, or “...that complex and argumentative process by means of which certain people and notions are advantaged over others at any given time”, and fails to give account to the diverse nature of all LGBTIQ+ people.

### **3.5 CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this chapter was to explore and discuss the positive experiences and possible challenges of gay and lesbian students in South Africa and abroad. This was done firstly by providing a background constituted of studies conducted abroad and in South Africa. As noted throughout the discussion thus far, the South African Constitution ensures equal rights for all and outlaws discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. However, sexual minorities in South African still experience homophobic assaults, as they may not be fully aware of their rights or they are aware of these rights, but are afraid to take action. Often lesbian and gay students tend to become desensitised to the victimisation that they experience and feel that cases of unfair treatment does not warrant reporting. Included as part of the chapter, was the discussion of homophobia in an education context in South Africa and abroad. The discussion included marginalisation experienced by gay and lesbian students and how this may hamper them and their studies at a later stage; and how centralisation may, in contrast to marginalisation, provide sexual minorities with the opportunity to be actively involved, thus increasing their potential for learning. Furthermore, the discussion provided examples of current safe spaces both in South Africa and abroad. Among the safe space examples were PFLAG, ItGetsBetter and Kaleidoscope.

The chapter also provided a discussion on the need for the creation of support programmes such as safe spaces and ally programmes on university campuses. Appropriate support means integrating nuanced understandings of the variety of ways in which different LGBTIQ+ people are differently affected by homophobia and of the ways in which they may experience discrimination from other LGBTIQ+ people. The establishment of such support may include formal spaces of support and the sharing of experiences as well as professional care and therapy.

Institutions and support systems are significant for the improvement of the campus environment. For homophobia and heterosexism to be eradicated on campus, however, intervention in group settings should be provided. Allies and safe space programmes should be responsible for educational preparation for both one-on-one and group-level interactions.. There is thus a need for higher education institutions and campuses to become proactive about homophobia and heterosexism. This may be done through designing more contextually appropriate and all-inclusive programmes, leading to a safer campus environment, regardless of students' differences in sexual orientation, that realise the significance of positing heterosexism as problematic for the whole campus or university. Notwithstanding the positive features that accompany safe spaces, this chapter concluded by critically reflecting on these spaces, how they produce exclusivity and how they may exacerbate negative experiences faced by sexual minorities.

# CHAPTER 4

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The chosen research method for a study, whether it be quantitative or qualitative, informs the researcher of the particular research bases and approach to be taken during a sociological inquiry. Morgan (2007:49) argues, in this regard, that specific systems of beliefs and practices inform the view of social researchers on the nature of social reality and subsequently influence their choice of a particular social science research methodology. This decision influences the researcher in terms of their choice of their research design, sampling techniques, data collection methods and the nature of their analysis or, in short, their choice of a specific research paradigm (Morgan, 2007:49). Paradigms mainly focus on issues concerning the nature of social reality and the nature of scientific knowledge. The nature of social reality, referred to as one's ontological view, centres on how one views the social world (as something external to individuals or as something that is actively socially constructed by people) (Bryman, 2016:544). The nature of knowledge, is referred to as one's epistemological focus, which centres on whether there is one particular truth or that the meaning of social experience may be understood by consulting and using diverse methods. Proponents of qualitative research assume that social actors play an active role in the construction (and reconstruction) of their social reality. The ontological standpoint of constructivism states that social entities are not pre-given. Proponents of this view, however, argue that human beings ascribe meaning to their social reality and that, because of this, human action (and interaction) should be regarded as meaningful (Bryman, 2016:547). According to Thomas (2009:75), by using the epistemological approach of interpretivism, researchers study people's agentic construction of reality by the interpretation of those individuals' actions and the way in which the world around them informs their unique experiences and interpretations.

This chapter focuses on a discussion of the chosen meta-theory, explorative qualitative research design and research methodology (sampling, data collection and data analysis). In addition, the chapter also explicates the ethical considerations.

## **4.2 THE META-THEORETICAL FOCUS**

Social reality may be viewed in different ways, and researchers may have to select from a variety of research methodologies. Of importance in this regard, is that researchers need to always consider the underlying philosophical (or meta-theoretical) notions on which one's selection of a specific research design and methodology is based (Hoffman, 1990:1). This section of the chapter focuses on the ontological and epistemological research bases on which qualitative approach is founded. The research topic necessitated the use of social constructionism as ontological approach and the epistemological approach of interpretivism. With roots in phenomenology, both seek to "...replace the objectivist ideal with a broad tradition of on-going criticism in which all productions of the human mind are concerned" (Hoffman, 1990:1; cf. Bryman, 2016:26) and is associated with the central theoretical argument's queer theoretical focus, since it focuses on the importance of how we, as social actors, experience and actively socially construct (and even reconstruct) the world. Consider Ahmed's (2004:146) and Leung's (2013:401) arguments in this regard. Ahmed notes that "queer feelings" directly relate to understanding diverse, plural and non-conforming sexual identities. Leung's interpretation of Ahmed postulates that "...queer lives are uncomfortable as they must inhabit structures whose contours they misfit and live by narratives whose scripts they fail to reproduce".

### **4.2.1 Social constructionism**

This subsection focuses on the ontological approach of social constructionism. This ontological approach is mainly associated with an interpretivist approach to thinking (which is discussed in a later subsection).

Social constructionism has been linked to the post-modern approach in qualitative research. Social constructionism fundamentally argues that reality is decisively formed by our view of it (Korsgaard, 2007:8). It is rooted in the notion that it is difficult for individuals to go further than their "sensory perceptions" and reach the world as it may or may not exist autonomously of human thought and action. Proponents of social constructionism reject the notion that our knowledge is a direct perception of reality. It might be assumed that people construct their own forms of reality (as a culture or society) among us. Meanwhile accepting the historical and cultural relativism of all forms of knowledge, it follows that the idea of 'truth' becomes problematic. Burr (2006, cited in Andrews, 2012:41) argues that within social constructionism, there is no objective fact; instead, knowledge is a result of viewing the world from a particularly unique perspective. Berger and Luckmann (cited in Andrews, 2012:40) further argue that society exists "...both as objective and subjective reality". This, according

to them, results from "...the interaction of people with the social world, and this social world in turn may influence people, resulting in routinisation and habitualisation" (Andrews, 2012:40). Andrews (2012:41) continues in this regard by noting that the "...experience of society as a subjective reality is attained through primary and secondary socialisation. The former involves being given an identity and a place in society". Burr (2006, cited in Andrews, 2012:41) argues that one's identity is not only dependent on your own internal construction thereof, but results from an interaction with the external social context. Socialisation takes place through interaction with one's significant others who facilitate the objective reality of society, which may result in an internalisation of messages deemed meaningful by individuals (Andrews, 2012:41). Korsgaard (2007:10) maintains that it is imperative that language be considered a characteristic of social constructionism. He argues that language is not merely a reflection of an autonomous reality and it does not, in its structure and content, disclose the structure and content of the real world (Korsgaard, 2007:10). He further contends that this makes social constructionists critical of the traditional view of language as primarily, if not completely, descriptive. Language is not a more or less specific explanation of either our thoughts or reality. According to Korsgaard (2007:10), speaking and writing are both actions; it is doing something and constructing something. Therefore language and inscription can produce knowledge and truth, which, as a result, may have an effect on how the individual acts and perceives his/her social reality. Language, thus, informs one's thoughts and actions. Language provides the necessary means to actively construct the way in which the world is experienced by social actors. Berger and Luckmann (1991, cited in Andrews, 2012:41) argue that dialogue is essential in this regard, insofar as it maintains, modifies and restructures one's subjective reality. According to Dong (2008:14), symbolic interactionism is significant in this regard. He argues that this theoretical tradition "...maintains that human beings engage in social action on the basis of meanings acquired from social sources, including their own experience. These meanings are both learned from others and to some extent shaped or reshaped by those using the symbols". By doing this, social actors "...use symbols and develop meanings for objects in their social contexts [and in so doing], they develop a "mind" that is both reflecting and reflexive". According to Turner (2004, cited in Dong, 2008:14), the human mind should be regarded as a process that is in a constant state of change and flux, based on a social actor's interaction with his/her environment. Thus the individuals and society cannot be separated far from one another because they are created through social interaction and one cannot be understood without the other.

The main criticisms levelled at social constructionism include the following: It is critiqued for being anti-realist in refuting that knowledge results from a direct sensory perception of

reality. Furthermore, social constructionism has been criticised for its possibly liberating position, which means that if things are the way they are only because of our social bonds, as opposed to being natural, it should therefore be possible to modify them into how we would relatively have them be (Boghossian, 2006:8). Some further opponents of social constructionism argue that it is nominalist, in that it is "...concerned solely or predominantly with the naming of persons, categories, situations or social forms" (Brickell, 2006:100). As a result, social constructionism may be said to ignore the 'real' existence and significance of gender and sexual identity, a contradiction that is illustrated by such binary oppositions as "reality or social construction" and the phrases such as "only socially constructed", which is often used to critique social constructionist approaches (Brickell, 2006:100). As such, critics argue that this ontological approach lacks "...a clear grounding in 'gender, race or class analysis' [without sufficient]...attention to social relations of dominance and subordination (Brickell, 2006:101). Finally, social constructionism has also been subject to critique for not offering a significant explanation of the "intrapyschic processes" through which individuals come to inhabit certain forms of sexuality (Brickell, 2006:102). Brickell (2006:102) draws on the work of Blumer (1969) in this regard when he states that "...the self is not an outcome of mechanistic, causative processes but rather something that emerges within interpretation and social interaction... [made] available to us through language, symbolism, roles and scripts". As will be evident from particularly chapters 5 and 6, the researcher sought to address these concerns by providing an in-depth account of the subjective narratives of the gay and lesbian participants, as it relates to how their intrapsychic and interpersonal scripting (Jackson & Scott, 2010) reaffirm or challenge the larger structural context of which they form part.

#### **4.2.2 Interpretivism**

The interpretivist model has its roots in philosophy and human science, particularly in history. According to Neuman (2011:103-104), the interpretive approach may be defined as follows:

*...The systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds.*

The approach focuses on the way in which people make sense of their subjective reality and assign meaning to it; it does not focus on individual objects which exist in isolation. It rather explores their worlds within the context of their lives (Babbie & Mouton, 2008:28).

Researchers who associate with this worldview tend to believe that one needs to understand subjective human experiences, rather than only focusing on explanation, prediction and control, favoured by quantitative researchers. The interpretive approach has a vast history, mainly associated with its origin in the nineteenth century up to Weberian Sociology. The interpretivist approach is associated with Max Weber's approach of *Verstehen* (Babbie & Mouton, 2008:30; De Vos & Strydom, 2011:8). Dilthey (1833-1911) contends that social scientists should emphasise an empathetic understanding of their social reality (Neuman, 2011:103; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014:117). This differs fundamentally from explanation in Natural Sciences. The idea of *Verstehen* focuses on exploring an in-depth understanding of social actors and phenomena in their natural context, with a primary emphasis on displaying empathy and interpretation of the actions of social actors. Social scientists should thus concern themselves with the interpretive understanding of people (Babbie & Mouton, 2008:31). According to Neuman (2011:106), interpretivists argue that human agency is significant and views people as being able to make conscious choices. Human agency may be defined as "...an idea used in interpretive social science that we assume that the world of common sense understanding is stable and real and continues from the past into the future without dramatic change; we do this from the practical need to accomplish everyday tasks". This means that it is significant to consider the decision-making process of individuals, their subjective feelings and their ways of understanding events (Neuman, 2011:106).

In keeping with social constructionism, the proponents of interpretivism focus on the processes by which social actors create, negotiate and modify meanings (Schwandt, 2003). Both constructionism and interpretivism arose as a challenge to scientism and have been influenced by the post-modernist movement. Constructivists and interpretivists reject a realistic scientific inquiry that adopts the notion that it is possible to remain exclusively objective and holds that knowledge of the world is not a simple reflection of what there is, but a set of social artefacts based on an active social construction (Glesne, 2006:6-7). Moreover, unlike positivists (who argue that common sense is inferior to science), interpretivists argue that common sense is important in guiding people in their daily lives and is used to explain and organise events (Neuman, 2011:106). Interpretivism distinguishes social sciences from Natural Sciences insofar as the former has, as its objective, the understanding (rather than only explaining) the meaning of social phenomena. Despite the fact that interpretivists find human subjective experience important, they also seek to develop an objective science to study and describe social reality. This, according to Neuman (2011:106), is because neither common sense (subjective experience) nor science (objective interpretation) has all the answers; instead interpretivists view both objective interpretation and subjective experience as significant. This can be related to the work of

Alfred Schütz on inter-subjectivity. Schütz (1966:82) assumes that inter-subjectivity is significant in social actors' everyday lives. According to Schütz, the inter-subjective nature of the world must be presumed because we live in it as men surrounded by other men, inevitably linked to them through common influence and work, understanding others and being understood by them (Schütz, 1962:10).

Furthermore social constructionists and interpretivists are interested in the critique of normative or grand narratives, which may influence people in terms of the manner they wish to act. An interpretivist and social constructionist view may provide the researcher greater scope to address issues regarding everyday events, experiences and social structures, as well as the values people attach to these phenomena (Collis & Hussey, 2009:56-57), particularly because these approaches are mainly focused on an understanding of the context and the process whereby people influence and are influenced by the context. This claim explains the researcher's choice of social constructionism as the philosophical foundation for this study on the need for safe spaces for gay and lesbian students. Both approaches basically argue that the nature (and structure) of our social (and sexual) realities are constantly constructed and reconstructed through interaction (Creswell, 2009:8). In the context of this study, participants constructed their own knowledge within the social context influenced by their previous knowledge and understanding, and thus, the researcher sought to position herself as a social scientist ascribing to a social constructionist epistemologically interpretivistic approach.

As the emphasis is placed on the socially constructed nature of the students' lived reality, the research context was created in such a way that there was an inter-subjective relationship between the researcher and her participants, in order for the gay and lesbian students to describe their unique individual experiences on their campus. This research climate provided the researcher an opportunity to investigate, explore and understand gay and lesbian experiences, and further, gather and document the intricacies of these students' experiences through a strategy of face-to-face interviews in a social context (the Potchefstroom campus) in which these experiences took place. This interpretive approach thus sought to explain the subjective meanings that informed the participants' social action. In using this approach, the researcher became an empathetic and inter-subjective enquirer (Carr & Kemmis, 1986:88; Dilley, 2000:135; Thanh & Thanh, 2015:26) who attempted to recognise and understand the meaning attached to behaviour as the participants conveyed it. As such, in this study, the students (rather than the researcher), were placed in the position to describe their experiences and the main emphasis was placed on how they perceived their experiences and how they experienced everyday life (Neuman, 2011:101)

and not on whether their responses accurately reflected a preconceived reality. Additionally, the usage of social constructionist ontology was not only to gather facts, but to initiate dialogue and comprehension and to open up new possibilities for new meanings and perspectives to be explored (Neuman, 2011:105).

These basic assumptions of social constructionism and interpretivism formed the ontological and epistemological basis for the present study. This should not be considered as an implication that social constructionism is better than the other existing meta-theoretical approaches, but it is rather a more appropriate approach for this specific study.

#### **4.3 THE USE OF A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN**

Qualitative researchers mostly agree on the underlying assumptions which inform social constructionism and interpretivism, but there are many distinctions, traditions and details which cause the qualitative research practice to be very diverse (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:33).

According to Singleton and Strait (cited in Webb & Auriacombe, 2006:589), a research design includes a clear statement of the research problem, together with strategies for collecting, interpreting and presenting data which may provide answers to the research questions. When studying the issue of homosexuality, one is confronted with contentious issues such as perceptions, viewpoints, values and norms, which may lead the researcher to consider using a research design that will provide in-depth and “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of the participants’ subjective views on the subject matter. For the purpose of this study, a *qualitative research design* was used. While quantitative researchers seek clarifications of a few narrowly defined variables that have an impact on phenomena, the objective of qualitative research centres on the accumulation of in-depth descriptions and the emphasis on the researcher’s ability to understand, explain and explore phenomena with which they are presented (Jarbandhan & Schutte, 2006:672). Bazeley (2007: 2) notes that a qualitative research design is preferred in conditions where a thorough understanding of a process or experience and evidence is needed to determine the particular nature of the issues being explored and where the data available is not in numeric form. A qualitative approach was necessary for this study as the data that was collected was used to provide an in-depth account of the experiences of lesbian and gay students as well as the need of safe spaces on the Potchefstroom campus.

There have been many attempts to delineate qualitative research in the social sciences. Nonetheless, Mason (2002:3) describes qualitative research as grounded in a philosophical

view which is mainly 'interpretivist' in nature, based on its concern with how the gay and lesbian students subjectively constructed, deconstructed, interpreted and experienced their lives as sexual minorities on the Potchefstroom campus. Qualitative researchers intend to produce rounded and contextual understandings on the basis of rich (Wilson & MacLean, 2011:194), nuanced and detailed data (Mason, 2002:3). There is greater emphasis on 'holistic' forms of analysis and explanation than on charting surface patterns, trends and correlations. Although proponents of qualitative research may use some form of quantification in certain studies, statistical forms of analysis are not seen as central (Mason, 2002:3). In his attempt to differentiate between quantitative and qualitative approaches, Dabbs (1982:32) indicates that the notion of quality is essential to the nature of things. Thus, qualitative research, following from a range of disciplines, paradigms and epistemologies, tends to embrace several standards of quality, known variously as validity, credibility, consistency or trustworthiness. In addition to certain standards that may be thought of as common across disciplines and paradigms, the "goodness" (Morrow, 2005) of the qualitative method is evaluated on the basis of the paradigmatic foundations of the research and the standards of the discipline.

As the qualitative study is informed by a constructionist and interpretivist paradigm, it becomes important to have the standards of quality and credibility that recognise and embrace subjectivity (Morrow, 2005:253). Following on this is a discussion of the criteria used to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative enquiry.

#### **4.3.1 Criteria for the trustworthiness of qualitative research**

Trustworthiness is the term used in qualitative research as a means to determine the quality of particularly a qualitative research design. It refers to the extent to which the data and data analysis are credible and trustworthy (Bryman, 2016:302; Guba, 1981:75). Researchers should provide sufficient information on particular strategies, including credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability, of their research design to enable readers to determine the quality of their research. The applicability of these principles for this study are discussed below.

##### **(a) Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative research may be defined as the extent to which the data and data analysis are considered as believable and trustworthy (Shenton, 2004:64). Credibility is associated with internal validity; since it focuses on how the empirical findings from the study match the lived reality of participants. It is the reader's responsibility to evaluate the scope of

its credibility based on his/her understanding of the study. Bryman (2016:302) notes that, in order to ensure the credibility of findings, the "...research is carried out according to the principles of good practice *and* submitting research findings to the members of the social world who were studied". Thus, the member checking is imperative, insofar it is important to gain feedback and confirmation on the correctness of the interpretations and conclusions on the part of the researcher, from the participants themselves, is one technique of increasing credibility (Anney, 2014:276). Lincoln and Guba (1985:314) and Shenton (2004:68) thus emphasise the necessity of member checking in order to ensure credibility. For the purpose of this study, to retain as much of the subjective constructions of their realities as gay and lesbian students, the importance of referential adequacy was observed through the audio recordings of the interviews, with the consent of each of the interviewees.

### **(b) *Transferability***

According to Anney (2014:277), research outcomes are transferable when it can be applied to contexts outside the research setting. A qualitative researcher can improve transferability by describing the research methods, environments and assumptions fundamental to the study. Seale (1999:45) argues that transferability may be ensured by providing a detailed and "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the research context and the views of the participants, in order to make "...judgements about the possible transferability of findings to other milieux" (Bryman, 2016:303). The researcher has, in this study, provided a rich, thick description of the study for the data and descriptions as part of chapter 5 in order to be potentially transferable to similar contexts in South Africa (i.e. other university campuses).

### **(c) *Dependability***

Dependability is similar to the idea of reliability; insofar as it is necessary to ensure the consistency of observing the same outcomes and findings under similar conditions (Riege, 2003:81). According to Merriam (1998:205), it may be defined as the extent to which research findings can be repeated by using similar social actors in a similar context. Therefore, the procedure through which findings are derived should be clear and should be repeatable as far as possible (Anney, 2014:278; Shenton, 2004:71). Care was taken to ensure that the research process was logical, traceable and clearly documented in a flexible manner by giving a detailed account of the research process. This was done through having an outside researcher (study/research supervisor) conduct a critical reading of the research study, who then examined the process of data collection, data analysis and whether the results of the research study could be supported by the data.

#### **(d) Confirmability**

Finally, confirmability is based on the acknowledgment that although research is never fully objective (Shenton, 2004:72), the researcher "...acted in good faith" (Bryman, 2016:303). It addresses the fundamental issue that findings should embody the situation being explored rather than the beliefs, theories and preconceptions of the researcher (Gasson, 2004:93). Confirmability is based on the notion that the truthfulness of findings lies in the data and that the researcher must effectively link together the data, analytic processes and findings in such a way that the reader is able to approve the appropriateness of the findings. Several procedures used to achieve the goal of dependability are also applicable in confirmability, mainly accountability through an audit trail (Anney, 2014:279). An audit process was used by working forward and backward through the research process, to ensure that the data interpretation of the findings was sound and confirmed findings. Findings in this study were based on the interviews rather than the researcher's own personal biases.

#### **4.3.2 Qualitative research: Exploration of various social settings**

The purpose of this research was to discover responses to questions through the application of systematic or qualitative procedures. Qualitative researchers seek to answer questions by exploring different social settings and the individuals inhabiting these settings (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:270). They are interested in how, through symbols, rituals, social structures and social roles people tend to arrange themselves, their settings and make sense of their surroundings. According to Mead (1962:135) (also see Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014:343), just like a child who is not born with a fully constructed sense of 'self' and acquires it over time through socialisation processes, people acquire selves through social processes, including interactions with other human beings. This means that 'the self' then becomes reflexive (putting ourselves in another social or sexual actor's place and acting the same way he or she does). Mead (1962:134) declares that "...it is by reflexiveness that the whole social process is thus brought into the experience of the individual involved in it; it is by such means, which enables the individual to take the attitude of the other towards himself, that the individual is able consciously to adjust himself to that process, and to modify the resultant process in any given social act in terms of his adjustment to it". Qualitative procedures provide a means of gathering information about the people researchers observe and interview. Qualitative techniques therefore sanction researchers to become inter-subjective in sharing in the understandings and perceptions of others and exploring how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives, hence the earlier reference to *Verstehen*.

Researchers using qualitative techniques, thus explore the ways in which social actors make sense of themselves, others and the social world (Bryman, 2016:28).

Different types of qualitative research have common features and use similar procedures, regardless of some approaches associated with the specific methods of data collection and analysis. **Firstly**, the qualitative approach is concerned with the **primacy of data**. Researchers approach participants with the purpose to collect the rich and in-depth data from them that may become the basis for theorising (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:273; Bryman, 2016:316). The interaction between the researcher and the participants may result in the creation of new theoretical ideas which may help the researcher to modify already existing theories or uncover the essence of social phenomena.

**Secondly**, a qualitative approach emphasises the requirement of **sensitivity on the part of the researchers to the particular context which they study**. Researchers must be sensitive to the context of the research and engage themselves in the setting and situation. The participants' social context may influence their behaviour and narratives given the social dynamics of the research setting. Thus it is important to respect the specificity of the context and the culture in which the research occurs (Bryman, 2016:316). Researchers have to take into account the entire context and its potential influence on people's lives, as was the case in this study on the lived experiences of self-identified lesbian and gay students on their university campus. If researchers understand the context, it may be possible to better locate the actions and people's insights and enhance one's understanding of the meanings being communicated by the research participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:272). Furthermore, in a qualitative study, researchers are expected to make the research experience as much part of the participants' everyday environment as possible. This means that the more the research relates to and forms part of the daily experience of the participant, the more it becomes naturalistic. Research is often perceived as naturalistic when the behaviour being studied is less constrained by the researcher or by the design used in the research study (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007:5). This may be explained by using the concept of the participants' "life-worlds" (Ashworth, 2000:98). According to Ashworth (2000:98), the researcher's focus on the "life-worlds" of participants emphasises the latter's subjective experiences of their situations and, as such, the researcher should always remain cognisant of the necessity of providing as much of a detailed account of the narratives and the experiences of the research participants as possible (Ashworth, 2000:98).

**Thirdly**, qualitative researchers focus on gaining an **emic (insider) perspective** of what they are exploring, i.e. the interpretations of the people participating in the research and their

perceptions and the meanings they ascribe to their everyday lives. Qualitative approaches are associated with the subjective nature of social reality. These methods provide insights from the standpoint of the participants which may enable the researcher to perceive things as their informants do as they explore the insiders' view. Charmaz (1991:338) argues that, in order for the researchers to be effective, they must attempt to engage the topic under discussion from the perspective of the participant; thus the lesbian and gay student in this regard. This foregrounds the importance of the participants' narratives rather than those of the researcher. Researchers thus explore the inherent meanings and interpretations participants assign their everyday experiences. Qualitative research is based on the foundation that individuals are the primary sources to describe their views and feelings in their own unique way (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:271).

