Queering transformation in higher education

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Transformation in higher education has tended to focus on race and sex, at the expense of other forms of discrimination. This article addresses the silencing of 'queer' issues in higher education. Using queer theory as a framework, and drawing on current literature, popular media reports, two personal critical incidents and a project addressing homophobia in educational institutions, I explore the concerning nature and pervasiveness of homophobia in South African higher education institutions and argue for the adoption of a queer approach towards transformation. Such an approach prioritises the intersectionality and multiplicity of social identities and foregrounds queer issues in South African higher education institutions, including the challenging of homophobia and its manifestations.

Keywords: higher education; transformation; homophobia; queer theory; intersectionality

Introduction

Transformation scholarship in higher education has tended to centre on race and, by extension, gender, framed by the political and socio-economic transition from apartheid to a democratic South Africa (Fourie, 1999). This has been important in addressing the legacy of apartheid within the systemic transformation of higher education institutions. However, the selective focus has done little to address other forms of discrimination such as homophobia– "the individual and societal contempt for and prejudice against [same-sex desiring individuals]" (Walters & Hayes, 1998: 2). While it is no secret that queer[1] students in higher education institutions mostly do not enjoy favourable experiences (see the Ministerial Report 2008), the general response has been to ignore the issue, with parity in terms of race and sex being the main priority areas for both researchers and institutional administrators. This article contests this static and limited approach, not least on its superficial framing of power and oppression. The reduction to racial and gender parity creates boundaries between those who are perceived as victims and those who are perceived as perpetrators, silencing questions as to how race may be sexualised, how gender may be classed, and how class may be raced. Instead, a queer approach towards transformation is needed. This approach would foreground discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, while highlighting the multiple, pluralistic ways in which identification is performed.

The article draws on existing research, personal experiences (as a student and now staff member at the University of KwaZulu-Natal) as well as my current research project aimed at addressing homophobia in secondary schools and higher education institutions in South Africa. I begin with a discussion on the meaning of queer theory and its associated concepts. I then present a review of literature on the daily experiences of queer students in higher education institutions internationally and in South Africa specifically. This is followed by a discussion that demonstrates the need for the adoption of a queer approach. The article is not driven by the need to quantitatively present experiences of homophobia; rather it seeks to qualitatively highlight the patterns and nature of homophobia, through the experiences discussed, so as to argue for a more inclusive, complex approach towards transformation.

Jansen (1998: 106) highlighted the importance of using critical incidents in the study of transformation as these "tell us more about the nature and extent of transformation than any official documents or quantified outputs [would]". Radebe and Taylor (2010) similarly argue that critical incidents can "bring out" issues which are often ignored in the study of transformation. Whiteford and McAlister (2007: 74) write that

> *[critical incidents] are context bound, generate thick description of specific phenomena and allow for iterative processes, that is, the person experiencing and recounting the incident is able to review the story over and over again, understanding it in different ways and with greater degrees of depth.*

In essence, critical incidents in this article serve to foreground issues which are silenced by the politics of heteronormativity, the belief that heterosexuality is the norm in terms of gender and sexuality (Warner, 1991).

On theory and concepts

This work is, to a large extent, based on queer theory, the growing and contested postmodernist body of knowledge which positions forms of identification as fluid and multiple. 'Queer' is often used by many (but not all) queer theorists, including this study, as an umbrella term referring to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Queer theory includes "sexualities and gender identities that are outside [the] heterosexual [identity] and [challenges] gender categories" (Renn, 2010: 132). To be 'queer' is not necessarily perceived as an 'identity' in the stable and fixed sense. As Youdell (2010: 88) explains "queer is about interrogating how discourses of sex and sexuality are implicated in processes of subjectivation that constitute subjects who are sexed and sexualized in particular ways". Queer theory challenges modernist forms of 'identity' construction as these "rely on fixed definitions of gender and sexuality [which] limit what can be known about the identities and experiences of LGBT students, faculty and administrators" (Youdell, 2010: 132). In choosing queer theory, therefore, I seek to move away from a discourse which privileges unitary, static identities, to an understanding that "seeks to place the question of sexuality as the centre of concern, and as the key category through which other social, political, and cultural phenomena are to be understood" (Edgar & Sedgewick, 1999: 321).

Queer theory "critically analyzes the meaning of identity, focusing on intersections of identity and resisting oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender" (Abes & Kasch, 2007: 620). It also locates the multiple, performed nature of identification beyond the category of sexuality to include other forms of identification such as race, class, disability, and so on. Understanding how issues of sexism, racism and heterosexism intersect, for example, can be useful in interrogating issues of difference more deeply, thus reflecting society more fully.

