Doing Research on Sexuality in Africa: Ethical Dilemmas and the Positioning of the Researcher

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The process of knowledge production involves a series of steps and is influenced by several factors which impact upon the end result of the research in various ways. When the topic of research is sexuality such conditions and influences become surrounded by a greater number of implications, some with far-reaching consequences. Not only is this due to the fact that sexuality is generally regarded as a sensitive topic, if not a taboo, that must not be mentioned in public, but it is also a topic that poses difficult questions that the researcher must resolve or the very success of the project may be in jeopardy. This article reflects on key epistemological conversations and debates on doing research on sexuality in Africa. The authors are both anthropologists who have conducted research in urban areas of Mozambique on young people's sexuality.

One of the authors focused his interest on exploring the socio-cultural construction of sexual scripts for sexual acts in Maputo city. The other author worked first on the perceptions and routines of condom use among the youth and later explored the practices, meanings and narratives of sex amongst the youth in the same city. The fact that one of the researchers was a male and the other a female generated interesting nuances on the kinds of experiences and results they were able to produce.

An important note is that both researchers explored themes on sexuality in partial fulfilment of the requirements for their respective dissertations for a Master's degree at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa. The production of their theses, like the publication of any other academic piece required them to follow strict ethical procedures. And that is where their debate begins.

Whose Ethics Exactly?

After selection of the research theme, the next challenge for the postgraduate student was to convince the Department of Social Anthropology via a standard research proposal that included various points and the commitment of the researcher to comply with, *inter alia,* the UCT code of Ethics for research on human subjects, the Ethical guidelines and principles of conduct for anthropologists issued by Anthropology Southern Africa (ASA 2005, 142-143) and the statement on ethics by American Anthropological Association (AAA 1971).

Given that ethical considerations may decide whether or not one's project is approved, this is clearly a key element in the process of obtaining permission to conduct research. Thus the university's ethics committees, more than the department's academic review process, have the last word on whether one may proceed with the research and consequently with the MA programme. In that regard,

there was awareness that researching sexuality and other sexual matters or issues would be a challenge, since "anything having to do with sex causes a great many people to feel embarrassed (Kelley and Byrne as cited in Frith 2000, 281) mostly because, as pointed out by David (1987: 4) "sexual practices always involve some degree of privacy, and the ethical implications of their scientific study and of the publication of findings are myriad".

Therefore, following our commitment to the various ethical guidelines, it was made clear that the researchers would not overuse nor abuse the power inequity that could emerge as a result of the research encounters, such as during interviews (ASA 2005; Scheurich 1997). Also, one needed not to override social and cultural values of the participants, and be on guard against undue intrusion. From the start the participants who accepted to join in the study would be treated as subjects and not as objects, and, especially, if selected from amongst participants in the previous studies,[1] there would be need to give them due respect. The scholars would obtain informed consent from the participants that accepted to join the study. Also, only after they shared the research objectives and methodologies, volunteered to take part and were assured of their anonymity (to protect participants from exposure after obtaining their consent) would the study proceed.

Participants would be informed and reminded about the freedom to ask anything they find of their interest, to choose not to answer specific questions, to discontinue the interview or to withdraw, without any penalties. The researcher would also let them know that the study was being conducted for academic purposes at the Department of Social Anthropology at UCT and that the research results would be widely available once published in academic journals or presented in seminars and conferences.

In the case of the authors of this article there was the challenge of researching "at home" (Mkwanazi 2005, Spiegel 2005) that would require them to unpack and question their assumptions of "normality". Also, as happened to one of the authors, during the fieldwork researchers could be confronted with similar questions to the one posed to Mkhwanazi (2005; 115) "… of people who thought that men menstruated" especially when conducting focus group discussions.[2] If a similar situation emerged, he had planned to share with the study participants his points of view regarding the raised issues in a reflexive way, without imposing his point of view, having been warned by Das (1989) about the need to share life threatening information.

