# THE PSYCHOSOCIAL EFFECTS OF UNSAFE SPACE ON THE LGBTQI COMMUNITY

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| A B S T R A C T | A R T I C L E I N F O |
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| The concept of safe space is commonly recognized as a secure and inclusive environment where individuals are able to freely and comfortably express their own personal identity. However, the issue of unsafe space remains a concern for LGBTQI individuals in South Africa, despite the fact that they are protected by the Constitution, which is acknowledged and respected worldwide. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa,1996, specifically in sections (12) (1) (c) and (2) (b), emphasizes the right to freedom and security for all individuals. Section (9) addresses the safeguarding of LGBTQI rights, prohibiting discrimination based on sex, gender, or sexual orientation, while section 10 promotes the importance of human dignity and protection. Therefore, it is essential that the LGBTQI community does not experience any form of discomfort in any environment they find themselves in. However, it is apparent that there remains a void to be filled as the LGBTQI community continues to experience a sense of insecurity even within locations they consider as sanctuaries; and this bears psychological and social ramifications. This article aims to delve into the adverse consequences that these unsafe spaces can impose upon LGBTQI individuals through an examination of research studies that have focused on matters about LGBTQI issues and the notion of unsafe spaces. An extensive investigation was conducted utilizing electronic research tools to procure pertinent data and discern common themes from studies conducted within the period spanning from 2014 to 2018. The analysis revealed that the issue of space continues to be a significant concern, necessitating stakeholders to exhibit a heightened level of responsiveness towards the apprehensions of the LGBTQI community. | |

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, safety is everyone's concern regardless of gender. However, the concept safety is interpreted by people in different ways, but when it comes to those who identify themselves as members of LGBTQI safety seems to be a more serious issue particularly due to societal misunderstanding of their sexuality. According to Iversen (2019:315) and Ellman (2021:188), the term "safe space" emerged in the late 20th century and it has since been used in different contexts. Linander, Goicolea, Alm, Hammarström, and Harryson (2019: 914) allude that safe space as a concept that emerged to keep marginalized groups safe from violence. Safe space is referred to as that which is free of bias, conflict, criticism, potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2018). Murchison, Eiduson, Agénor and Gordon (2023: 2180) suggest that individuals should be allowed to be free from self-doubt, hostility, fear, or non-affirmation. Taking from the elements in the definition of safe space, it is evident that unsafe space does have negative effects on people who self-identify as LGBTQI. Negative effects could include but not be limited to living in fear, self-doubt or experience an inferiority complex, stress which may also lead to depression, suicidal thoughts or attempts. Owing to societal disregard of the right to equality, dignity and the right to be different, the LGBTQI

community find themselves having to feel rejected, dehumanised, digraced, and undermined. According to Tejero (2023), "people whose sexuality is seen to be outside the 'norm' often fall victims to violent acts or prejudice. Matebeni (2014) indicates that cases such as those of women murdered in some townships in South Africa because of their HIV status are exemplary of such violence and prejudice". In Cape Town, lesbian women are raped every week and the violence towards LGBTQI minorities continues to wage war on the streets of the mother city (Martin, 2012).

Safe space (or unsafe space) could be viewed from micro, mezzo, or macro levels. Figure 1 shows the different levels of possible unsafe space and their effects on individuals.

Negative attitudes towards people who identify with LGBTQI members are prevalent among other people and societal systems; it is critical to understand each level as and where it occurs: (1) micro-individual level; (2) mezzo-interpersonal level; (3) macro-institutional level; and also a cultural or societal level.

## 2.    FAMILY AS AN (UN)SAFE SPACE

Families do not only exist in space but also in time. A family is considered the safest place for any individual. All people, including those who self-identify as LGBTQI, require family support. Robertson and Suinn (in Ross & Deverell, 2015:258) believe that there is a correlation between empathy emanating from family members and self-confidence. It is evident that LGBTQI people need the support of their families to a greater extent than those outside this group, and this family involvement is crucial for their wellbeing. Bennett & Gates (2021 ) allude to the fact that without family involvement and the support from within the LGBTQI community, these individuals may be seriously affected psychologically and socially. Furthermore, Rustin and Cook (1995) believe that the understanding, acceptance and positive involvement of parents and family during the upbringing of LGBTQI family members are crucial in building confidence and survival skills.

