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Navigating Cisheteronormativity in Military and Police Training: Experiences of Black Gay Male Soldiers and Police Officers in South Africa

Tshepo B. Maake

Department of Sociology, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The South African historical research proves that military training camps during apartheid were sites of cisheteronormativity, which recognised cisgender heterosexual men and informed the ill-treatment of gay male recruits who were exposed to harsh conversion therapies. Due to limited research, little is known about gay male soldiers and police officers' encounters with cisheteronormative occupational cultures in their training experiences post-1994. This study explores how cisheteronormativity manifests and shapes Black gay men's negotiation of sexual identity disclosure, agency, and belonging in the male-dominated military and police training spaces. Through qualitative in-depth interviews with 24 Black gay soldiers and police officers who underwent police and military training, the study established that Black gay male soldiers and police officers are often propelled by cisheteronormative ideologies and occupational cultures in training spaces to carefully negotiate their sexual identities. The findings reveal that acceptance and tolerance in these contexts is conditional, often dependent on concealment, silence, or conformity, while disclosure and visibility risked exclusion but also enabled resistance and redefined belonging. The findings contribute to our knowledge of how cisheteronormative occupational cultures operate as oppressive forces, especially within the South African military and police training spaces, and how Black gay men's agency challenges and destabilises them, exposing the fragility of hegemonic heterosexual masculinities. Consequently, I argue that it is necessary to challenge cisheteronormative ideologies and heteronormative male occupational cultures in order to promote and achieve the social inclusion and integration of Black gay men, in such military and police training spaces as explored in this study.

KEYWORDS
cisheteronormativity; Black gay men; military training; police training; masculinity; belonging; occupational culture; South Africa

Introduction

Historical research on the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) reports that the apartheid military occupational culture was cisheteronormative in that heterosexuality

CONTACT Tshepo B. Maake emaaketb@unisa.ac.za Department of Sociology, University of South Africa, Office 9–11 Winnie Madikizela Mandela Building, Preller Street, Muckleneuk, Pretoria, 0002, South Africa

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was a requirement for men to join the force (Kaplin 2004; Mankayi 2011; Van Zyl et al. 1999). Gay men who joined the military during the apartheid period were exposed to homophobia in their training and later forced to undergo conversion therapy that was initiated through the aversion project that took place from 1969 to 1987 (Belkin and Canaday 2011; Celliers and Heinecken 2000; Kaplin 2004). Consequently, gay men endured deliberate physical harm from psychiatric military personnel and suffered human rights abuses emanating from the hostile conversion therapy that they never consented to (Kaplin 2001; Van Zyl et al. 1999). Due to the limited literature available on gay men's experiences in post-apartheid South Africa military training, there is limited knowledge on how the abolition of the aversion project and the legal recognition of gay rights has affected the occupational culture and treatment of gay men. Although there is a lack of historical research on the treatment of gay people in the South African Police Services (SAPS), the organisation has established itself as cisheteropatriarchal as it upholds masculine ideals that are associated with a heterosexual male occupational culture (Faull 2013; Martin 1992). Cisheteropatriarchy is a term that recognises the interconnection between heterosexism and patriarchy in privileging cisgender heterosexual men in various social, political and economic contexts (Leyva, McNeill, and Duran 2022). The heterosexual male occupational culture had rendered gay men's experiences in the SAPS during apartheid invisible. It is for this reason, that this study seeks to investigate the training experiences of gay soldiers and police officers in contemporary South African military and police services, with a particular focus on how they negotiate sexual identity disclosure and belonging amidst cisheteronormativity in their training.

Various studies in South Africa have established that cisheteronormative ideologies are evident in various social spaces and inform the homophobia and ill-treatment of Black gay men and other sexual minority individuals (Brown 2018; Mkhize and Mthembu 2023; Ramalepe and Asamani 2023). However, South African literature on cisheteronormativity in traditionally male-dominated workplaces, particularly the police and military organisations, remains minimal, and this more narrowly focused study brings to the forefront Black gay men's experiences of training to become soldiers and police officers amidst cisheteronormative occupational cultures. This study acknowledges the reality that the South African legal recognition of sexual minority rights has not transitioned to complete acceptance and tolerance in various social spaces and seeks through this study to unpack the negotiation of Black gay male identities in military and police training spaces. To address the identified gaps, the study seeks to answer the question: How do Black gay men negotiate sexual identity disclosure and belonging amid cisheteronormativity in police and military training spaces? It is important to study Black gay men's experiences in training spaces because these spaces represent their first encounter with the military and police environment and has implications on their social integration. It is imperative to mention that the paper focuses solely on the training experiences of these gay men and does not intend to cover the whole experience of working in the police and military.

The paper begins by reviewing historical literature on the experiences of gay recruits in the apartheid military and police services. It then examines literature on cisheteronormative occupational cultures and their impact on sexual minorities in the workplace. Building on this, a theoretical framework is established using Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinities and Adrienne Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality. Following this, the research design guiding the study is outlined. The paper proceeds with an

analysis of the findings and a discussion of key insights and contributions. It concludes with recommendations for dismantling cisheteronormative male occupational cultures to foster more inclusive and non-oppressive work environments, including in South African military and police training spaces.