While the idea of fluidity remains the greatest strength of queer theory, it can also be its key weakness, particularly in repressive contexts. Queer theory relies, to a large extent, on the subversion of hegemony; it pushes individuals to refuse "to conform to its practices" (Kirsch, 2000: 36). This, therefore, means that power is viewed as a fluid, political exercise which is dependent on individual action. Kirsch (2000: 42) argues that

> *[q]ueer theory confuses personal action with structural power, it asserts the primacy of the first or individual aspect, while ignoring the determinants ... Resistance to structural power requires the more concerted energy of collective action.*

In oppressive contexts where agency may be limited due to the rigidity of structure, the reliance on individual action may, therefore, be limited. The notion that individuals can simply act does not necessarily take into account the fact that the individual operates within a social order whose 'norms' are regulated and policed individually, institutionally and culturally. To suggest that the individual can subvert hegemony fails to take this into account: it locates oppression only at an individual level. Thus, while this article focuses on intersectionality and multiplicity in identification, it nevertheless acknowledges that the forms of human agency advocated by queer theory cannot sufficiently address transformation, particularly with regards to homophobia in the South African context. Without a collective effort, individual agency alone is not enough.

What do we know about the experiences of queer individuals in higher education institutions?

Dugan and Yurman (2011: 201) note that the development of scholarship in this field is important as "indeed it is within the higher education context that many students begin to explore and/or disclose their sexual identities, positioning college and university environment with potentially high levels of influence in this process". International literature in this field has tended to focus on campus climate (Tomlison &

Fassinger, 2003; Tierney & Dilley, 1998), identification studies (Renn, 2007; Abes & Karsh, 2007; Dilley, 2005; Abes & Jones, 2004) and visibility (Dilley, 2002; Tierney & Dilley, 1998). While the West has done a great deal to address homophobia in higher education institutions, homophobia still exists. DeSouza and Showalter (2010: 137) writing from a USA perspective note that:

> *Anti-LGBT attitudes are frequently manifested through verbal, physical, and psychological harassment. LGBT students at institutions of higher education often face hostile environments, which have been linked to an array of serious consequences that negatively affect their mental and physical health as well as their quality of life, including career development.*

Also in the USA, Walters and Hayes (1998) report that institutional cultures often delegitimise sexual identifications of queer students and staff, thereby limiting their contributions to learning. While many institutions in the USA explicitly include sexual orientation as a protected right in their policies and institutional vision statements, Walters and Hayes (1998) note that safe working and learning environments are often not created for those deemed 'deviant' due to their same-sex interests. The same findings have been noted in the UK (see Valentine & Wood, 2010). Homophobia is, therefore, not a problem of the 'developing world', as often presented in international media platforms, but remains a problem for most countries across the globe.

In South Africa, there is a paucity of information about how queer individuals experience higher education. This is mainly because queer issues, in general, remain silenced and very much 'in the closet'. This silence is not surprising, considering the fact that, although racial and gender discrimination are prioritised, South African institutions are still struggling to address these 19 years after the collapse of apartheid. In terms of homophobia, the Ministerial Report (2008: 46) cites the Council on Higher Education report on discrimination which suggests that "[i]n the area of sexism and homophobia there are no higher education institutions among those audited that can claim to have completely solved these issues". This is chilling, considering the fact that higher education institutions are ideally placed for leadership on these issues.

While homophobia has hardly been addressed in South African higher education institutions, academic scholarship focusing, in particular, on queer research has equally been slim. Apart from the Ministerial Report (whose mandate was not really on homophobia[2]), little exists in the form of educational scholarship. This is, I argue, owing to the fact that the queer research is, to a large extent, viewed as a dangerous terrain, with those doing research in this area being suspected of 'deviant' sexual behaviour (see Msibi, 2011). From the few extant studies, it is clear that the experiences of queer individuals remain chiefly negative in our universities.

