

## Not STRAIGHT forward for gays: A look at the lived experiences of gay men, living in Cape Town, with regard to their worker roles.

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### Abstract

**Background:** The South African constitution protects the rights of gays; however in the workplace gays experience discrimination and marginalization. As a result of marginalization they struggle to reach their potential regarding career development and the fulfilment of their worker role.

**Objective:** The study explored the experiences and perceptions of gay males with regard to acquiring and maintaining their worker roles.

**Methods:** The study is phenomenological and qualitative in design. Eleven of these men participated in two focus groups. One male participated in two in-depth interviews and one interview was conducted with a key informant.

**Results:** Three themes emerged: 1) Being boxed in, 2) The glass ceiling, 3) This is where I can wear my feather boa.

**Conclusions:** The study findings clearly depicted the many barriers experienced by homosexual men and how this negatively impacts on their worker role. Minimal facilitatory factors exist, to assist gay males in regard to their worker role. It was found that homo-prejudice still exists in South Africa and its workplaces and has a negative impact not only on gay men's worker role but also their well-being. This significantly highlights the great need for occupational therapy intervention in the lives of these gay men, and their workplaces.

**Key words:** occupational therapy, occupation, homosexuality, vocational rehabilitation, qualitative research, ex-offenders

### 1) Introduction

In the past, homosexual practices were not legalized in South Africa. In 1996, with the birth of democracy and a democratic constitution, the rights of gays (the term gay is an accepted term in Lesbians, Gays, Bisexual and Transgender- LGBT studies) were protected and legalised. History was made when the South African government created a non – discriminatory clause to ensure that the rights of gays were respected and implemented

nationally [1]. South Africa was the first country in the world to include gay rights in their constitution. This is in contrast to the American constitution that remains unclear regarding the legal rights of gays and lesbians [2]. In the South African context the rights of gays have not been embraced by all South Africans. Hence some people still have conservative social attitudes and norms that marginalise homosexuals within the workplace and affect their worker roles [1]. It could therefore be argued that although the South African Constitution has protected the rights of gays, this appears to be a political statement as non- direct discrimination towards LGBT particularly in the workplace still exists.

A homosexual identity is more than merely one's same-sex sexual behaviours or feelings, but has implications for how one is perceived in society and in the workplace [3]. As a consequence of marginalization, some gay men tend to hide their sexual identity. By reviewing American statistics, one may gain a perspective of the extent of homo-prejudice one could expect to find within the workplace. According to Ragins and Cornwell [4], between 25% and 66% of American gay employees report workplace discrimination, but because most gay and lesbian employees do not fully disclose their sexual orientation at work [5], the potential for discrimination may actually be higher. Statistics regarding the existence of homosexual discrimination in the workplace, within a South African context, do not exist, or were related to HIV and AIDS. However it could be deduced that homoprejudice is still visible in the workplace [6].

Occupational therapy is defined as the art and science of helping people do the day`-to-day activities that are meaningful to their health and well-being through engagement in purposeful occupation [7]. Occupational therapists are therefore concerned with the elimination of restrictions or barriers that prevent human beings from engaging in occupations and the promotion of participation in occupations such as work, activities of daily life and leisure activities. Wilcock [8], stated that one of the foundations underlying occupational therapy theory and practice is the belief that there is a relationship between occupation and health and well-being. Therefore, as occupational therapists, the researchers believe that engaging in occupations, including work, improves one's health and well-being within all cultures. It could be argued that discrimination in the workplace is an existing barrier that affects LGBT. Researchers have suggested that work discrimination has a profound effect on the well-being of the LGBT population [9]. Work discrimination can be defined as the unjust and negative treatment of workers based on personal attributes that are irrelevant to job performance [10]. The current study aims to gain insight into the challenges that gay men experience and perceive regarding their work role in Cape Town, South Africa.

