

‘Real women’ and ‘real lesbians’ : discourses of heteronormativity amongst a group of lesbians

Angela Ochse

Department of Sociology University of Pretoria Angela.Ochse@up.ac.za

Abstract

The pre-1996 anti-homosexuality laws have been repealed and today South Africa’s constitution recognises and protects the rights of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation. Despite equality in terms of the law, there is still a great deal of stigmatisation of same-sex sexuality, or any relationship that does not conform to heterosexuality. This dominant heteronormative narrative of relationships has led to an ‘othering’ of same-sex couples and families. Lesbian relationships are therefore assumed to be inferior to heterosexual relationships, and are plagued by stereotypes and misconceptions. In addition, given the context of violence in South Africa, adopting a non-heterosexual identity could prove to be dangerous. In response to these homophobic conceptions which are dominant in society, the women in my sample reveal particular ways of representing themselves and their same-sex relationships. Different discourses are appropriated in an effort to present themselves in a more ‘favourable’ light. This article investigates to what extent ‘heteronormativity’ in particular is appropriated in describing themselves, their own, and other same-sex relationships.

Keywords: gay, lesbian, same-sex, sexuality, stereotype

The South African context

Understanding the historical context of South Africa is essential, if light is to be shed on current situations. The Equality Clause, section 9 in the Bill of Rights, prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation by the state and all other persons. In addition, on 30 November 2006, the Civil Union Act was signed into law, giving all same-sex intimate unions the same rights as heterosexual intimate unions, in terms of couples being able to marry. Despite these progressive laws, societal recognition and legitimisation of same-sex sexuality is still a long way off.

The patriarchal nature of South African society is both oppressive and overwhelming for lesbians. While the constitution represents equality and fairness, this is not reflected at a societal level. In comparison to some other countries, South Africa's lesbian communities are relatively 'underground'. Services offered to them are blatantly lacking and steeped in notions of heterosexism. According to Jody Kollapen, then Chairperson of the South Africa Human Rights Commission, 'lesbian and gay people are still experiencing discrimination in the home, the community and the workplace' (Anon. 2007: 3). This is most blatantly reflected by the high incidence of curative rape and the murder of black lesbians in townships. 'This extreme violence is a way of controlling women's sexuality, of "curing" lesbians of their "deviance", of having their sexuality operate outside of heterosexual and patriarchal norms and control' (Muthien 2005: 52). The threat of violence and the harsh climate of heteronormativity which prevails in South Africa result in many lesbians living in fear of being 'found out'.

An investigation of the consequences stigmatisation has for the primary relationships of lesbians has shown that due to the widespread order of heterosexism, negative perceptions as well as poor information services, many lesbians feel conflicted about whether or not to share their sexual identity (Kritzinger & Van Aswegan 1992). Lesbians are constantly confronted by the possibility of being avoided or rejected, and thus are faced with the choice of either concealing or disclosing information about their sexual orientation. This situation is exacerbated given the very real threat of hate crimes in South Africa. As regards the Civil Union Act, some argue that the right to equality and marriage only applies to those who are open about their sexuality. Thus, 'the rights that accrue to individuals as a result are accessible only if a gay identity is claimed – that is, by "coming out" as gay or lesbian, and/or being openly gay or lesbian' (Matebeni 2008: 249). Being openly lesbian in a patriarchal and patronising society means having to expose oneself to the risk of discrimination, as well as physical harm.

The struggles lesbians face are thus not only internal conflicts, but the struggles are also entangled with the broader norms of society. Family, friends and religion can be sources of conflict if they mirror heterosexist ideologies and are thus opposed to same-sex sexuality. Thus, the powerlessness of lesbians in a patriarchal society affects their lives in many different spheres, such as their family life, work environment and social gatherings – in fact, any heterosexual space in which they find themselves. Kritzinger and Van Aswegan (1992) maintain that in a patriarchal society such as South Africa, a lesbian can be described as a 'double deviant': as a woman she is confronted by male privilege, and as a lesbian she is faced with extensive heterosexual privilege. She thus encounters domination and suppression in her life as a woman and as a lesbian (ibid.).

Given South Africa's patriarchal history and conservative context, most people subscribe to what Wright (2001) terms 'heterosexual supremacy', to describe the notions which idealise the male–female bond as being naturally superior to any other variant of sexual relationship. It is this heterosexual supremacy that imposes patriarchal forms of society on people who do not fit into the neat categories of heterosexuality, thus silencing and marginalising them. Heterosexuality is considered to be the outcome of a normal

and healthy psychosexual development, while same-sex sexuality tends to be considered a pathological divergence from that supposed norm. Lubbe (2007) argues that the consequence of thinking within such binary labels has led to heterosexuality becoming privileged over same-sex sexuality. Ristock (1997: 282) states that heterosexism is ‘the use of heterosexuality as the dominant and institutionalized form of sexual identity for dominance and privilege’. On this topic, Alexander (2005: 22) suggests that women’s sexual agency and erotic autonomy are troublesome, because ‘they pose a challenge to the ideology of an originary nuclear heterosexual family that perpetuates the fiction that the family is the cornerstone of society’. Heteronormativity thus plays a major role in emphasising the correctness and institutionalisation of heterosexual dogmas and traditional family forms, by censoring, punishing, ‘medicalising’ and rendering same-sex sexuality invisible (Lubbe 2007).