According to experts, the level of acceptance of sexual orientation and gender identity by parents can detract from or expand a child's healthy growth and development in many ways (Harbeck, 2014). Harbeck (2014) also indicates that many LGBTQI youth experience rejection and emotional isolation from their parents. This negation can lead to problems such as self-harm, depression, and drug and alcohol abuse.

The rejection by family members comes from afar and difficulty of dealing with societal stigma is one of the perpertuating factors but should not be an excuse. Drawing from one of the first published narratives to come out from a black South African lesbian, Vera Vimbela is her experience of how she was publicly punished by her family and people in her village in the Eastern Cape. Her Family sent her to a local chief in Transkei for a public whipping after finding out that she was a lesbian (Botes, 2020).  Rejection by significant others makes the LGBTQI community appear as though they chose their sexuality whereas it is an inborn matter which should not even be questioned as this is how one was born and LGBTQI are not compelled to change who they are owing to societal (mis)understanding. Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2012) claim that rejection by parents or family members may lead to homelessness as some LGBTQIs are evicted from their family homes or ill-treated to a point where they decide to leave. According to Rosario et al. (2012), homelessness is a significant public and social crisis. Brundage (2009) argues that parents who grew up in a world where homosexuality was regarded as immoral are more likely to reject their children who fall within the LGBTQI ambit.

## 3.    FUNCTIONAL COMMUNITIES AS AN (UN)SAFE SPACE – SCHOOL, CHURCH, AND WORKPLACE

Being rejected by the society should never be because of one's sexual orientation is discrimination, violation of human rights and perpetuation of inequality within a community. Weyers (2011) talks about two basic types of communities, namely; functional and geographical. For the purpose of this section, the author focuses on the concept "functional community" which is referred to as that which exists for a specific purpose. Functional community includes but is not limited to schools, churches, and the workplace. One would not anticipate that these may be unsafe places but somehow, LGBTQIs find themselves being threatened and discriminated against.  The discrimination faced by the LGBTQI is evident even in institutions such as those with regulate marital status of couples (Langolois, 2022). Mudarikwa (2018)  emphasises how severe discrimination targeted toward same-sex couples is owing to their identity, personhood, and their sexual orientation. Legislative frameworks such as Civil Union Act and others are meant to promote human dignity. However, it has been noted by Mudarikwa (2018) that Civil Union Act, particularly section 6 creates an

opportunity to continue this discrimination and marginalization of same-sex couples which contradicts the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa since marriage officers' rights, opinions and feelings are put ahead of the rights of same-sex couples.

Not only does the LGBTQI community experience discrimination but also experience experiences both physical (beating and to some extent murder) and emotional violence including torture. Matebeni (2011) argues that with all the rights and protection encapsulated in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, there is still a "strong disconnection between the 'promise' of a post-apartheid South African Constitution and the lived daily experiences of LGBTQI 'supposedly' protected by the same Constitution.

Schools are largely heteronormative environments, where little is done to address the safety needs of LGBTQIs. The education system—secondary school and to a lesser extent university—is both an obstacle and an opportunity for young LGBTQIs. Teachers have a role to play in protecting and helping young LGBTQIs gain confidence about their position in society and broaden the minds of the entire student population regarding sexual diversity. Nell and in addition, Shapiro (2011); and Mayo (2022) believe that teachers and learners should work together in designing and implementing a policy framework for LGBTQIs that protects all facets of mainstream sexual orientation. Nell and Shapiro (2011) found that in various secondary schools' life orientation teachers indicated that although homosexuality has an impact on the classroom, the concept of LGBTQI is not included in their curriculum regardless of the available material. The exclusion of LGBTQI in the syllabus may contribute to the youth being unaware of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Being aware of sexual orientation helps them to choose to "come out" freely and of their own accord (Bochenek & Brown, 2001).