## **2) Literature review**

### **2.1) Workplace Policies**

A study conducted by Rostosky and Riggle [11] identified the importance of implementing policies within the workplace to ensure equality for all homosexual individuals. The study discussed disclosure and integration of sexual identity into all social roles, including the worker role, which has been conceptualized as the apex of identity development for gay and lesbian individuals. Disclosure of one's sexual identity is essential to psychosocial adjustment and general psychological well-being [11]. A work environment that includes institutionalized policies of non-discrimination can send a message to workers that it is safe to disclose their sexual orientation. However there are individuals in the work place that still experience various forms of discrimination and internalized homophobia, due to their sexual orientation. Empirical findings have documented a positive correlation between measures of internalized homophobia and indicators of psychological distress, including lower self-esteem and increased anxiety and depression [12]. Those individuals with high levels of internalized homophobia are also considered to be more susceptible to restricted success in their intimate relationships and in their careers [12]. Higher levels of internalized homophobia may create psychological difficulties for gay individuals and may inhibit them from forming supportive networks and responding assertively to the overt and subtle forms of discrimination that they encounter. Therefore protecting the civil rights of gay employees is an essential step in normalizing the work environment for LGBT minority citizens [13]. Organizational and institutional policies that protect gay workers (including both male and female gay workers) make it safer for non-heterosexual individuals to speak out. To fight for equitable policies, gay workers need to be out in the workplace and mobilized, yet fears of job loss and other negative repercussions may keep workers silent and invisible [13].

Correct implementation of workplace policies in South Africa is needed to ensure that the rights of homosexuals reflected in the constitution is brought down to a grass roots level. Flawed policies in workplaces jeopardize the rights of gay men and thus devalue the protection given to gays within the constitution.

### **2.2) Intervention Programmes to combat homo-prejudice in the work place**

A lack of literature exists in regards to programmes that have been implemented to combat homo-prejudice in South African workplaces. However, a Stonewall workplace guide called Straight Allies, has been implemented in companies in the United Kingdom [14]. The Straight Allies programme encompasses the vision that in order to create workplaces that are gay-friendly and to include the rights of all its employees, straight (heterosexual) people need to advocate for the rights of their gay colleagues in order to get their message across to a predominantly heterosexual audience. These straight people act as allies to their homosexual colleagues and are defined as “heterosexual people that believe that lesbian, gay and bisexual people should experience full equality in the workplace” [14]. The programme includes the belief that people, including gays, can perform better if they can

be themselves. The aim is to encourage people at all levels within organisations to assume active roles in making their workplaces more gay-friendly [14].

The workplace itself has social norms to which all employees have to abide. Most of these social norms have been created as expectations of the worker role. When an employee discloses that he is gay it often perpetuates a lack of understanding of workplace social norms. This ignorance of the topic can be reduced through education, or by means of micro affirmations. Micro affirmations are tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and listening to all employees whether heterosexual or homosexual [14]. The latter elements such as advocacy by heterosexuals on behalf of LGBT regarding discrimination in the workplace could be viewed as a useful strategy in the South African workplace.

Although there are limited literature on the role of occupational therapist in the rehabilitation of LGBT, the role of occupational therapist has been discussed in relation to the provision of intervention for issues related to sexuality [15]. With a strong focus on reducing anxiety amongst gay men, changing the attitude of gay men regarding sexual practices and providing education on safe sex practices [15]. Other areas where occupational therapists provide intervention for gay men are in the area of abuse and domestic violence [16]. The occupational therapy intervention consist of treating an individual`s functional problems examples improving hand function, advising on energy management, ergonomics, budgeting, communication skills, time management and work skills such as interview skills [16]. It is from this perspective that it could be argued that occupational therapists could be instrumental in enabling the participation of LGBT individuals in the workplace.

### **3.2 Aim**

The aim of the study was to explore the challenges that gay males experience in the workplace with regard to acquiring and maintaining their worker role in the Cape Town, South Africa .

### **3.3 Objectives**

- 3.3.1. To explore and describe the barriers that gay males experience with regard to acquiring and maintaining their worker roles.
- 3.3.2 To explore and describe the facilitatory factors that gay males experience with regard to acquiring and maintaining their worker roles.

## **4. Methods**

Qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive and includes describing the individual and setting, analyzing data for themes, and eventually drawing conclusions about its meaning [17]. The phenomenological approach may be referred to as a way of understanding people's perceptions and perspectives of the meaning of a particular situation or event [18]. Therefore, by using phenomenology as an approach, the researchers were able to gather information from the participants' perspectives and gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of homosexual males.

### **4.1 Study setting and the sampling strategy**

The setting in which the study was conducted was at the Pride Shelter Trust, in Oranjezicht, which is a trauma shelter that houses Men who Sleep with Men (MSM) who have recently undergone some kind of a crisis; and the Health 4 Men head office in Green Point, which provides clinics for MSM around the country, specialising in Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) diagnosis and treatment. These premises were selected as venues for the study, by the key informant who was the managing director of the shelter and the Health 4 Men organisation.

