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In(ex)clusion of transgender students in South African higher education institutions

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This study aimed to critically assess the current state of transgender student inclusion in South African universities, highlighting the challenges, progress and potential areas for improvements that exist. This article highlights the complexities of legal identity, self-determined identity and the recognition of transgender identity in South Africa. Using photovoice and drawings as data collection tools, this study explored the lived realities of seven transgender university participants in a society that upholds heteronormative values and practices. Purposive and snowball sampling approaches allowed us to identify participants for the study among a population that would otherwise be difficult to reach.

Contribution: The findings of this study are discussed under themes that are evocative of the students' experiences of exclusion practices in their institutions of learning. We argue that South African universities should focus not only on increasing diversity but also on creating inclusive environments that support the success and well-being of all student populations, in this case, transgender students.

Keywords: exclusion practices; inclusion; transgender; institution of higher learning; transformation of higher education; cisnormative.

Introduction

In recent years, the issue of transgender inclusion in universities has gained significant attention in South Africa (Jagessar & Msibi 2015; Kiguwa & Langa 2017; Sanger 2014; Sithole 2015). Universities are considered places of education, diversity and social progress, making it crucial to examine the degree to which they espouse these values, by the assessment of various practices, such as how inclusive they are for transgender individuals (Goodrich 2012; Msibi 2013). This discussion aims to critically assess the current state of transgender student inclusion in universities and highlight the challenges, progress and potential areas for improvement. Many universities have implemented inclusive policies and support systems in response to concerns expressed by transgender and gender nonconforming students and staff and advocates of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBTQI+) rights (Brown, Maseko & Sedibe 2020; Hames 2007; Msibi 2013). Such measures include nondiscrimination policies, gender-neutral housing options and the establishment of LGBTQI+ resource centres or student organisations. Although these initiatives are positive in theory, their effectiveness in practice varies. Instances of discrimination, hate speech and microaggressions continue to occur, inhibiting transgender individuals' sense of belonging (Lesch, Brits & Naidoo 2017). Some institutions may have comprehensive policies but lack implementation and enforcement mechanisms, resulting in a gap between policy and practice. In addition, a lack of awareness can hinder the development of adequate support systems and their continued implementation over time. The inclusion of transgender individuals in universities is complex and multifaceted. Achieving meaningful transgender inclusion requires a comprehensive approach that tackles systemic issues, promotes awareness and education and fosters an environment of respect and acceptance among all individuals (Anderssen et al. 2020; Cook et al. 2020). Universities must continually reassess their practices, engage in dialogue with the LGBTQI+ community and collaborate to create genuinely inclusive spaces that empower and support transgender students and staff (Theriault 2017). As part of this conversation, this study underscores the need for inclusive campus access and facilities for transgender students in universities. While this information may seem redundant, as past literature already deals with a good description of the level of existing knowledge on this topic, in this study, we critically examine why it is necessary to revisit and reiterate this knowledge, especially in academic discourse. We reiterate this knowledge with the support of current evidence to emphasise the persisting inequalities as a result of ignorance and reluctance regarding the holistic inclusion of transgender identities in universities. We begin by highlighting the complexity of legal identity

and the self-determined identity of transgender people in South Africa. We then discuss the theory of practice in relation to transgender identity. We also attempt to draw attention to the use of arts-based methodologies as a valuable and effective data collection tool in research among vulnerable and minority populations.

Transgender identity determinants in South Africa

Transgender is understood as an umbrella term that refers to people whose gender assigned at birth does not correspond with gender behaviour and attributes labelled as restrictively masculine or feminine (Monakali & Francis 2022). The affirmation of and support for transgender identities in South Africa are underpinned by the constitution (*Act no. 108 of 1996*), which prohibits all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender (RSA 1996). *The Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act* (no. 49 of 2003) grants individuals who meet diagnostic and medical preconditions the facility to alter their registered birth sex on official records and consequently their gender identity (RSA 2003).

To put it simply, one's gender recognition requires the correction of one's legal 'sex' status, in registries, birth certificates and other documents, so that it corresponds to one's gender identity. In essence, medical science is considered explicitly and limitedly the cornerstone of the determination of rights (Spade 2003). This fixed-over-time legitimisation of transgender identities in South Africa is problematic in many ways.

Transgender in South Africa is legally and officially described as a transitional process of physical and psychosocial adjustment performed by medical and psychiatric professionals to achieve greater congruence between the sex assigned at birth and their experienced gender (Wilson et al. 2014). Gender-reassignment surgery is predominantly performed at only two public hospitals – Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town and Steve Biko Academic Hospital in Pretoria (Jugroop, Esterhuizen & Walton 2016). However, both of these facilities perform only four operations per year, resulting in a long waiting list for gender-reassignment surgeries.

A gender marker can also be legally changed for individuals undergoing hormonal treatment (Jugroop et al. 2016). These rigidly determined interventions are costly and inaccessible to most students, poor working class or rural transgender persons, as the providers for gender-affirming procedures are usually found only in major cities (Luhur, Mokgoroane & Shaw 2021). Monakali and Francis (2022:1) hold the view that these restrictive processes invariably perpetuate patriarchal ideals that 'underpin the binary construction of identity' sustained by 'unrelenting anti-LGBT rhetoric that thrives within educational institutions that perpetuate gender inequalities, homophobia and transphobia'.