Historical overview: gay men's training experiences in the South African police and military

Historically, gay identities were not recognised by the apartheid government and were legally sanctioned through the Immorality Act of 1957, which prohibited sexual relations between men (Gevisser 1994). This anti-gay legislation informed the ill-treatment and violation of Black gay men's rights as they experienced a double oppression based on not only their race but also their sexual identity. However, there was resistance from Black gay men and lesbians in the 1980s that led to the formation of inclusive lesbian and gay organisations, such as the Gays and Lesbians Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW), an organisation that was led by Simon Nkoli, a Black gay anti-apartheid activist. Nkoli argued that he cannot be free as a black man if he is not free as a gay man, and this was also reflected in GLOW's liberation movement, which combined a resilient anti-apartheid agenda with public assertiveness around gay identity (De Vos 1996). The anti-gay legislation of the apartheid system also filtered into the military and police sectors, but due to the vastness of the history of gay and lesbian liberation movements in South Africa this cannot be fully covered in one paper. I therefore prioritise the historical context of gay identities in military and police training in line with the focus of this paper. During the apartheid period, the South African Police (SAP), currently SAPS, comprised of mainly white male police officers, and embodied predominantly white Afrikaner supremacist masculinity (Marks 2008). While historical research documents the exclusion and subordination of women in the SAP (Potgieter 2012), it has neglected the existence and experiences of gay men, leaving a gap in comprehending the historical constructions of gay identities in the police. Despite the lack of evidence on the existence of gay identities in the historical SAP, research illustrates that the organisation was shaped by the apartheid white Afrikaner Christian religious ideology that informed the criminalisation of gay and lesbian identities in South Africa (Marks 2008). Consequently, homophobia was rife during apartheid and this likely informed the invisibility of gay police officers. Although the experiences of gay men in the historical SAP training spaces have not been well-documented, it is necessary to pay attention to the contemporary SAPS because current research demonstrates that the organisation remains male-dominated and proclaims masculine ideals that embrace heterosexual male occupational cultures (Faull 2013; Martin 1992)

Contrary to the SAPS, the SANDF's history on the training experiences of gay men has been extensively explored, providing us with a picture of how gay identities were perceived in the apartheid military. Before the democratisation of South Africa, the apartheid military was known as South African Defence Force (SADF). The apartheid SADF was divided into the permanent and conscript forces. The permanent force could be positioned in leadership roles, while the conscript force could only occupy subordinate positions (Callister 2007). The SADF's policy on homosexuality was grounded in the conscription system, as it did not allow for the employment of gay men into the

permanent force (Van Zyl et al. 1999). Gay conscripts were considered to have "behavioural disorders", hence their exclusion from occupying leadership positions. Due to its preoccupation with ensuring that the permanent force of the military did not include gay men, the SADF's recruitment process included questions around individual's sexual identities, and where it was established that potential recruits were gay or took part in what was termed "homosexual acts", recruitment was discontinued (Belkin and Canaday 2011). Members who did not engage in "homosexual acts" but confessed some tendencies described as gay were sent for rehabilitation, as it was believed that they could be cured (Celliers and Heinecken 2000; Heinecken 1998). However, gay men who were employed through conscription were exposed to ill-treatment and hostile cisheteronormative masculine workplace cultures, as they were perceived as a threat to the heroic discourse of a masculine soldier which was informed by the notion of heterosexual male dominance (Belkin and Canaday 2011; Mankayi 2011).

The aversion project that took place from 1969 to 1987 in the South African military psychiatric hospitals, included a kind of electric shock therapy that attempted to change the patients' "gay behaviour patterns" by associating them with pain administered through electric shock (Van Zyl et al. 1999). There was no evidence to prove that these procedures were effective; however, doctors in the military hospitals were allowed to conduct them, without the permission of the gay conscripts who were forced to consent to conversion therapy that they were not fully informed about (Kaplin 2001). The aversion project was abolished in 1987 but left gay people with scars and trauma. When South Africa became a democracy in 1994, the new constitution included the protection of sexual minority identities and abolished all policies that unfairly discriminated against gay men and lesbians, including in the military and police. The unfair policies were repelled post-1994, but extensive research in South Africa demonstrates that some workplaces continue to embody cisheteronormative male occupational cultures, which hinder the full acceptance and tolerance of gay identities. The following section reviews literature on cisheteronormative ideologies and their implications on the presence and visibility of gay identities in male-dominated workplaces and industries, globally and within South Africa.

Sexuality and cisheteronormative masculine occupational cultures in workplaces

Scholars remind us that traditionally male-dominated workplaces epitomise dominant heterosexual masculine occupational cultures that are informed by normative gender divisions of labour that dictate which occupations men and women can occupy (Benya 2013; McDowell and Schaffner 2011). The gender division of labour hinders women opportunities from gaining employment in traditionally male-dominated workplaces. In cases when women successfully penetrate these workplaces, they are exposed to cultures of discrimination and exclusion (Benya 2013; Heinecken 2019). However, it is not only women who encounter exclusion and discrimination in these workplaces, because the occupational cultures also tend to be heteronormative. Heteronormativity is defined by Bell (2009: 115) as "a powerful but often unmarked set of assumptions, practices and beliefs that constantly reinforce the normalness and naturalness of heterosexuality as the only normal, natural form of sexuality". Warner (1991) warns that heteronormativity

has a totalising tendency that suppress LGBTIQ+ identities in various social spaces. These conceptualisations informed the recent term, cisheteronormativity, which refers to the simultaneous social regulation of sex, gender and sexuality that reinforces conformity to a cisgender institution of heterosexuality (Marchia and Sommer 2019).

Accordingly, cisheteronormativity is produced and reproduced in traditional male-dominated workplaces to enforce the binary sex–gender–sexuality norm that exalts heterosexual identifying cisgender men and leads to the construction of gay identities as peculiar to these working environments (Reingardė 2010; Speice 2020; Willis 2012). The cisheteronormative occupational cultures of male-dominated workplaces entrench what Rich (1980) terms "compulsory heterosexuality" highlighting the social assumption that all male employees are innately heterosexual, erasing the existence of gay identities within these workplaces. However, various international and local literature found that gay men exist in traditionally male-dominated workplaces and their sexual and masculine identities matter because they are used by their heterosexual counterparts to exclude and discriminate against them (Mennicke et al. 2018; Willis 2012). Studies from the global north particularly the European Union, United Kingdom and United States report that male-dominated workplaces tend to embrace heteronormative ideologies that recognise male heterosexuality as ideal requirement to the work performed in these workplaces (Covin 2015; Gurung et al. 2018; Mennicke et al. 2018; Reingardė 2010; Rumens and Broomfield 2012; Speice 2020).

