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Living the L-word:
Black and white lesbians in Johannesburg

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Letitia Smuts

UJ Department of Sociology

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LIVING THE L-WORD: BLACK AND WHITE LESBIANS IN JOHANNESBURG

Letitia Smuts

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to highlight the different meanings that lesbian women attach to their sexual identity based on other elements of their identity, and their temporal and spatial context. This work begins to shed some light on how a lesbian identity is shaped and re-negotiated in South Africa today. It contributes to the broad body of social identity theory and to theories of sexuality in particular by employing the intersectional model in order to understand how lesbian identity in South Africa is shaped. The way in which a white racial identity shapes a lesbian identity has been implicit in recent literature, which has focused primarily on black lesbians' experiences and how their racial identity intersects with their sexual identity. This analysis is expanded to explicitly include white women within its purview. This allows a comparison between the experiences of black and white lesbians.

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

Both Jenkins (2004) and Castells (1998) propose that individuals to some extent play an active role in negotiating their identities. Identity is seen as a social process whereby actors interact with others in the course of constructing their identities. Identity therefore has multiple meanings for each individual. However, identity is even more complex than that. These authors suggest that identities cannot be seen in isolation and individuals do not always have the freedom to determine their identities. The process of shaping identities, thus, depends on the amount of power that agents possess to negotiate identities, as well as the context in which the individuals find themselves.

While the new South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) is committed to upholding and acknowledging the human rights of lesbians, stigma persists in some areas of society making it difficult to be openly lesbian. The construction of a lesbian identity is challenging, since the identity is shaped within a largely heterosexual society. As a result, lesbian women often choose to hide their sexual identities or adopt certain strategies to 'pass' as heterosexual. It is probably as a result of this that the 'coming out' process has been so central to attempts to come to grips with homosexual identity. In the process of constructing and realising this new, often oppressed, identity, lesbians rely on the multiple elements of their broader identities, including race, class, and religion, as well as the person's historical and political background. As Cock (2003: 42) points out 'there is a frequent clash of different discordant identities and racial differences cut across a unifying gay identity'.

Martin and Lyon (1972: 1) define a lesbian as 'a woman whose primary erotic, psychological, emotional and social interest is in a member of her own sex, even though that interest may not be overtly expressed'. In this paper, 'lesbian' will be defined as a female who is emotionally, socially, and sexually attracted to other females, who has gone through a process of evaluating her sexuality, and who has adopted and incorporated this identity as part of her being, either to a large or small extent. The working definition asserts that a lesbian should already have gone through a process where she internalises what it means to be a lesbian, and, thus, she has consciously adopted a lesbian identity. The reason for this articulation is directly based on the current project's objectives. The study aims to analyse how a lesbian identity is developed and realised over a number of years and it would, therefore, not be possible to study participants who have not made their sexual identity public in some areas of their lives.

To contextualise the development of lesbian identity, a proper understanding of an intersectional approach to identity is required. Intersectionality can be defined as 'the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination' (Davis, 2008: 67). Intersectionality acknowledges that identities are always in flux and are constantly being re-negotiated in light of other multiple identities, and is further complicated by various power contexts. The concept of intersectionality has developed out of efforts by black feminist scholars to specify the interaction between different social categories such as race, gender, class and sexuality. As Weldon (2005) points out, black women, in particular, have unique experiences and identities and can therefore not be understood in the same way as white women or black men. Intersectionality theories aim to overcome this dilemma. The significance of the approach is that it provides a way in which the interaction between systems of oppression can be described (Weldon, 2005). More specifically, it examines how power functions at the intersection of different identities and makes it possible to gain some further insights into the complexity of how identities are shaped. Weldon (2005)

points out that the core idea of intersectionality is that social categories do not combine in purely additive ways, but are rather interdependent.

Intersectionality theories are inherently constructionist in nature. Hames-Garcia (2006: 78) contends that essentialist understandings of identity should be rejected, and that some form of constructionism should be supported which understands homosexual identities 'as coming into existence in the context of intermeshed oppressions'. These oppressions could include patriarchy, homophobia, racism, and colonialism. Hames-Garcia (2006: 87) argues that a woman's positioning in relation to her identities, including gender, sexuality, race, and more, occurs within the matrix of such oppressions. According to intersectionality theories, various multiple identities need to be factored in when trying to understand a single identity. Similarly, the emergence of a lesbian identity needs to be understood by focusing on the interaction of multiple identities, as well as the experiences of subordination or discrimination. Hames-Garcia's rationale to favour a form of social contructionist approach in the study of homosexual identities overlaps considerably with the intersectional approach to identity.

Themes of stigma appear prominently in international and South African literature on lesbians and an argument will be made that lesbians often shape their sexual identities around their personal experiences of stigma or the fear of being stigmatised. In brief, Goffman (1986: 3) defines stigma as a process whereby persons are devalued based on an attribute that is deeply discrediting within a particular social interaction. The person with the discrediting attribute experiences various negative social consequences such as discrimination and social rejection. In terms of Goffman's articulation of stigma, homosexuality is perceived as a blemish on the individual character. In order to deal with the possible stigma and ultimately to avoid social rejection or being labelled, lesbian women construct their identities in specific ways. To use Goffman's (1959) phrase, lesbians often have to 'manage their identities' in order to avoid being stigmatised. Therefore, lesbians choose to express their sexual identities in different ways. Often lesbians choose to pass themselves off as heterosexual in order to avoid any possible stigmatisation. Passing, however, does not go without certain costs. Goffman (1986) provides a detailed account of some of the negative consequences that the individual experiences in the process of passing. For one, the person who tries to pass as something or someone they are not, often experiences high levels of anxiety living a life that can collapse at any moment (Goffman, 1986: 87). Also, Goffman claims that the passer could feel torn between two worlds. Passers may feel alienated by their new 'groups' because they are not able to identify with their attitudes fully (Goffman, 1986: 87). This is often the case when lesbian women are torn between the spaces where they feel comfortable expressing their sexual identities and the spaces where they try and pass as heterosexual. Goffman (1986: 87) also presumes that passers might suffer feelings of disloyalty and self-contempt when they cannot take action against offensive remarks made by members of the group in which they hide their sexuality.

South African literature also alludes to the fact that secrecy dominates the lives of many local lesbians who attempt to hide their lesbian identities. Hames (2005: 1) believes that women all over the world, in different kinds of settings, remain silent about their sexual orientation when it does not correspond with the predominant heterosexist experience. South Africa's constitution does not necessarily translate into approval of homosexuality by the majority of the population (Patron, 2000: 125). This leads to feelings of reluctance when lesbians decide to make their identities public. According to Hames (2005: 1) lesbian women still tend to search for 'relatively safe places' before they feel comfortable enough to acknowledge their sexual identity. Hattingh (2005: 214) claims that some homosexual individuals engage in much more than mere silence, namely pretending. Pretending can be seen as an alternative to secrecy. In order to be accepted by the larger heterosexual community, lesbians often pass themselves off as being heterosexuals and associate themselves with specific 'accepted' groups to avoid being stigmatised. Schurink (1981: 87) found that some lesbians are willing to 'sacrifice' their 'deviant' lesbian identities in order to gain from the benefits of a non-homosexual orientation. A covert lesbian, thus, concerns herself with passing as a heterosexual woman in order to fit in with the norm in society. She tends to employ a variety of techniques to manage a certain impression in the heterosexual arena.

Furthermore, stigmatisation against lesbians often manifests itself in the form of hate crimes and the literature shows that the fear of hate crimes is one of the biggest concerns for lesbians in South Africa. Wells and Polders (2004a: 1) define hate crimes as 'actions against a person based on their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion or political convictions or gender that intend to do harm or intimidate the person and may vary from verbal abuse to murder'. According to Cock (2003: 41) there is a particularly vicious edge to some lesbian attacks in South Africa. The murder of Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Moosa on 7 June 2007 is but one case that has received a great deal of media coverage. The two women had been raped and shot before their bodies were discovered in Soweto. Another

case of a recent hate crime is that of former Banyana Banyana soccer player, Eudy Simelani, who was raped and stabbed to death in her hometown of KwaThema, Springs, Gauteng on 28 April of 2008 for being a lesbian (Mogoatlhe, 2008). The three women mentioned here had been openly 'out' lesbians. These cases highlighted the immense struggle some black South African lesbians have to endure based on their sexuality. It is not surprising then, that the fear of stigma surrounding lesbianism in a heterosexist society often results in the creation of secretive subcultures. This secrecy, according to Morgan and Wieringa (2005: 17), both isolates and protects women. These acts further marginalise lesbians in specific economic and cultural positions.