They were also alert to the challenge that "…, while a strict adherence to the code of ethics might protect one's research participants, who or what protects the anthropologist in the field?" (Becker *et al*. 2005, 126). For both researchers there was the feeling that since they were doing 'ethnography at home' the need for protection was not an issue as they were comfortable and knew the relevant support networks. Finally, and inspired by Spiegel (2005, 135), they were cautious that in the event of an unexpected occurrence raising serious ethical issues for the researchers they would guide themselves through an ethic of care that would include getting in touch with supervisors or other lecturers from the Department of Social Anthropology of UCT for guidance, advice and support.

After submission and approval of the proposals each of the researchers was confronted with a new reality: there was a clear realization that they would be using

a code of ethics produced and informed by a cultural order different from the one practiced in the social and cultural context where the study would be developed. By proceeding in such manner, would the researchers not be ignoring the fact that "Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighbourhoods…), but they study *in* villages" (Geertz 1973, 22)? Specifically, by using the approved code of ethics from the UCT they were bound to override the participants' own ethics when they were different from the approved professional research. What was the ethical thing to do?

This new dynamic presented in the field raised a number of questions. Since researchers are also socio culturally informed rather than a culturally free, where was the place of the researchers' own ethics in all this? How were they to manage the coexistence of diverse ethics without contradicting the principles of their discipline, while learning about and capturing by description or otherwise, the diversity of human life? Was the solution in giving less weight to the ethics of the study participants and more weight to the approved ethical considerations, or vice versa? If they chose to act in the approved manner would the researchers not be going back to Geertz's (1973) utopia, presenting only the *natives'* point of view in a context were they were also one of them, and lived in the cosmopolitan and heterogeneous *village* that is Maputo?

One of the possible escape routes for such dilemma was Spiegel's (2005) ethics of care. In his view, it is important to "protect participants, the researcher and protect anthropology".

How were the researchers to interact with participants, follow strictly the approved ethical consideration or learn and adopt the codes of ethics produced and reproduced in Maputo City, including the ones informing the researchers themselves? Which of the ethics should inform the setting up of questions in order to make sure that they were ethically appropriate? How were they to guide the research in order to know if one was being intrusive or overriding the socio-cultural values of the participants? As a consequence, the main challenge became how to reconcile the various ethical codes of the discipline, of the participants and the of researchers themselves without sacrificing any of them, since participants should not be treated as objects but as subjects. What kind of subjects are subordinate and conform to the approved ethical considerations? And since the aim of the research was to produce a thesis, how could this exercise not be exploitative and be seen as making use of participants to an end?

Confronted with such dilemmas, the male researcher noted that when he started observing in the field while conducting focus groups discussions, interviews as well as informal conversations, he realized how wrong he had been in minimizing the importance of Becker *et al*.'s (2005) warning regarding the need for ensuring that they were always protected, since for many times the interaction with participants in the fieldwork proved to be "violent" to him, albeit not in a physical way. His ears refused to 'accept' some words (even today he does not feel comfortable writing about it) that, when uttered he reacted strangely, his eyes refused to see the pictures or television when sex-related pictures were displayed, even if they were familiar to him.

In this regard he was heavily influenced by the conflict of dealing with what people were saying on the one hand and his expectation about what should be acceptable

under the UCT codes of ethics that he subscribed to on the other. He was concerned that when it came to writing his dissertation (knowing that any further ethical adjustment by the supervisor would detract from the lessons and sexual scripts provided by his Maputo City context and which he shared with participants) he would not be able to adequately reflect what he experienced.

Should his data be considered pornographic or not? Was it appropriate to write about certain things and not others? If he accepted exactly what participants shared with him would this be regarded as overriding their socio cultural values? And what if he refused to use them in his thesis? Would this not, in reverse, be a way of reducing perceptions and cosmologies that informed their sexualities, just to fit into the approved ethical considerations that are not the same with local ethics?

