

Perceptions and Performances of Intimacy in Same-Sex Male Friendships

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Abstract

Friendships are among the most important social relationships studied in psychology due to their benefits on personal well-being. They consist of many qualities, each of which facilitates the maintenance and growth of the friendship. Intimacy is one of the most important qualities studied due to its alleged therapeutic benefit within friendships. Intimacy is usually characterised as self-disclosure or closeness in research. Studies of intimacy in same-sex friendships have found that female friendships are more intimate than male friendships as men seldom self-disclose in their friendships. These findings have led to the belief that men's friendships are inferior as they lack emotional expressiveness. Contrasting findings suggest that intimacy has been feminised in society thus affecting the way in which researchers measure this phenomenon.

Because of these issues, this study sought to highlight how men in South Africa understood and displayed intimacy in their same-sex friendships based on their own experiences. Semi-structured interviews as well as a focus group were conducted. They consisted of male students of different ethnic groups at the University of Cape Town. A thematic analysis was used to highlight the themes that emerged from the data collected. This analysis indicated that men preferred the terms 'closeness' or 'brotherhood' over intimacy. The analysis found that men display intimacy through self-disclosure and shared experiences. Moreover, the analysis indicated that intimacy was displayed through mutual assistance which encompassed both shared experiences and self-disclosure. This implies that current conceptions of intimacy may require reappraisal in order to be more inclusive of men's experiences.

Keywords: intimacy, closeness, male friendship, assistance, shared experience

John Donne's celebrated adage 'no man is an island' highlights the important fact that a person does not live his/her life alone. People are connected. We form relationships with one another, build rapport and live amongst one another in communities, families or as married couples. Even when alone, we often feel that we need someone to talk to or do things with. Relationships are the cornerstone of human interactions which underscores a crucial statement made by Aristotle: man is by nature a social animal. One of the most important human relationships is that multifaceted phenomenon, friendship (Warris & Rafique, 2009). Friendship is one of the closest and most fascinating interpersonal and social relationships studied in psychology.

Friendships have been of great interest to researchers for many reasons. One reason is that friendships provide a space where vital social skills required in relationships can be developed (Glick & Rose, 2011). A second reason friendships are studied is the distinctions in friendships styles over the developmental stages in life (Fox, Gibbs, & Auerbach, 1985). This is especially so during the phases adolescence and early adulthood. During these critical periods of development, different levels of friendship are desired by individuals (Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Sharabany, Hofman, & Gershoni, 1981). A third reason why friendships are studied is that they have psychological, behavioural, cognitive and emotional benefits (Bell, 1981). This is indicated by the fact that young adults begin to seek different dimensions within their friendships (Berndt, 2002; Konstan, 1997; West, Lewis, & Currie, 2009).

Several features have been found to be of beneficial value to the formation and continuation of friendships. These features indicate that a friendship is significant to an individual. Sharing of feelings and engaging in shared activities are some of the features identified by research (Walker, 1974). Berndt (2002) speaks of other features which include loyalty, self-esteem, and support. Konstan (1997) mentions several key features of friendships including; reciprocal obligation, mutual assistance, frankness, honesty, passing time as well as authenticity. This indicates that many features form part of close friendships. Whilst all of these characteristics are significant, one stands out particularly in psychological literature. This attribute cuts across all the other features and is seen as being vital to adolescents and young adults in their friendships (Johnson, Brady, McNair, Congdon, Niznik, & Anderson, 2007). Studies have shown that this attribute is expected and valued in friendships (Fehr, 2004). This attribute is intimacy.

Conceptualising Intimacy

Intimacy has been conceptualised differently by various authors. This perhaps is due

to the broadness of this important aspect of friendships. Konstan (1997) highlights two aspects within the framework of intimacy: generosity and affection. Closeness is another way of conceptualising intimacy and is described as a mutual fondness for another person. Closeness is furthermore seen as interdependence with that same person and is an indicator of intimacy within friendships (Bowman, 2008).

Another dimension, self-disclosure, plays a role in the maintenance and growth of close friendships. It is often considered as being synonymous with intimacy in a number of studies (Bowman, 2008; Collins & Miller, 1994; Cozby, 1973; Hacker, 1981; Reisman, 1990). The previous point is indicated in Cozby's literature review. His review highlights the importance of self-disclosure as it aids people in relating and communicating with one another. This helps to build intimacy in relationships. Jourard and Lasakow (1958) used a Self-Disclosure Questionnaire to measure various sex and racial differences in self disclosure. This further indicates the value of self-disclosure in intimate relationships. Studies of university students found that besides self disclosure, support, trust and shared activities best characterises intimacy or closeness in friendships (Monsour, 1992; Parks & Floyd, 1996). Intimacy can therefore be described as mutual, verbal sharing as well as demonstrable, platonic affection characterised by a communicated understanding of, respect for, and a desire to help another person (Garfield, 2010; Lewis, 1978; Reisman, 1990). In essence, intimacy is a reciprocal expression of care which can take place through physical affection or through verbal and emotional disclosure. Intimacy involves feelings of significant attachment and closeness to a person (Fischer & Narus, 1981). Interestingly, studies have found significant gender differences in same-sex and cross-sex friendships in relation to intimacy (Cozby, 1973; Hacker, 1981; Hall, 2010; Floyd, 1997a; Floyd, 1997b; Fox, Gibbs, & Auerbach, 1985; Walker, 1994). The findings which have arisen from these studies have resulted in certain assumptions as to how intimacy is conceptualised and understood in same-sex male and female friendships.

General Findings in Intimacy Studies

The following paragraphs deal with the general findings that research has shown to exist in intimacy studies. These studies focussed on mostly same-sex friendships and have yielded certain results pertaining to the two genders and their intimate friendships.