Working on the basis that it is important to consider multiple identities as well as the power context within a society in order to fully understand a lesbian woman's sexual identity, the closely related experience of race and of being lesbian must be considered in conjunction. Hooks focuses on how a black racial identity and sexual identity occur within the matrix of homophobia in the United States. Hooks (1989: 124) argues that black lesbian women are often expected to choose one identity over another, such as: do you identify more with the political struggle of your race and ethnic group or the gay rights struggle? Black lesbians also face a dual dilemma in that they have to confront both racism and homophobia. They often feel isolated because of the tensions between them and the larger, predominantly white gay community created by racism and tensions within black communities around issues of homophobia (Hooks, 1989: 125). This leads to an even further divide between black and white lesbians. Collins (1998: 65) underlines that white women do in fact enjoy certain racial privileges provided by 'whiteness', which then differentiates them from their non-white counterparts. However, homophobia does exist in white communities, but it manifests itself differently within this racial grouping.

What makes Hooks' account of homosexuality among black individuals significant is twofold. Firstly, she does not treat black communities as monolithic. Instead, she argues that this homogenous notion should be challenged. The argument is that black communities vary as urban and rural experiences create diversity of culture and lifestyle (Hooks, 1989: 121). Secondly, it cannot be argued that black communities are more homophobic than other communities (Hooks, 1989: 122). According to Hooks (1989: 122) it is necessary to interrogate the nature of the homophobia. By doing this, she argues, one can see that race is not the most significant denominator of homophobia within these communities and other factors can come into play here too. Hooks claims that a lot of the time religion provides a better understanding of the cause of homophobia. 'Many Christian black folks (like other Christians in this community) are taught in churches that it is a sin to be gay, ironically sometimes by ministers who are themselves gay or bisexual' (Hooks, 1989: 122).

Hooks' argument that race is not always the critical denominator when it comes to homophobia, is useful in trying to understand homosexual identities in South Africa. In South Africa, the ascription of race categories has meant that privilege and exclusion were assigned to certain groups of individuals on the basis of colour. During apartheid privilege were bound to whites as a racial group and people of colour were excluded from these privileges. This has created a further, persistent divide among both racial groups which results in differences in experiences among these groups within the gay community (Gevisser and Cameron 1993: 5). Many black lesbians experience a conflict between their racial and sexual identities. In line with Hooks (1989), Conerly (2000: 7) argues that black individuals either view these two identities as inseparable or they see one identity as more important than the other, and organise their social, political and sexual lives around their choice. This links up to Butler and Astbury's (2008: 231) argument that homosexuals often feel the need to compartmentalise their lives, in essence, separating their homosexuality from other areas in their lives in order to cope with their sexual orientation. In addition, many black lesbians perceive racism and sexual stereotyping on the part of white lesbians (Conerly, 2000: 11). Conerly (2000: 12) argues that black and white lesbians tend to be separated culturally, politically, and, in those cases where black and lesbian cultures have a spatial presence, geographically. At times antagonism can exist between the groups. This division between the two groups forces black lesbians to choose a primary association with one of the cultures. As a result of this, black lesbians often tend to create their own spaces, 'usually within the larger cultures within which they are marginalised'. (Conerly, 2000: 12). Furthermore, Reddy (2000: 163) and Hoad (2007: 71) claim that black South Africans view homosexuality as a 'white man's disease' and 'un-African'. The politics of lesbian identification is embedded in South Africa's colonial history and the beliefs of traditional African cultures. It can, thus, be argued that the experiences of black and white lesbians are exceptionally different from one another.

Swarr and Nagar's (2004) article on the experiences of black women in same-sex relationships in Soweto, South Africa, demonstrates the challenges that some black lesbians face when constructing their sexual identities within a particular context. They criticise Western feminist studies and their approach to conceptualising a lesbian identity

claiming that lesbian studies' key arguments have not 'engaged with the complexities of living in places where political violence and struggles for resources as basic as clean water, food, and literacy directly inform women's options, strategies and means for articulating their sexualities' (Swarr & Nagar, 2004: 494). In Soweto, a black township in Johannesburg, the politics surrounding lesbianism and poverty intersect lesbian's lives in three critical ways. First, Swarr and Nagar (2004: 496) found that their gender identities are shaped by their 'raced' and 'classed' constitution of masculinity and femininity in their specific geographic locale. According to Swarr and Nagar (2004: 495), Sowetan lesbians take up masculinity strategically as a coping mechanism to assert their agency, claim masculine privileges and declare their desires for relationships with women, just like heterosexual masculine men. In effect, 'butchness' allows some Sowetan lesbians to achieve social power in the face of impoverishment and violence (Swarr & Nagar, 2004: 496). In the literature, these claims are not made about white lesbian women, which could suggest that butch/femme gender roles play out differently among racial groups in South Africa. Secondly, they contend that the historical and socio-political context of South Africa informs Sowetan lesbians' feelings and beliefs about religion. As with most religious institutions, black churches have preached homo-hatred over a number of years. This, in effect, creates a conflict between sexual identity and religious identity. The authors, however, fail to acknowledge that Soweto constitutes various 'extensions' and 'zones', and should, thus, not generalise as each of these sections have different cultures and views, as well as numerous churches. Finally, Swarr and Nagar (2004: 497) claim that the violence and homophobic harassment faced by lesbians are directly related to their poverty. Along with their modes of transportation and their insecure housing, the degree to which some are known to be lesbians in their communities, makes them vulnerable to attack. The point that Swarr and Nagar's study bring to the fore, is the issue of identities linked to space or place. As Lindstrom (in Howard, 2000: 382) argues, one's home address is a marker of values and socio-economic position. Swarr and Nagar's study illustrates the beliefs that a particular community have towards lesbian identity and how that impacts on a lesbian woman's struggle for identity, and at the same time it tells a story of a particular social class disposition. Swarr and Nagar's (2004) perspective of the experiences of black lesbian women living in Soweto is significant in that they illustrate the interrelatedness of race, gender, class and sexuality within a specific space in South Africa. However, to fully understand how a lesbian identity in South Africa is shaped and account for the racial differences in the lesbian experience, a broader analysis is required.

Identity theory and an intersectional approach provide a backdrop for discussing lesbian identity in more depth. Lesbian identities are formed in particular social contexts and as a result different meanings often emerge. The relationship between stigma and lesbian identities is also of great importance. Lesbian women in South Africa, in particular, shape meaning based on their different identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination. Black and white women do not have the same histories nor did they have the same privileges during apartheid South Africa. As a result, there are differences in their experiences of being lesbian.

Coming out

The second critical concern is that of the process of 'coming out' or 'coming out of the closet', which refer to an admission of homosexuality either on a personal level, to oneself, or on a more public level, to others (Tanner, 1978: 53). In this regard, Cass' identity formation model is widely used to describe the coming-out process of homosexual men and women. Cass (1984: 143-167) claims that 'coming out' is a developmental process and that it involves six steps, namely: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride and identity synthesis. Through this process the homosexual individual explores his/her sexuality and is able to recognise and accept a homosexual identity. What this process entails is an identity transformation from the 'socialised' norm of heterosexuality to the 'deviant' style of homosexuality (Tanner, 1978: 53). Rust (1996: 92) makes a related argument and claims that when a heterosexual identity is replaced by a lesbian identity, the social relationships of these women are psychologically lost and rebuilt, and the lesbian then realises that heterosexual norms, ideals, and expectations no longer apply. Rust (1996: 90) further argues that this transformation is characterised by a consistency between one's own perceptions of one's behaviour and one's self, and between one's private and public identities. Finally, Rust (1996: 87) argues that identity is the link which connects the individual and the social world and changes in sexual identities usually also result in changes to the individual's relationship with others and society as a whole. Kahn (1991: 68) and Rust (1993: 53), however, argue that these development models, including Cass', often present the coming-out process as fundamentally a linear and universal progression. Rust (1993: 51) challenges these models and argues that homosexual identity formation is not orderly and

predictable and that individuals often skip steps and sometimes returns to earlier steps. This is also what Kort (2003) has in mind when he adapts Cass' model to acknowledge that there is a constant interplay between the six stages in the coming-out process. It needs to be noted that Cass makes no mention of the significance of race in her analysis. Instead, she claims to have come across no significant differences between gender, occupation, religious upbringing or place of birth in any of the six stages (Cass, 1984: 155). Herein lies a significant shortcoming of Cass' development model.