The researchers in the current study consisted of one qualified occupational therapist that has a PhD degree and four final year occupational therapy students from the University of the Western Cape. The process of recruiting participants was initiated by the researchers by means of an online search for gay organisations in the Cape Town area. All the participants had no direct or indirect relationships with the researchers. Four organisations were contacted and showed interest in the research project. These included: The Triangle project, The Inner Circle, Health 4 Men and Pride Shelter Trust. All four of these organizations provided services that ranged from social support, counselling, medical assistance and the temporary provision of shelter to the gays who were homeless. Purposive sampling was used in order to select the participants in this study. Participants were selected from two organisations according to a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria (See Table 2). Two participants were selected by means of an internal data base from the Triangle Project. After they were selected from the data base then the participants were telephonically contacted in order to inform them of the study. The remaining nine participants were selected from the data base, at the Health 4 Men clinic. Demographic information was collected from all participants, including the key informant, in order to contextualise the study (See Table 1).

The key informant is the managing director of the Pride Shelter Trust and Health 4 Men organisations. He was contacted and selected due to his experience of working with homosexual men and tackling issues of homo-prejudice in a variety of areas. The information obtained from the key informant would strengthen the information obtained from the study participants, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the study.

**Table 1: Demographic Information:**

<b><u>Participant number:</u></b>	<b><u>Age:</u></b>	<b><u>Race:</u></b>	<b><u>Religion / Spiritual Belief:</u></b>	<b><u>Job Title:</u></b>	<b><u>Length of time in job:</u></b>	<b><u>Marital / Relationship Status:</u></b>	<b><u>Length of time identified as gay:</u></b>
1	22	White	Open-minded	Lead Designer & Animator	1 ½ years	In a relationship	10 years
2	34	White	Christian base / Spiritual	Business Analyst in corporate IT & financial	6 years	In a relationship	12 years
3	46	Coloured	Spiritual	Marketing Manager	8 years	Partnered	26 years
4	56	White	Christian	Chief Executive	11 years	Single	30 + years
5	32	White	Dutch Reformed	Art Shop Sales Assistant	6 months	Single	Since a young boy
6	37	White	Agnostic	Senior Support Engineer	About 10 years	Single	About 12 years
7	39	White	Spiritual	Internet Developer / Webmaster	6 years	Married	9 years
8	47	White	Christian / Spiritual	Admin Officer / IT / Support / Accounts	5 years	Married	30 years
9	20	White	Spiritual / Non-believer	Sales / Motor Industry	8 months	Partnered	10 years
10	21	White	Secular Humanist	AEA / ECT-S	4 years	Involved	21 years
11	29	White	Roman Catholic	Personal Assistant	1 year	Single	Whole life
12 In-depth interview participant	25	White	Spiritual / Not religious	Data Administrator	Almost 2 years	Single	25 years
13 Key Informant	52	White	Atheist	Project Director at Health 4 Men	2 years	Married	32 years

**Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

<b><u>Inclusion Criteria</u></b>	<b><u>Exclusion Criteria</u></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Participants must be males between the ages of 18-55.</u></li> <li>• <u>Participants from all race groups were included in this study.</u></li> <li>• <u>The participants had to have been employed for at least 6 months after being released from prison as this would have provided a time period for them to have worked and therefore speak from experience.</u></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Individuals were excluded if they had additional psychiatric diagnosis according to the DSM IV</u></li> </ul>

#### **4.2 Data Collection**

Bloor, Frankland, Thomas and Robson [19] argued that the ideal size of a focus group should be between six to eight participants. Two focus groups of approximately 90 minutes in duration, were conducted to encourage the twelve participants to engage with each other. The focus groups were of an open nature, which meant that the first focus group had eleven participants, ten of which participated in the second focus group with an additional, new participant. In the second focus group there was evidence of recurring information, therefore indicating data saturation. The focus group questions were open ended, the researchers asked probing questions based on the participant`s response. Some of the questions included: Could you describe to me whether you experienced any challenges in doing your tasks in the workplace? As a gay male, could you describe to me your experiences of working? Could you describe to me whether there was anything in the workplace that assisted you in doing you work? Two in-depth interviews, of about 90 minutes each, were conducted with one participant. Another 45 minute interview was conducted with a key informant.

To bracket means to suspend or lay aside what is known about the experience being studied [20]. Bracketing enabled the researchers to become aware of their own biases and perceptions about the project. The researchers utilised bracketing by declaring their own biases before the study as well as during the course of the study. This was ensured through the use of a reflective journal and regular discussions with a mentor (expert in qualitative research) about the project. The researchers gained access to the participants by initially contacting the participants telephonically and explaining the study as well as the ethical issues such as confidentiality related to the project. The researchers also described their role in the project, once the potential participants were interested then the study was described face to face to the participants providing them with the opportunity to ask any questions related to the study before providing consent to engage in the study.