Collins (2015) explains that male-dominated workplaces comprise work that is physically laborious and risky and constructed as male and masculine. Accordingly, research found that dominant ideas about masculinity in male-dominated workplaces emphasise heterosexuality, validating and affording heterosexual men the power to dominate and position gay men below them (Reingardė 2010; Rumens and Broomfield 2012). Gay men who work in traditionally male-dominated workplaces often struggle with tolerance and acceptance due to the broader dominant cisheteronormative ideologies that determine heterosexuality as a key component of being acknowledged as a man (Carey et al. 2022; Collins 2015; Maake, Rugunanan, and Smuts 2023). In a study by Reingardė (2010) on heteronormative ideologies in Lithuanian workplaces, it was found that male-dominated workplaces promoted heteronormative masculine ideals that hindered gay men from talking about their sexual identities and forcing them to pass as heterosexual. Similarly, a UK study found that gay police officers experienced exclusion, discrimination and homophobic slurs due to heteronormative ideologies held by heterosexual colleagues. Like these European studies, research into the United States military found that although the Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) policy was repealed in 2011, gay service members continue to experience heteronormative ideologies that inform acts of discrimination, such as sexual harassment, offensive speech and intimidation (Carey et al. 2022; Gurung et al. 2018). These studies are evidence of how heteronormative ideologies entrench discrimination and exclusion in workplaces and end up forcing sexual minority employees to conceal their sexual identities.

International research indicate that silence is a coping mechanism that gay men who work in male-dominated workplaces employ to avoid exclusion and minimise the pressures of fulfilling heteronormative expectations (Collins 2015; Reingardė 2010; Speice 2020). Although little focus has been placed on male-dominated workplaces specifically by South African researchers, some scholars who have explored these spaces found

that the cisheteronormative occupational cultures of these organisations compel Black gay men to conceal their sexual identities and pass as heterosexual (Maake, Rugunanan, and Smuts 2023; Moodie, Ndatshe, and Sibuyi 1988). Maake, Rugunanan, and Smuts's (2023) study on the experiences of Black gay mineworkers in the post-apartheid South African mining industry established that they are often exposed to intolerant heteronormative workplace cultures that expose them to discrimination from their heterosexual male colleagues, instilling fear and forcing them into silence. Broader literature on sexual minority identities in South African workplaces demonstrates that Black gay men are exposed to heteronormative ideologies that force them to conceal their sexual identities (Mawambi 2014; Olney and Musabayana 2016; Ramalepe and Asamani 2023; Tshisa and van der Walt 2021). However, most of these studies are focused broadly on the overall experiences of LGBTIQ+, with a narrowed focus on gay identities in masculinised male-dominated workplaces and none of these studies focus on the cisheteronormative ideologies in the contemporary South African police and military spaces. Our knowledge of cisheteronormative ideologies in police and military occupational cultures is based on historical research that focused on experiences before South Africa became a democracy (see Belkin and Canaday 2011; Faull 2013; Van Zyl et al. 1999). I argue that it is important to pay particular attention to gay men's experiences and the cisheteronormative culture of male-dominated workplaces because international research suggest that male-dominated workplaces tend to embrace a predominantly cisheteronormative occupational cultures that exclude gay men. As such, paying attention to gay men's experiences of and encounters with cisheteronormative occupational cultures in a study of police and military training contributes significantly to our understandings of how heteronormativity facilitates the negotiation of gay men's identities at the start of their careers.

Compulsory heterosexuality in male-dominated masculine training spaces: a theoretical framework

In theorising masculinities, Connell (2000) argues that in different cultures and time periods of history, gender is constructed differently, and people's understanding of masculinity is scattered across time and different cultures with various conceptions of what it means to be a man. Connell (2005) argues that the construction of masculinities is informed by various identity intersections and acknowledges that throughout history in most societies, heterosexuality has been central to the construction of hegemonic masculinities and what it means to be a man. Connell (2005: 77) defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women". Therefore, hegemonic masculinity is reflective of the dominant cultural stereotype of a "real man" in any social institution and often adheres to heteronormative gender stereotypes because it is constructed with the intention to legitimise men's power over women. Research found that the dominant ideas around masculinity in South Africa, emphasise heterosexuality and patriarchy because men are expected to be sexually attracted to women, lead families with bravery, bear children, and practice aggression when their positions of dominance are not being respected (Langa 2020; Siswana and Kiguwa 2018). Hence, Ratele's (2011, 2013) argument that sexuality in the heteronormative South African context is a

weapon used to delegitimise gay men's masculine and sexual identities because they are sexually attracted to other men and do not engage in sexual intercourse with women.

Thus, sexuality plays a critical role in the construction of hegemonic masculinities; it creates a power hierarchy where heterosexuality is used to place men who identify as heterosexual in dominant positions, while placing gay men in subordinate positions. The construction of masculinities in male-dominated workplaces is often cisheteronormative, as it acknowledges heterosexual masculinities as ideal and relevant in these workplaces. Thus, heterosexuality is a key contributor to the constitution of what is termed a "real man" in these male-dominated workplaces. Much of the international literature demonstrates that in various male-dominated workplaces, the ideal man is expected to fulfil the cisheteronormative gendered notion which prescribes that a man should be sexually attracted to women and not other men. This idea is better understood through Rich's (1980) concept of compulsory heterosexuality, which she coined in her critique of the universal assumption that women are innately sexually attracted to men, and being lesbian is a choice that women make due to their bitterness towards men. Compulsory heterosexuality is a consequence of the invention of heterosexuality as a dominant mode of sexual organisation that is expected to be universal, unchanging and essential (Katz 1990). This naturalisation and universalisation of the institution of heterosexuality informs the expectation of compulsory heterosexuality, where every person is expected to be inherently attracted sexually to members of the opposite sex (Rich 1980). This heterosexual expectation leads to the exclusion of other expressions of sexuality, labelling them as unnatural deviances. Arguably compulsory heterosexuality rejects the notion of sexual diversity and enforces the single language of heterosexuality, consequently informing the construction of negative connotations of lesbian and gay identities (Rich 1980; Wittig 1992).

