


Shifting professional and personal identities of the cisgender scholar doing LGBT research

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Background: Scholars researching the issues of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other sexual and gender minorities (LGBT) are being denounced as performers of 'dirty' work and promoters of 'immorality'. Such scholars face obstacles in the workplace, such as difficulties in obtaining ethical approval, scarcity of funding, bullying, denial of promotion and unacknowledged scholarship, among other struggles.

Objectives: This article intends to highlight the unintended, unanticipated and often overlooked impact that certain LGBT research interests have on the professional and personal identities of the scholar.

Method: This exploratory qualitative study uses a reflexive dialogical single case study approach to understand how Katlego (a pseudonym), a cisgender heterosexual researcher, is affected by his interest in LGBT studies. Continuous supervision notes that enable thoughtful reflexive practice in qualitative research shaped the basis of this article.

Results: This article shows how Katlego's LGBT research interest resulted in him being policed, his professional intentions questioned, his bodily expression scrutinised and personal conflict being blamed on his allegedly 'disgraceful' research interest. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the conflation of Katlego's interest in LGBT research with pervasive negative assumptions of non-heteronormative sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions has resulted in a shift in his professional and personal identities.

Conclusion: This article calls for awareness of the issues faced by all researchers interested in LGBT research and support strategies for navigating the professional identity, workplace environment and social ecologies within a frowned-upon research field. Failure to do so could compromise their career trajectory, well-being and safety in compulsory heterosexual environments.

Contribution: This article illustrated how gender regimes position the researcher as an active creator of knowledge; therefore, the research process experiences can neither be made invisible nor neutralised. Researchers must overtly consider and prepare for situational and unanticipated ethical issues.

Keywords: cisgender; gender regimes; gender stereotypes; LGBT; workplace discrimination.

Introduction

Drawing on the concepts of gender regimes, this article explores the professional and personal experiences of a cisgender heterosexual (cis-het) scholar with a research interest in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) studies. Outsider researchers undertaking studies with disenfranchised and vulnerable communities are predominantly concerned about aspects of access, ethical conduct, validity and trustworthiness within the writing of the research report (Mathijssen et al., 2023). There is silence, however, about the effects that research of this nature may have on the work environment of the researcher. Levine et al. (2004) define vulnerable and disenfranchised populations as categories of people who are increasingly susceptible to discrimination, harm and/or injuries in some way or who are emotionally violated or offended. South Africa, despite its most progressive constitution that affirms and protects those of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, through its sociopolitical ecologies, paradoxically produces uncontested discrimination, dehumanisation and violence, which leads to fatalities (Sutherland et al., 2016).

Heterosexuality, the pervasive benchmark by which everyone is measured, remains systemically produced and valorised (Matebeni et al., 2018). I firstly wish to draw attention to a narrative that heterosexuality is under attack. This view that particularly emanates from traditional and

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religious fronts (Borras Guevara et al., 2023; Jodamus et al., 2022) requires critical examination and contestation. The belief that heterosexuality is under attack often stems from a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of efforts to promote equality and inclusivity for marginalised communities, such as the LGBT community (Francis, 2021b). Advocacy for LGBT rights is not an attack on heterosexuality but rather a push for recognising and affirming the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity (De Wet, 2017). It is about challenging discrimination and creating a society where everyone can live authentically and without fear. Non-heterosexual lifestyles in South Africa continued to be inscribed in common discourse as a deviation of traditional social norms, evil, abhorrent and un-African (Human Dignity Trust, 2020; Van Heerden, 2017). Individuals who are seen to espouse LGBT safety and social inclusion are subjected to personal and professional censorship and vilified similar to those for whom they advocate (Roberts, 2014). I am also foregrounding that in the realm of sexuality and gender studies, the majority of research studies tend to primarily focus on achieving their research objectives, often overlooking the critical examination of the research processes and experiences themselves. As a consequence, there is a scarcity of updated literature sources that delve into the nuanced aspects of conducting research in this field as is the case in this article. This gap in the literature further prompted the motivation for conducting this study. By reflecting on the actual research processes and experiences, I aim to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by shedding light on the challenges, insights and nuances encountered during the research journey. Through this exploration, I seek to offer a valuable resource for researchers and scholars interested in gender and sexuality, providing them with an updated understanding of the research landscape and potentially inspiring further investigations in this field.