The courts have ruled in favour of people of transgender identities who were subjected to unfair discrimination, regardless of whether they had officially changed their legal gender marker. The Equality Court in *Lallu v. Van Staden* (Van Hout 2022) ruled that a neighbour's verbal abuse of a transgender woman equated to harassment, hate speech and unfair discrimination (Van Hout 2022). The Magistrate's Court in 2014 found a school principal guilty of discrimination, harassment and physical assault and ordered the Limpopo Department of Education to pay R60 000 to the victim, Nare Mphela, a transgender woman (Geldenhuys 2021). In 2019, a Western Cape Court ruled in favour of Jade September, a transgender woman who claimed to be exposed to gender maltreatment (Van Hout 2022). Prison officials denied her the right to express her gender through jewellery, gender-affirming underwear, dress, hairstyle and cosmetic use.

These examples of litigation were based on judgements made predominantly on the *Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act* (PEPUDA, Act no. 4 of 2000). PEPUDA (s. 1) defines harassment as:

'[*U*]nwanted conduct which is persistent or serious and demeans, humiliates or creates a hostile or intimidating environment or is calculated to induce submission by actual or threatened adverse consequences and which is related to:

- sex, gender or sexual orientation, or
- a person's membership or presumed membership of a group identified by one or more of the prohibited grounds or a characteristic associated with such [*a*] group (04).

The revised version of the 2017 Yogyakarta Principles (Principle 31), to which South Africa is a signatory, explicitly rejects psychiatric and psychological assessments and recognises gender based on self-determination (Yogyakarta Principles 2017).

Although South Africa has made significant progress in the medical and official recognition of transgender identities, efforts to expand the criteria to accommodate individuals who may not undergo these procedures should be considered. There is a need to simplify the legal process of changing identity documents. South Africa can further enhance the inclusion and protection of transgender individuals, fostering a society that embraces gender diversity and respects the rights and dignity of all citizens.

Practice theory

Even though one stated objective of higher education institutions (HEIs) is to create inclusive and social learning spaces for everyone, exclusion practices in HEIs still occur (Mzangwa 2019; Walker 2003). Therefore, the impact of exclusion must be studied (Schneider 2010). This study adopted practice theory as a theoretical framework to understand the impact of exclusion practices (Inglis 1997). Practice theory is a sociological framework that explores the way in which social practices are shaped by individuals, institutions and society as a whole (Bourdieu 1977). It focuses on the everyday actions, behaviours and routines that individuals engage in, as well as the larger social structures and systems that influence and are influenced by these

practices (Marine & Nicolazzo 2014). Social actions (or human behaviour) of inhabitants (such as lecturers, students, administrative personnel and security guards, in the case of HEIs) have an impact on how minority groups respond to exclusion and inclusion (Bourdieu 1977). Therefore, this theory assists in evaluating participants' lived realities and experiences at universities. The intention for adopting practice theory is to comprehend the relations of power and domination within organisations or societies known in this theory as 'fields' (Bourdieu 2000). Dominant and minority groups exist in the field (Inglis 1997), with dominant groups suppressing minority groups. For example, colleges and universities reinforce genderism and cisgenderism by virtue of practices, policies and norms (Goldberg 2018; Marine & Nicolazzo 2014).

Genderism refers to instances of discrimination and prejudice that originate from the discontinuities between the sex with which an individual identifies and how others, in different spaces, perceive their sex (Browne 2004). While cisgenderism is defined as the cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates or pathologises self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behaviour, expression and community (Lennon & Mistler 2014), Lindqvist, Sendén and Renström (2021) argue that cisgenderism refers to the notion that it is probable and practical to visually identify the gender identity or infer bodily characteristics of a person based on their appearance. In this paper, we argue that this assumption is a discriminatory ideology that delegitimises student's own self-designated gender. As a result, students (or employees) of cisgender identities are regarded as the dominant group in society and their cultural values and norms (or cultural capital) are imposed on a minority group (or groups) in the field (Bourdieu 1977). The minority group is expected to adhere to dominant cultural capital because it is the only capital that is acceptable in normative fields (Bourdieu 1977). According to Mampane and Brown (2021), heteronormativity is the dominant norm in most societies (i.e. heteronormative fields). Even HEIs are influenced by this heteronormative (or cisnormative) dominant culture; therefore, students who do not conform to this norm are excluded (Msibi 2013; Sanger 2014).

The imposition of the dominant culture (heteronormativity and cisnormativity, in the context of this study) on the minority group produces symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977). Symbolic violence refers to an act of misrecognition of one's capital (Bourdieu 2000), because it is not in accordance with dominant societal capital. In this way, transgender identity is misrecognised as an abnormal gender identity (Beemyn 2003). According to Bourdieu (2000), misrecognition should be understood as everyday and dynamic social practices that do not recognise people for who and what they are. This is the case simply because their symbolic and cultural capital (such as gender expressions) was not previously 'cognised' (Bourdieu 2000). In other words, symbolic violence refers to excluding the minority group from society and denying them what it is to be fully human because their symbolic capital differs from that of the dominant group or groups in the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). According to Bourdieu (2000), the symbolic violence that minority groups experience affects their daily lives. This heteronormative culture exposes students of transgender identities to oppressive and discriminatory organisational systems. Bourdieu (2000) argues that practice theory opposes the notion of a field or society that is dominated by an elite culture that rejects the symbolic capital of the marginalised group. Such fields trigger minority stressors for marginalised groups (Meyer 2003) and intensify oppressive learning environments for students with transgender expressions.

Methodology

This study aimed to explore the lived realities of transgender students in universities (which are assumed to uphold heteronormative and cisnormative values and practices). Therefore, a qualitative research approach was employed to examine the behaviour of individuals and groups, the functioning of HEIs and the way in which interactions shape relationships. The voices of the participants were significant in capturing the experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth 2016) with regard to the exclusionary practices that occur in their respective HEIs. We recognised, too, that some elements might not be so easy for the participants to put into words, and so for this reason, we collected nonverbal and visual information using arts-based data collection tools, namely, photovoice and drawings.