Although Rich (1980) coined the term in relation to lesbian existence, the concept has been used in various studies on heterosexual and LGBTIQ+ experiences (Brown 2024; Smuts 2023) demonstrating that it is useful to understanding even the existence and experiences of gay men in male-dominated workplaces. The compulsory heterosexuality inherent in the occupational cultures of male-dominated workplaces perpetuate the idea that all men who work in these spaces identify as heterosexual, marginalising gay male identities and rendering them vulnerable to persecution and exclusion. As Black gay men are not able to fulfil the cisgender heteronormative expectations in the police and military training spaces due to their sexual identities, they may be excluded, and the legitimacy of their masculinity questioned. This possibility of exclusion and discrimination forces them to be deliberate in navigating cisheteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality in the training spaces. Their presence in these spaces challenges to hegemony of heterosexual masculinities and depending on their observation of tolerance and acceptance, they will either disclose or conceal their sexual identities. The disclosure of Black gay identities in the military and police training contexts has the potential to disrupt the institution of compulsory heterosexuality and the hegemonic heterosexual masculinities, while concealment and conformity maintain the continued dominance of both. However, in whatever action they take, Black gay men are propelled to prioritise their wellbeing during their training. In the subsequent section, I unpack the research design, outlining the methodological choices that I made for this study and describing the processes that were followed.

Research methods

This study employed a feminist standpoint epistemology as it sought to understand gay men's experiences from their position of oppression in a space where they are not generally accepted. The feminist standpoint epistemology was necessary for this study as it places significance to context and acknowledges that the spaces that oppressed groups occupy inform their different and unique experiences. Consequently, the qualitative research design was necessary to achieve the goal of the feminist standpoint epistemology for this study. The qualitative research design allowed for an in-depth exploration of gay male soldiers and police officers experiences in heteronormative male-dominated training environments.

Before data collection could take place, ethical clearance was requested and granted by the University of Johannesburg's Humanities Research Ethics Committee. Upon obtaining ethical clearance, the participants were identified and selected through social media, including Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), using the snowball sampling technique. Snowball sampling was the most relevant technique because I sought to collect data from a special population (Black gay men within military and police training spaces) that was difficult to locate due to the broader cisheteronormative ideologies that continue to entrench homophobic violence and hate crimes in the South African society. The advantage of snowball sampling was that I could collect data from two gay men whom I identified through personal connections and ask that those participants share necessary information required to locate other members of the population (Babbie 2021). The selection of participants relied on five identity markers, which were sex, gender, sexuality, occupation and race. In line with the goal of the study, the participants had to be Black males who identify as gay men and have undergone police and military training in South Africa. Participant recruitment on social media was impacted by the sensitivity of the topic under study and required careful consideration when approaching potential participants. Hence using referrals and building rapport during recruitment proved to be fruitful in recruiting the participants on digital platforms, spaces that may be considered unsafe. Following the stated selection criteria, twenty-four participants were recruited and successfully interviewed.

A semi-structured in-depth interview method was employed for the collection of data because the method allows for the collection of detailed information that best describes the participants' lived realities, including their opinions, views and beliefs about the phenomenon under study (Babbie 2021; Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis, and Bezuidenhout 2014). Due to the national lockdown that was implemented to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus from 2020, the interviews took place online through Zoom or Microsoft Teams and telephonically with the participants. All the interviews were conducted in English, with the shortest lasting for 31 min and the longest for 120 min. During the interviews, the participants shared their journeys from entering the military and police training spaces, to encounters of heteronormativity and exclusion, to completing their training despite the challenges encountered. While every journey was unique, they were accompanied by important decisions on how to negotiate the disclosure their sexual identities in training spaces that embodied cisheteronormative male occupational cultures.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis were employed for the purposes of analysing the data. Through critical engagement and extensive reading of the transcribed interviews, similarities between the narratives were identified and themes derived. Some of the important themes that emerged from the thematic analysis were the production and reproduction of cisheteronormativity in military and police training spaces, the impact of cisheteronormative ideologies on the sexual identity disclosure decisions and discrimination in communal spaces. Measures taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality included using pseudonyms, saving the recordings and transcripts in a password-protected Google drive folder and withholding any information that can potentially identify the participants, such as their immediate workplace or division and the exact position they held at work. It was imperative to protect the participants' identities due to the broader intolerance and lack of acceptance of sexual minority identities in some South African communities. To ensure that participants were supported in cases where they might have experienced psychological harm, I had made arrangement with a psychologist who agreed to step in and assist; but fortunately, none of the participants were affected psychologically during the course of the study. In the next section, I engage with the findings of the study, focusing first on how Black gay men negotiated sexual identity disclosure and second, how they navigated compulsory heterosexuality during their training in the police and military.