In a masters' study on queer students at the University of Zululand (UKZN), Ngcobo (2007) found that queer students experienced homophobia, discrimination, lack of respect, violation of constitutional rights, labelling and difficulties in 'coming out'. This is the same university where 'straight' male student mobs had, for two nights in 2005, "embarked on a massive and fierce protest and 'toyi-toyied' (demonstrated) against gays and lesbians staying in their blocks" (*The Natal Witness*, 2005). Queer students were evicted from their rooms and harassed. The University of Zululand is not the only institution with these challenges. Queer students, for example, have been 'correctively' raped, beaten, verbally abused and ridiculed as well as denigrated in various South African institutions (Ministerial Report, 2008). Often, homophobia is peddled by both students and lecturers. For instance, a student newspaper at the North-West University's Potchefstroom campus reported on a student victimised by a lecturer who had stated that "homosexual people should not exist" and that she "will never agree with [the students'] repellent lifestyle [because] the Lord has a big problem with gay people, because two male dogs don't mate" (HREID, 2013). Homophobia has similarly been noted at Stellenbosch University where a house committee member reportedly declared his dislike for gay people in a meeting of first-year students, and where a lesbian student reported abuse by male students in residences (Harrison & John, 2012). This abuse was sexual, racial and gendered. Incidents of hate crime have also been reported at the University of Cape Town where a wardrobe in celebration of gay pride was set alight by unknown individuals (Bailey, 2010). Incidents of homophobia at the University of the Wiwatersrand prompted the institution to be the first in the country to launch a

programme borrowed from the USA, known as Safe Zones@Wits, targeted at addressing homophobia and providing 'safe spaces' for queer students.

In his pioneering work, Eric Richardson (2008) argues that much of the discrimination that queer learners experience is a result of the lack of both explicit mention of queer issues in national education policies and teaching on these issues. Francis and Msibi (2010) confirm the need for this direct teaching, as it can assist in addressing homophobia. In higher education, the transformation agenda has assumed an already transformed academic corps. However, as many scholars (Soudien, 2010; Hemson & Singh, 2010; Vandeyar, 2010; Sehoole, 2005; Waghid, 2002) demonstrate, the development of policy is insufficient to drive the transformation agenda as policy and practice are two different things. Generally, from the paucity of extant research, it can be concluded that many queer students in South African universities experience higher education in negative ways due to homophobia.

On being queer in the current South African higher education institution

As indicated earlier, this article uses critical incidents and data from a project I led which is designed to challenge homophobia in South African secondary and higher education institutions. I begin the discussion with two critical incidents from my experiences as a student in the then Faculty of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. After presenting these incidents, I draw from my current project work to showcase the experiences of queer individuals in higher education institutions.

Misinformation, hatred and distrust

The first incident I wish to highlight came as a shock to me when I was in the third year of my BEd degree. I was attending an English class when a discussion about HIV/AIDS ensued. The discussion was headed by my lecturer who was White. I mention race, in this instance, as homophobia is often assumed, quite wrongly in South Africa, as a 'Black' thing. My lecturer explained confidently to the class that he felt angered that HIV & AIDS had to be a problem for everyone now when, in fact, it was gay men who first acquired AIDS through their 'unnatural' sexual acts. Some of us (students) who had studied how the virus is transmitted tried to protest, but he insisted, noting that he lived during the 1980s and that gay men were the first to be identified as having AIDS. We felt defeated as we were too young in the 1980s. The forcefulness with which he pushed his idea on the class left a bitter taste; many students left believing that AIDS was a gay disease. It was clear to me that the lecturer wanted gay people to be blamed for spreading the disease.

The main reason why I began with this incident is to highlight the many insidious ways in which homophobia finds expression. Higher education institutions are meant to be places where accurate knowledge and information should be taught, debated and produced. While indeed HIV may have been perceived historically as a 'gay disease', its origins remain contested. Informing students who would be going to schools to teach young people that HIV is a 'gay disease' was not only dangerous and reckless, but also did much to foster homophobia among students. Many of the students who had attended the lecture went on to express how HIV was then a punishment of gay people from God, and how they detested gay people.

One of the key ways in which oppression is entrenched is through the distrust and suspicion for the 'other'. Tatum (2000: 79), for instance, noted that "stereotypes, omissions and distortions all contribute to the development of prejudice". What occurred in the example above demonstrates the negative constructions and lies that are told about queer people, and the results of that negativity. Students who had publicly not articulated negative attitudes towards queer people previously suddenly found ammunition and reason for disliking gay men for spreading AIDS.

I argue, in this instance, that the lack of appropriate, positive teaching on queer issues in higher education programmes greatly inhibits a broadly inclusive transformation agenda. In addition, the fact that the South African transformation approach has, to a large extent, been built mostly around race contributes to the continued marginalisation of other identifications, with many individuals continuing to feel justified when peddling prejudicial and discriminatory ideas, as long as these are not racial. Transformation

has to take into account the various, multiple ways in which identification is performed, as well as the interconnected nature of all forms of oppression. In other words, focus should move away from racial and gender parity to an investigation into how "social power structures, such as racism, classism and heterosexism [intersect]" (Abes & Kasch 2007: 619).