A further distinction can be made between 'out of the closet' – referring to an admission of one's homosexuality either to oneself or to others – and 'in the closet'. 'In the closet' refers to a homosexual individual who has not announced his/her sexual orientation in public or a homosexual who has not realised that he/she has homosexual tendencies. Valentine (1993: 246) proposes that the duality of 'out' and 'in the closet' is too narrow and argues that the phenomenon is far more complex, with lesbians often maintaining different sexual identities in different spaces.

In as far as the literature emphasises the shared identities of lesbians, it often runs the risk of silencing the differences that exist among these women. A comprehensive study is needed that tries to establish the different meanings that different types of lesbian women attach to their lesbian identities and how other identities determine these meanings within various contexts in South Africa. This study starts to fill this gap and add to existing South African literature by comparing black *and* white South African lesbians, in the process identifying some of the different meanings attached to a lesbian identity. The research builds on an intersectional understanding of identity in order to investigate the relative importance of multiple identities in the coming out process.

RESEARCH DESIGN

After reflecting on the aims of the study, the most appropriate research approach were identified. One objective of this study was to explain why lesbian women experience their sexual identities in different ways, and this involved making assessments based on context. A qualitative approach emphasises the social context and the meaning of social action (Neuman, 2006: 158). Second, the empirical research aimed to produce rich, detailed data that describes how a lesbian identity is formed and shapes 'meaning'. Qualitative research enables researchers to interpret data by means of assigning significance or coherent meaning (Neuman, 2006: 159). A qualitative approach thus allows the documentation of ways in which meanings are constructed and negotiated within particular social contexts (Bernard, 2000: 166; Neuman, 2006: 13). A qualitative approach was ideally suited to gaining insight into the respondents' motivations and perspectives with regard to this topic. The approach was operationalised by way of in-depth interviews and intersectional data analysis technique. In practice, this approach provided a step forward in understanding the construction of a lesbian identity.

Data was gathered through a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Babbie and Mouton (2001: 291) argue that interviews enable the researcher to explore the contradictions that may come about in the conversations, which then allows the researcher to identify how the respondent constructs meaning. Based on the literature review, a number of important issues to include in the interview questionnaire were identified. Respondents were asked to identify their race, religious affiliations, cultures, occupations, and urban or rural geographical context. Further questions aimed to establish how respondents interpret their identity and when, if at all, the participants first came out as a lesbian. The coming out process was explored in detail.

Attempts to gain access to lesbian women through a range of lesbian and gay equality organisations failed, because members of the organisations felt that they had been 'over-researched'. The alternative sampling method eventually strengthened the study. The data indicated that relying mostly on members and contacts of these organisations could have resulted in a one-sided view from lesbians within an activist lesbian community. Instead, snowball-sampling method allowed a range of different views from women of different social backgrounds and political preferences to be engaged.

Fourteen interviews – with seven black, and seven white lesbians – were conducted between April 2007 and April 2009. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and in English. Sexual identity is a very personal and private aspect of people's lives, so it was very important that the participants' privacy be respected. All participants signed an informed consent form. The interviews had yielded a large amount of rich information. In-depth interviews made it possible to gather a large amount of detailed data reflecting rich subjectivity and enough reliable contextual information to make judgements based on the participants' experiences and how these relates to their sexual identities.

NARRATIVES OF BEING LESBIAN

In order to demonstrate a clear account of experiences each respondent's story will be presented in the form of a narrative, focusing on issues pertaining to identity. The narrative approach was chosen so that in developing the analysis the participants' individual voices could still come to the fore. This approach also allows the reader to become familiar with the life stories of each of the participants of this study, and more importantly, it will show how their experiences have contributed to their view of themselves as lesbians. It also becomes easier to highlight the differences and similarities between the experiences of each of the participants. The narratives will be presented following the interview design: A journey starting with some biographical information of each participant, the first time the participant realised that she had romantic feelings for other women, her experiences of coming out, if at all, and then, some of the significant multiple identities that arose from each story told. After providing this 'platform' to each respondent, the coming out process of the particular woman is located within Cass' Identity Formation Model. Furthermore, to facilitate a comparison between black and white lesbian women, the narratives will be divided into two groups according to race. A response to the international and local literature becomes possible based on this analysis.

Black Participants

1 Nomvula: A Small Town Girl in a Big City

Nomvula is a 21-year-old black lesbian who grew up near Nelspruit. She moved to Johannesburg to start her graduate studies and stays in a residence near the University of Johannesburg where she is a student. She first realised that she had feelings for other women in Grade 8.

> I didn't understand it. Like, 'cause I come from a rural area in Nelspruit ... I grew up in the rural areas. And then this girl came to town, and she was from Jo'burg. And (pause), and then she just started talking about gay people. I didn't understand in my mind that I was attracted to her. I thought that…ugh…she was just like a friend. And then she just started talking about how people just go out with the same-sex people. And I…I…I…actually I rebelled…actually. Does that actually mean that if you are a girl, you can go out with a girl? Ah! (Screams.) Like, what does that mean? I didn't understand it. It's too strange for me. And then I got to know her, and then I sort of forgot that I first reacted like that.

A year later Nomvula decided to tell her friends at school that she was a lesbian. Her friends did not understand this and made it out to be some sort of phase that Nomvula would eventually grow out of. They were also concerned that Nomvula would ask them out on dates, which, to Nomvula, was a ridiculous thought:

> Like… "I've been your friend for so long, what makes you think that I am attracted to you NOW?" We've been friends for a very long time and then all of a sudden they didn't want to get dressed in front of me. "What am I gonna do to you?" You know? (Laughs.) I mean… (Laughs.)

Apart from her friends' initial reaction to her coming out, they eventually accepted her. Nomvula had her first real relationship with a woman when she was in Grade Twelve. This created a lot of controversy at her school because she wanted to take her girlfriend along to the matric farewell and her school did not permit this. She ended up going with a group of her friends instead.

During her whole high school career, Nomvula made a conscious effort to keep her lesbian identity a secret from her parents who, according to her, were staunch Christian people. Her grandfather is a pastor, which made coming out to her family an even bigger challenge. Nomvula believes that the news of her seeing other women romantically would not fit in with their religious doctrine. Furthermore, Nomvula claims that her family have certain expectations of her as a woman, which has prevented her from telling them about her lesbian identity:

> Yeah, so they expect me to be like a girly-girl, seeing that I am the only girl. So, they want grandchildren and all of those things. All of that … hmmm (Pause.) … I don't know? I think I haven't had the need to actually tell them, because they might just abandon me. Or something like that.

Throughout her high school career, up to her 20s, Nomvula had no problem hiding her sexual identity from her family. However, she is presently in a relationship and keeping this secret has become a source of anxiety for her. Nomvula wants to move in with her girlfriend at some stage in her life, but she does not know how she would

explain this to her parents if they decided to come for a visit. Coming out to them is also not an option for her. She feels that this experience, whilst being a liberating one, would ruin the close relationship with her parents and she would not want to risk that.

Now, in Johannesburg, she has experienced some discrimination based on her lesbian status.

> Nomvula: You can just be sitting there drinking, or eating actually, and the guys will come up to you – and they can see that you are going out – you are sitting there, a proper couple, and the guys will just come up to you; 'I want to talk to this chick'. And I would be; 'Do you not see that we are chatting here? Like, where do you get the right just to come up to us and say that?' And then he would say that I am a woman and I can't just openly be dating other women.

This discrimination has mainly been in the form of verbal harassment. Nomvula believes that it is usually men who are the instigators of acts of stigma towards lesbian women. In her case men have often aimed to provoke her by calling her names or flirting openly with her girlfriend. As mad as these instances made her, she chooses not to fight with anyone:

> I can't change anyone's mind about what I want. They want what *they* want. I can only change myself. I cannot change other people. Everyone actually has to individually decide; 'I accept this now'. [that there will always be some people that do not agree with her choice of lifestyle] I can influence them, but I can't do it *for* them.

This has also led Nomvula to be very selective about where she goes socially and she tends to avoid mainstream events like open parties and going to the local pub. She avoids unknown places and goes to parties where she knows the people who are attending. In spite of this, to her it is easier being a lesbian in Johannesburg than it is in the Nelspruit area. There, the discrimination could occur in any setting – pubs, shopping centres and even on the street – but in a more urban space such as Johannesburg she has more choices of going where she wants to go in an effort to avoid harassment.

Nomvula also expressed some concerns with regards to attending church. Her Christian background is extremely important to her, but she is scared of how the church members would react to her revealing her sexual identity. Her fear stems from what she has been told by fellow church members in her hometown. They have often uttered their hatred toward homosexuals and expressed that there is no place for them in a Christian church.

