

"I believe in myself and I am a strong deaf gay (person)": An oral history project with Deaf gay and lesbian South Africans

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I. Introduction

This paper focuses on an analysis of life stories of Deaf gay men collected as part of the Deaf LGBT oral history project of GALA – Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action. John Meletse and Ruth Morgan initiated the Deaf LGBT oral history project in 2002 at Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA). At that time Ruth was the director of GALA and John had been employed to work on this project. Due to high levels of homophobia in the Deaf community it has been extremely difficult to identify people who are willing to be interviewed. Most LGBT Deaf South Africans are still highly closeted and only out to their immediate LGBT friends. The situation for Deaf lesbians is even more difficult as they are even more secretive about their sexual orientation. John is openly gay and has appeared on DTV frequently in order to raise awareness in the Deaf community about LGBT issues.

2. Conducting the interviews

John has been interviewing Deaf gay people for the past 7 years. It has been a hard process as it is very difficult to identify people who are willing to be interviewed on video. We have assured people we will protect their identities but this has not helped a lot. In this presentation we will be using pseudonyms (not real names) for the people we interviewed.

Mr Meletse was interviewed by Deaf TV (DTV) in 2003 where he came out as gay. In 2006 he was interviewed again by DTV and came out as both gay and HIV positive. In both of these TV interviews Mr Meletse spoke about his work at GALA on the Deaf gay oral history project and gave his cell number so people who want to be interviewed could contact him. After these interviews Deaf gay men came forward to be interviewed.

This paper is based on an analysis of 13 translated English transcriptions of these life stories. Eight of the life stories are from gay men and one is from a lesbian. For the past eight years Mr Meletse has been conducting videotaped interviews with Deaf LGBT people from Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town who tell their life story narratives in SASL. He has interviewed 4 Deaf gay men from Johannesburg at the GALA offices and 4 Deaf gay men were interviewed at DCCT in Cape Town. He has done 1 interview in Durban.

In terms of race – 3 of the interviewees are black, 1 was coloured and 5 were white. Most of the people interviewed are white as it is easier for white Deaf people to come out as gay due to more acceptance and respect from the white Deaf community. In the black Deaf

community there is still a lot of homophobia making it very difficult for black LGBTs to come out.

3. Transcribing the interviews

Together with an interpreter, Mr Meletse then translated these SASL life stories into written English. The transcripts were then analysed in terms of common themes that emerged.

4. Analysis of life stories

Themes

The results of the thematic analysis will be discussed in terms of the following topics which are arranged chronologically

We found the following main themes:

- 4.1 Not conforming to traditional gender roles while growing up (acting feminine)
- 4.2 Early same-sex experiences in Deaf school hostels
- 4.3 Sexual abuse in hostels
- 4.4 Homophobia in Deaf school hostels
- 4.5 In the closet at school
- 4.6 Struggling to come out to families
- 4.7 Deaf Clubs and networks

4.1 Not conforming to traditional male gender roles (Feeling and acting feminine growing up)

Most of the interviewees had not conformed to gender stereotypes from a very young age. At home they developed a strong bond with their mothers and not with their fathers. When very young they played with the other little girls – preferring dolls and girls games like skipping to playing with little boys. As they got older they preferred helping their mothers with cooking and cleaning. This is the same behaviour as hearing gays report in their life stories.

Rodney, coloured Deaf gay man in his 30s described how he imitated his mother who was his feminine role model:

I think I found out that I was gay when I was six years old. This is when I was the only child in the house and had no brothers or sisters. Because I had nothing to do, I always looked at my mother and copied everything that she did. Whenever she was not around, I wore her clothes, make-up and shoes and whenever she saw me in her clothes, she got so furious and got me to take them off and wash my face. She hated it when I especially took her handbags. She would grab it from me and put it away but, when she left the room, I took it again and carried on playing with it in front of the mirror. And so, my grandfather decided to buy me cars to play with. I never played with those cars, I just left them lying around the house.

...When I arrived at home, my mother introduced me to her sister and her sister's daughter who she said was my cousin. She was naughtier than I was. She said she wants to play with me but, I must be the girl. So I wore a G-string underwear, wore make-up and we started playing. We had lot of fun but, we did not have sex

Lazarus a white Deaf gay man from Cape Town in his 50s, also explained how he enjoyed cleaning the house and cooking when he was young:

My mother went to explain to our priest that she had a problem at home with me. My family were surprised that I liked to clean the house and wash clothes in a basin. My sister couldn't do these things as she had a physical disability and was in a wheelchair. When my parents went to work I cooked for my sister.