Scholars conducting LGBT research are being denounced as performing 'dirty work' and as promoters of immorality (Irvine, 2014). Such scholars face obstacles in the workplace, including difficulties in being granted ethical approval, a scarcity of funding, bullying, denial of promotion and unacknowledged scholarship (Irvine, 2014, 2015).

The rigorous control of ethical approval for scholars in LGBT research is often used as a gatekeeping tool to discourage scholarship with LGBT populations (Irvine, 2014). Ethical clearance applications for LGBT research have been subjected to intense censorship under the guise of heightened concerns for the vulnerable's safety, respect and support needs (Irvine, 2014; McCormack, 2013; Meezan & Martin, 2009). Considering the focus of this study, this dilemma seems to be common among scholars with interest in LGBT research in many parts of the world, for example, Australia (Dowsett, 2014), China (Cui, 2022), New Zealand (Keene, 2021), South Africa (Msibi, 2014) and the United Kingdom (McCormack, 2013). While these concerns are valid to an extent, little is known about the safety and well-being of the scholars in LGBT studies and their preparedness for often

dangerous and uncomfortable fieldwork. Shaw et al. (2020, p. 278) explain that 'the everyday, situational and unanticipated ethical issues that occur when doing research with others' (such as LGBT populations) have long-term implications on their personal and professional paths if not well planned. They refer to these issues as 'ethics in practice'. Scholars in LGBT studies are continuously exposed to intense, traumatic narratives of violence and discrimination. Others must deal with aggressive relatives of participants of queer identities (LaSala, 2003) and social agents such as religious bodies (Asante, 2020) or traditional leaders (Ntlama, 2014) who do not support sexual and gender diversity. In-depth interviews and disclosure in LGBT research have led to unintended consequences of trust and emotional closeness (Råheim et al., 2016). Scholars conducting LGBT studies have also faced instances of participants who misinterpret their role as that of a therapist or as a member of the population and potential romantic partner (Roberts, 2014).

For these reasons, this article draws attention to the unintended, unanticipated and often overlooked impact that certain subjugated research foci such as LGBT studies have on the professional and personal identities of the scholar. Against this background, an account is given of a single case study of the experiences of a cis-het scholar who has assumed an LGBT research interest.

Theoretical framework

This discussion draws on gender regimes and gender performativity in analysing the personal and professional lives of cis-het scholars researching LGBT studies. Academic scholars have increasingly raised questions regarding sex and gender registration. They aim to expand the definitions of male and female or eliminate the fixed binary construction of gender and sexual orientation. Gender regimes are used as a key theoretical concept to interrogate the structures, processes and beliefs in which customary gender roles and categories are produced and reproduced (Connell, 1987). Gender regimes can be defined as the 'structural inventory' (Connell, 1987, p. 99) of 'gender relations in a given institution' (Connell, 1987, p. 120). Connell (2002) cites four main components to social constructions within gender regimes:

- symbols of representation, power relations, the gendered division of labour and the modes of interindividual interaction.

Acker (2006) describes four similar points of gendered processes, referring to the fourth as identity and the making of the self as an adequate and gendered, organisational performer.

The fourth component aligns with Butler's (1997) notion of gender performativity. Butler (1997) argues that performativity can be explained as a repetition of norms that subsequently constitute the subject. As these norms appear self-evident, necessary and naturalised, they become regulatory (Butler, 1990). Sex and gender segregation are pervasive forces that serve a primary formal and informal

organising principle that marginalises and oppresses those who do not fit these fixed boxes. In addition, Butler (1990, 1997) argues that heterosexuality is given the normative, compulsory and dominant status of sexuality in society, often referred to as heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers to the assumption that heterosexuality is the only legitimate and normative form of sexual orientation (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Those who transgress 'normal' heterosexuality are punished in the Foucauldian sense (see Foucault, 1978). These binary sex and gender constructs become important in employment and labour, as specific occupations are built on deep-seated social ideas about gender and sex (Mennesson, 2012).