> I am a Christian. I believe in the Lord. I pray … But it sort of clashes. I have been taught as a child, not even as a child, as I grew up…hmm…the Bible does not allow homosexuality, and though some people say that the Bible has been changed, or whatever, it was ultimately written by people. In that time I think it was written by men. Women didn't have the power to do anything, and they had their own view of what the Bible should look like. I have a problem with the Bible, and at the same time I cannot question the Bible because I am a believer. Which means that I have got to have faith in the Bible. Whether it was written by men, or women, or whites, whomever … So it, it really is a problem.

Nomvula emphasises the significance of geographical context, certain social spaces and religious concerns in the presentation of her lesbian identity. Her fears of coming out in a small town have leaked over into a big city like Johannesburg. In Johannesburg she has had to face her fears of people not being accepting of her sexual identity. Nomvula also has great concerns about her religious identity, claiming that it does not correspond with Christian beliefs. As a result, she has chosen to practise her religion in private, much to her dismay. Nomvula falls within the fourth stage of Cass' Identity Formation model, namely 'Identity Acceptance'. She is comfortable with her lesbian identity, but still adopts a strategy to pass as straight in some areas of her life.

The concerns Nomvula expressed about religion are similar to Angelina's who we meet next.

2 Angelina: The Activist Approach to Identity

Angelina is a 23-year-old Xhosa woman who resides in a student residence at a university in Johannesburg. She describes herself as 'a proud lesbian woman' who is actively involved in a homosexual rights organisation in Soweto. When she came out as a lesbian in a rural township[1] at the age of 16 she decided to tell her close friends first. They were very supportive of her and their positive reactions encouraged her to reveal her lesbian identity to

[1] Angelina did not want to reveal which 'rural township' she was referring to in order to protect her family's identity.

her parents. However, she waited until she was in her first year of university before telling them. She describes their reaction as follows:

> Their reactions were pretty much of the "Oh God, my daughter is a lesbian, let's keep it quiet"- type. You know, they live in the township where it is pretty much frowned upon to be a lesbian. So, (pause) they basically were afraid that people would think less of them if it came out that their only daughter was a lesbian. We keep it on the down-low, so to speak. But privately they don't really mind… (Pause) What I mean is, I keep my private life separate from them and that's the way they want it.

Even though Angelina prides herself on the fact that she is an openly gay woman, she chooses to hide this identity when she visits her family back home: 'When I go back home, in the rural townships… that's, that's where I keep quiet about it. For my family's sake. But usually I don't ever hide who I am.'

Initially she also experienced conflict between her religious beliefs and her lesbian identity. According to her, being gay is not the 'correct Christian behaviour' and that made her feel ashamed of her sexual identity. In her view, Christians, as a collective, do not accept homosexuality in their religion. Coming from a strong Christian background, this had an effect on her. Angelina explains:

> I don't think my religion shaped my lesbian identity. I think my sexual identity shaped my *religion*. I no longer have the same relationship with God as I had when I was younger – before I came out. I can't expect to go to church and be who I wanna be. They won't accept me! But I know who I am, and I love my God. He is my Saviour and he loves me. My relationship is good with him. But now I just have to do it privately rather than… in the open.

After further probing on this issue, Angelina revealed that as much as she knows that the Christian church will not accept her, she refuses to keep this side of her life hidden. According to her, she would be a total hypocrite if she purposefully kept her lesbian identity a secret from her fellow church goers. That to her, would be truly 'un-Christian like'. Having said that, Angelina has not joined a church since she moved to Johannesburg in the fear of being discriminated against.

In her life, there have been numerous instances where Angelina was discriminated against for being a lesbian. One year, while marching in the Annual Gay Parade in Johannesburg, a woman ran up to her with a Bible and told her that she was going to hell for being a lesbian. Angelina did not take this laying down and told the woman that she was not allowed to judge– only God was.

On yet another occasion she was visiting a friend somewhere in Soweto and some young men followed her from the taxi rank. They knew that her friend was also a lesbian and therefore made the assumption that she was a lesbian too. In this case Angelina could not fight back because there were five men and she feared that it could become violent if she talked back, so she decided to merely ignore their verbal assaults. One of the most memorable times where she was attacked for being gay, came in high school. A boy she went to school with suspected she was gay, and one day he forcefully dragged her into the boy's bathroom and started kissing her. He kept asking her why she preferred women to men and exclaimed that his kisses could 'cure' her from this disease. She kicked him and managed to run to safety. She complained to some teachers but they did nothing about it.

In many ways these terrible experiences made Angelina the person she is today, as the following quote testifies:

> I am not scared to stand up for who I am. It motivated me to become more involved with gay and lesbian groups to help others. (Pause) … I always speak my mind and stand up for gay rights. I think it is very important to be involved. It is not enough to say that you are who you are, and society can think what they want about it. You have to challenge them. It's like a responsibility we have to the future generations.

She attributes the importance she places on her activist role to the negative experiences she had in the past. In her opinion, every lesbian woman should be vocal about her sexuality and challenge homophobia, even though she admits that not all lesbian women have the opportunity to do so.

> I think some women feel ashamed about being a lesbian. In those cases they tend to hide it. And that is just making it worse. I don't blame them – sometimes they have no other choice. But, I don't know? I think all lesbians should be proud of who they are and they should fight for the right to be accepted. But like I said, not all of them feel that way.

Contrary to what Angelina said about usually not hiding her lesbian identity and her feelings toward all lesbian women being open about their sexualities, she chooses to hide her lesbian identity at home and have not joined a

church in the fear of being ostracised. This illustrates that there are still specific spaces in her life were she, in fact, does not feel comfortable to reveal her lesbian identity. What was also interesting about Angelina's story is that she does not feel that her sexual identity changed because of her religious identity, but rather the opposite. The way she approaches her religion stems from how she views herself as a lesbian. Angelina's narrative has shown that her role as an activist is very important to her. Based on the enormous emphasis she places on her role as an activist, this can be described as a significant part of her overall identity. On the surface then it seems like Angelina falls within the fifth stage of Cass's model – Identity Pride – because of her confrontational attitude toward homophobic notions, yet she is not open about her lesbian identity in all areas in her life. Nonetheless, Angelina has a strong activist attitude which forms a dominant part of her overall identity, so the 'Identity Pride' stage captures her coming out experience the best.

Quite the opposite is true for Rihanna, the next narrative. Read in conjunction, these narratives support the postulation that heavy reliance on members of activist organisations would have been likely to bias the results and confirm that the second choice of snowball sampling has strengthened the study.

3 Rihanna: "A luxury I do not have"

Rihanna is a 24-year-old unemployed Zulu woman who grew up, and who is still living, in Soweto. Rihanna's account of being a lesbian is shrouded with secrecy. From the time in high school when she first realised she was a lesbian until now, she has not spoken about it to anyone close to her, apart from a friend in high school who was also gay. Her friend has been, and still is, the only one who introduces her to other lesbian women. Realising that she was sexually attracted to other women was a very confusing time for her and if it was not for her friend, Rihanna believes that she would not have been able to deal with her sexual identity.

Rihanna explains her secrecy as a result of fear that no one would approve of her being a lesbian. She claims that her parents, especially, would not approve of it because it is not accepted in their culture. Furthermore, she is terrified of the rest of her community finding out, because they might tell her parents. She also believes that homosexuality is still frowned upon in general and she is, therefore, scared of the possible consequences. 'They won't accept it! They won't accept it! So … I don't know. Maybe that has made me scared to be who I am – openly.'

The way she views her lesbian identity is further complicated by her strong religious beliefs. She was taught that the Bible does not permit homosexuality and is afraid of what would become of her when she dies. Ultimately, she is unsure whether or not she will be permitted to enter heaven because of her attraction to other women. Furthermore, in Rihanna's view, only certain types of women have the luxury of coming out publicly. She claims that white women and rich women have this luxury of revealing their sexual identities without being judged, whereas black lesbians coming from working class communities would not be accepted by their families and communities. In this regard Rihanna integrates race, religion and context in an effort to explain why she would not take the risk of exposing her lesbian identity.

In her statements she highlights the differences between black and white lesbians, as well as people from different classes, as her reference to 'rich women' demonstrates. Rihanna's story highlights the difficulties she believes that black lesbian women face when choosing to reveal their sexual identities. These difficulties are largely based on African cultural and traditional beliefs. Based on these assumptions, she has chosen to keep her lesbian identity a secret from most people in her life. Her religious beliefs also impact on the way she views her lesbian identity. Rihanna finds herself between the first stage of Cass' Identity Formation model, 'Identity Confusion', and stage two, 'Identity Comparison'.