**Fourthly**, researchers use the noted "**thick descriptions**" (Geertz, 1973). This entails the accumulation of detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences, transcending a mere focus on observable social phenomena and rather emphasising the students' interpretations, discovering their feelings and the meanings they ascribe to their actions (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:272). Thick descriptions develop from the data and the context and, as such, the description of the situation should be detailed. A thick description, according to Denzin (1989:83), may be defined as "...deep, dense, detailed accounts of problematic experiences...it presents detail, context, emotion and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another". Thick descriptions are considered by many as providing the basis for qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000:128-129; Janesick, 1994:216).

**Lastly**, the researcher should always aim to **adopt a non-judgemental stance** towards the research participants. The researcher is expected to respond to questions about the nature of the study as honestly and openly as possible without preconceived ideas or judgements. In order to do this, the researcher should, in an inter-subjective manner, derive his/her data through the professional use of interviews, focus groups and/or observations (Creswell, 2009:173; Myers, 2009; Sprinthall, Schmutte & Sirois, 1991:101). Qualitative methods are argued to be primarily inductive, compared to the deductive methods of experimental science (Bendassoli, 2013:2). Qualitative researchers oppose the notion that their work comprises proposing and testing hypotheses as they are interested in achieving, as noted, the understanding (*Verstehen*) of a certain situation, individuals, groups individual and (sub-) cultures, among others. They rather focus on elucidating and predicting future behaviours as opposed to the so-called "hard sciences", with their laws, theories and hypotheses employed or rejected on the basis of their predictive value (Bendassoli, 2013:2).

This design is not, however, without its own limitations. The most commonly cited points of critique of a qualitative research design centres on the fact that it may be very time-consuming and costly, that there is a strong possibility of researcher bias and that it may be difficult to generalise the findings to the entire population, given the smaller research population (Anderson, 2010:2; Mays & Pope, 1995). It has further also been noted that qualitative studies may be unable to address the relationship between variables with the degree of accuracy that is required to establish social trends or to inform social policies. Furthermore, since the methodological approach does not ensure objectivity, the quality of information is considered questionable, thus making qualitative studies produce data that is not comparable (Sarantakos, 2013:46).

Given the explanation of the research design used in this study, this particular subsection on methodology reiterates the study's assurance to provide an in-depth exploration of the experiences of gay and lesbian students on the North-West University Potchefstroom campus.

#### **4.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In keeping with the preceding focus on the qualitative research design, this subsection comprises three foci: The sampling procedures for a qualitative study, data collection methods and data analysis.

##### **4.4.1 Sampling procedures**

A research population is defined as the research object and may include individuals, organisations or groups (Welman et al., 2011:52-53). A sample is a "...subgroup of a population" (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000:125). Sampling has also been defined as a representative "taste" of a subgroup from a larger population (Berinstein, 2003:17). The sampling procedure involves taking a representative selection of relevant participants from the broader population (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:164) and using the information collected as research data. The selected sample should be representative of the larger research population in order to denote the characteristics of a known number of units in the population (e.g. gay and lesbian students on other South African university campuses) (Lohr, 1999:3). Cochran (1953:5) argues that by using the correct sampling methods, researchers may be afforded the opportunity to reduce research costs, to conduct their study more efficiently, and provide for greater accuracy. Sarantakos (2013:167) argues that sampling may enable the researcher to undertake the study in a relatively shorter period of time, provide "...comparable and equally valid results", be less labour intensive and more economical

insofar fewer people are involved which may require fewer financial costs (e.g. travelling, printing questionnaires, etc.). These advantages notwithstanding, it has been argued that sampling may require more administration and planning on the part of researchers and that, given the reduced number of participants who form part of the sample, questions arise in terms of the representativeness and generalisation of the findings (Sarantakos, 2013:167). Once the population is defined, it is then necessary to sample the research population relevant to the particular study. In keeping with the focus of the study, the participants were self-identified gay and lesbian students registered as undergraduate or postgraduate students on the North-West University Potchefstroom campus. Their fields of study, age, socio-economic class, ethnicity, gender identification and/or race were not regarded as exhaustive criteria in the selection process. This is attributed to the importance of gaining an intersectional representation of the diverse, plural and varied configurations of homosexuality, advocated for by researchers such as Francis (2017b) and Msibi (2013). For the purpose of the study the sample comprised twenty (20) self-identified lesbian and gay students (10 lesbian and 10 gay male students respectively) on the North-West University's Potchefstroom campus.

This study adopted a **non-probability sampling method** through purposive and snowball sampling. Non-probability sampling is a common method in qualitative research where researchers use their judgment in the selection of a sample. The benefit of non-probability sampling is that it is an appropriate means for researchers to gain access to their selected sample at little or no cost and, as such, the participants may potentially be more "readily available" (Neuman, 2011:248; Babbie, 1990:97; O'Leary, 2014:189). This approach has, however, been critiqued for not being representative and unlike probability sampling, used in quantitative research, where participants have the same (or more equal) chance of being selected to take part in the study, participants who are selected using the non-probability sampling technique are chosen because they meet pre-established criteria (as noted above) (Sarantakos, 2013:177). This sampling method is thus mainly used in those circumstances where the researcher wishes to undertake a qualitative and exploratory study (Sarantakos, 2013:177). According to Sullivan and Losberg (2003:148), sampling sexual minorities tend to present challenges to researchers. This community is said to be characterised as "hidden" and difficult to access, because sexuality is not always visible or obvious (Rumens, 2011:163). This challenge of identification, according to Abrams (2010:541), may be overcome by the usage of sampling techniques that would allow the researcher to gain entrance into the "hidden" and hard to reach social groups (an example of such a technique would include snowball sampling) and using specific organisations to gain access to the participants. For instance, given the challenging nature of accessing participants who identify

themselves as lesbian and gay, Jagessar and Msibi (2015:66), in their study of homophobia in the university residences in KwaZulu-Natal, used a snowballing technique because this technique was considered crucial when dealing with such sensitive issues.

To conduct the in-depth interviews, access had to be gained to the selected sample of student participants. This was done through the non-probability sampling techniques of purposive and snowballing techniques which are discussed in the next subsection.

#### **(a) Purposive sampling**

**Purposive sampling** is a technique in which the researcher purposely chooses (Abrams, 2010:538) subjects who will provide the best perspective on the phenomenon of interest (Sarantakos, 2013:164). According to Acharya, Prakash, Saxena and Nigam (2013:332), purposive sampling is also known as judgemental sampling or expert sampling. The main objective of this form of sampling is to provide a sample that can be regarded as “representative” of the population which the researcher is studying. In keeping with this argument, Sarantakos (2013:164) notes that the most fundamental criterion associated with the choice of a sample is the “...knowledge and expertise of the respondents, and hence their suitability for the study”. Nevertheless, purposive sampling is not without its limitations. The results from the data, for example, cannot necessarily be generalised beyond the sample (Acharya et al., 2013:332). Clearly, the knowledge and experience of the researcher making the selections is a key aspect of the “success” of the resulting sample; however, it would be difficult to quantify that characteristic of a sample (Battaglia, 2008:525). Two options arise in the use of this sampling method. First, through purposive sampling, self-identified homosexual students who are members of the Potchefstroom LGBTIQ+ student organisation entitled *Campus Pride* were contacted and requested to participate through a concisely written background and objective to the study. These individuals were requested to forward the information to their members, courtesy of their mailing list. Secondly, the researcher requested that those individuals who agreed to participate in the research talk to other parties who may find the study relevant and interesting. These participants may then, on approval of other potential interviewees, forward the latter individuals’ information to the researcher or, alternatively, the interested parties were to contact the researcher voluntarily. This decision implies the use of **snowball sampling**.

#### **(b) Snowball Sampling**

Snowballing is a method of locating subjects with certain qualities or characteristics that are

essential to the study. Snowball sampling is mainly used by those researchers who are interested in studying minority groups in society (e.g. homosexual individuals), sensitive topics or research populations that are difficult to gain access to (Lee, 1993; Rumens, 2011:163). Those who opt to use snowballing attempt to identify people who are representative of the study sample. These participants, with whom the researcher establishes the necessary rapport and trust, may then be requested to refer the researcher to other people who also, in the case of this study, identify as gay and lesbian students (Given, 2008:816). For instance, Msibi's (2012) study among queer youth in South African schools, was informed by the principles of the snowball sampling technique, in that the participants informed their friends about the project, some of whom then decided to participate. In his study, heterosexual students who noted their concern about the high levels of homophobia and had homosexual friends, were also helpful in connecting the researcher to their homosexual friends. Snowball sampling is thus considered a convenient way of continuing the main goals of purposive sampling in those situations where it may be difficult to locate relevant participants. It does, however, require that the participants are likely to also know other social and sexual actors who share similar features that will make their participation relevant (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:167). This method is thus particularly applicable for locating so-called "hidden" (Rumens, 2011) populations where it is difficult to gain access to a research population, including the homosexual students of this study (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:167) and where the topic under investigation is of a sensitive nature (Lee, 1993; O'Leary, 2014:190).

The next subsection focuses on the data collection methods.

#### **4.4.2 Data collection methods**

This subsection provides a synopsis of the primary method that was used during the data collection process. This included the use of in-depth interviews through an interview schedule (an example is included in Appendix B) which mirrored the principles associated with interpretivism, constructionism and the qualitative research design (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:33).

The **in-depth interview**, according to Babbie and Mouton (2001:289), takes the form of a conversation in which the researcher probes the participant to discover new information, to open up new dimensions of a problem or to secure vivid, accurate and detailed accounts that are based on the personal experience of the participant. This study used an interview schedule in which questions were formulated based on the existing literature on homosexuality within higher education institutions in an attempt to provide as detailed and

informed an interview schedule as possible (Creswell, 1998:99; Dilley, 2000:131). This, in turn, introduced the researcher to both deductive and inductive components of the study. According to Thomas (2006:238), inductive reasoning refers to methodologies that primarily use in-depth readings of data to develop concepts and themes. This understanding of inductive reasoning, according to Strauss and Corbin (1998:12) occurs when the researcher begins with an investigation into the chosen theme for study and allows the theory and inductive findings to arise from the data. In contrast, deductive reasoning is used in order to determine whether the new data is consistent with the findings from previous research, or hypotheses identified or constructed by the researcher (Bryman, 2016:20-21).

Thomas (2006:238) argues that qualitative researchers may adopt both inductive and deductive reasoning. Patton (1991:194) believes that, as the researchers begin with fieldwork, they may be open to the new findings which result from the data in an inductive manner. Further, as the analysis reveals patterns and main dimensions of interest, researchers will then wish to verify and clarify the emerging findings, which is a more deductive approach to data collection and analysis. According to Bhattacharjee (2012:15), researchers must be able to adopt inductive and deductive reasoning while undertaking their study. This is done when there are additions or modifications to a given model or theory that are considered to be the essence of scientific research. With regard to the content of the interview schedule, it comprised three sections: The first section included questions on the biographical and academic background of gay and lesbian students, whereas the second and third sections focused on the opinion-related questions (based on themes from the literature) (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:237) about the students' experiences on campus and the nature of and need for safe zones, respectively. The duration of the interviews ranged from one hour to three hours. Students were also recorded (if they gave permission for the researcher to do so), but some of the students did not allow the researcher to record them (she thus did not record these interviews) and others were reluctant at first. The interviews took place at a setting of the students' personal choice. Most students preferred a more private space, in this case the researcher's office and some students preferred the campus cafeteria. In this study the participants were encouraged to relate their personal narratives in their own words (cf. Babbie & Mouton, 2001:289). The advantages of in-depth interviews are that complex matters can be explored in greater detail; potentially ambiguous responses can be clarified; and, based on the rapport the researcher attempts to establish with the participant, it may become relatively easier for sensitive information to be attained (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:309). In-depth interviews also provided a more relaxed atmosphere in which data was collected that participants may have felt more comfortable having a conversation with the researcher about their lives, as was the case in this study (Boyce & Neale, 2006:3).

However, this data collection method does have limitations. In-depth interviews may be prone to biases (Boyce & Neale, 2006:3). The researcher made every effort to design a data collection instrument which ensured that interviews were conducted with the least amount of bias on her part. Interviews were also time-consuming as they are a time-intensive activity owing to the time it takes to conduct interviews, transcribe them and analyse the results. In planning for data collection, the researcher must be cautious to include time for transcription and analysis of this detailed data. The researcher displayed the appropriate interviewing techniques (Bryman, 2016:168), including probing to gain the most detailed and rich data from the participant. In this study probing was employed to seek clarification from the participants when they were unclear about what they meant by their statements and also to reflect on the remarks made by the participants which added inductive contributions to the existing knowledge base on the topic. None of the participants asked to leave during the interview.

#### **4.4.3 Data analysis**

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) delineate qualitative data analysis as "...working with the data, organising them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns". The aim of data in a qualitative study uncover particular concepts, themes and meanings which inform the narratives of the participants.

Qualitative data analysis, according to Babbie and Mouton (2001:490), refers to all forms of analysis of data that was gathered using qualitative techniques regardless of the paradigm used to govern the research. Once the data has been collected, the information has to be organised for the researcher to analyse the central findings (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). For the purpose of this study, **thematic analysis** was used to analyse the data collected from the participants through open and selective coding. Transcribed interviews were coded both for existing themes (which have been theoretically engaged in previous research through deduction in the literature review chapters) as well as new themes from the data collected inductively during the in-depth interviews (Bhattacharjee, 2012:3-4). These included: **Defining homosexuality, views on homosexuality, positive experiences of gay and lesbian students on the North-West University Potchefstroom campus, challenges experienced by gay and lesbian students on the North-West University Potchefstroom campus and the need for safe zones/spaces on the campus.** Open and selective coding were used firstly to identify first-order concepts from the data and, secondly to apply newly conceptualised themes to the existing ones to determine whether these respectively required further analysis (Sarantakos, 2013:368). The researcher furthermore explored whether the

findings supported previous studies and literature or whether it presented novel narratives on the subject matter, courtesy of the students.

Coding in qualitative research may be defined as the process of generating ideas and concepts from the empirical findings from a study by reviewing the interview transcripts and field notes which resulted from the research (Bryman, 2016:445; Given, 2008:85). The process of coding, particularly in qualitative research, is regarded as the “...important first step” as means to “...*label, separate, compile, and organize* data” (Charmaz, 1983, quoted in Bryman, 2016:445). As such, this procedure refers to the steps the researcher needs to undertake in order identify and arrange the recurring ideas, concepts and categories which result from the data. These ideas, concepts and categories are then further delineated or integrated into a smaller number of categories, relationships and behavioural patterns in order for the researcher to relate the lived experiences of the participants and draw particular conclusions from the data (Bryman, 2016:444-445). For the purpose of the study then, the researcher had to undertake a detailed reading of the data in order to identify as many ideas and concepts as possible and explore how these relate to each other. In order to do this, the researcher adopted the process of **open coding**. This refers to the in-depth “...process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, quoted in Bryman, 2016:446). In so doing, the researcher sought to label those concepts and themes which were associated with the objectives of the study (as listed above) and then group these into discernible categories for further theoretical analysis (Bryman, 2016:446). It is worth commenting on Bryman’s (2016:447) reading of Charmaz’s (2006) work in this regard. The latter contends that qualitative researchers may (in addition to the noted process of open coding), also undertake **initial coding**, **focused coding** and **theoretical coding**. The first of the three basically relates to the process of open coding insofar as it entails a detailed ‘line-by-line’ reading of the data in order to “...generate as many ideas and hence codes” (Bryman, 2016:447) from the empirical findings. This leads to a more **focused coding** approach which attempts to identify the recurring themes and codes which require further theoretical engagement (Bryman, 2016:447). **Theoretical coding** involves an integration of the identified codes from the preceding coding stages in order for the researcher to provide his/her readers with a “theoretical understanding of the object of interest...[and] instils a theoretical coherence and understanding of his or her data” (Bryman, 2016:447), as evident from the thorough critical analysis in chapter 6.

Thematic analysis, as an autonomous qualitative descriptive approach, is primarily defined as “...a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79; also see Wilson & MacLean, 2011:551). Through focusing on meaning

across a data set, thematic analysis permits the researcher to identify and clarify the shared meanings and experiences of participants. The reasons for using thematic analysis include its capacity to allow for accessibility and flexibility (Wilson & MacLean, 2011:551). For individuals new to qualitative research, thematic analysis tends to provide an entry into a way of doing research that may be regarded as potentially ambiguous, complex and theoretically challenging. It offers a way into qualitative research that explains the process of coding and analysing qualitative data systematically, which may then be linked to broader theoretical or conceptual issues.

Moreover, after data has been collected, the researcher has to familiarise him- or herself with the data through reading and rereading the data and writing down the initial ideas that they hold (Wilson & MacLean, 2011:552). When the researcher has familiarised him- or herself with the collected data, the researcher then begins searching for different themes and sub-themes and organising these themes (Wilson & MacLean, 2011:552). Furthermore, the researcher reviews and refines the themes and searches for the relationship between the data-set and the themes. For the purpose of this study, the researcher adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis, where the data was analysed through a step-by-step procedure which began with examining the interviews conducted with the gay and lesbian students in order to uncover the recurring patterns of meaning, themes and ideas used in describing and understanding homosexuality in an educational context. As part of the second step of the analysis, specific codes were identified in order to highlight potential themes and patterns which emerged from the data (Bhana, 2012:312). In undertaking the thematic analysis, it was imperative for the researcher to identify repetitious themes and topics which arose from the data (e.g. the gay and lesbian students' emphasis on the importance of formal policies on the Potchefstroom campus in order to protect their basic human rights), highlighting the similarities and differences which were evident in the narratives of the gay and lesbian students (e.g. the reasons they ascribed to defining themselves as either 'gay' or 'lesbian') and linking the empirical findings to the "...social scientific concepts" used as part of chapters 1, 2 and 3, which informed the compilation of the interview schedule (Bryman, 2016:456-457).

In view of the forgoing discussions, the following subsection describes the biographical information of the participants.

#### **4.5 BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

As is evident in Table 1, the biographical categories used to describe the gay and lesbian students included their fictitious names, sex, sexual orientation, race, nationality, age, faculty

of study as well as the their year of study.

**Table 1: Biographical information of participants**

Name	Sex	Sexual Orientation	Race	Nationality	Age	Faculty	Year of Study
Alan	Male	Gay	White	S.A	23	Arts	Third
Bob	Male	Gay	White	S.A	20	Arts	Second
Bradley	Male	Gay	Coloured	S.A	24	Law	Third
Enris	Male	Gay	White	S.A	22	Educational Sciences	Third
Larry	Male	Gay	White	S.A	20	Arts	First
Mario	Male	Gay	Black	S.A	23	Natural sciences	Third
Mxolisi	Male	Gay	Black	S.A	20	Economic & Management Sciences	Second
Santo	Male	Gay	Black	S.A	20	Engineering	First
Thinus	Male	Gay	White	S.A	22	Arts	Honours
Tshiamo	Male	Gay	Coloured	S.A	21	Arts	Second
Batso	Female	Lesbian	Black	S.A	25	Arts	Honours
Brenda	Female	Lesbian	Black	S.A	22	Economic & Management Sciences	Second
Caroline	Female	Lesbian	Black	S.A	21	Natural sciences	First
Dee	Female	Lesbian	Coloured	S.A	22	Arts	Third
Ellen	Female	Lesbian	Black	S.A	23	Educational Sciences	Third
Lungile	Female	Lesbian	Black	S.A	22	Health Sciences	Honours
Precious	Female	Lesbian	White	S.A	21	Arts	First
Sally	Female	Lesbian	White	S.A	20	Engineering	First
Zack	Female	Lesbian	White	S.A	23	Educational Sciences	Second
Zintle	Female	Lesbian	Black	S.A	21	Law	Second

Pertaining to Table 1 on the gay and lesbian students who participated in in-depth interviews, the following biographical data was of significance. Participants were selected based on their suitability for providing the best information. Given the study's focus on the need for safe spaces on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University for gay and lesbian students, they were the most likely participants chosen for the research. The average age of the participants was twenty-two years (22). With regard to their nationality, all were South African. The interviews comprised eight (8) white participants, with nine (9) who identified as black and three (3) who identified as coloured in terms of the racial category. Their faculties comprised two (2) engineering students, with two in (2) law, eight (8) in the faculty of arts, two (2) in Natural Sciences, two (2) studying economic and Management Sciences, three (3) in educational sciences and one (1) student of the health sciences faculty. Pertaining to the year of study, there were five (5) first year students, six (6) second year, six (6) third year and three (3) Honours students.

Accompanying the preceding delineation of the biographical information of the students as well as sections on sampling, data collection and data analysis, are the ethical considerations.

## 4.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Social scientists have an ethical responsibility to their research participants because they explore the social lives of other human beings. Most ethical issues around informed consent, privacy and security are collective to all these research methods, yet some distinctions exist (Gomm, 2008:377; O'Leary, 2010:41; Sarantakos, 2013:16). Ethics in qualitative research, often associated with the relationship of researchers to their research participants, are fundamental principles related to the decision making process in research, ranging from the problem formulation to publication of the findings (Sarantakos, 2013:17); qualitative researchers therefore aim at providing information anticipated to contribute to knowledge, advance practice and transform the lives of participants.

Silverman (2000:201) argues that researchers should always be cognisant of the fact that through their research, they enter into the private spheres and lives of their participants. As a result, this raises several ethical implications that the researcher should address during and after the research has been conducted. Creswell (2009:87) refers to the fact that the researcher has the responsibility to respect the rights, values and needs of the participants. With regard to ethical issues, adherence to the strict ethical code of conduct set by the North-West University's Ethical Practices Protocol regarding participants' treatment in the research procedure is fundamental to this study. The University's ethical codes include: **Informed consent and voluntary participation** (informing the participants of their rights, obligations and roles during and after the research), avoidance of **harm and risk** (thus safeguarding participants) and ensuring **honesty and trust, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity** (in this case, the protection of lesbian and gay students' identity in interviews). A detailed application for ethics approval was submitted to the Faculty of Arts' Ethics Committee. The application was approved and an ethics number was allocated to the study (NWU-00471-15-A7). Refer to Appendix C for this letter of approval.

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, it was imperative for the researcher to determine whether or not the research constituted a potential risk to her participants in order for her to address potential harmful effects before the commencement of the study (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:523; Sieber, 1992; Wilson & MacLean, 2011:599). In her capacity as a researcher, the researcher was committed to ensuring that no harm was inflicted on the participants. In terms of the principle of voluntary participation, it was made clear to the participants that the research was only for academic purposes, that they were not forced to participate in the study and they were told that the interviews were completely voluntary. To ensure that voluntary participation (Nel, Rich & Joubert, 2007) is acknowledged, the interview schedule

was accompanied by a written Informed Consent Statement (O'Leary, 2010:41). This provided an in-depth explanation of the nature and purpose of the study, the researcher involved as well as the core concepts, procedures and risks associated with the research (O'Leary, 2010:41). Issues surrounding informed consent are related to the concern to avoid potential risk to participants. Informed consent means the significant consent of individuals to participate as an exercise of their choice, free from any element of fraud, deceit, coercion or similar unfair inducement or manipulation. Relative to this study, the researcher informed the participating students about the purpose and nature of the study and their role during the data collection process. In line with this, the researcher obtained the informed consent in writing in the format given in Appendix A.

Of great importance (and which formed part of the Informed Consent Statement), was information on the protection of the participants' interests and well-being. Two principles were of importance here: confidentiality and privacy (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:523; Nel et al., 2007). With regard to interviews, confidentiality was ensured by having participants choose their own pseudonym (Ackerly & True, 2010:266) at the start of the interview. In this study, most participants chose their own pseudonyms. This notwithstanding, in some cases participants allowed the researcher to provide them with pseudonyms. In some of these cases, gay and lesbian participants mentioned that they did not want their names to be concealed because they believed that it would force them back into the closet. This notwithstanding, their real names only appear on the informed consent statement and not the interview schedule or in the final report, in order to safeguard them. No one will, as such, be able to link the information to the specific participant. The researcher thus ensured that all identifying characteristics were removed before the dissemination of the central findings of the study and participants were provided with a guarantee that their names and any other information which could put them at risk, would not be released. This was particularly important in this study, since Platzer and James (1997) argue that the risk for closeted gay and lesbian students to be identified by their heterosexual counterparts on campus may only increase their fear of participating. Furthermore, privacy was ensured insofar as the participants were not forced to reflect or comment on sensitive issues they consider personal. According to Wilson and MacLean (2011:600), privacy becomes significant when the researcher studies topics that relate to sexual behaviour and violence towards "minorities" where the researcher may need to ask the participants sensitive questions about their private lives. Thus it is important that responses to such questions remain confidential.

## **4.7 CONCLUSION**

This chapter discussed the methodology used in the study on the need for safe spaces. The chapter emphasised the necessity for using social constructionism as an ontological approach and the epistemological approach of interpretivism. This was followed by the discussion on the use of qualitative design and the discussion on the sampling procedures, data collection methods and analysis processes. The chapter was concluded with the ethical consideration a researcher has to bear in mind with regard in conducting research; these considerations meet the ethical standards set by the North-West University.

## CHAPTER 5

# THE NEED FOR SAFE SPACES ON THE NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY POTCHEFSTROOM CAMPUS: FINDINGS

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Consider the following quote of one of this study's participants concerning the position of sexual minority students on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University:

*...to be honest I have not heard of anyone in the university who has reported a crime against discrimination because of their sexuality, this may mean that because students are not aware of the policies or laws concerning sexual orientation, they find it hard to go and report the incident because they also do not know what to expect when they report the incident* (Batso, lesbian student).