In the South African context, the theory of gender regimes provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex dynamics surrounding gender and sexuality. This theory recognises that while legal advancements have been made to affirm and protect the lives of LGBT individuals in South Africa, there still exist repressive and pervasive gender constructions that socially subject them to discrimination and marginalisation (Francis, 2021b). One aspect of gender regimes in South Africa is the persistence of heteronormativity. Under colonial and apartheid rule, patriarchal structures were reinforced and maintained, as power was concentrated in the hands of white males to uphold white, heteronormative family structures (Carolyn et al., 2020). The rigid gender roles and expectations that emerged from these systems served to maintain social control and reinforce racial hierarchies. Women, particularly black women, were systematically marginalised and subjected to various forms of oppression, including economic exploitation and sexual violence (Klausen, 2022). In the context of gender and sexuality, colonial and apartheid era laws and policies enforced heteronormativity and criminalised non-normative sexual behaviours (Mbasalaki, 2020). Homosexuality was stigmatised, and same-sex relationships were criminalised, further marginalising and oppressing individuals whose sexual orientations and gender identities did not conform to societal norms (Hove & Ndlela, 2019). The enduring impact of colonialism and apartheid on South African society is evident in the persistence of societal attitudes and power structures that privilege whiteness, heterosexuality and traditional gender roles (Francis, 2021a). This normative framework perpetuates the social marginalisation of LGBT individuals, often relegating them to the margins of society and denying them full acceptance and inclusion. Despite legal protections, LGBT individuals can still face stigmatisation, prejudice and exclusion from various social, familial and religious contexts (Human Dignity Trust, 2020).

Historical legacies of apartheid and colonialism have influenced societal attitudes and power structures, which can intersect with gender and sexuality to produce unique challenges (Francis, 2021b). For instance, black lesbian women in townships and rural areas are particularly vulnerable to violence and corrective rape, as they face discrimination on the basis of their gender, sexuality and race (Gaitho, 2022).

The theory of gender regimes helps us understand the impact of colonialism and apartheid on South African society, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. The historical legacies of these oppressive systems have influenced societal attitudes and power structures, perpetuating discrimination and marginalisation. By recognising and addressing these challenges, we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable society that respects and celebrates diverse gender identities and expressions.

Methodology

Research design

This exploratory qualitative study used a reflexive (Brookfield, 2017) dialogical (Frank, 2005) single case study approach (Gaya & Smith, 2016) to gain an understanding of the ways in which a cis-het researcher has been affected by his interest in LGBT studies. This is congruent with the belief that the self cannot be separated from the research (Cuenca, 2010). Reflexivity on research processes creates opportunities to develop, adapt and refine the related processes (Calderhead et al., 2012). As a supervisor for postgraduate studies, I prioritise creating a nurturing and inclusive environment for all my students. While reviewing the supervision notes for Katlego, who identifies as heterosexual, I came across instances where his sexual orientation had been inaccurately assumed to be different from his self-identified heterosexual status. Recognising the significance of this issue, I embarked on a thorough examination of the supervision notes and engaged in additional conversations with him to gain a deeper understanding of his experiences. Drawing upon this comprehensive understanding, I have utilised the supervision notes as a valuable resource to write a reflective article on the misclassification of Katlego's sexual orientation.

Participant

This case study focuses on the experiences of a single participant, who is assigned the pseudonym 'Katlego' for anonymity. To provide context for the discussion, it is important to reflect on the background of the participant. Katlego identifies as a heterosexual African man who embraces hegemonic masculine patriarchal and indelible evangelical religious values. He initially qualified as a teacher and, upon pursuing postgraduate studies, asked the author to supervise his Master's in Inclusive Education research. I was upfront that my research focuses solely on school inclusion for LGBT youths. Katlego insisted that he wished to explore the field of LGBT school youths, as he claimed this was a concern at the school where he taught. He, therefore, expressed an interest in learning more, even though this contradicted his personal and cultural beliefs. By virtue of his identity, Katlego became, by default, an outsider researcher in LGBT studies. As a supervisor, the author had no insights on how to prepare him for ethics in practice (Shaw et al., 2020). I was conscious only of my privilege as a gay-identifying scholar with insights into the everyday experiences of the LGBT population.