Photovoice is the practice of collecting data by capturing pictures that enable the participants to record and reflect their personal and concerns about the phenomenon under investigation (Sutton-Brown 2014). Drawings, on the other hand, are graphics or visual images used as a data collection tool to respond to a specific research prompt or question (Sutton-Brown 2014). As data collection tools, photovoice and drawings have immense potential to capture participants' unique experiences and perspectives. These methods empower participants to document their lives visually, facilitating dialogue, challenging stereotypes and supporting participant-driven research and advocacy. Photovoice and drawings align with the principles of participatory research, empowering participants as co-creators of knowledge (McNiff 2007), thus supporting our aims and research philosophy.

The photographs and drawings depicted the physical spaces, social interactions and cultural nuances that shaped the experiences of the participants in this study. Their photovoices and drawings, with the associated narratives, were regarded as raw materials before they were interpreted by the researchers (Pentassuglia 2017). This data method ensured that the emotions, perceptions, experiences and realities of the participants' social worlds were heard and understood (McNiff 2007; Ngidi & Moletsane 2018; Pentassuglia 2017). The data were collected in four phases, summarised in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Four phases of data collection.

Phase	Activity
Phase 1: Preparing for the study	• Consent forms and formal letters were issued to each institution's gatekeepers and students.
	• The study was introduced to potential participants in a virtual meeting.
	• Consent forms were signed by those who wanted to participate in the study.
Phase 2: Training on arts-based method	• Participants were trained virtually on arts-based research method.
	• Participants were informed that their participation was anonymous, voluntary and strictly for academic purposes (ethical considerations followed).
Phase 3: Generating the data	• Participants generated their artworks by responding to the following research prompts:
	▪ 'Do a symbolic drawing representing exclusion practices and inform what you often encounter when you express your gender at the institution you were enrolled in. How do you respond to systemic oppression? Put this in a form of a drawing. Give your drawing a caption (title) and write a brief paragraph to explain.'
	▪ 'Take two photographs that will explain your needs as a transgender student at your current institution or where you were enrolled. What can be done to ensure that you are more welcomed and included at the institution?'
Phase 4: Interactive or discursive processes	• The researchers travelled to Stellenbosch (Western Cape), Johannesburg (Gauteng), Empangeni (KwaZulu-Natal) and Klerksdorp (North West) to engage with the participants individually in their desired locations.
	• Face-to-face discussions between researchers and participants took place to explore the meaning of each one's artwork and photographs.
	• Discussions were audio-recorded (with participants' consent) and transcribed verbatim.

Source: Buthelezi, J., 2022, 'Inclusion experiences of transgender students in institutions of higher education', PhD thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg

TABLE 2: Participant profiles.

No.	Participant pseudonym	Gender identity	Location (province)	Level of study	Residence type during studies
1	Lay	TGW	North West	Second year	University residence
2	Ace	TGW	Gauteng	Honours degree	University residence
3	Mshophi	TGW	KwaZulu-Natal	Honours degree	University residence
4	Champ	TGM	Western Cape	First year	Home
6	KayBee	TGW	Gauteng	Honours	Lived between university residence and home
7	Thendy	TGW	Western Cape	Second year	University residence

Source: Buthelezi, J., 2022, 'Inclusion experiences of transgender students in institutions of higher education', PhD thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg
TGW, transgender woman; TGM, transgender man; No., number.

Nonprobability sampling was used to select participants with the desired characteristics (i.e. transgender students) for this study. Two sampling methods were employed: purposive and snowball sampling. We reached out to universities with student bodies that represent LGBTQI+ sexual orientations and gender identities, expressing our interest of research with transgender students. Coordinators of these student bodies shared our contact details and interested students reached out to us. Through a process of purposive sampling, five students of transgender identity agreed to participate in the study. We asked each participant to suggest other students who identified as transgender and who might agree to participate in this study (snowball sampling). Through this process, two additional participants agreed to contribute their experiences to the study. We acknowledge the relatively small sample size, which is because of the fact that this marginalised population is difficult to reach and access. The additional inclusion criterion of being a student at a South African HEI further limited the number of potential participants for the study. However, the small sample size allowed us to gather rich and detailed data, aided by the data collection methods discussed. Below is a brief profile of the participants.

Following the interviews, we transcribed the recordings of the verbal discussions that occurred during each session. We also documented the photos and drawings, notes on the context, participant explanations and any observations made during the session (as suggested by Ahn & Filipenko 2007). This comprehensive documentation ensured that the data were accurately represented for analysis. We immersed ourselves in the data by reviewing transcripts, photos and drawings multiple times. Our aim was to gain a holistic understanding of the data and identify the initial ideas, patterns and themes that emerged from the participants' visual representations and verbal discussions (Laholt et al. 2017). We interpreted and analysed the data by integrating visual and verbal data. Using an inductive approach, we generated the initial codes by systematically identifying meaningful elements within the data. We also explored the connections between codes, identified patterns and considered alternative interpretations. Two themes related to our research focus emerged from the data. These are reported on and discussed below.

Ethical considerations

In this study, the researchers respected the privacy of the selected participants and research sites (Creswell 2014). The participants did not want their identities to be revealed. We granted them an opportunity to choose a name that they wished to be used during the data collection processes (RSA 2013). The participants designed their own pseudonyms using certain letter from their names, creating a new name to protect their identity and privacy (and their institutions), as recommended by Kothari (2004). The study was granted ethical clearance by (institution name removed) (clearance code Sem 1-2022-038). The sampled participants were adults in their late 20s and early 30s and therefore capable of making their own decisions. This study was sensitive because it explored the exclusion practices of students with transgender identities. During Phase 4 of the data collection (the face-to-face discussions), a professional psychologist was on standby to provide counselling sessions for participants who needed additional support. This was performed to prevent harm during the data collection.