### **4.3 Data analysis**

The method of qualitative data analysis as described by Morse and Field [21] were used in this study. The process involved the coding of information, thereafter the organisation of the codes into categories and then the grouping of the categories into themes that described the lived experience of the participants in this study. Strategies such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were used in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data [22]. Credibility was ensured by the dense description of the lived experience of the research participants. The descriptions of the lived experience of the participants were audio-recorded as they were talking and the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim to ensure that each participant's story was captured in their own narrative. Credibility was also ensured by means of member checking whereby a summary of the findings were reviewed by the participants in order to ensure its accuracy. Credibility was also enhanced by triangulation. Triangulation is described as a means of establishing different patterns of agreement based on more than one method of observation, information gathering or the use of more than one data source in order to establish credibility [23]. Within this study triangulation was ensured by the use of more than one method of collecting data, for example, face to face interviews and focus groups. Each piece of data, when added to the previous data, strengthened or confirmed previous findings thus reinforcing the triangulation of the data. Transferability was ensured by the detailed description of the research methods, contexts, detailed description of the participants and the lived experience of the participants. Dependability was ensured by means of dense descriptions, peer examination and triangulation. The study was documented in such a manner that the readers could follow a decision trail. Confirmability was ensured by the process of reflexivity whereby the researcher's own biases or assumptions were made apparent by means of a reflexive journal. In the current study the research findings were purely from the perspective of the participants.

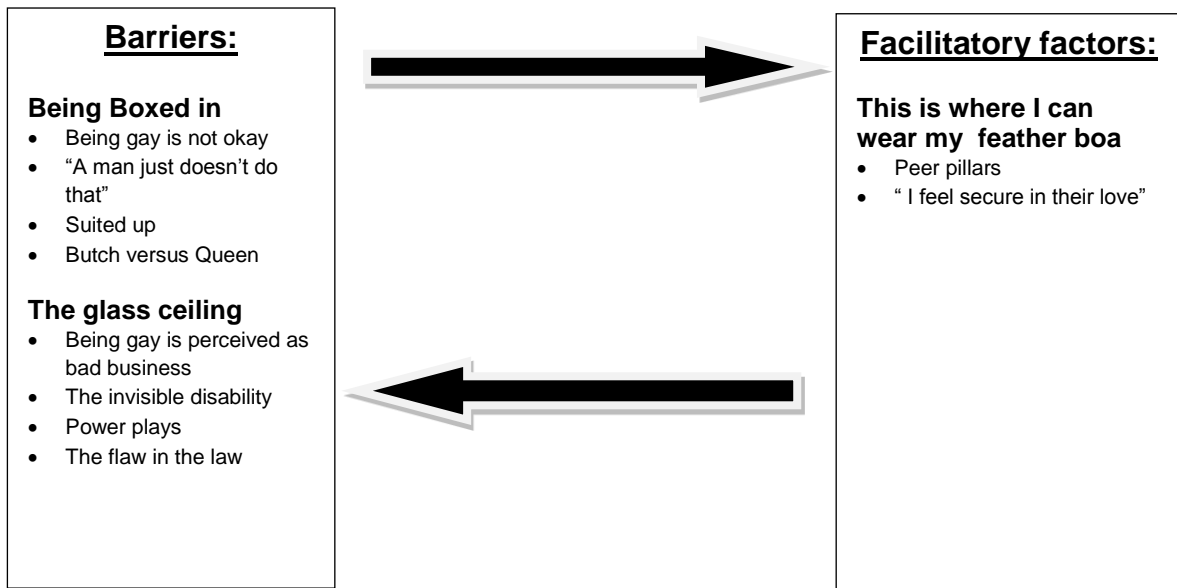
### **5 Ethics**

Informants were contacted by telephone to explain the aim, purpose and process of the study. The details with regard to the study together with the consent forms were fully disclosed to the participants on their arrival at the interview session. All the participants gave their written consent to participate in the study as well as to have the findings of the study published in journals. The ethical standard of this study was approved by the University of the Western Cape.



## 6 Findings

**Figure 1 Graphical Representation of the research findings**



## **Description of Figure 1**

The barriers and facilitators identified in the study affects the ex- offenders ability to adapt to their worker role. The findings of this study suggest that rehabilitation professionals should try to eliminate the barriers and incorporate the facilitators identified in this study. A detailed explanation of the findings will follow in the section below.

The following themes i.e. “Being boxed in”; “The glass ceiling” and “This is where I can wear my feather boa” will be described in the following section.