Although South Africa has a constitution which encapsulates equality and democracy, legally speaking, the lived reality of South African minorities does not always mirror these noble standards. While the constitution represents equality and fairness, the societal reality is that homophobic notions have been retained and continue to be reproduced by heterosexist ideologies.

Method

The information in this article was drawn from a broad exploratory study with the aim of understanding the dynamics of lesbian intimate unions, as identified by a group of white middle-class lesbians in Pretoria. One of the key research questions sought to explore to what extent those in the sample appropriated heteronormativity in describing their own, or other, lesbian relationships. A great deal of information was gathered, of which a significant amount dealt directly with how the interviewees identified themselves and their relationships.

An important selection criterion was that the participants had some same-sex relationship experience, having been involved in a number of lesbian relationships or a long-term lesbian relationship. During the research process it became evident that the sample was only composed of women over the age of 30. The reason for this was twofold: first, most women with the relevant experience, or who were in more established intimate unions, tended to be older. Second, the sample shaped itself through a snowball technique, and thus many of the respondents suggested their lesbian friends for participation. It was due to this fact that all the respondents were roughly the same age, middle class and white. It became evident that focusing on women over the age of 30 allowed a greater likelihood of them having been involved in relationships of longer duration, or in a number of same-sex relationships. This was, however, not always the case, as many middle-aged women had only recently begun same-sex relationships, or had been in the same intimate relationship for many years. The women who were willing to talk about their sexuality and their same-sex relationships were recruited – in other words, they were older women who had in some cases been open about their

sexuality for longer, and perhaps felt more comfortable sharing information with regard to their sexual identity. A total of 15 women participated in the study.

Information was collected by means of individual interviews. Charmaz (2006: 29) notes in this regard that ‘qualitative interviewing provides an open-ended, in-depth exploration of an aspect of life about which the interviewee has substantial experience, often combined with considerable insight’. In-depth individual interviews, with a focus on nuance and understanding, were most effective in exploring the context of lesbian relationships.

During the analytical phase, some discourses became evident and particularly noteworthy. Looking at patterned responses and topics caused certain themes to emerge from the data. The use of discourse analysis was functional in questioning societal context, and these women’s life experiences and perceptions. Fairclough, an accomplished author writing in the field of discourse analysis, argues that without reducing social life to language, this approach to discourse analysis is ‘based upon the assumption that language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research always have to take account of language’ (2003: 2). From this perspective, then, discourse analysis is an important research method, should one want to understand society and people’s responses to it. A study of the discourses of the women in the sample permitted insight into their perspectives on their positions in the world, as well as how they responded to it.

Terms and identity: labeling lesbians in South Africa

All of the respondents expressed a sense of difference, which emerged from the notion of being ‘marked’. The majority of the sample felt their sexual orientation placed them in a marginal position, and most had endured the experience of being an uncomfortable minority. Freda’s explanation provides a vivid picture of being the centre of negative attention:

That is why we are such deep people; we care so deep because we had to fight for ourselves to be. We had to take a lot of abuse as well, sometimes not verbal abuse, but just the way people look at you the way they shift away from you. They don’t want you in their presence; they raise their eyebrows and ask questions around you ... not from you or to you, from others. (Interview, September 2007)

In a few instances the respondents expressed their frustration at the fact that people had negative perceptions of them, because of preconceived ideas surrounding lesbianism. This notion of being stereotyped is expressed as follows:

The label itself is confining because people have particular notions about what lesbian means. It is about, if someone is a lesbian then they are a certain way, it does not leave much room for open dialogue. (Maher & Pusch 1995: 32)

Similar to other research findings on black South African lesbians, the respondents in this sample exclaimed their aggravation over being classified as deviants rather than ordinary people (Potgieter 1997). From Yvonne's statement, 'We are not freaks, we are just normal people!' it is suggested that because she is lesbian, she is labeled as abnormal (Interview, February 2008). Yvonne felt that once classified as 'lesbian' she was boxed into a category that ignored her professional capacity. Other members of the sample expressed similar views about their identities as mothers, women or professionals being blurred by the label 'lesbian'. Rachelle (Interview, February 2008) noted: 'I am a qualified social worker and she [referring to her partner] is a teacher, we are not freaks!'

The women's discourses reflected an obvious awareness of marginality and exclusion from the majority group. Unconstructive stereotypes, predetermined judgements, differential treatment and the possibility of physical and verbal discrimination all played a role in demonstrating their difference from the South African norm.