Churches are considered safe places where people are able to communicate freely with God in the presence of others. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, particularly chapter 2, Bill of Rights addresses religious freedom. Section 15(1) stipulates that, "everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion." Section 15(2) emphasises that under certain circumstances, state institutions may conduct religious observances. Furthermore, section 31 establishes the rights of cultural, religious and linguistic communities in that: "Persons belonging to a cultural, religious or linguistic community may not be denied the right with other members of that community –

(a) to enjoy their culture, practice their religion and use their language; and

(b) to form, join and maintain cultural, religious and linguistic associations and other organs of civil society."

Lastly, section 9(3), the right to equality prohibits unfair discrimination based on, inter alia, religion, conscience, belief or culture.  However, regardless of the Bill of Rights, protecting LGBTQI community, churches, especially the Pentecostal charismatic churches still find it difficult to accept them. In reference to this, an incident was reported on 23 January 2017 by News24, when a proudly South African gay celebrity, Somizi Mhlongo, stormed out of the Grace Bible Church after Ghanaian-born Bishop Dag Heward-Mills made homophobic comments. Discussing the issue of soul and sin, Heward-Mills said homosexuality was unnatural.

"You don't find two male dogs or two male lions, two male… impalas, two male cats, even lizards, two male elephants, two male... There's nothing like that in nature, it's unnatural," he said.

A similar sentiment is shared by Angie and Debbie Winans who created controversy throughout the black community when they released a song that denounced homosexuality, "It's not Natural" (Douglas, 1999). For many young LGBTQIs, religion is a major challenge. Most young people are brought up as members of a church, something from which many derive comfort and a sense of belonging (Van Klinken, 2015). There are few religions that accept homosexuality and this can have negative psychosocial effects on homosexuals. From the statement by Bishop Heward-Mills, it is evident that Christianity and many other religions are still facing the challenge of understanding LGBTQIs and accepting them in their institutions. Isolation or disengagement from church activities and substance abuse may follow should the church not play a supportive and inclusive role towards LGBTQI people. Substance abuse owing to stress and other substance-related disorders which may have been caused by rejection from different contexts at different levels (micro, mezzo, and macro) may have serious implications in the lives of LGBTQIs. According to Barlow and Durand (2011), substance-related disorders include a range of problems associated with the use and abuse of drugs such as alcohol, cocaine, heroin, and other substances which alter the way people think, feel and behave. These are costly in human and financial terms.

There is a dire need to "ensure that the provision of government services is done in an equal and dignified manner is not only aimed at protecting the rights of same-sex couples. It is also aimed at ensuring that the historical discrimination and marginalisation of LGBTQI persons is systematically addressed, and that South

Africa transforms into a more equal, tolerant and diverse country. Equality, therefore, holds a much stronger purpose and objective than the objection to conclude same-sex marriages based on the need to protect religious views of civil marriages officers, which are not impacted or limited by allowing couples to sign forms and recite the marriage oath to them. This is so even when we recognise that there can be no doubt that the right to freedom of religion, belief and opinion, in the open and democratic society contemplated by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa,1996 is essential" (Mudarikwa, 2018).

Human Rights Watch and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) reported that South Africa is an important model for the rest of the region, to learn from its successes in progressive and non-discriminatory laws. However, they stressed that South Africa's rights discourse needed to also model the failures and challenges in implementing a sweeping commitment to remedy abuses and achieve social change (HRW/ IGLHRC, 2009). The Constitution of the Republic of South African 1996 states clearly in its preamble to "heal the divisions of the past" and to "lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law" (HRW, 2009). However, despite the changes to constitutions and legal definitions in the human rights discourse, the reality is that these changes do not necessarily translate into implementation or a shift in people's attitudes, beliefs and cultures.

Martin (2012) quoted a very interesting and crucial argument by Gouws (2005) which allude that

"Rights discourse uses universalizing language which obscures realities of inequality. On a discursive level, the language of rights creates the impression that rights have some intrinsic value. In other words, individual's own rights and this notion put boundaries between the state and individual and between self and other. One consequence of this view of rights is that it obscures the connection with community and reliance on others. When rights are viewed in this way it becomes difficult to solve conflicts and to transform social relations of inequality".