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews with lesbian and gay students of the North-West University's Potchefstroom campus who served as participants in the study. The chapter comprises several subsections which reflect the various sub-themes of the interview schedule. These sections provide a comprehensive discussion of the narratives of the ten gay male students and ten lesbian students regarding their experiences on this specific university campus.

As noted, the various headings and subheadings used in the chapter reflect the thematic sections from chapters 2 and 3 as well as the interview schedule. Section 5.2 focuses on the views of gay male students' and lesbian students' experiences on the university campus.

The **first section** of this chapter focuses on the **personal and group identity construction**, in which the discussion encompasses a focus on how the participants construct their personal identities, their group identities and gender performances. The **second section** of this chapter provides a comprehensive discussion of the **students' narratives of their experiences on their university campus**. The main focus of this section is on the campus lives of these individuals. However, how their campus lives differ from other contexts, such as family, church and their communities at large are also compared. **Lastly** the chapter encompasses a discussion on how these participants view and understand the concept of a **safe space**. This section focuses on the participants' awareness of current university policies and the necessity of these policies to protect gay and lesbian rights and recommendations on policies that would afford gay and lesbian

students equal rights. This section further centres on how individuals describe or define safe spaces and a safer campus, the forms which these safe spaces may take and lastly, how such safe spaces may have long-term impacts on participants.

## **5.2 PERSONAL AND GROUP IDENTIFICATION**

The themes used to guide the discussion centres on students' personal and group identification. This section is informed by the discussion of gay and lesbian students' personal and group identity construction, and gender and identity performances.

### **5.2.1 Personal identity construction**

What follows are subsections in which the participants reflected on defining their sexual orientation.

#### **(a) *Defining the gay male identity***

In terms of the first sub-theme used in the interview schedule, the participants were requested to state whether or not they regard themselves as gay. All participants confirmed their sexual orientation as gay.

In terms of the confirmation of their sexual orientation, six participants, Alan, Bradley, Enris, Mxolisi, Santo and Thinus, indicated that their homosexual identity was characterised by their physical and sexual attraction to other men. Here Alan justified his physical attraction to other men by stating that he "...does not feel any attraction to girls" and therefore he "must" be gay, whereas Thinus equated his sexual desire for other men to an emotional attraction: "...it's just a feeling" and it is "...a part of me, it's not something that I can just wake up and decide to erase or perform some magic and its gone". Furthermore, Thinus noted that he has been aware of his sexuality since kindergarten. According to him, during those times it was "...uncomfortable because you cannot just go around kissing boys" therefore one needs to "...keep control" over oneself. Bradley and Santo justified their sexual orientation stating that "...it is who I am and I can't change that". Enris and Mxolisi shared similar justifications that they are "...gay because that is what I am, how I was born". Mxolisi claimed in this regard that

*...if we were to trade sexual orientations [with our heterosexual counterparts], I wouldn't trade mine for any of the orientations because my orientation is who I am and I love being me, though there was a bit of weirdness when I became aware of my sexual attraction to other men, and I should say that there is still some weirdness when I think about my sexual orientation. It becomes weird because when you come to discovering that*

*you are gay you look at yourself as if you are crazy or something is wrong with you. Before you discover who you are, there is a certain way in which you were socialised, heterosexual values and norms in my case, so you start to feel weird in a sense that you tend to get confused and start asking if your whole life will be a lie. A lie in the sense that you lived a heterosexual life only to find out that you are homosexual, then you end up asking yourself questions such as: how am I sure that I won't discover that I am something else apart from heterosexual and homosexual? Will I ever stop and say I have discovered myself or am I going to keep discovering myself?*

This statement was similar to that of Santo who thought it "...weird having to be aware of your likes for other men for the first time". These participants also shared a common thought that it is not as significant to try to display characteristics that shows that one is gay, as Thinus argues, "...I don't feel like I have to fit into a gay profile or something", and with Alan noting that "...I like to think of myself as just a normal person, I don't like...being the typical gay person or being the guy that straightens my hair or wear fancy clothes and all that kind of stuff, so I don't display anything". Unlike the above participants, four of the other gay male students, Bob, Larry, Mario and Tshiamo argued that, regardless of displaying attraction to other men, they did not regard it as of importance to equate their sexual orientation to the physical attraction to other men. They all justified their gay sexuality to the gender role they play and traditional feminine characteristics they possess. On the one hand, Tshiamo mentioned that "...I am gay because I have always liked doing all these things that are socially meant for girls, like cooking and cleaning" and Bob mentioned that "...I have always loved wearing girls clothes and looking all girly". On the other hand, Mario and Larry characterised their gay identity by the traditional behavioural patterns and their personality. Larry alluded to the fact that "...I identify as gay because I always feel the need to nurture, care and be compassionate", while Mario related his experiences to being "...submissive and soft". Bob and Mario consider it important to display characteristics of one's gender identity in relation to one's sexual orientation because (as per arguments in favour of a cisgender identity), just as it may be important, according to Mario, "...for heterosexual men to feel the need to show that they are manly by cutting their hair instead of letting it grow or wearing weaves". Tshiamo also states in this regard that:

*...it is important to display characteristics associated with gay identity because it often works to your advantage, when I display characteristics associated with my identity I am saying that I am comfortable with who and what I am, unlike those who do not display it, because they are afraid of*

*adversity. For example, I believe myself to have a feminine speaking tone and I am ok and comfortable with it.*

Bob, a Faculty of Arts student, argued that "...I have always seen myself as flamboyant and I think that's what characterises my gay identity. I think the gay identity is oftentimes associated with flamboyance and outspokenness". He further argued "...that my gay identity is always associated with the love of fashion, I love fashion and I love shopping, if I had the skills I would become a fashion designer; I mean fashion designing has always been associated with gay identity as well". Mario also mentioned that gay people come in different colours, shapes and sizes and "...if I am more girly, I don't expect all gay men to be girly, others may not be as girly as I am; others are conservative and not as outspoken as others are. Therefore if a person is comfortable with their appearance, then they need to be accepted for who they are and want to be".

**(b) Defining the lesbian identity**

Just like the gay participants were asked to confirm whether they identify themselves as gay, lesbian students were also asked to indicate their sexual orientation. Each of the ten participants confirmed their sexual orientation as lesbian.

In keeping with their gay male counterparts, ten participants argued that in order for them to uphold their lesbian identity, their homosexuality was indicative of their sexual attraction to other women. Batso and Brenda, students in the Faculties of Arts and Economic and Management Sciences, also indicated that their emotional attraction to other women may be an indicator of their sexuality. Zintle noted she has been attracted to women from a very young age, although she initially found it uncomfortable to express yourself when she was younger. She argues that, "...I am a lesbian and that is what I am and I don't even consider changing my sexuality at all because society has its own opinion about lesbian". In keeping with this, Lungile mentioned that "...I am a lesbian and I love myself the way I am". Their arguments were shared by Precious. Regardless of her love for the way she is, Precious indicated that she believes that she is a lesbian because she does not and never had any sexual "spark" for boys; however, whenever she was with women it felt "right" and was sexually attracted to them. She further indicated that her experimentations with dating a boy in the past, to "prove" to herself whether she was lesbian or straight, led her to the conclusion that she was lesbian. She stated that "...I dated a guy once in my high school years, it never lasted even a year. The reason it never lasted was that I felt like I was wasting my time and wasting someone else's time by pretending to be sexually attracted to him when I was really not. I felt that we were worlds apart, however when I met a girl, maybe

for a chat I would feel differently or I would feel that there is a 'spark' compared to the experiment I executed".

Ellen, Sally and Zack indicated that their sexuality is not only characterised by their attraction to other women, but also manifests in their physical appearance and the activities they like to engage in. Ellen states, for example, that "...after realising that I am more involved in the things that are traditionally manly...well I thought I must be lesbian and from there-on I referred to myself as a lesbian...and I am happy with that self-actualisation". This thought underscores the preceding references to the cisgender approach of the gay male students.

Precious exclaimed that though it took her some time to figure out what she was feeling towards other women, she states: "...I had lesbian friends but never thought I would discover myself to be lesbian as well. I discovered that I was a lesbian when I was at a restaurant and saw this lady and she was such a beauty and just started admiring her, then I asked her out and she agreed and that was the day I discovered that I was a lesbian and the only thing that was left was to come out to my friends. After having discovered my lesbian identity, it also came to my mind that before I came out I was just in denial and afraid of how people will see me and how they would treat me."

In addition to exploring the participants' narratives on whether they define themselves as gay or lesbian, the focus was on their views on the stereotypes associated with how their gender identities are indicative of particular stereotypes associated with their sexual orientation.

### **(c) Stereotypical gender depictions**

Ten gay participants, Alan, Bradley, Bob, Enris, Larry, Mario, Mxolisi, Santo, Thinus and Tshiamo, identified masculinity as behaviours and roles associated with boys. Six of them, Alan, Bob, Bradley, Enris, Mxolisi and Santo displayed a more androgynous interpretation, since they noted that if a man identifies as gay, he does not necessarily have to act in a feminine or masculine way. Alan states in this regard that although

*...I gym a lot but that's for myself, it doesn't mean because I'm male I need to act masculine. I think the world today gives you the space to express yourself and not every man is masculine or all feminine people are gay.*

Bradley echoes this thought by stating that "...I believe that I don't have to be girly for people to see me as female, neither do I have to be manly to be seen as male". Bradley's reason for this is that it is not everyone who will conform to the preconceived ideas and notions of how one ought to display oneself. These ideas and socialisation include that a girl should or should not act in a particular manner or should wear certain types of colours that 'supposedly' enhances femininity; for example, a girl must have a touch of pink in her

wardrobe to show their feminine side and a boy should have blue clothes to show that he is a male; men are expected to have “buffed up” bodies that show strength and their masculinity and women are then expected to be “petite” and “slim-curve” to be viewed as feminine. Bradley believes that, stereotypical ideas are associated with gender and sexual identity; it may be difficult for one to freely explore one’s own ideal identity where one can express who one is. He further highlighted that all persons, whether heterosexual or homosexual, need to be given an opportunity to freely express themselves in terms of how they portray themselves and therefore societies and the world at large need to move away from these stereotypical ideas which may be furthering the discrimination against other sexual identities. Four of the participants, Larry, Mario, Thinus and Tshiamo, believed that masculine and feminine behaviours can be related to the person’s comfortability, which is a state in which a person is at a physical, emotional ease, relaxed and free from constraints. Mario believes that “...a person should act according to his own comfortability, for example. I am a male gay student and I am feminine; I like putting on make-up and I sometimes wear weaves and I am comfortable with that”. Tshiamo stated that “...I love handbags and heels yet I am male and gay, which means that I might be male and still be feminine and other people might be females and still be masculine because they feel comfortable with that.” These statements were echoed by Thinus who noted:

*...I don't feel like I should be manly, but I don't feel like I should be feminine as well...it just feels like society has these prescriptions of what you should be and should not be...I don't really feel the need to fill the role that they want me to...going with what society thinks kind of oppresses you...no not oppresses you, but confines you. I mean, be who you want to be.*

With the same definition background of masculinity and femininity, seven participants indicated that they do not believe that when one is lesbian, she has to act manly or show great strength, be a member of a soccer team or only dress up in clothes that are mainly designed for men. Caroline noted that one can still wear a dress and identify as lesbian, which means that just because you are lesbian does not mean that you have to portray a masculine character or expression. Precious, who studies in the Faculty of Arts, noted that if one is comfortable with oneself and how one portrays one’s sexuality then the opinions of others need not matter. This is because whatever the identity that you project, you remain true to yourself and do not attempt to conform to societal expectations. Zack, an Educational Science student, indicated that she “...loves to play soccer and is not a fan of dresses, and she is very comfortable with herself” because she does not allow society’s views of what is normal oppress and suppress her.

### 5.2.2 Group identification

This subsection focuses on the distinction between whether the participants chose to associate with other self-identified homosexual individuals or chose to follow a more individualised disposition with regard to their sexual orientation.

#### **(a) *The necessity of having homosexual friends and heterosexual friends***

Nine of the self-identified gay male participants, excluding Alan, and eight lesbian participants (excluding Ellen and Zack), reported having friends who were gay and commented on the importance of associating with others like them (with regard to their sexuality) for different reasons. Their reasons ranged from socialisation with those who share similar needs, such as the need for equality, protection and the need to be heard and mobilised/recognised (Caroline and Mario), associating with people who face the same adversity (Precious), having friends as a support system in coming out and being able to express themselves comfortably without judgement. Mario, Thinus and Santo felt that having friends that are gay or lesbian is "...comforting" when one is faced with adversity, while Larry emphasised that it is important that when one has to "...come out of the closet" there are others who have gone through a similar situation and who are potentially able to provide you with a "...feeling of safety and excitement", a thought echoed by Thinus. According to Ennis, gay and lesbian communities offer more support and understanding of one's situations and experiences than the heterosexual community which may merely "tolerate" the gay and lesbian community, primarily because of the provisions in the South African Constitution and the policies of the University against homophobic discrimination.

Therefore, according to Bob, having gay and/or lesbian friends at the University is like having a "...second family" which will protect and support you in the face of adversity in that particular environment. Although some participants (Batso, Bob and Tshiamo) view it as "...fun" having a gay friend who experiences the same things as you and you have a "...connection" (Brenda) with that person, Alan, Ellen and Zack emphasised that it is not "...necessarily important" to have homosexual friends. Ellen stated that "...you can still have a friend who is not gay or lesbian and they still understand and support you as though they are experiencing the same things as you". Ellen's reasons for considering it unnecessary to have a homosexual friend were based on how her heterosexual friends may give the support that is no different to that of a homosexual friend, because it is all about understanding and loving and accepting her for who she is. She further indicated that often it is someone who has been through rejection, isolation or discrimination of some kind, who will understand how a person feels when rejected. She states "...most of my straight friends have been subject to discrimination based on the colour of their skins, felt isolated and rejected, and therefore with

what they have experienced, which also makes them feel like a minority; they understand the struggles of a minority group and they understand and are able to give support knowing how it feels to be rejected and discriminated against. And they wouldn't want someone else to suffer for being unique or different". Zack indicated that it is not necessarily about whether her friend is gay or lesbian, it is rather about having a "...strong support system..." from either homosexual or heterosexual friends. Zack added "...you can have gay and lesbian friends but their level of support may be low, and on the other hand you can have straight friends and they are the strongest supporters, so it is not necessarily about gayness or straightness but what can be brought to the table" in terms of friendship and support.

**(b) *Assimilation into a group or individualisation***

Seven out of ten gay male students and eight lesbian students deemed it significant to be part of existing homosexual groups on their campus. Their reasons ranged from visibility and recognition (Batso and Tshiamo), embracing diversity (Zintle), a sense of belonging and liberation (Bob, Larry and Lungile) and meeting with people who share similar experiences and support with regard to the disclosure of their identity (Lungile). Larry, a Faculty of Arts student, thought that being in a group that supports gay students and cater for gay students' needs is "liberating", while Mario and Tshiamo (in Natural Sciences and in the Faculty of Arts, respectively) noted that being assimilated into a group is "cool" because a person gets to have fun while bonding with other gay and lesbian students without having to think that you might be an outcast and it is a "great experience". This is because sometimes people in the group may say things that they went through and you tend to learn from them and you also find people who are a bit older than you and have had more experience than you and therefore learning from them makes it a "great experience" (Larry). Bob, a student in the Faculty of Arts, emphasised that the reason people feel liberated and excited about being in a group is that the people within the gay community regard all members as a "solid family" away from home, where everyone can freely express themselves and receive "great" response and support. Three of the gay male students, Bradley, Enris and Tshiamo, emphasised that it is important for one to be part of a visible group on campus in which one is empowered to fight against marginalisation and laws or policies that govern the institution which favours the exclusion of sexual minorities. Enris, a student in the Faculty of Arts, notes, "... it is important to be in a visible group on campus, especially if the group is a revolutionary movement to restructure or change policies to be inclusive". Lungile stated that "...being in a group of gay and lesbians is awesome because you know that when you don't have a voice there is a group that is willing to voice out for you and support you as well with coming out of the closet".

Three gay (Thinus, Santo and Alan) and two lesbian (Ellen and Zack) participants did not share the same positive association with regard to being part of a visible group on campus. Thinus attributed his resistance of being part of a visible gay group to the fact that he sees it unnecessary to make himself visible. This notwithstanding, he does mention the positive aspects that may result for other gay people who join such groups, such as an "...improved self-esteem" and having "improved self-confidence", a thought echoed by Santo. Ellen and Thinus viewed these groups "...as culprits" (Ellen) or as the "...cause" (Thinus) of furthered segregation between heterosexuals and other sexual minorities, in that when one is seen in such a group, one tends to be treated differently by members of the overall campus community or those who had no idea that they were gay or lesbian, prior to joining the group. Santo further emphasised that visible gay groups sometimes lose their focus on being different and they start to pursue equality with heterosexuals; since heterosexuality is regarded as normal, these groups then try to reinforce normality according to what is considered normal by the heterosexual community in the group, thus leaving the groups not knowing what they really want. Alan elaborated on this point in noting the following:

*...being in a visible group is like fighting to be like other people rather than embracing differences...our differences are what make us unique and trying to equalise myself with another person means that I regard how other people behave as normal [or] heterosexuals and myself as abnormal, because I do not fit into the heterosexual category.*

Zack also mentioned that such groups are mostly important for those individuals who may require more support in coming out and are still in the process where they need to associate with people who only share the same experiences before associating with those who share similar interests, be it heterosexuals or homosexuals.

These were the participants' views on assimilation and individualisation. The next subsection focuses on the campus climate for gay male and lesbian participants.

### **5.3 UNDERSTANDING GAY AND LESBIAN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES ON CAMPUS AND IN DIVERSE CONTEXTS**

The main emphasis of this section is on the campus lives of these individuals, however, a comparison is also drawn between how these lives differ from other contexts, such as family, church and their communities at large. The first part of this section underlines the **participants' definitions and views of the closet**. Secondly, a focus on the gay and lesbian participants' **behavioural changes in different contexts**, e.g. church, family and community at large. The following sub-themes encompass this subsection: **disjuncture between on- and off-campus behaviour** and **similar on- and off-campus behaviours**.

Finally, the subsection provides an overview of the **experiences of gay and lesbian students on campus**, thus the negative and positive experiences respectively.

### 5.3.1 The closet

Participants were asked to define the closet, state whether or not they were out of the closet on campus, if they have ever thought of remaining in the closet on campus and lastly if their behaviour on campus differs from the one displayed in other contexts of society.

All participants provided a definition of the closet and assigned particular attributes to the symbolic image of the closet. Some defined it as an "...uncomfortable" place (Bradley, Precious, and Batso, students in the Faculties of Law and Arts) and "...confining" (Alan) where you display a "...false identity" (Thinus). It was also associated with "...depression" (Tshiamo, Precious and Zintle) and "...no liberation" (Dee and Mario), whereas Brenda thought it provides a place of "...safety", regardless of its discomfort. Several participants noted that the closet is a place filled with "...restrictions" (Santo) and a place of "...confusion" (Bob), since one can be confused about which identity one needs to adapt to in order to escape adversity. Thinus emphasised that the closet is not "...freeing" because people tend to be "...private" and thus end up "...acting" like someone they are not. Alan and Batso argued that, although the closet may be a "...safe" place it becomes uncomfortable as it is difficult to express oneself because there is no other person to confide in but the "...self" who is basically "...stuck" in the closet. Tshiamo, Precious and Zintle further noted that such "...restrictions" (Zintle) and "...self-captivity" (Tshiamo), coupled with the "discomfort" (Precious) that arise from the closet may cause depression in the lives of the closeted people because they do not know what is to be expected, either adversity or tolerance and acceptance, once they are out of the closet, as was the case for Bradley and Ennis. Brenda, who studies Economic and Management Sciences, stated that "...when you are in this place you feel trapped and safe at the same time, trapped in the sense that you are living in a world that is isolated and no one to reach out to, and safe in the sense that you never know what the future may hold when you finally come out. You start questioning the safety and the available support".

Included in the interview schedule was a question on whether the participants considered themselves as 'out of the closet' on their university campus. All the self-identified gay male and lesbian participants affirmed to being out of the closet on the university campus. Four of the participants, Bob, Bradley, Mxolisi and Santo noted that they only recently came out. Larry recalled that although some universities do not provide a "...safer place" to come out, most of them, however, provide an atmosphere where students can "...feel free" to come out, through a provision of inclusive policies on diversity. Bob argued that, in most cases, a

person will only come out of the closet after coming across or meeting a few homosexual people on campus which, according to Mario, means that one has to determine the attitudes towards homosexuals on campus in order to verify whether the campus is a "...nice" place for one to "...disclose" one's identity. This thought was echoed by Bradley who stated that "...it is through motivation, not only from students but also an initiative from lecturers as well, that gay students will consider disclosing their identity to the public and live comfortably". Thinus (a Faculty of Arts student) reported that he came out in high school and never had difficulty on the university campus and just continued to live his life as a gay male student. Batso, who studies in the Faculty of Arts, added that remaining in the closet means that one has not fully accepted oneself for who you are and what you are.

Six out of ten gay male and only two lesbian participants reported having considered to remain silent or in the closet on campus for various reasons. These reasons varied from "...stigmatisation" (Alan and Dee), "...discrimination" (Larry), "...social image" (Lungile) or how homosexuality is viewed by the wider campus community based on potential "...stereotypes" (Enris) assigned to sexual minorities and "...exclusion" (Bradley) from certain activities. If there was a change, Alan noted that he would go back into the closet. He described coming out as "non-ideal" because it is not an easy process. This is because, once one is out of the closet, there is another world of discrimination that one has to face, which may seem "...nice" when viewed from when a person is inside the closet, however there is a possibility of "...hostility" once the person is outside the closet. He noted that "...it is this hostility that would make one want to go back into the closet".

According to Larry, a Faculty of Arts student, it is often the lack of a solid support structure, from family and friends which could make people consider going back to being in the closet. He also cites not being able to cope with the demands of a heterosexual society on how people ought to behave, structures that exclude sexual minorities and the fact that sexual minorities are constantly being reminded of how "...sinful", "...unacceptable" and "...un-African" their sexual orientation is, as further reasons to remain closeted. Lungile, a lesbian health sciences student, stated that "...if it was possible for me to go back to the closet I could have done it a long time ago; I mean having to be ridiculed and being called '*Indoda*' [a man], while I am a woman and being excluded from women's activities because I was thought of as 'rough', that could have been enough reason for me to go back into the closet".

Those who noted having not considered staying in the closet on campus argued that they have not done so because they had already been out of the closet before they entered university and considered coming out of the closet as "risk taking". Thinus noted that he came out of the closet in high school, therefore by the time he came to the university, he was

comfortable with the fact that he was gay and therefore did not necessarily see the reason why he should "...temporarily" go back into the closet. Tshiamo, who studies in the Faculty of Arts, argued that he did not remain closeted because he thought he would make a difference in terms of others being encouraged to "...embrace their differences" and embrace who they are "...without feeling sorry for themselves and without feeling inadequate to change negative views directed towards gays by the campus community". Brenda, an Economic and Management Sciences student, noted coming out of the closet is a big risk and once one has taken that risk one would not want to go back into the closet and decided to take yet another risk on campus not knowing what the outcomes might be, so if you were out in high school it is not necessary to hide your sexuality when you get to university.

As part of the section discussing the closet, it was seen as appropriate to include a discussion on how the behaviour of participants changes in different contexts. These different contexts ranged from interactions with others outside the campus context (e.g. with family, church members and when they are with friends).

### **5.3.2 Participants' behavioural changes on and off campus**

As noted before, the main emphasis of this section is on the campus lives of these individuals but also comparing how their lives differ from those in other contexts. This subsection discusses participants' narratives on how their behaviours differ across contexts such as church and family, compared to their behaviours on campus. Firstly, the disjuncture between on- and off- campus behaviour is discussed. Following the first discussion is the discussion of similar on- and off- campus behaviour.

***A disjuncture between on- and off-campus behaviour:*** Seven gay male and three lesbian participants affirmed that persons' behaviour and how they "...carry" themselves, change when those individuals are with their families and at a place like church. This change of behaviour is due to several reasons, including a family's opposition to your sexual orientation (Sally, Brenda, Thinus and Larry) and their religious beliefs (Mxolisi). Thinus noted that he does not really go to church, but his behaviour on campus differs from the one displayed at home, for the reason that his parents are not comfortable with "...it" and they aren't "...accepting". He further noted that he cannot be as "...flamboyant" at home as he is at university, thus he has to tone it down when he is at home. Larry believes that when you come out to your family it often serves as a disappointment to them, and therefore having to act all "...gayish" in front of them becomes uncomfortable for him because he thinks that he is exacerbating the situation. Having grown up in a strict Christian family, Mxolisi stated that his behaviour on campus and with friends differs greatly from the behaviour he displays at home and at church. He recalled a memory when he and his family were discussing issues

of homosexuality. He remembers his parents stating that if any of their kids turned out to be gay, they should be gay "...outside" their house, but when they come inside the house they should "...come back straight". Santo and Zintle shared a similar experience. When their parents would note that if a child is gay in their family, Santo's mother indicated that "...if a child of mine chooses to be gay, they should be gay outside the house where my eyes won't see but when they get back here, they should be normal" and Zintle recalls her parents' assertions towards homosexuals: "...you can be gay or lesbian as much as you want as long as I won't see it but when you come back be prepared to act like a normal person". Enris recalled an instance where he was still closeted and went to church and heard the pastor preaching about how sinful homosexuality is and how disobedient homosexuals are to the Word of God. When he finally came out, his behaviour on campus had to be different from the behaviour displayed at church since it would trigger "...negative attitudes" towards him and he would possibly experience emotional abuse and discrimination from members of his congregation. Santo argues that being born into a Black traditional family, it becomes difficult when you are a gay child and want to express how you feel to your family. He attributes this to the fact that you get subtle and explicit warnings that you will get "...disowned", "...kicked out" of the house and "...get cut off" and no longer receive financial support. Brenda, a Black Economic and Management Sciences student, recalled a memory when she first came out of the closet to her parents, they "...threatened" to cease their financial support of her studies, claiming that whenever she is ready to be "...straight" then they would again reinstate their financial support. Thinus, a Faculty of Arts student, indicated that as a gay male child in the family you are often requested to choose to either get a wife or spend the rest of your life alone. This, according to him, may result in feelings of "...anger", "...sadness" and "...loneliness". He believes that it is the parents' responsibility to make their gay child feel "...comfortable" with himself, not "...criticize" him and the child "...must not" be persuaded to become someone and something he is not.