Finding a place in South Africa

Fourteen of the respondents were of the opinion that the average South African is uninformed and has negative perceptions of same-sex sexuality. Thus, despite South Africa's constitutional equality and legal marriage rights, the freedom to be openly lesbian or gay, without battling stereotypes, is arguably very prevalent. Over half of the respondents noted that while the South African constitution was outstanding and remarkably sound on paper, same-sex sexuality was far from being granted the constitutional standards of equality. Despite their legal equality, these respondents felt that those who were not open about their sexuality would not be able to access their rights sufficiently. As one participant said:

I think the constitution is amazing, but, like I have said to other people too, the reality is that legal protection does not necessarily translate into social acceptance because you sit with peoples' perception, their stereotypes, all of that that people have grown up with from political, religious and cultural perspectives. (Catherine, Interview, November 2007)

The conundrum in South Africa, of having a liberal constitution and a conservative public, is clearly evident in the views of these respondents. Wanda's views are a reflection of the findings of Kritzinger and Van Aswegan (1992), as well as those of Matebeni (2008):

My take on it is the constitution is fantastic ... [but] in terms of the reality of implementation in terms of how society behaves regardless of the constitution is another problem. (Wanda, Interview, February 2008)

An insightful dynamic became apparent when it was discovered that most of these respondents preferred not to be identified as 'lesbian'. The term 'gay' was favoured over 'lesbian' in most cases.

Gays, lesbians and dykes: rejecting 'lesbian'

Initially the respondents were asked how they preferred to identify themselves, or which word they favoured when referring to themselves. This was done for the purpose of being able to phrase questions using the terminology the respondents were most comfortable with. The answers to this question revealed more than just word preferences; they revealed feelings about the words as well as the understandings and meanings attached to the different terms.

Maher and Pusch (1995: 19) note that 'in a social context of compulsory heterosexuality, where lesbian existence is either denied or seen named as deviant, people named lesbian negotiate lesbian identity'. The word *lesbian* is known to have many negative connotations. Historical classifications of lesbianism as an illness, or some kind of dementia or perversion, have been outlined as reasons for these offensive associations (Kitzinger 1987; Renzetti 1992). 'Gay', unlike 'lesbian', is not connected to these negative undertones from the past. Many of the respondents seemed to perceive lesbianism as it is viewed by dominant, heterosexist beliefs, that is, in a negative light. Eight of the respondents preferred to be called 'gay' in all instances and felt that identifying as 'lesbian' was distasteful.

This general rejection of the word was framed in different ways, and the reasons for such a negative interpretation were many. Gerda was specific about her rejection of the term 'lesbian'. She had a hard time identifying herself, because of her awareness of the undertones regarding lesbianism. Similarly, many respondents expressed an awareness of existing disparaging views, given that lesbianism is inaccurately classified as a sickness, perversion or form of gender confusion. Gerda's discomfort with the term was noticeable:

It took me a long time to say, 'Yes, I am a lesbian', because it sounds like a sickness or something! So personally I would rather say I am gay. (Interview, January 2008)

Brown (1995: 10) notes that a woman may call herself 'gay', thus 'purposefully eschewing the term *lesbian*, reflecting class and cultural origins where the latter term is more stigmatised than the former'. By choosing 'gay' as opposed to 'lesbian', these respondents appropriated a word with no negative historical meanings. When asked how she preferred to identify herself, Ilza explained why 'gay' was preferable. She recognised that these connotations were connected to the past, and made explicit that her perception of 'lesbian' connotes images of butch-femme couples. Her preference for being called 'gay' separated her from the negative images of lesbians that she had adopted:

As gay ... I prefer the word. I think there is a very definite boundary between the gay women of today and the older generation. That was the generation where, older than I am, where they were very divided into femme and butch roles ... And I don't know why but I associate the word lesbian with those people. I know one woman who was furious when called a lesbian. She said, 'Don't insult me like that!' I think it has a negative connotation. I prefer gay, I don't mind if people want to say I am a lesbian, but being gay I prefer. (Interview, February 2008)

Even though the literature portrays these kinds of stereotypes with regard to butch women as being directed from heterosexual society, there is evidence that some in the same-sex community still accept them as true (Hattingh 2005). Although having a butch or femme identity is a personal matter, many respondents expressed their disdain towards butch women in particular, because of their supposed heteronormative emulation. Historically, the rise of lesbian feminism in the 1970s has had the effect of pathologising butch-femme role play. It has been characterised as a gross mimicry of heterosexuality.

... female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and have a power that is just out of reach. (Halberstam 1998: 9)

This was reflected in the discourse produced by the majority of the respondents, who suggested that being classified as butch implied gender confusion. There were also numerous stereotypes that labeled butch women as aggressive, jealous and gender confused – traits associated with masculinity. In an effort to escape being labeled as such, some respondents adopted heteronormative discourses which framed butch lesbians as abnormal and led to a general rejection of the term ‘lesbian’. They had arguably internalised and agreed with these institutionalised negative characterisations. Consequently, a definite connection was made between lesbians and role-play or butch-femme acting out. Two respondents expressed the opinion that lesbians who adhered to heterosexual role-play in their relationships were individuals coming from oppressed communities, as discussed by Peplau and Gordon (1983). For example, Johanna said:

So you'll find where people are very suppressed – in the Northern suburbs of Pretoria where the society is quite conservative – you'll go in, to the gatherings there and its kind of very butch-femme. You know, very feminine girls, lipstick and nail polish and then the very butch ones with the sensible shoes and baggy clothes and bad haircuts. And it's an extreme stereotype ...
(Interview, September 2007)