Cisheteronormativity in training: negotiating sexual identity disclosure and belonging

Sexual identity disclosure during their South African military and police training was informed by the participants' critical observation and evaluation of their surroundings. Police and military training in South Africa spans over twenty-four months; however, the participants spent approximately twelve months in military and police training academies, with the other twelve months spent in deployment implementing the skills learned. All the participants indicated that they were aware of the cisheteronormative nature of South Africa's military and police occupational cultures when they joined the organisations and anticipated some challenges with tolerance and acceptance. Despite the anticipation of these challenges, some of the participants eventually chose to disclose their sexual identities, while eighteen of the twenty-four kept them hidden until they completed training and left those spaces. The decision to delay disclosure or remain silent was not simply about safety, but also about negotiating the possibility of belonging in these institutions. Belonging here was perceived as contingent upon conformity to heteronormative expectations, meaning that the disclosure of a gay identity risked undermining one's position as a legitimate member of the training group and also later full recruit. The participants who had not yet disclosed their sexual identities before training, continued to keep them hidden. Junior kept his sexual identity hidden due to his earlier observations of the training environment:

> I will always judge my surroundings first before I could interact, and from there, it was a bit difficult for me because of the people that I was working with. I was like, let me just keep my sexuality to myself just to make other people feel comfortable. Because some people they do not feel comfortable around gay men, so I will rather keep it to myself and say that no, these

people, I will respect them, I will not tell them about my sexuality (Junior, SAPS, 10 February 2022)

Junior further elucidated that he was unable to disclose his sexual identity due to his observations of his colleagues, which led him to believe that he would not be accepted as a gay individual. In his narrative, he stresses that he did not wish to make colleagues uncomfortable, an indication that he did not feel empowered to challenge the cisheteronormative culture of the organisation by disclosing his sexual identity. He considered it respectful to avoid disclosing his sexual identity, which is problematic as it was at the expense of his own comfort. Although unintentional, respect in this instance was used to deny himself the autonomy to make decisions about his sexual identity, which favoured him over other people. This, however, could be informed by a fear of exclusion in a heterosexual male-dominated police training space. Junior's silence demonstrates how belonging was conditional because he could only be included by suppressing a fundamental aspect of himself. His strategy highlights the tension between wanting to be recognised as "one of them" and the awareness that disclosure could rescind that sense of belonging. Despite this initial reluctance, as he made friends in the training spaces, he began disclosing partially, and expressed that most of the male friends that knew accepted him, which was a positive outcome for him. However, the acceptance from his heterosexual male friends did not translate to full disclosure of his sexual identity, indicating caution when it comes to who he can disclose to. Tshepiso, Ishmael, Bakang and Ikageng shared similar sentiments, as they described unfavourable observations that led to them avoiding the disclosure of their gay identities:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I think I was; I was more cautious in a way that uhm if I tell them straight up, they might, uh probably make fun of it or they won't believe me when I say it. So uhm, I didn't want to complicate uhm things for myself when I was there cause I didn't know how it would play out if, let's say someone fully knows that really you are gay and all of that, so especially when I'm sharing a room with a lot of guys. (Tshepiso, SAPS, 3 December 2021)

There was one guy in college who was openly gay and he went through the most because you know how people are, they make fun of you, calling you names and all that. For me, I did not want to put myself through that, especially not for the whole year. The phase where people are calling you names, and making fun, laughing and all of that. So, I just decided that I can't put myself through that. (Ishmael, SAPS, 20 November 2021)

Another reason is that I had a friend [gay] at college, and we are still friends right now, even though we communicate on the telephone and stuff because he is based in Joburg and I'm this side [North-West]. So … uhm … I could see the kind of treatment [name-calling and bullying] he would get from both the trainers and the trainees. And so … it was something that I didn't want to experience. I just wanted to get it over and done with. (Bakang, SAPS, 18 November 2021)

I did not open up during my basic training; I only opened up the second time when I actually … when I went back to the military. … but I never opened up to anybody that I am gay, but for them, they will see that I am gay, and they were calling me names like you are gay, you are more feminine and by that time I was not even bothered because I have been to varsity now and I have been exposed to people calling me names. (Ikageng, SANDF, 24 January 2022)

Instead of appropriating the concealment of his sexual identity to making other colleagues uncomfortable, Tshepiso describes the concealment of his sexual identity as a

cautionary measure to protect himself from humiliation. This view was also shared by Ishmael and Bakang who observed their gay colleagues experiencing name-calling and ill-treatment. Ikageng left military training without completing due to similar challenges of name-calling that affected his psychological well-being, but due to his love for the military profession he later returned with a changed perspective. Instead of making efforts to hide his sexual identity and passively succumbing to the name-calling, he challenged the narrative by refusing to conform to cisheteronormativity and living openly as a gay man in the male-dominated training space. He even got involved in a romantic relationship with another gay men during his training and they engaged in public display of affection (PDA). Ikageng's defiance was not only an assertion of his identity but also an attempt to reconfigure belonging in the training context as he demanded to be recognised as both gay and a legitimate part of the military community, without erasure. Unlike Ikageng who refused to conform upon his return to the military, Bakang went further and explained "so, everything that we did, we just wanted to fit in", which is evidence of conformity to the cisheteronormative occupational culture of the training space and a desire to belong, as he purposefully engaged in passing until he completed his police training. For Bakang, belonging meant blending in, even if that belonging was conditional, and premised on silence. Tshepiso closed his narrative by explicitly highlighting the issue of sharing spaces with a lot of men and how that would've complicated things for him if he was openly gay, which is an indication that training in a male-dominated context may trigger anticipations of ill treatment and hinder the disclosure of a male gay identity. This was the case for Ratanang, who expressed how the male-dominated cisheteronormative nature of the military training spaces ignited his fear to openly identify as gay:

> Initially, when we started, it was not easy; it was boys, as many boys in one place like you have never seen so many guys naked in front of you. Even the way it was set up, the training, I mean the way it was, they needed "real man" there. So, at first, I used to hide myself, as in hide myself, but there were those ones who would see through you that there is something about you. But then, as time goes on, we got used to it, and it was interesting now, and they started accepting me, and I started accepting myself just like that. (Ratanang, SANDF, 22 November 2021)

