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Discrimination challenges and psychological well-being of black African queer employees

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Orientation: It is known that black queer employees are exposed to various forms of discrimination because of their sexual orientation being different from the norm. However, because of societal progression in terms of equality and inclusivity in Africa, it is hoped that the discriminatory challenge has lessened and that black queer employees are now in a position to experience well-being. When employees experience well-being, personal functioning and organisational performance are promoted.

Research purpose: The purpose of the study was to investigate black queer employees' experience of discrimination in the workplace, as well as their psychological well-being.

Motivation for the study: Previous research studies investigating black queer individuals were mostly conducted in a developed world setting and approached from a pathological stance. As a result of progressive societal changes taking place in Africa, it seems necessary to also conduct research focussing on this minority social group from a positive psychological stance.

Research approach/design and method: The study was qualitative in nature, and data were collected from nine black queer employees. The research strategy of phenomenology was used, because it reveals the lived experiences of black queer individuals around a specific phenomenon; for example, sexual orientation.

Main findings: The findings of the study show that although black queer employees did not report experiencing discrimination, there are still a number of discriminatory challenges to which they are exposed. The overall impression was that black queer employees are experiencing psychological well-being, despite the discriminatory challenges that they are exposed to.

Practical/managerial implications: Although much progress has been made in Africa to promote equality and inclusivity, more can be done to support black queer employees. Organisations should place more emphasis on wellness programmes, employee support programmes and health and safety initiatives, to promote a supportive working environment for black queer employees.

Contribution/value-add: The study contributes to the literature on the work experience and well-being of black African queer employees.

Keywords: black African; queer; psychological well-being; discrimination; sexual orientation discrimination; sexual orientation.

Introduction

A larger and more complex talent pool is emerging as a result of the labour force becoming more diverse (Ozeren, 2014). This talent pool includes individuals with different sexual orientations and gender identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and others (LGBTQIA+: henceforth referred to as queer). Despite legislation regulating equality and equal access, queer employees continually face many challenges on both a personal level and in the work context, such as being compelled to refrain from revealing their sexual identity through to blatant discriminatory practices such as job dismissals (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2016; Ozeren, 2014), and cases of micro-aggressive, homophobic language and destructive behaviour (Vollenhoven & Els, 2013). According to Meyer (2003), these examples are outside stressors, referred to as distal minority stressors experienced by minority social groups such as queer individuals, which increases their risk of negative mental health outcomes (Ramirez & Galupo, 2019). These stressful experiences, along with other factors such as internalised homonegativity, negative appraisal of one's sexual identity and poor social support, contribute

to an increased risk of negative mental health outcomes for sexual minority individuals (King et al., 2008; Meyer, 2003). Studies indicate that black people (Williams, 1999; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003) and queer individuals (Harper & Schneider, 2003) commonly experience discrimination in areas such as employment, housing, education and human services. The discrimination and stigma attached to queer employees also negatively influences organisational efficiency and production, and the experience of decent work and mental health (ILO, 2015). Staglin (2019) mentions that the negative experiences that queer individuals are exposed to are associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing mental health conditions – which include the risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviour. Previous research has also found that lesbian, gay, bisexual and 'others' have a higher risk of poor mental health and low well-being when compared to heterosexuals (Semlyen, King, Varney, & Hagger-Johnson, 2016).

Previous queer studies have found that black queer employees are particularly vulnerable to possible sexual orientation discrimination (Judge & Nel, 2008; Levine & Leonard, 1984; Muzend, 2012; Polders & Wells, 2004). A study conducted by Whitfield et al. (2014) found that whilst a majority of queer individuals report being victims of sexual orientation discrimination, racial minorities experience even greater levels of sexual orientation discrimination than their white, queer counterparts. Consequently, findings of the latter study further portend that the intersection of race and sexual orientation creates elevated levels of discrimination risk beyond the already elevated rates of discrimination experienced by queer individuals specifically towards queer individuals of colour.

Discrimination against queer employees has been researched for a number of years; however, most studies focused primarily on the experiences of queer individuals in developed societies such as Europe, Australia and the United States of America. Sufficient research concerning this minority group has not been conducted in African countries, mainly because queer individuals in Africa often hide their sexual orientation because of fear of persecution (Mavhunda-Mudzusi, 2017). Homosexuality is still criminalised in many African countries, and most African societies are generally not acceptant of homosexuality, which may be attributed to religious and political leaders' public opposition thereto (Gore, 2018). South Africa has been progressive and inclusive in terms of equality and gender, but discrimination against black queer employees is still occurring – even in this African country (Mawambi, 2014). However, one needs to acknowledge that despite continual sexual orientation discrimination, great strides have been made in terms of recognising queer rights over the past few years in Africa (Klein, 2017). This progression has led to an increase in societal acceptance of sexual orientation minorities (Epprecht, 2012), which suggests a possible decrease in sexual orientation discrimination and improved mental health and well-being.