In this respect, Rihanna's story is considerably different from Bonisiwe's.

4 Bonisiwe: A Woman of the World, Or Not?

Bonisiwe is 25 years of age and grew up in Glenvista, a middle-class suburb in Johannesburg. She has a successful career as a graphic designer. She suspected that she was a lesbian in high school, but took some time to find herself and explore the idea of being with another woman. It was in her first year of college that she finally came to terms with her sexual identity and decided to tell her family and friends. They were all very supportive, and, as a result, Bonisiwe claims that she felt very confident, happy and strong for the first time in her life. It is evident that

Bonisiwe has a very positive outlook on her lesbian identity. Her parents and friends have always been supportive of her choices and this has led her to feel proud of her sexuality.

Bonisiwe repeatedly expressed that she is a 'woman of the world' who does not abide to any specific African culture. She also states that she would probably be classified as a coconut by most black cultures, but that does not bother her because she is happy with who she is. However, recently she has been exposed to some traditional views about homosexuality which have baffled her. Bonisiwe is currently dating a white woman and this has created some problems in her life. In her opinion, others, specifically black men from the townships, are intolerant of her dating a woman. The fact that she is dating a white woman, in particular, makes it problematic. 'Homosexuality is not widely acceptable in black culture, so they think my [white] girlfriend influenced me in some way.' Some of the black men she encountered claim that her white girlfriend has made her a lesbian and that she had no choice in the matter.

The notion that homosexuality is un-African is relevant when one reads Bonisiwe's story. No matter how much she exclaimed that she was a woman of the world who did not abide by any African laws, she could not hide from society and black cultural views. It is not just that she is a lesbian that exposes her to these views, but the fact that she is a black woman who is dating a white woman in particular. Contrary to most of the other black participants, Bonisiwe has had the opportunity to move to the final stage in Cass' Identity Formation model, namely 'Identity Synthesis'.

Thandi, on the other hand, is more exposed and influenced by her black culture's views about homosexuality.

5 Thandi: A Tainted Identity

Thandi lives in Soweto, where she grew up, and works as a bank teller in a middle-class suburb close to central Johannesburg. She is 28 years old. She has been dating women since high school, but chooses to hide her sexual identity from her family and co-workers in the fear that they would not accept her. Her reason for not disclosing her lesbian identity is based on the homophobic views members of her community, as well as her parents, hold. She recalls a particular event when she was younger which has motivated her to keep quiet about her sexual identity:

> I remember when I was young living there [in Soweto] there was a woman who was dating other women, and the whole community basically shunned her. I was about 8 or 9 years old when I asked my father what's wrong with her. Why does everybody treat her differently? And he told me that she was living in sin. And he basically made it sound like she was a dirty person and she was doing dirty things. Every time she walked pass he would shout "wena ngulube emdaka" which means "you filthy pig" [in Zulu]. My mother, on the other hand, stayed quiet. I don't think it really bothered her. I don't know. But if she was OK with it she wouldn't have told my father out of fear. But I couldn't understand it – she looked like any other woman I knew. I couldn't understand what the hype was about. And then when I was old enough to understand it, and I first realised my own feelings for other women I became scared to reveal that I date women. I didn't want to get treated liked that woman did. Especially not by my father.

Thandi explains that the homophobic views that men in her family and in her community hold have had an impact on her identity. She has had to lie to many people in her life and as a result she lives a closed-off life to which few, mainly her girlfriend, has access. Living with this secret has caused Thandi lots of distress as she does not know how long she can keep up the appearance of a heterosexual woman. Plus, her parents have recently become suspicious because she is not dating any men. 'I am not getting any younger, and I have never brought a boyfriend home.' Her parents have set her up on numerous dates with men, and every time that happens Thandi has to act 'straight' and lie about it afterwards, telling them that she was not interested in the man.

Thandi's story is deeply linked to questions of identity and embarrassment: 'And I still feel a little bit ashamed now and then … of who I am. My girlfriend doesn't understand it, but I have a tainted identity.' According to Thandi her current girlfriend does not have the same fears as her because she was brought up in a different kind of neighbourhood. 'She lives in a nice suburb where people are open about that kind of thing [same-sex relationships].' Her girlfriend has often expressed that she wants to meet Thandi's parents and live an openly-gay lifestyle. But, because of the reasons mentioned above, Thandi will not agree to it and this often result in friction in their relationship.

During the interview Thandi expressed on more than one occasion that she was ashamed of herself. For one, she is ashamed of having to lie to her family about who she really is. Secondly she is ashamed of being a lesbian, stressing that if she had a choice in the matter she would have wanted things to be different. Like so many of the other participants Thandi believes that she was born a lesbian and no men could change her feelings towards other women. But these feelings contradict with her religious beliefs which make it hard for her not to feel ashamed of herself. Even her body language was evidence for the shame that she felt. She kept hiding her face behind her hands when she talked about her attraction to other women. Thandi's experience has raised profound doubts and feelings of shame which have continuously plagued her, but she has accepted the possibility that she is gay, which places her either in the second stage of Cass' Identity Formation model, namely 'Identity Comparison', or the third stage, namely 'Identity Tolerance'. Her constant need for secrecy prevents her from moving towards the final stage of identity formation.

Her story is unlike Nomi's, who has had to overcome her fears and face up to the truth of being a lesbian.

6 Nomi: Being True to Oneself

Nomi is 35 years old and a receptionist at a company in City Deep, an industrial suburb in Johannesburg. For most of her life she lived in Port Shepstone, Kwazulu-Natal, until moving to Johannesburg in 2005. She recalls being an extremely shy teenager, so when a guy finally asked her out at 17, she was ecstatic. They continued dating for a number of years and when she turned 21 they got married. They eventually had two children – a boy and a girl. Four years into her marriage, Nomi met a woman through a friend, and they fell in love. For the first time in her life she realised that she had always been attracted to other woman on some level. She believes that she had denied this side of her for her whole life, because she always wanted to fit in with the rest of her peers. In high school all her friends were dating boys and she wanted to be accepted by them, so she did the same. When she was 21 all her friends were getting married, so she married her high school sweetheart.

Falling in love with a woman naturally led to her and her husband getting a divorce. This was a very difficult time for her, because she knew that she was breaking her husband's heart. She claims that he has not been able to look her in the eye, and that he is only civil to her on behalf of their children. She describes her family's reaction as that of shock and disappointment. Over the years they have become used to Nomi dating women, and the fact that they had grandchildren was also a source of relief to them. Her in-laws have not yet, to this day, spoken to her.

Even though the relationship between her and the woman she fell in love with during her marriage did not work out, it encouraged her to explore her lesbian identity. Since then she has been seeing other women. Nomi believes that she had no other choice but to be true to herself. Living a lie in a loveless marriage was not an option for her. Hence she embraced her sexual identity and the impact that it would have on the people closest to her. A number of years have passed since she first came out as a lesbian, and she is currently open about her sexual identity in all areas of her life. According to Cass's coming out model, Nomi could be placed within the last stage of the model, namely 'Identity Synthesis'.

Quite the opposite is true for Martha who would have been happy to have kept her lesbian identity a secret, yet circumstances prevented her from doing so.

7 Martha: A Quiet Soul

Martha is 38 years old and works as a live-in domestic worker in Alberton, a middle-class suburb of Johannesburg, where she moved in 2004 after having spent the first part of her life in Durban. She realised relatively late in her life that she was a lesbian. According to her she always wondered why she had no interest in being with men, but never explored these concerns. When she was about 35, she met a woman and they fell in love. She had no intentions of telling her family about the relationship, terrified of what their reactions would be, but her father heard a rumour that she was dating women. One night he followed her to a bar where she was meeting her girlfriend and he found them holding hands. He dragged Martha out of the bar and took her home. The next day, he demanded she pack her belongings. He put her on a bus to Johannesburg to go live with her aunt. This was an effort on his part to hide that they had a lesbian in the family from the community, and avoid the shame of being judged. It was also an attempt to separate Martha from her girlfriend, hoping that the separation would make her heterosexual again. This experience was devastating to Martha because she was not only separated from her girlfriend, but also from her mother and

sisters. However, she claims that it would have been worse had she stayed. 'My father would not have allowed it. If ever me and my sisters ever betrayed him, he would punish us. So I'm happy I didn't have to go through that.' In addition she felt ashamed of her sexual identity and believed that her father's reactions were justified.

> But I am bad. What I'm doing is not right. This is not natural who I am. I don't blame him for treating me like he did.

