

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

To God Be the Glory: Discussing Sex in Evangelical Communities in Southern Nigeria

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Abstract

Many people hold stereotypes and assumptions about religious communities in regards to their feelings and beliefs about sex and the impact it has on the lived experiences of religious people. However, stereotypes and assumptions are not often grounded in reality, and many people are hesitant to address the issue head on. This qualitative ethnographically informed preliminary grounded theory study aimed to engage an Evangelical Pentecostal community in Southern Nigeria with the ultimate goal of understanding how communities conceptualize and discuss sexuality topics, the factors influencing sexual decision making amongst youth and young adults, and to identify research needs that will better inform innovative and efficacious research utilizing religious communities in sexuality research. Results showed that this population was highly interested in discussing sexuality in their community including major threats to their ideal sexual behavior path, reasons why people stray from this ideal and how to keep people on this ideal path. This research demonstrates that religious communities are interested in conducting sexuality research so long as the research takes their values and beliefs into account and respects their limitations when it comes to research intent and methods. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2015; 19[4]: 41-49).

Keywords: Sexuality, faith-based, Nigeria, community based research, qualitative.

Résumé

Beaucoup de gens détiennent des stéréotypes et des hypothèses concernant les communautés religieuses en ce qui concerne leurs sentiments et leurs croyances sur le sexe et l'impact qu'elle a sur les expériences vécues par les personnes religieuses. Cependant, les stéréotypes et les hypothèses ne sont pas souvent ancrés dans la réalité, et beaucoup de gens sont réticents à aborder la question de front. Cette étude qualitative qui est ethnographiquement informée de théorie ancrée de façon préliminaire avait pour objectif d'engager une communauté évangélique pentecôtiste dans le sud du Nigeria dans le but ultime de comprendre comment les communautés conçoivent et discutent les sujets portant sur la sexualité, les facteurs qui influent sur la prise de décision sexuelle parmi les jeunes et les jeunes adultes et d'identifier les besoins de recherche qui permettront une meilleure recherche innovante et efficace en utilisant les communautés religieuses dans la recherche sur la sexualité. Les résultats ont montré que cette population était très intéressée à la discussion de la sexualité dans leur communauté, y compris les principales menaces à leur trajectoire idéale de comportement sexuel, les raisons pour laquelle les gens s'éloignent de cet idéal et la façon de garder les gens sur ce chemin idéal. Cette recherche démontre que les communautés religieuses sont intéressées à mener des recherches sur la sexualité tant que la recherche prend leurs valeurs et croyances en compte et respecte leurs limites en ce qui concerne l'intention et les méthodes de recherche. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2015; 19[4]: 41-49).

Mots-clés: sexe, recherche évangélique, fondée sur la foi, Nigeria, recherche à base communautaire, qualitative

Introduction

Cross-cultural research is often stymied by contradicting perspectives between researchers and participants. In order to understand how to best conduct sexuality studies and design programs to positively impact sexual and reproductive health, researchers and public health professionals must first understand how certain aspects of one's sexual

repertoire, such as abstinence and fidelity, are conceptualized and accepted in social and cultural contexts. This information may be useful to a variety of sexuality-related programs, and may create more opportunities for effective engagement with communities that have often been looked at as "taboo." While the study described in this paper is specific to a particular geographical area and cultural background, its results may provide helpful

insights for other geographical locations and influence future studies that will continue to advance the understanding of these issues.

Studies documenting the determinants of sexual behaviors among Nigerians remain limited, although there has been limited quantitative research that has offered cursory insights into the factors associated with sexual decision-making. One study estimates that 16% of Nigerian women aged 15 to 24 have sex before age 15¹. Another study estimated that among women aged 15-24, 54% of girls from Northwest Nigeria were married by age 15 and 81% were married by age 18². Findings suggested that girls received little information about sexuality education, lacked the confidence to insist on condom use with their husband, and were more likely to marry husbands that were significantly older and more experienced than themselves².

Social norms dictate abstinence until marriage in Nigeria; however, it is often the case that adolescents become sexually active before marriage³. Reliable population-based statistics are non-existent and researchers must instead rely on smaller scale studies and make assumptions about the wider population. One study estimated that nine out of ten male and female non-student adolescents have initiated sexual intercourse and 40% of secondary school students in Lagos have already had sexual intercourse by the time they enrolled in the research study³. According to another study, 78% of men and 29% of women aged 15-24 have had sex with a casual partner in the past 12 months¹. Other studies have estimated that between 50% - 80% of all women living with HIV in Africa have only one sexual partner and most of these women were infected through heterosexual transmission⁴.

Partnering with the Faith Community

Contemporary research focuses primarily on religious community's treatment response to HIV/AIDS, rather than seeking to understand how religious communities conceptualize sex as part of the lived experience^{5,6}. Researchers have appeared more timid in engaging the faith community in broader concept of sexual health research often assuming that these communities will be automatically resistant to any discussions of

sexuality, particularly from researchers that come from outside their communities^{7,8}. Research that addresses religious influences on sexual behavior has primarily been focused on whether particular religions are a predictor of certain sexual behaviors or avoidance of certain behaviors^{9,10}. Religion has also been used in some research to discuss gender relations and explain why there are greater health disparities between males and females^{11,12}. However, fully engaging with the faith community to develop interventions aimed at improving sexual health, particularly in the realm of reproductive health and research must move beyond its current timid limits and become more collaborative. Many communities uphold the church as a central leader in the community and the church's opinion is often a powerful and persuasive voice that may cue community members to action. If researchers can effectively engage faith communities in community-based sexual health research, the outcomes could prove to be extremely powerful.

