Developing Academic Identities as Gay Male Lecturers at South African Universities: Two Autoethnographic Narratives

Grant Andrews
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5268-0800

Henry Nichols
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1738-1853

Abstract

Despite South Africa's progressive and inclusive queer rights legislation, attitudes in the country are still markedly hostile to queer people, who suffer widespread discrimination, violence, exclusion, and stigma. Many researchers have explored the experiences and attitudes of queer people in educational settings in South Africa. However, research on the academic identities of those from gender and sexual minority groups is still rare. This article explores the academic identities of the two authors, who are both gay men working at South African universities. The main research question was: how are the academic identities of the two participating gay male lecturers developed in relation to educational and professional experiences? While we are both in our mid-30s and have thus lived through the South African transition into democracy, we are from different racial and cultural backgrounds and work in different contexts. We use autoethnographic methods to generate data for this study, through: 1) a semi-structured online discussion between the two authors, and 2) personal narrative reflections. Queer theory and theories of masculinities were employed to frame our analysis. We performed a thematic analysis of the data to identify significant convergences and divergences in how our academic identities have developed as gay lecturers. Our findings indicate that early educational experiences of silence on topics of gender and sexuality, supportive queer mentors and peers, and a concern for social justice were significant factors in developing our academic identities

Print ISSN 1023-1757; Electronic ISSN: 2519-5476; DOI https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2021/v28n2a3

Keywords: academic identities, queer studies, gay academics, South African LGBTQ rights, higher education, autoethnography.

1 Introduction

Gender and sexual minority groups, including those people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+), are still given relatively little attention in South African research on education. While researchers have pointed to the widespread discrimination, violence and marginalisation that learners face in South African schools (Francis 2017; Bhana 2014) and have explored the identity development of queer[1] teachers in heterosexist contexts (Richardson & Archer 2008; Swanepoel 2019), very little research has focused on the academic identities of queer people working in higher education settings in South Africa. This article uses autoethnographic methods to discuss how, as two gay male lecturers at South African universities, we developed our academic identities in relation to our gender and sexual identities. In our discussion, we also identify how social cohesion played a role in the development of these academic identities. Chan, To & Chan (2006:290) define social cohesion as 'a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations'. Thus, we consider social cohesion as encompassing mechanisms that allow queer people to feel included in educational and academic spaces, and to feel safe and free to be themselves both within particular groups and in broader institutions.

[1] The term 'queer' is an umbrella term used to refer to people who belong to gender and sexual minority groups, including those who self-identify under labels of LGBTQ+ identities (Andrews 2020). While both authors identify primarily as gay, and we mostly use the term 'gay' to refer to our personal experiences, we often refer to people from other gender and sexual minority groups in, for example, our literature review and discussions of our mentors and peers. This includes those who might not self-identify with labels like 'gay' or do not fit within binary definitions of gender that some of these labels assume. We thus use gay specifically for those who self-identify as such, and 'queer' to refer to broader experiences of gender and sexual minorities in heteropatriarchal societies.

For the purposes of this article, we define academic identities as the way we understand our roles, perspectives and professional conduct in the three spheres that are often viewed as significant in academic roles, namely teaching, research and service or community engagement. In all three of these areas, our identities as gay men were important in informing our work. Both participating lecturers, for example, teach courses on queer theory or topics of gender and sexuality in education, conduct research that explores sexuality diversity in South African education and culture, and are engaged with outreach and service structures that work with LGBTQ^{+} young people. McCune (2019:22) emphasises the function of narrative in the formation of academic identities, defining these identities as 'a set of significant stories about an individual that are created and recreated over time through social, cultural and historical processes' within academic roles. Identity is a very personal construct that is defined in personal terms for each individual, thus we each shared our narratives in our own words, discussing aspects we viewed as significant in developing our academic identities. As McCune notes, academic identities can 'provide an ongoing narrative about who one is as an academic that can drive personal choices and give consistency in motivation and ways of being' (McCune 2019:22). For this reason, the autoethnographic narratives we share in this article demonstrate how these identities developed in relation to experiences that shaped our outlooks on academia and our understandings of who we are, professionally and personally. We focused on affective dimensions of these narratives, specifically how we experienced feelings of either inclusion or exclusion in educational settings. These autoethnographic narratives are not necessarily generalisable, but can give insight into how academic identities are shaped in relation to sexuality and gendered identities in specific contexts. Additionally, the autoethnographic reflections might offer insights into experiences of systemic and ongoing forms of social exclusion in educational settings that potentially affect other academics or students who are gender and sexual minorities.

2 Contextualising Gender and Sexuality Diversity and Social Cohesion in Educational Settings

Post-apartheid policies and legislation were crafted to address the injustices of apartheid that saw groups oppressed primarily based on race, but also based on factors such as gender and sexuality. This legislation includes the

Equality Clause in the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution, 1996, and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, 2000. The National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality, amongst other groups, fought for greater legal protections for queer people by stressing sexual freedom as a fundamental human right (Gevisser & Cameron 1995), and South Africa became the fifth nation worldwide to legalise same-sex marriage in 2006. In education, the South African Schools Act, 1996, sought specifically to 'combat racism and sexism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance' (RSA 1996). School curricula introduced the subjects Life Orientation (LO) and Life Skills, which included comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) from the year 2000 that aimed to address topics of sexuality and sexual behaviour; however, there have been widespread calls from religious and cultural groups to stop CSE in schools (Chaskalson *et al.* 2019).

These progressive policies and legislation have made South Africa a global leader in legal protections for LGBTQ+ rights, especially on the African continent where restrictive laws still dominate. However, the legal frameworks have not eradicated queerphobic attitudes for many South Africans. Queer people still face rampant violence, 'corrective' rape, discrimination and stigma in South Africa (Judge & Nel 2008). In addition, schools and higher education institutions are still sites of rampant queerphobia (Francis 2017; Jagessar & Msibi 2015).