Research problem and questions

There is a dearth of research studies focussing on black African employees, who have been identified as a sexual minority group that is particularly vulnerable to sexual orientation discrimination (Whitfield et al., 2014). This elevated vulnerability to sexual orientation discrimination may be attributed to the intersection of race and sexual orientation. Previous research studies have found that race adds an additional dimension to discrimination in the workplace, particularly in terms of income and promotional opportunities (Elmslie & Tebaldi, 2007). The latter scholars postulate that black queer individuals earn lower salaries and achieve less workplace advancement than white, queer individuals regardless of job performance or qualification. These examples of institutional prejudice and discrimination affect the health and well-being of sexual minority people (Muller & Hughes, 2016) and therefore research investigating sexual orientation discrimination and well-being of black African employees should continue.

With the shift in focus in psychology from pathology to mental health and well-being, it seems appropriate to consider the well-being of black African queer employees. Furthermore, because of societal changes taking place in terms of queer acceptance, it is possible that there may be a change in the type and severity of discriminatory challenges that black African queer employees are experiencing which may improve their well-being. Against this background, the purpose of this research article is to investigate the discrimination challenge and psychological well-being of black African queer employees.

The research questions of the study are:

• To what extent, if any, are black African queer employees experiencing discriminatory challenges in the work context?
• To what extent, if any, are black African queer employees experiencing psychological well-being?

In the following section, the theoretical framework of the study is briefly discussed, after which a literature review is presented of psychological well-being and sexual orientation discrimination of black African queer employees. This discussion is followed by the research methodology used in the study, an exposition of the findings of the study and the discussion and implications thereof.

Theoretical framework

The study was approached from a positive psychological perspective, as much queer research (Daley & Mulé, 2014; Roen, 2019) was previously approached from a pathological perspective – focussing on distress, dysfunction and mental disorders (Vaughan et al., 2014). This approach seems outdated, since Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) recommended a shift from a pathological approach to a more balanced or positive perspective. Thus, to investigate a positive quality such as well-being is consistent with this

change in focus. Focussing on positive psychology creates valuable insights with regard to functioning well, as it enables individuals to flourish and cope with difficult times in life (Gable & Haidt, 2005). People belonging to the sexual minority often experience great difficulties internally and externally, and a positive psychological approach is appropriate in order to support individuals who self-identify as queer to cope and flourish.

Literature review

Psychological well-being

The eudaemonic perspective of well-being focuses on the content of one's life and the processes involved in living well: thus experiencing psychological well-being (Ryan et al., 2008). The key focus of eudaemonia is for individuals to live well (rather than to only feel good); to engage their best human capacities towards pursuing virtue and excellence; to continuously engage in reflectivity and deliberation concerning their actions and aims, and to pursue excellence through voluntary actions (Waterman, 2008). This suggests that psychological well-being is of particular importance to black queer employees who decide to reveal their sexual identity or those that decide to transition. Even if a queer individual decides not to reveal his or her sexual identity, they should still strive towards virtue and excellence; although, such a decision may prevent them from achieving this higher state of being.

Psychological well-being emphasises a variety of psychological features, allowing an individual to function well (Ryff, Keyes, & Schmotkin, 2002). The construct is multidimensional in nature, consisting of dimensions such as self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life and autonomy (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Ryff (1989) defines self-acceptance as a positive attitude towards oneself. In terms of self-acceptance of queer employees, previous research found that self-acceptance is not an external process of revealing one's sexual identity to others but rather, when the queer individual comes to accept him or herself (Rosenberg, 2018). The latter author further asserts that queer people never reach an end-state of self-acceptance and that this is a life-long process. A study by Woodford, Kulick, Sinco and Hong (2014) emphasises the important role of self-acceptance when considering discrimination and psychological stress; finding that self-acceptance mediates the relationship between discrimination and psychological distress.

Environmental mastery speaks to one's confidence in the perceived capability of managing responsibilities of life (Keyes, 2014). High levels of environmental mastery indicates a sense of competence in managing the environment, control of a complex array of external activities, effective use of surrounding opportunities and the ability to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values (Ryff & Singer, 1998). The scholars further explain that low levels of environmental mastery denote difficulty in managing

everyday affairs, an inability to change or improve surrounding context, an unawareness of surrounding opportunities, and that the individual essentially lacks a sense of control over the external world. Although queer individuals could choose to work for organisations that are supportive of their personal needs and values – this is not always possible. Furthermore, as was mentioned earlier, queer employees are exposed to hostile working environments and discriminatory practices, often making them refrain from reporting because of the fear of retaliation or being perceived as a trouble maker, and/or to conceal their sexual identity (Fric, 2019).

The psychological well-being dimension of positive relations with others refers to whether one has, or can form, warm, trusting personal relationships (Keyes, 2007). Ako (2010) emphasises that many African states continue to avoid the responsibility of protecting queer individuals and in doing so an ongoing culture of homomisia, heterosexism and intolerance is perpetuated. Ensher et al. (2001, as cited in Bhana, 2013) argue that when employees perceive mistreatment because of their group membership, they experience emotions of alienation and anger, which may result in negative work-related behaviours, such as lower levels of job satisfaction and organisational commitment. The aforementioned may contribute to queer individuals deciding not to reveal their sexual identities at work. However, there is no conclusive determination regarding the strength and direction of the (potential) relationship between sexual orientation disclosure and co-worker supportiveness (Wax, Coletti, & Ogaz, 2018).

