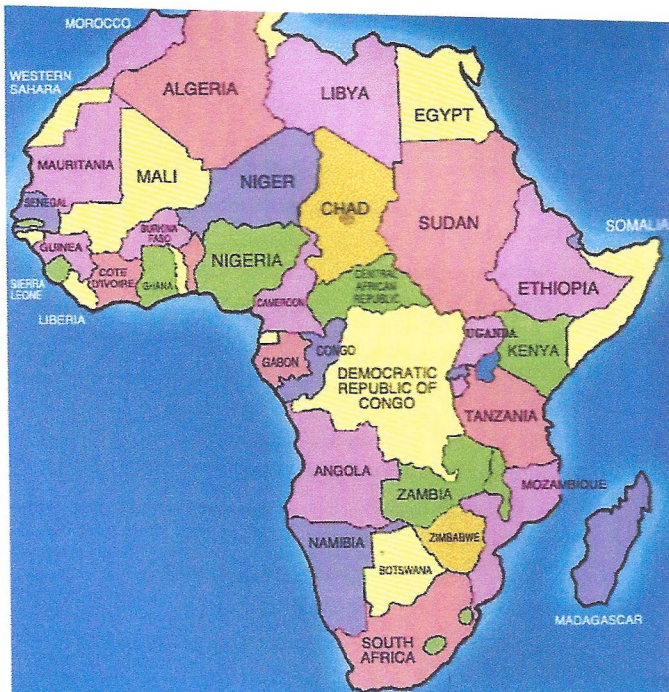


“What do you mean you are lesbian? You are black”: Reflections on black lesbian identity

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Mapping the context

In this article, I bring together thoughts and views drawn from my doctorate in systemic-psychotherapy research, which examined the factors and processes by which individual women identify their sexual orientation. Views obtained from interviews with women across the sexual-orientation range (lesbian, bisexual, asexual and heterosexual) were analysed using qualitative-research methods. Account was also taken of ideas drawn from critical discussions on the subject with relevant practitioners and clinicians. While the study focused on the women's individual ideas and thoughts, it adopted a broader perspective on the role played by wider systemic factors such as relevant historical events, the socio-political milieu, the question of the influence of biological factors on sexual-orientation development, as well as the role played by the family, the wider community and religious networks.

The research project was aimed at trying to reach an understanding of how these women experience their sexual development, how they negotiate related changes within their lives and the meanings made of these events. The study was aimed at opening up theoretical and clinical-practice discussions on the subject of women's sexuality, rather than to make generalisations about women. The issues raised in the study were used as a platform from which to continue the enquiry with the hope of encouraging

further research and theory development within the field of systemic psychotherapy.

The research enquiry began with individual and focus-group discussions with women and clinicians in Zimbabwe and it ended with interviews of the same groups in the United Kingdom. Conclusions drawn from the study are that sexual orientation is experienced and created from within the individual, is affected by attitudes and messages from family and friends, and its expression is dependent upon political, economic, cultural, religious and spiritual realities.

While the project was not comparative research as such, I found myself reflecting upon and making comparisons between women's experiences in (primarily black) South Africa and Zimbabwe, where I was born and where I lived, and in the (predominantly white) UK, where I now live. In writing this article, I position myself as a Southern African, UK based, black lesbian woman and mother. I also position myself as an academic researcher, a systemic clinical practitioner and supervisor in children and families mental health services.

In writing this article, I wish to contribute towards conversations around sexual orientation, with particular focus on black lesbian women. Views shared in this article are not in any way representative of the views of black Southern African lesbian women, neither do they represent views of black lesbian women who live in the UK, as these women come from hugely diverse racial and cultural backgrounds.

The black African socio-political and cultural context

My research “journey” started in Zimbabwe where, in 1993, the president of the country referred to homosexuals as “worse than dogs and pigs”. The message to the Zimbabwean society at that time was that homosexuality was not to be tolerated because in traditional African society there is no room for men who want to have sex with men and, as for most people, it is unimaginable that women can want to have sex with other women.

More than a decade later, in April 2011, President Mugabe was again quoted by a Zimbabwean reporter as having repeated his attack on gay and lesbian individuals, condemning homosexuality as “against nature”, an immoral practice of the “filthy West” that should never be legalised in Zimbabwe. This followed heated debate on whether gay and lesbian human rights should be included in the new Zimbabwean constitution following the setting up of a coalition government in 2010.