Participants further commented on the overt and covert discrimination they experience outside campus. The discrimination experienced by these participants, as discussed below, may be a possible explanation of their behavioural changes when in different environments. Seven gay male and five lesbian participants indicated that they have been victims of discrimination outside the context of the university. These included Tshiamo's remarks on how when he walks outside campus or at home he overhears people calling him a "...Faggot" or "...*stabane*" (an isiZulu derogatory word for "gay"). Thinus recalled that his grandfather removed him out of his will and that his aunt and cousins "...badmouthed" him, and he was told that it is "...unnatural" by his sister. Ellen indicated that she has been a victim of verbal insults and threats which later escalated to actual abuse.

Feedback from other participants highlighted discrimination from the community members and their neighbours. Bradley noted that staying in a community that is "...traditionally heteronormative" and religious and not widely "...exposed" to gender and sexuality issues, one is often exposed to some sort of discrimination, be it overt or covert. He recalls being told that he needs to be "...spiritually delivered" before "...infecting" other young people in their community with demons. Santo and Mario noted that on numerous occasions have they been targets of physical and verbal abuse. However Santo stated that "...I pay no attention to people who say things or threaten to deal with me"; for example, a "...straight man once told me that one day they will deal with me and I will regret the day I 'decided' to become a 'sissy'". Ellen, an Educational Sciences student, recalled a situation where she was going to the mall, and because her attire consisted of a baggy pair of trousers and a big T-shirt, she all of a sudden heard words like "...*Mfazi-ndoda*" (direct translation woman-man), others were saying "...she thinks she's a man". Brenda also recalled a time when she was passing a group of men sitting at a certain corner she heard them saying that "...*uzi funela nje indoda ezo myenza abe straight*" (she just needs a man who will make her straight), which to her sounded like a threat of rape.

**Similar on- and off-campus behaviour:** Those who noted that their behaviour is the same or never different on campus and other contexts attributed their choices to more "open-minded families" (Batso and Precious), "personality" (Alan), a person's "level of self-confidence" (Bradley) and one's "level of self-acceptance" (Mario and Caroline). Alan, a gay male student who studies music, argued that changing one's behaviour in accordance with the different social contexts you are part of, is based on a personality issue in that his personality made him not change his behaviour at home or with friends. He argues that those that change behaviour are people who like living their lives wearing "...face masks"; therefore his behaviour on campus is no different from the behaviour at home or with friends. The benefit of having a family and friends who are open-minded, according to Bradley Batso and Precious, is that it helps one become free and liberated to express how one feels. They live their lives without the fear of being misunderstood, which may also result in an increase in one's self-confidence. Precious, a Faculty of Arts student, stated that "...I can never afford to go through my life constantly changing who I am to please other people". Alan recalled that although his family expressed disappointment when he came out of the closet, they never stopped supporting him and when they finally accepted him for he is, he then became clear about who he was with them and therefore became himself around them and never had to change his behaviour around them or around his friends and around campus. Emphasising self-acceptance, Mario, a Natural Sciences student, argues that it is how much one "...accepts" oneself that will determine behavioural changes in different contexts or

environments. He notes that if you have not fully accepted the fact that you are gay it becomes difficult for you to maintain a constancy in your behaviour between different social environments. He argues the following in this regard:

*...I have fully accepted that I am gay and I do not feel whatsoever obliged to change my behaviour as a gay person; how I behave on campus is how I behave at home and when I am with my friends. I don't attend church, but even if I attended church I don't think my behaviour would change. I believe that if people want to flaunt their gay identity they should not be restricted or feel limited by a place to do it.*

Some participants indicated that they did not recall times when they were discriminated against. These narratives may be possible justifications of their behaviours remaining the same or not changing when they are in different environments.

Three gay (Larry, Enris and Bob) and three lesbian (Batso, Precious and Zintle) participants were the only ones who provided a different response to the question regarding discrimination outside campus. Larry and Batso reported that they do not recall a time where they were discriminated against, however Larry noted that sometimes he might walk past a group of heterosexual males and they start laughing. However, he attempts to ignore that because he believes that he might mistakenly attribute their laughter to him being gay, while they might be laughing at something else. Enris stated that "...when I walk in the streets and pass a few people I feel as if I am too different and abnormal". He further argued that if the person's support structure is "...solid" they hardly notice people's opinions of them; this was a thought echoed by Bob. Zintle and Precious, lesbian students studying in the Faculties of Law and Arts respectively, indicated that the possible reason that some people face discrimination in their communities is that they "...flaunt" their sexuality in public thereby making heterosexual people "...question" their own sexuality and as a "...defence mechanism" they tend to act with violence towards gays and lesbians.

Having engaged on a discussion on the issues with regard to how gay male and lesbian participants view the closet and the disjuncture between their behaviour on and off campus, and similar behaviours on and off campus, the subsection to follow will focus on how the respondents experience being gay on the university campus.

### **5.3.3 Experiences of gay and lesbian students on the university campus**

Considering the responses to possible experiences of discrimination outside the campus in the previous section, the following subsection discusses the possible experiences of discrimination on the university campus and the need for safe spaces on the Potchefstroom

campus. The themes used to guide this discussion are based on the theoretical bases provided in chapter 3.

Thirteen participants (six gay and seven lesbian participants) acknowledged that they have been victims of discrimination on the university campus. The experiences that were associated with the discrimination on campus included the following: bullying (Enris, Ellen and Zack), isolation and/or loneliness (Sally), depression, anxiety, academic performance negatively affected (Alan and Brenda) and suicidal thoughts (Bob). Enris noted that as a result of discrimination, he was verbally and socially bullied on campus. He initially equated it with harmless roughhousing, but it later escalated to the level in which he was mentally affected. He recalls an experience where he was being called names like “sister” as an attempt to “...intimidate” him. Although it may often be difficult to recognise social bullying, Enris noted that he was aware that people were spreading rumours and lying about him and that caused him to isolate himself, since it seemed like his reputation was being destroyed. He added in this regard that

*...it is hurtful having to walk around campus that has people who, when they look at you they see a bad person or a person who has no morals. And this was all because of people who see a person as a threat to their own heterosexual sexuality, and in order to validate themselves they just end up deciding to ruin and destroy that person's reputation and image. And I don't think the very same people who destroy others' reputations are aware of the pain they inflict, the emotional, the social damage they end up causing in that person's life all because that person refuses to conform to their way of life, which is heterosexuality. Not that they have told me to change myself to be heterosexual, but their attitude and their actions of discrimination they have towards me proves to me that they want me to change who I am and what I am so that I can be as they call it 'normal' like them.*

According to Mxolisi, a gay Economic and Management Sciences student, who went through similar experiences where he found out through a friend that there were people in class who were gossiping about him and typified him as being dramatic and that they would never get close to a gay person like that, indicated that this kind of treatment from fellow students may have had a negative impact on his academic life and performance. Mxolisi stated “...had I not gotten the help I needed I would've failed some of my modules ...going to class had become a burden as well because you would think of class and start thinking about the negative treatment that you would possibly get when you get there, so I would have those

moments that when I think of class I would just feel a little sick and would miss the class because of feeling unsafe”. Alan also noted that with the verbal and emotional abuse that happened while he was staying in the university hostels, he felt that he was being treated like a “...nobody” and as a result his academics “...took a blow”. He indicates that “as you know most universities have what is called initiations which are based on heterosexual norms and standards, so during initiations I would not be allowed to take part in the activities because I was gay and not man enough as they proclaimed and I would be called names such as ‘sissy’ and ‘fag’. This led Alan to fearing for his friends as well, because he did not want his friends to suffer discrimination because of him. As a consequence, he felt that he had also disappointed his friends. He notes, “...you just think of yourself as unworthy of love and if people just bully you because you are gay then they might even bully you based on the things that they think are not fitting to the society”. Brenda, an Economic and Management Sciences student, shared an experience similar to that of Alan’s. She stated:

*I nearly left university because I would sometimes get teased and called a ‘bitch’ for being lesbian. So the treatment I was receiving made me nearly fail my modules. I mean imagine yourself coming to university to pursue your dreams, and you get treated badly because you are different, what would be your reason to remain in that university? I would ask myself what is the use of being here if the treatment I’m getting is making me fail the one thing I came here to do, which is to study? I mean who would want to study at a campus where its environment is not welcoming to people of difference and even making it hard for one to pursue that which they came for? I believe that every person should get their education that is free from discrimination, harassments and violence of any kind.*

Bob commented that “...when one experiences discrimination and being bullied endlessly, one becomes vulnerable to a whole lot of thoughts, such as whether or not one can ever be lovable and accepted. And when one keeps on being bullied, you end up asking whether such treatment will ever end or would it be better for one to just end their life”. Owing to this, he contemplated suicide because the pressure to ‘pass’ as heterosexual became insurmountable. He continues: “...imagine having to deal with the fact that you are gay and you have to deal with being bullied, being isolated and that the most important thing you came to university for, which are your academics, are taking a wrong turn. Having come to university to study, then you just find yourself having to deal with the fact that you are gay on a predominantly heterosexual campus and thus have to fit-in and conform to the norms and the standards of the university”. Lungile, a Health Sciences student, recalled a situation where she would walk on campus and be stared at and often people whispering after she

passed them. She states "...too often I would walk on campus and people would just stare and after a few seconds you hear them whispering "she looks like a man and walks like one too" to an extent that I would consider just reaching my destination and just stay there until late at night so that when I come back it's very dark and no one would care to notice...I would always watch my back since I do not know what might happen, maybe wake up in a hospital or wake up dead. The thing is you never know, so you need to always be on the watch out".

Cyber-bullying has become another platform through which homosexuals experience discrimination. Mario noted that although one might not be directly bullied on social media, one is affected when fellow students post hurtful statuses and images online that discriminate against homosexual individuals. He recalls seeing an image that read "gay is not okay" and "God hates fags" on a student's timeline. When he confronted the student about it, the student deleted the post. Precious also recalled receiving a text from an unknown number that read "Why are you trying to be like a man, can't you be woman enough?" Precious noted that the text made her feel unsafe on campus and got her "...scared" for her life because she did not know what would happen to her the next day.

The seven participants who had **not experienced discrimination** on campus cited that they may have had feelings of anxiety or fear of the unknown, which led to isolating themselves and a decline in their academic performance as a result. Bradley and Batso noted that it is not the fear of being discriminated against that worries some people in the gay community on campus, but the fear of the unknown or not knowing what tomorrow may bring, so that means one always has to expect the "good" or even the "worst". Bradley justified this fear when stating that "...you never know what might happen tomorrow, you might wake up tomorrow and find an anti-gay policy on campus". He argues that the fear of the unknown on its own may cause one to isolate oneself because of the fear that the people one is connected with might not be there when one faces discrimination. Larry said that "...I sometimes isolate myself from people because you never know when they may decide they don't want a gay friend, and that is a bit depressing". Santo and Caroline argued that they have never experienced discrimination on campus. Santo's justification was that sometimes people need to learn not to take everything to heart. The reason he has not experienced it is that he does not pay too much attention or entertain discriminatory remarks.

Participants (Batso, Caroline, Santo) also indicated that there have been **positive experiences** on campus regardless of how they felt about themselves. Caroline, a student in Natural Sciences, attributed her positive experience on campus to the type of friends that she surrounds herself with. She argues "...the reason campus is the best for me is because

my friends are so supportive and they are not prejudiced against any person of any kind. I think that is the reason campus is positive for me, so my friends make my campus experiences pretty great". Santo's positive experiences are attributed to the fact that he is a first year student and looking forward to the experience. He notes "I mean, what I would say are my positive experiences on campus so far are that I have not really experienced any negativity and that it looks like a pretty welcoming campus and so far my friends have been great". Batso indicated that her positive experiences of the campus include the fact that she has never been assaulted, though she does not know what might happen. The campus, at this stage, is a place where she found friends who accept her and she belongs to the group called *Campus Pride*. To her, the fact that a historically religious campus like Potchefstroom also allows the kind of societies that are considered to be "sinful" and "un-African"; it shows that there is progress, although it might not happen overnight and though the progress seems to be "slow". She does, however, believe that times are changing and the university is, in her own words, "...becoming a place where gays and lesbians are recognised. And if the university consists of faculties such as Educational and Social Sciences that touch on issues concerning homosexuality, then it means that the university is becoming modernised and not too traditional". Having provided the experiences of students on campus, it is important to focus on the participants' views regarding the management of campus and the possibility of safe spaces in the institution.

#### **5.4 SAFE SPACES**

This subsection focuses on the participants' views of safe spaces or safe zones. The discussion comprises their **awareness of the policies** that exist at the university, the **necessity of these policies in the protection of gay and lesbian rights, recommendations** as to what can be done to protect their rights on the specific university campus, and an emphasis will be placed on their views on the **necessity of designated venues and gay and lesbian students' organisations** as a form of safe spaces. Emphasis will also be placed on the forms which safe spaces can take, how these safe spaces could contribute to individual empowerment and what potential longer-term influence safe spaces could such have on the health, safety, identity development and education of homosexual students on the Potchefstroom campus.

#### **5.4.1 Awareness and necessity of campus policies on the protection of gay and lesbian rights**

All gay and lesbian participants acknowledged that they were **not** aware of the policies with regard to the protection of homosexual students on campus. Each of the twenty (20) participants regarded it as necessary for the university to have policies in place for the protection of gays and lesbian students. Alan, Batso and Brenda indicated that having policies in place may be advantageous for those individuals who are not in a position to fight for themselves. It should therefore be a legal obligation on the part of the management of the university to protect the rights of homosexual students and the university should thus put in place certain procedures and disciplinary measures that will help protect homosexual students. Thinus noted that, although he does not feel threatened on campus, policies are necessary insofar as they create a platform for other students to come out of the closet without fear and with the acknowledgement that there is protection provided by the university through inclusive policies. Mario stated "...the reason some people are still in the closet is because they are not aware of the policies, not that I am aware, but some people need solid statements from the university that specifies that gay and lesbian students are protected".

Santo and Caroline also recommended policies that are specifically disciplinary when it comes to the protection of homosexual students. It may contribute to the decline in bullying and other sexual orientation-based crimes on campus. Mxolisi stated that "...if students were told that if they verbally abuse another person they would get expelled, they would not do it with the fear of being expelled...which means that the university would be safer and a person can freely walk on campus without being verbally bullied". Some participants also noted that although the university embraces diversity, its diversity is mostly based on the cultural, religious and racial differences rather than differences in sexualities or sexual orientation (Bradley, Enris, Tshiamo and Batso). Tshiamo, a Faculty of Arts student, noted that the word diversity is broad and may seem inclusive; however, there are those dominant groups (e.g. heterosexuals) that are embraced more than others (homosexuals).

Participants also made additional suggestions to safeguard gay and lesbian students on the university campus. They noted that the policies should include suspension of people who commit any type of crime against homosexual students (Dee), be it bullying, harassment, intimidation or any other form of discrimination. Others suggested measures that would serve to protect the rights of gays and lesbians on campus, ranging from the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity as specifically protected categories (Larry, Mario, Santo) in the policy wording of university documentation to the need of the university's management to introduce initiatives to train staff and students on issues related to homophobia and how they themselves could contribute to combating such bullying and

discrimination. This, according to Bradley and Zintle (both students in the Faculty of Law), may show homosexual students that they are supported by both students and staff. Bob noted that to ensure that gays and lesbians and other sexual minorities are protected, the university must ensure that there are solid policies and surveys that are also meant for tracking the bullying or discrimination incidents on campus. These surveys will help to evaluate the effectiveness of these policies or laws. If these laws or the policies that are in place are not effective, the university's responsibility should be to seek more drastic disciplinary measures or policies. Mxolisi underlines these calls for acknowledging and supporting a sexually diverse student contingent by stating,

*...as a student I deserve to finish my education without having suffered discrimination and assault...if the university says that it embraces diversity it needs to make sure that those diverse groups complete their education free from violence or discrimination of any kind.*

Alan, Santo and Batso also mentioned that it is important that the campus security staff should be equipped with enough protection measures, such as 24 hours online or a protection service that will provide necessary information to the victims on how to handle the situation immediately after it happens and when one starts receiving threats and seeing bullying tendencies emerging. The staff should also be trained on how to deal with issues regarding violence towards homosexuals and how they should avoid secondarily victimising the victim who is reporting the incident. This according to Santo, an Engineering student, means that the "...mistreatment" of gay students that comes from the very campus security officers appointed to protect students should be "...dealt" with and the law should take its course in bringing justice to students who are victimised by the very people who are placed in positions to protect students. Such treatment, according to the quote provided by Batso, may be as a results of the fact that "...students are not aware of the policies or laws concerning sexual orientation, they find it hard to go and report the incident because they also do not know what to expect when they report the incident". Other participants noted that in order for the university to enforce policies or to restructure the policies, it needs to work together with the students (Batso, Santo) and determine the experiences of students and conduct confidential surveys annually (Tshiamo, Alan and Zack) about the campus climate and work together to put to place policies that have the inputs from homosexual students and students' organisations that might be in place at the university.

Participants indicated that these surveys must include "...questions concerning the challenges faced by gay and lesbian students" (Alan), "...how often these students report such crimes and how these crimes were dealt with by the campus staff" (Batso), and

“...ways in which the campus climate can be made inclusive”. These surveys should furthermore include the “...prevalence of anti-gay language and victimisation (assaults and harassments) in lectures and on the campus as a whole” (Santo), the surveys may “...allow students to comment on which university policies they feel are not inclusive and may lead to these students’ negative experiences on campus” (Zack), “...how they are affected by the presence of discrimination if they had ever been victims of it” (Tshiamo), and lastly participants indicated that those surveys may also encompass the questions on whether there are enough of or the availability of LGBTIQ+ student-related resources which address the creation of a positive climate and promote positive learning experiences for students (Batso). Participants also noted that for the policies to be more effective, the university needs to provide clear information through which homosexual students can know their rights and also know what is expected of them and what to expect from the university staff.

Having discussed the students’ awareness of the university’s policies and their necessity in promoting a positive climate, the next subsection provides participants’ narratives of their views of safety in the form of safe spaces, the forms in which these spaces may take and also what constitutes a safe campus and how these safe spaces affect their livelihoods.

#### **5.4.2 Defining a safe space/zone**

Seven specific descriptions were given by participants as to what could constitute a safe space or a safe zone. Safe spaces were described as a “...place where I am protected from harm and danger, I would call it a safe haven” (Sally) and a “...building where people can go and discuss topics such as being gay and experiences on campus” (Thinus). Batso defined a safe space as “...an autonomous space for people who feel that they are marginalised to come together to talk about their experience of discrimination”, a “...space where there is no victimisation and anti-LGBT violence, harassment and hate speech are not tolerated” (Precious), “...a place where you feel comfortable with yourself and where people accept you for who you are” (Ellen), a place or a building where difference is appreciated and embraced (Brenda) and a space free of homophobia (Larry). These sentiments were echoed in other descriptions which posited a safe space as a “...place of freedom where I am able to freely act and speak out or voice my experiences and ideas” (Mxolisi) and a context “...where people are free to express themselves and their sexuality without being judged” (Bradley). Tshiamo shared similar thoughts with Bradley when he noted, “...a safe space is a place where I can fully express myself without the fear of being unwelcome and being interrogated about my sexuality”. Caroline describes a safe zone as a place where the respect for others, regardless of whether they are gay or lesbian or straight, is “...encouraged”. Thinus and Larry noted that although the “building” does not have to consist

of any "...LGBTQ signs" or be termed a building which comprises only a gay and lesbian student contingent, it should be a building consisting of different academic activities where other people will not be able to know the reasons for going to the building. Alan described a safe space to be a place where one feels comfortable with one's friends, regardless of their sexual orientation. He indicated "...a safe space is a place where I can feel comfortable with my friends, gay or not, it is about me having a feeling of safety without having to worry about how my sexuality may be problematic to them. I believe that the fact that people befriend me means that they appreciate me for being me and that's the safest place one can be, being with people who love you regardless of your sexuality".

When asked to define what would characterise a safer campus, most participants noted that specific protective policies for gay and lesbian students would make the campus more secure for them to feel comfortable to express themselves. Bob, on the one hand, stated that "...the adjustment of policies to include gays and lesbians would [make] a campus...safer", a thought echoed by Thinus. Alan, on the other hand, attributed a safer campus to something that is psychological, in that he believes that if people become educated about homosexuality and come into contact with homosexual people, their perceptions may possibly change and thus the misconceptions they have about gays and lesbians would change and the campus could be safer and understanding. A safer campus was also described as a place where, regardless of cultural and religious differences, sexual diversity could be embraced and where no group is more highly regarded than others (Batso and Sally). Zintle indicated that "...a safe campus is a place where the education offered is free from harassment, discrimination and violence". Similarly, Enris described a safer campus as "...a place that is intended to be free from conflict and actions that are threatening, so that students can finish their studies free from discrimination".

#### **5.4.3 Designated venues and students' organisations for gay and lesbians on campus**

Seven gay students (Thinus, Bradley, Mxolisi, Enris, Alan, Larry and Mario) and one lesbian student (Dee) indicated that it was not useful to have a designated venue for gay and lesbian students on campus. Thinus and Dee noted that these venues may not be useful and effective for those that are still in the closet because, when they enter or are seen entering those venues, it forces them *out* of the closet. This may be a somewhat bad thing if one has to be pushed to come out of the closet, rather than willingly and freely coming out. Thinus states in this regard that "...a person who is still in the closet may not possibly find it easy to go to a venue that clearly states, for example 'Gay students only', this is because the

moment they enter the building it involuntarily causes them to come out. If you did not want people to know you are gay, and maybe for some reason you need information on coming out and you decide to go to that building, people may automatically take it that you are gay, which possibly means you got out of the closet when you were not ready". In the case of Bradley, Mxolisi and Enris, they all indicated that when one is seen entering that specific venue it indicates the "...gay and lesbian space" (Enris). It may further exacerbate the occurrence of discrimination. According to Bradley, this is because a certain space that is meant for certain types of people tend make them vulnerable to attacks and probably vandalism of their structures and also become overpowered by groups that may seem to have the most influence on campus and against homosexuality". For Bradley, a Law student, this means that when people see you entering such designated venues, their perceptions of you may change for the better or worse. If, for example, they were positive, they may become more negatively inclined towards you because of your sexual orientation. He indicates that "...if, for example your friends do not know that you are gay and never mentioned how they feel about homosexuality, and they see you entering that venue, their attitude may possibly change, probably with a reason of how they were socialised while growing up". He continues, "This does not only extend to my friends...but you find that there are people who used to view you in a positive light, for example they thought you were a good person, and now their perceptions of you change from good to worse".

Alan's disregard of designated venues is associated with how such a communal space may only further contribute to "luring" other people to sin in a different way, mentioning that "...there seems to be some form of correlation between a group of homosexuals and their promiscuous and unruly behaviours". Alan noted that his sexuality is a "...personal thing", not something communal. Contrary to the aforementioned benefits of having lesbian and gay students' organisation on campus, five participants (Bradely, Dee, Thinus, Alan and Enris) noted that they were not part of a gay and lesbian organisation and that it was not important to have gay and lesbian students' organisations. One of the reasons for the possible disdain students may express towards having such an organisation, according to Alan, is that the gay and lesbian organisation would not necessarily change people's perspective, and such a movement would be "...stereotypically gay" and it tends to strengthen people's stereotypical views of gay people.

As opposed to those who noted a more negative view about communal safer spaces, twelve participants regarded it as necessary to have designated venues that are mainly for gay and lesbian students on campus. Tshiamo, Batso, Precious and Lungile, for example, indicated that having such a venue may create a platform where gay and lesbian people can be

visible, recognised and given the attention they need in terms of their safety and policies against discrimination that are not just generalised to the whole campus community but are specific and are reflective of the lived experiences of gay and lesbian students on campus. Tshiamo and Precious (students in the Faculty of Arts) noted that gay and lesbian students (and their organisations or movements) require and deserve the same and equal privileges as other societies on campus. Tshiamo believes that

*...just like other societies that have their venues where they discuss issues concerning themselves, gay and lesbian students have to be awarded similar venues, where one is able to express oneself. These venues may also help in empowering other gay and lesbian people to feel free knowing that there is a place they can run to for support.*

Similarly, Santo indicates that the university needs to grant equally opportunities for students to express their sexual identities in places where they feel comfortable and feel supported by people who share similar “experiences” and share similar “...goals in terms of vision provided by the organisation”.