Personal growth is the ability to develop and expand the self, to become a fully functioning person, and to self-actualise and accomplish goals (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). To reach the peak in psychological functioning, one must continue to develop the self through growth in various stages of life (Ryff, 1989). This refers to continual evolution and problem-solving, in order to grow one's talents and abilities. An elevated level of personal growth is associated with continued development, whilst a depleted level is suggestive of a lack of growth. Queer individuals with a growth mind-set are likely to realise that personal growth produces results, irrespective of sexual orientation. Dweck (2006) theorises that a growth mindset leads to tendencies to embrace challenges, persist when experiencing setbacks, view efforts as a path to mastery and learning from criticism.

Purpose in life refers to one's sense that life has meaning and direction (Keyes, 2014). Research shows that individuals scoring high on this dimension of psychological well-being have goals in life and a sense of directedness; they sense that there is meaning to present and past life, hold beliefs that give life purpose, and have aims and objectives for living (Ryff & Singer, 1998). When queer employees focus on their responsibilities, and strive to be the best, they set attainable goals for themselves, which not only inspires others around them, but motivates them to do better and have a sense of

direction for their own lives (Herrick, Stall, Goldhammer, Egan, & Mayer, 2014; Scheier & Carver, 1992).

Autonomy is the regulation of one's own behaviour through an internal locus of control (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). It is mentioned that a fully-functioning person has high levels of self-assuredness, assessing the self on personal standards and achievements, whilst not relying on the standards of others. Autonomous individuals do not seek out commendation from other individuals, are focused on their own beliefs, and are less persuaded by others' ideas (Ryff, 1989). Queer individuals generally require autonomy, personal insight and intrinsic motivation to sustain self-confidence, which is much needed if one considers the queer individuals' discriminatory challenge (Herrick et al., 2014). Fric (2016) asserts that queer individuals often have a lack of self-confidence and experience emotional isolation as a result of the internalisation of society's homophobia.

Sexual orientation discrimination of black African queer employees

Sexual orientation discrimination can be defined as harassment or differential treatment based on someone's perception of somebody being gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual (Adja-Kwaku, Addae, Nkansah, & Nyarko Apiah, 2013). For the purposes of this study, sexual orientation discrimination is regarded as harassment or differential treatment, based on someone's perception of an individual's sexual and/or gender identity (i.e. being queer). Research regarding queer employees has mostly been conducted from a Eurocentric point of view in westernised societies. Although significant differences between African and the developed societies – specifically the United States – are noted, it was necessary to take cognisance of research conducted in these countries, because of the dearth of research investigating this marginalised group. According to Brown (2011), African-American queer individuals face greater challenges disclosing their sexual orientation in their own communities, where homophobia is prevalent, which may possibly be attributed to the conservative nature of many black households. Rose (1998, as cited in Lemelle & Battle, 2004) argues that African Americans are more homophobic and therefore, it is likely that a greater degree of homophobia results in greater stigmatisation of homosexuality in African American communities, and in turn, this causes more 'closeted' behaviours and produces more stress amongst gay African American men. As a result, innumerable forms of stereotypical and derogatory references continue to be rampant both on a social and professional scale, when relating to members of the black queer community – possibly leading to a regression in job engagement and advancement opportunities accorded to the black queer minorities, when employed.

Studies conducted in South Africa have reported that despite the language of inclusivity and tolerance in this post-apartheid country, many South African institutions, including Afrocentric organisations, continue to reproduce patterns of heterosexism (Richardson, 2006; Wells & Polders, 2006). Some of the overt and covert ways in which homophobia and heterosexism are maintained, are for example through patriarchal behaviour by key staff members in organisations, which include maintaining heterosexuality as the norm, which is communicated through institutional traditions and 'cultures', and often through violent means (Francis & Msibi, 2011). Lötter (2015) found that both gay and lesbian employees (i.e. consisting of various races) experienced discrimination in South African workplaces, although their experiences are slightly different. The researchers found that both gay and lesbian employees experienced discrimination in the form of workplace bullying; the use of prejudice and stereotypes, and concerns associated with people management practices, policies and procedures. In addition, lesbian employees reported to experience sexual harassment. However, there seems to be a dearth of recent empirical studies focussing on sexual orientation discrimination of black African employees which confirms the necessity of the current study.

Research approach and design

A qualitative approach was used which allowed for the voices of participants to be captured as reflected in their lived experiences (Babbie & Mouton, 2014). The ontological stance of subjectivity and the epistemological stance of interpretivism were adopted because they are most compatible with qualitative research (Dieronitou, 2014). In line with the posed research questions, the study was approached from an interpretivist paradigm, using an inductive approach (i.e. providing an accurate description of an event in order to ultimately build a theory that will make sense of the observation) (Babbie & Mouton, 2014). Approaching the study from an interpretivist paradigm was found to be the most appropriate paradigm to use to understand how black queer employees' sexual orientation have affected their discrimination challenge and psychological well-being within the work context. The research strategy of phenomenology was used, because the study sought to understand the lived experiences of black queer employees concerning sexual orientation discrimination and psychological well-being.