South African higher education institutions are highly racialised and gendered environments (Shefer *et al.* 2018:62), with 'continuing challenges with respect to exclusionary and discriminatory practices on the basis of gender, race, class and other social inequalities'. Hames (2007:62) describes the gendered nature of South African academic settings as spaces 'marked with codes for man-as-thinker, man-as-aggressive debater, man-as-athlete [… and] boys-becoming-men'. These often hypermasculine spaces, that favour forms of hegemonic masculinity, can be unwelcoming to women or gender nonconforming men (Hames 2007), including gay men.

Globally, gay academics have expressed pressures to conform to heterosexist norms to be 'acceptable' within academia (Ozturk & Rumens 2014), such as wearing clothing that is deemed gender appropriate (2014: 506) and avoiding coming out for fear of a backlash from students and colleagues (2014:511). In a study by Bilimoria and Stewart (2009:85), some queer academics expressed that they experienced outright hostility and

'interpersonal discomfort' in professional environments. In addition, the study revealed that queer academics expressed a sense of obligation to support queer colleagues and students who were gender nonconforming or identified as LGBTQ+, demonstrating a sense of social cohesion amongst queer people in hostile or unwelcoming academic spaces.

Queer academics also stated that they were often interested in exploring issues of gender and sexuality in their research, but faced restrictions on these research topics in some cases (Bilimoria & Stewart 2009). In a large Australian study, LGBT educators at schools and universities expressed 'being overlooked for promotion, not being offered the same opportunities as heterosexual staff and the sabotaging of work' (Irwin 2002:68). In addition, research by Ripley *et al.* (2012) demonstrate that when topics of gender and sexuality diversity are discussed in classrooms, many students overestimated the amount of time afforded to these topics. The study showed that students demonstrated a strong awareness and focus on the sexuality of their gay instructor, and when asked to describe the instructor, '28 of the 32 participants first described him as "gay"' (Ripley *et al.* 2012:125). This hyperawareness of an instructor's sexuality might impact on students' experience of the class. Russ, Simonds and Hunt (2002) conducted a study where the same lecturer presented classes to eight groups; in four of these groups, the lecturer gave an example mentioning his same-sex partner to the class, and in the other four he gave an example mentioning an opposite-sex partner. When students were asked to evaluate the lecturer for a possible job appointment at their university, 'students perceive a gay teacher as significantly less credible than a straight teacher [and] students of a gay teacher perceive that they learn considerably less than students of a straight teacher' (Russ *et al.* 2002:311). While this study was published 19 years ago and social attitudes have undoubtedly changed in many contexts, this demonstrates how bias can play a part in the professional prospects of queer lecturers and the experiences of their students. Given the homophobic climate in much of South Africa, these factors might still significantly impact the academic identities of gay lecturers.

These various studies indicate that queer academics are both hypervisibilised and simultaneously invisibilised in professional settings. Schneider and Dimito (2010:1355) note that gay men were the category of sexual minority 'most likely to feel a negative impact' of their sexuality on their career and academic choices. The two authors of this article experie-

nced their sexuality as powerfully influencing their academic identities, and the experiences they share in their autoethnographic reflections mirror the hypervisibility and invisibility that are discussed in the literature.

Queer academics continually need to consider the ramifications of being 'out' or 'closeted' in their classrooms or in professional settings. Harbeck (1992) discusses the concept of the classroom closet, which includes the multiple ways that educational spaces stifle queer identities and compel queer teachers and academics to be closeted. While attitudes of students might be much more accepting of diverse sexuality and gender expression, particularly in western contexts (Ripley *et al.* 2012), there is as yet too little research in the South African context to understand how queer academics experience the relationship between their sexuality or gender expression and their academic identities. Our study thus offers a perspective on the experiences of gay male academics in South Africa.

3 Theoretical Framework: Queer Theory and Hegemonic Masculinities

We use two primary theoretical lenses to analyse the narratives generated in this study: queer theory and theories of hegemonic masculinity. These two theoretical approaches both take a critical approach to questions of gender and sexuality, where the categories that define various groups are seen as social constructs that are shaped by contexts (Connell 2013:80). These social constructs are produced by social practices that reproduce ways of *being* and *doing* a particular gender or sexual identity; for example, playing contact sports could be seen as a practice of masculinity, even though there is no innate or essentialist 'masculinity' that exists outside of these social practices and the contexts that shape them. Thus, these critical theories of gender and sexuality acknowledge that identity categories and roles are not natural or innate, but are learned and constructed through one's social interactions.

Queer theory challenges the assumed correlation of particular bodies with particular genders and sexualities. In other words, queer theory disrupts ideologies of heterosexism, cisgenderism and fixed gender roles for those who identify with different genders (Meyer 2007:21). Heterosexism refers to the 'discursive practices that present opposite-sex attraction and sexual behaviour as the dominant and assumed social practice', and cisgenderism refers to 'the cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates,

or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth' (Lennon & Mistler 2014:63). Both ideologies exclude, marginalise and delegitimise the experiences of gender and sexual minorities. These minority groups, who often identify under labels of the LGBTQ+ umbrella, are denied rights, power and privileges due to these dominant ideologies, including in South Africa (Bhana 2014). Queer theory offers concepts and approaches that disrupt notions that heterosexual and cisgender identities are 'natural', 'normal' and 'acceptable' while non-normative gender and sexuality are 'deviant', 'unnatural' or 'abnormal' (Beasley 2005:162).

As men with non-normative sexualities who in some ways embody non-normative gender expression, we move in educational spaces that are largely heteropatriarchal and that marginalise gender and sexual minorities (cf. Harbeck 1992; Schneider & Dimito 2010). We thus adopt a position of 'queer' in these spaces, disrupting heterosexism by asserting our right to belong in academia and challenging the prescripts of 'compulsory hetero-sexuality' that still pervade educational settings in South Africa (Francis 2019).