Women are more intimate men. In terms of gender and intimacy, it has long been argued and assumed that women are more intimate than men in their same sex friendships (Cozby, 1973; Walker, 1994). This finding is relatively long-standing and is seen as the norm

within society (Fehr, 2004). Studies using self-disclosure, empathetic understanding and closeness as dimensions of intimacy found that women were more intimate than men (Dindia & Allen, 1992; Fisher & Narus, 1981; Walker, 1994; Warris & Rafique, 2009). Whichever way intimacy was framed, intimacy was a characteristic of friendship that women had in abundance in comparison to men. These findings have had consequences on how same-sex friendships are understood. One consequence is that women's friendships are seen as more satisfying since their friendships are more intimate (Elkins & Peterson, 1993; Hacker, 1981). Another consequence is the idea that women possess a greater capability to self-disclose than men, thus their friendships are more intimate. This finding fits in with the notion that men are 'clams' and women are 'blabbermouths' (Hacker, 1981). Therefore, male friendships are seen as less intimate than same-sex female friendships (Bank & Hansford, 2000; Roy, Benenson, & Lily, 2000). This finding has led to the belief that male friendships are less significant than female friendships.

Men's same-sex friendships are inferior. Research has also yielded the conclusions that men's friendships are inferior due to the fact that men are supposedly deficient in intimacy (Wood & Inman, 1993). Men are thus said to be more stressed as they do not reap the therapeutic benefits of self-disclosure in their friendships (Elkins & Peterson, 1993; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Warris & Rafique, 2009). The persistence of this finding has led to some studies attempting to extend emotional and verbal intimacy in men (Garfield, 2010; Lewis, 1978). Since self-disclosure is a common aspect of emotional intimacy, men have been seen as less intimate in many of these studies (Bowman, 2008; Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Cozby, 1973; Lewis, 1978; Williams, 1985). Augmenting this assumption are the studies which indicate that men occasionally view self-disclosure as being a valid way of being intimate and that they desire close friendships (Bowman 2008; Fehr, 2004). This indicates that some men see self-disclosure as an important dimension of intimacy which further suggests that certain forces may impede men from being intimate in their same-sex friendships.

There are 'barriers' to intimacy in male friendships. Studies have shown that men experience difficulty in engaging in self-disclosure and other emotion-centred aspects of intimacy in their same-sex friendships. The factors that supposedly inhibit men from being intimate include homophobia, competition, aversion to vulnerability, emotional restraint, and a lack of role models. These factors indicate that gender and sex-role perceptions influence how intimate men are in their same-sex friendships (Bank & Hansford, 2000; Lewis, 1978; Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009). Research further indicates that notions of masculinity affect

men's displays of intimacy in their same-sex friendships (Bem, 1974; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993). Men are unlikely to display intimacy through self-disclosure due to the gender norm of being stoic (Migliaccio, 2009). Adhering to these stereotypical norms is said to be costly to the men as they do not allow them to be 'sufficiently' intimate in their friendships (Fischer & Narus, 1981).

These abovementioned findings may be the reason that men are found to be 'clams' and thus lack intimacy in their same-sex friendships (Hacker, 1981). This is not always the case. There is evidence to suggest that men perform and conceptualise intimacy in various ways which are not captured by the above studies. This has led to the suggestion that men's friendships are intimate, but in a different way than female friendships.

Intimacy in Same-Sex Male Friendships

In most cases, past research has found that men communicate intimacy through activity-based and functional commonalities. Men find that instrumental reciprocity is important in their same-sex friendships (Roy et al., 2000). Men communicate closeness and intimacy through shared activities and mutual assistance (Bank & Hansford, 2000; Migliaccio, 2009; Wright, 1982). This however does not mean that men's friendships are less intimate than those of women (Caldwell & Peplau, 2004). Rather, it suggests that in addition to self-disclosure, men conceptualise and display intimacy differently.

In one study, Reisman (1990) administered a Conversation Topics Questionnaire to men and women in a university in Hungary and found that gender played a role in conversation topics. He further found that men do express and discuss their concerns from time to time, which is in contrast to the finding that they are not intimate. Using in depth interviews, one study found that doing activities for a friend or even a loved one was a way for men to communicate affection and intimacy (Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009).

Fehr's (2004) research described three main perspectives on gender differences in intimacy in same-sex friendships. In the first perspective, both men and women agree that intimacy is viewed through the lens of self-disclosure but men still prefer to show intimacy through shared activities. The second perspective offers a rather attractive explanation for gender differences in intimacy. It states that men's and women's friendships are equally intimate and are of equal importance. This perspective indicates that men achieve intimacy via activities rather than self-disclosure. The converse is true for women. The last perspective reasons that self-disclosure is the only way women achieve intimacy whilst men can achieve intimacy either by shared activities or self-disclosure (Fehr, 2004).

These perspectives are based on previous research and may need to be updated with new research on the perceptions and construction of intimacy in same-sex friendships. These perspectives about men's conceptions of intimacy suggest that men are perhaps equally as intimate as women are in their same-sex friendships. Despite this, stereotypical notions of intimacy in same-sex friendships still ensue. The reasons for this arise from the definitional and methodological assumptions that exist in the research.

The Feminisation of Intimacy

One issue affecting the current conception of intimacy in same-sex male friendships is the feminisation of intimacy. This speaks to the preconceived and definitional assumptions that influenced the aforementioned studies (Bowman, 2008). Self-disclosure and emotional expressiveness are ways to express intimacy that are seen as feminine by most men (Migliaccio, 2009). Men have thus tended to avoid such styles of relating and this leads to the assumption that they are less intimate than women in their same-sex friendships.

Interesting findings by Bowman (2008) and Hacker (1981) indicate that self-disclosure may not always be beneficial and may make relations uncomfortable, particularly for men. This is due to the vulnerability with which self-disclosure is bound, which is contrary to gender norms surrounding men (Migliaccio, 2009). Thus, self-disclosure may not be the best or most correct way to conceptualise intimacy. Despite this interesting yet controversial argument, intimacy continues to be understood as self-disclosure, inevitably leading to the idea that men's friendships lack intimacy (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1991; Walker, 1994).

Wood and Inman (1993) argue the following points. Firstly, they argue that explanations of intimacy are not gender neutral and all-encompassing. In other words, they do not include intimacy styles of both men and women. Secondly, they argue that men's explanations of intimacy are sidelined and devalued. Lastly, they argue that female norms of relating are legitimised and perpetuated into society, thus leading to the findings that same-sex male friendships lack intimacy. If definitions of intimacy were broader and included men's performances of intimacy, this may not be the case.