Research setting

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of black African queer individuals, a variety of participants within the LGBTQIA+ community were included from two different African countries, namely Malawi and South Africa. The interviews were conducted at a venue that was agreed upon before the interviews commenced. It was requested that the interviews be conducted in the workplace, which was the natural setting within which the black queer managers were working. However, not all participants felt comfortable with the request, and therefore some participants were interviewed at a venue they identified as being

convenient. Lastly, interviews were conducted free from distractions, and at times and locations that were most suitable for participants.

Research participants

The population of this study was black African queer employees who were working in predominantly heteronormative working environments. In order to select the sample, a non-probability sampling method was used – namely snowball sampling (Babbie & Mouton, 2014). It was deemed appropriate to use snowball sampling, because this sampling method is mainly used when the focus of study is on a sensitive issue, possibly concerning a relatively private matter, and thus requires the knowledge of insiders to locate people for the study (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The demographic profile of the final sample, which consisted of nine queer individuals, is indicated in Table 1.

A total of nine participants were selected for the final sample from two African countries, namely South Africa and Malawi. Two of the participants were transgender women who self-identified as heterosexual (participants 2 and 4) and seven of the participants identified as either homosexual and/or bisexual. Five of the participants (participants 1, 2, 5, 6 and 8) were openly queer and four of the participants (participants 3, 4, 7 and 9) refrained from revealing their sexual identity at work.

Data collection

Data were collected by in-depth interviewing using semi-structured interview schedules. The semi-structured interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions, probing was used, and clarifying questions were asked. This gave the respondents the opportunity to tell their stories as they had experienced them. The rationale for the use of this data-collection method was to allow for the collection of sufficient data (Mathers, Fox, & Hunn, 2002) – without missing any significant information. Each interview took approximately 30 min, and the questions posed were formulated in line with the research objectives of the study. Example questions are: 'How do you perceive your working environment?', and 'How would you describe your relationships with others in the organisation'?

Strategies employed to ensure data quality

To ensure data quality, the credibility and trustworthiness of the study was considered (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). These authors assert that it is important to consider credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability when conducting qualitative research. Credibility was advanced by collecting data until saturation was reached, and developing a research procedure that allowed the researcher to generate sufficient, multifaceted and credible data from the participants. The researcher established rapport with the participants to ensure transparency and prolonged engagement (Babbie & Mouton, 2014). Another strategy used in this study to enhance trustworthiness is transferability (Hair, Celsi, Money, Samouel, & Page, 2016), which were promoted by ensuring that the study findings can be transferred to other contexts by collecting detailed data and including a diverse and clearly defined sample. Dependability was considered by describing the study sample and documenting the research methodology was used in sufficient depth. Furthermore, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Confirmability was advanced by developing interview questions from the research questions and literature review, and field notes were kept (Babbie & Mouton, 2014).

Data analysis and interpretation

The interviews were conducted with black African queer employees. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to avoid the possibility of misquoting the participants. The editing process and preparation of the interviews for coding included a thorough review of the transcripts. Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) (Baugh, Hallcom, & Harris, 2010), was applied to code and analyse the information provided by the participants. Using CAQDAS to manage, extract, compare and explore the collected data eased and facilitated the analysis process (Ngalande & Mkwinda, 2014). Furthermore, the software assisted with building networks and relationships, resulting in the creation of a graphical representation of the data (Ngalande & Mkwinda, 2014).

TABLE 1: Demographic profile of participants.

Participant	Gender	Sexual orientation	Marital status	Children	Years in current organisation	Level of education
1	Male	Homosexual	Single	No	4 months	Honours/B Tech degree
2	Female	Heterosexual (transgender)	Life partnership	No	6 years	Honours/B Tech degree
3	Male	Homosexual	Single	No	3 years	Masters
4	Female	Heterosexual (transgender)	Single	No	3 months	National diploma/degree
5	Female	Homosexual	Single	Yes	6 years	Matric
6	Male	Homosexual	Single	No	11 months	Masters
7	Female	Bisexual	Single	No	1 year	Honours/B Tech degree
8	Male	Homosexual	Single	No	2 years	Honours/B Tech degree
9	Male	Bisexual	Single	Yes	1 month	Honours/B Tech degree

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The coding process was guided and framed by the research questions of the study. This process enabled the researcher to identify what is relevant and set the stage to interpret meanings and draw conclusions (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Through the grouping of codes, themes were generated. As new categories emerged during subsequent interviews, they were included in the initial list of categories mentioned. These categories were clustered together in order to create the themes of the study.

Ethical consideration

In a qualitative study, ethical considerations have a particular resonance because of the in-depth nature of the study process (Arifin, 2018). Prior to collecting the data, an explanatory letter was emailed to the participants a week before the scheduled interviews, explaining the nature and objectives of the study. In order to ensure that the participants gave informed consent to participate in the study, an introduction was given, outlining the purpose of the study and the research procedure that would be followed – as well as ethical considerations that would be observed, such as confidentiality and the protection of identities. The participants were also made aware that participation in the study was voluntary, and that, as such, they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants.