Martha sees her lesbian identity as something unnatural and blames Satan for her feelings toward women. Nonetheless, she claims that she did not have a choice in the matter. Based on the way Martha sees her sexual identity, she has not told any of her new friends in Johannesburg that she is a lesbian. The only person she confides in, and who supports her, is her employer. Martha describes her employer as 'a very kind and loving lady' who she grew to trust, and one day Martha broke down and told her why her father had sent her away to come work in Johannesburg. Regardless of her white employer's empathetic reaction towards her sexual identity Martha does not feel that her black friends, who mostly consist of other black domestic workers in the surrounding area, would share the same sentiments.

Martha's story demonstrates the conflict which exists between her sexual identity and between her religious identity. What she thinks is right according to her Christian beliefs does not fit in with who she is as a lesbian woman. Her narrative is entrenched with feelings of shame, and as a result she shies away from who she really is. Her views about her lesbian identity are further complicated by, what she refers to as, her cultural beliefs, shared by most of her friends and neighbours in her immediate community. This also had a damaging effect on how she views herself. Today Martha lives a hidden and lonely life. Consequently, the effects of these happenings on her personal identity have been detrimental. She views her sexual identity as shameful and often blames Satan for punishing her with these 'unnatural feelings towards women [her words]'. These feelings of homosexuality being incorrect and undesirable fit in with the first stage of Cass's model – 'Identity Confusion' – however in this stage the lesbian only *start* to question whether she is gay. Even though Martha experiences conflict with her sexual identity and her other multiple identities, she admits that she is gay and that there is nothing she can do about it. She, thus, fits better into the second stage of the model, 'Identity Comparison'. Within this stage, she admits to being a lesbian but inhibits these behaviours which have resulted in experiences of isolation and alienation from others.

White Participants

8 Toni: Me Against the World

As a teenager in Alberton in Johannesburg, Toni had dated a few boyfriends, but soon realised that she was more attracted to women. Now 24, Toni had taken the decision to disclose her lesbian identity at the age of 17. At first she was hesitant to tell her family and friends, fearing rejection, but in the end she decided that it was better to come out with the truth about her sexuality. Her friends accepted her from the start, and she feels that their reactions made her feel confident about her choice to reveal her lesbian identity. Thereafter she came out to her mother and father. According to Toni her mom got extremely worked-up and wanted to kick her out of the house. Her dad blatantly made it clear that he did not accept her decision as well. Toni felt that her family did not understand her and this created tension in their home. However, Toni feels that their initial negative reactions – the disappointment and resentment her parents felt towards her – made her more resilient.

Toni can recall numerous other instances where other people's reactions led to her developing a thicker skin. There was the time when she was walking in town with a friend, and an unknown man by the side of the road spat at her and called her a 'fucking lesbian'. Her first reaction was to physically attack him, but she quickly realised that this would not do much good. She claims that it is mostly in public places where she experience discrimination for being a lesbian: 'And then I will get it a lot in pubs where men try to make a move on me, and when I tell them I'm a lesbian their common response is "I'll make you straight" '. In situations like this Toni would try and ignore the men, but if they continue to harass her she would end up leaving instead. Once again, she points out that these experiences made her a stronger person, and it also created the need for her to stand up in what she believes in. These negative experiences made Toni want to prove herself to the people around her.

> When I was younger and I first came out I wanted to prove to the world that who I am is OK. I wanted to change their views about homosexuality. But as I got older I realised that that is not what is important in life. What is important is that you are OK with yourself, and you accept you as you are.

Today Toni is 24 years old with very different views about her sexual identity than what she had when she first came out.

> My attitude has changed from when I was younger and just came out. But the past four years I have just embraced being a lesbian – it's who I am. Now I just say it's OK, you can't change the world's perspective. First I thought I had to live up to it – act like a lesbian according to society's standards. 'If that's what you want, I'll give it to you!' I was exposed to only that, so I went and did it. I mean, we weren't exposed to many lesbian role-models growing up.

Toni's views about her sexual identity changed over the course of the years from that of wanting to prove herself to the world, to an empowering self-acceptance. However, there is still an area in her life where she fears coming out. At the time of the interview, Toni was studying to become a teacher. She was in her final year of studies and was working at a high school as part of her training. She expressed that she has certain concerns with regards to being a teacher and a lesbian: 'Will the students accept me? Will their parents accept me? Will the principal accept me?' Furthermore, she is also unclear about certain legal issues surrounding lesbianism, such as who would be the beneficiary of her medical aid if she chose to get married.

The way in which Toni's sexual identity has changed over the years, is something that alludes to the development process which all lesbian women go through in their lives. Initially Toni felt the need to fight those that discriminate against homosexual individuals, but eventually she came to terms with the fact that it was impossible to change all the negative views that some have of lesbian women. This, according to her, was an important step in her life, as it enabled her to become more comfortable with her sexual identity. For a long time then, Toni's experience of coming out were linked to the 'Identity Pride' stage of Cass's model. She immersed herself into the gay and lesbian subculture, and she prided herself on confronting the heterosexual establishment. Time passed, and now Toni is able to recognise those heterosexual individuals who accept her as a lesbian, without having to prove herself to others, which puts her somewhere between the 'Identity Pride' stage and the final stage, 'Identity Synthesis'.

Toni's journey as a lesbian woman is somewhat different to that of her girlfriend, Jillian.

9 Jillian: "They made me who I am"

Jillian is a 22-year old education student from Linden who works as a primary school teacher. Jillian cannot recall a time where she had ever been interested in being with a man. In fact, she has never been with a man romantically or sexually. Talking about her teenage years, Jillian describes her struggle with her sexual identity as follows: 'It was hard to identify with my lesbian identity publicly; even though I knew inside I was a lesbian and have always been.' This was a very confusing time for her, and she was uncertain whether she should come out to her family and friends, but when she met her girlfriend she decided that it was time to tell the truth.

According to her she comes from a very sheltered background, which is why it was extremely important to her that her family accepted her. She claims that she did not really care what her friends thought, because it was easier to find new friends if they weren't accepting of her than having her family members hate her for it. As it turns out, her friends accepted her, as did most of her family members, which came as a relief. She explains that her sister is extremely religious and initially had problems with it. Her mom also went through a stage where she wanted to prove to her daughter that women are supposed to be with men. But that soon passed, and Jillian claims that their reactions where predominantly positive.

For two years after disclosing her lesbian identity she was quiet about it and did not identify herself as a lesbian in public (apart from close friends and family). Over the years she claims she has become more open about her lesbian identity in public – everywhere but one space. Jillian explains that her co-workers at school are unaware of her sexual identity:

> I am not worried about what my colleagues will think, but I am worried about what the parents will think. I am scared of ridicule, especially in these Christian-based schools. However, if somebody walked into my class room and said I was gay, I would not deny it. You don't come out and say 'hi, I'm a heterosexual'. But my identity won't change.

A big part of how identity is constructed and meaning is conveyed is due to social relationships with other people. Jillian's story indicates the enormous impact positive reactions towards the coming-out process can have on the construction of a lesbian identity. Having said that, she still chose to silence her lesbian identity for a number of

years after she came out to those nearest to her, which could indicate that she was still confused about her sexual identity. Her position as a teacher is also a source of concern, but she claims that she would not hide from it if anyone asked her about her sexual identity. Jillian falls within the fourth stage of Cass' Identity Formation model, 'Identity Acceptance'.

In this respect, Jillian's concerns with regard to parents at school overlaps with Shantie's, who is also a teacher.

10 Shantie: "I am who I am"

Shantie is 25 and works as a Montessori director, teaching three to six-year-old children. Shantie had a relatively positive experience when she came out as a lesbian to her mother at the age of 16 and living in Weltevredenpark. Her mother completely accepted her and she believes that their relationship just grew stronger after that. The only concern she had was based on her and her mother's strong religious upbringing. 'I always sort of knew that you had the fear of God in you … and you worry about not wanting to sin 'cause God is going to strike you down etcetera, etcetera'. For a while she even feared that God would strike her down dead for being a lesbian. Shantie explains that as she got older, these doubts faded. In fact, her religious views have completely been altered since she first came out. Today she considers herself to be an agnostic. I tried to probe whether her agnosticism has anything to do with her former religion's views about homosexuality, but she did not want to explore this subject further merely stating that as she got older her views with regard to God and religion changed.