Methodological Assumptions

Linked to the feminisation of intimacy is methodology; *how* this phenomenon has been studied. It is possible that various ways of approaching the topic of the differences in intimacy between men and women carry different assumptions about those differences in them already. In other words, certain methods assume different things about male and female

friendships. These assumptions can lead to biased findings. For example, Bowman (2008) used the Relational Closeness Inventory (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989) to measure mutual interdependence and fondness. Some of the other methods used by a multitude of studies include questionnaires, meta-analyses and mixed methods (Collins & Miller, 1994; Dindia & Allen, 1992; Hacker, 1981; Hall, 2010; Roy et al., 2000). Each questionnaire measured a particular aspect of intimacy, many of which were feminised. The problem with these methods is that they come pre-packaged with certain ideas of intimacy (Walker, 1991). These methods also contain preconceived notions around intimacy thus find certain gender patterns in terms of intimacy. This leads to a biased understanding of intimacy in same-sex friendship studies. Furthermore, the above literature focussed mainly on white and Western populations and have generalised these findings to other populations. This narrow sampling frame might not have captured other cultural or social intricacies involved in same-sex male friendships especially within a multi-cultural context such as South Africa.

It seems as though alternative methods should be used to gather men's perspectives on the topic of intimacy. These methods seek not to measure intimacy but to identify how it is understood and performed by men. For example, a study conducted by Patrick and Beckenbach (2009) used interviews to grasp how men viewed and displayed intimacy. Through qualitative methods, studies such as these have found alternative explanations for intimacy in male friendships (Migliaccio, 2009; Wood & Inman, 1993). Unfortunately, these perspectives have been sidelined by society. It is evident from previous research that researchers should conduct research that circumvents the abovementioned methodological, definitional, stereotypical and sampling biases in order to find out how men understand intimacy as well as how they perform it in their same-sex friendships.

With this in mind, the current study proposed to investigate the topic of intimacy in same-sex male friendships in a way that restricts the built-in assumptions found in certain methodologies. This was done in order to gain a 'purer' understanding of men's perceptions and performances intimacy in their same-sex friendships. A shared understanding of intimacy by groups of men was also sought in this study as this had not been done in great detail by previous researchers.

Aims

The research question was as follows: *How do men perceive, perform and represent intimacy in their same-sex friendships?* Previous research into this topic used pre-existing measures of intimacy which were imbued with definitional, methodological and sampling biases to gauge men's levels of intimacy as well as understand men's perceptions of intimacy in their same-sex friendships. The bulk of previous research also investigated the topic of intimacy using chiefly quantitative methods. Given these issues, I undertook this project in hopes of discovering how young men thought about intimacy as well as how they performed intimacy in their same-sex male friendships. I had hoped that by asking men to discuss *their* subjective opinions on this often untouched topic, a varied conceptualisation of intimacy would be uncovered.

Methods

Qualitative Research

Given that the research aimed to look at the men's subjective perceptions and performance of intimacy in their same-sex friendships, qualitative methods were chosen as the most appropriate method to locate individuals or groups as observers within the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This research methodology is based on meaning-making and the importance of experiences (Willig, 2008). This was important in this research as the men's experiences of intimacy were sought.

This research paradigm asks questions such as "how does it feel" or "what does it mean" to get some understanding of a particular phenomenon. This understanding is based on the participants' understanding of events and not on any preconceived ideas about the phenomena under investigation. Qualitative research is thus a flexible, participant-driven interaction focussing on one vital characteristic: the importance of meaning (Willig, 2008). This study focussed specifically on the meaning of intimacy in male friendships. Through the qualitative paradigm, the researcher was able to circumvent the definitional, methodological and sampling issues present in previous research. The research focussed on interpreting the data that emerged from these participant-led interactions.

Participants

The participants in this study were undergraduate male students attending the

University of Cape Town (UCT). All the participants were recruited using purposive sampling and were all students from the Department of Psychology. Sign up for both the interviews and the focus group were voluntary as recommended by Krueger and Casey (2009). The numbers were not large enough to generalise to the wider population as is the case in most qualitative research endeavours. However, the researcher hoped that varied racial and cultural spread of the participants would allow for varied views and experiences around the notion of intimacy. The research was also contextual to the specific environment in which it was conducted, namely UCT. The recruited participants were of various ages between 18 and 30 ($M = 21$). In terms of ethnicity and quantity, the participants were Black (4), White (4), Coloured (1) and Indian (1).

Data Collection

This research used two data collection techniques as both seemed to fit the research question. The first of these were semi-structured individual interviews. These focussed conversations were geared at understanding the individuals and their experiences and views of intimacy (Parker, 2005; Willig, 2008). It involved me, as the researcher building rapport with the participants so that they could speak openly about the topic being discussed. The interviews involved me as the interviewer acknowledging how I may have influenced their responses to the questions that I asked. The questions asked of the participants significant, culturally sensitive and were sensible so that a co-creation of knowledge could ensue (Parker, 2005). The interviews relied on me to clarify, probe and ask the interviewee to elaborate on certain aspects of their experiences and views on intimacy in their male friendships. This was especially important in considering that six individual interviews were conducted. The questions asked of the participants were open-ended (see Appendix A). An additional question (see question 15 in Appendix A) was added to supplement the knowledge provided in the earlier interviews and to help better answer the research question.

The second technique used in this research was focus groups. Focus groups are group interviews which have interactional aspects to them (Wilkinson, 1999; Willig, 2008). They are conducted because they may elicit shared perceptions and ideas as well as unity amongst group members (Krueger & Casey, 2007; Willig, 2008). Participants seem to feel more respected and comfortable in a group setting as they are more akin to the natural world. This is the strength of focus groups. The fact that past research hinted at shared activities being vital in building intimacy in male friendships, it was decided that focus groups would be a relevant data collection technique as they would provide a much needed shared understanding

around the topic. Focus groups are said to be useful when insights are required or when feelings around certain topics need to be determined or addressed (Krueger & Casey, 2007). Therefore focus groups were considered appropriate for this research as they would be able to gain shared conceptions and perceptions around intimacy in same-sex friendships. Given that a basic understanding of intimacy in same-sex friendship was sought from these data collection procedures, the questions asked in both procedures were similar.

Procedure

The study was advertised to undergraduate students using UCT's interactive website, Vula. Participants for both the focus groups and the interviews procedure were chosen based on whether or not they signed up for a particular slot during the data collection timeframe. The students were recruited using the SRPP programme which allows students to gain a particular number of points as part of their psychology course requirements. The participants were made aware of the fact that the interviews would be recorded using a cellphone and that the recordings would be confidential. The interviewees were also asked to read and sign consent forms (see Appendix B). Most importantly, I explained to each participant the voluntary nature of the study. The same explanation procedure was used for the focus group.