Similarly the woman researcher was confronted with challenging dilemmas that were centred on the subtle distinction between writing sexuality and writing pornography.[3] The discussions from the focus group and interviews provided graphically descriptive narrations of the sexual acts and practices that, unlike the male researcher, she enthusiastically transcribed and discussed in her paper in order to give a "thick description" of the target group. However, discussions with the supervisor and reading of the ASA (2005) and AAA (1971) ethics flagged her to the possibility of going against the academic writing standards. "Do not write in a way that creates sexual arousal" was one piece of advice. Here, she identified one of the greatest contradictions on studying sexuality. Sex and its dynamics are most of the time eroticized and sensualized in the dominant discourse. In the Mozambican and South African context, speaking publicly about the theme is rare. Discourse about it is now coming to the public arena with the debates and awareness programmes of HIV/AIDS. However, much of the discussion remains very instrumental without any profound descriptions of its ways and means, almost as if sexuality without HIV is not relevant.

When she used ethnography to deeply explore youth sexuality, the details were profound and meticulous. Most definitely, those details were able to create sexual arousal in contexts where public reference to sex is a taboo. How should one proceed then? What can be said or not said regarding the vivid descriptions people provided of their own practices? Is not the aim of the discipline of Anthropology deeply exploring meanings and practices in order understand/explain people's behaviour? How could the "thick description" of sexuality then be a problem?

For researchers working in Africa, the excuse for not writing the details in exactly the way they were narrated was associated with the need to discontinue the colonial tendency to construct Africans and African sexualities as something exotic. As Arnfred (2004, 7) points out, African sexuality is often constructed as different from European/Western and portrayed as deviant. Indeed many European politicians or common men on the street when commenting on the scourge of HIV in Africa, still automatically lame it mainly on 'the sexual life of savages'; therefore, this description from an African site that was creating sexual arousal could be understood within the pre-conceived ideas of Africans as promiscuous and sexually indisciplined.

Although such concern is valid for the African context, bearing in mind the historical construction of the Africans' sexualities, some questions regarding the aim of the discipline of Anthropology can be raised: How does one write the knowledge provided by informants when they can be read in various manners including ones that see

only promiscuity in African sexuality? Should one filter the information given? Shouldn't the emphasis be on critically accessing the perspectives that read African sexuality as promiscuous and not necessarily restrain local narrations fearing that they would be promoting such unconstructive perspective? With regard to the writing of sexuality that creates sexual arousal, would it not be crucial to engage cultural relativism and read sexuality in the context of were it was produced? How can one write a thick description of sexuality (sexual practices in this case), guaranteeing that such information will not create arousal? Is self-censorship ethical because it protects the people and the discipline? In any case does it? All indications are that old prejudices die hard and will not necessarily be put to rest by ethically sanitised ethnography.

Even Researchers are Sexual Beings

Kulick (1995) illuminated some of the dilemmas faced by researchers working on sexuality. Kulick's edited volume was a rare exploration of the sexual life of the people who used to study savages. He exposed the ambiguity of doing fieldwork and doing anthropology, since while on one hand anthropologists are recommended to and do write pages about close contacts with the *natives* regarding rituals, eating, sleeping, farming, hunting, fishing and gossiping habits. On the other hand, when it comes to writing about sex there is a big silence in anthropological narratives, the anthropologists' own sexualities are the most muted of all, perpetuating the dubious image of the asexualized scientist/ethnographer whose entire fieldwork experience follows the professional code of ethics to the letter. Kulick (1995) revealed the hitherto whispered about homosexual[4] and heterosexual fieldwork experiences which now emerged as research results, that, according to the very restrictive codes of ethics, were about things that were not even supposed to have occurred. Kulick's critique also revealed the issue of heterogeneity in dealing with ethical principles, since he was proposing an anthropology that stresses the sexual experiences of the anthropologist while other codes recommend the muting of the researchers' sexuality, at least when in field. So what were the present two researchers to do - follow Kullick's (1995) approach or stick to the approved UCT ethical considerations?