It was evident that Shantie is very comfortable about her sexual identity. She does not mind walking in public while holding her partner's hand and she does not fear being judged by other people. 'But for me it doesn't matter, like, I am who I am and if you don't like it – up yours.' However, the presence of a possible fear of being ostracised comes out strongly in Shantie's story with regard to her occupation as a teacher. She claims that people are 'funny about their children', and she fears that the parents of the kids she teach might not understand her sexual identity. Her possible 'paranoia', as she puts it, could be due to the deviant reputation of homosexuality, which she has somehow internalised. Shantie fits into the fourth stage of Cass' model – Identity Acceptance.

Outside of her workspace, however, Shantie does not fear showing affection toward her girlfriend in public. In this, her story is quite unlike that of her girlfriend Jackyl who minds public displays of affection and had different experiences of coming-out.

11 Jackyl: By Invitation Only

Jackyl is a 25-year old journalist who lives with her girlfriend of nine years. They have been dating since she was a 16-year-old schoolgirl in Weltevredenpark. Jackyl is only out to some people in her life. According to her, you need an invitation to see that part of her identity. For instance, her colleagues at work do not know; also people who she first meets and are not very close with. Jackyl explains that her secrecy at work is not at all due to a fear of being stigmatised. It started as a lie she told when she first started working at her company. A guy asked her if she was involved with anyone and she lied and said that she has a boyfriend so that he would not hit on her. Panic struck the minute she said this as she realised that she had to keep up this lie. She even went so far as to create a whole boyfriend persona with the name of Steve. Five years have passed and she has only told three of her closest friends at work that she is in fact a lesbian. 'But I don't know why I haven't told anyone. I actually don't know why I haven't. It's just that I kind of went so far with it and now I would feel like an idiot!' However, she claims that she does not invite her co-workers into her personal life, in the sense that they don't socialise outside the workplace, therefore she does not feel the need to ever come out to them. She, once again, claims that it is a personal side of her identity which only selected people are allowed to see. As a result, she also chooses not to hold hands with her girlfriend in public.

However, everyone in her family knows. Jackyl's mother was suspicious of her and her current girlfriend spending too much time together. One day she confronted Jackyl and that is when the truth about her lesbian identity came out. Jackyl recalls her mother's reactions:

> She told me that she wished I was dead. She told me she would rather have me been beaten up by a man, or she'd rather have me die of AIDS than be with a girl. It's the worst thing she could think of. Her and my father sent me to a psychologist to 'fix me'. Which just encouraged me to be more comfortable with myself. So for about two years my mom kicked me out of the house … she just found it an abomination.

She couldn't understand it. I don't know why. I think she blamed herself. It's like when your child becomes a drug addict you start blaming yourself and saying "well, what did I do wrong?" '

After a while Jackyl says her father came around to the idea of her being a lesbian, but it took another three years before things became right between mother and daughter again.

Throughout Jackyl's narrative she stated that being a lesbian is a private side of her overall identity. This could be why she chooses not to hold her girlfriend's hand in public, or it could be an underlying fear of being stigmatised based on her parent's initial reactions. The same could be said about keeping her lesbian identity hidden at work. It is ironic, because even though she claims that her reaction at work was not due to the fear of being stigmatised for being a lesbian, why did she not say that she had a girlfriend? Why did she feel the need to say that she had a man in her life to avoid being hit on? Jackyl can be placed in the fourth stage of Cass' model – Identity Acceptance – as she accepts her lesbian identity, but still chooses to pass as straight in some environments.

Jackyl's story shows that she tries to shy away from being associated with the label 'butch', entirely opposite from Mandie's feelings.

12 Mandie: The Tomboy

Mandie is a 31-year-old Afrikaans woman. She grew up in Alberton in a working class family with three brothers. As a child she was always more attracted to toys that boys played with, like toy guns and cars. Her favourite game as a child was playing army-army with her brothers. In fact, when she was young she dreamt of going off to war, claiming that it was a very 'manly' thing to do. As a result of her tomboy tendencies she never felt like she really fit in with the other girls of her peer group. 'They were always more into playing with dolls and they constantly made fun of my short hair and boyish build.' At home she also received pressure from her parents to dress more 'girly' and grow her hair longer, but Mandie never wanted to. She was quite happy with her appearance, but never questioned why she felt the way she did.

In primary school she used to steal her brothers' erotic *Playboy* magazines and hide them in her room. Strangely enough, it was these very *Playboy* magazines that gained her entry into a friendship group of girls when she was 13. 'They were curious, but they were also intrigued by it because they wanted to have big boobs and look like those chicks. I liked it because they [the women in the magazines] did something inside me that I couldn't explain.' Without having really known it at the age of 13, these pictures excited Mandie sexually. A year later she realised that she had fallen in love with a girl in her high school. This crush was significant because it made her realise that she was a lesbian. 'Nothing ever happened between me and this girl, because she was straight, but it explained so many things.' She goes on to say that it explained why she never fussed over boys like the other girls did and why she rather wanted to play with them than be with them romantically.

She came out to her family when she was in matric. She claims that there were no responses of shock or expressions of denial. 'They all kind of expected it all along.' It was just her uncles that laughed at her expense. Even though they have never in her life said anything outright negative towards her, she claims that they probably do so behind her back. 'They probably call me a dyke. You know how Afrikaans men are!' Coming from an Afrikaans background, Mandie claims that Afrikaans people would rather talk behind a homosexual person's back than call them names to their faces. This, however, does not bother her.

Mandie explains that she leads a very happy life. She has been living with her girlfriend for 5 years, she has a close group of friends consisting mainly of other lesbians and heterosexual men, and she has a job that she enjoys. For seven years now she has been working as a security guard at a clothing store in Alberton. She claims that she has always been attracted to dangerous jobs, plus, as she exclaims: 'I finally get to play with guns!' Her pride in her job was made abundantly clear when she showed me the gun in her holster during the interview at her home.

Mandie's story is different to the other respondents'. She firmly characterises herself as a butch lesbian and it seems that she takes a sense of pride in that. Also, she is attracted to women who are 'butch'. Her girlfriend also sports a short hairdo and is muscular like a man. She never wanted to associate with other girls growing up, but now she has a big group of woman friends who mainly consists of other lesbians. Her lesbian friends have similar interests to her own and they are all attracted to other women. Mandie is able to recognise supportive heterosexual others, mostly men, and she is at peace with herself which places her within the last stage of Cass's model – 'Identity Synthesis'.

However, she herself said that her sexual identity is still a primary factor in her life, which then begs to question whether she truly fits neatly within this stage that Cass has identified.

Not only is Mandie's story quite different from the other participants in this group, but compared to the next narrative, it is worlds apart.

13 Fran: The Facade

It is not just in the teaching profession where participants fear disclosing their sexual identities. Fran, a 51-year-old public relations officer at an insurance firm in Sandton, has feared being stigmatised based on her sexuality for 33 years, since her parents rejected her when she first came out as a teenager living in Durban. As a result, Fran has chosen to live a 'closeted' life in some areas of her life.

> Nobody at work knows. They might have their suspicions, but nobody knows for sure. I made a decision years ago that I was going to keep my personal life separate from my professional life. I mean, I don't want my sexual preference to be the only thing people focus on when they look at me at work. I'm sure this might sound very old-school to you – an old-fashioned way of thinking – but it works for me. Also, I am a very well-known public figure thanks to my job that I do, so it might hurt the company in some way.

Fran and her partner have been in a relationship for 15 years, but she chooses not to take her to any work functions in an effort to avoid office rumours that she might be gay. She has even gone so far as to wear a ring on her wedding finger. The ring symbolises the love and commitment Fran and her partner shares, but at the same time she uses it as a tool to 'pass' as a married heterosexual woman:

> I just don't correct them when they make the claim that I'm married. Plus, I've never referred to my 'husband' before. I always say my 'partner' is away on business or so.

In her opinion, she would never have had to hide her sexuality if it wasn't for the negative views that those closest to her held of homosexuality. As from the first time Fran came out – in 1975 – her experiences have been less than positive, with family members turning against her. These negative reactions from family members, together with society's indifferent feelings towards lesbian women during the 1970s, has led to Fran's decision to be secretive of her sexual identity in her work environment:

> Even though I am content with keeping my identity a secret, I wish society could have been different. If they were accepting from the start, things might have been different for me. The stigma and discrimination I experienced from my parents was just too much.

However, Fran claims that she has become comfortable with her sexual identity over the years:

> Don't get me wrong, just because I hide it doesn't mean that I don't embrace my sexuality. I am very comfortable with it *now*. In my twenties I was still trying to figure things out… (pause) but eventually you just come to the point where you realise 'this is who I am and I am happy with it'.

