


Chapter 6

Gender and Culture Shock at University: Perspectives of First-Year Male Students From a Public University in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The chapter seeks to embark on a qualitative study with first-year male students from a public university in South Africa to understand their adjustment and adapting to university life due to challenges with gender and sexuality matters that they face. The authors is mostly interested in male students as they are the usual perpetrators of gender and sexuality offences in universities. With this chapter, the author wants to understand the experiences of these students as they transition from one world (their hometowns) to another (university campuses). Of interest in this study is that some of the students at this university come from previously disadvantaged backgrounds: villages, townships, and farmsteads. Some of them have gone through traditional rites of passage such as initiation schools; others come from patriarchal backgrounds and heteronormative backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

I remember when I set foot for the first time on a university campus, in January 2012. It was my first time in a city, there were a lot of people around me, men, and women, black and white. The campus presented me with lots of opportunities and challenges. One of them was intimate relationships with female students. As a heterosexual young man, I was interested in heterosexual women. It was the first time in my life seeing so many “beautiful women” in one place. I wanted to try my luck with some of them. I was from a village, a heteronormative and patriarchal community, a place where *spanking* [slapping a person with a hand, especially on the buttocks] a girl, convincing her to have sex with you if she

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is resisting was “manly”, a place where you can pull a girl from a bar and force her to go to your place with you and have sex with you, a place, where gender-based violence in many of its forms is a minor offence and can be resolved by family negotiations, sometimes even paying a fine to the family of the victim. University life was different. These behaviours were punishable.

University life came with a variety of challenges, most importantly, gender and sexual issues, policies and so forth. All those were foreign to me. In my first year, a surge of sexual harassment cases by academic staff members against students and fellow staff members emerged. Some male academics lost their jobs. Some male students were also excluded from the university due to harassment cases. One of them was my best friend, we came from the same village. I then realized that I was in a different world, and I had to adapt. But some of my fellow students, especially those that were from a similar social and cultural background as me could not adapt. Some even went to the point of changing universities and going back to study at universities that had similar cultures to the ones they grew up in. To them, the University was a foreign culture.

This chapter is influenced by this background and my personal experiences at university as a first-year male student regarding gender and sexuality issues. The chapter seeks to embark on a qualitative study with first-year male students from one public university in Gauteng, South Africa to understand their adjustment and adapting to university life due to challenges with gender and sexuality matters that they face. Due to ethical considerations the name of the university has been concealed and will just be referred to as “the University” in this study. I am mostly interested in male students as they are the usual perpetrators of gender and sexuality offences in universities. With this chapter, I want to understand the experiences of these students as they transition from one world, their hometowns to another, university campuses.

Of interest in this study is that some of the students at the University come from previously disadvantaged backgrounds: villages, townships, and farmsteads. Some of them have gone through traditional rites of passage such as initiation schools, others come from patriarchal backgrounds and heteronormative backgrounds. These factors influence their relationships with female and queer students (David, 2015). It is important to understand how their learning environment and learning abilities have been affected by these gender and sexuality conundrums.

Students across the world deal with adjustment issues when they set foot in institutions of higher learning. This is an important aspect of their academic journey. When changing an environment, there is a need to develop new living habits and make new friends and colleagues in the new environment. This also involves moving from normal routines to establishing new ones, learning a new organizational culture, a new language, a new local culture and so forth (Ngonyama-Ndou, 2020). These challenges mean one must adjust, unfortunately not everyone has a smooth adjustment when they move to a new culture.

BACKGROUND

Every year the number of students entering universities around the world is increasing (Mudhovozi, 2012). This results in the growth of the diversity of students. Universities have students from multiple backgrounds, identities, skills, abilities, nationalities, etc. Some universities pride themselves on these diversities. While there were times when universities were reserved for the wealthy and the elites, universities have become more accessible to the public. There are more students in institutions of higher learning now than there were in the past. This makes universities a competitive space, socially, culturally,

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