Some authors argue that butch-femme identities are more complex than mere imitations of heterosexuality and encompass a variety of forms (Halberstam 1998; Walker 1993). Butch-femme stereotypes, which were prevalent amongst the group of respondents, were viewed as simple imitations of heterosexual relationships. Many myths and misconceptions about lesbians are linked to inaccurate assumptions about sexuality. From what Amy said, her awareness of the stereotype that ‘all lesbians want to be men’ was evident. She clearly wanted to avoid being associated with this typecast:

Because that is another thing you know, it is important for me to be a woman, I am not a man and I don't want to be man, which is not why I am a lesbian! (Amy, Interview, November 2007)

A great need emerged amongst these research respondents to present themselves as average people, removed from the stereotypes. Peplau and Gordon (1983) try to show

that these stereotypes originate from a mistaken assumption about the inseparability of the three components of human sexuality. These three components are defined as sexual orientation (attraction to gender), gender identity (belief of being male or female) and gender-role behaviour (acting in traditionally masculine or feminine ways). Misconceptions arise because people wrongly assume that if an individual differs from the norm in one of these dimensions, they must differ in terms of the others as well. A lesbian, for example, differs with regard to her sexual and romantic attraction to women – this does not translate into her being confused about being a woman, or wanting to be a man, nor does it mean she rejects traditional gender roles (as stereotypes suggest). Gerda explains her confusion when she began to realise she was lesbian, demonstrating how ingrained many of these stereotypes are:

I thought I was a freak, because I am feminine and at that stage the only lesbians I had seen where all butch, so I thought I was a freak! And my husband at that stage was telling [me] that I am a freak because 'gay women want to be men'. (Interview, January 2008)

'Real women' and 'real lesbians'

Some respondents, in an effort to break away from stereotypes, argued that they (as gay women) wanted to be completely 'woman identified'. They wanted to retain their identity as women while being with women. Ilza explains:

... most of the people I know say they love women because they are women. They don't want a woman who looks like a man and tries to act like one. (Interview, February 2008)

There was also an implication that butch women are not *real* women and butch-femme couples are not *real* lesbian couples because of their heterosexual mimicry. Gerda explains that in a *real* lesbian relationship, roles are thought to be equal because they are not defined by gender:

I think if you have a relationship with somebody that has sort of more male genes in them, then they sort of take the role of domineering attitude. But there, I think that is another factor there, I don't think that is real lesbianism. But if you have a real lesbian relationship, where both of you are feminine, the one that is the best [at whichever chore or activity] does it. (Interview, January 2008)

Peplau (1988) argues that most same-sex relationships do not conform to traditional male and female roles. Instead, there is role flexibility and turn-taking. Johanna explains that in relationships where partners 'act out' or mimic heterosexual roles, inequalities arise because one partner adopts a more dominant role and an unequal power relation develops. She believes there is the potential for greater equality in a same-sex relationship, because the possibility of negotiating roles and responsibilities exists. With reference to role-playing relationships, Johanna comments:

So sometimes those relationships are very dysfunctional. Those relationships mimic heterosexuality, and heterosexuality is built on an understanding of power. Somebody in the relationship is dominant and someone is submissive, subservient ... whereas in gay relationships, you have the opportunity to negotiate that. Sometimes I am stronger and sometimes you are stronger and there is that mutuality that can potentially exist. But if you want to act out and that's all you have ever understood about being homosexual and living a gay life, then there is a very high possibility for enormous conflict. (Interview, September 2007)

The general implication was that butch women are not real women and that having two *real* lesbians or *real* women (with more feminine than masculine qualities) together would be more acceptable and would mirror the ideal of equality in a relationship.

Being proudly lesbian

Only three respondents preferred 'lesbian' to 'gay', and were even comfortable appropriating the more taboo term 'dyke'. This was a minority discourse in the sample, but nevertheless provides interesting data. Three respondents – Johanna, Wanda and Tasha – described themselves as feminists and politically active lesbians, having all been involved in the struggle for same-sex rights in South Africa. They expressed complete comfort with their identity and had been involved in well-established long-term relationships. Rather than rejecting 'lesbian', these respondents appropriated the term in order to redefine its meaning. They used the word in a rebellious fashion in order to make a statement, in so doing both rejecting and redefining the common and institutionalised stereotypes. 'Lesbian' is defined as separate from the derogatory meanings of dominant discourse. Wanda exclaimed:

I call myself a lesbian! Why deny it? Even a dyke ... I don't mind if people call me a dyke. Like I said earlier I am political so I don't feel negative about saying, 'I am a dyke'. (Interview, February 2008)

Johanna also argued that she is comfortable with both 'lesbian' and 'dyke'. She noted that there are difficulties surrounding terminologies, but that they no longer have the same meanings they had historically. She noticeably embraced the term 'lesbian' rather than rejecting it:

For me, [lesbianism] is a clear affinity with women. Woman between woman. Gay men tend to refer to themselves as gay, lesbians tend to refer [to] themselves as lesbian, some are comfortable enough to appropriate dyke. I am more comfortable with dyke than lesbian for example ... I think there are a lot of issues around terminologies and not many are confident enough to call themselves dykes because it's regarded as a negative word, but in fact it has been reclaimed long long ago. (Interview, September 2007)