### **6.1 Theme One: Being Boxed in (Barrier)**

The first theme that emerged was called “being boxed in” which was viewed as a barrier in the context of this study. In the workplace there are many stereotypes which exist in regards to homosexual men, these stereotypes ranged from the type of work that a gay male could do to the type of clothing that a gay male has to wear. The participants felt that they are often put into little boxes or categories, in which freedom and diversity is restricted. In addition, these stereotypes habitually draw homo-prejudice within the heterosexual culture. The following quote substantiates this.

*“we as gay people don’t want to be boxed... we don’t want to be in those little boxes...”*  
(P 1)

#### **Being gay is not okay**

Society portrays being gay as bad. The participants expressed how the media plays a big role in reinforcing stereotypes, as whatever people see, read or hear is what they perceive as the norm. If an individual differs from this, they are viewed as being bad people and are then rejected. The individuals added that they get judged, based on their sexual orientation before people get to know who they are and what work abilities they possess. Below are quotes from the participants to demonstrate how “being gay is not okay”.

*“You see it on media, you see it in religion, and we indoctrinate it. Everything kind of says bad, bad, bad!”* (P 11)  
*“So for me, the gayness, or being gay was always everything. It’s seen as a negative thing.”* (P 1)

#### **A man just doesn't do that**

The research findings portrayed that certain careers are stereotyped as being either more male or female orientated such as engineering and designing respectively. The following quote validates this statement:

*“I wanted to go into arts and all that, but that wasn’t a thing that you did because, it was just err, not the thing to do because you know, a man just doesn’t do that.”(P 3)*

### **Suited Up**

The participants felt that the corporate work environment (usually described as individuals having white collar type of jobs, working in offices and earning good salaries) was the least accepting of the gay culture, compared to other work environments. It is expected in the corporate work environment that employees conduct themselves in a certain, masculine manner, with reference to the way they dress, speak and interact in the workplace. According to the participants, these masculine work expectations restrict the diversity of their expression, as gay men, within their worker role. Below are quotes from two participants to display how being employed in the corporate world was challenging for them as homosexual men.

*“I’ve been a male PA for 11 years and it’s been really tough and, um, serving men, has always been, it’s like, really been tough, you know? Cause in the corporate realm, you know you can’t (referring to being openly gay), it’s not something that’s smiled upon.” (P 11)*

*“I mean, you have absolute, like jail, in terms of how you supposed to act and who you are and what you supposed to be... where the corporate was stifling, it was too, it was literally suffocating.”(P 12)*

### **Butch versus Queen.**

The more feminine homosexual men experience more homo-prejudice than the masculine homosexual men. It unfolded that the more feminine men were associated with a loss of power, as people assume that they are the ones that get penetrated during sexual intercourse. Hence people have less respect for them and discriminate against them more. Below are two quotes which validate this category of “Butch versus Queen.”

*“It’s the pe-ne-tra-ted that elicits the negatives (stereotypes and discrimination) because that’s what threatens society...” (Key informant)*

*“So what we find in people who often attract the most negative projections (stereotypes and discrimination) are the effeminate identified men.” (Key informant)*

## **6.2 Theme two: The glass ceiling (Barrier)**

The second theme that emerged has been named the glass ceiling. A glass ceiling represents a barrier that's transparent and that cannot be overcome. Although some of the participants had achieved and reached levels of great success within their companies, many of them still feel that their homosexuality hinders their progression within their respective workplaces. The following quote substantiates this.

*"I'm able to go and not any further because of the fact that I'm gay, so definitely the glass ceiling is there and I am going to have to take a very big sledgehammer to actually knock through that" ( P 3)*

### **Being gay is perceived as bad business**

Several participants explained that when representing their companies, they feel compelled to tone down their personalities, tone down their voices and tone down their hand movements, as these traits are perceived as unprofessional. They fear that if the company fails to close a deal or loses clients it will be attributed to their sexual orientation. A quote made by one of the participants is evidence of this.

*"like in a professional environment if you don't tone it down in certain instances, and if you lose the business, your boss is going to turn around and say it's because you gay" (P 4)*

Another participant validated this notion and explained that despite his high work standard, his company still selected the clients with which he could interact, as they perceived that his homosexual orientation would negatively impact the image of the company. He stated:

*"They saw me as good enough to do the work but they didn't see me as good enough to represent the work... I was only allowed to interact with gay men or gay friendly people"*  
(P 12)

### **The Invisible Disability**

In this context, an invisible disability refers to people's negative attitudes and associated behaviours projected towards their gay colleagues that limits the gay male's ability to progress in the workplace. This acts as a barrier to these gay men progressing within the workplace and has disabling effects on their work performance. They are aware that they are missing out on job opportunities and promotions because of their sexual orientation; however, they are unable to prove it. Thus these disabling effects are invisible. The invisible disability has been described by two participants, which may be seen in the quotes that follow.