In navigating the disclosure of his sexual identity in a male-dominated training space, Ratanang mentions that the military needed "real man", and therefore, he decided not to disclose his sexual identity initially. This sentiment suggests that Ratanang did not believe that he would be considered a "real man" if he openly identified as gay in the male dominated military training spaces, supporting literature which asserts that gay men are excluded from constructions of hegemonic masculinities, which are often heterosexual in male-dominated workplaces (Collins 2015; Maake, Rugunanan, and Smuts 2023; Speice 2020). Fortunately, when colleagues learned about his gay identity, they were unexpectedly accepting. However, this "acceptance" did not transform the dominant ideas of masculinity, as he further elaborated that his training colleagues treated him differently from his heterosexual colleagues due to his socially described feminine attributes. He explained, "(laughing) they see me as soft and being too girlish", which is a stereotype that informs the construction of gay men's masculinities as inferior in the military training spaces. This differential treatment shows that belonging, for gay men, was

always precarious because they could be "accepted" but only within hierarchies that reinforced their marginality. Thus, belonging was partial and marked by the constant negotiation of stereotypes about gay men.

Similar to the other participants, Sithelo also engaged in a critical observation of the training environment of the military, which, according to him, was not safe for openly identifying as a gay person:

> I would say I was still finding my feet whether I am bisexual or actually gay and, in the military … in the military space, I was still identifying myself as straight just to be safe; also just to be safe from a lot of drama and trauma. I was yeah, I think … I think it's a matter of I was not yet ready to face the negativity that comes with being gay. So, I just preferred to be safe and classify myself as straight. What is it going to be for me in such a space and knowing the military culture that they tend to look down on … not that they do but it's what the society brings to us and actually makes us believe that the military looks down on homosexuality to an extent that it makes you not want to put yourself out there. So rather be safe and keep a low profile. (Sithelo, SANDF, 10 April 2023)

While Sithelo was still figuring out whether he identified as gay or bisexual, he was convinced that both identities would not be accepted in military training, hence he opted to pass as heterosexual. More than anything, his reluctance was informed by his concerns with safety, as he anticipated negative reactions and did not consider the military context a safe space for gay men. However, his views on military training as an unsafe space did not emanate solely from his observations of the training spaces, but were already informed by prior knowledge of military culture that he had gathered from society. This demonstrates how social spaces intersect in informing gay men's experiences and perspectives, highlighting that male-dominated training spaces do not exist in isolation, but are part of the broader social structures and systems that shape ideas around acceptable and unacceptable expressions of sexuality. Like Sithelo, Shane also passed as heterosexual during training:

> During my basic training I identified as a straight guy, I did not want to be called gay. I did not want to be around gay guys. And somehow, there were people who were able to see because I remember there was one guy who was already in the Defence Force who actually approved. You know, when a person approaches you and asking questions about "are you straight what's happening with you". Then one of the instructors actually called me and said: "I see everybody's dating here and what's happening with you? are you straight are you gay?". I remember very well the that the answer I gave was the answer that I have and say it depends on why you are asking me? Are you asking out of curiosity or out of interest. Then he said out of curiosity then I said I am straight. (Shane, SANDF, 13 April 2023)

Shane not only kept his sexual identity hidden, but he went to the extent of avoiding contact with other gay people and refusing to be "called gay". This reluctance to associate with the "gay identity" during training may be interpreted as a stigma management strategy, as it would reduce the visibility of his own gay identity as he intentionally wanted to avoid disclosure. While Shane chose not to disclose his sexual identity, he was confronted with questions from colleagues who were suspicious about his sexuality and romantic relationships, but even with these enquiries, he still maintained the concealment of his sexual identity until he left the training space.

Tumelo had initially disclosed his sexual identity before going for military training. He expressed his dilemmas in negotiating disclosure during training:

> So, I think most of us have had that experience of going back into the closet, so I think I was quite in between trying to convince myself that yes, I'm gay, and I wouldn't want to go back to the moment where I was hiding because I know how difficult it was and also now trying not to expose myself to discrimination and isolation and all of those things. So, I was forced to keep that thing [gay identity] into the closet. I was not expressing myself fully; even part of myself was showing that I'm gay, but then I would try and confuse them. How I speak, how I walk, especially in the early days because I was going with the fact that people especially who come from your traditional backgrounds are really stereotyped and very judgemental towards people who are different. (Tumelo, SANDF, 15 January 2022)

In line with previous research (Collins and Callahan 2012; Ozeren, Ucar, and Duygulu 2016; Reingardė 2007; Tshisa and van der Walt 2021), Tumela narrates how the fear of discrimination hindered the full disclosure of his sexual identity. Although he had previously disclosed his sexual identity to family members prior to joining the military, he found himself in a position where he had to go back into the "closet". Similar to Shane, he attempted to pass as heterosexual and adjusted his behaviour to fit in with the cisheteronormative male expectations of the military culture. In his observations of the military training spaces, he notes that broader societal attitudes about sexual minority identities may penetrate the military training spaces, influencing how his training colleagues treat gay people. This was also evident in Tuelo's narrative, as he explained how society's cisheteronormative Christian ideologies complicated his sexual identity disclosure during training:

> You know, when I got that side, I was still hiding myself because I was scared that I would be judged by other people, but only to find out that no man the way I'm living, it's like I'm living another life that is not mine and I started coming out. Yes, some of the members they started judging me, but others were protecting me, so it was like a mixture. You didn't know if you're liked or hated or maybe people feel that (laughs) you know there are members who are like those deep Christian family that they would believe that your sexuality of being gay and all stuff like that. (Tuelo, SANDF, 12 January 2022)