Ragan Fox (2013) specifically uses queer theory to analyse forms of communication and interaction within academia. Fox (2013:59) explains:

> Much like whiteness is popularly and mistakenly constructed as the absence of race, love and sex in academic settings tend to be marked as significant and excessive only when matters of queer sexuality are evoked.

Fox notes that the term 'queer' also functions as a verb, and explains that '[q]ueer*ing* connotes a form of cultural spectatorship and production that locates and celebrates non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality' (Fox 2013:62, emphasis in original). In the context of our academic identities, we see our work and the work of many other queer academics in their research, teaching and service, as 'queering' academia and spaces of higher learning. This is because our perspectives, and even our presence in these often-exclusionary spaces, disrupt heterosexism and cisgenderism.

The second theoretical lens employed in this study is Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities (Connell 2013). Connell explains that masculinity is not singular and is not always or

only enacted in male bodies, but is socially constructed in ways that favour certain types of practices and punish or subordinate others. Hegemonic masculinity is described as 'the pattern of practice (i.e. things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:832). Hegemonic masculinities are contrasted with subordinate masculinities, namely those forms of masculinities that are viewed as undesirable or that do not maintain the gender order that favours men, and these subordinate masculinities often include gay or gender variant masculinities (Connell 2013). Hegemonic masculinities are seen as 'traditional' forms of masculinity that are generally defined in many cultures by 'machismo, domination of women, aggressiveness and predatory sexual behaviour' (Van der Walt 2019:20). The desire to enact idealised forms of masculinity often lead men to enact elements of so-called toxic masculinity, which include distancing oneself from those deemed to be unmasculine through acts such as bullying, homophobia, transphobia and violence (Van der Walt 2019).

As gay men, the authors have often been confronted by ideals of masculinity that might not align with our gender expression, and our gay identities were often constructed as 'unmasculine'. These dynamics of masculinity are important in how we have developed academic identities, and have impacted on how we have perceived instances of exclusion and marginalisation in educational spaces, particularly in our teaching.

In employing these two frameworks to reflect on our experiences, it is important to note the intersectionality of our identities. Intersectionality is a recognition of 'the mutually constitutive relations among social identities' (Shields 2008:301). While we both identify as gay men, we have different racial and economic backgrounds which greatly affected our experiences. We thus reflect on various aspects of our identities before presenting our autoethnographic narratives in this article.

4 Methodology: Autoethnography

We employed autoethnographic reflection in this study, where data were generated by means of conversation between the two authors as well as through personal narrative reflections by each author. We chose the method of autoethnography since it can translate personal experiences and reflection into research data, allowing for a broader understanding of what counts as

valuable knowledge and potentially providing insight into untold realities and perspectives from groups that are often marginalised in academia (Schmid 2019). Autoethnography 'centers the self as a site of inquiry' (Marx *et al.* 2017:2), and is often used in relation to critical identity theories such as those employed in this paper. Marx *et al.* (2017:2) explain that '[d]eeply personal accounts of race, gender, culture, language, and other aspects of identity can powerfully illustrate how people live with and through privilege and marginalization each day'. The autoethnographic approach might be particularly valuable in education research, as Marx, Pennington and Chang explain (2017:2),

> [e]ducation, in its many forms, is an institution that mirrors the society around it, including its patterns of privilege and marginalization. Personal stories of living through and being a part of these patterns highlight for readers the ways we are all affected by and affecting institutionalized power and privilege.

By using autoethnography and framing our lived realities as gay men as valuable knowledge within academia, we also challenge heteropatriarchal epistemologies that marginalise non-normative voices and perspectives, a 'queer' orientation to knowledge production (see Beasley 2005).

We recorded a semi-structured conversation using the video conferencing software Zoom where we were guided by a series of questions related to our academic identities and our educational experiences as gay men. The main research question was: How are the academic identities of the two participating gay male lecturers developed in relation to educational and professional experiences? In line with our definition of academic identities, we discussed our experiences as youth in South African schools and universities, and finding our academic voices in postgraduate and professional settings, while considering how these experiences impacted on our current teaching, research and service foci. This recorded conversation was supplemented by personal written reflections of the two researchers subsequent to the conversation, with data from these two methods interwoven in our thematic analysis.

Jeanette Schmid (2019) explains that autoethnography can be a powerful method for working towards social justice, particularly in the post-apartheid South African context. Schmid notes that 'autoethnography is a

potential gateway for those with subordinated, subjugated identities to have voice and to express unheard, silenced, perhaps taboo-ised stories' (Schmid 2019:265). We thus present our autoethnographic narratives in this paper to speak to South African contexts of queer[2] people working in academia, but we simultaneously recognise the limited nature of autoethnography to reach generalisable findings and conclusions. While our reflections might speak to broader local and even global realities of gender and sexuality in education, our narratives are personal and context-specific, and are limited by our own recollection and our individual understandings and experiences of gender and sexuality. Shields (2008: 301) explains that identity refers to 'social categories in which an individual claims membership as well as the personal meaning associated with those categories', thus our personal and affective understandings of being gay lecturers are important in defining our academic identities. Our hope in sharing this research is that it can contribute to understanding queer identities in academic and educational spaces, and '[affirm] minority narratives, [create] spaces of solidarity with others sharing this experience, and [introduce] overlooked texts into the academic arena' (Schmid 2019:69). We concur with Schmid's assertion that auto-ethnography can be an approach to challenge and disrupt power dynamics, particularly heterosexist ideologies in educational spaces that might exclude or marginalise queer people and experiences.