*“anything that is not normal...the way I speak, the way I dress, the way I act, my mannerisms, or anything like that, you notice it straight away (clicks fingers), and peoples' body language and how they treat you changes” (P 1)*

*“but if someone is homophobic in your workplace and your boss is a homophobic they not gonna dismiss you for being a homosexual...they going to find every other reason and they will follow the process but it won't be because your are homosexual” (P 3)*

The participants elaborated that coming in and out of the closet continuously and having the fear of being judged, required immense amounts of energy, as they lead a double life, by assuming different roles at home and work. Problems tend to emerge as the two aspects of their lives spill over into each other, which causes anxiety and distress for the participants. The quotes below are evidence of this and highlight the category exceptionally well.

*“I keep myself contained until I get home. Then I kind of (pushes hands and arms away from body to emphasize the feeling of letting go)...scream and say, ‘F#\*k, I suck c#\*k!’. I wanna say something, I wanna shout!” (P 2).*

### **Power plays**

Several participants explained that the higher their positions in the workplace, the less they were discriminated against, this is related to the glass ceiling theme as the participants were of the perception that they could not seek promotion opportunities due to their sexual identity. On the other hand, those homosexual employees who worked on lower levels and perhaps lacked power status in their companies, experienced more challenges which included fear of being transparent about their sexuality to work colleagues and clients and the need to behave in a manner that does not allow them to be their true selves. The following statements captivate these realities.

*“I think it's also got to do with your position, where you are in the corporate industry. If you're a big shot guy you're not gonna give a shit about what you do and what you say. You gonna be more open and more free about it because, 'I kind of pay your pay check at the end of the day.' But if you're in my position, and you're a bit lower, way lower than anyone above you...You gonna straighten up and act a certain way, cause you have to. I feel like I have to...” (P 1)*

*“I've also found that the higher up you become, the more open you are. Because you got a status, you know. And when you, particularly when you talking to the people who work for you. Um, there's not that fear. They can't do anything to you...” (P 10)*

### **The flaw in the law**

Despite the government's efforts to protect all South African employees and citizens, by including equality clauses for all within the constitution the process of complaining or reporting an incident, within any workplace, is often long, tiring and tedious. The process is also flawed as there is no way to ensure the process can remain confidential. This is evident in the quotes that follow.

*"is that somewhere between the HR (Human Resource) people trying to keep a secret (the participant`s sexual identity) and keep that confidentiality, somewhere...that comes out and that risk always exists" (P 2)*

*"Look, you can't legislate attitude (discriminatory attitude), you just can't" (key informant)*

### **6.3 Theme 3: This is where I can wear my 'feather boa' (Facilitator)**

The third theme that emerged has been named "this is where I wear my feather boa". According to the participants, the feather boa (a long scarf made of feathers) represents a sense of gay pride and the embracing of their sexuality. This theme encompasses support systems experienced by the participants.

#### **Peer pillars**

Peer pillars refers to colleagues in the workplace with whom the participants have disclosed their sexual orientation, and have proven to be supportive and accepting. Due to their support and acceptance, the participants feel free to be themselves with those people. The support of their peers also helped them to feel more comfortable and at ease within their respective workplaces, and thus allows them to engage more fully in their work tasks. One participant said:

*"In all my work environments there's been one or two colleagues that have been supportive"(P3)*

*"With the juniors, it sort of bonded us..... I think it made us become closer" (P 12)*

Another participant substantiated that the type of exposure one experiences desensitizes one to homosexual men, thus making work environments more comfortable. He said:

*'He (Boss) explained to me, that when he grew up, he grew up with a mom that was in the theatre, and he was dressed up with all the drag queens so everyone thought he was gay, so I think it's also because of the person who*

*you are working with, your bosses what their experiences was with gay people are and have they been exposed to it, makes a big difference.’ (P1)*

### **I feel very secure in their love**

Support and acceptance from friends and family members contributed to the participants' confidence to truly be themselves around the people they love, without any false pretence. This is often a place in which they find comfort and love, which is a stark contrast to the prejudiced environments some of the participants experience in their places of work. Even though support from family and friends were found to be invaluable to the participants who experienced this, not all of the participants had the benefit of relying on their friends and families for support. The statements below, made by two of the participants expresses the benefit of having this support.