Adam could only relate to other gay people when he was growing up who were interested in the same things as he was:

I was always happy when I was around gay people and I really learnt a lot from them. We would talk about clothes, cooking, boyfriends and a whole lot of other things. It was always interesting to learn from each other- in contrast to straight people. I could not identify with them or things they did and so I did not socialize with them most of the time. They were not interested in art, fashion or cooking.

4.2. Early same-sex experiences in Deaf school hostels

Some of the interviewees spoke about the fact that they became sexual with other boys in the Deaf school hostels:

Rodney, a coloured gay man from Cape Town in his 30s describes his first same-sex encounter at school:

One day during lunch time I was playing around on the playground and a boy came to me and said that he lusts for me and wanted to have sex with me. He said that we should go to the toilet and have sex there. I told him that " sorry but I am busy". He kept coming back over and over again but I fought him off but, he did not listen and still came. He kept begging me and I got tired of fighting him off. Ultimately, I ended up giving in and we went to the toilet and had sex. I was relieved after we had it and so was he. I asked him why he wanted to have sex with me a boy instead of a girl. He said he liked the shape of my buttocks...

Orateng, 26 year old black man from Kwa Thema explained how he had regular sex with a particular boy at school:

I told my friend about the boy who always sneaked to my bed at night to have sex with me. He was very shocked. My friend and I shared everything (as well as secrets about other guys). My friend told me that some boys come to his bed at night to play with him, but he never had sex with any of them.

Mpumi, 25 year old black gay man from East London described his first sexual experiences at school:

At night I wake up and I went to his bed moving slowly and I slept with Sello, I touched him, he pushed me with his hand. When he woke up he got a fright as he thought maybe it was something like a ghost or a criminal, I said that I was sorry. When Sello saw that it was me he relaxed. Sello asked me why I had come to sleep there, I told him I needed to keep warm. His face was different kind of angry, maybe shy. He was shy but I flirted with him, telling him that we played every weekend. I was shocked when I saw that Sello was interested in me as a gay and wanted to be sexual. Sello asked how to have sex and I told him “in the buttocks”. Sello was shocked. We didn’t plan to have sex as we didn’t have a condom. It was the first time we had sex. We had sex and I was screaming telling Sello that it was painful, Sello became angry and I said that I was sorry. I was in the front he was in the back I told him to do it slowly, he said “I know”, I accepted. I was holding a pillow over my mouth to stop myself screaming, I asked him to finish and we finished.

Adam, a Deaf white gay man from Johannesburg in his 40s described learning about masturbation from an older student:

During the night a senior boy in our hostel used to wake me up, take me to the toilet and teach me about sperms and how to masturbate and later I found it interesting. After then, I started doing all these myself and I enjoyed it.

Some interviewees were approached for transactional sex by other male students in the hostels. Mpumi described how these students who approached them for sex did not identify as gay. They would offer sex for bread. These students were terrified of gossip and that they would be seen as “gay” and would threaten to hit them if they told anyone about having sex with them afterwards. The interviewees had to keep it a secret. They could not have relationships with these students as they would only want sex once in a while due to their fear of gossip.

4.3. Sexual abuse in the Hostels

Three of the white students reported that they had been sexually abused in the school hostels by older students or men:

Lazarus a 50 year old white Deaf gay man from Cape Town, was repeatedly raped by an older student before he knew he was gay. This resulted in emotional problems about his gender identity - he wasn’t sure if he was being raped because he was a woman:

A strong man used to rape me in the school hostel. It happened repeatedly. I wasn’t sure if I was a woman or a man. I decided that I was a man. I couldn’t tell anyone about my confusion. I kept it inside until I tried to tell my priest. He referred me to a psychologist

Godfrey, a white Deaf gay man from Durban aged 30, was also repeatedly raped at school by an older student and was too scared to tell anyone. This went on for years until he eventually told a friend. He only was able to talk about it in therapy many years later:

I had to stay at the school hostels because my mother had to return to Johannesburg. I was happy to be at the Deaf school. Everything was okay but, when I was seven years old, I was abused by a male senior learner who was mentally disturbed. The first time he came to me, I was walking around the school and he grabbed me by my clothes and told me he wanted to have sex with me. I was scared of him and so was everyone at school. I told him that I did not want to have sex with him but, he forced himself on me and from then it became a regular thing- him having sex with me.

4.4. Homophobia in hostels

Rodney, a coloured gay man from Cape Town in his 30s had to leave the hostel after the other students started to suspect he was gay as he was spending a lot of time with his close male friend.