Six gay (Bob, Tshiamo, Santo, Mario, Mxolisi and Larry) and nine lesbian participants (Batso, Precious, Caroline, Lungile, Brenda, Ellen, Zintle, Sally and Zack) commented on the importance of having lesbian and gay student organisations. They felt that it was important to have organisations that would support and potentially persuade the campus management to restructure and enact policies which advocate the rights of gay and lesbian students in order to encourage constructive change for all gender and sexual actors on campus. Tshiamo noted that the university should work with a gay and lesbian student organisation in order to know how students experience the campus climate and which steps need to be taken to address the needs, challenges and contributions of gay and lesbian students.

Santo commented on how a gay and lesbian student organisation may create a platform to meet new friends with common interests. In addition, it is also “fun” and it gives you an opportunity to meet diverse people, since it will be a sexual minority group. It introduces you to different people of different identities in terms of sexuality, race, cultural and religious background. Other important aspects of having a gay and lesbian student organisation include the fact that organisations also present many opportunities to learn more about oneself (Batso), and learn how other students who have faced adversity have dealt with certain situations, such as discrimination, bullying and coming out (Precious and Caroline). Some participants noted that such organisations offer the experience that one cannot have in the classroom, including having a platform to actively and openly express one’s sexuality

and themes that would include gender and sexuality. From the group of participants who expressed the importance of having such an organisation, only ten were in fact actual members of a gay and lesbian student organisation on campus (Batso, Caroline, Santo, Tshiamo, Sally, Larry, Lungile, Precious, Bob and Mxolisi) while three (Mario, Brenda and Zintle) noted that they are also members of organisations outside campus, such as the “I Am Gay” support network (an organisation which supports individuals) and the “Johannesburg Pride” (an organisation that provides a celebration of LGBTIQ+ life through events as well as a platform to continue the fight for equality and challenge the prejudice that the LGBTIQ+ community experience).

#### **5.4.4 Recommendations for safe space formations**

This subsection delineates specific formations for safe spaces.

##### **(a) *The university campus***

The campus climate tends to have an impact on how well students learn and how well they interact with their peers. For a campus to be a safe space, the university staff and students need to create a supportive environment for gay and lesbian students (Brenda). Participants indicated that the supportive environment provided can improve students’ academic performance (Mario). Santo and Caroline noted that students on campus need to understand that although people may differ in terms of their religious and/or cultural beliefs, anyone can be a “...resource” (Santo) for gay and lesbian students in terms of providing a safer environment and climate where gay and lesbian students can “...flourish” (Caroline) in their studies. Batso stated that the “...campus can be a safe space if there is an introduction of allies who will also promote a safe and inclusive environment”, which as a result will create a positive campus climate. Tshiamo added that an inclusive environment consists of “...inclusive” policies and “...nurturing practices”, counsellors and lecturers who are genuinely welcoming to all students. Mxolisi and Brenda attributed a safe university campus to a space where students are educated about diversity and support for homosexual students.

##### **(b) *One-to-one consultations***

Several participants (Batso, Brenda, Precious, Thinus, Tshiamo, Santo and Zintle) indicated that one-to-one consultation with either lecturers, psychiatrists, psychologists or social workers could help some students accept who or what they are. Santo, an Engineering student, noted that some individuals struggle with feelings of not being good enough, important enough and lovable. He states in this regard that, “I used to feel like I am not good enough for anybody because me being gay and all these stereotypical views about gays just

made me feel so different, and with some of the stories that one hears on media about gay and lesbian people being killed mercilessly, you end up thinking that gay lives don't really matter and are less important and you just don't feel loved". He therefore believes that social workers and psychologists may play a constructive role in the provision of support and counselling services for gay and lesbian students. Batso indicated that having a psychologist to talk to is also helpful for gay and lesbian students, because sometimes students do not necessarily have people to talk to about their experiences and what they are facing on campus. Psychologists working together with social workers can therefore play a constructive role in trying to prevent students from suffering from internalised homophobia or feelings that will affect their mental health or psychological well-being. Having a one-to-one conversation with the social worker, according to Precious, gives you time to "...talk" or "...cry" and it is an opportunity to look at the issues you are facing from a "...different perspective" with a person who will respect you and your opinions. Batso also commented on the fact that it is sometimes "...easier" to share your problems with a stranger than your family or friends, because psychologists or social workers help you find your own answers to problems without judging you, regardless of whether it may completely solve problems, but you may find it easier to "...cope" and "...feel happier". For Tshiamo, consultation with social workers helps him overcome anxiety and depression. Batso noted that by opening themselves up to what they are struggling with, the social support that gay and lesbian students receive from social workers may possibly help build resilience against stressful situations they experience.

Zintle stated that "...some people have difficulty loving and accepting who they are; they are often depressed and counselling can help them explore barriers to self-esteem and teach them ways in which they can make their happiness a priority". Students indicated how such one-on-one consultations may have long-term impacts on their health. These impacts on participants' health (emotional and psychological well-being) ranged from lower levels of depression (Zintle), higher levels of self-esteem (Santo) and less fear and anxiety (Lungile). Zintle further indicated that the availability of people to talk to, such as psychologists on campus, may reduce eating disorders and the rate of suicide and provides emotional and psychological stability, a thought echoed by Precious. The more educated people and students are, according to Thinus, the more they understand what discrimination and homophobia does to a person. Such understanding may eliminate the abuse toward gays and lesbians and therefore preventing gay and lesbian students from fearing for their future on campus. Noting that some students tend to internalise negative derogatory messages regarding their sexual orientation, safe spaces would contribute in the noted reduction in

substance use, abuse and possibly prevent students' suicidal thoughts (Bob), as noted in the preceding sections.

Thinus also suggested that the one-to-one consultation would be a "...great idea", however, it should *not* take place in a building that is specifically for gay or lesbian students, meaning that people should not have an idea as to why the person is going there. Participants also commented on the fact that lecturers need to create a space in which students can talk to them about what they struggle with (Batso). In terms of this, participants also suggested that lecturers should make students understand that they can be confidential sources of support for the students (Batso and Tshiamo). With lecturers, counsellors and psychologists as safe spaces, a positive education environment may be established.

**(c) Social activities for homosexual students**

Participants commented on the fact that social activities can be an effective form of a safe space, since people like to be "...part of something" (Santo) or be "...socially" (Brenda) included. Another reason given was that taking part in social activities frequently increases the student's well-being especially if they have less access to social events or groups that share an interest or participate with people they identify with (Batso and Tshiamo). Group activities and movie nights also strengthen the gay and lesbian community. Some participants considered movie nights as "...fun" (Thinus), a great way to meet friends, and the best way to stay connected to other people who share the same interests as you (Dee). Dee indicated that "...I believe that social activities are meant for uniting people who have the same interest, for example, creating a movie night may bring together students who may be homosexual or heterosexual, who may happen have an interest in movies; therefore social activities such as this may be the best way to connect, have fun and make friends".

**(d) The classroom as a safe space**

Ennis and Lungile, students in the Faculties of Arts and Health Science respectively, noted that a safe space in the classroom may be effective if the lecturer becomes an ally. This would ensure that, whenever students feel that if behaviour interpreted as discriminatory arises in the classroom, students should raise their voice and corrective measures should be taken towards those who discriminate against others. Zintle, a Law student, argues that "... just imagine you are sitting in class, you hear other students making these negative comments or slur and you are seated there, like no one's doing anything". Alan, Mario and Lungile noted that lectures can be used to educate people about the "history" (Alan), the "lives" (Lungile) and "experiences" (Mario) of gay and lesbian people and about homosexuality broadly. Participants (Bradley, Batso, Brenda, Zack, Ellen and Larry) indicated that an "inclusive" (Ellen) classroom is characterised by the acceptance of gay and

lesbian students by including them in class discussions where they will not feel “segregated” (Bradley) because of their sexual orientation and are made to feel comfortable and “free” (Larry) to express their views and ideas in class without feeling judged. Batso and Zack also indicated that a classroom should have an inclusive use of terminology, where the language used is specific and lecturers use positive references to gay and lesbian studies or theorists or people across history. Zack further pointed out that in most classrooms it may be assumed that the majority of students are heterosexual, resulting in language used that only caters for heterosexuals and is not inclusive of homosexual students. She stated that “...if for instance, a lecturer goes as far as using terms such as boyfriend or girlfriend instead of partner, the lecturer is using heterosexual terms and tends to assume that all students in the class are heterosexual”.

Not only did the participants comment on how a classroom can be used as a safe space, they also indicated the impact that such a space can have on their **academic achievements** in the long run. Participants (Thinus and Ellen, students in Faculties of Arts and Educational Sciences, respectively) noted that with stressors like bullying and harassment and derogatory language, gay and lesbian students are more likely to experience negative education outcomes. Ellen noted that “...I think the only way they can really achieve in their academics is when they feel comfortable with themselves, feel confident, and they feel confident to approach their teachers, and feel free in class. So if one is not comfortable...and the campus is not a safe environment, you’re not going to want to try hard, or work hard, or really achieve good marks”. Therefore with safe spaces and a supportive environment, there should be an improvement in the academic performance of gay and lesbian students (Thinus). Safe spaces can also contribute to students feeling liberated to take part in the inclusive campus events, also group assignments and group discussions. Safe spaces, including the classroom context, could contribute to an increase in class attendance, because students will feel free to go to a classroom that does not tolerate any discrimination and bullying or negative language against gays and lesbians.

When participants were asked whether they had **friends who have enrolled for gender and sexuality courses**, twelve participants indicated that they did not. Those who answered yes, indicated that their friends’ experiences were “...enlightening” (Thinus, Batso, Caroline), and their friends became more accepting of gay people. These courses also dealt with issues related to diversity and extended to a focus on themes relating to bisexuality, transgenderism and queer identities (BTQ). Thinus stated that the fact that his friends are aware and knowledgeable of their experiences of the gender and sexuality course, makes him feel “...excited” in the sense that if they were able to accept him; then other people may also if they are just informed.

Seven participants also commented on the **necessity of having openly gay/lesbian lecturers**. They believed that it was beneficial to have a lecturer who identifies as gay or lesbian for specific reasons. These reasons included lecturers becoming role models to gay and lesbian students. These lecturers, according to Batso (a Faculty of Arts student), encourage gay and lesbian students that if it was possible for them to attain such the status of being lecturers, the sexual minority students too can achieve whatever they set their minds to, regardless of what people's opinions may be concerning their sexual orientation. Another reason was that lecturers tend to be in the public eye and they are people that students can look up to and admire. Precious also indicated that a student's confidence is often improved through the knowledge that there are good gay and lesbian lecturers to look up to for inspiration. However, thirteen participants indicated that it is not beneficial to have a gay or lesbian lecturer for a variety of reasons. These included the view that the lecturer may, regardless of his or her sexual orientation, be able to enforce a safe environment and climate. Secondly, they noted that as much as the lecturer, regardless of sexuality, is sensitive to issues involving sexual minorities, you may still find gay and lesbian lecturers who do not promote or make an effort to provide a safer environment for gay and lesbian students. Sally recalled a situation where there was a gay lecturer who did not care about the lives of gay and lesbian students and would not make an effort to provide help to students coming to his office regarding their experiences. Sally added "...often the lecturer who you think would be your role model would turn out to be your worst nightmare or enemy". She mentioned that

*...often as a lesbian person I may not want to communicate my problems and experiences with, for example, straight people, but may find it constructive speaking to a lesbian or gay lecturer who has been through what I may be or might have gone through in terms of the discrimination or some kind of segregation regarding sexual orientation. And the lecturer you thought might be of help and a role model is unavailable to talk to students; it's as if their environment restricts them from discussing issues related to their sexual orientation or maybe they feel that being seen with a lesbian or gay student may destroy his or her image and may probably jeopardise his or her career.*

Overall all gay and lesbian participants indicated that lecturers in general, regardless of their sexuality, should be regarded as playing an important role in creating a positive change at university campuses. Some participants indicated that lecturers can create a positive change through "...open-mindedness" and being supportive of all students regardless of their gender

or sexuality, promoting sensitivity and embracing diversity without excluding a certain group of people.

#### **5.4.5 Classroom pedagogy: Courses on homosexual topics**

Twelve participants indicated that it **would be beneficial** for the university to include a course on gender and sexuality, not only for gay and lesbian students, but also for heterosexual students and teachers for sensitisation purposes. Participants noted that students and lecturers need to know about gender and sexuality for them to be able to enforce a positive environment and be able to deal with a situation where gays and lesbians are concerned (Batso, Brenda, Mxolisi and Sally). Thinus noted that "...knowledge is power" and the more informed people are, the more they are able to make informed decisions.

Participants further commented on how such courses may also be considered as forms of safe spaces. Participants indicated that these courses or the curricula that are inclusive of gays and lesbian have the potential to improve their outlook on the problems they face. Such courses, according to Zack and Thinus, may be of value to both gay and lesbian students *and* heterosexual students in terms of understanding the history of homosexuality. Using "...correct terms", such as "gay or lesbian" instead of "faggot or dyke/lesbo" to describe sexual minorities, which means that the more educated people and peers are about gay and lesbian lifestyles, the more they may become welcoming and accepting and potentially reducing prejudice and intolerance towards homosexuality in general. Dee, a Faculty of Arts student, stated that "...for example in [arts], it is rare to hear anti-LGBT remarks in class because the course has topics and modules that incorporate gay and lesbian studies and the classroom and the department is much safer to go to; however, you can never say the same with engineering departments and theology". Participants also indicated that this type of curriculum is limited to a few isolated modules, including education (Dee) and social sciences (Tshiamo). Participants noted that they feel safer on campus when they are in a class that represent issues, history and events about gays and lesbians in the curriculum positively than in a class that never includes such issues as part of its curriculum. Precious (an Arts student) and Caroline (in Natural Sciences), indicated that a course on homosexuality can also help in terms of educating students regarding the respect they should show to other students regardless of their gender or sexual orientation and where everyone is catered for equally.

Contrary to the views that gender and sexuality courses are beneficial, nine participants indicated that a course on gender and sexuality is **not necessarily beneficial** because there is already information on sexuality topics and what is left is for people to educate

themselves. Alan, Bob and Enris believe what is in fact necessary are seminars or some specific events, which would focus on gender and sexuality, from which students and staff members would learn more about issues concerning gays and lesbians and how they can be sensitised to situations that involve gay and lesbian students. These events may include walks on campus that are focused on the celebration of gay and lesbian history and the university calendar should include a diversity celebration day. According to Bob most universities have days in their calendars that are mainly dedicated to celebrating diversity, however, after visiting one of the universities on that specific day, he realised that the diversity celebrated was mainly focused on cultural beliefs and religion, whereas sexual orientation remained an ignored background variable. He further indicated that since he has enrolled as a student at the North-West University Potchefstroom campus, he has not come across a pamphlet or a date on the calendar that indicated a celebration of sexual minorities or diversity. He notes "...the only time I see the word diversity is on the University's slogan and I obviously know that the campus has different people from different religious, cultural backgrounds, of diverse sexual orientation and all, but the question should be posed as to how often do these differences get celebrated? Maybe to be more specific, what initiatives has the University developed that are mainly dedicated to the celebration of gay and lesbian students?"

#### **5.4.6 The impact of safe spaces on students' identity development, individual empowerment and safety**

Having now considered the diverse views of safe spaces, the chapter concludes with a focus on the potential impact of such contexts over the long term.

##### **(a) *Safe spaces' long-term impact on students' identity development***

Participants indicated that long-term impacts of safe spaces on the student's identity development would range from valuing and accepting your sexual identity more (Batso). Safe spaces would provide an environment in which the students may feel safe to explore and share their sexual identity with others. With safe spaces on campus it also encourages one to be a role model to others that it is safer to disclose your sexuality and not suppress it. Safe spaces could in future provide liberation for the student to come out of the closet without fear of rejection and victimisation or being discriminated against (Mario and Thinus).

##### **(b) *Safe spaces' contribution to individual empowerment***

Thinus indicated that safe spaces can empower you to never "...suppress" yourself and your sexuality just to keep society happy, but to live "...comfortably" without "...fear" of adversity. Some participants noted that safe spaces empower gay and lesbian students to express themselves and it is empowering in itself that there are people on campus who support gay

and lesbian students (Batso). Having safe spaces may encourage or empower a person to come out of the closet (Alan) and take a stand against the discrimination of gay and lesbian students on campus (Batso).

**(c) *Safe spaces' long-term impact on students' safety***

Participants indicated that the long-term impacts of safe spaces on the student's physical and emotional safety would include an elimination in homophobic bullying (Mario), reduce the possibility of violence to gay and lesbian students (Ellen), provide a safer campus in general and if students want to continue their studies, they would not hesitate to continue at the same university because of its assurance of relative safety (Batso). Safe spaces could in future reduce the possibility of threats to sexual minorities in general. Other participants indicated that the availability of safe spaces on campus would prevent crimes on campus that are based on sexual orientation, such as gang-rapes (Brenda).

## **5.5 CONCLUSION**

The chapter provided an in-depth narrative of the information gay and lesbian students related as part of the study. Their views were gathered from their participation in in-depth interviews. The discussion in this chapter comprised the themes included in chapters 2 and 3, which informed the compilation of the interview schedule. The themes ranged from personal identity and group identification to stereotypes associated with gender depictions. The chapter further discussed the necessity of safe spaces on campus, inclusion of gay and lesbian themed material in university curricula, the forms which these spaces can take and their potential long-term impact on individuals.

The first section of the chapter looked at the personal and group identity of gay and lesbian participants. Ten participants affirmed their sexual orientations as openly gay men and ten participants their sexual orientation as openly lesbian women, for varied reasons. This section also focused on the stereotypes associated with these identities. A few stereotypes that arose from the participants' narratives comprised the notion that gay men are viewed as feminine and lesbian women as masculine. Some participants noted that the fact that they are gay does not mean they are feminine and the fact that some are lesbians does not mean they need to be masculine either. They indicated that how they decide to portray themselves was a matter of comfortability. Thus society seems to be fixed on the traditional view of what is normal and not normal. On the participants' group identification, participants commented on the necessity of being assimilated into a group and individualism. Some participants found it necessary to have friends who are gay and lesbian, while others did not. Participants also discussed their views on whether they would assimilate into a visible organisation on campus or whether they preferred a more individualised identity. Some participants noted

that it was significant for one to be part of a visible group on campus for various reasons, including the fact that such groups unite people with similar experiences, enhance the visibility of gay and lesbian students, provide a strong support system, provide participants with a sense of belonging and that such groups tend to embrace diversity.

The second section of this chapter provided a discussion on students' narratives on their experiences in diverse contexts, with the main emphasis on the campus lives of these participants. The first subsection focused on the participants' view of the closet and whether or not they considered themselves out of the closet. The subsection also commented on the disjuncture between on- and off-campus behaviour. Participants also commented on the experiences on their specific campus. Those who indicated having had negative experiences noted experiencing bullying (verbal, emotional and cyber-bullying), and this left participants feeling isolated, having suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, mental instability and this caused their academics to deteriorate. However, some participants reported having experienced the campus positively when they decided to ignore the negativity and not taking the negative attitude towards them personally, supportive friends, society that caters for gay and lesbian students and a study field that encompasses studies on sexuality.

The last section of this chapter provided a comprehensive account to participants' narratives on safe spaces and the awareness and necessity of policies protecting the rights of gay and lesbian students. Participants reported being unaware of the policies on the protection of gay and lesbian students; they did, however, note how beneficial such policies may be. They considered such policies as providing a voice for those who cannot express themselves. Participants also noted that such policies could promote the provision of safe spaces. Students provided different definitions and descriptions of safe spaces and what constitutes a safer campus. As part of this discussion, students also commented on the usefulness of designated venues, student organisations and courses that deal with topics on homosexuality.

Chapter 5 thus provides the foundation for the final two chapters to follow. The noted themes in the previous chapters are critically discussed in order to explain the need for safe spaces for gay and lesbian students on the North-West University Potchefstroom campus.

## CHAPTER 6

# THE NECESSITY OF SAFE SPACES ON THE NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY, POTCHEFSTROOM CAMPUS: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an analysis of data that was generated through individual interviews in order to answer the research questions and address the research objectives stated in chapter 1. These include, among others, **exploring the experiences of gay and lesbian students** on the Potchefstroom campus and an explanation for the reasons in favour of or against having a **safe space or zone** on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University.

The first section centres on students' **construction of identity**, which incorporates themes associated with communal and individualised identities of gay and lesbian students. This is done in order later to engage critically with the potentially reciprocal influence between the nature of gay and lesbian identity construction and its implications for the provision of safe spaces or zones. Secondly, the chapter focuses on the themes associated with the **positive experiences** and **possible challenges** faced by gay and lesbian students. Thirdly, the way in which these experiences may expound the potential roles of safe spaces or zones is discussed. The former encompasses the focus on the themes related to the **features associated with safe spaces**. These features include: **definitions** of safe spaces and **forms which safe spaces or zones could take**; consideration is also given to the **reasons in favour of or against** the development of these spaces.

### 6.2 HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

This subsection comprises three parts which are associated with the empirical focus on homosexual identity construction – whether it be gay male identities or lesbian identities. Firstly, a discussion of the themes associated with the **construction of gay and lesbian identities** is provided. Secondly, a focus on how **gender may be conflated with or linked to one's sexual identity** is given. Thirdly, this is followed by a focus on how the participants sought to be **assimilated** into a supposed mainstream heterosexual society, given their views on their sexual identity. Finally, consideration is given to the role and importance associated with constructing and maintaining **communal identification** in gay and lesbian communities.

### 6.2.1 Gay and lesbian identification

An in-depth account of the theoretical and empirical nature of the themes associated with views on gay male and lesbian identities encompass the focus of chapters 2 and 5. Ten participants in the study identified themselves as gay and ten participants identified themselves as lesbian. Three sub-themes emerged from the detailed empirical accounts of the participants. These are now discussed in order to emphasise the reasons for constructing gay or lesbian identities. Regarding the views of the two groups of participants, their accounts of whether and why they identified as gay or lesbian included their references to physical and emotional attraction as a determinant of their sexuality (Bieschke et al., 2000, Kaczorowski, 2015; Rhoads, 1995). Their interrogation of heterosexual normative ideologies associated with femininity and masculinity played a role in performing gay and lesbian individualised identities versus structural functionalist views (Blumenfeld, 2000; Bradley, 2013; Connell, 2005; Segal, 2007) and the conflation of gender identities with gender atypical behavioural patterns and sexuality.

The narratives of students regarding physical and emotional attraction were interlarded with reference to "...not attracted to girls" or "...likes for other men" for gay students and being "...attracted to women" and not experiencing a "spark" for men, on the part of lesbian students, as based on the argument that we cannot merely assume that each individual conforms to a cisgender model of identity construction which favours having "...one sexuality" and "...one gender", in this case heterosexuality, to which the individual was assigned at birth and fixed for life (cf. Corber & Valocchi 2003; Herz & Johansson, 2015; Matamala; 2014; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). For example, one student recalled that "...there is a certain way in which you were socialised, heterosexual values and norms in my case, so you start to feel weird in a sense that you tend to get confused and start asking if your whole life will be a lie". One of the students in the Arts Faculty, provided an account of her experimentation of more than one sexualities, with the aim to "prove" or validate her attraction to people of the same sex in order to construct her identity as lesbian, a thought evident in the work of Plummer (1998; 2015) on the supposed "messiness" associated with homosexual identities. Francis (2017b) highlights the use of sexuality as an agentic feature of the sexual actor, and as a result underlining the importance of variability or diversity of sexualities, an argument Richardson and Monro (2012) also confirm. Sixteen participants, in particular, initially indicated that the identification of their homosexual identities was due to their physical, sexual and emotional attraction towards other men, for gay students, and other women, for lesbian students (Rhoads, 1995), a thought which Lorber (1996) and Schilt and Westbrook (2009) highlight in their work.

The importance of “performing” particular gender roles (cf. Butler, 1999) or exuding specific gender-appropriate **behavioural patterns** emerged as a sub-theme that seemed to have some impact on the students’ identification as gay or lesbian. As the findings reveal, gender roles and behavioural patterns had an effect on how students defined their identities. Some gay participants defined their identities through the performance of roles that were socially and, one could argue, traditionally associated with and meant for women, a thought associated with Connell’s (1987; 2005) reference to so-called “emphasised femininity”. Gender roles exhibited by gay men included their references to “...cooking” or “cleaning”, “...nurture and compassion” and being “...submissive and soft” or exuding “...flamboyance”. These types of roles and behaviours may be associated with weakness (Blumenfeld, 2000), femininity (Bradley, 2013:48) and subordinate masculine behaviours (Segal, 2007). Participants’ narratives recalled the categories of “hegemonic masculinity” and “emphasised femininity” (Connell, 2005:78) that uphold society’s expectations of males to be masculine and females to be more feminine. Francis and Msibi (2011:164), for example, note in this regard that African homosexual males may be seen as effeminate and frail and are, as such, given names such as *rama* (a margarine brand). Related to this thought, some participants displayed conformity to fixed identities, regarding it as important to display characteristics of gender identity related to sexual orientation. This may be explained through Lorber’s (1996) assertion that it is common that sex, sexuality and gender correspond with one another and are fixed. Participants used the terms associated with masculinity and femininity as expressive attributes of their gay or lesbian sexuality (Butler, 1999), suggesting therefore that gay men are effeminate and lesbian women are masculine, as per one participant’s assertion that she discovered that she was a lesbian when she engaged in “...manly” activities. Furthermore, some participants were found to be displaying stereotypical gay and lesbian identities in the need to reflect their sexual orientation.

