

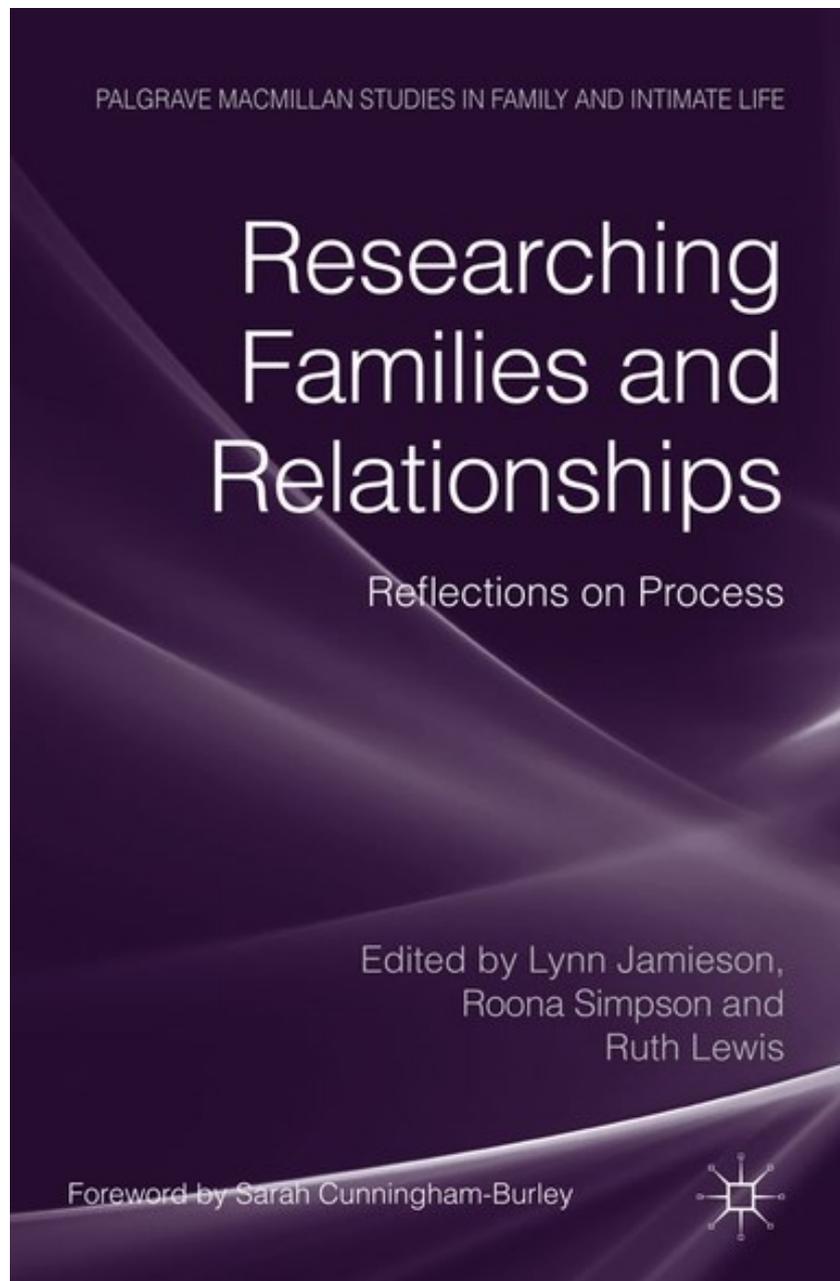
Researching men's same-sex relationships
in a socially-excluding context:
The case of Nigeria

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As a researcher, I have rarely

worked with conventional relationship structures, drawn instead by preference or circumstance to a form of near anthropological fieldwork among those often dubbed as dangerous classesⁱ: the abject, marginal, deviant—the excluded—who I see simply as those outside the status quo. There is much to learn from working with those on the margins. Studying the social periphery often allows insight into the broader social structures that label some social actors as dangerous.

One study I was involved with explored male sexuality in several large cities in Nigeria, bringing together researchers from Canada, the USA and Nigeria with local community groups and stakeholders working to promote the health and human rights of sexual minorities in Nigeria.

Initiatives that involve researchers from more than one institution are often among the most rewarding, but may be among the most challenging too. Research institutions in different parts of the world may operate within different normative structures that can both facilitate as well as constrain research. The availability of the physical tools of research, resources, materials, and infrastructures that researchers from the global north may take for granted, such as reliable internet access, an uninterrupted electrical supply and timely modes of transportation, may be less predictable in the global south. However, other constraints can include differential conceptualisations of the relationships we are studying.

