

# A study of public library services to gays and lesbians

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**N**cumisa Mfazo's choice of research topic for her MBibI degree came directly from her experiences in book selection meetings in Cape Town. From time to time she witnessed librarians putting gay-oriented books aside saying, 'My community wouldn't want this!' She was left with questions, which led her to investigate services to gays and lesbians in Cape Town's public libraries.

Perhaps Ncumisa's real, if unspoken, aim was to alert library staff to a possible neglect of one sector of their communities. In her preliminary research she found much criticism of libraries among gays and lesbians across the world. The consensus of the various investigations of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgendered) people's information-seeking habits is that libraries are perceived as unfriendly places and that other information sources are preferred. Most of the research has taken place in countries like Canada and the US where access to other sources such as the Internet can be assumed. But what about South Africa where less than 10% of the population have access to the Internet?

Ncumisa's project had three questions:

- ❖ Should libraries consider the needs of gays and lesbians when they select materials?
- ❖ If so, are they doing so?
- ❖ How are public libraries providing for the information needs of their gay and lesbian communities?

An underlying question relates to the attitudes of public library

**Should libraries consider the needs of gays and lesbians?**

staff. For example, do they agree that public libraries should cater for the reading and information needs of gays and lesbians?

The first question

was answered by reading the available philosophical and research literature. There is consensus that LGBT people do indeed have specific reading and information needs - and that public libraries have a responsibility to meet those needs. Public libraries are part of South Africa's public services. Chapter 10 of the South African Constitution of 1996 describes one of the basic values that govern public administration as 'providing service impartially, fairly, equitably and without bias'. The Batho Pele principles of fair access to public services are based on these words. Moreover, the LIS profession's commitment to the principles of intellectual freedom and free access to information implies specific attention to services to marginalised sections of society, including LGBT people.

In November 2006 South Africa became the first African nation and the fifth country in the world to legalise same-sex marriages. In his discussion of the ruling of the Constitutional Court on the issue of same-sex marriage, Judge Albie Sachs points out that the acceptance of difference is particularly important in South Africa with its history of discrimination. He writes that 'equality means equal concern and respect across difference' (2010: 257). The Constitutional Court endorses the claim that the rights of gays and lesbians have to be seen in the frame of human rights. Despite the idealism of our Constitution, prejudice towards LGBT people is widespread. The International Gay and Human Rights Commission claims that violations of the rights of gays and lesbians are the most frequently overlooked of all human rights violations. The Commission lists violations such as murder, incarceration, forced HIV testing, arbitrary arrest, denial of freedom of association, denial of privacy and confidentiality, and discrimination in the workplace. The high number of so-called 'corrective rapes' of lesbians in South Africa suggests that this crime should be added to the list.

To answer her other questions Ncumisa designed a questionnaire for staff responsible for collection development in Cape Town's 100 libraries. Sixty-nine senior librarians from across all six districts sent in responses. It has to be said firstly that the study provides a picture of a metropolitan library service, which might not be generalised to other more rural parts of South Africa. Cape Town is often described as the 'gay capital' of South Africa so its citizens might be expected to be open-minded.

The key positive findings are that the majority of respondents agree that public libraries should include gay and lesbian material in their collections and that it is a question of human rights. But other findings are less clear-cut, for example:

- ❖ Opinion is equally divided among respondents on whether Cape Town's libraries are meeting the reading and information needs of gays and lesbians
- ❖ In spite of their beliefs that libraries should include LGBT materials and that their libraries do not have enough such materials, Cape Town's librarians buy very little LGBT material
- ❖ Only about half of the respondents (55%) claim to consciously consider the needs of gays and lesbians in their collection development activities
- ❖ The fact that most respondents seem to rely on the pre-selected books at monthly book selection meetings and at bookshops might be a factor. Gays and lesbians are not likely to submit requests for LGBT-oriented titles
- ❖ Collection development policy makes no explicit mention of the needs of gays and lesbians, which, as several respondents

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point out, makes it easy to overlook them

- ❖ Of the 41 libraries in the survey with community information and pamphlet files, 35 do not include gay and lesbian-oriented information.

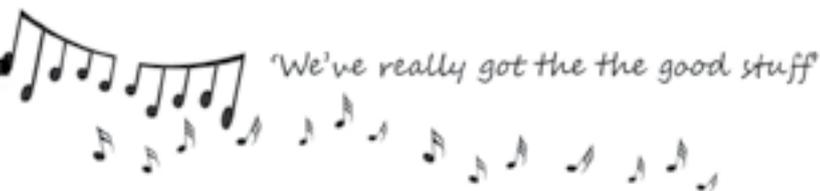
Overall, the situation might be described as 'spotty'. The key finding is that there seems to be a contradiction between what respondents say they believe and their day-to-day practices in the libraries. Their theoretical belief that gay rights are human rights is not reflected in practices in acquiring materials for their libraries and in providing inclusive information services. The study suggests that librarians'

diversity education should not ignore the needs of gays and lesbians and should call on the knowledge of LGBT NGOs like Triangle. It also highlights the need for libraries throughout South Africa to examine their book selection processes, collection development and information services for LGBT people, if they are to fulfil their social mission and contribute to social justice.

**Reference**

Sachs, Albie. *The strange alchemy of life and law*.- Oxford U.P., 2009.

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