Those participants that noted that they identified as lesbian because of manly activities and gay participants who associate their gay identity with flamboyance and outspokenness, may seem to display stereotypical lesbian identities. This could be due to the stereotypical view that all lesbian people are masculine and manly and tend to challenge male dominance (Judge, 2014; Msibi, 2009) and that gay men are effeminate and frail (Bradley, 2013; Francis & Msibi, 2011). By exuding such behaviour, the students potentially uphold what Rich (2003; 2004) calls “compulsory heterosexuality”. One educational sciences student, for example, noted that her engagement in activities that are traditionally masculine was associated with her need to proclaim her identity as a lesbian. Gay participants, in particular, argued in favour of the “...need” to display characteristics associated with one’s gender identity which corresponded with one’s sexual orientation. Participants justified their gay sexuality with the

traditional feminine characteristics, thus denoting that because they are effeminate, they are supposed to be gay. One student noted "...I am gay because I have always liked doing all these things that are socially meant for girls..." These findings partly concurred with Schilt and Westbrook's (2009) cisgender ideology which notes a performance of gender roles society considers appropriate for one's sexual orientation, although not necessarily one's biological sex.

As opposed to these views, the findings also indicated some participants' disregard to display gendered characteristics which supposedly correspond with one's sexual orientation. These participants' narratives referenced the lack of interest "...to fit into a gay profile" and others regarded themselves as "...normal" and sought to distance themselves from "...being the typical gay person or being the guy that straightens my hair or wears fancy clothes and all that kind of stuff". Another gay male student (from the Faculty of Arts), also negated a link between his enjoyment of exercise as a means to overcompensate through a more muscular physique in order to be considered masculine (cf. Pope, Phillips & Olivardia, 2000), for as he notes, "...I gym a lot but that's for myself, it doesn't mean because I'm male I need to act masculine. I think the world today gives you the space to express yourself and not every man is masculine or all feminine people are gay". In keeping with the preceding paragraph, some participants defined or constructed their gay or lesbian identities as something conflated with **gender atypical behaviours and sexuality**. Participants presumed their gender role performances to be desirable and consistent *across* the continuum of human sexual identities. For instance, participants noted the difference or the reflexivity of sexual identities by referring to how gay and lesbian people come in different colours, sizes and shapes and how one participant mentioned that he does not have to fit into a gay profile to be considered gay; thereby upholding sexual fluidity and individualised sexualities (Plummer, 1998; 2003; 2015; Van den Berg, 2016). In critiquing essentialist views on homosexuality, these participants echo the earlier work of Plummer (2003:520) on the importance associated with emphasising the intersectional differences among homosexual individuals through his emphasis on "...localism, ambiguity, differences, instability...and a certain playfulness" which may characterise the varied ways in which individuals construct their identities. This is important because, according to Van den Berg (2016:27), gay and lesbian people should initiate "...their own representations of themselves and thus produce themselves as discursive subjects".

The preceding views (whether in favour of or against compulsory heterosexual roles), in fact, contradictorily challenge *and* uphold the centrality of heteronormativity (Jackson & Scott, 2010), insofar as these participants, on the one hand, display liberationist and queer theoretical tendencies to challenge gender and sexual identity stereotypes and, on the other

hand, tend to display assimilationist inclinations insofar as they seek to emphasise 'sameness' and association *with* heterosexuality (Van den Berg, 2016). Examples of how these students sought to reflect heteronormative principles included the performance of particular roles (cf. Johnson et al., 2007), therefore rendering the 'other' types of experiences by "typical gay" men, such as "straightening hair" or "fancy clothes", as abnormal (Kitzinger, 2005). Such laudable attempts notwithstanding, a liberationist tendency may, contradictorily, *both* transgress *and* reinforce heteronormativity, insofar as those who refute heterosexual ideals through emphasising their differences as opposed to similarities with heterosexuality, may risk further "othering" and "objectification" (cf. De Wet et al., 2016; Rothmann, 2016; Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015) of the supposedly uniquely different gay and lesbian identity within a heteronormative campus context, rather than only critiquing it. Consider, for example, Rothmann's (2017) reference to Plummer's (1998) work on gay and lesbian liberationists in America in this regard, when he notes that such groups may inadvertently render their identities "vulnerable", "privileged and sacred" since such an "...ideological isolation may result in distinctions within and among members of the homosexual community themselves" (Rothmann, 2017:5-6). This results in what Plummer (1998: 85) considers to be "...an ever increasing self-imposed segregation" (Rothmann, 2017:6).

These arguments inform the next subsection's focus on a choice to be assimilated or dis-assimilated from communal homosexual contexts.

### **6.2.2 The role of space: A case of assimilating or dis-assimilating?**

This subsection provides a critical integration of participants' narratives on communal and individualised gay male and lesbian female identities. Firstly, is the discussion of the significance participants' place in being part of a visible homosexual group on the Potchefstroom campus. The second sub-theme centres on how the disclosure of one's sexuality upholds the notions of the liberationists' and queer theoretical views and how this differs from the ideologies brought forth by proponents of assimilation into a heteronormative university setting.

The first sub-theme centres on the **importance placed on forming part of a group**. Fifteen (15) participants reported that forming part of a visible group on campus is significant. As the findings of this study highlight, that forming part of a visible group results in the provision of "comfort", a "...feeling of safety and excitement" (Rankin, 2003), support (Goodenow et al., 2006; Payne & Smith, 2011; Rothmann, 2014) and understanding (Hind, 2004), "...a second family" (Dietz, 1997), "...visibility" (Weeks, 2007), a "...sense of belonging", "...embracing diversity" (National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education, 2004), "...networking" (Evans, 2002), "...disclosure" of one sexual identity to others like you" (Nel et

al., 2007) and "...improved self-confidence" (McCormack, 2012; Rivers, 2011) by positioning oneself "...against heteronormativity" (D'Emilio, 1992). It is clear from the participants' narratives, corresponding with literature, that being part of a group on campus has an impact on their social lives. Some participants have never been part of these groups while others have been. This difference notwithstanding, they viewed affiliation with a group as important in their lives and in the lives of other homosexual students, a thought evident in the work of Lee (2002). These findings echo the precepts underlined by theorists and social scientists whose work echoes the principles of queer liberationists (D'Emilio, 1983; Eide, 2010; *The Broken Rifle*, 2012; Van den Berg, 2016; Yep et al., 2003), who are argued to be dedicated to "...improving" (Jagose, 1996:30) situations for homosexuals. Therefore by having a visible community and participating in such groups emphasise an organised assertion "...against heteronormative ideologies" (Seidman, 2003:65) and sexual, gender and social inequalities resulting from these ideologies. With visibility, participants tend to support a queer liberationist's notion of exclusivity (*The Broken Rifle*, 2012), which argues against hiding one's sexuality and gender expressions, but may contradictorily uphold the principle of homosexual (or arguably, homonormative) difference, embracing homogeneity in homosexual circles which may reinforce a further binary between heteronormative standards of normality (Eide, 2010) and the supposed incurable and 'exotic' homosexual subculture (cf. Epstein, 1987; Fox & Ore, 2010; Stein & Plummer, 1996; Van den Berg, 2016).

However, in contrast to the literature that supports forming part of a visible group as important, five participants noted that being part of a visible group is not necessarily significant. Participants referenced this insignificance to these groups being the "...culprits" or "...cause" for segregation and exacerbation of homophobia, as attested by Levine (1998) and Fox (2007). One participant noted that these groups, with some of their principles and ideologies, unconsciously uphold heteronormative precepts through their need for equality with heterosexual people; thus upholding the notions of assimilation which makes a case that gay and lesbian students deserve equal rights and acknowledgement (Robson, 2002; Van den Berg, 2016). Adopting a post-structuralist stance, proponents of queer theory critique this thought, referring to the fact that sexual minorities should not merely be assimilated into an uncritical acceptance of heteronormative principles and ideologies (Epprecht, 2010; Francis, 2017b; Seidman, 1993; Tierney, 1993; Van den Berg, 2016). Consider Milani and Wolf's (2015:165) argument that those individuals who are assimilated into an existing heterosexual milieu hide their "...queer skin under the otherwise straight masks". Plummer (2015) also contends that one should, from a queer theoretical perspective, critique "...old radical languages of liberation, identity politics, rights and

citizenship” and rather seek to challenge such normalisation through “...a ‘politics of provocation’” (Plummer 2015:121).

Another sub-theme which emerged from the findings was how participants described “**the closet**” and their narratives on their experiences of it. The discussion also focuses on how their disclosure or concealment of their sexuality reinforce an assimilationist/heteronormative and transgressive/homonormative ideologies. Participants described the closet as something which upholds a “...false identity”, something with “...no liberation”, which is “...restricted” and “...private” (Adams, 2011; Calhoun, 2000). All participants provided definitions that rendered the closet as a place of oppression. These findings echo earlier literature which resulted from the work of, among others, Brown (2008), Calhoun (2000) and Seidman (2002) who describe the closet as a state of “gay oppression” since it posits gay and lesbian students as “subordinates” (Sedgwick, 1993) to heterosexuals.

All participants affirmed being **out of the closet**, thus upholding the queer theoretical principles that aim to challenge heteronormativity (Hennessy, 1993:964; Valocchi, 2005:752; Jagose, 1996). According to Corrigan and Matthews (2003), coming out of the closet and being visible on the part of gays and lesbians, are both beneficial to their community and their needs. This assertion and participants’ disclosure of their sexuality is supported by queer liberationism which believes that one does not need to hide one's sexuality, but rather embrace it (Eide, 2010). Therefore, by disclosing their identity, participants dis-assimilated from the heteronormative standards to proclaiming their difference (Robson, 2002) from the presumed heterosexual majority.

Ten students noted that they engage in intense self-reflexivity depending on the different social contexts they enter into (e.g. the church, an education institution or other heteronormative institutions). Some participants noted that because they are from Christian families, their behaviour changes from what they do in their familial context to what they convey on campus. When these participants are around their families their behaviour reflects heteronormative behaviours based, in part, on their fear of opposition, being disowned and their financial dependence on their parents. Davis (2008) argues that social actors experience different forms of privilege or subordination/exclusion resulting from the interaction of multiple identities (Richardson & Monro, 2012). Therefore these spaces may limit their ability to freely express and embrace their sexuality. This supports Smuts’s (2011) argument that spaces are significant, as they can enable or limit an individual’s identity owing to a lack of access to particular social and material resources, and as a result these identities are spatialized. The participants’ narratives meant that they constantly had to maintain different behaviours or sexualities in various places or social spaces, depending on

the level of freedom they are allowed in these particular spaces (Acosta, 2008; Ferreira, 2011; Francis, 2017b; Valentine, 1993).

However, some participants argued that their behaviour remained the same in different social contexts. Their similar on- and off-campus behaviour was attributed to the open-mindedness of their families on a structural level and on an individual level, the participants' own personalities, self-confidence and self-acceptance, which recalls Cass's (1979) reference to "identity synthesis" as an example of experiencing identity pride. One evident example of such identity pride came courtesy of a gay male student who regarded it as important to display, what one could consider, 'typical' gay male characteristics, for as he noted, "...when I display characteristics associated with my identity, I am saying that I am comfortable with who and what I am, unlike those who do not display it, because they are afraid of adversity. For example, I believe myself to have a feminine speaking tone and I am ok and comfortable with it". The participant's thoughts are echoed by Plummer's (2015) concept of "cosmopolitan imagination". Participants noted the openness of their families as a reason for the consistency in their behaviour, which implies the application of this "cosmopolitan imagination" which signifies an attitude of openness and tolerance towards sexual difference and an appreciation of sexual fluidity and plurality. Furthermore, the acceptance and tolerance of difference in the contemporary world provide individuals with the ability to be reflexive and create their own individualised identities (cf. Giddens, 1992; Plummer, 2015). Three students noted that, because of tolerance and acceptance, they felt free and liberated to express their sexuality and were therefore afforded an opportunity to make choices on how they live their personal lives, denoting the preceding reference to an acceptance of their supposed 'otherness' rather than its subordination (cf. Plummer, 2015).

The subsection to follow critically engages the positive and challenging experiences of gay and lesbian students on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University.

### **6.3 STUDENT EXPERIENCES: POSITIVE AND CHALLENGING**

This section consists of two subsections which are associated with the primary focus of the students' experiences. First is the discussion of the theme associated with gay and lesbian students' **positive experiences**. Secondly, the focus is on the **challenging experiences** of these students, which may later serve as a basis for the necessity of safe spaces or zones on campus.

### 6.3.1 Positive experiences

Themes discussed in this section, as with the other subsections, relate to the questions posed as part of the interview schedule used in the study. The first sub-theme centres on the importance of the support structure of peers in positively experiencing the campus environment. The second sub-theme centres on positive experiences informed by the availability of university structures (e.g. university policies, university courses and managerial involvement).

The first sub-theme focuses on the importance of the **support from peers**. Three participants, in the Faculties of Arts, Natural Sciences and Engineering respectively, reported that they experience the campus environment positively. As the findings of this study reveal, participants attributed their positive experiences to “supportive people” (Dietz, 1997; Evans & Broido, 1999; Hecht, 1998). Two students (in the Faculties of Natural Sciences and Engineering, respectively), for example, noted that their positive experience of the campus was attributed to the support they receive from friends and the fact that they have not experienced any form of negativity on the campus. Related to this thought was that participants also noted that they have never faced any physical or verbal assaults. One lesbian student from the Faculty of Arts, for example, mentioned in this regard that she has never faced assault while on campus. The noted student also attributed her positive experiences to the progress the campus is making with regard to providing the opportunity for students to form gay and lesbian societies, a thought which is evident in the work of Garcia-Alonso (2004). Regardless of such positive initiatives, the same student did, however, concede that she “...does not know what might happen” in the coming years as it relates to the protection of sexual minority students. From a queer theoretical stance one should be wary to naïvely assume that the creation of such separate (or exclusive) spaces and the student’s individual agency is indicative of complete acceptance at a macro level of the country’s larger cultural scenario (cf. Jackson & Scott, 2010). It may rather speak to the continuing efforts of sexual minorities to assimilate into either exclusively homonormative spaces or conform to the mainstream and ‘tolerant’ heteronormative gendered and sexual context, in order to avoid potential discrimination (cf. Atkinson & De Palma, 2009; Jagessar and Msibi, 2015; Milani & Wolff, 2015). This recalls findings from Jagessar and Msibi’s (2015) study which indicated that LGB residency students refrained from reporting homophobic acts directed towards them, due to the ignorance of their residential managers. In citing the work of Atkinson and De Palma (2009), they argue that other students provide “organised consent” since they consider the homophobia as “...not that bad” (Jagessar & Msibi, 2015:71). In exercising their agency through, among others, joining LGBTIQ+ student organisations, students concurrently (although potentially unknowingly) enact

heteronormative and homonormative sexual identities, insofar as they may “...*naturalise*, *normalise* and *legitimise* some expressions of same-sex desire, at the expense of others” (Milani & Wolff, 2015:167), thus assimilating into a separate, private and non-political sexual culture” (Milani & Wolff, 2015:167), without critiquing the dominance of heteronormativity. Students further attributed their positive experiences to the ability of “**faculties to address issues concerning homosexuality**”. These findings underline Evans’s (2002) work on explicit and implicit centralisation and the implications of such centralisation (cf. McCormack, 2012; Rivers, 2011; Weeks, 2007; Grace, 2006). Evans (2002) argues that implicit and explicit centralisation are characterised by the inclusion of material that purposely centres on themes focusing on homosexuality, therefore with students implicitly and explicitly centralised, they may experience the campus environment as more positive. Since participants did not cite many problems, Francis’s (2017b) argument on agency becomes evident. Participants who did not cite many problems may have had choices to resist, contested and reflexively chose between existing discourses and decided to exercise power, thus regarding themselves as agents. According to Francis (2017b), if there is an exclusive emphasis on their negative experiences or their victimhood as gay and lesbians, they then become labelled as helpless and powerless, thus negating any possible agency on their part. This agency exercised by participants, according to queer theorists, rejects what they call the “heterosexual bribe” (Sumara & Davis, 1999), the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1999) or what Ingraham (1996) typifies as “heterosexual imaginary”, thus discarding the proposition of publicly presenting themselves according to what is considered appropriate heteronormatively or homonormatively (Alexander & Wallace, 2009; Halperin, 1995).

### **6.3.2 Challenging experiences**

While it was significant to note participants’ positive experiences on campus, it is also important to look at the challenges they face on campus. Thirteen participants cited being victims of discrimination on the university campus. Three of them from Education Studies, noted that they have been victims of “bullying” which, for one student resulted in depression. This supports Furr et al.’s (2001) and D’Augelli’s (1989) assertions that homosexual students are more likely than heterosexual students to feel lonely, depressed and express sadness owing to the fear of disclosing their sexual orientation.

Participants also noted experiencing isolation (Francis & Msibi, 2011; Rothmann, 2014) and loneliness (Athanasas & Larrabee, 2003; Blackburn & McCready, 2009), anxiety (D’Augelli, 1989) and contemplating committing suicide (D’Augelli, 1992; Ratts et al., 2013; Renn, 2000). Six participants noted that they were victims of social and verbal bullying; examples included overt verbal homophobia due to name-calling, including names such as “sissy” and

“fag”, which resulted in being depressed and a gradual decline in their academic performance, an argument Blackburn and McCready’s (2009) research on queer youth in schools attest to. One student, from the Faculty of Arts noted that, owing to the decline in his academic performance, coupled with “endless bullying” and the “pressure to pass as heterosexual”, he contemplated committing suicide - a thought evident in the work of Dietz (1997), Hetrick and Martin (1987), Kosciw et al. (2008), Mudrey and Medina-Adams (2006), and Troiden (1988), asserting that coping with identity-based victimisation may lead to suicidal ideation or tendencies. Two students echoed the research of Rankin (2005) and Rankin et al.’s (2010) American studies when they reported experiencing cyber-bullying which resulted in their feeling unsafe on campus.

A student in the Faculty of Arts noted an experience of exclusion. He noted that it was because of his sexual orientation that he was excluded from the university’s hostels’ heteronormative-based initiations. This finding underlines an argument brought forth by the Department of Education (2008), noting that it is due to patriarchal behaviours by students and staff in higher education in which overt and covert heterosexism and homophobia are retained. These behaviours tend to enforce heterosexuality through institutional traditions, cultures and often implicitly or explicitly. This assertion is echoed by Alvarez and Schneider (2008) who argue that universities tend to proudly proclaim their promises to a diverse community of students, yet contradictorily tend to offer very limited prospects for meaningful inclusion. This thought notwithstanding, an Arts student commented on the fact that there seems to be progress in institutions that were historically religious and heteronormative with regard to the recognition of gay and lesbian students. Another student, however, noted his inability to cope with the demands of a heterosexual society on how he ought to behave, and that heterosexual structures tend to remind sexual minorities of how “un-African” their sexual orientation is, and as a result they remain closeted. A thought echoed by Dlamini (2006) and the ILGA (2017) and UNESCO reports (2012).

Having provided participants’ narratives of their positive and challenging experiences on campus, the next subsection provides a critical engagement with the students’ narratives on the necessity of safe spaces or zones on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University.

#### **6.4 THE NECESSITY FOR SAFE SPACES ON THE POTCHEFSTROOM CAMPUS**

This subsection comprises a discussion on the central theme of the study: The need for safe spaces or zones on the university campus.

### **6.4.1 Key features associated with safe spaces**

There is firstly a discussion on the definitions and descriptions of such spaces. The second subsection provides a delineation of the varied forms safe spaces or zones could take on campus, based on the views of the participants. Lastly focus is given on the necessity or reasons in favour of and against the implementation of safe spaces or zones.

#### **(a) Definitions of a safe space**

Most participants describe a safe space as a physical place (as evident from their personal quotes), which may denote buildings or offices and people, where “protection from harm” is important, where participants feel accepted and “comfortable” with themselves, where there is an appreciation of difference and the context is “free from homophobia”. These descriptions echo Hind’s (2004) definition of a safe space as a place, which takes the form of a room, a person or a programme where bigotry and discrimination against sexual minorities is not tolerated and where people can be themselves, free to flourish and live autonomously (Plummer, 2015:75). Some participants described a safe space as a space (denoting an environment or climate) where marginalised people come together and discuss issues with regard to their experiences of discrimination and where victimisation, hate speech and harassments are not tolerated. These descriptions support Evans’s (2002) definition of safe spaces.

#### **(b) Forms of safe spaces**

The purpose of this subsection is to discuss the findings from participants centred on their views on, among others, the different forms, functions, advantages and limitations associated with safe spaces or zones on their campus. Firstly, a demarcation of the possible formations such spaces could take (according to the participants of the study) is provided in order to critically engage the reasons for providing or avoiding the creation of such spaces on the campus in the next subsection. Examples of these formations included the following: the larger campus as an overarching safe space, one-to-one consultation as a safe zone, the facilitation of social activities for LGBTIQ+ students, classroom contexts and courses and student organisations as a means to empower sexual minorities.

*The University campus as a safe space or zone:* Seven participants argued that the campus environment displays the potential to empower students with regard to learning, progress and networking with their friends in favour of creating a supportive setting for sexual minorities. This thought echoes the recent argument of Ghaziani (2015) on how society at large (rather than smaller segregated homosexual contexts) may contribute to the inclusion and protection of homosexual individuals owing to a changing social and political landscape,

arguably in South Africa and abroad (cf. Reddy, 2010). This is supported by Evans's (2000:81) notion that learning is enhanced when students feel validated and when they experience positive interactions with peers and the faculty, both in and outside the classroom. Seven participants noted how the university campus may be regarded as a safe space for gay and lesbian students. Their views are attributed to the fact that findings noted that a university campus may be considered a safe space if there is an introduction of ally programmes that promote inclusivity of gay and lesbian students. Participants also indicated that it is important that people are educated and sensitised about diversity and support for LGBTIQ+ students. Such recommendations by the participants recall Francis's (2017b) and Msibi's (2015:391-392) reference to Kevin Kumashiro's (2002) call for education *for* 'others' (thus attempts to improve the lived experiences of homosexual students through overt support and affirmation) and education *about* 'others' (providing knowledge to heterosexually identified students and staff about homosexuality). The availability of such programmes according to Boostrom (1998), to support gay and lesbian students, may contribute to improved academic performance on the part of sexual minority students for them to improve their academic achievements, as noted by a self-identified lesbian Natural Sciences student. The education and sensitisation of people about the issues regarding LGBTIQ+ students may result in the development of inclusive policies and, according to a student in the Faculty of Arts, "nurturing practices"; the campus may therefore become a safer space. Macgillivray's (2004) American study suggested that increased sensitisation and consciousness among students and staff about topics or issues related to homosexuality, may encourage the management of education institutions to amend their policies in such a way as to protect homosexual students against discrimination. As such, these initiatives may encourage staff members and students of universities as well as their families and friends who want to participate in training sessions to become a so-called "safe space" and/or "ally" for potentially victimised minority students (cf. Alvarez & Schneider, 2008; Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Evans, 2002; Grace & Wells, 2004; San Diego State University, 2009).

*One-to-one consultations:* While it is important to look at the university campus as a safe space, it is equally important to acknowledge how one-to-one consultations with lecturers, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers (Evans, 2000:81; Nel et al., 2007:289) may contribute to a sense of support for gay and lesbian students. Eight participants thought it was important to have one-to-one consultations as forms of safe spaces, a thought evident in the works of Evans (2002) and Grace (2006). According to Harper et al. (2007:104), to improve the healthy development and functioning of gay and lesbian students, psychologists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals based on university campuses must consider an exploration of gay and lesbian students' social problems and

consider addressing the ways that historical, social and structural elements may adversely affect sexual minorities on campuses, as also noted by Francis (2017b) and Jagessar and Msibi (2015), among others, who advocate a continued emphasis on structural constraints which are informed by heteronormativity, rather than merely positing sexual minorities as either agents *or* victims.

Six participants commented on the importance of such one-to-one consultation on students' health. Some participants, for example, noted that with the presence of such medical professionals to consult on campus, their depression levels may decline and they may be less inclined to experience suicidal tendencies, a finding in keeping with similar studies in America (cf. Evans, 2002). Their view contradicts previous studies which have commented on how some sexual minorities may, because of the fear of rejection, avoid disclosure of their sexual identity to health care professionals (Taylor, 1999). Such support may contribute, as evident in the work of Grace (2006), to students displaying higher levels of self-esteem and confidence. Others noted that owing to the availability of these professionals, students are able to access sources for resilience regardless of facing adverse situations characterised by risk factors. Some participants noted that, owing to society's and the media's negative portrayal (Butler et al., 2003:5; Little; 2001; Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Sears, 1997) of gay and lesbian people, they often become victims of internalised homophobia (Flebus, 2009). In keeping with this thought, it was considered necessary to quote an engineering student in the study again who noted that:

*...I used to feel like I am not good enough for anybody because me being gay...made me feel so different...stories that one hears on media about gay and lesbian people being killed mercilessly, you end up thinking that gay lives don't really matter...less important and you just don't feel loved.*

He believes that social workers and psychologists play an important role in the provision of support and counselling services to students who are physically and emotionally affected by the issues they face (cf. Harper et al., 2007). These professionals are therefore able to support and counsel them and may contribute to the prevention of such internalised homophobia and marginalisation, based on biased and stereotypical imagery and narratives in mainstream society (cf. Harper et al., 2007:104). The preceding statement also illustrates the impact the media has on the gay and lesbian students' health and how they view themselves in comparison to heterosexual students.