The issue of brutal attitudes towards homosexuality is one of the few subjects that unite African nations. With the exception of South Africa, homosexuality is shunned in most African countries. Nigerian clerics, as well as the presidents of Namibia and Tanzania, have reacted by joining in the condemnation of homosexuality. President Mugabe calling homosexuals “worse than pigs” therefore serves to neutralise the perceived threat to the fabric of the African culture and

community. Expelling, imprisoning or deporting homosexuals serves the purpose of ejecting them, if all else fails. For individuals in Africa, there are real political risks connected with being gay or lesbian. Homosexuality in these countries is regarded as a "perversion" and in some cases an offence for which one can be imprisoned. Same-sex experiences are regarded as a threat to the fabric of society and to common sense thinking.

In most African societies, marriage is viewed as the prestigious cross-sex relational system that has the greatest implication for cultural notions of gender, sex and reproduction. Women's sexuality, in this context, is prescribed along the role expectation of heterosexuality where a woman is expected to get married, reproduce and rear children and live a heterosexual lifestyle. The only Southern African country that has taken a more liberal stance on sexual orientation is South Africa. The post-apartheid constitution includes a clause that makes discrimination on sexual identity illegal. In December 2005, the South African High Court declared it unconstitutional to deny gay people the right to marry. The high court instructed parliament to amend marriage laws to include same-sex unions within a year. In South Africa, homosexual couples and individuals are allowed to adopt.

Despite these legislative changes, South African gay individuals still face hate crimes. In April 2011, a South African newspaper reported that a lesbian activist was stoned to death outside Johannesburg. A spokesman for the Human Rights Watch said evidence indicated the murder appeared "to be the latest in an epidemic of brutal homophobic attacks". The 24-year-old lesbian activist was stoned, stabbed with broken glass and gang-raped in what was described as "corrective rape". A national task team to tackle hate crimes against lesbians and gays has been set up by the Justice and Constitutional Development Ministry.

While in the majority of African countries homosexuality is considered taboo, unnatural and its practice against the law, discrimination on racial grounds is no longer common. African countries are now independent and the majority of the population is black. Black African lesbian women may indeed face real

hostilities from their families, the community and from law enforcement in terms of their sexual orientation. They do, however, have a fairly secure racial identity, which they have no need to defend, and they do not face racially motivated crimes.

What do you mean you are lesbian? You are black

I caught myself thinking that there is something not quite "authentic" about being black and lesbian. After all, lesbians are "assumed" to be mainly white women with no children. Calling oneself "black lesbian" has a feel of committing some sort of identity fraud, letting friends and community down, with the risk of being shunned and cut off from family. It has a feel of having to take sides against black people, like risking your "real" identity of being black and taking on some unknown identity with none of the support structures from the community, friends and family. There is a sense of loss, of crossing an invisible line, of following your heart and exposing yourself to the unknown.

Personal-identity accounts are rooted within and influenced by social relationships, cultural and social backgrounds. While it would appear conceivable, therefore, to create a personal account of being black with the support of these relationships, creating a personal account of being lesbian becomes a challenge as it requires a different "audience" which may not be as accessible and supportive as the socio-cultural relationships. This then begs the question: "Why do it, why 'choose' to be lesbian and risk offending the community, family and friends?"

In my opinion, sexual-orientation development is a complex, multifaceted and multidimensional process and it is an identity matter. Like identity construction, the construction of sexual orientation is influenced by several broad systemic factors, some of which include messages from the family, peers, and wider community. Participants in my research were clear in their minds that, in their experience, sexual orientation development is also shaped by what they described as a "given", a "gut" or "instinctual" feeling. Participants identified the "gut" feeling as associated with how they thought they arrived at an understanding or appreciation of their sexual orientation. This "gut" feeling, which is almost intuitive, becomes

recognisable as individuals try to explain and describe the development of their sexual attraction. The participants were unified in their use of "physical descriptions" or embodied experience in an effort to spell out their thoughts and feelings about sexual-orientation identity.

Of this experience, one of the participants (not their real names) said:

"I knew I was attracted to women quite young, umm before I was actively sexual at about ten. I might have been nine or ten but I didn't really understand what it was; it was just a physical thing." Taz

"I suppose it's like a story in two halves, really. Up to the age of 30, I thought I was completely heterosexual and, in my 30s, I discovered I wasn't, 'cause I had a lesbian relationship, then I wasn't entirely heterosexual. Umm, I kind of feel up to the age of 30 being one thing and from 30 onwards being another." Nancy

"It's a very physical, gut wrenching reaction and I think for me that would be the defining fact" [to sexual orientation]. Denise

I do not believe one can "choose" to be lesbian. The real choice is to do with lifestyles. Acts such as "corrective rape" cannot change the victims' sexual orientation, but they could cause enough terror to "force" the individual woman into living a heterosexual lifestyle.