Of those six spaces made available for the focus group, only four were filled. This was still a feasible, manageable and acceptable size according to researchers (Krueger & Casey, 2007; Wilkinson, 1999; Willig; 2008). One focus group was run purely to acquire group perceptions of intimacy as well as to see if they would bring about similar and additional responses to that of the interviews. Prior to the signing of the consent forms (see Appendix C), I explained the role of the note taker, who was present during the focus group. Refreshments were provided during both types of data collection.

Ethical approval was granted for this study by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at UCT.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely used, flexible analytic qualitative method involving the identification of particular themes across research data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It provides rich details about the data acquired. This allows for a broader understanding of the phenomena under study which is why it was chosen to investigate how men perceive and perform intimacy in their male friendships. By applying this analytical perspective, the researcher hoped to discover the themes which are important to the research question that was under investigation. These themes would be highlighted in great detail as recommended by

Braun and Clarke (2006).

The researcher looked at the explicit or semantic meanings that emerged from the data as language allowed the participant to convey his experiences and meanings thus which gave rise to reflection (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I decided to loosely follow a step-by-step process when conducting this analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). This included transcribing the recorded discussions, generating codes, searching for themes within the data and reviewing these themes for the report.

Certain themes were expected to emerge, based on previous research. Due to some of the questions asked, it was hoped that new themes would also appear. I also searched for similarities and differences in the themes found in the focus group and interview data. This was done merely to see if similar and or different themes emerged from both techniques and was not part of any formal analysis.

As per Braun and Clarke (2006), I had a hand in reporting which themes came to light as well as why these particular themes were chosen for analysis. The analysis used in this study was concerned mainly with men's perceptions and performances of intimacy and identifying the main themes that emerged from the data. This is due to the particular aim of the study.

Reflexivity and Power

Given the fact that this research does contain a personal meaning to me, it is important that I acknowledge my personal and theoretical influences on the research process (Willig, 2008). I acknowledge that I am a subjective co-creator of the knowledge and contribute to the meaning-making process. I chose to view men as experts on the topic of intimacy as much as possible to ensure that their experiences and thoughts were identified.

Being male and having same-sex male friendships also shaped what was found and how things were explained or interpreted during the research process. It also allowed me to investigate intimacy as an insider and allowed for commonality to emerge between myself and the research participants.

Familiarity played an important role in terms of the individual interviews. Despite this, one particular interview felt more tense which may have had more to do with power relationship between the participant and the researcher. This may have been due to the fact that I, the interviewer, was five years younger than the participant.

The focus group began with an ice-breaker, allowing for familiarity among the participants. To diffuse power relations in the focus group, I conducted the focus group as a

facilitator and listener. By doing so, the participants were seen as the experts with their own knowledge and experiences surrounding the topic of intimacy (Krueger & Casey, 2007).

Analysis & Discussion

Before the analysis it is important to note how the analysis is represented. The focus group participants were coded as *F1*, *F2* and so on whilst the interview participants were coded with *P1*, *P2* and so forth. These codes will be used when referring to their extracts within the analysis. Extracts from the interviewer will be coded as *Interviewer*. All extracts from the interviews and the focus group will be italicised and will be followed by their codes which will be placed in brackets. Square brackets represent parts of the extracts which have been removed. Ellipses (...) represent that the extract does not end or begin at that particular point. Dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewees will be presented with the participant code followed by a colon.

The focus group was used to gain a shared understanding of intimacy by men in comparison to the individual perspectives sought by the semi-structured interviews. Given that the results from both the focus group and interviews were similar, I have chosen to use both the focus group and interview participants as one whole cohort of men. This has allowed for a somewhat uncontaminated set of results which reflect the bedrock men's feelings around intimacy and male friendship.

Intimacy

Intimacy as romantic relations. This study has chosen to let men define and explain intimacy according to their experiences. In the majority of cases, the men did not like the word intimacy as it was linked too closely with romantic relations with women. When asked 'what comes to mind when you think of/about the word intimacy?' this is how the majority participants responded:

Uh for me the word intimacy is uh like err romantic stuff. (P1)

Physical relation. Um ya that's something I'd reserve pretty much for um a significant other and I'd expect the significant other to reserve for me. (P6)

Nah, intimacy is not 'cause I'm associating it with things that I once did (laughs) with not-males. (P5)

Intimacy for me is not something that I think of between a male and male friendship. It's something that I more think of like with a girlfriend or with another girl that I care about. I don't usually think of intimacy between me and my male friends basically. (P3)

This indicates that the word intimacy could be problematic when discussing the bond that exists between men in close friendships. This might have been due to the fact that the question proposed to them was general. Still, it must be noted that even in general terms, the majority of participants view intimacy through a romantic lens. For them not to think of their friends suggests that there may be a need to shift away from the prototypical definition of intimacy. It also suggests that other dimensions of intimacy, such as self-disclosure and emotional expressiveness are linked to romantic relations. This is in line with research where men perceived intimacy as physical affection particularly towards a loved one (Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009). This however was not the only way that intimacy was conceptualised by men.

Intimacy as closeness. As previously discussed, the word intimacy is loaded with certain connotations that covertly and overtly denote ways of relating between friends as well as romantic interests. The point of this research is to understand how men view the friendships they are in, not their romantic affiliations. In some cases, the men in this study perceived intimacy using the word tight. This occurred when I asked them which word they would prefer instead of intimacy. What is suggested here is that intimacy may not be the correct word to conceptualise the connection between male friends. This is evidenced by the following extracts:

Err I would prefer tight. (P1)

It's more of a slang word but I mean, tight. Um if I'm tight with my guy friends its, it suggests that were close but we don't have the, the intimacy that you would have with another girl so ya. (P3)

The aforementioned suggestion of closeness relates to past research linking closeness with intimacy (Bowman, 2008). Another word used by the men was similar to 'tight.' This word was brotherhood. Given the proximity of such a relationship, it is quite surprising that male friendships are seen to lack intimacy. One participant in particular, gave a very interesting explanation of brotherhood which was based on a concept in Islam of the same name. This connection was described in such a way that it stood in place of intimacy:

What comes to mind when I think about it? Just that brotherhood man. Like when you see him then you know this guy, he understands you and you understand him, just that deep connection. You can just look at that guy and you just feel this connection. That is intimacy ya. I don't know what else. (P5)

I would say brotherhood. That would be a better word for me. (P5)

Seeing that one of the participants in the focus group also likened male friendship to brotherhood, it can be said that brotherhood is a valid explanation of intimacy. This is supported by Floyd's (1997a) work which centres on brotherly love in male friendships. Tightness and brotherhood are both aspects of a more general word that the men used to describe intimacy in their friendships; closeness. As seen in the literature, closeness is viewed as one way of explaining intimacy and incorporates quite comfortably the notions of brotherhood and tightness as seen in male friendships (Bowman, 2008). The word close is synonymous with dear, loving and intimacy which indicates that closeness is a justifiable substitute for 'intimacy'. It represents a connection that is cherished by men. When asked how he knew he was close with his male friends, one participant responded in a way that truly reflected this theme:

It's ah I would say it's something...in a way it's something you just feel and you know. (P3)

In relation to a question asking whether or not he told his friends that he cares about them, another participant argued that:

It's sort of implied with the fact that you know we friends or we brothers or whatever. If I didn't care about you, I wouldn't be your friend. (P4)

In both scenarios, closeness in male friendship is a bond that is often unspoken. This connection may not necessarily be the same as the closeness seen in same-sex female friendships but it does indicate that men do feel close in their relationships, at least to some extent. This is in agreement with Wood & Inman (1993) who theorised that closeness is a way of conceptualising intimacy. They further suggested that men may view friendships differently, which therefore leads to the theory that men conceptualise intimacy in their friendships differently. This would indicate why studies by Fehr (2004) and Migliaccio (2009) allude to alternative views of conceptualising and expressing intimacy in male

friendships. This next excerpt is particularly important as it shows a shared identification with the word close:

F1: Ya, I would use friendship (laughs)... [] It's like uh closeness, connection like that kind of thing. Someone who just gets it... or gets you.

F3: Like uh close.

F1: Ya. Close.

Interviewer: Okay.

F1: at the end of the day, it's someone (F3: Ya) who you want to share experiences with. You know someone who you actually like.

F3: Very, very, very close.

In essence, closeness is the umbrella term which incorporates brotherhood and tightness. It is the overarching theme consistent in studies of same-sex and cross-sex friendships. It is also a more suitable replacement for the word intimacy in male friendships. The question that then arises is how is this closeness communicated and performed in male friendships?

Past literature would suggest that the correct, healthy way of communicating intimacy is through emotional expression. Emotional expressivity is said to be therapeutic and associated with mental health (Reissman, 1990; Warris & Rafique, 2009). The function of this paper is not to discredit this notion. In Monsour's (1992) study, men more than women acknowledged that emotional expressiveness is a way of displaying intimacy.

What this study aims to show is that in men's friendships, intimacy or 'closeness' is usually expressed through different means. The usual case is some form of action (Fehr, 2004; Wood & Inman, 1993). These actions range from general talk and self-disclosure to actions and highlight the multifaceted phenomenon of intimacy in male friendships.

Men's Friendships

Shared Experiences and shared interests. The very first question asked of the men was 'what comes to mind when you think about the word friendship.' This was considered an apt question to gauge what characteristics men found to be important in their friendship. The participants made reference to a number of characteristics that previous research has highlighted in the past. The one which was most easily spoken about was that of shared experiences and mutual sharing. The men defined their friendship in terms of a sense of

shared activities that included many things such as talking, joking, as well as other shared experiences for example:

F2: I think of like [] people that I've met and people I still have as friends with me now and the most thing that comes to mind is like mutual sharing; sharing of things, ideas and ya other things in life. (F2)

F1: Especially experiences as well. That's like more important than any of them. The people you've experienced things with. Have gone through hard times, good times, you know all that stuff. (F1)

The idea of mutual sharing is seen to be important by men in their male friendships but has been labelled impersonal by many who view friendship through feminised lenses (Wood & Inman, 1993). Yet this theme in male friendships seems to be generated whenever men speak of their friends or about friendship. This is especially so where shared experiences are concerned. Two participants spoke of their friends and noted these important attributes:

Ya and I mean we, we all...pretty much were in similar classes in school so we became tight from that. (P4)

We were very close because we had, we shared the same kind of morals and we went to the same primary school as well so we grew close in high school because we were just like in the same place. (P5)

This indicates the importance of shared experiences but also that of shared interests. In essence sharing at multiple levels is vital to friendship. Not only that but it is also important, for intimacy (Migliaccio, 2009). An umbrella term for this sharing could be companionship as it indicates a sense of accompaniment and togetherness found in friendships (Konstan, 1997). In essence, the men in both the interviews and the focus groups seem to have noted the importance of commonality and shared experiences within their friendships. Perhaps the most telling quote about male friendships is the one provided by one participant in the focus groups:

We laugh together, we like cry together, we do all things together and we connect to a certain level that we don't like ignore each other or we don't like- we feel like we not separated. We feel like he's my brother. You can share everything with him. (F2).

This is in line with the theory proposed by Fehr (2004) who explained that men's friendships value shared activities or companionship. This solidarity in male friendship helps to build closeness (Hall, 2010). This has often been looked over by friendship studies which have focussed primarily on the therapeutic of self-disclosure and emotional expressiveness in friendships. This suggests that alternative views on closeness and intimacy should be considered and valued as some men find companionship to be important an important quality of their close male friendships (Chu, 2005; Konstan, 1997; Migliaccio, 2009; Wood & Inman, 1993; Wright, 1982).

Companionship was not only found to be a characteristic of same-sex male friendship. It is also a key indicator of intimacy or closeness in male friendships. This was indicated when the participants in both data collection procedures were asked the following questions:

'How do you know that your friendships are intimate/close/tight?'

'How do you know there's a brotherhood?'