Initially, Tuelo's observation of the military occupational culture forced him to conceal his sexual identity and conform to cisheteronormative gendered expectations. However, he was not comfortable with passing, hence his decision to finally disclose his sexual identity. His biggest dilemma was the fear of being treated differently and stigmatised; however, he was well received by some of his colleagues, who he felt were protective of him. As anticipated, there were colleagues who stigmatised him, and despite his dilemma with not being able to tell how other people perceived him, he refused to suffer in silence and lived openly as a gay man in military training. His strategy of passing underscores the broader dynamic where belonging in the military was not an inherent right, but something to be carefully negotiated through concealment, silence, or selective visibility. Unlike Tumelo and Tuelo, Elvis joined the military as an open gay man, and he did not attempt to conceal his sexual identity in anyway. He explained, "personally, I really enjoyed my training because I was open about my sexuality, I really enjoyed it, I mean, I was comfortable". However, Elvis mentioned that there were instances where colleagues tried to make him uncomfortable, and he chose to ignore them. While differences are evident in that some of the participants disclosed after observing the training environment, and others disclosed from the beginning of their training, their actions demonstrate gay men's agency in that they did not allow themselves to be passively oppressed and

conform to the cisheteronormative expectations of the training spaces. In this sense, Elvis redefined what belonging meant for him. Instead of seeking assimilation into heteronormative expectations, he claimed belonging through authenticity, showing that visibility itself could serve as a form of resistance and inclusion.

Invading "heterosexual men's spaces": Black gay men navigating compulsory heterosexuality in communal spaces

Black gay men who kept their sexual identities concealed during police and military training, hardly encountered stigmatisation and exclusion, because their masculine performance conformed to the cisheteronormative expectations of the military and police culture. They were able to share spaces, such as bungalows and showers, without feeling like they did not belong. For example, Sihle, Bakang and Sizwe did not experience discrimination or exclusion in communal spaces because their gay identities were unknown to their colleagues. These participants actively performed a heterosexual masculine identity, which gained them recognition as a "real man" and belonging in predominantly heterosexual male spaces. However, they reported incidents where some of their openly gay colleagues were subjected to discrimination in shower spaces. Heterosexual colleagues during Sihle and Bakanag's police training were against sharing shower spaces with gay men and held that gay colleagues should share showers with women. These views perpetuated the cisheteronormative notion of masculinity, which inhibits the recognition of gay men's masculine identities. Although the shower spaces were primarily used for bathing, participants described them as heterosexual male spaces in which gay bodies were seen as invading:

> Going to showers again where people would feel like you are invading their space, like every time you had to go and take a shower, you'd feel like you are entering their space and that is not where you really belong, and they would show you in how they suddenly changed, in how they start covering themselves up or how they move out of the showers or how they give you space or the looks that they give you, the silences. So, yeah, it was a lot … the showers were a problem, I won't lie, I think that's where the homophobic … the homophobia is. (Tumelo, SANDF, 15 January 2022)

> I remember such a time during my basic training I actually had a fight with a Venda guy because we have like open showers, there is a lot of men there … as much as I am gay, I am male, and I have my fair share, I can actually join the shower. This Venda guy told me that I must actually wait for them to take a shower, and then I will come in later, you know. I asked him a question, why should I come in later? He said, "because you are gay", they are not comfortable in taking a shower with a gay. I was like, what's the whole point? Even though I am gay, I am taking a shower with you, and that is where I am living. That is where it all started then it erupted into an actual fight. (Ikageng, SANDF, 24 January 2022)

> So, we had open showers which is not different from … they are just open space. Some people would shower when I shower but they would be uncomfortable around me, but I do not care where I am if I need to bath, I need to bath. So, for them I do not know how I was looking at them or whatever but that is how the shower thing works when we will be like 5 in one shower an open shower. (Elvis, SANDF)

Tumelo, Ikageng and Elvis's experiences were supported by Olitilwe, who explained that every time he entered the showers, other men either left the showers or started covering themselves. The reported experiences in the showers reflect the compulsory heterosexual

masculine ideal that affords heterosexual men in the military and police training spaces the power to proclaim ownership of spaces and decide who belongs. From the narratives, it appears that the cisheteronormative male gaze was always alert to "gay invaders", ready to humiliate and exclude gay men. Thus, cisheteronormativity is not automatically inherent in these spaces, but is reinforced and reproduced through continued discrimination and exclusion of gay male bodies. However, Ikageng did not allow the discrimination to deter him from proclaiming his belonging, as he resisted homophobic slurs and attempted exclusion from some of his heterosexual colleagues. It is unfortunate that he had to engage in a physical fight to emphasise his belonging as a man in the space, but his resistance was necessary to challenge compulsory heterosexuality in the shower spaces. Unlike Ikageng, some participants found alternative means to navigate compulsory heterosexual spaces and escape the cisheteronormative gaze that sought to persecute them:

> So, in terms of … when we have to go and shower, it's an open shower, mind you, so he would wait for everyone to finish and then he would go last, even though he would find the hot water finished, he wouldn't mind. But he would always take a shower after everyone. (Bakang, SAPS, 18 November 2021)

> It was very difficult for me; I would rather wait when everyone is finished, and I will be the last one to take a shower, and that will be maybe 1:00 o'clock in the morning or late in the afternoon when everyone is actually done, then I will go and take a shower. (Junior, SAPS, 10 February 2022)

> Like I would bath after everyone. During the night, that is when I will go and shower or early, early in the mornings, that is when I will go and shower because the things that they would say to me they were not good at all. (Ratanang, SANDF, 22 November 2021)

> From first day I woke up at half past two in the morning so that I could go and shower alone and then I come back and sleep so that I do not shower with the others because it is just an open plan shower that is what I did from the first day everyday 2:30 wake up go and shower come back and sleep. For the rest of the year until I finished. (Seputla, SAPS, 4 February 2022)

> I remember now. I even turned out to make my own shower schedule. Usually when we wake up, we wake up around half past four, five o'clock in the morning. So, if they wake up half past four, I will try that already by quarter past or half past four I already had a shower. So that I do not make anyone uncomfortable. And no one makes me uncomfortable. So, I tried to avoid confrontations with them. (Olitilwe, SANDF, 13 April 2023)

The cisheteronormative exclusion in the shower spaces compelled the participants to devise showering schedules that did not coincide with the heterosexual majority to avoid experiencing the discomfort that comes with the stares, coverups and intrusive commentary about their sexual and masculine identities. On the one hand, the participants' readjustment of their showering schedules unintentionally maintained the hegemonic status of heterosexual masculinity, which hindered the social integration of gay men in this communal space. On the other hand, it allowed the participants autonomy in creating comfortable and safe spaces for themselves, while also highlighting the fragility of the heterosexual masculinity. Black gay men's presence in the shower spaces is seen as an invasion not because they do not belong there, but because their presence challenges the prevalent cisheteronormativity that protects and legitimise the unwarranted power that allow heterosexual men to claim ownership of this space.