Findings
Discrimination of black African queer employees in the workplace

From the responses received, it was interesting to note that the respondents largely reported that they were not discriminated against. This is, in the main, contradictory to most previous studies investigating the work experiences of queer employees (Sears & Mallory, 2011). However, although the participants did not report sexual orientation discrimination, various forms of discrimination challenges were mentioned – such as derogatory remarks, casual transphobia, organisational policies and hostile working environments.

From these responses, one may conclude that respondents are faced with a variety of sexual orientation discrimination challenges, which could potentially affect their well-being. Respondents mentioned challenges such as casual transphobia and colleagues prying into their personal lives, which made them felt uncomfortable in the workplace. Another participant, who is open about her sexuality, asserted that facing discrimination in the workplace regarding her sexuality is the norm rather than the exception. This may be one of the reasons why some black queer individuals have not disclosed their sexuality. Another challenge faced by the black queer participants was being the victims of derogatory remarks made by colleagues in the workplace. As one participant mentioned,

she has no apparent need to open up about her sexuality in the workplace, as she does not want to be ridiculed. Another participant, who is yet to disclose his sexuality, stated that he does not feel comfortable with the idea of disclosing his sexuality in the workplace, arguing that he owes nobody an explanation. In addition, some participants mentioned that there is a lack of inclusivity and an absence of queer policies in the workplace, which is a challenge as it leaves black queer individuals vulnerable.

Psychological well-being of black African queer employees

In the context of psychological well-being, issues of self-acceptance, establishing and maintaining positive relationships with others, environmental mastery and personal growth were brought to the fore by the study participants.

From the responses solicited and presented in Table 3, it is evident that the first sub-theme that emerged was self-acceptance. Most participants eloquently stated that they are accepting of themselves, or that they are learning to accept who they are becoming. It is noteworthy that other participants highlighted having a strong, transparent attribute helps them to stay true to themselves. Hence, they do not fear being who they are. It should be mentioned that although some participants (i.e. participants 1, 2, 5, 6 and 8) revealed that they had disclosed their sexual orientation to colleagues, others (i.e. participants 3, 4, 7 and 9) have not done so arguing that they are not comfortable disclosing their sexuality. In terms of relationships with others, most participants (i.e. participants 2, 3, 4, 6, 8 and 9) mentioned that they are satisfied with the relationships they have with their colleagues. The overall impression is that participants have established good relationships with others in the work context. However, a few participants indicated that they have a neutral relationship with their colleagues – emphasising that it is mostly professional.

When considering environmental mastery, it was interesting that participants found ways to cope in different environments in order to attain environmental mastery, which is a crucial factor that contributes to an individual's psychological well-being. It was mentioned by one respondent that the office exterior was changed to suit his taste. This action helped him to have great energy and to be productive because the office reflects his personality. For another participant, it meant avoiding negativity by not associating with people she does not want to associate with. A key finding is the diverse interpretations participants attributed to personal growth. From their responses, personal growth is viewed as a process of self-actualisation, as it determines an individual's success level in terms of career advancement and overall happiness. For two participants, personal growth was partly attributed to them pursuing their Master's degree qualifications. Others mentioned that overall career advancement has been good, despite personal growth being

TABLE 2: Sub-themes generated from responses in terms of the discriminatory challenge.

Subtheme	Verbatim quotes
Derogatory remarks	'I was speaking to a manager who was very professional and then upon my exit I just heard someone saying – so is that your girlfriend leaving?' (P8, Male, Homosexual)
	'… At my previous employment, I was called "that girl." There was always a girl on shift, but they were not referring to her, they called her by name. But to me, they call me [by] referring to a girl, until management came in and tried to fix the entire situation.' (P9, Male, Bisexual)
	'There is this guy at work, he is not really objectifying whether he is gay or not … and they tend to think he is gay … So, they will make remarks like – oh my gosh he is gay, he is afraid, why can't he just say? Does he think he is going to lose his job, what's going to happen if he comes out? Some other things are really mean. They would make fun of his height – it makes sense why he is like that. His height, it makes sense that he is gay – then why does he not come out?'(P7, Female, Bisexual)
Casual transphobia	'Women just hate me, those are the real challenges that I face and I wish they would just get off my back. I just think they look at me funny, like just weird, like I don't understand. I can't even talk about it cause I just kind of feel like I'm giving negativity power … I had people's full support and then all of a sudden I'm this beautiful girl and ladies started acting weird. Maybe, I guess, it's just women hating other women.' (P2, Female, Heterosexual [transgender])
Organisational policies	'It's a religious institution, so anything that is advocated for in the Bible, anything that is advocated against, then it's not going to be accepted. So as we already know, being queer is something that religious people use to trash the queer people, so I don't think the policies are anywhere near friendly to the queer community, or I would say they are not friendly at all, though they are not stated explicitly.' (P3, Male, Homosexual)
	'There is no inclusivity of different sexual orientations.' (P9, Male, Bisexual)
Hostile work environment	'… They [colleagues] are quite aware of how they phrase things or how they say things, even though certain moments you can hear the nuances of violence specific to a person's personal belonging, or personal location. But it's nothing that has been sort of overt or that has been a jarring experience.' (P6, Male, Homosexual)
	'Outside work and among my friends, I am free to say it [that I'm gay]. But at work I do not think I am ready yet, because I do not feel they will be accommodating and understanding.' (P7, Female, Bisexual)

TABLE 3: Sub-themes generated from responses in terms of psychological well-being.