When I was sixteen, the Deaf boy whom I had sex with when I was ten and I started drawing close to each other. Other Deaf learners noticed this and said that I must not sleep in the same hostel with them anymore. I had no problem with it and I accepted what they had said because I did not want anybody pointing fingers at me any further. So, I travelled from home to school. (Rodney, Coloured Deaf gay man from Cape Town, in his 30s)

4.5. Teasing at hostels/school for acting effeminately

At school – the interviewees were mocked and teased for acting effeminately (like a woman). These young gay boys signed with effeminate floppy movements involving more wrist movements using effeminate facial expressions. During puberty the young gay boys started to walk differently – more effeminately – swinging hips. The teasing made the interviewees feel very bad about themselves and they could not develop good self esteem – they felt different from the other students for not conforming to gender stereotypes.

Mpumi, 25 year old black Deaf gay man from East London was given a hard time by the hostel mother:

The hostel mother is Deaf, she is asking other boys why Mpumi is always crying like girl, because I dont know how to defend myself by hitting other boys when they fight with me. She did not like e fact that I signed in a feminine way. The hostel mother always called me and sent me to do errands for her but I became fed up with her. She told the teacher that I liked to sign in a feminine way (or I liked to sign like a woman) but she complained to me that I must change the way I sign. I should sign like a straight man. But I couldn't change my life to be more masculine. I was sad. The hostel Deaf mother always came to check on me when I was taking a shower or going to the toilet. She was surprised that I was not happy. She tried to force me to tell her why I was unhappy I told her i was growing up. One Deaf girl spied on me (and told the hostel mother) that the Deaf don't like me to act in a feminine way.

4.6. In the closet at school

Rodney, a Coloured gay Deaf man from Cape Town in his 30s described how he couldn't tell anyone he was effeminate or gay at school:

When I started school still, I was always alone. Nobody knew about my secret of wearing my mother's clothes and being gay- I kept it to myself.

One day, one Deaf girl came to me and asked me why she had never seen me propose to a girl before. I did not tell her that I could not because I was gay. I just kept my secret to myself and told no one. I told myself that when I complete my schooling in Worcester, I was going to tell them that I was gay and be free and openly gay. I know that they were going to be shocked. They were going to ask themselves why I never told them before. I would have never told them because, I respected the law of the school that I was in and I did not want to get blamed at or expelled from school for being gay. The law was much more powerful than I was .

4.7. Struggling to come out to families

Lazarus, a white Deaf gay man from Cape Town in his 50s, could not come out to his family as gay. They pressurised him to get married to a Deaf woman when he was a young man. He always dressed perfectly but they didn't know he was gay. Eventually his wife separated from him and they got divorced after there was gossip in the Deaf community that he was a moffie. His wife found out and left him.

I felt fed-up as some Deaf people spread a rumour that I was gay. That resulted in my divorce. She also told my parents about my life. They weren't surprised. She had known me since we grew up together.

Godfrey, a white gay Deaf man from Durban in his 30s, only came out to his family in his mid 20s after seeing a psychologist whom he told about his sexual abuse at school:

I told then about what had happened to me while I was still at school- the physical abuses and consistent rapes. My mother was shocked but, she learned to accept and understand everything. She said that she will give me her support whenever I needed it. On the contrary though, I did not tell my mother that I was gay, it was a topic to be dealt with another time.

During another session, the counselor asked me when I was going to tell my family that I was gay. I told him that I had not decided yet and as soon as I made up my mind, I would tell them. After some time of thinking about it, I decided to tell my family but, I told my mother first. When I came out as being gay, she was not resentful or unsupportive, instead, she accepted my decision. She understood that what had previously happened to me -at school- somehow had an impact on me. She did not judge me.

When we got home, she told my father and my two brothers that I was gay. At first they did not like the idea that I was gay and could not accept it at all. They stopped talking to me and this lasted for about two weeks. After two weeks, my father finally came around and started making conversations with me and later so did my older and younger brother. The three of them accepted that I was gay and I was part of the family.

My relatives however do not know that I am gay, we have not told them yet. But, I am happy that my family accepts that I am gay and my father did not decide to chase me out of the house. They have however, requested to see my boyfriend and how we act around each other. They swore that they will never try to make me change. They respected my decision.