Infection and denial

The second incident I wish to highlight occurred in 2007, as I was about to leave for my studies to the United States. At this time, I was already employed on contract at UKZN teaching undergraduate programmes. A colleague I trusted and respected called me to her office to 'guide' me before I left. In the meeting, I was warned to be careful in the USA. I was told to particularly be careful of being 'converted' by the Americans to 'engaging in despicable homosexual acts'. Implicit in this was the suspicion that I may, in fact, be gay, and that a context such as the USA would allow for an easier performance of my supposed gay identity. I was told that homosexuality was demonic and unAfrican and that I should guard against this as so many young people were falling into this 'sin'. I did not know how to respond, as this was an African woman for whom I really had a great deal of respect. After the discussion, I left my colleague's office with an assurance to her that I would not become gay. I knew in my heart that I should have challenged her on this, yet I remained silent.

This incident highlights the many ways that are used to advance homophobic sentiment under the construed notion of care. Clearly, my colleague's statement harboured negative views about homosexuality. It revealed various strategies that often get employed to maintain homophobia. First, is the notion that homosexuality is contagious and can, in fact, be picked up like a disease. It often is not explained how one gets infected and how one can prevent such an infection. Secondly, the notion that homosexuality is unAfrican is forwarded; the fact that Americans are meant to convert me follows the idea of homosexuality as a western import. This argument is often forwarded by most African leaders when trying to denounce homosexuality. This assertion is clearly both false and homophobic. Thirdly, religion is often used as a key instrument, as people simply cannot challenge what God says. This strategy goes to the heart of homophobia in that it dehumanises people and makes them feel that who and what they are is sinful. Finally, such articulations leave very little room for challenging. Remaining silent and colluding only reinforces the status quo instead of destabilising it.

An important point to further highlight concerns both the race and gender of the academic concerned. As a Black woman who lived and experienced oppression under the apartheid regime, one would have expected a much more compassionate, critical individual who understands the systemic nature of prejudice and discrimination. However, this was not the case at all. In contexts where transformation is synonymous exclusively with anti-racism, individuals are often inhibited from seeing other forms of discrimination being enacted in their day-to-day engagements.

The transformation agenda needs to recognise academics as people who have been similarly shaped by both the history and social conditions of this country. The agenda needs to address the limitations presented by social structures and the shared apartheid past, and focus on "the organizational culture and the development and acceptance of new, shared values. This can only be achieved through fundamental changes in the mindset ("cognitive transcendence") of all stake holders and role-players, amongst which academic staff requires attention" (Fourie, 1999: 277). What Fourie (1999) points to resonates with work I have been doing with queer students in my university. This is a point I now turn to.

The project

For the past two years, I have been involved in a project that works with learners, university students and teachers in addressing homophobia in secondary schools and higher education institutions. The project was an interventionist project with teachers, learners and students, and was funded by MACAIDS and recently HIVOS. Of the 14 initial participants, four were UKZN students. These students were joined by an additional two other students who heard about the project from others and wanted to join. A DVD on the experiences of queer students, together with voices from all students, learners and teachers was produced.

This DVD is currently being used to prepare in- and pre-service teachers to teach about same-sex issues in schools and to address homophobia. Five training sessions were held fortnightly on Saturdays, focusing on the personal development of participants, and offering a platform for participants to share their experiences and how to deal with homophobia. The brief discussions highlighted below are expressions by the university participants during the project's training sessions.

Silenced, closeted and feared

Apart from two participants who joined the project late, all the participants in the project were 'in the closet'. The reason for this is that many of them fear victimisation once exposed. One participant, Zama, noted that part of the fear regards what the students had heard about a former student who became the laughing stock of the campus after he declared his love to a straight student on campus. The 'straight' student apparently threatened to beat the queer man and had gone around telling everyone on campus about what had happened. Generally, all the students in the project expressed great anxiety about the unwelcoming climate on campus. Although not out, suspicions of their 'deviant' sexuality abound. Nomsa explained her residence life as follows:

> *I really find the residences difficult. I often visit my girlfriend who stays on campus. Although I have not told anyone on campus about my sexual orientation, people just know. The difficult part is when I have to go to the bathroom. The other day I went into the bathroom and there was this older lady there who had just finished bathing. She didn't realise that I had walked in. When she realised that I was inside she nearly fainted. She had one glance at me and started running. I stood there feeling terrible. Why was she so scared of me?*

The fact that the woman would run out of the bathroom points to the negative construction of queer students who are often perceived as sexual predators, ready to have sex with everyone they see. This view has been expressed by nearly all the queer students, including the secondary learners in the project. As Lucky noted,

> *Straight people always think we want them. The guys get very worried when we go near them as they immediately think that we want them. Every time I find myself explaining that gay people don't find everyone attractive. We are just like straight people.*

Lucky points to the essentialising of 'gay' behaviour that often happens as a result of heteronormativity. As Muñoz (1999) points out, it is heteronormativity which assembles all forms of sexual difference into one essentialised understanding. The expectation is often that all queer people share similar emotions and characteristics, something which queer theory contests.