While feminist researchers and feminist writers like Jackson (1999), Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1993) and Belenky *et al.* (1986) draw attention to the interplay between family influences, society and culture in the construction of women's sexual orientation, we must bear in mind that, as suggested by women in the research, sexual orientation is self-identified and how one then lives her day to day life will depend on other social factors including the political context and religious influences.

Unlike gay and lesbian individuals, black persons do not have to "come out" and publicly declare that they are black. It is obvious to everyone and to themselves that they are black. While black lesbians will therefore be obviously black in appearance, their sexual orientation remains unseen and unknown unless and until it is revealed as such. Most people identify with and are socialised in their own ethnic, racial and cultural groups before acknowledging a sexual identity. Sexual-orientation identity issues will emerge later and the process of negotiating this development is fraught with anxieties and difficulties associated

with coming to terms with one's identity as lesbian.

“Coming out” is viewed in most literature and clinical practice as a way of developing an identity integrating a sense of self. It involves not just coming out to one's self and accepting and respecting one's sexuality but actually coming out and declaring one's sexuality publicly. It is argued that, by going public and involving oneself in the gay community, one can gain a sense of belonging and benefit from the support within the community. Not everyone feels comfortable going public and necessarily getting involved in a community. Going public for a black lesbian individual may mean having to make a choice between two minority communities, which may be fundamentally different and conflicting. Coming out means having to deal with homophobic attitudes from the family and the black community and discrimination from the dominant white community.

Drawing from my research and from the literature, homophobia, the universal message of heterosexuality, culture, religion and the political context greatly influence how people express their sexual orientation. Heterosexuality is generally assumed as the only acceptable, viable sexual orientation identity. Engaging in the debate on heterosexuality, Jackson (1999) argues that:

“Heterosexuals do not generally expect to be asked to explain themselves. Lesbian and gay sexualities are marked categories, routinely named and made visible as ‘other’ while heterosexuality has usually been unmarked as the unexamined norm which needs no name and no justification for its existence.”

To the majority of members of society, it is “natural” to fall in love with a person of the opposite sex; however, lesbians and bisexuals challenge this viewpoint. Having heterosexual attachments and relationships and having children gives meaning and focus to one's life. The homosexual lifestyle seems to imply that it is possible to have adult romantic attachments that do not involve procreation. In religious circles and in the majority of cultures in Africa, the homosexual life style is a threat to what might be perceived to be the “natural order” of heterosexuality. It is inconceivable, therefore, for a woman to wish to be anything but heterosexual.

While carrying out my research, I found myself making comparisons between

homophobia in terms of public discourses as experienced in Zimbabwe and hidden homophobia which some of the UK study participants alluded to during the research process. Addressing the issue of homophobia, one of the research participants said;

“It's just the way society is, and it's just geared that way. There is so much homophobia. You know I do admire people who don't give a damn about that sort of thing. I am a bit more selective, a bit more sensitive I suppose. I get upset by having someone react badly to me.”

The literature distinguishes between internalised homophobia, which arises when gay men, lesbians or bisexuals, themselves, fear and loathe homosexuality, and institutionalised homophobia whereby social structures (such as those in African countries) discriminate against lesbian, gay and bisexual people. These hostilities become more intense under certain forms of social organisation, the dominance of heterosexuality and the belief that homosexuality is unnatural. Same-sex experiences come under attack because of fears about widespread threats to social order.

But does it really matter whether you are black or white lesbian because surely you are faced with the same problems?

To a large extent, I think it does matter. The dominant culture in the UK does acknowledge homosexuality and protects individuals against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation regardless of ethnicity or race. Most black people also belong to a minority culture whose membership is likely to have attitudes, beliefs and values that differ from those of the dominant culture. These attitudes will vary depending on individual values and the extent of assimilation into the dominant culture. Because the dominant culture legislates against discrimination, thus protecting individuals, some lesbian youth may find family attitudes towards their sexual orientation more accepting perhaps, because their parents are more tolerant of diversity and difference. Gay parents who come out later in their lives may be challenged by their own internalised homophobia derived from traditional attitudes on homosexuality, depending again on their own cultural and family experiences

Great strides have been made in the UK with regard to legislating against discrimination on racial and sexual orientation grounds. Several bills and legislative acts have been passed, the most recent being the Equality Bill 2010 which is aimed at bringing together all the various strands of discrimination: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation. Despite legislation being clear about discrimination on sexual orientation and racial grounds, minority groups still face prejudice and discrimination. With the support of legislation and families, black-minority individuals can find ways of dealing with racial difficulties. Black gays and lesbians however sometimes have to face these hostilities without the support and acceptance of their minority community.