*Social activities and opportunities for LGBTIQ+ students:* Another form cited by participants for safe spaces or zones was social activities and opportunities for LGBTIQ+ students. Six participants commented on the effectiveness of social activities. They noted that these

activities may assist those who had no access to social events and student clubs outside campus. Thus students are made to feel as “part of something” that is “fun” and it gives them an opportunity (Evans, 2002) to make new friends that share similar interests. These activities are also thought to bring about unity in the gay and lesbian community (cf. Biegel, 2010:126).

*The classroom as a form of safe space:* The last form of safe space that eleven participants cited to be of significance was a classroom as a form of safe space. Of particular interest here was the use of language. Participants noted that this context may become a safe space since lecturers and fellow students should encourage a lack of discriminative language used during lectures, which could result in homosexual individuals feeling judged by others (Francis, 2017b; Grace, 2006; Kumashiro, 2002; Msibi, 2015). This kind of classroom develops structures that stimulate reciprocal discourse, inclusion and respect among students (Gayle, Cortez & Preiss, 2013:2), a thought echoed in the work of Chang (2005), Grace and Benson (2000), Monson and Rhodes (2004) and Msibi (2013). Participants noted that a safe space such as a classroom can be created through educating other students about the history, lives and the experiences of gay and lesbian people (Richardson, 2008). This approach, according to Kumashiro (2002), is referred to, as noted above, “education *about* the others”, and “...calls educators to bring visibility to ignored issues” (Msibi, 2015:391), a recommendation forwarded by Evans (2002) and Grace (2006). A safe classroom for gay and lesbian students is where lecturers also make positive reference to gay and lesbian studies and the language that is used should always be inclusive. Lecturers are regarded to be in a position to create safe places for underrepresented groups, including LGBTIQ+ students (Davidson, 2006). According to Evans (2000), research suggests that learning is affected by motivational factors intrinsic to the individual, such as self-confidence, perceived importance of learning, and expectations of success, as well as the social context, including whether or not the learning environment is encouraging and supportive (Evans, 2000). Participants noted that the acceptance of gay and lesbian students in a classroom may have positive impacts on their academic performance and they tend to feel liberated to contribute during class discussions and group assignments because of a supportive classroom environment. This supports Boostrom’s (1998:407) notion that students are able to learn and flourish in the classroom environment because they feel empowered to take risks by expressing their unique insights and disagreements with others. In order to incorporate, rather than exclude themes associated with homosexuality, Francis (2013) draws on the work of, among others, Boal (1979) in order to engage learners, from a school in Bloemfontein, in what is referred to as Forum Theatre. This technique, defined as a “participatory improvised theatre form [which]...raises consciousness, enables debate and

critical reflection, and encourages a democratic form of knowledge production that engages the audience in their own learning and unlearning” (Francis, 2013:4). He argues that, notwithstanding some limitations of the approach (e.g. the fact that the presenter/lecturer/teacher may decide on the nature of the performances), students, in his study, were able to enact their agency to critically reflect on the principles associated with heteronormativity and heterosexism (Francis, 2013:10-11). These findings underscore Kumashiro’s (2002:23) and Msibi’s (2013:68) arguments which note that the non- or under-representation of sexual minorities in higher education curricula stifles attempts to critique and transform heteronormative pedagogies in teaching and learning. Therefore, according to Francis (2013:4), individuals need to be exposed to creative and constructive methods of teaching and learning in order to address issues related to heterosexism and homophobia, among others.

Participants further noted the necessity of having an openly gay/lesbian lecturer in this regard. Those who noted it necessary to have openly gay and lesbian lecturers attribute their reasons to the role that these lecturers play in terms of inspiring students and the positive influence through their autobiographical “life narratives”, as favoured by, among others, Grace and Benson (2000). These findings echo the works of Grace (2006) who asserts that lecturers walk into classrooms with personal histories (autobiographies) that overtly and/or subtly influence professional practices. Thus a lecturer’s history and everyday pedagogical practice may deeply impact on students’ learning and lives. Furthermore, lecturers can use autobiographies in class as spaces for disclosing issues that have been historically ignored, suppressed or denied in the larger culture, society and the education institution; it may also “...provide a more nuanced, balanced and thick descriptive account of the experiences of sexual minorities” (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015:8). As a possible means of limiting the effect of, for instance, prejudiced objectification by a homophobic lecturer, who may be obligated to teach a class on gender and sexual identity, it is worth considering how the first-hand accounts of homosexual lecturers or guest lecturers would enable a more positive learning environment (Grace, 2006).

Although the preceding findings may be sound, the disclosure of one’s homosexuality in an education context may harbour potential threats, such as anxiety over potential institutional homophobia, stigmatisation, fear of exclusion and verbal and physical threats (Rothmann, 2014; Warren, 2008). Thirteen students noted that it was not necessary to have gay and lesbian lecturers. One Engineering student indicated a situation where a self-identified homosexual lecturer did not make an effort to provide help to gay and lesbian students. This finding can be illustrated by the works of Griffin et al. (2007) and Petrovic and Rosiek (2003)

exploring how lecturers can address heterosexism and homophobia in their domains. Their findings asserted that lecturers were hesitant to confront homophobia and heterosexism, choosing to be cautious rather than risk controversy and conflict. Most common costs associated with challenging homophobia and heterosexism included lecturers being afraid of losing their jobs.

*Student organisations:* Ten students noted forming part of student organisations on campus. According to the National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education (2004), if students have negative experiences on the “proactive” campuses, campuses without such initiatives may leave gay and lesbian students experiencing further fear, feel at risk and less supported or protected by the laws and policies that are enforced by the university with regard to diversity and equal rights of students, regardless of their perceived gender or sexual orientation. These risks and fear of negative experiences may be addressed through the creation of programmes to decrease the rates of harassment and violence and ensure gay and lesbian people that the university is a relatively safer and supportive place where they, like other members of the academic community, can reach their full potential as students (National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education, 2004).

#### **6.4.2 Arguments in favour of creating safe spaces/zones on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University**

In-depth accounts of the theoretical and empirical nature of the themes associated with safe spaces in general, and of gay and lesbian students in particular, comprised chapters 2 and 5. In order to progress with the appreciative stance of difference through the provision of safe spaces through constructing and deconstructing policies, Plummer (2015), as noted before, proposed an adoption of a cosmopolitan sexuality stance towards gender and sexual identity in contemporary society. Such a view determines an agenda for legal and political transformation. It may provide one with a number of ideas and ideals which encourage “forward dreaming” to assist in creating a better sexual and gendered world for all. He maintains that this approach may encourage the construction (and potentially deconstruction) of a world which fosters a wider willingness to live with, through and across differences (Plummer, 2015:75). These inclinations, according to him, are dependent on the development of social structures that allow for the appreciation of diversity, sexual autonomy and a freedom to flourish, regardless of gender identity and sexual orientation. Informed by the findings and in keeping with the preceding thought, a discussion of the potential for encouraging further positive experiences for students in the context of safe spaces or zones now follows.

*Defending the rights of gay and lesbian students and identifying and restructuring policies:*

The findings in this study suggest that there was a lack of awareness on the part of the study's participants of the policies protecting gay and lesbian rights on their campus. All students reported that they were unaware of the policies protecting their rights and they considered it necessary to have such policies in place to safeguard them (cf. Biaggio et al. 2003; Grace, 2015; UNESCO, 2012). Some students noted that if steps were taken to restructure policies to accommodate gay and lesbian students, this would be beneficial to those sexual minority students who may be struggling to defend themselves. Although some students noted that they did not feel threatened on campus, they believed that it was important to have policies in place which attended to and "dealt" with the needs of gay and lesbian students and staff, insofar as these policies create a platform for other students to come out of the closet without fear. This finding echoed the contributions of previous research undertaken by the National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education (2004) and Robert (2009). Note, for example, that the various participants underlined the importance and positive nature of formal policies which aim to protect the rights of gay and lesbian students. An example included one of the Natural Sciences students noting that the reason why some students decide to remain in the closet is "...**because they are not aware of the policies**"<sup>5</sup> which protect them, an argument to which Barrett, DiGiovine, Holmberg and Gudelunas (2007) attest. As one student firmly asserted, "...as a student I deserve to finish my education without having suffered discrimination and assault...if the university says that it embraces diversity it needs to make sure that those diverse groups complete their education free from violence or discrimination of any kind".

The above may suggest that, without necessary policies, students may be likely to feel unprotected against hate crimes or discrimination. This may further prevent them from reporting incidents of these crimes. It also became apparent that students considered the restructuring of policies to be inclusive of homosexual rights (particularly for those who are still in the closet) to be imperative (Fox, 2007), particularly in deciding on whether, when and how they decide to disclose their identities to others on campus. The construction of these spaces or policies to protect gay and lesbian students on campus, potentially contributes to the affirmation of their identities and also challenges the system of "compulsory heterosexuality" (cf. Rich, 2003). In keeping with this, Ratts et al. (2013) argue that the influence which may arise from these spaces, may be used to the advantage of sexual minorities to improve the campus climate in a positive way, and regulate the university's policies and the extent to which these policies are executed. Some participants, as also noted above, highlighted the importance of an organised and visible group or organisation

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<sup>5</sup> Emphasis added.

on campus, "...especially if the group is a revolutionary movement to restructure or change policies to be inclusive" and "...being in a group of gays and lesbians is awesome because you know that when you don't have a voice there is a group that is willing to voice out for you and support you as well with coming out of the closet" (cf. Plummer, 2015:76; Reddy, 2010). Their views recall Corrigan and Matthews's (2003) belief that it will be to the benefit of homosexual communities to be more visible, in order to further their shared political and socio-economic needs.

*Sensitisation:* Another theme that emerged from the study's findings centred on how safe spaces provide homosexual and heterosexual students and staff with education and understanding of sexuality to encourage a reciprocal understanding and respect among all sexual actors on campus (Francis, 2017b; Kose, 2009; Kumashiro, 2002; Msibi, 2015; Payne & Smith, 2011; Richardson, 2008; Szalacha, 2003). Eleven students noted that safe spaces provide a platform for sensitisation. This sensitisation is thought to bring about an eradication of misconceptions and stereotypes concerning gay and lesbian students and may thus contribute to making the campus a 'safer' (Fox, 2007; Fox & Ore, 2010) and more inclusive space (Macgillivray, 2004). Birkett, Koenig and Espelage (2009) argue that efforts should be made to create positive campus climates for all students and if there are current efforts focused on intervening to prevent students being bullied, these should consist of components to reduce the harassment and bullying of gay and lesbian students. This may include working toward changing negative attitudes and behaviours to gays and lesbians that may, at times, be fostered by students and/or lecturers (cf. Birkett et al., 2009). Thus, creating a more positive environment, tends to benefit the entire student body in the institution, not just the sexual minority students (Birkett et al., 2009). Some participants noted that the availability of courses and training for both students and staff may lead to more positive attitudes to issues related to homosexual students, which may result in increased sensitisation, a thought evident in the work of Szalacha (2003). One lesbian student in the Faculty of Arts argued that, through the use of surveys or testimonials (Macgillivray, 2004) which monitor the students' experiences on the campus, the campus management may be encouraged to restructure policies in such a way to also protect sexual minorities from being discriminated against.

*Safe social networking and support:* One of the key themes that also emerged in terms of the potential positive features associated with safe spaces or zones on the Potchefstroom campus, came from six participants who commented on the importance of safe spaces in creating a positive platform for gay and lesbian students to interact and relate with others that are similar to them, a thought Alvarez and Schneider (2008:72), Butler et al. (2003:21), Evans (2002:522) and Fox and Ore (2010:630), among others, have commented on in their

own work. Six of the students interviewed regarded safe spaces to be safe social networking and “fun” places owing to the fact that the university climate may often not be favourable and therefore a safe space becomes a “safe haven” and a context where they could be comfortable with their friends and can securely express themselves without fear of judgement, a thought evident in the studies of Hind (2004) and Evans (2002). Some participants described their friends to be sources of information and support. Some noted that it is important to have gay and lesbian friends from whom one would get social support and have someone to talk to. While some of the participants singled out gay and lesbian friends as the most likely to provide support, they noted that support and potential sources for social resilience may come from many different people or allies (Biegel, 2010; Francis, 2017b; Grace & Wells, 2004; Rothmann, 2014; Washington & Evans, 1991), including heterosexual friends and lecturers.

Friends are thought of as exceptional bases of support for gay and lesbian students (Higa, Hoppe, Lindhorst, Mincer, Beadnell, Morrison, Wells, Todd & Mountz, 2014:11), and those of our participants who were part of a gay and lesbian organisation reported having friendships that were diverse in terms of sexual identity. Bringing people together, according to Fetner and Elafros (2015:574), is one of the aims of safe spaces, a thought which was evident in the narratives of the participants. Such spaces, according to Plummer (2015:76), tend to question the existing orders by mobilising resources (a thought noted by Tshiamo, a Faculty of Arts student), set up new practices (such as annual surveys), tactics and strategies through activist performance (for example policies, as per findings from participants) to diffuse into varied cultures and potentially challenge and change the social order. In keeping with Plummer’s argument, Van den Berg (2016:26) asserts that it is a queer thinker’s task to interrogate existing unjust principles that uphold disciplinary structures of conformity, and visions of heterosexuality which intimidate and constrain people’s identities and life choices. Kumashiro’s (2002) “anti-oppressive education” paradigm is also evident here, insofar as he also advocates in favour of providing a context where one could *critically* educate and sensitise individuals about the heteronormative ‘othering’ of sexual minorities (cf. Francis, 2017b:24; Msibi, 2015:392).

These laudable efforts through safe zones notwithstanding, one would be remiss if a focus is not afforded on the potential implications of creating and/or providing safe spaces or zones on the Potchefstroom campus.

### 6.4.3 Challenges associated with the provision of safe spaces/zones on the Potchefstroom campus

While it is significant to acknowledge the importance of safe spaces, it is also important to acknowledge that safe spaces may introduce particular implications which could impact on the experiences of gay and lesbian students on the campus. This subsection, therefore, presents a critical engagement with the sub-themes which emerged from the findings regarding the limitations associated with safe spaces or zones.

*Creating an exclusive and marginalised community:* Although the preceding discussion commented on the importance of acknowledging the importance of sexual diversity and plurality along intersectional lines, one of the key themes that emerged was the fact that safe spaces contribute to the creation of exclusive and marginalised communities, as argued by Fox (2007) and Fox and Ore (2010). Some participants noted that the influence of safe spaces may prevent members from concealing their identities if they wish to do so and how, through designated venues and organisations, these spaces tend to be segregated from the larger campus community (cf. Levine, 1998; Robinson, 2012) to provide only sexual minority students with, what Walsh-Haines (2012:15) refers to as, their “place at the table”. In so doing, such contexts may become spaces that are, as noted by a student in the Law Faculty, “...meant for certain types of people”. With sexual minorities being oppressed through exclusion, these very spaces tend to engage in the practice of reverse discourse which only change the direction of power and not the foundational ideologies on which this discourse relies (cf. Foucault, 1980). This then results in embracing an originally oppressive discourse in a larger societal space (cf. Milani & Wolff, 2015). In this regard, stereotypes, values and homogenised views of what it means to be gay or lesbian are not challenged or inhibited, but are rather intensified (Fox & Ore, 2010), and therefore result in the reinforcement of homonormativity. As noted by a gay Arts student, these safe spaces resemble “stereotypically gay” organisations. The participant notes in this regard that “...just **like other societies** that have their venues where they discuss issues concerning **themselves**, gay and lesbian students have to be awarded **similar** venues....”<sup>6</sup> Although the researcher remains cognisant of the fact that one cannot generalise, this quote, evidently informed by principles associated with homonormativity, does not contest the dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but argues in favour of being assimilated into an existing heterosexual context and thus retain heterosexuality as a normative ideal (cf. Jagessar & Msibi, 2015; Jagose, 1996; Stein & Plummer, 1996) while potentially reinforcing a demobilised gay and lesbian constituency and a privatised gay culture (cf. Plummer, 1998; Rothmann, 2017).

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<sup>6</sup> Emphasis added.

Consider Jagessar and Msibi's (2015) research on the experiences of sexual minority students of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in this regard. In their aptly titled article, "It's not that bad...", they emphasise the fact that these students face heteronormative regulations on a daily basis and may, because of the centrality of heterosexuality on their university campus, internalise, normalise and even trivialise overt and covert heteronormative or homophobic treatment from others, since it is seemingly "...not all that bad" (Jagessar & Msibi, 2015:71). In so doing, they explicitly refer to Atkinson and De Palma's (2009) argument that such views by sexual minorities may only further reinforce and provide "...organised consent" to the centrality of heterosexuality as opposed to homosexuality. Their argument was evident in the narratives of students who equated belonging to a gay or lesbian organisation as an attempt to fight "...to be like other people rather than embracing differences...our differences are what make us unique and trying to equalise myself with another person means that I regard how other people behave as normal". This recalls Asencio's (2011:337) argument that homogenous homosexual spaces may reinforce homonormativity since it may reinforce "...the norms and practices within the gay community that support heteronormativity and marginalize certain forms of gender and sexuality". This thought was echoed by a gay male student who (in a queerly theoretical way) believes "...that visible gay groups sometimes lose their focus on being different and they start to pursue equality with heterosexuals, since heterosexuality is regarded as normal; these groups then try to reinforce normality according to what is considered normal by a heterosexual community". This, according to Francis (2017b), in his critical engagement with Kumashiro (2002) and Francis and Msibi's (2011) work, may further reinforce heterosexism and further "marginalize" sexual minorities as "deviant", which may result in further internalised homophobia, silence and isolation on the part of sexual minorities (cf. Francis, 2017b:25).

Two participants noted that safe spaces, such as venues or buildings, may not be useful for those students who are still in the closet. One gay Faculty of Arts student noted that "...a person in the closet may not find it easy to enter a 'gay students only' venue" or building because they came out of the closet voluntarily of their own accord. Their narratives suggest that while safe spaces may be safer for some sexual minorities, it may not be as easy for those who have not disclosed their sexuality to enter into or engage with others in such spaces, particularly when these spaces are designated classrooms, offices and buildings. These marginalised spaces, according to Fox (2007:502) and Petrovic (2002:149), tend to further exacerbate the potential for homophobic discrimination towards sexual minorities, a thought noted by a gay Law student, and may further reinforce compulsory heterosexuality. According to Van den Berg (2016), this separatist stance adopted by safe spaces should be

considered as problematic, since it upholds the idea of a single and homogeneous identity category for homosexual students and its separation from a potentially oppressive and dominant heteronormative culture, also tends to segregate and marginalise gay and lesbian students which may, contradictorily, make them both 'invisible' and 'too visible' (cf. De Wet et al., 2016). As a result, heterosexuality may be viewed as the normative sexuality, making gay and lesbian students passive and inferior victims compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Fox, 2007:502).

## **6.5 CONCLUSION**

Three particular themes informed the discussion in this chapter which correspond with the general and specific research questions and research objectives stated in chapter 1. These firstly centred on the homosexual identity construction, secondly on the experiences faced by gay and lesbian students on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University and lastly, the necessity of safe spaces or zones on the campus. In the exploration of how homosexual participants construct their identity, additional sub-themes emerged. These included the manner in which participants display differences about being feminine and more masculine and how as a result of this, either echo or challenge the cisgender model on gender and sexual identity construction. Another sub-theme that arose focused on how space contributes to the decisions of the gay and lesbian students to be assimilated and dis-assimilated (cf. Van den Berg, 2016) focusing on the significance of being part of a group and how participants' views inform a queer theoretical consideration of the closet. Furthermore, another sub-theme evident in this chapter centred on how participants' identities are concomitant to social spaces or places and how they exercise their reflexive sexualities as a result (Plummer, 2015).

Secondly, the chapter discussed the experiences of gay and lesbian students on campus. Sub-themes that arose from this theme included references to how the participants displayed a definite critical engagement with their positive experiences and challenges on the university campus. Here some participants noted their positive encounters on campus, such as experiencing campus as welcoming because of the support they receive from their peers and available societies. The second sub-theme discussed in this section focused on the negative experiences (or challenges) which participants encountered which included, among others, bullying; as a result of bullying participants experienced depression, decline in academic performance and suicidal tendencies.

This chapter concluded with a focus on the necessity for safe spaces or zones on the North-West University Potchefstroom campus. The sub-theme that emerged centred on the features that can be associated with safe spaces. This highlighted the different definitions of

safe spaces as narrated by participants. Safe spaces or zones were viewed as a place of protection and a place where bigotry and discrimination are not tolerated. This section also discussed the forms which safe spaces could take. Participants noted the significance of safe spaces such as, among others, classrooms, social activities and one-to-one consultations. Consideration was also given to the reasons in favour of safe spaces. These spaces were thought to be significant, particularly as it related to defending gay and lesbian rights through persuading the campus management to amend policies to explicitly accommodate sexual minorities. Safe spaces are also thought to afford sensitisation through an inclusive curriculum. Furthermore, safe spaces are regarded as safe social networking and support spaces. Lastly this section discussed the critique against or problems associated with the creation of safe spaces or zones. Safe spaces were critiqued for creating an exclusive and marginalised community which may consequently exacerbate the occurrence of discrimination towards gay and lesbian students (Fox, 2007; Levine, 1998; Fox & Ore, 2010). Evident from this subsection, in particular, was the fact that students (potentially unbeknown to themselves), displayed a critical queer interpretation of both the necessity of safe spaces or zones but also the limitations (e.g. assimilation, homogenisation and segregation) associated with these contexts.

Chapter 7 concludes with a brief delineation of the in-depth analysis in chapter 6, which focuses on the necessity of safe spaces on the North-West University Potchefstroom campus. Here answers are provided to each of the research questions posed in chapter 1.

## CHAPTER 7

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

As concluding reflections on the study, the sections to follow concisely clarify the general and specific research questions and objectives stated as part of chapter 1. This is followed by recommendations for future research as well as the recommendations for practical initiatives on campus in order to implement measures to address discrimination and prejudice faced by sexual minorities on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University.

### 7.2 CONCLUDING REMARKS: REALISATION OF THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Chapter 1 argued in favour of the necessity to provide an inductive and theoretical framework for the necessity of safe spaces on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University, based on the experiences of gay and lesbian students. These issues included, as the general objectives noted, **“to explore the experiences of gay and lesbian students”** and **“to explore the potential roles of safe spaces or zones on the North-West University Potchefstroom campus”**. In so doing, the researcher sought to also answer the corresponding research questions: **“What are the experiences of gay and lesbian students on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University?”** and **“What is the potential role of safe spaces or zones on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University?”** In order to achieve this, the importance to use an interpretivist epistemological approach and constructionist ontological approach as research bases for the study were emphasised. This was done to highlight the importance of developing safe spaces or zones on the campus which seek to provide an inclusive context for sexual minorities. In addition to the study’s general objectives mentioned above, specific objectives were formulated. The discussion of chapter 7 is organised in terms of these **specific objectives**.

The **first specific research objective** focused on the provision of a **theoretical discussion on the contributions of theoretical debates, particularly queer theory**, in relation to the position of sexual minorities in society as part of chapter 2. The first part of this chapter highlighted the views on how African countries view homosexuality as “un-African” and the need to still mobilise sexual minorities together with working toward the eradication of violence against sexual minorities. In some countries, including South Africa, having

decriminalised homosexuality and irrespective of the law that embraces equality, there still seems to be the pervasiveness of discrimination based on minoritised sexual and gender identities and this may be due to the heteronormative structures and norms that are likely to play a role in governing how individuals should and should not behave (cf. Bhana, 2012; Msibi, 2012). This thought notes that those individuals who do not conform to the predetermined gendered and sexual norms based on a cisgendered heteronormative system, are likely to be subjected to subordination and exclusion by society overall and potentially face imprisonment (Ndashe, 2010; Reddy, 2001:85) in other African countries. Reference was made to sociological contributions expressed by, among others, Plummer (1998; 2003; 2015) who argued in favour of an emphasis on the role of reflexivity in highlighting the plurality of sexualities (along intersectional lines) with regard to sexual minorities in modern society (Plummer, 2015). The chapter also included foci on a queer theoretical critique and interrogation of binaries and societal heteronormative structures. This included the interrogation of heteronormativity (McIntosh, 1968; Rubin, 1993; Smuts, 2011; Stein 1989; Valocchi, 2005; Warner, 1991) and the symbolic image of 'the closet' because of its tendency to further subordinate homosexual identities in relation to heterosexual identities (cf. Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; De Wet et al., 2016; Fuss, 1995), and queer theory as anti-assimilationist (cf. Card, 2007; De Vos, 2015; Robinson, 2012; Robson, 2002; Slagle, 2008; Van den Berg, 2016; Yep et al., 2003). The chapter concluded by providing an insight into criticism levelled against queer theory and its main principles (cf. Eve, 2004; Green, 2002; Msibi, 2013; Spargo, 1999; Watson, 2005).