Johanna had reinterpreted 'lesbian' and 'dyke' as constituting an empowering identity, rather than a pathological, negative and marginal identity. Tasha also reported being

comfortable with these terms. When asked how she preferred to be identified, she responded:

'Lesbian' please! I like to be called 'lesbian', because 'gay' thwacks us in with the boys, not that we shouldn't but the boys don't like us to be thwacked in. But I like the word 'lesbian', I have not got an aversion to it ... (Interview, November 2007)

None of these three respondents ascribed to the same pessimistic views about the term 'lesbian'. In these cases, reclaiming the label is used to construct an empowerment opportunity. Such resistance to being labeled as deviant creates space for empowerment and new identities, with the women portraying themselves as proud to identify as 'lesbian' or 'dyke'. Even though they embraced and redefined these terms, none of the women fitted the stereotypical descriptions that many of the other respondents had given. Those respondents who rejected 'lesbian' and accepted 'lesbian as deviant' reflected a degree of adherence to the dominant stereotypes. These three respondents, on the other hand, gave no credence to such institutionalised notions – instead, they embraced and redefined the terms and did not feel the need to develop new terms by which to identify themselves.

Primary versus elective lesbians

Some researchers have proposed a distinction between lesbians who perceive themselves to be born that way ('primary' lesbians) and those ('elective' lesbians) who see themselves as having chosen same-sex relationships later in life. According to Golden (1996: 235), 'primary lesbians have a sense of difference based on sexual attraction toward members of the same sex and do not perceive this difference to be a conscious choice'.

Elective lesbians, on the other hand, see their involvement in same-sex relationships as a choice. The literature revealed that research cannot identify what causes a person to be lesbian or gay. There is, however, an ongoing need to diagnose same-sex sexuality. This need arguably has a heterosexist slant, in that it assumes that same-sex relationships are unnatural and something which could be prevented or cured. Interestingly, many respondents felt the need to justify or diagnose their own lesbianism. This became evident in the different discourses that arose where the respondents used different reasons to explain their sexuality.

Discourses relating to always having been lesbian

The majority of respondents in the sample (including those who had been in heterosexual marriages) expressed the discourse of that of the primary lesbian, as discussed by Golden (1996). This assumes that sexuality is fixed early on and persists throughout one's life course. Within this framework, identifying oneself as lesbian or gay, or coming out, is a process of accepting what one has always been. Hollander and Haber (1992, cited in Kitzinger & Wilkinson 1995: 95) outline that 'the very expression "coming

out” suggests that the lesbian has always been inside, awaiting debut’. Many of these respondents phrased their being lesbian not as a choice, but as something inherent that they had been aware of from a young age.

Some respondents told stories explaining the difficulties of growing up knowing of their lesbianism. Three respondents said that their families had always suspected they were lesbian. From a young age, Johanna and Catherine experienced conflict with their families around notions of their sexuality. Both had barely known what ‘being gay’ meant, but their families had gauged their sexuality at a young age in light of their behaviour. Catherine stated that, in her upbringing, same-sex sexuality was condemned as a sin, and that her mother and teachers at school had undertaken to steer her in the ‘right direction’ by making her feel guilty about the feelings she had:

For me it was much more of a typical traumatic event. My mother being worried about me before I even knew the concept Well, I have always been gay, I have always been lesbian. You know, I was in love with girls, in junior school I was fooling around with girls in the bathroom not with boys. (Interview, November 2007)

Catherine and Johanna reported that they had always been attracted to women and would identify themselves as primary lesbians. Other respondents also felt that their lesbianism was inherent and had always been there, but added that they had only come to the realisation later on in life. For them, claiming a lesbian identity involved a move into the unknown. Claiming a forbidden identity often results in material costs – especially when leaving marriages. The prospect of losing one’s home, one’s standing in society, and the possibility of losing one’s children is daunting. None of the respondents, however, expressed regret about having made the transition to lesbianism. While the women gave varying reasons why they had entered into heterosexual marriage, most suggested that they did so to fulfil societal expectations, as well as the expectations of their respective families. Most respondents expressed similar sentiments to that of Mary:

I have always known that I was not supposed to be married; you get married because the world expects you to. (Interview, February 2008)

It was particularly revealing to hear how those respondents who had adopted a lesbian identity after having been involved in heterosexual marriages would self-identify. Mary’s story, for example, was very similar to that of the majority of respondents who only realised their lesbianism later in life:

It was only when I was about 37 then I really admitted to myself that this is what is going on in my life, that I am gay and I don’t really want to be in a marriage anymore, and that’s when, I won’t say I went out looking, but admitted to myself, and opened up to myself then. (Interview, February 2008)