Subtheme	Verbatim quotes
Self-acceptance	'I feel positive and what I like about myself is that it encourages me to be who I am. I am in journey of healing; I am going in that place of understanding.' (P4, Female, Heterosexual [transgender])
	'Well, I love myself, I celebrate myself so much. I struggle to place myself in a position where I'm not [openly gay]… I'm one person who accepts things for what they are. What I can shift I can shift, what I can't, I can't. I come to work with a different energy each day.' (P6, Male, Homosexual)
	'I feel like now I understand myself better, I really do not have to be anybody else, I do not have to pretend to be somebody or not be myself. I love being myself now and I think I understand myself better. I have grown in that aspect of respecting my boundaries, from the dressing and everything.' (P7, Female, Bisexual)
	'It's been a working progress, I've tried so hard to be very positive about myself and I'm learning now how to love myself and I'm learning how to appreciate myself only now … as a working woman you know, I'm learning that people should not even take advantage of me or work.' (P2, Female, Heterosexual [transgender])
Relationships with others	'You know, growing up feeling mostly rejected by people, that you cannot be part of certain environments where people are all together. So I always tried to explain myself first when somebody approaches me. So that has been hard for me – especially at work.' (P7, Female, Bisexual)
	'I'm myself and everybody else is themselves around me you know. I've never been pressurised to act in a certain way or behave in a certain way. I've always been allowed to be myself. I have the most incredible boss who has opened his arms about my transition, about the way I am. Therefore, I've never felt the need to conform or to behave a certain way. Even before I transitioned, I used the term "gay" to masquerade.' (P2, Female, Heterosexual [transgender])
	'I have a good relationship that I share with them, but in terms of the things that I'm supposed to engage with them at work, it's a good relationship that we share.' (P3, Male, Homosexual)
	'My colleagues, they are very willing to help and willing to listen when I have problems, and they are open to teach us stuff.' (P4, Female, Heterosexual [transgender])
	'Our relationship is more of a college-wise professionalism – nothing more, nothing less.' (P1, Male, Homosexual)
	'It is mostly just greet and pass. Unless otherwise I have a direct relationship with you, where either I must submit or do a certain task with you.' (P7, Female, Bisexual)
Environmental mastery	'I am that kind of a person, I don't say people accept me. But, I accept myself and people. Therefore, I create the environment for me, to be more working friendly and conducive.' (P1, Male, Homosexual)
	'The first thing I did in my office when I moved in here, it was like a weird yellow colour – I changed the office … I truly believe that an office space needs to be reflective of the personality of the person who is working in that office space, because it really does contribute towards how it is that you start your day, how you enter into your space, and how you allow that to affect and effect how you work your productivity levels throughout the day.' (P6, Male, Homosexual)
	'I am critical person; first I assess the people around me. If I feel like one simple thing ticks me off about you, I'm going to step away from you. I have created that space for myself – if you tick me off you are out. I think people think I'm odd in a way because I am always by myself. If those people are not there, I am by myself. I think in that manner I have created a safe space for me working by myself and working myself around those people.' (P7, Female, Bisexual)
Personal growth	'I'm saying that for the past 3 to 4 years my personal growth hasn't been that much, it's been minimal. I would say the reason for that is cause of family and the other institutions that I'm attached to. My life, more has been revolving around family a lot, so that's why I've been experiencing some minimal growth.' (P3, Male, Homosexual)
	'It has grown immensely, yes it has grown very, very big, because I've, first of all, I literally took a chance and I transitioned and I chose to do that in front of the world and … and it's the hardest thing ever and that on its own it shows growth in my character that I stood for, what I believe in, and I lived through that.' (P4, Female, Heterosexual [transgender])
	'Positive, as I said earlier, I mean, I have not been at a point where I feel like I am at a plateau. I am constantly at a space where something new is coming up that is challenging me … quite a lot of things that a person within my personal capacity and my professional capacity, I will be pursuing further.' (P6, Male, Homosexual)
	'Personally I have learnt to not just take every knock as a personal knock, but access the knock and just see whether it's something that I did not do and how I can change that even if it's something that I did not do. How to react in a proper way rather than always reacting in a much more, I won't say violent, but an aggressive way.' (P8, Male, Homosexual)

minimal in the last 3–4 years. For another participant, growing spiritually and mentally was the gauge used to define personal growth, which was satisfactory. Satisfactory personal growth, according to another participant, was overcoming the challenges of transitioning openly in a society that is mostly still largely unreceptive to individuals of trans experience. Some participants revealed that they are happy with the challenges that come with advancement, arguing that nothing hinders them from advancing. It was also mentioned by one participant that he taught himself not to over analyse and take things to heart, and every obstacle is a learning curve that pushes him to try again.

Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore black African queer employees' discriminatory challenge on account of their sexual orientation within the work context, as well as their psychological well-being (see Tables 2 and 3). In terms of the discriminatory challenge, participants did not report sex-orientation discrimination, but reference was made to sex-orientation discriminatory challenges such as derogatory remarks, casual transphobia, organisational policies that are non-inclusive and hostile working environments. It may be possible that black African queer employees have become accustomed to experiencing harsh social discrimination which could possibly have led to participants not accurately reporting on the discriminatory challenges within the work context. Another aspect that could have attributed to participants not experiencing discrimination at work is the non-disclosure of their sexual identity. Brown (2011, p. 3) states that a number of black African corporate executives who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) choose to 'pass as straight' and invest a lot of time and energy concealing their personal lives or avoiding certain colleagues and company events. Mendos (2019) refers to a survey which found that LGBT people in South Africa often do not report discrimination and hate crimes because of the fear of revealing their sexual identity to others.

One of the challenges reported by the participants is the absence of queer-inclusive policies, which is a serious workplace challenge that often leaves queer individuals vulnerable (Hoffshire, 2017). These authors found that many queer individuals are subjected to homophobic policies and practices that include a lack of protection, healthcare benefits and accessibility to promotions. A study conducted in South Africa found that very few organisations have provisions protecting queer employees from discrimination on the grounds of gender identity and the expression thereof (Mendos, 2019). Overall, the findings of the study show that there is still a long way to go in terms of black queer recognition and acceptance in African workplaces.

In terms of psychological well-being, issues of self-acceptance, establishing and maintaining positive relationships with others, environmental mastery and personal growth were brought to the fore by the study participants. Most participants responded with positive attitudes of self-acceptance (self-love) and maturity, indicating they have accepted themselves for who they are, and that they are not derailed by their sexual identity. Of note is that, most participants who mentioned self-acceptance have disclosed their sexual orientation to their colleagues and are liberated with who they are. Participants, who reported lower levels of self-acceptance, have not yet disclosed their sexual identity – mainly because they fear rejection and/or mistreatment. Mohr and Fassinger (2003) found that queer individuals who experience difficulty in accepting their own sexual orientation were more inclined to be anxious and distrustful of others, which is associated with high levels of avoidance. The researchers explain that although queer individuals often crave close interpersonal contact, the potential negative consequences thereof are feared. This suggests that although the concealment of one's queer identity may promote harmonious work arrangements, it does not contribute to one's experience of psychological well-being. In this regard, Schrimshaw, Siegel, Downing and Parsons (2013) found a negative relationship between concealment and mental health.

Available literature indicates that people who exhibit high levels of positive relations with others tend to have a warm, satisfying and trusting relationship with their contemporaries (Ryff & Singer, 1998). In terms of maintaining relationships with others, most respondents indicated they have positive relationships with their colleagues. A few respondents indicated, however, that they have neutral relationships with their colleagues – emphasising it is mainly professional in nature. Webster, Adams, Maranto, Sawyer and Thoroughgood (2017, p. 4) refer to the importance of creating a supportive psychological climate for queer employees, which 'allows for positive social interactions (i.e., warmth, cooperation, and social rewards) and being able to express one's true feeling and self without fear of repercussion'. It is thus possible that the organisations the respondents are working for have, to some extent, created psychological climates which are supportive and inclusive of black queer employees.

With regard to environmental mastery, most of the black queer individuals seemed to experience this dimension of psychological well-being positively, indicating that they have created spaces that are suitable for them that cater to their needs. Thus, it seems that most of the respondents have achieved some sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment. The latter includes control of a complex array of external activities; effective use of surrounding opportunities, and the ability to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values (Ryff & Singer, 1998). A study by Luiggi-Hernández et al. (2015) reported average levels of environmental mastery for a queer sample. One may thus conclude that the respondents have, to some extent, chosen and created suitable working environments that are supportive of them functioning well.

When analysing personal growth, the respondents indicated they experience personal growth as a process of achieving self-actualisation. Some respondents indicated satisfaction with their personal growth – partly attributing it to their decision to further their studies. In this regard, Ryff and Keyes (1995) postulate that personal growth is the ability to develop and expand the self, to become a fully functioning person and to self-actualise and accomplish goals. The respondents in the study bemoaned that personal growth does present its own challenges along the way. However, this does not derail them from achieving their goals. Gormley (2017) found that gay, lesbian and bisexual students felt that although they felt growing support, more resources and awareness is needed in order to support them to a state of self-actualisation. One can conclude from

this finding that in order to attain peak psychological functioning, it is important that one takes responsibility for continuous development of the self through growth in various stages of life.