Findings and discussion

The findings of this study are discussed under themes that are evocative of the students' experiences of exclusion

practices in their institutions of learning. This section presents research findings and discussions under two significant themes: (1) *exclusionary identification and access systems* and (2) *exclusionary physical facilities*.

Exclusionary identification and access systems

Most studies on nonheteronormative students at South African universities have focused on experiences with restrooms (Brown & Diale 2017; Brown et al. 2020), residences (Jagessar & Msibi 2015), curriculum access (Msibi 2013; Rothmann & Simmonds 2015) and institutional attitudes (Sanger 2014). In addition to these aspects, this theme highlights the unexplored concern of student identification cards that display fixed gender biometrics. It embodies the way in which these student cards indirectly unrecognise, deny access to, discriminate against and exclude transgender bodies at the entry points to universities and their facilities. In most cases, student access identity cards contain biometric information, including facial photographs, student numbers, gender markers and study programmes, to provide access not only to the wider campus premises but also to various specific facilities, such as libraries, laboratories and residences (Alterman 2003). Most public universities in South Africa are fenced, and access to campuses or buildings is controlled by security staff who authenticate students and staff through the scanning of access identity cards (Hans 2014) and verifying that the holder is the person whose particulars (including their photo) appear on the card or the access system. These regulated security measures aim to increase the safety of institutional properties, staff and students. The emphasis of these access measures is tied to safety. However, the expected adherence to a fixed gender presentation results in the surveillance of transgender and gender nonconforming bodies. It emphasises the materiality, embodiment, context and meaning embedded within practices and processes of reproduction.

Mshophi, a participant, provided the images in Figure 1 and Figure 2. She used them to point out the ways in which predetermined gender biometrics on the access card breed discrimination, harassment, unfair restrictions and exclusion of those with 'incongruent' bodily expressions. When her feminine presentation is compared with the social expectations of male-assigned gender expression, as recorded in her student access card biometrics, validity is brought into question. Ironically, the perceived safety, as intended by the student access card, marks Mshophi as fraudulent and renders her unsafe in this institution that purports to protect her. These fixed binary hegemonic gender markers, which are not value free (Ullman 2015), justify Mshophi's punishment for her nonconforming sex or gender presentations. This control of stabilised gender authentication unsurprisingly sanctions and erases Mshophi's transgender identity. The 'gender deviance' through her bodily expression denies not only access to the physical campus and services but also erases her constitutional recognition:
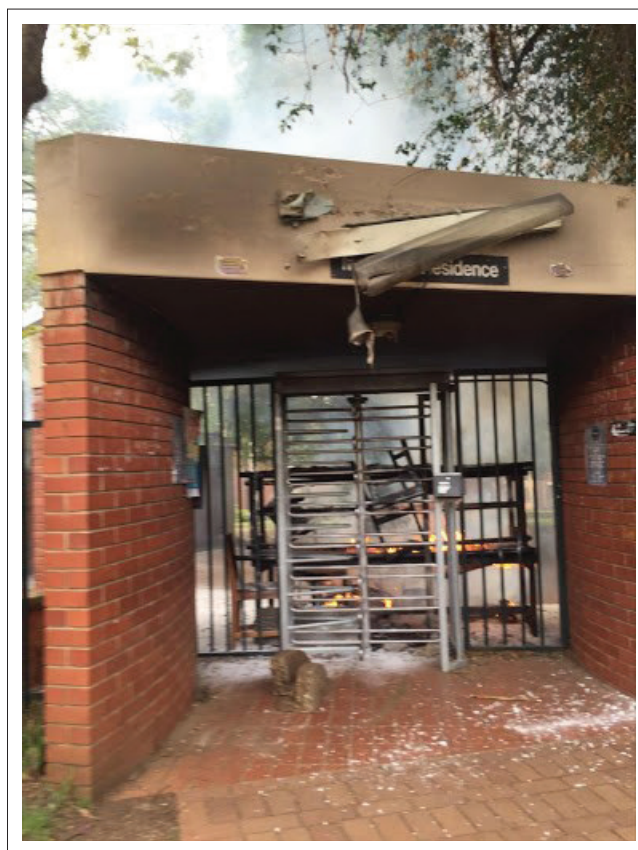
Source: Buthelezi, J., 2022, 'Inclusion experiences of transgender students in institutions of higher education', PhD thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg.
Note: A dislodged light fitting covers the name of the residence. Beyond the fence and turnstile, desks and chairs that have been used to block the entrance from the inside have been set alight.
FIGURE 1: Turnstile gated entrance to a residence, seen from the outside, as captured by Mshophi.

Source: Buthelezi, J., 2022, 'Inclusion experiences of transgender students in institutions of higher education', PhD thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg.
Note: The photo has been edited to blank out the student's photo and other particulars on the card.
FIGURE 2: Student card, as captured by Mshophi.