As the data collection proceeded, the socio cultural proximity with the words, pictures and movies involved in the study allowed the male researcher to get closer to the local cosmologies of sex and related issues from the participants in the context of Maputo, allowing for the steady improvement of his data collection technique. However, sometimes what he considered appropriate differed from, and even clashed, with what some of the participants considered correct, or vice versa. The researchers, ultimately, were *nativized*[5] in a very heterogonous village.

According to the AAA briefing paper, concerning consideration of the ethical implications of sexual relationships between Anthropologists and members of a study population and prepared in 2000,

> The anthropological fieldworker must be aware of the actual or perceived difference in economic and social "power" between the researcher and the population studied. In many field situations, the anthropologist is an exotic "other" whose presence may be disruptive to the local cultural group and who is often perceived to be from a world of wealth and power ….

For the research participants, and Maputo City, rather than a context where the ethnographer held power over powerless participants, the researchers found that they were taking part in encounters where power shifted from participants to the researcher and back again continuously. That fact led the researchers to incorporate new elements, perceptions and even practices related to sex issues, since the participants were not immune to the practices, narratives or to the *exotic* perceptions that they shared with or even taught their researchers.

As the AAA (2000) paper goes on it warns that "Humans are sexual animals, and the possibility exists that the researcher may be placed in an ethical dilemma should a sexual relationship develop in a field situation. It is equally important to the anthropologist to be aware of the health implications of such a relationship to the researcher as well as the population under study." While that concern is legitimate its relevance in the context of fieldwork could be questioned: Is not awareness to health implications a must in any context and any kind of relationship, be it at *home* or in the *field* (at home or abroad)? Does the advice and ethical code apply only to American anthropologists abroad and not, say, on campus as well?

Being a young heterosexual male, in fact the male researcher was not immune to the glances, the 'provocative' and sensual ladies' clothes, even of some of the women informants. Were they dressed in such way only to impress him or was that their usual dress code? Was he treating female participants only as participants or also as *women*? During the fieldwork was his sexuality suspended and just turned back on when he had left the field and was reviewing his field notes in his tent or *hut*?[6] His sexual life was on, and it helped him to understand differences and similarities in sexual scripts provided by other participants, as well as to make sense of the dynamics shaping them. However, it was not supposed to be part of the study and he had no informed consent of his partner.

The female researcher, as a young woman researching and studying sexuality, noticed that the topic itself came overloaded with all manners of prejudice. Within her networks of friends and acquaintances the perception of her choice of study was generally linked to the idea of sexual availability. In the context of Maputo, the public arena construct of ("decent") women is of a heterosexual, subservient, docile, fragile and domesticated woman. Women are required not to show their sexual desires and needs, and to wait for the men to initiate and propose any romantic or sexual relationship.

Her choice to have a profession and her research orientation on sexuality created in most men (and women!) the perception that she was different from their view of the "decent" woman. Therefore, the idea that she was an easy sexual catch and that she was sexually available was held by many. That assumption was not even limited to the field. A number of her male respondents looked at her in such way even away from the research setting.

The experience of the female researcher shows an interesting example of the awakening of the sexuality of the researcher in fieldwork. During one of the many nights out with the group being studied in order to become *one of them*, the female researcher was confronted with a proposal to become a girlfriend of one of the participants. Such proposal was accompanied by sensual and seductive gestures and attitudes. Since she was not interested in the proposer the researcher declined the invitation. However, this participant was persistent and only gave up after a few

more days of trying when other members of the group got wind of the situation and requested him to stop as he was disturbing the course of the research. This kind of "incident" simply shows that not only that the researchers deactivate their sexual being (as per AAA code of ethics) but also that the participants/informants may end up putting science first. Though they may regard each other as objects of desire or interest it is not entirely clear how either party should manage such contexts, except, may be, to do the right thing as both an anthropologist and a socialised person.