Discussion: challenging cisheteronormativity and negotiating belonging: social integration of Black gay recruits in military and police training

The findings of this study indicate that the legal and constitutional recognition of sexual minority identities in South Africa, has not been substantially successful in transforming the cisheteronormative male occupational culture of police and military training. Although formal discriminatory practices against gay men, such as conversion therapy, have been abolished post-1994 (Van Zyl et al. 1999), the police and military training spaces remain largely cisheteronormative, informing experiences of social exclusion and discrimination. In navigating this cisheteronormative occupational culture, twenty-two of the twenty-four participants chose to observe how cisheteronormative ideologies operated in the training spaces before making decisions on disclosing their sexual identities to colleagues. Their observations informed their decisions to either conceal and pass as heterosexual or disclose and confront the heteronormative occupational cultures of training environments. Agency in disclosure or concealment was therefore not only about safety but also about negotiating belonging because the participants had to decide whether to prioritise acceptance into the training spaces or to assert individuality at the risk of being excluded. This is an indication of agency, because the participants had control over knowledge of their sexual identities in a space that could potentially threaten their safety. However, the findings contradict previous literature, which asserts that gay men are often passive recipients of heteronormative stigmas in male-dominated organisations (Olney and Musabayana 2016; Tshisa and van der Walt 2021; Willis 2012), as some (six of twenty-four) participants in this study practised their agency by disclosing their sexual identities and challenging cisheteronormative stereotypes about gay men. This agency, I argue, is empowered by the South African post-1994 legal framework that protects sexual minority identities in workplaces.

It can be argued that the disclosure of one's sexual identity is not relevant in workplaces; however, the cisheteronormative male occupational culture, which perpetuates compulsory heterosexuality, may compel Black gay men not to disclose their sexual identities. Silence and the lack of disclosure of gay identities maintain the cisheteronormative male occupational culture and suppresses possibilities for the social integration of Black gay male bodies in the training spaces. This suppression also limits their ability to establish a sense of belonging, as many of them are only recognised as part of the collective when they hide and remain silent about crucial aspects of their identities. Hence, I argue that the persistent cisheteronormativity embedded in the contemporary military and police training spaces has undesired implications for the social integration of Black gay men as a significant number (eighteen of twenty-four) of the participants were pressured to conceal their sexual identities and conform to cisgender norms, affecting their sense of belonging. Those whose gay identities become known may be isolated and pushed to the periphery, because their presence threatens the hegemonic cisheteronormative ideologies that privilege heterosexual men. However, their agency, visibility and resistance in training spaces and completion of training, challenges the cisheteronormative ideologies that seek to discredit their capabilities, creating space for transforming the cisheteronormative gendered narrative of what specific South African soldiers and police officers should look like. These acts of resistance show how belonging can be redefined; not as assimilation into heteronormativity, but as claiming space on one's own terms.

The findings further demonstrate that heterosexual masculinities remain hegemonic in communal training spaces, particularly the showers, in which Black gay men are seen as invaders. However, I argue that the hegemony of the heterosexual masculinity in the police and military training spaces is simultaneously fragile because it is threatened by the presence of gay men and has to be imposed and reinforced through violence, homophobia and the exclusion of gay men. This fragility is further exacerbated by gay men's abilities to perform their duties and complete the same training that heterosexual men undergo. Their competence unsettles exclusionary cisheteronormative ideologies and demonstrates that belonging in the military and police training spaces cannot legitimately be restricted by sexuality, even though hegemonic masculinities attempt to maintain such boundaries.

Concluding remarks

This study paid attention to how Black gay men navigate cisheteronormative male occupational cultures of the South African military and police training spaces. The paper documented Black gay men's experiences of navigating sexual identity disclosure, negotiating belonging, forging resistance, and practicing agency amidst cisheteronormative ideologies that are used by heterosexuals to delegitimise their capabilities, existence and belonging in police and military training spaces. Black gay men's agency and visibility were identified as significant in destabilising not only the cisheteronormative occupational cultures, but the hegemony of heterosexual masculinities. Additionally, this study calls for the police and military training organisations of our country to not only act against discrimination based on sexual identity, but to actively interrogate cisheteronormative ideologies and attitudes that continually make the social integration of gay men in the South African military and training spaces difficult. The limited social integration in military and police training undermines the legislative efforts of the South African democratic government to recognise and protect sexual minority rights in employment organisations and eliminate social exclusion based on sexual identity. Post-1994, the SAPS and SANDF have been proactive in their efforts to transform their patriarchal and racial occupational cultures to integrate the underrepresented women gender and Black "racial" group. However, sexual minorities—LGBTIQ+ persons—are integrated into policy, and more research is necessary to guide the transformation of the police and military cisheteronormative occupational cultures in training spaces to achieve the social integration of sexual minority individuals. The onus should not be on for example the Black gay male employees alone to see this transformation in training spaces as in this study, but should include specific and focused organisational efforts that empower them.

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ORCID

Tshepo B. Maake http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7523-9871

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