Thematic analysis was chosen as the method for data analysis in this study. Thematic analysis involves a process of 'systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set' (Braun & Clarke 2012:7). We performed the thematic analysis by firstly transcribing the recording of our conversation, and then each

[2] We recognise that our experiences are from the perspective of men who primarily identify as gay, and thus we cannot speak for the experiences of queer people of other identities. We also acknowledge that many aspects of our identities afford us levels of privilege, particularly our identities as cisgender men in a patriarchal, largely transphobic country. However, many of the experiences we discuss demonstrate a generalised exclusion and oppression of different gender and sexual minorities, and thus while we discuss our identities as gay men, we refer to queer people in academia as being affected by similar systemic exclusions that centre on heterosexism and cisgenderism.

participant wrote separate personal reflections about our experiences as gay men in educational settings. Each participant then read through the transcript and reflections and highlighted significant extracts related to aspects of our academic identities. These extracts were organised into four main themes which emerged from our analysis of the data, namely: early educational experiences; queer mentors and support structures; 'coming out' and silence in professional spaces; and teaching and research on gender and sexuality. We present our reflections in our own words as spoken in the video recording or written in our personal narrative reflections, with the speaker of each quotation identified by their initials.

The positionality of each researcher is important in how we uniquely developed our academic identities, especially in light of intersectionality (Shields 2008). Both authors are employed at schools of education, working primarily with preservice teachers. The first author, Andrews (identified as GA in the data presentation) is a gay, English-speaking, coloured[3] male who was raised in a working-class, under-resourced, semi-urban community. He does not identify as religious, but was raised in a Catholic household, with many in his childhood community identifying as strongly religious. He is currently a lecturer at an urban university in Johannesburg. The student body at this university is culturally and economically diverse, and the university is well resourced. The political climate at the university is generally progressive and accepting of diverse gender identities and sexualities, including having gender-inclusive bathrooms across campuses. GAs research mostly focuses on gender and sexuality in literature, film and education. The second author, Nichols (HN in the data presentation) is a gay white male from Bloemfontein in the Free State province. He was raised in an urban, middle-class and strongly religious community, and he identifies as Christian. He is currently a lecturer at a rural university campus in the Free State. The campus consists of almost exclusively black students from underprivileged backgrounds. HN is the only white lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the campus. Generally, HN's students are not affirming or accepting of same-sex sexualities or queer people generally.

[3] This racial designation usually refers to mixed-race, Malay or indigenous South African (Khoi or San) groups. While this is a contested category stemming from apartheid laws, it is still used widely in the country.

5 Autoethnographic Narratives of Developing Academic Identities as Gay Lecturers

5.1 Early Educational Experiences

A common element that emerged in our conversation was the lack of discussion about gender and sexuality in our early learning environments. Both authors had experienced heteronormative discussions of sex, sexuality and gender roles with teachers in school and with university lecturers, but critical discussions on these topics, or any mention of gender and sexuality diversity, were almost completely absent in our school and undergraduate university careers.

GA described a lecturer in his undergraduate psychology class using a research study from the 1980s on sexuality diversity to claim that very few people were gay or bisexual in South Africa, and GA experienced this as '*just another way to* […] *dismiss diverse sexuality*'. GA noted his feelings of exclusion were compounded by being a racial minority on his campus during his undergraduate studies, as well as being from a working-class background, as the student and staff populations were mostly white and middle-class. His sexuality was seen as another way that he was made to feel unwelcome in the university space.

HN noted that religion was a strong factor in limiting discussions of sexuality in his school environment, and he particularly remembered a very religious teacher who skirted issues of gender and sexuality diversity, as well as male-presenting peers laughing during a school discussion when the word 'gay' was mentioned, and HN explained of this moment, '*I felt that I was abnormal'.* HN added that the culture of silence around gender and sexuality extended to how he conducted himself when he ran for a position on the student representative council while at university: '*I decided to keep [the fact that I am gay] to myself. Once again, as with the rest of my life, I kept quiet'.* This reflection demonstrates the exclusionary effect of compulsory heterosexuality (Francis 2019) in educational settings. HN noted that students were divided into groups by (assumed) gender when discussing sex in school, and the moment of the male-presenting peers laughing at the mention of gay sexuality is an example of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2013) in action. HN, and any other learners who were gender or sexual minorities, were positioned as outsiders in this moment, as other students who presented as male demonstrated their allegiance with hegemonic

heterosexist masculinity through derisively laughing at the idea of sexuality diversity. Additionally, the very act of dividing students by gender based on their bodily presentation is dismissive of gender diversity and seeks to regulate bodily performativity of putative binary genders.

GA noted in his reflection how he was often cautious of appearing too '*feminine*' around male-identifying peers at school through his gestures, voice or clothing as this might lead to bullying or ostracization. In terms of queer theory, the regulation and policing of bodies reinscribes binary gendered codes within institutions, and educators are often complicit in subtly or overtly marginalising queer students (Francis 2017; 2019), including through commonplace practices like dividing learners by assumed gender.

Both authors expressed that directly discussing the topic of LGBTQ+ identities could be enabling and validating for young people, and that a culture of silence around gender and sexuality made it difficult to find self-acceptance or to feel included in educational spaces. The reflections demonstrate a lack of social cohesion for the authors in early educational experiences, and feelings of marginalisation, exclusion and negative affect surfaced in the discussion.

Our early educational experiences reflect broader realities in South Africa. Ngabaza and Shefer (2019:22) note sexuality education in South African schools is often inadequate and harmful to queer youth, and 'sexuality education has been deployed to regulate and discipline young sexualities ... reinforce and perpetuate gender binarisms and heteronormativity'. The commonalities in our experiences have influenced both authors' academic identities in wanting to speak openly about gender and sexuality diversity in our teaching, to be involved in working with queer rights and support groups in our communities, and to conduct research on sexuality in education.