*“for other people it’s such a gradual thing and they have supportive systems whatever it may be from their family, from their friends, and it’s not traumatic” (P4)*

*“I have great support. I have an older brother who is gay, gay identified, so he basically made a path for me with regards to my parents and things like that.” (P12)*

## **4 Discussion**

The theme “boxed in” illustrates the barriers that homosexuals experienced in the work place. Stereotypes were seen as an example of a barrier that homosexuals experience. Stereotypes could be defined as shared sets of beliefs about, or shared representations of, groups or social categories [24]. In this particular study, the participants experienced stereotypes of a negative nature, which they then internalised. These internalised stereotypes act as barriers to the participants within their workplace. In the focus groups, the participants described their experience of some of these stereotypes in the categories, “Being gay is not okay” and “a man just doesn’t do that”. Their internalisation or personalising of these stereotypes caused them to question their work abilities and career choice, as they are treated and received in a manner that says, “Being gay is not okay”. The participants were of the perception that the manner in which people look at the participants and the behaviour of society towards them is contradictory to legislation, as one cannot legislate an attitude. It was established that the participants perceived further stereotypes within the corporate or business world, whereby they felt unaccepted and judged. In the corporate and business world, employees have a particular masculine manner in which they conduct themselves in the workplace, which the participants felt was restricting and limiting for gay people. Work discrimination can be defined as the unjust and negative treatment of workers based on personal attributes that are

irrelevant to job performance [10]. From the category “power plays” and “the invisible disability”, the participants described varying degrees of discrimination from being denied work opportunities or promotions with no clear explanation, to obvious discrimination such as homophobic remarks by colleagues or clients. Researchers have suggested that work discrimination has a profound effect on the well-being of this population [9]. This was described by the participants, as they discussed the impact of the discrimination they experienced on their psychological well-being, such as feelings of frustration, and an incoherent identity causing distress.

The findings of this research as described by “power plays” indicate that many of the participants that identified themselves as gay males fear disclosing their sexual identity, or exposing their true selves in the workplace, as this factor may elicit either blunt or subtle discrimination. The consequences of disclosure in the workplace, presents two main challenges: “true identity” and “false identity”. True identity is described as, when the homosexual discloses their sexual identity to work colleagues, which leads to discrimination and occupational injustice in the workplace [25]. This was expressed by several participants that had disclosed or had been involuntarily “outed”. False identity refers to when the gay individual decides not to disclose his sexual orientation to his fellow co-workers in an attempt to protect himself from ridicule and discrimination at work. This means he has to behave in a certain manner to avoid suspicion, which makes him untrustworthy to colleagues, and ultimately discrimination may still be experienced.

The constitution of the Republic of South Africa states equality for all citizens no matter their race, gender, sexual orientation and religion. However, these laws cannot monitor or legislate people's attitudes and thus cannot guarantee the absence of discrimination in the work environment [1]. The participants felt that reporting discrimination within the workplace becomes tedious, as the case first needs to follow the correct protocol, and through this process, many people within the company come to know of the person's sexual identity. Therefore, confidentiality can never be ensured, as described in the category, “the flaw in the law”. This brought the researchers to the realisation that despite the progressive South African constitution, the process of reporting workplace homo-prejudice is still ineffective due to the flaw of human error in correctly implementing discrimination workplace policies. Rostosky and Riggle [11] further highlights the importance of institutional and organizational policies, to address internalised homophobia and psychological distress and thus, allow for fulfilment of one's worker role. From an occupational therapy perspective the barriers that the participants experience lead to forms of occupational injustice called occupational deprivation and occupational marginalisation. Occupational deprivation is defined as a state of prolonged preclusion from engagement in occupations of necessity and or meaning due to factors outside the control of the individual [26]. The participants in this study experienced occupational deprivation as they often had to work in intolerable



conditions fearing that they may lose their jobs or experience discrimination. Occupational marginalization could be described as a non- direct discrimination to bar certain groups for example, from paid occupations, recreational activities, regulatory policies, funding and laws [27]. Within the context of the current study some of the participants felt that even though discrimination was not tolerated according to the South African constitution, gays were often marginalized when it came to promotion in the workplace as well as the selection of candidates for specific jobs. It is evident from the above, that many challenges were experienced by the participants within their places of work. These challenges ultimately act as barriers to their worker role, either indirectly by impacting on their self-esteem, confidence in their work abilities and psychological health, or directly by causing them to be denied work opportunities, promotions and an environment conducive to working.