Data collection and analysis

During our regular supervision sessions, I probed about the research project and Katlego's well-being as the researcher. The continuous supervision notes that I took during these sessions formed the basis of this article. Denzin and Lincoln (2017) state that notes of this kind enable thoughtful reflexive practice in qualitative research. A thematic analysis of the data was carried out and member-check of the results with the participant was conducted to validate that my interpretations of our discussions were accurate and valid. Verbatim supervision notes from Katlego have been used extensively in this article to guard against what Borning and Muller (2012, p. 1129) describe as a 'hidden agenda'. To conduct the thematic analysis, I followed a rigorous and systematic process. Firstly, I familiarised myself with the research reflections by repeatedly reading and immersing myself in the supervision notes collected of the years (Erickson, 2004). This process allowed me to gain a holistic understanding of the material and identify initial impressions and thoughts. Secondly, I generated initial codes by systematically labelling and categorising meaningful units of data. These codes were then grouped into potential themes based on their relevance and similarity. Through an iterative process of reviewing and refining these potential themes, I identified overarching themes that captured the essence of the reflections and represented key aspects of Katlego's experiences and perspectives. I employed a reflexive approach throughout the analysis, constantly reflecting on my own biases, assumptions and preconceptions. This reflexivity helped to ensure that the identified themes were grounded in the data and not influenced by my own interpretations. Trustworthiness was further established by sharing different iterations of the manuscript with Katlego.

Ethical consideration

When writing a reflective article based on the supervision process, it is essential to address the ethical dimensions involved. In this case, Katlego had already obtained ethical approval for their research project from the appropriate ethics committee. The ethical bases for this reflexive article are Katlego's ethics approvals for his Master's in Education (2018-026) and PhD (1-2022-038) studies, as granted by the University of Johannesburg. This approval signifies that the project has undergone rigorous scrutiny, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines and protecting the rights and well-being of participants. Katlego granted his consent for me to use the reflexive supervision notes to compile this article. Given that this article draws upon Katlego's experiences and reflections within the context of the approved research project, it does not require separate ethical approval. The focus lies on Katlego's personal journey, growth and insights, without directly involving human participants beyond what was covered by the original ethical approval. All quotes used in this article are made by Katlego.

Findings and discussion

Considering the volume of supervision notes, I only draw on two themes for this article: (1) workplace sexual orientation censorship and (2) tensions and consequences.

Workplace sexual orientation censorship, stigma and status

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act no. 7 of 1996 and its amendments), labour-relations legislative frameworks and educational policies protect, affirm and promote the care and support for diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The Employment Equity Act (EEA) was enacted to give effect to Section 9 of the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Despite all this, Katlego's workplace continues to stigmatise and condemn LGBT identities as being immoral. Katlego had to disclose his study to his colleagues when he requested their participation in his research. This brought a sudden spotlight to his entire life. Colleagues insisted on knowing what interest he had with 'gays and lesbians', as he is a 'straight' man. His focus on LGBT research was perceived as him being a member of this out-group.

Reflections on staff reaction to research focus:

'I introduced my topic at work to my colleagues with the aim to invite them to form part of the participants. They wanted to know what motivates me to do this study. The more I explained about this research gap in inclusive education, the more they poked about my personal life. They insisted to know if there was a personal reason for this topic. It became clearer that they questioned my sexuality. I suddenly felt unease and doubted that I made the right choice to focus my research on lesbian and gay learners.'

Reflections from a meeting with the school based support group:

'As I gained more knowledge about my topic, I started to advocate for the well-being of gay and lesbian learners at my workplace. One of my colleagues remarked that if I was not married, she would have been convinced that I am gay.'