5.2 Queer Mentors and Support Structures

A significant common aspect in our experiences as gay academics was the queer mentors who inspired us to move into the fields of gender and sexuality. These mentors served as support structures for us in our academic careers where, as sexual minorities, we would find comfort in working with other queer people at our universities, or be drawn to programs and academic subjects that allowed us to feel like part of a group of people with similar experiences. This aligns with Bilimoria and Stewart's (2009) finding

that queer academics often feel a sense of duty to provide support structures to their queer colleagues, which can contribute to social cohesion among queer academics. GA reflects on some of his mentors:

> **GA:** *It was very important […] that I had these queer role models or people in academia who were studying [gender and sexuality] and were out […] In my second year of university, one mentor offered a course on queer studies. It's like the first time you can even start to think of these things as being academic topics. So, he opened the idea that this is a legitimate academic discipline and that it's something that can be thought about seriously and can be brought into the educational space.*

In addition to these queer mentors, GA also reflected that joining the university's LGBTQ+ student society helped him to meet peers who could reflect and validate his struggles as a young queer person in a very heteropatriarchal academic space. This shared identity as 'outsiders' to the dominant culture made the student society an invaluable support structure in navigating an emerging academic identity.

HN shared a similar experience of support and validation in relation to one of his supervisors who identifies as non-binary, as well as queer colleagues who inspired him to conduct research on sexuality in education. In HN's case, being an academic was never a consideration during his undergraduate studies. However, he knew for a very long time that he wanted to help other young LGBTQ+ people to navigate the challenges they might experience due to their same-sex sexualities or gender variance. HN was offered a scholarship for his master's degree, but was initially unaware that it required a focus on gender and sexuality studies. However, HN realised that this would enable him to make a difference in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth. His desire to serve young people in the queer community was thus an important driver in his academic identity. HN reflects:

> **HN**: *If it [were] not for my mentor who provided me with my scholarship, I would never have done what I am doing now. And I am glad it happened like that. I still have frequent communication with him, and his continuous guidance allows me to become a better scholar in all senses.*

The role of mentors, peers and colleagues who are also queer and who studied gender and sexuality had a large impact on our academic identities. We could nurture our academic interests while feeling enabled in academic spaces by engaging with queer people who had achieved success in their careers despite working in heterosexist and gender-normative environments (cf. Ozturk & Rumens 2014). These queer support structures allowed for greater feelings of belonging in higher education settings, an important component of social cohesion (Chan *et al.* 2006); however, it is significant that we experienced limited feelings of belonging in the broader university setting, and that we were still confronted with a culture of silence around issues of gender and sexuality diversity. Our need for such support structures speaks to the pervasiveness of heterosexism and cisgenderism in higher education institutions. The act of queering academia (Fox 2013), which our mentors modelled for us, is primarily necessary because institutions are inhospitable spaces for some queer people.

4.2 'Coming Out' and Silence in Professional Spaces

We also discussed our self-image as gay men in university settinga, and how this impacts how we engage with colleagues and students. Both researchers recognise we often choose not to speak about our sexuality in educational spaces, due to feelings of self-protection. This is in line with the findings of Russ *et al.* (2002) and Batten *et al.* (2020) that being openly gay might be perceived by lecturers as an 'occupational hazard', and in Russ *et al.*'s study this perception was supported by the negative attitudes of students to gay lecturers (2002). The authors reflect on this reluctance to come out:

> **GA:** *I think it's an interesting thing that we face … the question of whether or not to come out in the educational space or to be open about [it]. Because straight people can talk about their relationships quite openly and they can say 'Oh, this is an experience I had with my opposite-sex partner' […] But for me, you feel almost like you're going to lose some kind of respect or like there's going to be some kind of intrusion into your personal life if you come out as gay.*
> **HN:** *… and [loss of] authority.*
>
> In our discussion, both authors wondered about the 'appropriate-

ness' of speaking about our same-sex sexualities in classrooms. As Govender (2017:38) notes, '[t]eachers' identities are, more likely than not, being read by students all the time', and especially in contexts of teaching on gender and sexuality diversity, students might read the focus on these topics as indicating the lecturer's gay identity (Govender 2017:35). However, both authors expressed a reluctance to openly state that they are gay, despite being 'read' as gay by students, as HN expressed that a student asked him about his sexuality at one point and he was unsure of how to respond to this student.

Later in the conversation, we also considered the ways that we performed gender practices that were deemed more masculine, and how we avoided effeminate behaviours that we imagined would lead to a loss of respect from students or colleagues. These fears of being openly gay or appearing gender nonconforming demonstrate the centrality of heterosexism in educational spaces, including the unspoken but tangible pressures to dress and behave in ways that conform to gender norms (Ozturk & Rumens 2014). This reinforces Connell's (2013) description of the assumed and socially-reinforced dominance of hegemonic masculinities in various institutions. It also speaks to the performative nature of gender as discussed in queer theory (Butler 1999), where '[g]ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being'. We were often consciously aware of this pressure to 'perform' a socially-accepted form of masculinity or to 'act' straight. We reflected on these dynamics of gender performativity as follows:

> **GA:** *The idea that gay men want to be women is a very common idea in South African cultures […] and that gay men are effeminate. And maybe there is the desire in us as lecturers […] to push back against that and maybe to butch it up a bit or try not to appear too effeminate. So I think I do that sometimes […] Maybe I'll put on a bit of a deeper voice.*
> **HN:** *I think we do.* […] *I think we see the feminine ones as the vulnerable ones.*

These reflections demonstrate how the authors still subscribe to particular forms of hegemonic masculinities as afforded more respect and higher status

(Connell 2013), and we try to perform these masculinities in professional settings. While this might be a form of self-protection as we fear subtle or overt homophobia if we challenge gender norms (Bilimoria & Stewart 2009), or what HN refers to as being '*vulnerable*', the authors both recognised that this was also a way of remaining closeted. Remaining closeted might be beneficial to certain types of social cohesion in the broader university community, particularly in providing a greater sense of safety and security for queer academics, but this comes at the cost of potentially stifling authentic ways of being. As Govender (2017) notes, the choice of whether or not to come out in educational settings is a tension that is part of the academic identities of many queer educators, but 'any decision to come out in the classroom […] needs to be considerate of context, risk and circumstance' (Bilimoria & Stewart 2017:39).