Her family's negative reactions to her lesbian identity directly contributed to her keeping up a façade for over a decade. However, in her testimony it is also clear that the way in which she perceives her lesbian identity has changed over the course of the years. At first Fran was confused about being a lesbian, but today she claims that she is happy and content with this part of her identity. It is, however, necessary to point out the contradiction that comes forth in her story. Even though she claims to be comfortable with who she is as a lesbian woman, this has not made her want to change how she acts in front of her colleagues. She has gone to great lengths to keep this side of her identity a secret. She can be placed in the 'Identity Acceptance' stage of Cass' Identity Formation model.

The following narrative documents the story of a lesbian woman who, after a number of years, have become comfortable with her sexual identity in light of any hardships she might have experienced throughout her life. In this sense, it is quite fitting to present this narrative last as it illustrates the final step of the coming out process.

14 Kathy: A Journey Completed

Kathy is the eldest of the participants – 52 years of age – and has been with her long-term partner, Fran, for 15 years. Kathy comes from a middle-class family in Pretoria and taught Accounting on university level for numerous years before she started her own accounting firm. Kathy came out when she was 18 years old. However, Kathy

claims that she knew that she was attracted to women since she was twelve. In primary school she had numerous crushes on girls but did not act on it, because she was scared of what her peers would think of her. When she eventually decided on coming out, she told her mother first. At this stage her father had passed away already, and her mother was the closest person to her. Kathy describes her relationship with her mother as fantastic; therefore she did not fret telling her. Indeed, her mother accepted her from the start and supported her during her coming-out process. She felt afraid of being rejected by her friends, but, as it turns out, they were also very supportive of her. Kathy can recall one or two occasions where some men in a pub called her a dyke and a muff-diver, but apart from that, she claims that she has never had any problems.

Overall it seems that Kathy has a positive view of her sexual identity based on the positive experiences she has had since she came out. However, she does acknowledge that at the time she came out, during the apartheid era, homosexuality were less acceptable than it is today. She continues that she feels lucky that her family and friends reacted they way that they did in a specific point in history, because it could have easily gone the other way. Being 52, Kathy has had a number of years to identify with being a lesbian woman. Thus, she made her sexual orientation out to be something that is a significant part of her, but that it is not something she deliberates about often. Kathy's narrative was relatively short. Reasons for this seems to be that she feels at peace with her sexual identity which alludes to Cass's 'Identity Synthesis' stage of coming-out. From Kathy's narrative it becomes evident that her lesbian identity is not a substantial part of her identity. Having reached this stage is a huge benefit, as she no longer experiences a constant conflict between her sexual identity and other multiple identities, which means that she is free to attend to other aspects of her life.

SYNTHESIS: SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Analysing an identity is complicated. As mentioned throughout this paper, rather than having one singular identity, people always embody multiple identities that are woven together. Based on the respondents' narratives, it has been possible to analyse lesbian identity in more depth. The narratives presented here illustrate different ways in which a lesbian identity is constructed and performed. In many ways these differences are based on the connections these women have with their other identities, which influence the meanings that they attach to their lesbian identities and vice versa. This paper illustrates that, in as much as there is a shared identity among these women, we have to account for the differences in experiences that exist in order to understand the multiple meanings attached to a lesbian identity in South Africa. Having said this, the meanings that these women attach to *all* of their identities are fluid and change over time. Identity shifts constantly take place over life transitions, and so do their views with regard to their lesbian identities.

Having read the individual narratives of the respondents, the similarities and differences between the black and white respondents begin to emerge. All the participants of this study were self-identified lesbians. However, they perform their lesbian identities differently. This study also shows that the coming out process varies from individual to individual depending on different backgrounds and experiences. All of the participants shared similar experiences in what Cass refers to as the first stage of coming out namely 'Identity Confusion'. The majority of the respondents first became aware that they might be lesbian during their teenage years. This time was often highlighted by feelings of confusion as they were realising something about themselves that was different to the dominant, heterosexual culture. The participants were then faced with feelings of alienation based on these differences between a hetero- and homosexual lifestyle in the 'Identity Comparison' stage. However, these feelings of alienation are played out somewhat differently among the races. All but two of the participants have moved past the first two stages of Cass's coming out model. The third stage – 'Identity Tolerance' – entails that a lesbian woman accept the probability that they are in fact homosexual. The majority of the white participants could be placed in the fourth stage of Cass' coming out model, namely 'Identity Acceptance'. During this stage the lesbian woman decides to disclose her sexual identity to a select few. Some of the black and white participants of this study actively decided to pass as heterosexual in front of other heterosexuals, depending on certain contexts. The choice to 'pass' as a heterosexual also depends on the different multiple identities of the woman, as well as the fear of stigmatisation.

Cass claims that in the last stage of the development process – 'Identity Synthesis – the lesbian woman develops a lifestyle where her lesbian identity is no longer hidden. Their sexual identities, thus, do not overwhelm them anymore, and it is also not the biggest part of their social identities. These women are comfortable enough with their

sexual identities that they feel no need to hide it from anyone or in any context. A possible explanation, at least with regard to Nomi and Kathy, of reaching this stage, is that they are older than the other participants, and thus had more time to reach this stage of the coming out process. But that does not explain Thandi and Martha, who are of the older participants but have still not reached the last stage of the development model. A more accurate reason would then be based on elements of their identities. Most of the participants who reached this stage of the coming out process probably reached this stage because they were in *a position* to be open about their lesbian identities in all areas of their lives, a luxury not all of the participants can experience. Due to their other, oppressed, multiple identities, they are held back from moving to a stage where they are allowed to be completely open about their lesbian identity. When considering the coming out process of these individuals, the black participants' racial identities were dominant. Also, religion and class were of importance to them, which mostly prohibits any form of homosexuality and complicates the coming out process to a large extent. The white participants, on the other hand, experienced the conflict between their homosexual and heterosexual identities differently. In a sense, they had more freedom to move from one stage to the other.

The narratives have illustrated that lesbian identities are shaped by a number of other identities. Factors such as race, ethnicity, class, religion and place of residence were significant. Similarly, these other identities are also influenced by a lesbian identity. Different parts of their identities come forth in different points in time, like in the case of the majority of white participants who hide their lesbian identities at work, but are open about it in their family lives. Social space is, thus, important when looking at lesbian identities. Different contexts determine how a lesbian performs her sexual identity in public. The black participants' choices to disclose their lesbian identities in public are particularly complicated by where they live. The majority of black participants indicated that they live in tight-knit communities, mostly in townships, where homosexuality is frowned upon. Due to the homophobic views apparent in these communities, they hide their sexual identities out of fear of being ostracised. The white participants, on the other hand, live in middle-class suburbs where they can live a relatively private life without other people of their community knowing about their sexual identities.

In the South Africa context, race is an all-present factor. This study found that race matters when one aims to analyse a lesbian identity in South Africa because the participants' notion of what race entails shapes how they experience their lesbian identities and vice versa. However, race was more important to the black participants than it was to the white participants. The white participants' views about their racial identities are still rooted in the historical notions of what it means to be 'white' in South Africa. They claim to attach no particular meaning to their race and assert that their other identities are more important. However, they are aware of certain privileges they enjoy as lesbian women in this country, which black lesbians do not. Significantly this study found that black lesbians find it difficult to separate their race from their other identities. The black participants linked their race to their cultures, gender, religions and to where they live. A black racial identity, thus, intersects on multiple levels and shapes the ways in which their other identities are constructed. The choice of some of the black participants to hide their sexual identities is, also, largely attributed to their race, with this linked to experiences of stigma. The ways in which the black and white lesbian women in this study managed their sexual identities were, thus, closely linked to their other identities. It is this very interaction between different experiences of race, other identities and stigma that contribute to the multiple meanings attached to a lesbian identity.

Despite the strengths and applicability of the model, Cass' assertion that other elements of identity are immaterial in the coming out process, can confidently be rejected. In as far as Cass' model was useful in the analysis of the data, this study moves beyond that and incorporates an intersectional approach to describe the coming out process of lesbians in Johannesburg. For analysis purposes, I would further add on to this model in order to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced account of the coming out process as described by respondents in this particular study by taking account how stigma, or the fear of being stigmatised, and other identities intersect on each level of the coming out process.

In the final analysis, however, none of the identities discussed here can be understood in isolation. Throughout the narratives different identities continuously overlapped and influenced one another indicating an intersectional relationship. Lesbian women construct their identities based on their lived experiences, expectations and interpretations of their other identities. Multiple identities manifest in a South African context, and how black and white lesbian women interpret these identities resulting in multiple meanings attached to a lesbian identity. Comparing the experiences of fourteen diverse lesbian women has contributed to a deeper understanding of lesbian identity construction.

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