'An issue I encountered as a student was with my student card, which is titled as Mr, although I physically appear feminine. I was once prohibited to enter at the gate, because they [*security guards*] believed that my student card does not belong to me. My student card information requires from me to explain myself at all times. I have accepted that the transition will never be an easy journey and challenges are part of the journey. I would come across security guards who will harass me because my student card reflected male. Even when they were aware of my gender

identity or sexuality as transgender, they would still harass me. 'But if you look closely, erh… at the gate picture you will see it is burning. I took that picture on purpose because I am trying to say this card with a Mr or a Miss must be burned or changed because it does not serve the needs of the LGBTQ community.' (Mshophi, 3, TGW)

Mshophi expressed her frustration with student ID biometrics and suggested that the captured fixed gender information should be removed. This raises the question of the extent to which institutions are willing to be inclusive of diverse gender identities and expressions. The restrictive material aspects of identity biometrics within these institutions accentuate the resistance to recognising and integrating gender diversity in their transformation practices. Moreover, they point to institutional operations that reproduce unequal power relations and privileged positions and identities (Ferfolja, Diaz & Ullman 2018). It is apparent that the restrictive biometrics attached to student identity cards violate the provisions of PEPUDA (as previously quoted in this article).

Lay, another participant, expressed how biometric information interacts with and affects her transgender being. She highlighted that the inability to conform to and maintain a normative gender expression, as required from this biometric template, results in her way (i.e. transgender) of being questioned. She called for a revision of intuitional practices to recognise the fluid and transitional dynamics of gender expressions and being:

'We are in 2022 and this institution does not acknowledge trans people in their student cards. The management should learn from other institutions. I am very disappointed about that, but anyways, life continues. So, the thing is, when I get to the gate at the security and present my student card, they see would "Mr" and then they see me. They then say, "What is happening here?" They just give me that confused look.' (Lay, 1, TGW)

On the contrary, Mshophi spoke of her resilience in not concealing or undoing her embodied gender identity and expression within the environment that upholds the dominant ways of gendered beings. Her acknowledgement of the challenges associated with her transitioning gender experience illustrates her persistence in maintaining her embodied identity.

In this theme, practice theory offers a valuable lens through which to understand how gender identity and expression are enacted, negotiated and transformed within universities that utilise biometric access facilities. Practice theory allows for insights into enacted, negotiated and transformed gender identity and expressions within these university settings. The practice of access through biometric technology highlights the processes of reproduction and change within university settings, with regard to transgender students.

To alleviate some of the challenges that transgender students face as a result of their ID or access cards, we suggest that universities adopt inclusive policies that recognise and respect individuals' self-identified gender. This would allow transgender students to update their gender markers and ensure that their access to resources is not hindered by misrecognition according to categorisations assigned at birth. Universities should also consider alternative access options for transgender students who may face difficulties with fix biometric information, such as providing manual overrides, making gender marker indications optional or using additional identification methods that accommodate their gender identity.

If universities are sincere about and committed to creating an inclusive environment, they will have to intentionally recognise and respect the diverse gender identities of students in their efforts and actively work towards dismantling the barriers that hinder their participation, well-being and success within the university community.

Exclusionary physical facilities

It may seem redundant to repeatedly discuss exclusionary facilities for transgender students at universities, considering that knowledge about these issues already exists. However, this discussion critically examines why it is necessary to revisit and reiterate this knowledge continually in academic and societal discourse. By doing so, we can better understand the ongoing challenges faced by transgender students and work towards creating more inclusive educational environments. In this study, two spaces, in particular, were highlighted: bathroom facilities and university residences. The transgender students still encountered limited access to gender-neutral bathrooms and residences as essential amenities. By reiterating this state of affairs, we emphasise the ongoing practices of inequality and prompt action to solve this issue. We find it necessary to repeat the knowledge about exclusionary facilities, as it has the potential to play a crucial role in raising awareness among various stakeholders, in particular, university administrators. By continually highlighting the challenges faced by transgender students, we intend to generate greater understanding and empathy, fostering a sense of urgency and advocacy for change in institutional practices. As an underexplored research topic in South Africa (Francis 2023), the understanding of gender identity and the experiences of transgender individuals continue to evolve, and it is necessary to revisit and revise our knowledge accordingly. By persistently engaging with the issue of facilities, we can incorporate new perspectives and insights that will contribute to more nuanced discussions and effective solutions.

Unsafe bathroom spaces

Bathroom spaces (toilet facilities) have not received much attention in South African literature discussions involving gender 'transgressions' (Brown et al. 2020). The problem with these spaces, however, is that they continue to exclude transgender and gender nonconforming students at schools (Francis & McEwen 2023) and universities (Brown et al. 2020). In this study, the participants demonstrated again that

these spaces, which are usually segregated by sex, are sites of their 'transgression' and therefore negatively affect their lives as students of transgender identity. The artwork and narratives from the participants of this study revealed that bathrooms remain unsafe and uncomfortable spaces, regardless of whether universities claim to be inclusive environments. Champ submitted the photo of restroom signs in Figure 3 and narrated the constant need to be vigilant because he does not want to 'cause a scene' by using a male bathroom. Champ was assigned female at birth but identifies as a transgender man:

'So, if you have to look at the picture. Uhm … it is a corridor, and I can say it is in public at campus and people can watch you when you walk there. People are looking at you when you walk on that corridor. Uhm … it has two sides. The right side is male and the other one is female. So, the whole fact that if I want to go to the bathroom I will have to go to the female side because going to the men's bathroom side is a terrifying concept at this stage when I do not look like a masculine man.' (Champ, 4, TGM)

Source: Buthelezi, J., 2022, 'Inclusion experiences of transgender students in institutions of higher education', PhD thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg.
Note: Photograph of traditional 'man' and 'woman' figures on large signs at the end of a tiled passage, indicating the respective toilet facilities: the gents to the left and the ladies to the right.
FIGURE 3: Toilet signs, as captured by Champ.