Our academic identities are thus impacted by these conscious and unconscious notions of gender performativity in professional settings, and by concerns over appropriateness and risk in openly acknowledging our identities. In addition, even though both authors subscribe to queer theories that challenge the binary and essentialist model of gender (Butler 1999) and work to interrupt heterosexism and cisgenderism (Meyer 2007), it is noteworthy that our academic identities seem to rely on binary frameworks that reinscribe stereotypes of traditional masculinity onto our bodies and performativities.

4.3 Teaching and Research on Gender and Sexuality

The final significant theme that emerged in our conversation was how we approached issues of gender and sexuality in our teaching and research, and how these topics were central to our academic identities. Both authors saw our teaching as taking on a social justice function, as GA expresses:

> **GA:** *There's always this different energy when you're talking about sexuality in the class […] Sometimes you feel like you need to be an advocate.*

We saw our role in educational spaces as a form of 'queering', where we could enact a disruption of norms and traditional roles around gender and sexuality in line with queer theory (Fox 2013; Beasley 2005). In this way,

we could create spaces for students to become more aware of the socially constructed nature of identities, give a voice to gender and sexual minorities, and work towards greater recognition of these marginalised groups in educational spaces. Both authors expressed that their own early experiences of silence around gender and sexuality in educational settings impacted their commitment to openly discuss these topics in their classrooms. Batten *et al.*'s (2020:201) study of undergraduate students found that 'disrupting heteronormativity is highly beneficial towards […] decreasing prejudice and promoting social equality.' This finding supports the authors' dedication to bring these topics into the classroom in meaningful ways to challenge prejudices. GA expands on this in the following extract from the autoethnographic conversation:

> **GA***: [Gender and sexuality] is always just something far off; it's something out 'there'. But when you actually say, 'This is what's happening in our schools', and you give them the examples and you show them the stats – those things make it more real. That culture of silence and of ignoring the topic is something that we're actively trying to work against. So in the work that we're doing now we're trying to speak it. There is that kind of pushing back against the silence and against the ignorance* […] *that we're actively trying to do all the time.*

In his teaching, GA uses queer theory to challenge the assumptions of students and to demonstrate that even those who are cisgender and heterosexual are 'performing' their gender identities through regimented behaviours. He introduces exercises of critical self-reflection, as this approach can foster an understanding of gender and sexuality as social constructs (Govender 2018).

HN similarly uses critical self-reflection in his teaching approach. He currently teaches three modules that include topics of gender and sexuality. One of these modules is a first-year module exploring social justice. It was enlightening for HN to see the growth in students' perceptions in the module:

> **HN**: *I asked them to write me an essay in the beginning of the year on how they feel about LGBTIQ people. At first, I was shocked at*

> *how negative and even aggressive these students were towards these issues. At the end of the year, I asked them to write the same essay. I was so surprised when reading the essays. There were such changes in how these same students are feeling about people who are not heterosexual. I strongly believe it is because there was continuous dialogue on these issues and the students had to face their own stereotypical views, and even perhaps ignorance.*

While both authors generally experienced a strong sense of freedom in their teaching approach, their research activities seemed to be more conflicted. The authors expressed that gender and sexuality researchers had limited opportunities for professional recognition in South African universities, especially in the field of education in which both authors work. GA explains:

> **GA***: For the type of research that we do, [managers and administrators] don't really see it as a valuable part of academic institutions. When you're in this niche, you still feel like [you are] not fully fitting into what's wanted from that field. You're studying something that's not really valuable in education. Are we [sexual minorities and researchers on gender and sexuality] really thought of in how things are taught at universities, or in how departments are structured, or in hiring principles, etcetera?*

The authors reflected on how we try to adapt our research interests to be more relevant to the broader subjects in education that we work in, especially in thinking about our career advancement. GA reflected specifically on the idea that recognising sexuality diversity and ensuring equity for sexual minorities, both for staff and for students, was still not a priority at most South African institutions of higher learning. This might compound feelings of exclusion for queer academics, and negatively impact on social cohesion at institutions of higher learning.

5 Discussion and Recommendations

The thematic analysis presented above shows that our academic identities were profoundly affected by our identities as gay men, and in this article we

presented many of the often unspoken experiences that shape the lives of gay and queer academics. For GA, working at an urban university with a progressive climate meant that he could more easily discuss these topics and feel more supported by colleagues. For HN, being the only white lecturer at his rural campus meant that he faced an additional outsider status, and the conservative climate meant that negative attitudes to LGBTQ+ people were prevalent. Despite these differences, both authors found that their students benefited from lessons on gender and sexuality and could critically reflect on their own positions to begin to consider gender and sexuality as social constructs (Connell 2013). Thus, an important finding of our analysis is that education at all levels should directly, openly and sensitively address topics of gender and sexuality diversity in order to work towards eliminating the culture of silence that positions queer people as marginalised outsiders in educational settings.

Teacher training specifically should be a point of intervention, as the autoethnographic reflections above demonstrate that students' attitudes can and do change when they are taught critical queer or gender theories and topics that present the realities of gender and sexuality diversity (Batten *et al.* 2020). Critical reflection exercises (Govender 2018) were found to be a useful method to engage these ideas in classrooms. Student teachers can then begin to question how their own teaching approaches might be underpinned by heterosexism and cisgenderism, and they can transform approaches in schools that stigmatise or ostracise queer learners. This could lead to greater feelings of belonging and social cohesion for diverse people in educational settings, and mitigate the types of shame, fear or exclusion that we felt and discussed in this paper, and that many queer young people still experience today (cf. Bhana 2014; Francis 2019).