Of key concern in the project, particularly for me as an academic, are the views expressed by students of their lecturers. From the discussions with students, it became clear that the majority of academics are not only very ignorant of queer issues, but also unapologetically homophobic. Like me, Nomali, a student, was summoned by a lecturer to her office. She notes:

> *She asked me what was wrong with me. Why would a beautiful girl like me be in a relationship with other women? There are so many men out there who would kill for me. She told me that God didn't like what I was doing and that I should stop. I was shocked and could not even answer her.*

What Nomali highlights, in this instance, portrays the reality of many of our campuses across the country. Our deep religious history finds expression in the most bizarre ways. For an academic to call a student to her office to lecture her about the evil nature of her sexual orientation may appear strange at first, but the reality is that academic institutions are constituted by people who are heavily influenced by popular perceptions and social expectations. The fact that Mrs Mnguni suggests that Nomali's appearance is grounds for changing her sexual orientation reveals just how little information some academics have about the meaning of sexual orientation and same-sex desire. This is deeply worrying as "higher education institutions [should] play an important role as site[s] where issues of tolerance, inclusion, access, and structural inequalities could be addressed effectively" (Cross, 2004: 391).

An equally important concern is the policing of sexualities, as is clearly visible in the above narrative, and indeed the personal experience shared earlier. The hegemony of heterosexuality is such that it dictates what is 'normal' and 'abnormal' behaviour. Difference, therefore, ends up being pathologised as abnormal (Foucault, 1990).

Conclusion

The above discussion highlights the need for the adoption of a queer approach towards transformation in higher education. The experiences highlighted in this article, and the findings of the Ministerial Report clearly indicate that homophobia exists in our campuses and is currently not receiving full attention. The exclusion of issues beyond race and sex distorts transformation, leading to a game of numbers rather than an inclusive and reflective approach that takes the intersections of discrimination into account. A queer approach to transformation examines ways in which various forms of discrimination find expression. It asks higher education institutions to consider the intersectional ways in which race, class, gender, sexuality, disability and other forms of identification mediate the experiences of students and academics. Otherwise, the transformation agenda fails to address the insidious ways in which forms of discrimination find expression in the day-to-day experiences of individuals considered to be on the margins of social norms. Adopting such an approach is crucial for addressing various forms of discrimination holistically, without privileging some forms of oppression over others.

While a great deal has been written about the racist nature of the acts by four White male students at the University of the Free State, little has been mentioned about how gender and sexuality may have been implicated. It is, for example, not a coincidence that the four perpetrators were male and the victims mainly female. Our understanding of racism fails if we do not simultaneously address the expression of hegemonic heterosexual masculinities.

As Kimmel (2000) argues, the perceived 'heroics' (as in this instance) that men perform have to do with ideas of manhood. The idea of manhood that underlies the racial and sexual violence in this country – and indeed the incidents reported in this article - is implicated with compulsory notions of heterosexuality.

A queer perspective shows up the current approach to transformation in higher education institutions as atomistic and compartmentalised. To be holistic would require that it takes intersectionality into account. This approach would see the inclusion of sexuality on issues concerning transformation, while simultaneously questioning the rigidity of identification.

There are important implications for policy, practice and curricula structures in higher education institutions across the country. First, diversity in all its forms needs to be actively promoted. The focus on race as the *raison d'être* of transformation is highly problematic. Secondly, both academic and student positions as transformed agents need to be actively interrogated. As Jansen (2009) aptly observed, we all carry 'bitter knowledge'. If this knowledge is left uninterrupted, we run the risk of merely dealing with deep, troubling issues only at a superficial level. Thirdly, curricula practices need to take into account our history, while seeking to explore the intersectional ways in which identifications find expression. This means understanding all forms of oppression as interconnected and in need of active addressing.

Endnotes

1 An umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) identifying individuals.
2 The term 'discrimination' in the mandate was capable of interpretation from very narrow to very broad.

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