While in most cases the female researcher felt disgusted by the sexual idea constructed of women studying sexuality in Maputo, during her fieldwork she also manipulated this stigmatising view to get more in-depth information, mostly from male informants. Her playing the role of the sexually liberated woman allowed both men and women to talk more openly about their views and practices of sex than they ever could with a 'decent' woman. Although this strategy was very useful, even necessary, she was aware that the ethical code emphasised the need to maintain the security and integrity of the researcher in the field. By entering into the seduction game the researcher was putting herself in danger. However, if all research (whether on sexuality or something else) were to strictly follow the safe guidelines and avoid the dangerous situations, much of the information gathering would be impossible. It is well known that most of the times people only opened after developing a more profound kind of rapport, well, that has it risks. The ethics codes seem to be implying that during fieldwork the researcher should not look at, desire the informants or get aroused, and be shocked or shy over what is being said. This only works if the researcher can block his/her emotions and only reactivate it after finishing fieldwork and returning to his/her house. Is this feasible?

When the male researcher was not responding to girls' advances they mocked him, calling him *matreco*[7], especially the ones he considered as *loose girls*, but including some of the other study participants. And the reverse was that the researcher and the other participants used to joke and tease each other about girls who did not respond to their greetings or even advances. Following local sexual scripts the one who advances is free to mock when they fail, but under whose ethics should it be availed to check if this constitutes sexual harassment, under the participants ethics, that sometimes coincided with the researcher's, or under the approved ethical considerations, itself a product from a particular and different socio cultural context?

Regarding dissemination strategies, we are committed to discussing with all participants on how to utilise the data once it has been analyzed, the best way to write results of the study, as well as to explain to them that dissemination strategies should include making the study available in public spaces such as the UCT Library, making presentations at conferences and scholarly publications. Finally, we agreed to distribute copies of the studies to the participants as a knowledge sharing strategy. However, during the male researcher's last group discussion, when he presented the raw findings and the very preliminary analysis, two contentious issues emerged: should he use participants' real names or pseudonyms in his writing? And should he even distribute copies of his reports to them?

The participants were quarrelling because four, out of twelve, participants demanded that their names should be displayed in the final dissertation because:

> *people should know that we are modern people, with no problems talking about sex and related matters, since sex is something that we do regularly in our lives…(E)verything we shared with you, thorough the last month, all our up and down trips around the City, in bars, cars riding, at the beach barbecue sessions, meetings in Rua Araújo[8], avenues and other forbidden[9] spaces, it was all true, why then should I hide myself, I assume my attitudes and no one forced my participation in this study, nor to share what I share. That is why I see no problem in displaying my name.*

Another one argued:

> *I want my full name displayed in the dissertation, and whenever you present papers at conferences you should use the examples that I provided, so that people all around the world know that I do exist and I have a say regarding sex and related issues.*

Other participants, however, demanded anonymity arguing:

> *You should not forget that people used to see us together, and if their names are displayed they will find a link between us and the study. I promise you that if my wife reads the study results, as you suggest we each should hold one copy, she will catch me and I will be in trouble… divorce for sure. Since she is my wife she will easily spot me in the study.*
>
> *My husband should not even dream about the details that I provided …. And you see I have been talking about sex related things that we do and worse-things that I have done with other guys but never with him …tell me it's a joke and you will not display my name.*
>
> *When I decided to participate in the study it was because I found it really interesting, I shared things that I never did before, even with my lady friends. You know it was therapeutic, and some of the things that we discussed I had never thought about them even doing it with regularity, but it doesn't give you the right to expose my name. Think about my parents, think about how they will react when they read explicit details about my sexual life (that they have never imagined) being available worldwide and followed by my name….*
>
> *As for me, its not negotiable. I just don't want my name exposed and that is final.*
>
> *I have nothing to prove to anyone, but since I am not a sex professional and I am not advertising sexual services or favours, why would you want to expose my name?*