### **Facilitators**

From one participant's perspective, gay men might develop workplace friendships as a means of helping them to sustain a viable sense of self at work. Supportive friendships have been proven to help people reflect critically on the processes of identity building within gendered work contexts [28]. The coming out or disclosure process doesn't only result in discrimination but also provided opportunities for individuals to establish new friends or strengthen existing friendships. Supportive friendships provide opportunities which assist the participants in expressing different dimensions of themselves in different contexts, including their work environments. Companionship and sociability obtained from workplace friendships, such as spending time together in the office, travelling to business conferences and dining out demonstrate the supportive function of workplace friendships [28], and has proven to have a positive impact on enhancing the experience of organisational life for the participants. Considering that the minority of the participants have the benefit of experiencing supportive work friendships, one can assume that they are deprived from the opportunities to experience identity building at work and establishing supportive friendships.

In the Stonewall programme series, “straight ally” is a term used to describe heterosexual people who believe that gay people should experience full equality in the workplace. Good straight allies recognize that gay people can perform better if they can be themselves. Those participants, who experienced supportive colleagues, found that they had straight allies. Supportive family and friends provide the participants with a space in which they feel safe to share, and express the difficulties they experience in the work place. This comfortable space and the sharing of information have been identified as therapeutic and valuable in the participants’ lives. It is evident that the facilitatory factors of having supportive colleagues, friends and family, allowed the participants a sense of relief. Supportive colleagues allowed

them to feel more comfortable in the workplace and supportive family and friends provided them with a space to voice their workplace concerns and difficulties. All of which reduced the stress and tension experienced by the participants due to the challenges they faced in their workplaces. Thus, these facilitators also enabled the participants to make sense of and deal with these barriers, improving their view of themselves as workers and the ability to engage in their work occupations.

## **5 Implications for occupational therapy**

Brotman et al. [29] verified that service providers of LGBT living in the community need to realize the challenges that LGBT face and develop specialized services, and eliminate discrimination faced by these populations ([Brotman et al., 2007](#)). It could therefore be argued that occupational therapists (OT) can utilise the Ottawa Charter's three tools of health promotion, advocating, enabling and mediation to effect change for gay males in workplaces in South Africa [30]. The OT could use advocacy by means of lobbying for the elimination of discrimination of gays in the workplace. Example, employers often seek ways to better the work environment for all employees, therefore the researchers recommend social gathering and team building events for all companies and employees to build a better interpersonal relationship. The majority of the participants felt that intervention needs to occur within the educational system, before people enter the job market. The education system includes educating learners about different cultures, not only in South Africa but in the world, with the aim of creating insight as well as a greater understanding of the diverse cultures that exist.

The OT could use the concept of mediation by developing a culture of acceptance and tolerance in the workplace and schools. Schools have been included, as it is here that homo-prejudice and other forms of prejudice begin. Thus, by tackling it in the school arena, it may help future workers to be less discriminatory towards their co-workers. Practical examples of improving the well-being of homosexual males in the workplace could include facilitating cultural sensitivity workshops, life skills groups and support groups. Jackson [31] also proposed the need for occupational therapists to address the sexual orientation of their patients before starting their actual occupational therapy sessions. Bedell [32] viewed these sexual orientation programmes as special programs that should be added to the standard therapy.

The concept of enabling could be used by improving the work skills of gays, this could include improving their life skills. These life skills include coping skills, stress management skills and assertiveness training. Other practical examples could include conducting self-esteem workshops and workplace discussion groups (groups where heterosexual and gays develop a neutral platform in order to discuss mechanisms of overcoming challenges in the workplace). The latter examples will greatly enhance the workers skills in order to cope within the work environment and fulfil one's worker role. It is suggested that further research be undertaken in different contexts in other countries in order explore the barriers and facilitators

experienced by homosexuals, gays and lesbians in order to develop strategies that would improve their well being in the work place.

## **6 Limitations of the study**

One major limitation that was identified in this study was the inability to generalise the findings of this study to the larger population due to the inherent nature of qualitative research and the limited number of study participants. Another limitation was the fact that only male participants participated in the study.

## **7 Conclusion**

The study findings clearly depicted the many barriers experienced by homosexual men and how this negatively impacts their worker role. Minimal facilitatory factors exist, to assist homosexual males in regard to their worker role. This study provides the evidence that homo-prejudice still exists in the given context, one may assume that this is true for other places across South Africa but this will require further investigation. Homo prejudice has myriad effects which impact not only on homosexual men's worker role and work occupation; but their well-being, psychological and physical health. This significantly highlights the great need for occupational therapy intervention in the lives of these homosexual men, and their workplaces.

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