Reflections on general comment made by a staff member:

'The administrator at my school one day said the only thing that makes her think differently is that I am married or else she would be sure that I am gay. I asked her why and she said that I am a too caring person. The combination of my research about gay and lesbian learners and my care for them could have convinced my colleague that I must be gay.'

While sexual orientation is a concealable facet of one's identity and is not apparent from a person's appearance (Prewitt-Freilino & Bosson, 2008), colleagues began scrutinising Katlego's behaviour and expressions to 'confirm' unambiguously that he is gay. Katlego's marital status remains an obstacle for others to classify him as gay. This is because stereotypically, a man who is married to a woman conveys his unquestionable heterosexuality, and his passage of social milestones into manhood (Maatouk & Jaspal, 2022)

are considered normative cues of his masculinity. This highlights the overarching influence of conformity to social expectations, be it in the private sphere (e.g. married life) or the public space (e.g. the professional environment). Katlego's other non-normative masculine cues, such as his caring demeanour, passion to know more about LGBT lives and the support for this vulnerable group, become stereotypical traits upon which to make inferences about his perceived non-heterosexual identity. He, therefore, started to moderate his behaviour in certain environments. The associated social stigma towards LGBT identities results in fear and loss of dignity because discrimination and violence towards LGBT individuals remain prevalent across South African ecologies (Human Dignity Trust, 2020; Msibi, 2019), including the workplace (Morrison, 2022).

Katlego's voluntary association with a gay man resulted in an increased censorship of his sexual orientation. From a gender-stereotypical view, the unnatural interaction between the heterosexual and homosexual binaries at Katlego's workplace is incongruent with hegemonic masculinity and violates the rules of engagement within the gender and sexual orientation regime (Acker, 2006; Connell, 2002). The denigration of LGBT identities underscores the contested interaction between heterosexual and homosexual identities in the workplace.

Reflections about friendship with a perceived gay colleague:

'There is always a question why I allow a gay-identifying colleague to chat with me if I am straight. Another colleague claimed my voice is changing affectionately when I talk to this gay colleague. They even said that I also like him; that is why I entertain the engagement. I sometimes want to hang out with this colleague, but I am so concerned what my other colleagues will say.'

Katlego avoids public interaction with a gay colleague in an organisational social context to allay the misclassification of his sexual orientation and avoid this interaction being seen as threatening the valorised hegemonic masculinity. The distancing emanates from notions that gay men are often perceived as feminine (Borinca et al., 2021), and individuals who fear the infection of their normed masculine identity (as if homosexuality were contagious) are more likely to avoid gay identities (Plant et al., 2014). This aligns with orthodox beliefs that traditional masculine norms are linked to heterosexuality (Herek, 1986). Katlego's confused and paradoxical internal negotiation to *do his hegemonic masculine identity* (Acker, 2006) or to *transgress the gender norms* (Butler, 1990) operates beyond the individual level. It inevitably reproduces an organisational social ordering that maintains boundaries between core and peripheral employees. Katlego's ambivalent effort to separate his 'dirty' research interest from his privileged cis-het identity reifies the hierarchisation between heterosexual employees and those who identify as 'other' sexualities and genders. Consequently, LGBT discrimination and stigma in the workplace discourage collegiality across diverse sexual

and gender identities and (un)intentionally perpetuate unequal gender regimes.

A workplace incident during a meeting with a parent and his child entangled Katlego's moral and professional conduct. The father falsely accused Katlego of having a romantic relationship with his son, a gay identifying learner who had asked Katlego to support him in disclosing his sexual orientation to his homophobic father. After the meeting, Katlego anxiously rushed to the school principal to manage the situation and prevent the possible negative ramifications of the parent's misconstrued views, fearing damage of his professional and gender identity.

Reflections on an incident when supporting a gay identifying learner:

'I became the "go-to teacher" for gay and lesbian learners because of my research with them. One of the gay learner participants shared about his father's homophobia towards gay people, particularly when such character scenes are on television. The learner wanted to disclose his sexual orientation to the father but requested me to be present. In the arranged meeting the father accused me of having a relationship with his son and that I am seeking the father's approval. He abruptly left the meeting. I was worried that this matter would reach the principal and be misconstrued about who I am what I do. The learner agreed that we report the incident to the principal who arranged a different meeting with the father to explain how the initial meeting was arranged. I was relieved that I would not be falsely accused.'