The above quote suggests that the respondent was gay all her life, but that she only realised it at a later stage. Some respondents explained that upon looking back, they realised they'd had crushes on women and that ultimately they had been lesbian all along. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) argue that the reconstruction of a past offers a sense of continuity with the present. Early experiences with women assumed an enormous importance for the respondents in explaining their current sexuality. Confirming the findings of this study, many respondents in this sample brought previously unrecognised or forgotten experiences to light, as Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) suggest. Mentioning the crushes they had on girls, their boyishness or childhood fascination with older women, seemed to serve the respondents by playing a significant role in the transition that subsequently took place. Gerda's discourse served to justify her current lifestyle, and in line with Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995), she highlighted incidents that had taken place in the past, to provide a sense of continuity with the present:

I did not experience myself as lesbian, I came out when I was 34, so up until 30 I had no idea that I was gay, I thought I was straight! If I look back I realise I have been gay all my life. I see that I was in love with this girl in standard seven and in love with this woman, and these friends! If anybody had at anytime, just taken my hand touched my hand or just given me a good kiss, I would have known, but I just didn't know. If I look back I wish that somebody had just kissed me, it would have saved me all that! (Gerda, Interview, January 2008)

Many respondents reverted to the discourse of having been or having wanted to be a tomboy, suggesting that being gay was inherent. Peplau and Garnets (2000) found that lesbians are more likely than heterosexual women to remember being tomboys when they were younger, but that this link is inconclusive because 'memories of childhood may be coloured by adult experiences' and 'most tomboys grow up to be heterosexuals' (2000: 355). For example, Gerda explains:

When I look back now, looking back I see that I have known most of my life, but I just did not see it. I did not link sexuality with women. I can remember I wanted to be a tomboy and then at a stage, around 13 I realised, I am a woman; I want to be a woman. (Interview, January 2008)

From these stories and other similar accounts, it is suggested that a woman's life was an unconscious acting out of her lesbian identity. Using the discourse that 'I have been gay all along!' or 'I knew there was something different about me' implied that being lesbian was not a choice, but rather an inherent trait. By framing their sexuality as an inborn trait they are freed from having to explain their lesbianism as a choice. It was suggested that once realising or accepting their sexuality, an emotional void was filled. Some respondents reported a sense of self-discovery and of finding themselves. They reported their lives as being fulfilled and self-actualised. Jen noted that before she admitted her sexuality to herself, she had felt incomplete:

I knew I could not be with a man and the whole faith issue was a struggle for me, and I also could not be with a woman, and I just got to a point and I realised you know I just can't do this anymore ... there was a huge portion of me missing ... (Interview, November 2007)

One respondent found a new sense of acceptance of herself:

And then I started meeting gay people, coincidentally. I met someone and I sort of realised, this is who I am and I felt at home. (Ilza, Interview, February 2008)

These women's stories of having a new-found sense of wholeness and completeness upon realising their sexuality, is connected to the suggestion that their lesbianism was arguably inborn. Gerda, for example, realised at the age of 30 that she felt differently about women after having seen an Internet site featuring women kissing. This image stuck in her mind and caused her to link sexuality with women. It was then that she realised what had been missing in her life:

And after that, it took a couple of months and it was not going away and I think for the first time sexuality clicked. Then I made the connection, because at that time I could not understand why I felt this hole, I could not understand what it is that I am missing! (Interview, January 2008)

In their article, Peplau and Garnets (2000: 329) present the perspective that '[w]omen's sexuality and sexual orientation are potentially fluid, changeable over time, and variable across social contexts'. The idea of sexual fluidity is explored by Baumeister (cited in Peplau & Garnets 2000), who investigates the concept of plasticity, i.e. 'the degree to which a person's sex drive can be shaped and altered by cultural, social, and situational pressures' (2000: 332). In contrast, a lack of plasticity would mean a person's sexuality is more rigidly patterned in early life, as a result of childhood and/or biological influences. If women's sexuality is not primarily shaped by biology and childhood experiences, there is a lot of room for investigating and understanding their sexuality.

This research shifts the focus from biological theories to sociological and psychological theories of sexuality. Baumeister (cited in Peplau & Garnets 2000) illustrates how the social environment could influence sexuality, by looking at factors such as education, religion and acculturation. The link between education and sexuality is highlighted. One survey found that completing college doubled the likelihood that a man would identify as gay or bisexual, but was associated with a 900 per cent increase in women identifying as lesbian or bisexual (Peplau & Garnets 2000: 332). Another consistency with the plasticity theory can be seen in the 1970s feminist movement, which resulted in many women turning away from sexual relationships with men and establishing relationships with women (Kitzinger 1987; Peplau & Garnets 2000). Thus, according to Baumeister, 'plasticity would permit a woman to change aspects of her sexuality or sexual orientation across the lifespan' (cited in Peplau & Garnets 2000: 333). This perspective sheds some light on those respondents who had been involved in long-term heterosexual relationships before becoming romantically involved with a

woman. This theory is of particular significance, because many respondents in my study had previously been married, before choosing a lesbian lifestyle later in life.

Although there is research being done in these areas, very few respondents in this study adopted the discourse of choice in explaining their switch from heterosexual to same-sex relationships. In this sample, the stories reflect that many of these respondents came out later in life; eight came out when they were over 30 years old. Seven of the women in the sample had been involved in a heterosexual marriage, and 14 of them reported having had some sort of romantic relationship with a man. Given the climate of heteronormativity, it is not surprising that they tried to conform by being involved in heterosexual relationships.