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research questions

The purpose of this review was to explore the negative effects that unsafe spaces can have on LGBTQI members through an analysis of studies that focuses on issues related to LGBTQIs and unsafe space, particularly their effects. The author, before conducting a review of literature, had two research questions which he asked himself:

(i)     What are the effects of unsafe spaces on LGBTQI people?

(ii)    How does the law protect people who identify themselves as LGBTQI?

### 4.2 Search and selection strategy

The author used a critical appraisal systematic review (CASR) to search and select the articles to be reviewed. The rationale behind using this strategy was mainly to identify methodological flaws in the literature, and this strategy helped the researcher to make informed decisions about the research evidence including helping to reduce the risk of bias when selecting studies. Critical appraisal is relevant in a sence that it checks the quality, reliability and relevance of the studies in the review in relation to the review question. It appraises each study in terms of the following aspects: Is the study relevant to the research question? Is the study valid?. The first step was to establish the appropriateness of results; second, to determine the validity of these results; and lastly, to determine if the results would help in addressing the problem. It was of critical importance to the author that the literature selected for review focused on the inclusion and/or exclusion of LGBTQI people. A comprehensive desktop research was carried out to gather relevant data from both qualitative and quantitative studies conducted between 2001 and 2018. Journals were mainly sourced from Google Scholar. However, other databases including Science Direct and MEDLINE were deemed suitable sources. To find relevant journal articles, the researcher used key words such as "safe space" and "LGBTQI" using Boolean operators as a search strategy. Only journal articles which were written in English were considered. Fifteen journal articles were selected based on their relevance to the phenomenon under review against the criteria of inclusion, and also that they addressed the two research questions (see 4.1) and the purpose of the article.

### 4.3 Quality assessment

According to Rushbrooke, Murray and Townsend (2014), to provide an evidence-based framework for reviewing articles, an author needs to apply a critical appraisal skills system. Ten questions were consistently asked of each selected study and answers to the questions through ratings between zero and 2 out of the possible total of 20 points. Table 1 shows the questions asked, as suggested by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2013), and further explains how the ratings were applied. A total of 10 out of 15 studies scored high ratings (16>) which indicated the high quality of each study. On the other hand, five studies scored below 16 points (<16) indicating a lack of rigour in various areas such as clarity on the findings, appropriate data-collection methods, and ethical issues. However, all 15 articles were deemed relevant to the purpose of the review.

### 4.4 Characteristics of the selected studies

The studies deemed appropriate for this review were carried out in several countries, namely, Canada, United States of America, United Kingdom, Sydney, New York, California, Switzerland and South Africa. Many studies directed to safety issues were conducted in the USA as opposed to South Africa. The author adopted a pragmatic approach in the sense that all articles were considered, regardless of the methods used in conducting these studies. McCann, Lee and Brown (2016) allude to the fact that a pragmatic approach is beneficial mainly because it allows the reviewer to gain a fuller understanding of a diverse range of issues. The selected articles were based on various methods of data collection ranging from focus group interviews, self-report measures, surveys, semi-structured interviews, case studies, narrative therapy-based workshops, and a retrospective review of anonymised data derived from clinical case records.

### 4.5 Data analysis

The author identified and coded relevant themes. The themes were coded from the results sections of the selected articles. To allow comparison between themes both within and between studies, the author then grouped them according to concepts. The themes were also given to a colleague for verification. Both the author and his colleague reached an agreement.

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1 Rejection by significant others

The results show that many LGBTQI people lack support from within their own homes. Two articles revealed that some are afraid of "coming out of the closet" and disclose their gender identity owing to an anticipated negative reaction by their parents. The results further stipulate that the LGBTQI community is vulnerable to rejection and at risk of being victimised, with significant long-term consequences. Family rejection is viewed as one factor contributing to depression, suicidal behaviour, substance abuse, and the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS among LGBTQI youth.