These questions were asked in relation to the various conceptions of intimacy that the men preferred to use. Again, the majority of men in both the interviews and focus group highlighted companionship through shared activities and interests. This justifies the importance of having various conceptions or measures of this phenomenon (Fehr, 2004):

Intimacy in male friendships...umm... I honestly don't know. I mean you usually see guys doing things together like playing sport or going out. Stuff like that. (P2)

I experience what he experience and he also experience what I experience. This show(s) intimacy. (F3)

They also stressed the importance of shared experiences as denoting closeness. This closeness is also linked to time, which seems to be an important sub-theme that underpins intimacy among males:

F3: Like back at home, out of all my friends, there is one that I spend like most of my time with and we share a lot with.

F1: That's what I was just gonna say. Like that is how I know who my close friends are.

Through shared experiences and time spent together, a sense of rapport is established between men. This rapport unifies men thus cementing the closeness of their friendships. In

one instance, the men in the focus group argued that their friendships have common mission, vision, purposes. This links closely to the shared experience and the closeness that result from these experiences (Swain, 1989). One participant said that:

It's (a) very intense thing and it's actually something where we end up like integrating our lives and our worlds to quite a large extent, you know which is an intense experience. (F1)

This indicates that companionship and shared experiences are valued characteristics of intimate male friendships. Research has shown this before yet it has been undermined due to feminine norms regarding intimacy. This research has highlighted this as seen by the alternative words that the *male* participants have used to explain and define intimacy in their male friendships. Therefore, non-verbal appreciation through companionship should not be seen as impersonal and safe as research has done in the past (Williams, 1985; Wood & Inman, 1993).

Self-disclosure. Based on previous research, it has been hypothesised that men could engage in self-disclosure as well as shared activities in order to communicate intimacy in their friendships (Fehr, 2004; Floyd, 1997b). Fehr's (2004) theory is supported by the findings in the current study whereby self-disclosure was found to be an important in male friendships. Not only that, but it is also a way in which intimacy is explained or conceptualised as indicated by these extracts:

Sharing secrets. That's what it would be ya. Sharing secrets comes to my mind. (P4)

Close. Sharing secrets and stuff. (F4)

In this way, the participants agree that self-disclosure is a viable way of viewing intimacy. This is in line with various conceptions of self-disclosure which encourage sharing of sensitive information (Fehr, 2004; Hacker, 1981). Closeness is also implied in self-disclosure as evidenced by one of the extracts above. The interesting part is that they engage in self-disclosure in a way that seems to contradict the literature (Camarena, Sarigiani, & Peterson, 1990). Men self-disclose to their male friends provided that they know them. One participant, who has known his best male friends for over five years, commented that:

There's nothing I wouldn't tell them. (P4)

This indicates a time dimension as well as trust, which is a prototypical feature that leads to intimacy (Hall, 2010). The participants admitted that they did confide and issues but it is usually contextual and brought about by some emotional upheaval. In this sense, self-disclose includes admitting some emotional vulnerability but only in certain contexts:

You won't be out having fun and talking about how depressing or sad life is or what issue you had or you know what a great time- you don't wanna actually say what a great time you having 'cause it's like weird. It's like, never mind that lets just have fun you know. (F1)

It's not something that comes up often unless it's triggered by a certain situation [] but I mean on a day to day basis it's not something that you just gonna bring up really. (P3)

The above extracts indicate a finding similar to that found in a study conducted by Reisman (1990). In the questionnaire round of this study, it was found that men do discuss or express emotions from time to time. This is in contrast to other studies which indicate that men are stoic and refrain from self-disclosing (Hacker, 1981; Lewis, 1978; Migliaccio, 2009).

Self-disclosure in men's friendships is linked to two subthemes; openness and understanding. Many of the men spoke of how they were able to talk about anything with their guy friends thus indicating that men's friendships do consist of some level of openness. This links quite closely to self-disclosure, a key measure and a key explanation of intimacy (Bownman, 2008; Chu, 2005; Cozby, 1973; Reisman, 1990). The following extracts display openness to a large degree and also summarises the feeling about male friendships that was shared by the majority of the participants:

A male friend is someone who you can talk about with, talk to about anything without any boundaries, any limitations and he will be understanding. (P3)

You can tell him what you want to tell him and he can also give you advice so it's that kind of bond. (F2)

This level of openness and ease challenges findings by Hacker (1981) which suggest that men do not want the burden of listening to one another's problems. The vulnerability in these friendships somewhat contradicts usual notions of masculinity where men do not self-disclosure for a fear of being seen as vulnerable to one another (Pleck & Sonenstein, 2009). What is suggested by the findings is that men's friendships contain self-disclosure perhaps to

a different extent than female friendships. This is in line with Fehr's (2004) work where it was thought that men communicate intimacy through both shared activities and self-disclosure. This does not necessarily mean that men's friendships are more or less intimate than the female friendships. Rather, it suggests that male friendships are not as inexpressive as previously thought.

The other subtheme, understanding, was mostly elicited through a question about the closeness of male friendships as well as a question asking the participants what they thought were characteristics of a good male friend. Two participants responded in such a way that indicated the importance of understanding in their friendships:

I would say that it's somebody who understands the way I think. (P2)

Someone you can talk to about anything and they will be understanding and listen and give you good advice. (P3)

The following participants indicated the importance of authenticity in their close friendships and linked the concept to security within their friendships. Security is related to trust which is closely linked to self-disclosure:

It's yeah, when you're just kind of in that secure when you know this guy understands you and you know that you think you can understand them. (P5)

Ya and if they are themselves. If your friends are like, ya, they, I don't know how to put this, they are authentic. They don't pretend then you can actually trust them... (F2)

Understanding and openness has been shown in some of studies (Migliaccio, 2009; Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009). It is evident that self-disclosure is beneficial to male friendships as it facilitates the creation of closeness in male friendships. This means that in some ways, men do reap the emotional and psychological benefits of expressive friendships which many studies have shown men to not benefit from (Elkins & Peterson, 1993; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958).