Katlego's heightened moral and professional identity panic unsurprisingly stemmed from the accusation that he was in a romantic relationship with a gay learner. This incident again resulted in a direct misclassification of his own sexual orientation, which was already on the radar among his colleagues. Katlego needed to perform hyperprofessionalism, hence his instantly reporting the incident to the principal, with the hope of distancing himself from any form of disgrace and undesirable attention. Teachers who identify as LGBT are at risk of being socially framed as unfit for the teaching profession (Msibi, 2019) because they are accused of being 'converters' of innocent heterosexual learners (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; Kagola & Notshulwana, 2023) or having the potential to sexually molest them (Ferfolja, 2007). The intervention from the principal enabled Katlego to maintain his respectability in the workplace and avoid being the target of homophobia (despite him being heterosexual).

Perceived sexual orientation, tensions and consequences within the personal spaces

Katlego's narratives indicate that gender performativity is tightly woven into all life domains, such as home, church, friendships and the workplace. The contested heterosexual or homosexual arena creates tensions between Katlego and those closest to him. Katlego faces stigma amid family expectations to conform to the religious and cultural norms of heterosexuality. The stereotypical social norms persistently

frame 'alternative' non-heterosexual lifestyles as abnormal, sinful and unacceptable. In his efforts to untangle these experiences, he questioned his choice of research interest, which has led to numerous losses.

Reflections about research at the home environment:

'My study caused immense tension between my wife and I. There was a constant anxiety when I had to meet with my supervisor or collect data with my research participants. She raised concerns about my comfort around gay and lesbian people because it was unusual for a straight man to have such associations. This spiralled later into questioning my behaviour. She had a problem that I am too emotional, sit cross-legged like a woman or that I would engage like a female during our disagreements. This caused me to become withdrawn and not talk about my study at home anymore. She insisted that I pursue a different focus for my PhD studies.'

Reflections about research focus in various social environments:

'A male friend told me that I should abandon my studies as it could be the reason for my challenges with my wife. He argued that researching these topics requires me to spend too much time with gay people and it could influence my sexual orientation. I eventually lost his friendship because he no longer wanted to be friends with someone with interest in gay people.'

'I shared my research interest with my dad, who told me that it is not a normal focus, and I should abandon my studies. My younger sister told me that I will have issues at church. As a youth leader in church, I was invited to talk about my Master's studies. I then shared with them about inclusive education and children with diverse sexual orientations. Afterwards I was called in by the pastor and admonished about the inappropriate and unacceptable discussions I have at church. He said I would encourage the young people in his church to become gays and lesbians. Ever since, I was side-lined from all church activities.'

Reflections from colleagues on personal presentation:

'During my PhD studies, I changed my hairstyle. I received messages from friends that I now adopt a gay appearance with my hairstyle and even want to use female hair products. This was after I enquired from a female colleague about the products she was using for her hair.'

Social cohesion in many African communities is understood from the perspective of shared traditional, religious and societal values often inscribed in the ethics of ubuntu (Bongmba, 2016). The ontology of ubuntu has its foundation in the interconnected and interdependent relations of self and others. The MacMillan Dictionary (n.d.) defines ubuntu as 'a quality made up of sympathy, kindness, and respect towards other people', aiming to 'create a priority of duty, which is for the fundamental goal of building a community that provides the material conditions for actualising individuals' substantive rights and well-being' (Sule, 2022, p. 52). The ubuntu moral compass guides civil interaction, collaboration and compromise, especially during difference and otherness. I reflected on these values of humanity, which brought into question people's responses to Katlego's engagement with