This was certainly the case with the Nigerian project. It was a complex undertaking, working towards meeting with men who had sex with other men, the focus

of our research. In time the research would become the first sexual health study of men in Nigeriaⁱⁱ, but our initial visit was an exploratory mission to understand how to represent the breadth and form of men's families and relationships in a context where some could be deemed illegal by the state.

Same-sex sexual activity is both criminalised and socially stigmatised in Nigeria. For our study, this illicit element created a research context in stark opposition to the experiences some on the team were accustomed to from scholarly activities in the global north, where diverse sexual activities, including same-sex sexual activities between consenting adults, are more likely to be legal and, to varying degrees, accepted.

Through the course of this study, the multi-national, multi-institutional research team had to develop degrees of cross-cultural understanding and open mindedness in order to undertake equitable, postcolonial collaborative work. Doing so required the team to confront a number of sensitivities that could influence understandings and acceptances of certain aspects of human sexuality.

For several reasons related to the study of sexuality within this Sub Saharan context, the research team needed to contend with a variety of reactions to the research on the part of the broader community. For example, in some instances the research was understood as a general study of men's sexual risk. In other instances, the research was seen more specifically as an exploration to better understand and represent specific forms of men's families and relationships.ⁱⁱⁱ Our framing of the aims of the research and the interpretation of these aims could vary depending on who the audience was, norms present about how sexuality might be viewed culturally and the research team's perceptions of potential reactions to a study addressing the full diversity of male sexualities.

Community partners can be key to conducting research in unfamiliar contexts, and our partners in the study of men's relationships in Nigeria were vital. They ensured the research team could interpret and make sense of some of the findings arising from the formative work, much of which involved the interaction and council of community members. Through community-based partners, the research team came to understand what research questions to ask, and how such questions about participant's families, relationships, general and sexual health would be best framed and presented.

Community partners were key to this research also in facilitating access to social groupings and potential research subjects that would otherwise be challenging for outsider researchers to locate and access. On occasion, the influences of the legal context necessitated that the research veer beyond the unobtrusive towards the covert. This was not because the research itself was breaking the law. Rather, careful, almost covert research activity was at times required in order that we could meet with different stakeholders to understand how to reflect their social, affective and intimate lives within a variety of relationships and kinship groupings, and to do so without endangering safety, anonymity or the confidential nature of our work.

Across the course of the research, the team met individuals and groups of men in public venues, open-air social gatherings, private homes and community functions. When planning for or travelling to these meetings, we could experience a range of emotions and reactions—forms of apprehension and excitement associated with the unknown, alongside the fatigue and stress possible when conducting research in resource-limited settings. Yet, our belief in the importance and necessity of the work, and the empathy frequently inherent in conducting social research open to understanding the intimate needs and desires of others, was usually sufficient to ground our

research encounters, and our interpretations of these experiences.

As the research progressed, we endeavoured to collect the most relevant and pertinent information possible while at the same time striving to meet the criteria for good ethical practise as set by the communities and research institutions involved. At times there could be challenges in terms of realising the desired cultural sensitivity in a context where the experiences and realities being researched could be deemed illegal by the state, and socially excluded by society at large.

To move the research forward required the researchers to accept one another's' differing world beliefs and normative frameworks, and to apply this acceptance to the recruitment of participants, the provision and acquisition of informed consent, and to the creation of safe and trusting spaces able to empower participants to share their experiences, with us, and with each other.

In hindsight, the shared goal of improving the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities was the anchor around which we could understand and agree. For our research team, compassion, agreed upon goals, and empathy for sexual minorities struggling for freedoms to be intimate with consenting adults of their choice were among the most important, and memorable elements of this research experience.

ⁱ Morris, L. (1994) [Dangerous Classes: The Underclass and Social Citizenship](#). New York: Routledge.

ⁱⁱ Adebajo, S. B., Myers, T., Allman, D., Remis, R. S., Calzavara, L., Ogunsoola, S. and Sandstrom, p. (2009) HIV, sexually transmitted infections and men who have sex with men (MSM) in Sub-Saharan Africa –The case of Nigeria. Eighteenth Annual Canadian Conference on HIV/AIDS Research, Vancouver, April 23-26. See also [Abstract no. MOPE0411](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Allman, D., Adebajo, S., Myers, T., Odumuye, O and S. Ogunsoola (2007) [Challenges for the sexual Health and Social Acceptance of Men who have Sex with Men in Nigeria](#). Culture, Health & Sexuality, 9(2), pp. 153–168.