Champ was uncomfortable using binary-designated male or female bathrooms because he felt that neither of them properly recognised his transgender identity. He feared that using a male bathroom could potentially be a 'scene of discrimination'. He feels that using the female bathroom will create a perception that he is pretending or acting as someone else to deceive others (Kersting et al. 2003). According to Bender-Baird (2016) and Foucault (1980), institutional spaces are environments under surveillance. Champ raised the concern that these limited binary-gendered facilities regulated and denied his own gender self-determinism. Within bathroom spaces, those who are seen as 'normal' (i.e. cisgender people) are authorised and granted the power of society to evaluate non-normative bodies in gender-binary bathrooms (Foucault 1997). It is therefore not surprising to observe that Champ's anxiety (and that of other participants) was specifically heightened by the surveillance in place to regulate bodies in these spaces. Brown et al. (2020) similarly reported the case of a female student who presented as more masculine being chased out of a bathroom by a janitor, while other students of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities have been met with disapproving stares, indicating that their presence was unwelcome. Transgender students' deviation from or misalignment with the cultural capital of the dominant group of society (Bourdieu 2000) continues to expose them to symbolic violence in these bathroom spaces.

Thendy, a transgender woman, also experienced exclusion in an institutional bathroom. She was reminded by a lecturer that her sexual organs did not permit her to use a female bathroom. To express her experiences, she drew the sketch in Figure 4.

Figure 4 is a sketch by Thendy, a participant in this study. The sketch depicts two people, drawn as simple stick figures. The first, a person with long, straight hair, says in a speech bubble:

'What are you doing here[?] You['re] not suppose[d] to be in these toilets[.] Do not forget that you [are] a man!!! Get out'. The second stick figure, who has short, curly hair and appears to be crying, responds, 'Okay!!' The drawing bears the title 'You don't belong here'. (Thendy, 7, TGW)

Thendy's sketch highlights one of the microaggressions she has experienced. According to Nadal, Skolnik and Wong (2012), microaggressions are day-to-day oppressive practices that 'other' or marginalise a minority group of society. Microaggressions are experiences that are associated with feelings of victimisation, suicidal thoughts and depression (Nadal et al. 2014). Thendy expressed her betrayal by her lecturer. After the incident, she sank into depression because she felt unsupported. During our discussion with Thendy, she referred to her initial trust in the lecturer who had harassed her in the bathroom:

'And I felt so bad and hurt because I trusted the person. I thought the person understands that I am trans and all that but *kwenzeka ukuba athethe ezonto-ke, ngendlela ayethetha ngayo* [*she mentioned those things about me in the way she said it*].' (Thendy, 7, TGW)

Thendy's lecturer created an unwelcoming space for her and caused increased feelings of marginalisation. Rothmann and
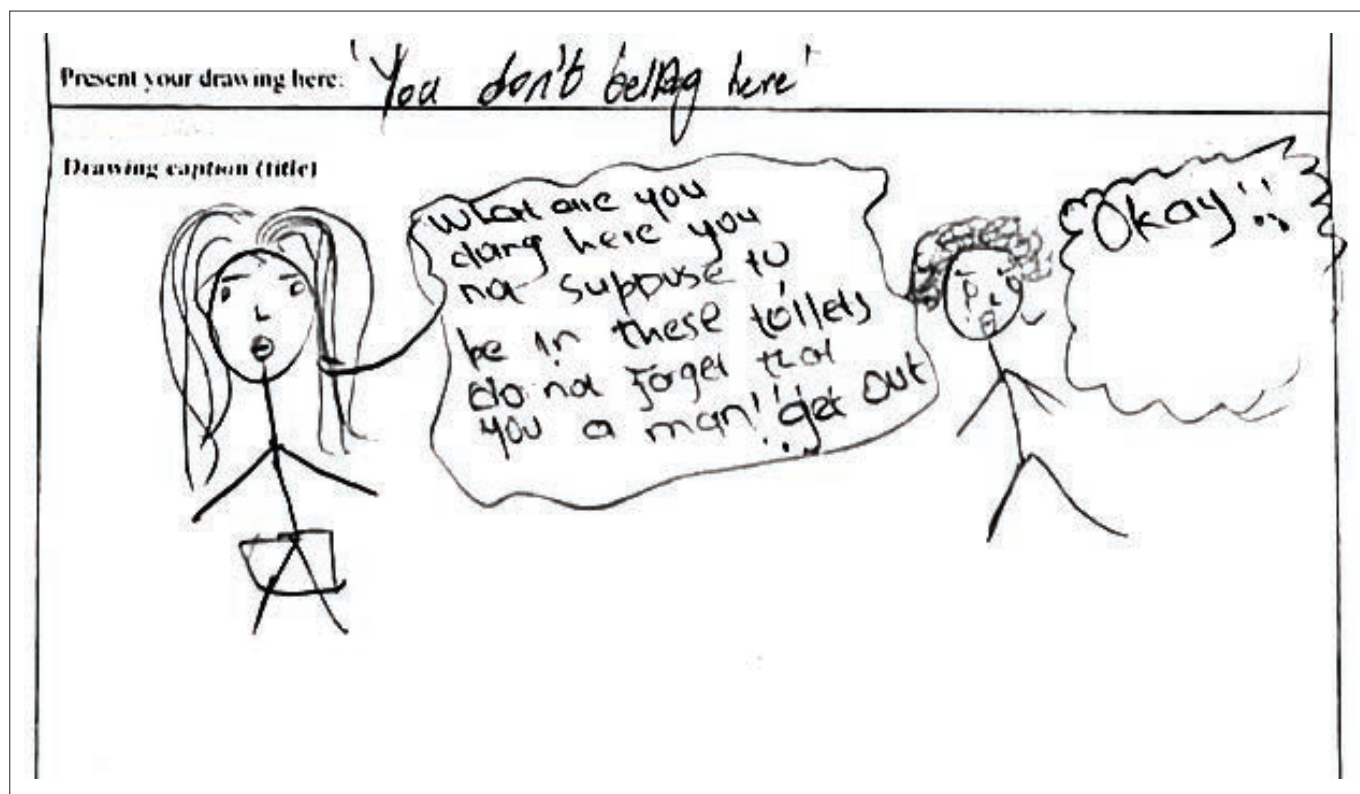
Source: Buthelezi, J., 2022, 'Inclusion experiences of transgender students in institutions of higher education', PhD thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg.