In a context where, according to Spiegel (2005), we should consider an ethic of care to protect participants, they were quarrelling among themselves about their right to be heard and recognised or to be protected by anonymity and it was not possible to satisfy both groups. The compromise solution was to impose the researchers' ethical order that excluded all the names. However, this was clearly prejudicial to the ethics of some participants. And by imposing his professional code on everyone the researcher was exercising his power privilege, but following his own ethics to

'protect' marriages, steady relationships and parents' sensibilities, was more important that giving a few of his research participants due recognition or even protecting his profession and himself (the only three dimensions mentioned by the ASA, AAA and UCT ethics).

Conclusion

The researchers survived both the discursive narratives on sex, after initial discomfort and 'shock' of diversity and the prospect of the dangers of deeply *becoming one of them.* They adjusted to the situation by learning about sex and related issues, at least as a spoken and shared thing with people not too close to the researchers. At the end of the experience the researchers learned about their own sexuality and not only about participants in their research projects.

This discussion highlights a large number of questions and the need to negotiate ethics from the fieldwork in Maputo City rather than strictly follow professional ethics derived from different socio cultural contexts. This is because anthropology is about expanding the comprehension of diverse ways of being human beings, rather than forcing diversity to comply with a particular way of thinking about human beings.

The two researchers were caught in a complex combination of codes of ethics from UCT, ASA and AAA, on the one hand. Though rooted in the same professional scientific academy they are nevertheless diverse in themselves. In addition, the ethics of the participants of the study and of Maputo City generally which were also heterogeneous and complex. A third dimension was the researcher's own sense of ethics which contradicted completely or partially one or both of the other codes of ethics.

Evidently in all research situations ethics are shifting and changing. One learns about diverse dimensions of sexuality in a dialectical process in which sometimes one hides participants' voices, the research context, the codes of ethics or even one's own ethics. Some other times the researcher challenges the ethics in a kind of 'writing partial truths' following Clifford (1986).

Moreover, there are times when one wishes to share moments with the study participants and make them co-authors of the research findings only to end up quarrelling about whether anonymity was more important than recognition. This scenario exposed even more ambiguity about how to manage the conflicts emerging in the presence of participants' heterogeneous ethics, researcher ethics and professional codes of ethic. And one has to still learn how to do it without overriding socio-cultural values contained in each of the different ethical perspectives.

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1. Like Manuel (2004 & 2005) and Paulo (2004)

2. Editor's Note: Mozambican-Sowetan playwright Richard Nwamba's radio play "Menstruating Men", a critique of South African xenophobia, was inspired by the reaction of South African mineworkers to some of their Mozambican counterparts who were seen in the communal ablution blocks to be urinating blood because they

were suffering from bilharzia. Apparently the South Africans mocked the Mozambicans by calling them menstruating men.

3. There is, of course, an element of the pornographic in all ethnography. That is why it is easier to capture the 'sexual life of savages' a la Malinowski and not of the average fellow citizen. Even when one refrains from reporting on sexualities, prying into people's sacred rituals and studying their lives under a microscope is not just intrusive it is also very colonial. The best anthropologists are callous people when observed form an African perspective. [Editor]

4. In a context were this kind of approaches do not raise much noise regarding ethical issues, since male homosexuality and its exposition tend to be more tolerated at theoretical level, not only, perhaps as a non discriminatory strategy.

5. Since most of participants of the study were born out of Maputo City, the same with part of the City inhabitants

6. Located in at the first floor of a three storey building in Malhangalene Barrio, in Maputo City village.

7. Meaning someone considered backward, out of his context, and who does not know how to fit in the fashion.

8. Stands for Araújo Avenues which is the former name of an Avenue at the down town were most of the Maputo City night clubs and sex workers are located.

9. Places were sex and related issues are less restricted.