non-heterosexuality and their intense aversion to deviation from the norms of heterosexuality, also explained as homophobia (Freude & Waites, 2023). Katlego's experiences with significant others in religious, kinship and friendship circles illustrate that sexual prejudice and homophobia remain pervasive in his social and personal spaces. Katlego's perceived non-compliance with stereotypical markers of heterosexuality and masculinity relegates him to an out-group status and makes him the subject of social abandonment and alienation (Acker, 2006). This is because heterosexual individuals are likely to monolithically position gay men as having traditionally feminine physical characteristics, traits and roles (Fingerhut & Peplau, 2006) and therefore deserve punishment for violating normative gender regimes (Borinca et al., 2021). The harmonious values of ubuntu are deactivated when non-heterosexuality is suspected. Katlego's social circles find it fit to dehumanise and marginalise people who do not conform to actual or perceived predominantly established expressions of heterosexuality (Sigamoney & Epprecht, 2013). By virtue of this, Katlego loses social relations, social capital and confidence because of his association with LGBT people and his qualities that deviate from orthodox and valorised masculinity.

Reflections of personal experiences with study in relation to research participants:

'This was emotionally draining because I am framed in a different way at work, home and in my community simply because of my research interest. I started to question my interest in the research, which made me feel miserable. I quickly reminded myself who I am and why I am doing this research. This experience was somehow an insight into what the participants in my research experienced.'

General reflections towards end of PhD studies:

'This is a difficult topic to research; you either lose people, lose yourself or question yourself. I question who I am, why am I doing this. I identified as a Christian and I am no longer that person because of these studies. I question how much more will I lose. People distance from you because of your association with gays and lesbians. I was never prepared for this.'

The tensions in his personal spaces push Katlego to the edge of self-delusion, dwindling aspirations and cogent anxieties. The dominant notions of complied cis-het norms and the phenotypic hierarchies of sexual identities and expressions result in overt and internal conflict with Katlego's identity, his kinship and close associates. Ironically, Katlego's questioned self directly reflects the marginalisation of non-heterosexual orientations and gender identities. Katlego's positionality shifted from an outsider to an insider researcher when his questioned sexual identity made him the subject of similar vilification, rejection and stereotypes attached to his embodied researched population. It highlights the politics surrounding the pervasive repressive treatment towards minority sexualities and all associated with this 'dirty' body of knowledge (Human Dignity Trust, 2020). As he scrutinises himself through his sociopersonal experiences, there seems to be a salient benefit in that his imposed 'shifting' sexual

identity translates to invaluable insights about privilege, oppression, pain, resistance and social cohesion. It provides him with visceral understandings of how LGBT populations perceivably 'infringe' on normative gender identities, which potentially threaten their relationships with significant others. It reflexively presents him with the daily lived experiences of LGBT populations in multiple circles of society. This 'dirty' and 'shameful' research shapes new understanding of the social world (his own included) and his punishable research interest. This experience is something that he was never prepared for and points to how these trapped emotions of guilt and distress in a 'dirty' research field have the potential to derail his entire career trajectory.

Conclusion

This article has brought to attention the lack of research on some of the unintended ethical issues that arise when a cis-het scholar engages in LGBT research. Despite progressive South African legislation (some of it nearly three decades old) that affirms and protects diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, non-heterosexual or perceived identities continue to face denigration, antipathy and avoidance. Emerging cis-het researchers in LGBT studies should be prepared for the consequences contemplated in this article (and others yet unanticipated) and ensure that they have adequate support systems in place when planning for such research. It is important for scholars across sexual and gender identities to reflect on their own personal positioning and how it might affect not only the research but also their professional and personal lives.

At a secondary level, this article illustrated how the pervasive social constructions of gender regimes invoke the notion that the self cannot be separated from the research. The professional researcher (in)directly is an active creator of knowledge (Ahmed, 2006) and their positioning cannot be invisible or neutralised. Once again, they must therefore be prepared to deal with any eventuality.

The unfortunate reality is that academic journals prefer to publish the results from the research and not the process and personal experiences. There is a need for more discussions and publications on the research process and its impact on the researcher. I believe that this article will go a long way to reshaping the reflection process of the researcher to 'contribute explicitly to the transformation to the researcher's sense, self or identity' (Moustakas, 1990, p. 14) in the workplace.

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Author's contributions

A.B. is the sole author of this article.

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Data availability

All data will be made available upon request.

Disclaimer

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