

28 September 2018

**An Open Statement by the Psychological Society of South Africa's
Sexuality and Gender Division:
Debates in the Dutch Reformed Church re Sexual Orientation and Misrepresentation of
Pedophilic Disorder as Comparable to Same-sex Sexual Orientation**

Introduction

The Psychological Society of South Africa's (PsySSA) Sexuality and Gender Division (SGD¹) welcomed the Dutch Reformed Church Synod's decision in 2015 to embrace gay and lesbian Ministers/ Reverends, ordain them in their calling as Ministers/ Reverends, and acknowledge and bless gay and lesbian congregants' unions by conducting and officiating their marriages under the Civil Union Act. This decision of the Church accords with PsySSA's own affirmative stance iro sexual and gender diversity². Accordingly, we were dismayed when these actions were reversed by the Leaders of the Church at a special Synod in 2016. In particular, given our focus on mental health and psychological well-being, the retraumatisation, disillusionment and hurt inflicted by these actions of Leaders of the Church on many church members have been most disconcerting. For these reasons, we followed with interest the eleven members of the Dutch Reformed Church who recently argued in court that the Church did not follow their own internal procedures by setting aside the decision of the 2015 Synod and by doing so, unfairly discriminated against a minority and vulnerable group of their Church. The assertion by the members' advocate, Jeremy Gauntlett, that the Church's actions were against the Constitution of South Africa and, especially, Section 9, indeed, struck a chord with PsySSA's SGD.

The subsequent letter by Rev Nelis Janse van Rensburg, Moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church, published in the Kerkbode, where he states that diverse sexualities need to be seen as equal to one another, was, therefore, deemed promising, as were the resultant renewed debates within the Dutch Reformed Church regarding sexuality and sexual orientation. However, considerable red flags have been raised by the apparent wilful misrepresentation by Dr Chris van Wyk of Psychology's views on pedophilia. This, in fact, appears to be a thinly disguised act of homophobia. It is our understanding that Dr van Wyk occupies one of the top six positions in the Dutch Reformed Church. Given his reach and position of influence, the utterly disaffirming false assertions and associated hurtful- and harmfulness may, indeed, be challenged in a court of law as hate speech.

¹ PsySSA is the professional body representing psychology professionals in South Africa. PsySSA has since its inception been dedicated to making a significant contribution to solving the pressing human development problems in South Africa. PsySSA is committed to the transformation and development of South African Psychology to serve the needs and interests of **all** South Africa's people. PsySSA advances psychology as a science, profession and as a means of promoting human well-being.

The mission of the SGD is to promote a psychological understanding of the fields of sexuality and gender. The SGD addresses this mission through the advancement of scientific research, clinical practice, continuing professional development and being responsive to related national, continental and international issues and concerns.

² <https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://www.psyssa.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/PsySSA-Diversity-Competence-Practice-Guidelines-PRINT-singlesided.pdf&hl=en> US

Therefore, it is incumbent on PsySSA's SGD, as representatives of organised psychology and leaders in the field of mental health and well-being, to issue a statement, as follows:

We strongly reject Dr Van Wyk's statement that homosexuality and pedophilic disorder³ are related; **sexual orientation** and **sexual interest** are not the same or even comparable. His bringing bestiality into the debate, as well, reminds of what the courts recently found in terms of Jon Qwelane's homophobic hate speech which similarly reflected comparisons to bestiality. Instead of leading the way in promoting neighbourly love and acceptance in accordance with Biblical principles, especially in respect of those who are on the margins of society and subsequently may be vulnerable to hate, abuse and discrimination, Dr Van Wyk and his allies appear to, themselves, be propagating hate and division.

While concurring with objections raised to date by many others, PsySSA's SGD also wishes to comment on the mental health and well-being implications of these false assertions.

We can confidently say that the definition of sexual orientation has been substantially documented in psychological literature⁴, both nationally and internationally. This statement, among others, offers one such definition, as well as a discussion on the psychological effects of discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Related psychological understandings

1) Homosexuality, as Heterosexuality, is a sexual orientation:

Sexual orientation refers to a person's emotional, affectional, romantic and sexual attraction to a person. It can also refer to a person's core sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviours, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions. Research and clinical experience further conclude that for most people sexual orientation is not 'a choice' or 'voluntary'. The core aspects of sexual orientation, whether heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual, typically emerge by early adolescence, even though the individual may not yet have become sexually active.