The findings regarding psychological well-being indicated that participants are mostly acceptant of themselves, celebrate and appreciate who they are, and are generally having positive relationships with others. Having said that, not all participants revealed their sexual orientation and/or gender identity at work; giving the overall impression that the participants' sexual identity has not affected their functioning at work. However, although instances of differential treatment and homonegativity at some workplaces were reported, most black queer people seem to have developed a sense of resilience to appropriately deal with work challenges related to their sexual orientation. Organisations need to do more to support black African queer employees in order to create a supportive psychological climate in which micro-aggressive behaviour at work is not tolerated or promoted.

Managerial implications

A person's gender identity may change over time, which may potentially influence an individual's mental health and organisational functioning. It goes without saying that a comprehensive wellness programme provides ongoing integrated health support that is linked to corporate objectives. Although it is acknowledged that black queer employees are responsible for their own health, a comprehensive wellness programme would provide them with knowledge and skills to assume greater self-responsibility for their health and well-being. In fact, Mchunu (2012) found that employee wellness programmes produce physical and mental health improvements amongst employees. Queer employees with a higher risk of poor mental health and low well-being when compared to heterosexuals (Semlyen et al., 2016) may greatly benefit from such programmes. Not only is it necessary for organisations to have such programmes, but they should be well communicated, implemented and managed. Although wellness programmes could produce excellent health results, benefitting organisations to a large extent, they are often a mere tick-box exercise that yields very little outputs.

Some respondents have mentioned that they are working in hostile working environments, in which incidences of psychological harm are prevalent. For example, one respondent – an openly gay man – reported that he often experienced getting misgendered and taunted by fellow colleagues. Some of the sex-orientation discrimination challenges mentioned not only create a hostile working environment but are also a violation of human rights and unfair discrimination. Section 14 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act, Act 85 of 1993 (RSA, 1993) states that every employee shall at work 'take reasonable care for the health and safety of himself and of other persons who may be affected by his acts or omissions'. Clearly, employees making

these types of comments are not informed about their general duties as employees. Furthermore, it is possible that employees, because of their Afrocentric cultures, are not sensitive and educated about black queer individuals and their rights, which harms and directly infringes upon the lived experiences of black queer persons. As such, one recommendation would be to establish health and safety committees that are cognisant of queer-phobic incidences which actively work to make the workplace safer for black queer employees, and report incidences that would compromise their safety and productivity at work.

An employee assistance programme (EAP) is a workplace intervention designed to assist employees with a wide range of problems that may have an impact on their health and well-being, as well as productivity in the workplace (Werner et al., 2017). From the responses amassed from the participants, it is apparent that casual transphobia, heterosexism and psychological hurt often take a toll on participants' well-being. This is supported by Hoffshire (2017), who found that possessing a marginalised sexual orientation tends to affect an individual's self-efficacy, performance and outcome expectations, as they often face additional stressors such as homophobia, discrimination, or barriers in a potential career field. Thus, having the EAPs in place would provide psychological support to employees whose personal problems may negatively affect their work performance. Moreover, EAPs would be an ideal support structure to help black queer employees who have not disclosed their sexual identity at work, employees who decide to disclose their sexual identity, or those who may decide to transition. Employee assistance programmes can also be used to educate and develop members of the workforce through training and effective diversity management strategies in order to create an inclusive, non-discriminatory organisational culture in which diversity is celebrative rather than frowned upon.

Limitations of the study

Despite the valuable contributions, the study had several limitations. Firstly, snowball sampling was used to recruit study participants. Eventually, only nine black African queer employees participated in the study, which is a relatively small sample size. However, it was extremely difficult to find black African employees who were willing to participate in the study. Although some initially agreed to participate, they eventually did not respond to requests to set up the interviews. Sharma and Subramanyam (2020) reported that queer individuals still need to hide their sexual orientation, which may be one of the reasons for the absence of psychological well-being studies of queer employees. Secondly, only a single data-collection method (i.e. semi-structured interviews) was used to collect the qualitative data. Lastly, there is a limited amount of academic literature on black queer employees, particularly in Africa. Therefore, it is important that the body of academic literature related to this selected sample be expanded.

Conclusion and recommendations

The purpose of this research study was to investigate sexual orientation discrimination challenges and the psychological well-being of black African queer employees. Although valuable findings were obtained from the study, more research is needed to test and confirm the study findings. It would be interesting to understand the experiences of transgender employees in more depth, regardless of race, as this kind of research is often avoided. Other work-related attitudes such as talent planning, recruitment, as well as diversity management and retention should also be investigated to establish whether these issues are affected by sexual orientation in the African context.

Going forward, there seems to be a need for open dialogue about the rights of sexual minorities in Africa. Such a process should be led by societal and political leaders, who should encourage discussions in an unbiased manner and in an atmosphere of respect – devoid of insults, threats and name-calling. Such a dialogue may eventually assist organisational leaders to create organisational cultures that sincerely embrace diversity and inclusion within the workplace. However, this requires an honest commitment from senior management to set the stage for such initiatives. It is only through the commitment of organisational leaders, that equality and inclusivity could be promoted in the workplace. Should organisations refrain from doing so, it may prevent them from reaping the benefits of diversity.

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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