FIGURE 4: Sketch by Thendy.

Simmonds (2015) highlighted nearly a decade ago how these practices brand institutions of learning as key centres or spaces of oppression and discrimination. Yet Thendy and Champ reported far more recently that they felt unsafe around those employed by HEIs. The practice theory explains that when those in a position of power (such as lecturers) in a dominant group of the society perpetuate exclusion behaviours, this inflicts deep wounds of oppression (Bourdieu 2000; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). It is certainly worth reporting transgender students' bathroom experiences again, with recent evidence, so that universities can be held accountable to their commitment to inclusivity. We do so also to highlight the persistent lack of service delivery for transgender students and the associated challenges in tracking the progress made by universities to attend to the needs of this much-underserved student cohort.

Exclusionary student accommodation

Higher education institutions have made some progress in the placement of LGBT students in residences (Kiguwa & Langa 2017). However, the present study found that students with transgender expressions were incorrectly placed in their residences. Transgender people's needs and considerations of their inclusion are often ignorantly conflated with or subsumed under gay and lesbian realities and needs (Beemyn 2003; Sanger 2014). KayBee and Ace (both transgender women) were required to share rooms with students who identify as gay men, maintaining the discourse of othering and showing poor understanding of gender and sexual orientation on the part of the university administration.

Lumping 'T' (transgender) with the 'L' (lesbian), 'G' (gay) and 'B' (bisexual) in LGBT disregards the unique needs and identities that each of these classifications may bring to spaces.

Ace produced the drawing shown in Figure 5 to expose how she was excluded from sharing a room or staying in a residence with female students.

Figure 5 is a sketch by Ace, a participant in this study. The sketch is titled 'The exclusion ["*exclusion*" *is crossed out*] prohibition of transgender women in a res women's floor'. The drawing depicts a row of three squares, each with a small, high window and a door in it. Each door is marked with an 'F'. To the left of the row is a circle containing a stick man with a slash through it. The right end of the row is written 'Females only'. Beneath the drawing is written:

> This drawing represents how transgender people were not allowed to stay in a women's or females floor mainly because [*they are*] regarded as men and there was no way a man ['*man*' *is crossed out*] transgender woman could stay in a floor that was meant [*for*] cis women.

Ace was prohibited from accessing this student residence because her identity document (and student card) classified her as male. When we asked her to explain or give meaning to her drawing, she narrated:

> '[*The*] caption of my drawing is the prohibition of transgender women in res: women's floor and it summarises my exclusion experiences of staying with male students at res because I was seen as male since my ID document confirms that I was born as a boy.' (Ace, 2, TGW)
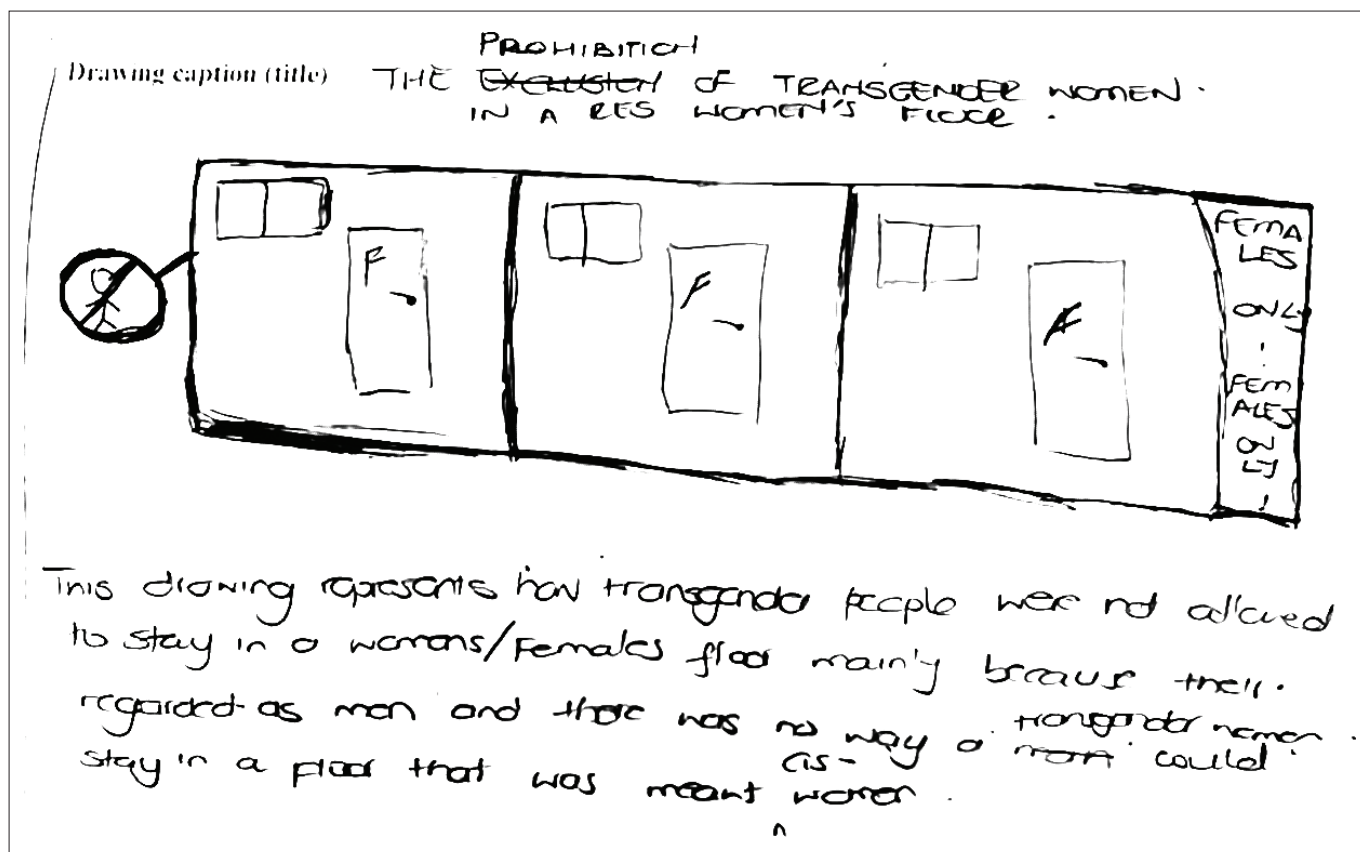
Source: Buthelezi, J., 2022, 'Inclusion experiences of transgender students in institutions of higher education', PhD thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg.
FIGURE 5: Sketch by Ace.