Using queer theory and the theory of hegemonic masculinities allowed us to analyse our positions as gay lecturers in relation to our performances of masculinity and the influence of heterosexism on our academic identities. We could also understand our roles in 'queering' educational spaces (Andrews 2020), challenging rigid norms, traditions and values in our environments through the lens of queer theory. In addition, we recognised the intersectional nature of our experiences; despite the many similarities we highlight in our reflections, we recognise that our racial and economic differences were significant in how we developed our identities. This includes GA's experience of multiple forms of exclusion due to being coloured,

disadvantaged economically and gay while studying at university. Our experiences are not necessarily generalisable, but the many commona-lities point to larger systemic forms of exclusion that are important to highlight in educational settings, and we hope that these autoethnographic narratives can add to understandings of academic identities for gender and sexual minorities. A recommendation for future research is to explore the voices of more queer people in higher education in South Africa, especially from diverse intersectional identities, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the systemic challenges faced by queer people in academia. This research could then inform policy and institutional changes to ensure that higher education institutions foster a sense of social cohesion for minority groups, and that queer voices are taken seriously in educational reform.

Batten *et al.* (2020:198) note that the stifling of queer academic voices 'has had a negative effect not only on the lives of sexual minority educators, but also on the educational experiences of students who are denied exposure to a multiplicity of sexual identities'. This loss of valuable diverse perspectives is the cost of continued heterosexism and cisgenderism in institutions of higher learning, a state of affairs that undermines the promises of South Africa's progressive legislation for queer rights. In light of our discussion of the importance of queer mentors and support structures in how we developed our academic identities, it is also important to recognise that social cohesion for marginalised groups should not be confined to only other members of those groups within institutions. Heterosexist structures and cisnormativity continue to exclude queer people from feelings of 'trust, a sense of belonging and the [reciprocal] willingness to participate and help' (Chan *et al.* 2006:290) within institutions, which Chan *et al.* propose as a model for social cohesion. To build on previous initiatives and legislation to address these exclusionary environments, we contend that institutions of higher learning in South Africa should meaningfully prioritise gender and sexuality diversity in hiring practices, curricula, processes of transformation and staff development initiatives, and that the voices of people belonging to these groups should be central to these transformative processes.

6 Conclusion

This article explored the question: how are the academic identities of the two participating gay male lecturers developed in relation to educational and

professional experiences? We conclude that every aspect of our academic identities was shaped by our sexual identities and gender expression, as we continue to confront forms of heterosexism and elements of gender policing in our academic careers. The article discussed how our experiences as learners and students were characterised by silence and marginalisation around issues of gender and sexuality diversity, and these educational spaces reproduced heterosexist ideologies that left us feeling unable to speak or ask questions about our identities. We faced conflicts around performing idealised hegemonic masculinity that seemed to demand compulsory heterosexuality in order for us to be accepted into educational communities. The culture of silence around sexuality diversity was also apparent in our teaching roles as academics, where we wondered about the appropriateness of speaking openly about our identities, and what effect this might have on the levels of respect we would receive from students and, by extension, on our career prospects where student evaluations are an important factor.

Through our narratives, we highlight that teaching and research on gender and sexuality were important to us due to our experiences of marginalisation as gay youth in educational settings. Both authors shared a determination to work towards social justice for queer people in South Africa in our academic roles, and both are involved in community and research projects that focus on queer rights and psychosocial wellbeing. However, we at times felt pressure to produce research that we understood to be more advantageous to career progression, and felt that a focus on gender and sexuality research in education was not always valued by higher education institutions in South Africa.

These dynamics demonstrate that we still experience multiple forms of marginalisation in our academic roles, and like many other queer academics globally (Schneider & Dimito 2010), our sexual identities are significant in shaping our academic identities and defining our experiences of social cohesion. The autoethnographic reflections presented in this article thus could contribute to a better understanding of academic identities and social cohesion for queer people in South African educational spaces, and the recommendations for research, educational reform and institutional change we offer above could lead to greater feelings of belonging for these often-vulnerable groups.

References

Andrews, G. 2020. Teaching Gender and Sexuality in the Wake of the Must Fall Movements: Mutual Disruption through the Lens of Critical Pedagogy. *Education as Change* 24,1: 1 – 20. https://dx.doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/7118

Batten, J., M. Ripley, E. Anderson, J. Batey & A. White 2018. Still an Occupational Hazard? The Relationship between Homophobia, Heteronormativity, Student Learning and Performance, and an Openly Gay University Lecturer. *Teaching in Higher Education: Critical Perspectives* 25,2: 189 – 204. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2018.1553031

Beasley, C. 2005. *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers*. New York: SAGE.

Bhana, D. 2014. 'Managing' the Rights of Gays and Lesbians: Reflections from Some South African Secondary Schools. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 9,1: 67 – 80. https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197913497663

Bilimoria, D. & A.J. Stewart 2009. 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell': The Academic Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Faculty in Science and Engineering. *NWSA Journal* 21,2: 85 – 103. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20628175

Braun, V. & V. Clarke 2012. Thematic Analysis. In Cooper, H., P.M. Camic, D.L. Long, A.T. Panter, D. Rindskopf & K.J. Sher (eds): *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology* 2: 57 – 71. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004 PMid:22108560

Butler, J. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Chan, J., H. To & E. Chan 2006. Reconsidering Social Cohesion: Developing a Definition and Analytical Framework for Empirical Research. *Social Indicators Research* 75,2: 273 – 302. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-005-2118-1

Chaskalson, J., D. Bhana, P. Brouard, R. Hodes, S. Ngabaza, P. Silbert & N. Zungu 2019. OP-ED: Knowledge Is Power: The Case for Comprehensive Sexualities Education in South Africa. *Daily Maverick*. https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-11-26-knowledge-is-power-the-case-for-comprehensive-sexualities-education-in-south-africa/

Connell, R. 2013. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Connell, R.W. & J.W. Messerschmidt. 2005. Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender and Society* 19,6: 829 – 59. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27640853 https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639

Francis, D. 2019. 'Keeping it Straight': What do South African Queer Youth Say they Need from Sexuality Education*? Journal of Youth Studies* 22,6: 772 – 790. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1539223

Francis, D.A. 2017. Homophobia and Sexuality Diversity in South African Schools: A Review. *Journal of LGBT Youth* 14,4: 359 – 79. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2017.1326868

Fox, R. 2013. 'Homo'-work: Queering Academic Communication and Communicating Queer in Academia. *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33,1: 58 – 76. https://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2012.744462

Gevisser, M. & E. Cameron 1995. *Defiant Desire*. London: Routledge.