This does not mean that self-disclosure is the only way men perform intimacy, as this study has attempted to show. Support for this is seen by the fact that some participants choose not to speak about their emotions as per the findings in previous research (Migliaccio, 2009). Fehr (2004) explains this by stating that while men and women agree on emotional

expressiveness and self-disclosure as being behaviours that indicate intimacy, some choose not to engage in it:

It's always general stuff. We never go deep. (P1)

There's not uh a lot of emotion. I'd say like it, it's very laid back. There's no hectic emotional like no one comes with their like very personal emotional issues. (P4)

I can't just tell somebody what I feel. There's still that uh give and take relationship and the whole masculinity thing. It's just that standard is still there (P5)

There is an indication here that gender roles and masculinity do play a role in intimacy but this relates particularly to self-disclosure (Bank & Hansford, 2000; Bem, 1974; Migliaccio, 2009; Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009). This however reinforces the fact that intimacy in friendships has been feminised as Hacker (1981) and Wood and Inman (1993) have noted. If self-disclosure is the chief measure or indicator of intimacy, then men are consequentially disadvantaged as self-disclosure is a feminised indicator of intimacy. As previously noted, there are *other* ways in which intimacy manifests in male friendships (Fehr, 2004; Monsour, 1992). They are important as they build and maintain intimacy in ways that self-disclosure does not. This is suggestive of the complex nature of friendships which comprise of many different behaviours and characteristics.

Mutual assistance and support. Although Fehr (2004) proposed that men communicate intimacy through self-disclosure and/or shared activities, a particular behaviour indicated by the participants in this study seemed to combine both these specific aspects into one vital theme. This theme is mutual assistance and support. Support demonstrates platonic affection in a way that links to the research conducted by Patrick and Beckenbach (2009). It is also a key behaviour which produces intimacy (Hall, 2010). An interesting finding was that some men did not feel comfortable with disclosing care towards one another. This arose when men were asked if they ever told their male friends that they cared about them:

Guys don't wanna hear that you care about them. It's just something you sort of know that if this guy is ever stuck, if he's in trouble or something, you are going to help him out. (P3).

I'm not comfortable with that, with saying, with making a statement like that. (P2)

Other participants commented that this ‘feels wrong’ and is ‘strange’ thus indicating the importance of other ways of displaying care without actually verbalising it (Patrick & Breckenbach, 2009; Wood & Inman, 1993). One of my interactions with a participant further displays men’s aversion to telling one another that they care. This is especially due to the fact that verbally expressing care is usually linked to romantic notions of intimacy:

Interviewer: So you would never just on a random day

P1: No. No-

Interviewer: Be like whoever, I care about you?

P1: No. it’s too un-no. It’s like proposing love to... to him it’s gonna be like you’re proposing love to him too.

The above argument does not take away from the fact that assistance can manifest through verbal behaviours such as advice giving and general emotional support. One participant argued that:

You need someone who can balance and who can be supportive if you, like you feel down and stuff like he can pick you up. (F3)

This is indicative of the fact that support is paramount to communicating care and intimacy in friendship (Hall, 2010). Another key aspect was that of advice which in itself allows for support and in male friendships. Advice underpins quite a few of the participants’ conceptions of male friendship and shows that intimacy manifests in different ways in male friendships (Bowman, 2008; Fehr, 2004). Advice manifested in the interviews and focus groups in this way:

If I needed any advice or anything or a wingman or anything, I always, I always go to Seb... (P3)

You can tell him what you want to tell him and he can also give you advice so it’s that kind of bond. (F2)

This advice-giving reliability is further seen in this brief interaction from the focus group discussion:

F3: When I have a problem like he's the first person that I call or same as him like when he has a problem, I'm the first person that he calls like hey my friend, I have this problem, I have this and this, give me some advice.

F1: You know its people (F3: Ya) you can rely on. Solid, you know and stuff.

Another example was given by another member of the focus group when asked how he shows his male friends that he cares about them:

*If you listen to whatever they say and if you give time to be like, ya, you give time for them and listen to them and just be with them all the way. Just ya, be beside them.
(F4)*

The key function here is the fact that advice seems to come about when men disclose their problems to one another. This is in order for solutions to be provided. This is verbal support which indicates the fact that assistance arises from both verbal and non-verbal behaviours, which links to the studies by Fehr (2004) and Camarena et al. (1990).

Support also manifests itself through assisting a friend through instrumental actions. In some cases, this assistance takes place in the form of provision. This is in line with Wood and Inman's (1993) arguments that practical help is an expression of care and closeness in men. Furthermore, practical help is linked to the unspoken bond spoken of earlier and works on the assumption that care is provided when there is a need for it:

*I mean if you, you can see that somebody requires assistance just go assist them [...]
ya I don't see why you should say it because I think doing something is actually more effective than just, than words as such. (P2)*

Uh gestures of friendship? Ya I guess there's also ya I mean there are like times where it's like you know they'll like ask me to do something and ya it's like I'll try you know my best to do it. (P6)

Practical assistance was summarised well when one of the interviewee participants was asked to define male friendship at the end of his interview:

Ya you know just like there for one another like you have each other's back... (P6)

This speaks to the importance of mutual reciprocity within assistance (Wood & Inman, 1993). These findings are in concordance with the theory that men's friendships are

instrumental in nature (Duck & Wright, 1985; Wright, 1982). In this way, reciprocity allows for men's friendships to be resourceful and valuable in terms of meeting certain needs (Hall, 2011). In essence, intimacy in male friendships usually follows the well-known adage 'actions speak louder than words.' In this sense, men are indeed intimate in their friendships and their way of being intimate should not be discouraged, undervalued or pathologised by those working within a feminine paradigm of thinking about intimacy and friendship (Migliaccio, 2009; Wood & Inman, 1993).

In contrast to this finding, men also value verbal attributes of self-disclosure in their friendships, particularly where support is concerned. The combination of both self-disclosure and shared activities into this theme of assistance indicates that perhaps men's friendships aren't as clear-cut as the literature proposes. The fact that both means to producing intimacy are found in this study suggests that men may find alternative paths to communicating intimacy in their same-sex friendships. Perhaps these paths are influenced by certain forces which the literature considers barriers to intimacy in male friendships.

Conclusion

The analysis indicates that male friendships are much more complex, much more multi-faceted than the stoic, emotion-avoiding, pathological relationships past research has indicated them to be. The accounts provided by the men detail that a subjectively close bond exists between the participants and their male friends. This bond is classified by the participants as brotherhood, tightness and closeness which in their view better represents the close relationship between male friends than intimacy does. This was supported by research conducted by Floyd (1997a) which focussed on brotherly love in fraternal dyads. The aversion to the word intimacy was due to the fact that it reminded the men of their romantic relationships with women. This in essence answered the question of how men *perceived* intimacy in their male friendships.