Religion and spirituality

In my experience, religion contributes to how sexuality is shaped and perceived. Religious belief-systems, like cultural belief-systems and practices, exert control over those who do hold them. In Islam, Catholicism and other religions and most cultures, sexuality is not regarded as an end in itself but as a means to achieve biological, familial and societal objectives. Homosexuality is looked upon with disfavour if it then excludes heterosexual relationships whose aspiration is procreation.

Religious beliefs and practices play a fundamental role in defining morality to do with sex and sexuality. Some of the disagreements in religious communities are to do with sex issues and gender. They are also to do with sex, especially as it relates to procreation, and as it relates to rights to contraception and abortion. The consecration of a homosexual bishop, in the United States of America, and the practice of blessing same-sex unions in Canada provoked an outcry in the Anglican Church. Within the church, there are some groups that push for acceptance of homosexuality. At the heart of these actions lies the need for collaboration with religious and faith-based leaders to improve the lives of lesbian and gay people.

A lot of black families have deeply entrenched religious and cultural beliefs. These beliefs will then inform how families react when a member of their group comes

out as gay or lesbian. While it is not within the scope of this article to carry out an in-depth analysis of different views of religious systems on sexuality and sexual orientation, it is my belief, however, that these ideas become entrenched, influencing the attitudes of those that do hold them. Whether the individuals involved challenge these ideals or accept them and pass them on to their children, will differ from individual to individual.

Summary and implications for clinical practice

Zimbabwe and other African countries do not recognise the authenticity of any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality. These countries legislate against homosexuality, which is a punishable offence for which one could be imprisoned. Because of the socio-political and religious attitudes, coupled with strong cultural belief-systems, it has been difficult for communities, families and individuals to challenge the prevailing mind-set.

In the UK, there is clear legislation regarding discrimination on racial and sexual orientation grounds. This then helps guide clinical practice even though it needs to be recognised that legislation does not in itself change ingrained religious and cultural attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality, which individuals and communities will still continue to have. Winnie, one of the study participants, believed that psychological therapies pay lip service to the idea of alternative sexual orientations and life styles. She argued that therapists might not be fully aware of their own prejudices and the pressure that is brought upon people to conform to a heterosexual lifestyle. In my work, I also come across young people and families who experience teasing and bullying on the grounds of sexual orientation. I come across professionals who do not seem to have insightful involvement and understanding of sexual orientation and racial issues.

It may be that it takes a while for legislative change to trickle down to the people for whom it is intended. It is possible, for that reason, that it may also take a while for change to take effect in the field of therapy.

In mapping clinical practice for individuals and families, account needs to be taken of the argument that sexual orientation is a multi-dimensional,

multi-faceted evolving process which is dependent upon the past, present and future and on other systemic contexts. Sexual orientation is also self-defined and dependent upon:

- Personal experiences of attraction and desire and the experience of coming out
- Personal qualities and opportunities that impact on personal choices in life style
- Self-identification and degree of self-acceptance of one's sexual-orientation identity

Some family therapy approaches seem well suited to explore issues to do with sexual orientation, as well as racial-identity issues. This is because these approaches not only acknowledge individual, interpersonal and wider contextual influences, but they also focus on exploring relevant historical beliefs, contexts and family scripts. Among some of the family therapy schools through which further exploration of sexuality matters could be made, are those that focus on family scripts and belief systems. These include the trans-generational and attachment-theory based approaches, as well as post-modern approaches such as narrative and social-constructionist approaches. Social constructionists argue that one's knowledge of the world and beliefs are constructed in conversation. The narrative approach views problems as arising when the way in which people's lives are narrated by themselves and others does not fit with lived experience. The concern is with the historical and social context arising from which problem-related belief-systems, scripts and narratives emerge. The narratives in this instance are narratives around women's sexual-orientation development.

In practice, narrative therapy proposes the opening of space for the authoring of alternative stories, the possibility of which has previously been marginalised by dominant oppressive narratives, such as homophobia and racism, which maintain the problem. The authoring of alternative stories opens up the possibility of the client taking control of their lives. Carr (2000) sees narrative therapy as privileging the power of the individual to choose the narrative by which he or she lives.

Practitioners are encouraged to be curious but sensitive in broadening the context, exploring and challenging the status quo with their clients. They are also encouraged to keep up to date with relevant literature that addresses sexual

orientation such as pink practice and literature from other countries such as the United States of America. It is my belief that there is currently a big gap in the literature informing practice on black minority gay and lesbian issues. For systemic practitioners to move forward in addressing these issues, there is a need for further research to support theories that would in turn inform practice with lesbian women in general and minority lesbian women in particular. National conferences focusing on minority issues such as the one hosted by AFT in 2010 also go a long way in generating conversations and reflective thinking on diversity and inclusion.

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