Lesbianism is my choice

Only two respondents said that a lesbian relationship was theirs by choice. Both identify as feminists and political lesbians. Wanda, who had previously been married, described her choice to be lesbian as a ‘choice she made for herself’. Tasha described herself as being involved with both sexes until she chose lesbianism over heterosexuality or bisexuality:

I never had any idea that, not, I never I never acceded to people's attitudes, I did not let myself say, 'Oh this is all naughty!' I let myself do what I wanted. I never had a big or small coming out. But I did boys and girls, higgledy piggledy and only when I was 22 that I decided that I was going to be a full-time lesbian as opposed to a fiddler. (Interview, November 2007)

Wanda and Tasha expressed very similar sentiments, explaining their choosing to be lesbian as a positive choice for their own lives:

I chose it as positive decision for myself, the thing that I wanted to do. (Wanda, Interview, February 2008)

The rhetoric of choice was not common in the group of respondents. The majority of respondents' stories suggested that they were primary lesbians. Very few respondents named their sexuality as a choice – something which was interesting, given that so many had been in heterosexual marriages. Many respondents demonstrated their awareness of the dominant discourse which frames same-sex sexuality as an abnormal form of relationship. With this background it is possible that they are not comfortable with labelling their same-sex sexuality as a choice, but rather as something unchangeable and inherent. This may possibly be because it is not institutionalised as a legitimate choice of relationship within South Africa.

Concluding reflections

This study shows that the women who were interviewed were aware of being a minority in the context of South African society. Some women were angry about the lack of social equality in this country, despite the high legal standards and constitutional equality.

Reflecting on identity, this relatively small study found that the majority of respondents preferred to identify themselves as 'gay' rather than 'lesbian'. It emerged from the study that the group of respondents felt the term 'lesbian' to be directly linked to classifications of same-sex sexuality as a perversion, as well as stereotypes about butch women. It was for this reason that they preferred to be called 'gay'. By rejecting the stereotypes associated with the term 'lesbian' they portrayed themselves as 'normal women', rather than gender-confused pathological stereotypes.

While not done at a conscious level, their adherence to the dominant discourses on lesbianism served to embed the stigma from which they were trying to escape. These women, by rejecting the term 'lesbian' on the basis of the negative stereotypes attached to it, are both accepting 'lesbianism as deviant' and further entrenching dominant heterosexist misconceptions. The respondents were aware of their minority position in society, and had adopted a discourse which 'others' those lesbians who do not conform to more feminine gender roles. The notion of butch women being gender-confused and abnormal was the reason they gave for separating themselves from this allegedly deviant group. By doing this, they portrayed themselves as belonging to a different and 'better' group, being separate from those to whom the stereotypes apply. This tendency to mimic heterosexist discourse allowed the respondents the opportunity to frame their own lesbianism as more natural or normal. While appropriating a part of the discourse that names heterosexual role-play between women as deviant, they ignored the discourse that names intimate unions between women as unnatural. By differentiating themselves from 'that type of lesbian' they appear normal to themselves, because they reject the negative images that stereotyping has imprinted and institutionalised in society. A minority of the respondents had chosen to identify with the term 'lesbian', embracing rather than rejecting it, as the other respondents had done. These respondents rejected the stereotypes associated with the term 'lesbian', instead trying to redefine and institutionalise new ideas and associations around the term.

When providing an explanation for their identities, the majority of respondents framed their lesbianism as an inherent trait, despite almost half of the women having previously been involved in heterosexual marriages. When reflecting on their current identity as lesbian/gay, they recounted same-sex experiences from their past in order to present their lesbianism as a trait they had always possessed, but only recognised later in life. Framing their sexuality as an inherent trait suggested something inborn and natural. Implying that a person was lesbian from birth, i.e. that it is inherent, could perhaps be a mechanism to counteract the weight of society's condescension. The pressure society exerts – both directly and indirectly – was made obvious by the mechanisms these

respondents felt the need to adopt, in order to present themselves as normal human and social beings.

By studying these respondents' lives in context, it can be assumed that lesbianism as a choice would be challenged or ridiculed. Perhaps it was for these reasons that very few of them reflected on their identity as a choice. For those respondents who had previously been married, their need to justify their lesbianism was perhaps compounded by the fact that they had maintained intimate heterosexual relationships before moving into lesbian relationships. These respondents in particular highlighted same-sex experiences that had only recently come to light. Having been or wanting to have been a tomboy was also adopted as a discourse to communicate that their sexuality had been evident from a young age. Many also spoke about the fulfilment they achieved in their lives once they recognised what had been missing. For these women, lesbianism was framed as a positive life change that had always existed within them.

The women's reflections on their own identity demonstrated an awareness of being different in the eyes of society, but also the need to normalise themselves in the face of a heterosexist and homophobic environment. The discourses that emerged from the study functioned in different ways to normalise their own lesbianism while rejecting other forms of lesbianism – their choice of identity, as well as the stereotypes held by this group of respondents, reflects this.