**Chapter 3** provided a **theoretical overview of the experiences of gay and lesbian students and the necessity of safe spaces or zones for gay and lesbian students**. To highlight the necessities of safe spaces, the chapter commenced with a thorough discussion of the possible challenges that are faced or may be faced by gay and lesbian students in education contexts both in South Africa and abroad. These ranged from homophobia and its manifestations (institutional and internalised) as well as explicit and implicit marginalisation (cf. Black & Underwood, 1998; Butler 2007; Butler et al., 2003; Evans 2002; Jenkins et al., 2009; Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Harper & Schneider, 2003; Nel et al., 2007; Sithole, 2015; Taulke-Johnson & Rivers, 1999). With this essential foundation, the chapter continued toward the section that specifically discussed experiences of gay and lesbian students in South African higher education. Here attention was paid to how these institutions continually display heterosexism in its overarching policies, pedagogies and overall discourses and how these may exacerbate or foster violence towards sexual minority students based on their sexual orientation (Alvarez & Schneider, 2008; Francis, 2017b; Grace, 2015; Jagessar & Msibi, 2015; Richardson, 2008; Wells & Polders, 2006). This discussion was accompanied

by the section on the positive experiences of gay and lesbian students in higher education institutions (D'Augelli, 1989; Evans, 2002; Evans & Broido, 1999; Grace, 2006; McCormack, 2012:10; Rivers, 2011; Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015; Weeks, 2007). The chapter concluded with a focus on the need for the creation of support programmes such as safe spaces or zones and ally programmes on university campuses. The establishment of such support programmes or systems may include formal spaces of support and the sharing of experiences with peers, lecturers or medical professionals (cf. Biegel, 2010; Fox, 2007; Payne & Smith, 2011; Poynter & Tubbs, 2008; Rothmann, 2014; University of the Witwatersrand Ally Training Manual, 2011). Finally, notwithstanding the positive features that accompany safe spaces, this chapter critically reflected on these spaces, how they may potentially reproduce exclusivity and how they may exacerbate negative experiences faced by sexual minorities (cf. Fox, 2007; Fox & Ore, 2010; Ingraham, 2002; Jagose, 1996; Levine, 1998; Stein & Plummer, 1996).

As an introduction to the findings of this study, **chapter 4** centred on the methodological approach used for the study, mainly informed by a **qualitative research design** used by the researcher. This chapter provided the necessity of qualitative design for the study, phases linked with it, and the research methodology that was used for the study. In-depth interviews served as the primary data collection method. Twenty (20) interviews were conducted with students (ten with self-identified gay male students and ten with self-identified lesbian students) from the North-West University Potchefstroom campus. The chapter also focused on the nature of data collection, which included the biographical descriptions of participants, and concluded with the discussion of the data analysis and ethical considerations that are concomitant to this research.

**Chapter 5** provided a thematic discussion of the empirical findings accrued during the fieldwork. The first section of the chapter looked at the personal and group identity of gay and lesbian participants. This section also commented on the stereotypes associated with these identities. The second section of this chapter provided a discussion on students' narratives of their **experiences** in diverse contexts, with the main emphasis on the campus life of their lives on the university campus. Here the chapter focused on the participants' view of the closet and whether they considered themselves as being 'out of the closet' or still closeted. The subsection also commented on the similarities or disjuncture between the students' on- and off-campus behaviour. This is where participants indicated that their behaviours change when they are in different environments, attributing their diverse actions to, among others, their families' opposition to their sexual orientation, their own religious views as well as the heteronormative cultural norms in society. The last section of this chapter provided a comprehensive account of the participants' **narratives on safe spaces**,

including a focus on how they would define it, its various configurations and the need for such spaces in order to engage in debates on the awareness and necessity for policies protecting the rights of gay and lesbian students.

**Chapter 6** presented the analysis of the participants' narratives based on the research objectives and research questions of the study. The first general research question was based on exploring the experiences of gay and lesbian students. This general research question was engaged through an emphasis on two specific research questions and objectives, which are discussed next (these were discussed critically under subsection 6.3.2 in chapter 6). The first specific research question and objective focused on the **exploration of positive experiences of gay and lesbian students on the Potchefstroom campus**. Students mentioned different positive experiences in this regard. They noted having supportive peers (Dietz, 1997; Evans & Broido, 1999; Hecht, 1998) as one of the reasons why they experience the campus environment positively. They also attributed their positive experiences to the availability of support mechanisms including a gay and lesbian campus society (Garcia-Alonso, 2004) and curriculum content addressing debates on homosexuality, history, lives and experiences of gay and lesbian people (cf. McCormack, 2012; Rivers, 2011; Weeks, 2007; Grace, 2006). The second specific research question and objective focused on **exploring the possible challenges faced by gay and lesbian students**. Concepts used by gay and lesbian participants to describe their experiences included examples of bullying (cf. D'Augelli, 1989; Furr et al., 2001) (verbal, emotional and cyber-bullying), feelings of isolation, (cf. Francis & Msibi, 2011; Rothmann, 2014), having suicidal thoughts (cf. D'Augelli, 1992; Ratts et al., 2013; Renn, 2000), experiencing depression (cf. Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Blackburn & McCready, 2009), anxiety, mental instability and a decline in their academic performance (cf. Blackburn & McCready, 2009).

The **second general empirical research question** centred on the potential role of safe spaces or zones on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University. The general research question and objective comprised four specific foci, which are highlighted in the subsequent paragraphs (this was analysed under subsection 6.4 of chapter 6). The first specific research question sought to explore the **positive features** associated with safe spaces or zones on the university campus. Participants were more prone to emphasise the capacity of safe spaces or zones to defend the rights of gay and lesbian students (cf. Biaggio et al., 2003; Grace, 2015) through, among others, empowerment. Safe spaces were also thought to bring about sensitisation on issues related to sexual diversity (cf. Francis, 2017b; Kose, 2009; Kumashiro, 2002; Msibi, 2015; Payne & Smith, 2011; Richardson, 2008; Szalacha, 2003) and they provide safe social networking and supportive spaces (cf. Alvarez & Schneider, 2008; Butler et al., 2003; Evans, 2002; Fox & Ore, 2010). The second specific

research question sought to explore the **limitations** associated with safe spaces or zones on the campus. It was evident from the findings that some of the students did not regard safe spaces or zones as important or necessary on the campus. This is attributed to the fact that these spaces create an exclusive and marginalised community (Fox, 2007; Fox & Ore, 2010) and they tend to exacerbate the potential for homophobic discrimination against sexual minorities (Petrovic, 2002), because a certain space that is meant for particular persons tend to make these particular persons vulnerable to attack and become overpowered by groups that have an influence on campus against homosexuality. The **third specific research question** and objective explored the **forms** which safe spaces could take on the Potchefstroom campus. In this regard, examples included the overall university campus as a safe space or zone, the role of one-to-one consultations, engaging in social activities with other homosexual students and the provision of opportunities for LGBTIQ+ students through critical pedagogies (cf. Chang, 2005) in classroom contexts and students' organisations which provide a haven of support for sexual minorities (Evans, 2002; Hind, 2004). Participants noted that these types of safe spaces have the potential to empower students and create supportive settings for sexual minorities (Ghaziani, 2015), thus improving the healthy development and functioning of gay and lesbian students (Harper et al., 2007), improved self-esteem and confidence (Grace, 2006), unity in the gay and lesbian community (Biegel, 2010) and encouraging the development of structures that stimulate reciprocal discourse and inclusion among students (Gayle et al., 2013). In terms of the **fourth specific research question** and objective, the researcher wanted to explore the reasons cited by students who are **in favour of or against** the development of safe spaces on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University. These reasons are concomitant with the positive features and limitations of safe spaces or zones. Students' reasons included the fact that policies were important because they tend to safeguard gay and lesbian students and would help those who cannot defend themselves. Some students were in favour of safe spaces because, as noted above, they provide sensitisation to the broader heterosexual and homosexual university community with regard to homosexuality. The sensitisation is thought to encourage the eradication of misconceptions and stereotypes regarding gay and lesbian students, whereas some students thought that social activities help them connect with others similar to them (Alvarez & Schneider, 2008). In contrast to these views, some students gave reasons why they are against the development of safe spaces or zones on the campus. They noted that these spaces tend to be segregated from the larger community (Levine, 1998; Robinson, 2012) and that such spaces tend to force some people out of the closet.

## 7.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The final research objective sought to provide specific **recommendations for future research** and **recommendations for practical steps to be taken on the Potchefstroom campus** as it relates to safe spaces.

### 7.3.1 Recommendations for future research

Based on the content of this study, the researcher wishes to recommend the following possible themes for future sociological research:

**Firstly** it would be credible to undertake a *qualitative study* on when and how discrimination and marginalisation of sexual minority individuals commence. This could contribute to a better understanding of the nature of homophobic discrimination and marginalisation, particularly in a South African context in which only a few studies have been undertaken. In so doing, one would not only focus on defining homophobia, but also explore the origins of such discriminatory practices. From a queer theoretical perspective, it may be advantageous to critically engage the underlying heteronormative *and* homonormative principles which inform the lived experiences of these individuals, thus ‘unmask’ the heterosexual performances of sexual minorities under the guise of their “queer skin” (cf. Milani & Wolff, 2015). This may require a critical exploration of how the larger cultural scenarios of African and South African contexts inform, retain or challenge debates which posit same-sex desire as “un-African”.

**Secondly** with one of the consequences of discrimination being the decline in students’ academic performance, the researcher would suggest that further research be conducted to investigate the academic performance of students in the LGBTIQ+ community to establish how the provision of safe spaces which encourage students’ participation in LGBTIQ+ programmes may potentially impact on their academic performance.

**Thirdly**, related to safe spaces as provided by lecturers, further research should also be conducted which assesses the efficiency of the sensitisation of lecturers on issues related to gender and sexual identity. If lecturers would attend courses that discuss issues regarding gender and sexuality, this could provide them with the necessary guidance and skills to address and even reduce discrimination on their university campuses in general, and in their classrooms in particular.

**Fourthly** further research is also needed to evaluate the efficacy of various programmes that deal with bullying, discrimination and the safety of sexual minorities, or courses that address wide-ranging issues in expectations of creating an environment where discrimination based on sexuality is eliminated. Research into the effectiveness of these programmes could not

only contribute to ensuring that higher institutions systems were receiving quality and effective sensitisation programmes, it could also assist in the assessment and identification of which programmes provide the desired results in the eradication of gender and sexuality-based discrimination. In this regard, further research on the nature of these programmes and courses are imperative, in order to identify the underlying epistemological and ontological principles which inform its content. Understanding which programmes are most effective, could allow the university management and other constituents to address challenges faced by sexual minorities more efficiently.

In addition to the noted recommendations, the chapter concludes with recommendations for practical initiatives to be taken on the Potchefstroom campus as it relates to safe spaces.

### **7.3.2 Recommendations for practical initiatives on campus**

It became apparent from the findings that all participants were unaware of the policies that protected the rights of gay and lesbian students, and in addition, the experiences addressed by participants in this study underlined the need to direct attention to the implementation and potential restructuring of institutional policies in order to inform students of their rights on campus. A multidimensional strategy of inclusion and support is required that moves the institution beyond access and beyond safety. Instead of requiring students to adapt to heteronormative and oppressive structures, this outlook appeals to management to structure and articulate the university's policy in such a way that gender and sexual diversity is provided for. Moving towards that realisation of the human rights of gender and sexual minorities and the implementation and/or restructuring of policies, De Wet (2017:128) proposes a clear conceptualisation and implementation of courses which focus on "human rights literacies that would promote transformative action by lecturers, state and school/university officials, teachers, students and learners". Such courses should include information and knowledge on how to master particular skills and use specific language which may encourage people to engage critically with debates on gender and sexual diversity and equality (De Wet, 2017:128). The restructuring may also require efforts to redevelop the curriculum (across faculties and from first year undergraduate level through to postgraduate level), student amenities, faculty and staff training, and more. In terms of the redevelopment of the curriculum, Rothmann and Simmonds (2015:122) suggested that there should be courses that speak to issues concerning and associated with sexual orientation and sexuality (either as stand-alone courses or content incorporated into modules of mainstream programmes and curricula). Furthermore, faculties can play a role to bring about balance and change to the manner in which homosexual persons are viewed in the courses provided. Classes can incorporate discussions concerning the contributions of homosexual

persons, such as politician and activists. In so doing, the superiority and inferiority binary is avoided, therefore no group (e.g. homosexuality) is considered to be inferior to the other (e.g. heterosexuality). Self-identified homosexual lecturers may also be become the ones who facilitate a more positive atmosphere in the classroom based on their first-hand account and may be able to provide a more balanced and detailed view of the experiences of homosexual persons (Rothmann, 2014; Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015). It may also need recognising the ways in which the culture, climate and curriculum of the university can be restricting and create barriers for students (Jagessar and Msibi, 2015). In keeping with this thought, the university should conduct awareness campaigns on diversity issues annually. It would also be significant if staff at the student counselling centres and the university health centre staff are trained on diversity issues, mainly as it relates to these LGBTIQ+ matters.

#### **7.4 FINAL SUMMARY**

Given the diverse experiences of gay and lesbian students on the campus, informed by their personal fears, the impact of the broader societal and campus culture, the fact that separate venues or societies may exacerbate their visibility which, for some (e.g. those still in the closet), may be problematic, the fact that allies too may face adversity if they were to assist students (e.g. openly gay and lesbian lecturers), problems associated with the “normalisation” of heteronormativity or deeply ingrained gender and sexual identity stereotypes all contribute to deciding as to whether or not such spaces are necessary.

With visibility being most important to gay and lesbian students, findings suggest that the introduction of formal policies may be essential in making decisions regarding the disclosure of their identities. The restructuring of these policies may also contribute to the declaration of their identities, serve as indicator of the safety measures provided for gay and lesbian students, and how these safety measures, through formal policies, may enable these students to be more inclined to report incidents associated with hate crimes on campus.

Safe spaces have been considered important as they encourage an understanding and respect between all sexual actors on campus, may challenge misconceptions and stereotypes aimed at gay and lesbian students. Creating a safer and a positive campus climate for all sexual actors, is therefore regarded as important. Furthermore, narratives also indicated that positive contributions of these spaces, as discussed above, may encourage agency on the part of the students to address and potentially challenge homophobia. Yet, such agency may result in participants unknowingly reinforcing and trivialising heteronormative influences in their everyday experiences.

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# Appendix A: Informed Consent

**INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT  
NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY, POTCHEFSTROOM CAMPUS  
MASTERS DISSERTATION: THE NEED FOR SAFE SPACES FOR GAY AND LESBIAN  
STUDENTS ON THE POTCHEFSTROOM CAMPUS OF THE NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY  
FIELD OF STUDY: SOCIOLOGY**

**RESEARCHER: TSHANDUKO TSHILONGO**  
Cell: 0760460818  
[tshandukotshilongo@gmail.com](mailto:tshandukotshilongo@gmail.com)

Dear Participant

This Informed Consent Statement serves to confirm the following information as it relates to the Master's dissertation with the focus on the need for safe spaces for gay and lesbian students on the North-West University Potchefstroom Campus:

- 1 The main purpose of this study centres on obtaining information from gay and lesbian university students, in an attempt to explore the need for safe spaces of on the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University.
- 2 The procedure to be followed is a qualitative research design, which includes the use of an in-depth interview comprised of open-ended questions whereby participants are given the opportunity to communicate their subjective views on the noted topic during either a face-to-face in-depth interview. Basic background information related to the sex, sexual orientation, race, nationality, age, current relationship status and academic qualifications will be asked. Interviews will be recorded, to ensure sufficient transcription of information communicated by the participant. If, at any time during the interview the participant feels that it should be switched off, the researcher will oblige.
- 3 The duration of the interview will be no longer than two hours at most.
- 4 If at any point during the interview the participant should feel uncomfortable, he/she will be given the opportunity to either make his/her discomfort known, or immediately end his/her participation.
- 5 It should also be emphasised that participation takes place on a voluntary basis, with the consent of the participant without any form of coercion.
- 6 The confidentiality and privacy of participants are guaranteed. The participants will be given the opportunity to choose their own fictitious name/pseudonym at the beginning of the interview. Only this name will appear on the interview schedule and in the published report and/or articles. The actual name and surname will only appear on this informed consent form in order to safeguard both the researcher and participant.
- 7 If a respondent regards any information as confidential in nature, and wishes to prohibit the researchers to publish it in the final report and/or articles, he/she should make this known during the interview. This will be adhered to by the researcher.
- 8 A list of the questions to be asked during the interview may be made available to the participant before the commencement of the interview he/she requests this. This will be done to ensure mutual understanding of what has been asked to avoid discrepancies during the interview.
- 9 A summarised copy of the final report or published articles will be made available to participants on request.
- 10 Participants are also requested to provide their e-mail addresses, but only if they feel comfortable to do so. This is done in order to forward relevant information associated with the study (e.g. the final research report, published articles, etc.) to participants if they request this. It is, however, not compulsory to provide this. It will be treated confidentially by the researchers.

I, ..... (Name and surname),..... (Chosen pseudonym) hereby declare that I have read and understand the contents of the Informed Consent Statement, and give my full consent to the interviewer,..... (name and surname) to progress with the interview on .....(date) and use information communicated by myself for the purpose of the Research Project outlined above.

Name and Designation	Signature	Date
<b>Supervisor</b> Dr J Rothmann		
<b>Researcher</b> Tshanduko Tshilongo		
<b>Participant</b>		

## Appendix B: Interview Schedule

### SECTION A BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Sex	
Sexual orientation	
Race	
Nationality	
Age	

### SECTION B ACADEMIC INFORMATION

Faculty of study	
Field of study (program and/or degree)	
Year of study	
Reason for choosing field of study	

### SECTION C PERSONAL IDENTITY

#### *Personal identity*

<p><i>Question 1.1</i> Do you identify as gay or lesbian?</p>
<p><i>Question 1.2</i> Why do you identify as gay or lesbian?</p>
<p><i>Question 1.3</i> When did you know you were gay or lesbian?</p>
<p><i>Question 1.4</i> How did you experience this?</p>
<p><i>Question 1.5</i> Are there characteristics you display or feel you need to display because you are gay or lesbian?</p>
<p><i>Question 1.6</i> Please explain you answer</p>

#### *Stereotypes associated with portrayal of gender*

<p><i>Question 1.7</i> If you identify as male, do you think you should act masculine?</p>
<p><i>Question 1.8</i> Please explain your answer.</p>
<p><i>Question 1.9</i> If you identify as female, do you think you should act effeminate/feminine?</p>
<p><i>Question 1.10</i> Please explain you answer.</p>

**Group identification**

Question 1.11 Do you have a gay or lesbian friend?
Question 1.12 Do you think it is important to have gay and/or lesbian friends?
Question 1.13 Briefly explain your answer.
Question 1.14 Do you form part of a visible LGBTQ community on campus?
Question 1.15 Is it important to be a visible lesbian/gay student?
Question 1.16 Explain you answer

**SECTION D  
THE CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT**

***The campus 'closet'***

Question 2.1 How would you define the closet?
Question 2.2 Would you say that you are "out of the closet" on campus?
Question 2.3 Please explain your answer
Question 2.4 Have you ever decided to <b>remain</b> 'in the closet' on your university campus?
Question 2.5 Please <b>explain</b> your answer briefly.
Question 2.6 Does your behaviour on campus differ from what you display in your behaviour in other contexts (Such as church, at home and with friends)?
Question 2.7 Please explain by providing reasons for your answer.

***Discrimination on the university campus***

Question 2.8 Have you experienced any form of discrimination outside the context of campus (your society in general, e.g. home, church)?
Question 2.9 Please explain your answer.
Question 2.10 Have you experienced any form of <b>discrimination</b> on campus because of your sexual orientation?

<i>Question 2.11</i> Please <b>explain</b> your answer briefly by providing examples.		
<i>Question 2.12</i> If you answered <b>Yes</b> , did you experience any of the following because of the discrimination:		
<b>Experience</b>	<b>Yes or No</b>	<b>Please elaborate briefly on how this affected you</b>
Isolation and/or loneliness		
Depression		
Eating disorders		
Anxiety		
Suicidal tendencies		
Academic performance affected negatively		
Bullying		
Other		
<i>Question 2.13</i> Does your <b>university/faculty/class</b> provide a <b>safe environment</b> for you to disclose your sexual orientation?		
<i>Question 2.14</i> Please <b>explain</b> your answer shortly by providing reasons.		

**Potchefstroom Campus Management**

<i>Question 2.15</i> Are you aware of the university's policies about issues regarding the protection of lesbian and gay rights on your campus?
<i>Question 2.16</i> Do you think it is necessary to have university policies in place to protect the rights of lesbian and gay students?
<i>Question 2.17</i> Please provide a reason(s) for your answer
<i>Question 2.18</i> What do you think could be done to protect the rights of lesbian and gay students?
<i>Question 2.19</i> If you could change anything about your campus experience for gay and lesbian students, what would that be?

**Safe spaces**

<i>Question 2.20</i> How would you define a ' <b>safe space</b> ' or ' <b>safe zone</b> '?
<i>Question 2.21</i> How would you define a "safer campus"?
<i>Question 2.22</i> Do you consider it <b>useful to have a designated venue</b> for lesbian and gay students on campus?
<i>Question 2.23</i> Please provide <b>reasons</b> for your answer

<i>Question 2.24</i> Do you think that it is important to have a <b>lesbian and gay student organisation</b> on your campus?		
<i>Question 2.25</i> Please provide <b>reasons</b> for your answer		
<i>Question 2.26</i> Are you part of such an organisation?		
<i>Question 2.27</i> Please explain your answer		
<i>Question 2.28</i> What <b>forms</b> could (or should) such safe spaces take?		
<b>Form</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>Please provide a reason for this form</b>
One-to-one consultation with a lecturer, psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker		
Social activities for LGBTQ-students: 'socials', reading groups, 'movie nights', study groups		
LGBTQ-office with trained counsellors, legal personnel		
Your classroom		
Your on-campus university residence		
The university campus		
LGBTQ-courses (voluntary/involuntary)		
Other (Please elaborate)		
<i>Question 2.29</i> How could safe spaces possibly contribute to your own individual empowerment?		
<i>Question 2.30</i> With safe spaces being created on campus, what long-term impact may these have on student's health, safety, identity development, and educational outcomes?		
Health (emotional and psychological well-being)		
Safety (physical and emotional safety)		
Identity development (e.g. Different phases/stage and/or coming)		
Academic achievements		
<i>Question 2.31</i> Do you think it would be beneficial to have a <b>course on gender and/or sexuality</b> ?		
<i>Question 2.32</i> Please <b>explain</b> your answer shortly.		
<i>Question 2.33</i> Do you have any gay/lesbian and straight friend who has ever enrolled for gender/sexuality courses?		
<i>Question 2.34</i> What were their experiences?		
<i>Question 2.35</i> Do you think it is beneficial to have a gay or lesbian lecturer?		
<i>Question 2.36</i> Please explain your answer briefly.		

*Question 2.37*

Do you think lecturers could or should be regarded as playing an important role in creating positive change on university campuses?

*Question 2.38*

Please explain your answer.

**Thank you for participating in this interview.  
If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.**

# Appendix C: Ethics Approval Letter



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South Africa 2520

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**Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory  
Committee**  
Tel +27 18 299 4849  
Email [Ethics@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Ethics@nwu.ac.za)

## ETHICS APPROVAL CERTIFICATE OF PROJECT

Based on approval by Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, the North-West University Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (NWU-IRERC) hereby approves your project as indicated below. This implies that the NWU-IRERC grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the project may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

<b>Project title:</b> <i>Exploring the need for Safe Spaces for lesbian and gay students on the North-West University Potchefstroom Campus</i>																
<b>Project Leader:</b>	Dr Jacques Rothmann															
<b>Student:</b>	T Tshilongo															
<b>Ethics number:</b>	<table border="1"><tr><td>N</td><td>W</td><td>U</td><td>-</td><td>0</td><td>0</td><td>4</td><td>7</td><td>1</td><td>-</td><td>1</td><td>5</td><td>-</td><td>A</td><td>7</td></tr></table>	N	W	U	-	0	0	4	7	1	-	1	5	-	A	7
N	W	U	-	0	0	4	7	1	-	1	5	-	A	7		
<b>Approval date:</b> 2015-11-12	<b>Expiry date:</b> 2017-11-12	<b>Category</b>	<b>N/A</b>													

Special conditions of the approval (if any):

- The questionnaire and interview schedule must be submitted to Dr. van Wyk for ethical evaluation.
- The project leader must carefully and continuously monitor the ethical implications of this project. If any problems occur the project leader must immediately report to the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts.

### General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, please note the following:

- The project leader (principle investigator) must report in the prescribed format to the NWU-IRERC:
  - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the progress of the project,
  - without any delay in case of any adverse event (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the project.
- The approval applies strictly to the protocol as stipulated in the application form. Would any changes to the protocol be deemed necessary during the course of the project, the project leader must apply for approval of these changes at the NWU-IRERC. Would there be deviations from the project protocol without the necessary approval of such changes, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the project may be started. Would the project have to continue after the expiry date, a new application must be made to the NWU-IRERC and new approval received before or on the expiry date.
- In the interest of ethical responsibility the NWU-IRERC retains the right to:
  - request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the project;
  - withdraw or postpone approval if:
    - any unethical principles or practices of the project are revealed or suspected;
    - it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the NWU-IRERC or that information has been false or misrepresented;
    - the required annual report and reporting of adverse events was not done timely and accurately;
    - new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.

The IRERC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your project. Please do not hesitate to contact the IRERC for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely

**Linda du Plessis**

Digitally signed by Linda du Plessis  
DN: cn=Linda du Plessis, o=NWU,  
ou=Vest Triangle Campus,  
#99-474614, email=lduplessis@nwu.ac.za,  
c=ZA  
Date: 2015.12.08 15:35:46 +0200

**Prof Linda du Plessis**

*Chair NWU Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (IRERC)*