### 5.2 Institutional inaccessibility, insecurities, and LGBTQI spaces

While several studies revealed issues of inaccessibility to institutions such as schools— especially Christian schools and challenges in the work space, other articles expanded on the issue of inaccessibility by pointing out that the treatment from within the ranks of, for instance, the Police towards LGBTQIs is often unfair and actually poses a threat to their safety. Some studies show that churches and schools find it difficult to accept self-confessed LGBTQI learners since the parents of other learners threaten school for allowing LGBTQI learners whom they believe will influence their own children into becoming LGBTQI.

### 5.3 Ineffective services towards LGBTQI

Even though studies recognise the efforts by various governments on same-sex marriages and prohibit discrimination in the public domain, the results show that service providers whose products are used at, for instance, weddings have sought exemptions that would permit them to decline providing service to LGBTQI people. Even more unacceptable is that some social services professions including child welfare agencies and

physical and mental health providers refuse services to LGBTQI people and similar groups.

## 6.    CONCLUSION

Physical spaces can have a direct influence on the mental and emotional wellbeing of individuals. Spaces are locations – whether public or private, functional or recreational – that include (but are not limited to) rooms, open terrains, vehicles, and corridors.  Anyone can feel threatened in a particular space for any number of reasons. Yet, the greater LGBTQI community has been particularly vulnerable to discrimination in most of these spaces.

This has led to the emergence of so-called "gaybourhoods," gentrified neighborhoods that feature clubs, bars, and restaurants specifically for the LGBTQI community. While "gaybourhoods" and other such spaces provide some refuge against physical and verbal abuse, they do not protect individuals against discrimination when negotiating hostile shared spaces daily. A safe space is not only a physical place free of harm, corporeal or verbal, but it is also an environment free of bias. It is a space in which bodies and minds are not threatened or exposed to prejudice. The psychosocial impact of existing as an LGBTQI person is a crucial issue as violence against homosexual people continues to rise its head in South Africa.

## 7.    STUDY LIMITATIONS

The researcher being in the field of social work wherein he is expected to advocate for the rights of the vulnerable might have been influenced by beliefs about the relative merits of different research designs when selecting critical appraisal criteria and tools.

## 8.    FIGURES AND TABLES
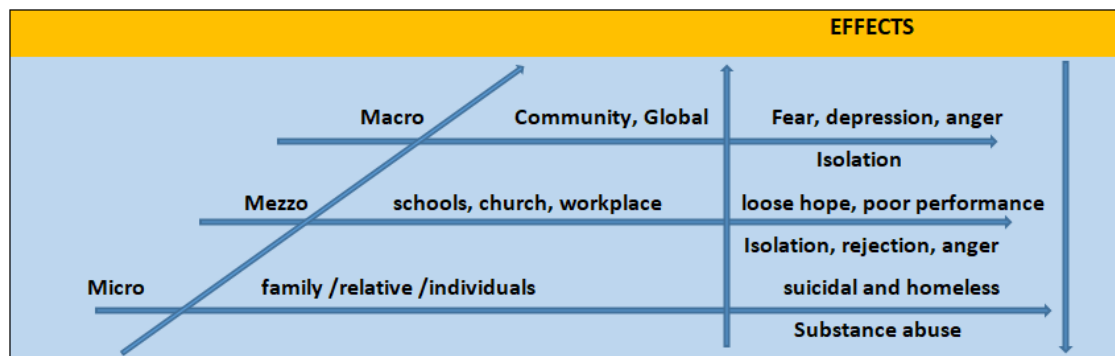
**Figure 1:** various levels and contexts of (un)safe



**Table 1:** Critical appraisal skills programme quality scores

| Questions | Rating - 0 | Rating - 1 | Rating - 2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Clear statement of aims | The article contains no information. | The moderate amount of information | Article fully addressed the relevant information |
| Appropriate methodology | | | |
| Appropriate research design | | | |
| Appropriate recruitment strategy | | | |
| Appropriate data collection methods | | | |
| Research relationships considered | | | |
| Consider ethical issues | | | |
| Rigorous analysis | | | |
| Clear findings | | | |
| Value of the research | | | |

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