References

- Alexander, M.J. 2005. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. USA: Duke University Press.
- Anon. 2007. *An ABC for LGBTI: A Resource Guide for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex People*. Pretoria: OUT LGBT.
- Brown, S.L. 1995. 'Lesbian Identities: Concepts and Issues.' In A.R. Augelli & C. Patterson (eds.). *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identities over the Lifespan*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Fairclough, N. 2003. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge.
- Golden, C. 1996. 'What's in a Name? Sexual Self-identification Among Women.' In R.C. Savin-Williams & K.M. Cohen (eds.). *The Lives of Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Halberstam, J. 1998. *Female Masculinity*. USA: Duke University Press.
- Hattingh, C. 2005. 'Struggles of Authenticity.' In M. van Zyl & M. Steyn (eds.). *Performing Queer: Shaping Sexualities, 1994–2004*. Roggebaai: Kwela Books.
- Kitzinger, C. 1987. *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*. London: SAGE.
- Kitzinger, C. & Wilkinson, S. 1995. 'Transitions from Heterosexuality to Lesbianism.' *Developmental Psychology*, 31(1): 95–104.
- Kritzinger, A. & Van Aswegen, F. 1992. 'Problems Associated with Stigmatisation: The Case of Lesbianism.' *South African Sociological Review*, 5(1): 83–98.

- Lubbe, C. 2007. 'Mothers, Fathers or Parents: Same-gendered Families in South Africa.' *South African Journal of Psychology*, 37(2): 260–283.
- Maher, M. & Pusch, W. 1995. 'Speaking "Out": The Implication of Negotiating Lesbian Identity.' In W.L. Leap (ed.). *Beyond the Lavender Lexicon: Authentication, Imagination and Appropriation in Lesbian and Gay Languages*. Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers.
- Matebeni, Z. 2008. 'Blissful Complexities: Black Lesbians Reflect on Same-sex Marriage and the Civil Union Act.' In M. Judge, A. Manion & S. de Waal (eds.). *To Have and to Hold: The Making of Same-sex Marriage in South Africa*. Pretoria: Fanele.
- Muthien, B. 2005. 'Playing on the Pavements of Identities.' In M. van Zyl & M. Steyn (eds.). *Performing Queer: Shaping Sexualities, 1994–2004*. Roggebaai: Kwela Books.
- Peplau, L.A. & Garnets, L.D. 2000. 'A New Paradigm for Understanding Women's Sexuality and Sexual Orientation.' *Journal of Social Issues Women's Sexuality: New Perspectives on Sexual Orientation and Gender*, 56(2): 329–350.
- Peplau, L.A. & Gordon, S.L. 1983. 'The Intimate Relationships of Lesbians and Gay Men.' In E.R. Allgeier & N.B. McCormick (eds.). *Gender Roles and Sexual Behaviour: The Changing Boundaries*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Press.
- Potgieter, C. 1997. 'Black, South African, Lesbian: Discourses of Invisible Lives.' Unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape, Bellville.
- Renzetti, C.M. 1992. *Violent Betrayal: Partner Abuse in Lesbian Relationships*. California: Sage.
- Republic of South Africa. 1998. 'Bill of Rights, Chapter 2, Section 9: The Equality Clause.' Retrieved from <http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution> (accessed 5 August 2008).
- . 2006. *Civil Union Act*. Cape Town: Government Gazette.
- Ristock, J.L. 1997. 'The Cultural Politics of Abuse in Lesbian Relationships: Challenges for Community Action.' In N.V. Benokraitis (ed.). *Subtle Sexism: Current Practice and Prospects for Change*. California: Sage.
- Walker, M. 1993. 'How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like You Are.' *Signs: Theorizing Lesbian Experience*, 18(4): 866–890.
- Wright, J.M. 2001. *Queer Families, Queer Politics: Challenging Culture*. Columbia: University Press.

Interviews

- Amy (pseudonym). Her residence, Pretoria, November 2007.
- Carol (pseudonym). Her residence, Pretoria, January 2008.
- Catherine (pseudonym). Her residence, Pretoria, November 2007.
- Fay (pseudonym). Her residence, Pretoria, January 2008.
- Freda (pseudonym). Her residence, Pretoria East, September 2007.
- Gerda (pseudonym). Her residence, Pretoria, January 2008.
- Ilza (pseudonym). Her workplace, Pretoria, February 2008.
- Jen (pseudonym). Her workplace, Pretoria, November 2007.
- Johanna (pseudonym). Her work office, Pretoria, September 2007.
- Mary (pseudonym). Her home, Pretoria, February 2008.

Meghann (pseudonym). Her residence, Pretoria East, September 2007.

Rachelle (pseudonym). Her residence, Pretoria, February 2008.

Tasha (pseudonym). Her residence, Pretoria, November 2007.

Wanda (pseudonym). Her residence, Pretoria, February 2008.

Yvonne (pseudonym). Her home, Pretoria, February 2008.

Biographical note

Angela Ochse is a lecturer in the Sociology Department at the University of Pretoria. Her research interests include women and development as well as issues of gender, identity and sexuality, especially within the context of southern Africa. The author can be contacted at HSB 19-09, University of Pretoria, Main Campus, Lynnwood Road, 0002.