In terms of the *performances* and *representation* of intimacy, the men seemed to support two of the theories identified by Fehr (2004). Firstly, men agreed that self-disclosure is a valid way in which intimacy is communicated. This is seen by the fact that in some cases, men can tell each other anything. This openness however is quite selective and contextual. This may be due to men's adherence to gender role norms and adherence to notions of masculinity as proposed by many researchers (Lewis, 1978; Migliaccio, 2009; Pleck et al.,

1993). Nevertheless, emotional expressiveness and self-disclosure are not the crux of men's friendships as seen this study. Rather these behaviours represent a method of expressing intimacy that can be used by men in the appropriate situation.

Secondly the participants also chose to engage in other behaviours which in their opinion better reveal intimacy. These behaviours are shared experiences and activities. Besides Fehr (2004), other authors have stressed the importance of shared activities and interests in men's friendships (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Migliaccio, 2009; Patrick & Breckenbach, 2009; Wood & Inman, 1993). The overarching theme presented here is that of companionship which involves men immersing themselves in one another's lives and experiencing things together in order to facilitate and extend closeness. Adding to this is the notion of time spent with friends. The time spent together in a common group with common interests and goals is perhaps at the core of men's friendships. Time is usually spent on shared activities which in some cases may include getting together to talk (Duck & Wright, 1993). The overarching idea is that companionship above self-disclosure is how men usually communicate closeness. Both however are accessed and exercised by men.

There was also a sense that men's friendships consisted of another theme that combines elements of both companionship and self-disclosure. This theme was support or assistance. Through self-disclosure, men could seek advice from one another on issues ranging from relationship challenges to other problems. This is linked to the fact that these men understand each other and the experiences that they go through. On the other hand, companionship also manifests in support through being present for the friend when they are in trouble. There also is an aspect of providing resources and doing things for friends to display care. This is in concordance with past literature on communicating closeness (Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009; Wood & Inman, 1993). This finding indicates that intimacy in male friendships may not be as clear-cut as previously hypothesised.

The various findings within this paper indicates that it may be time to look away from the male-deficit model of intimacy and to acknowledge men's ways of relating. This study has shown this by asking men what they think about the concept of intimacy instead of providing them with a scale measuring some dimension of intimacy. Given that the small sample of men used in this study were heterosexual, one wonders if these findings will be similar in same-sex homosexual and bisexual men. It would be interesting to see how masculinity interacts with intimacy in these friendships. Furthermore investigations into female friendships should also be investigated so as to understand how intimacy is perceived and performed in their same-sex friendships. This would add to the understanding of this

interesting feature of close same-sex friendships.

In conclusion, this study has shown that men perceive intimacy using different terms and indicates that intimacy in male friendships follows different paths. In some cases, contextually appropriate self-disclosure is favoured. In most cases however, men's actions speak louder than words. Companionship is thus central to intimacy in same-sex male friendships. These pathways to intimacy are used simultaneously to provide assistance and support in times of need. This research surmises that men's perceptions of intimacy underlie their expressions of intimacy. These perceptions and expressions of intimacy are significant and should not be undervalued.

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Appendix A

Questions: Interviews & Focus Groups

1. What comes to mind when you think about the word friendship?
2. Tell me about your guy friends. What do you guys get up to when you're together?
3. What do you talk about when you are with a group of guys? What don't you talk about? Why?
4. What do you think are the characteristics of a good male friend?
5. How do you know that you are close with your male friends?
6. How do you know that you can trust your friends?
7. Let's talk about your closest male friend. Are there things you speak to him about that you don't speak about with your other male friends? Why not? What makes him so special?
8. How do you show your male friends that you care about them?
9. How do you know that your friendships with your male friends are intimate?
10. What comes to mind when you think about the word intimacy?
11. What are some of the problems that you face in your male friendships?
12. Do you ever tell your male friends that you care about them? If so, why? If not, why not?
13. How are your friendships with guys similar to your friendships with girls?
14. From your personal experience, are your friendships with guys better than your friendships with girls? If so, why? If not, what makes them worse?
15. How would you define male friendship?

Appendix B

CONSENT FORM: Interview

You are invited to take part in a research project about intimacy in male friendships. The research is aimed at finding out how men perceive, perform and understand the concept of intimacy in their friendships with other men. As a researcher, I would like to know what your thoughts are about this topic. The information from this focus group discussion will be used to write a report that aims to help people understand how intimacy is expressed and explained by men in South Africa.

This study will allow you as a participant to express your ideas, knowledge and experiences surrounding the topic of intimacy in male friendships in an semi-structured interview setting. Your personal details will be kept confidential.

Please read through your rights as a research participant

I understand that:

- My participation is voluntary and I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the interview at any time.
- My withdrawal/ refusal to participate will not result in any penalty.
- I will not be paid money for participating in this study.
- SRPP points shall only be awarded should I choose to participate in this interview
- any information I choose to disclose in this interview will be confidential
- there are no expected costs to me participating in this interview

I hereby give my consent to be the subject of your research.

Signature _____

Date _____

If you have any questions about the study or any issues surrounding the study, please feel free to contact me on 083 308 0384.

Thank you,

Loyiso Maqubela

Appendix C

CONSENT FORM: Focus Group

You are invited to take part in a research project about intimacy in male friendships. The research is aimed at finding out how men perceive, perform and understand the concept of intimacy in their friendships with other men. As a researcher, I would like to know what your thoughts as a group are about this topic. The information from this focus group discussion will be used to write a report that aims to help people understand how intimacy is expressed and explained by men in South Africa.

This study will allow you as a participant to express your ideas, knowledge and experiences surrounding the topic of intimacy in male friendships in a group environment. Your personal details will be kept confidential.

Please read through your rights as a research participant

I understand that:

- My participation is voluntary and I may withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the group at any time
- My withdrawal/ refusal to participate will not result in any penalty.
- I will not be paid money for participating the study
- SRPP points shall only be awarded should I choose to participate in the focus group
- any information I disclose in this setting will be confidential
- there are no expected costs to me participating in this focus group

I hereby give my consent to be the subject of your research.

Signature _____

Date _____

If you have any questions about the study or any issues surrounding the study, please feel free to contact me on 0833080384.

Thank you,

Loyiso Maqubela