Ace expressed that students who were not assigned female at birth (or have had their gender marker officially changed) are prohibited from staying in female student residences. Bleiberg (2003) argues that 'roommate pairings for gender non-normative students can be particularly distressing for transgender students'. The challenge in residences is that students of nonconforming gender identities are policed to reveal their personal information, such as their biological sex (with which they do not identify) (Alexander 2009; Bleiberg 2003). They do so because the housing forms, for example, require that information from them (Alexander 2009), in line with university policy. For Ace, these institutional practices that disregard transgender students caused her heightened discomfort when residing with cisgender male students. According to Beemyn et al. (2005), student residence policies and practices that categorise students according to male and female gender identity markers do not embrace gender diversity. Student residences are characterised by heterosexual discourses that promote the heterosexual matrix (Kiguwa & Langa 2017). The challenge in these cases is that these heteronormative policies are not questioned by management or those in power (Alexander 2009; Beemyn et al. 2005). Lay observed this ignorance of institutional management:

'From experience, there's no support that I obtain as a trans to access inclusive student accommodations.' (Ace, 2, TGW)

According to Beemyn et al. (2005), student residence policies and practices that categorise students under male and female gender identities fail to embrace gender diversity. The study participants revealed that sharing rooms with students who express their gender differently affected their well-being and caused them distress (Meyer 2003). This is because they are paired with students who do not understand transgender bodies. As a result, they are marginalised and made to feel worthless. These forms of oppression cause doubt, anxiety and fear in students with transgender identities (Sanger 2014). There is a need to transform these residence policies to be gender-affirming and accommodate students with transgender expressions.

Despite these discussions on exclusionary physical facilities for transgender students at universities offering little in the way of new insights, it is critical to maintain these conversations. By doing so, we uphold the visibility and recognition of transgender students, drive policy and practice improvement, incorporate intersectional perspectives, promote education and awareness, combat resistance and demonstrate long-term commitment to inclusivity. Continued dialogue and action are essential for creating truly inclusive university environments that embrace and support the needs of all students, regardless of their gender identity.

Conclusion

This study used arts-based data collection tools to explore the impact of exclusionary practices on transgender

students at South African universities. It furthers the unsilencing of the lived experiences of transgender identities, which are normally ignored in learning institutions. These discussions signal that the issue is not temporary or sporadic but rather an ongoing concern that requires sustained efforts and dedication. We emphasise the need for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the situation and marked improvement to ensure lasting changes. South African universities should recognise and validate transgender identities. This includes acknowledging that gender identity is self-determined and not solely dependent on the sex assigned to one at birth. By affirming and respecting the self-identified gender of all students, South African universities can foster a sense of belonging and create an environment in which transgender individuals feel valued and supported. Therefore, we argue that South African universities should focus not only on increasing diversity but also on creating inclusive environments that support the success and well-being of all student populations, not least transgender students. Inclusive policies and practices involve recognising and valuing diverse perspectives, providing support services tailored to the needs of underrepresented groups and actively combating discrimination and prejudice. Therefore, South African universities should actively seek advice to provide genuinely inclusive access and facilities that accommodate the needs of transgender students. These include gender-neutral bathrooms and changing rooms that allow students to use facilities that align with their gender identity without fear of harassment or exclusion. Gender-inclusive residential options should also be considered in order to provide safe and comfortable living spaces for transgender students. Implementing inclusive practices requires ongoing commitment, evaluation and adaptation from all administration. Regular assessments and feedback from transgender students can help universities to identify areas for improvement and ensure that their policies and practices align with the evolving needs and experiences of transgender individuals. By recognising, respecting and accommodating the diverse identities of transgender students, universities can contribute to their overall well-being and academic success and the advancement of social justice within higher education.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

Authors' contributions

This article emanates from J.B., PhD. He was supervised by A.B., the co-author. A.B. analysed additonal data and co-wrote this article.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, A.B., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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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