Govender, N.N. 2017. The Pedagogy of 'Coming out': Teacher Identity in a Critical Literacy Course. *South African Review of Sociology* 48,1: 19 – 41. https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2016.1222912

Govender, N.N. 2018. Deconstructing Heteronormativity and Hegemonic Gender Orders through Critical Literacy and Materials Design: A Case in a South African School of Education. In Walton, E. & R. Osman (eds): *Teacher Education for Diversity*. London: Routledge. https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/63732/

Hames, M. 2007. Sexual Identity and Transformation at a South African University. *Social Dynamics* 33,1: 52 – 77. https://doi.org/10.1080/02533950708628743

Harbeck, K.M. 1992. *Coming Out of the Classroom Closet: Gay and Lesbian Students, Teachers, and Curricula*. London: Psychology Press.

Irwin, J. 2002. Discrimination Against Gay Men, Lesbians, and Transgender People Working in Education. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 14,2: 65 – 77. https://doi.org/10.1300/J041v14n02_06

Jagessar, V. & T. Msibi 2015. 'It's Not That Bad': Homophobia in the Residences of a University in KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.

Agenda 29,1: 63 – 73.
https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2015.1022984

Judge, M. & J.A. Nel 2008. Exploring Homophobic Victimisation in Gauteng, South Africa: Issues, Impacts and Responses. *Acta Criminologica: Southern African Journal of Criminology* 21,3: 19 – 36.
https://journals.co.za/doi/10.10520/EJC28993

Lennon, E. & B.J. Mistler 2014. Cisgenderism. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1,1 – 2: 63 – 64.
https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399623

Marx, S., J.L. Pennington & H. Chang 2017. Critical Autoethnography in Pursuit of Educational Equity: Introduction to the IJME Special Issue. *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 19,1: 1 – 6.
https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v19i1.1393

McCune, V. 2019. Academic Identities in Contemporary Higher Education: Sustaining Identities that Value Teaching. *Teaching in Higher Education* 26,1: 20 – 35.
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/10.1080/13562517.2019.1632826
https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1632826

Meyer, E.J. 2007. 'But I'm Not Gay': What Straight Teachers Need to Know about Queer Theory. In Rodriguez, N. & W.F. Pinar (eds): *Queering Straight Teachers: Discourse and Identity in Education*. New York: Peter Lang.

Ngabaza, S. & T. Shefer 2019. Sexuality Education in South African Schools: Deconstructing the Dominant Response to Young People's Sexualities in Contemporary Schooling Contexts. *Sex Education* 19,4: 422 – 35.
https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2019.1602033

Ozturk, M.B. & N. Rumens 2014. Gay Male Academics in UK Business and Management Schools: Negotiating Heteronormativities in Everyday Work Life. *British Journal of Management* 25,3: 503 – 17.
https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12061

Republic of South Africa [RSA] 1996. Chapter 2: Bill of Rights. *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.* Available at:
https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/chapter-2-bill-rights

Republic of South Africa [RSA] 2000. *Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (No. 4 of 2000).* Available at:
https://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/2000-004.pdf

Republic of South Africa [RSA] 1996. *South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996)*. Available at: https://www.polity.org.za/article/south-african-schools-act-no-84-of-1996-1996-01-01

Richardson, E.M. & B.E. Archer 2008. Two Teachers: Male, Black, Queer. Negotiating Identities in South Africa. In Dunne, M. (ed.): *Gender, Sexuality and Development*. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789087904722_009

Ripley, M., E. Anderson, M. McCormack & B. Rockett 2012. Heteronormativity in the University Classroom: Novelty Attachment and Content Substitution among Gay-Friendly Students. *Sociology of Education* 85,2: 121 – 30. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040711427315

Russ, T., C. Simonds & S. Hunt 2002. Coming Out in the Classroom ... An Occupational Hazard? The Influence of Sexual Orientation on Teacher Credibility and Perceived Student Learning. *Communication Education* 51,3: 311 – 24. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520216516

Schmid, J. 2019. Autoethnography: Locating the Self as Standpoint in Post-Apartheid South Africa. In Laher, S., A. Flynn & S. Kramer (eds): *Transforming Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Case Studies from South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.18772/22019032750.22

Schneider, M.S. & A. Dimito 2010. Factors Influencing the Career and Academic Choices of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People. *Journal of Homosexuality* 57,10: 1355 – 1369. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2010.517080 PMid:21058150

Shefer, T., A. Strebel, S. Ngabaza & L. Clowes 2018. Student Accounts of Space and Safety at a South African University: Implications for Social Identities and Diversity. *South African Journal of Psychology* 48,1: 61 – 72. https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246317701887

Shields, S.A. 2008. Gender: An Intersectionality Perspective. *Sex Roles* 59: 301 – 311. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-008-9501-8

Swanepoel, E.H. 2020. A Reflective Cybernetic Study on the Experiences of a Gay Male Teacher in the Free State Province. *Journal of Homosexuality* 67,9: 1197 – 1212. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1582222 PMid:30870135

Van der Walt, P.M. 2019. *Teaching Gender Concepts to Boys in High School: Male Teachers' Perspectives.* Master's Thesis. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch of University. https://scholar.sun.ac.za:443/handle/10019.1/107262

Grant Andrews
Lecturer
Division of Languages, Literacies and Literatures
Wits School of Education
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg
grant.andrews@wits.ac.za

Henry Nichols
Lecturer
Faculty of Education
University of the Free State
Bloemfontein
nicholshj@ufs.ac.za