Research indicates a significant potential biological basis for the development of sexual orientation. There is no empirical evidence indicating that sexual orientation may be acquired through contact with sexually and gender-diverse people, including the otherwise powerful mechanism of peer pressure. There is no reliable evidence that sexual orientation is subject to redirection, 'conversion' or any significant influence from efforts by psychological or other interventions. Research and clinical experience conclude that homosexual or bisexual orientations are naturally occurring minority variations of normal human sexuality. They are also documented widely throughout nature.

Importantly, there are international instances where use of the term, sexual orientation, is to be found, such as the recent move by the International Union of Psychological Sciences (IUPsyS) an umbrella organisation for psychology internationally, to endorse a change to its statutes that explicitly calls for the inclusion of sexual orientation as a 'protected' category in policies on the universality of science and the free circulation of scientists (see www.iupsys.net for more information).

2) Pedophilic disorder

Psychology does not see pedophilic disorder as a sexual orientation. Neither is pedophilic disorder seen as something good, but, rather, as inherently negative. Pedophilic attraction is towards children who

³ The diagnosis 'pedophilia' in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) IV-R has been renamed 'pedophilic disorder' in the DSM-5.

⁴ Note, list of references available on request.

are unable to consent to engage in sexual acts. The child, as a victim of the pedophile's actions, is often psychologically scarred. Pedophilic disorder, although a condition that needs treatment, when acted upon, also holds legal consequences and criminal prosecution.

A common manifestation of prejudice against homosexual people has been the allegation that gay men in particular pose a danger to children. Yet, all available reliable research data and clinical experience concludes that gay men are not more likely than heterosexual men to sexually exploit and abuse children. Claims to the contrary seriously mischaracterise the research and rely on suspect sources. The presumption that homosexual men are pedophiles also is not supported by respected, peer reviewed research.

3) Gender and gender diversity

Van Wyk asserts that according to the Bible God created humans as either male or female. This binary view of gender has been upheld by certain groups within the religious community and gender diversity has been ignored. People that have been born intersex has been forced into this gender binary. This gender binary also problematises people that are transgender and excludes people that are gender diverse. Gender identity is a person's private sense of being male, female, both or another gender. This may or may not match the biological sex that a person was assigned at birth.

Intersexuality on the other hand refers to a variety of conditions (genetic, physiological or anatomical) in which a person's sexual and/or reproductive features and organs do not conform to dominant and typical definitions of 'female' or 'male'. Such diversity in sex characteristics is also referred to as 'biological variance'.

4) Consequences and risks of homophobia

PsySSA acknowledges that people experience the negative impact of stigmatisation and victimisation due to patriarchal, heteronormative and cisnormative societies. Both international and South African research has found significant negative effects of exclusion and other forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation. Sexual orientation-based discrimination presents the same risks of psychological and other harms as discrimination on the basis of race, religion or gender. Notably, among youth who identify as homosexual or bisexual or who think they may be, research concludes that family rejection and exclusion, as well as bullying by peers, correlates highly with a range of high risk behaviours and outcomes ranging from truancy to substance abuse to attempts at suicide.

Much evidence points to this stigmatisation leading to deep-seated and widespread prejudice, discrimination and violence in Africa toward those who are not heterosexual. Furthermore, many gay and lesbian people suffer from minority stress due to the ill treatment by a homophobic society and confronted with religious condemnation.

Hate speech can lead to grave psychological, but also social consequences, as hate speech carries strong elements of humiliation and degradation. Furthermore, hate speech leads to the polarisation of society as people unconsciously absorb the hidden agenda that intends to show the intended group as inferior that ought to be hated and detested. Directly or indirectly referring to gay and lesbian people as pedophiles can be seen as hate speech.

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Invitation

PsySSA' SGD invites other organisations and professionals dedicated to mental health and well-being to join us in speaking out in opposition to sexual orientation and gender-based discrimination and/ or hatred.

Furthermore, Leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church, and others, are invited to make use of PsySSA as a resource to turn to when issues arise for which it may be uniquely qualified to provide counsel, such as in this instance where greater understanding of the concept 'sexual orientation' is sought.

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