Orateng, a black gay man from Kwa Thema in his 30s had a hard time telling his family that he was gay but they realised that he was and accepted him:

While growing up, my family knew that I loved cooking; cleaning and playing skipping and they were fine with it. I used to clean the whole house. My mother was shocked to see that I could clean the house so perfectly. I sometimes also bathed my sisters and cooked. One day, my parents asked if I was gay and I said No! they did not ask me more questions. They decided to leave the matter because they respected me. My mother would sometimes ask me if I was gay. She did not know. She was confused, I was confused, but my sister could see that I was gay. She said that she could see that I loved men and not women. I said yes! she was amazed but she never thought that I was stupid. She always asked me how I felt about men and whenever my boyfriend waited outside my house for me, she would check on me. She always made sure that my boyfriend never cheated on me.

Rodney (a coloured Deaf gay man from Cape Town in his 30s) could not come out to his aunt or his immediate family as they were Muslim. He lived with his aunt at one stage:

She always asked me if I had a girlfriend and teased me whenever she saw women passing by. I never told her that I was gay because she was Muslim as well as the majority of the people who stayed in that area.

4.8. Deaf Clubs and networks

It is very important for Deaf gay people to have a social space where they can interact freely with each other. However there are very few of these spaces available and the few attempts to start organisations have failed. In Cape Town, a LGBT organisation "The Triangle Project" set up a Deaf LGBT support group about five years ago after GALA approached them to do so on behalf of one of the Deaf gay men we had interviewed who wanted a group. The group was facilitated by a hearing counsellor working with an interpreter Unfortunately the group has now collapsed.

Rodney describes how the group collapsed as a result of the lack of interpreting services provided:

I thought that it might have been a good idea if the facilitator wrote down everything that he was saying during workshops but eventually, a lot of Deaf people stopped coming to workshops because there was no interpreter.

There seem to be more Deaf LGBT people in Cape Town who are out. This follows the trend for hearing LGBT - Cape Town is the gay city of South Africa. The LGBT community there is stronger with more clubs. Deaf LGBT people attend a club there called "The Bronx".

Godfrey describes his experiences clubbing:

The first time I met Leon, he took me to a gay club. When we arrived, I could not believe that all the men that were in the room were gay. It was an interesting experience but, I could not socialize with anybody because I was still too self-conscious and scared that I started panicking and perspiring. I had my pills with me and so I took some and got a bit better.

After three months of going to the club, I got used to it and some of my Deaf gay friends that had I met there. We developed a strong relationship. I stopped panicking and perspiring and I did not need the pills anymore when I had to go to the club. I had got used to the whole environment.

Lazarus described how he joined an organisation in Pretoria for Deaf LGBT people. This organisation also collapsed due to the fact that the members were gossiping and not united.

I could see that the Deaf still have trouble sustaining a gay and lesbian group because they don't have the level of skills needed to resolve problems.

In Johannesburg, the LGBT committee was formed a few years ago as part of the Bedfordview Deaf Club. They operate on facebook and have monthly parties for both Deaf LGBT and Deaf straight supporters who are accepting. The committee is composed of white Deaf people as it is situated in a predominantly white suburb of Johannesburg. Unfortunately there are still no social spaces for Deaf black LGBT people in Johannesburg who live far away and find it difficult to attend these parties due to transport costs.

In Durban, the LGBT Deaf people had a social event once a month at the house of a Deaf gay man. After his death about a year ago, the events have stopped. John observed that black Deaf gay men in Johannesburg go to clubs if they have the transport and entry fee money. More often than not, they don't have the money to go clubbing..

5. Conclusion

The analysis of these stories has revealed the extent to which Deaf gay boys struggle to come to terms with their sexual orientation and coming out at home and at school and in the broader Deaf community. Most parents and families of Deaf gay boys have a hard time accepting that their children are both Deaf and gay. Deaf schools which are usually the most important spaces for the transmission of Deaf culture, where peer groups replace families in terms of support, are not safe spaces for Deaf gay boys. Due to a lack of awareness about gay issues, Deaf boys experience homophobia from other children, teachers and hostel parents.

As adults Deaf gay men in South Africa are still struggling to be recognised in the broader Deaf social movement and Deaf communities. There are very few Deaf gay men and lesbians who are willing to be out in public. I (John) continue to be the only black gay Deaf man who

is out. When I try to get others to join me at Pride, they refuse as they are too scared to be seen in public or on TV. Friends of mine like Mpumi are out in Johannesburg but not in his home town P.E.

As long as the straight Deaf community continues to be homophobic and label black Deaf people, it will be impossible to establish a visible organisation for Deaf LGBT people. We need to first educate the straight Deaf community so that it will be safer for Deaf LGBT people to come out. John is trying to do this LGBT awareness training in his peer education HIV project with Deaf adults and Deaf learners at school. They are responding positively.