Study Purpose

The investigation of sexual health in Africa generally, and Nigeria specifically, has largely been built on quantitative studies that have made assumptions about the conceptualization of sexual behaviors in Nigerian and African communities, with little attention to the different social and cultural factors that may affect sexual behaviors and sexual health outcomes. This study sought to examine these assumptions and seek a clearer understanding of the manner in which a variety of factors may or may not influence one's conceptualizations of sexuality and sexual behaviors. Additionally, this research was conducted in partnership with a faith community, specifically one that identifies as Evangelical Christian, in order to ensure that study methods and findings were informed by, and reflective of, the specific effects that religious factors may have on sexuality, sexual behaviors, and sexual and reproductive health. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the social and cultural context of sexual behavior in Southern Nigeria, and specifically how culture and religion may affect public health messages and interventions

that impact sexuality.

Methods

Contemporary research on reproductive health in Africa has been primarily epidemiological, focused mainly on measuring prevalence and incidence rates of sexually transmitted infections and documenting rates of sexual or risk behaviors via cross sectional surveys^{13,14}. Less research has investigated the socio-cultural factors that influence sexual behaviors and the associated process of sexual decision-making. This study sought to overcome some of the limitations in this area of research by utilizing qualitative methods, particularly ethnographic field methods conducted within the frameworks of grounded theory and community-based participatory research.

This study was conducted in a large city in Southern Nigeria. The primary researcher has lived and worked in Southern Nigeria for the past 5 years collaborating with multiple community-based organizations on various projects. Data were collected over a four-month period in the fall of 2010 while the primary researcher was embedded within a tight-knit Evangelical Christian community. The study location was selected based on the primary researcher's previous experience and social network in this area. This community is organized around a centralized Evangelical Pentecostal church branch that includes a private university and a private hospital, in addition to the church. The researcher is not a member of the church, but was invited into the church community from the leadership for the purposes of this research. This research was approved by both the academic institution of the first author and the University Research Committee at the Nigerian university where the study was hosted locally. As this study utilized a qualitative approach, triangulation of different data sources were implemented to increase credibility and trustworthiness. Data presented in this manuscript were collected through three methods including: participant observations, key informant interviews, and document analysis. In addition to these three methods the researcher utilized field notes and a personal research journal to supplement the three methods listed above to further establish "trustworthiness" (which is the

grounded theory equivalent for overall validity), credibility (equivalent for internal validity), transferability (equivalent for external validity), and dependability (equivalent for reliability), and confirmability (equivalent for objectivity)^{15,16}.

Data Collection Methods

Participant observation was conducted over the entire four-month period^{17,18}. Participant observations interviews were conducted in various locations around the community, but primarily took place in four locations: on the university campus, the church ministry headquarters' chapel, the hospital owned by the church and the multi-family compound where the primary researcher lived. The primary researcher typically spent Monday through Friday on the university campus during business hours interacting with students, staff and visitors to the campus and taking part in all student and staff events that were offered. Much time was spent in the Student Services office where students often come for various needs and appointments with Student Services staff. The primary researcher interacted with students and staff either in the common waiting area of the Office or in the various staff offices in the department. A significant amount of time was spent in the cafeteria of the campus where both students and staff spent a considerable amount of time conversing over meals. Finally, much time was spent in the courtyard at the center of campus where there is a patio area under a mango tree where people from campus often congregate to relax and discuss current issues of interest.

In addition to the university, the primary researcher spent a considerable amount of time at the church headquarters for services and several church-related events collecting observation data. The church conducted a regular Sunday service that lasted three hours on average, Wednesday night bible study and fellowship which lasted approximately two hours, and a Friday night service that typically lasted two hours. Services included periods of praise and worship singing as well as a preached message or sermon on a chosen topic. Many Saturdays were spent at various church functions such as weddings, naming ceremonies, or special events organized by the church. In addition to regular church services, three different

conferences were hosted by the church during the four month period that the primary researcher was conducting this research; one catered to women and had approximately 10,000 participants from across Africa over the course of 5 days, one was a four day youth conference and had an estimated 5,000 youth participants from across West Africa, and one conference was organized for pastors and other church leaders that hosted several hundred participants over two days. All three of the conferences had activities that went from 6am until 9 pm with the majority of time being spent in informative lecture sessions.

The primary researcher lived on a large multi-family compound owned by the church. The compound received both short and long term visitors from various parts of the city, country and world. Much time was spent at informal events such as lunches and movie and game nights, as well as more formal events such as birthday and dinner parties. Activities on the compound gave the primary researcher the opportunity to network with individuals on a casual basis and host informal discussions on topics of interest. Finally, the primary researcher visited the church's hospital complex several times and spent time with both the HIV service provider staff as well as the HIV testing and counseling team. Notes related to participant observations were recorded either in real-time as they occurred or shortly after observations were made. Notes were taken throughout the course of the day and then reviewed every evening for completeness and accuracy. Notes were recorded either via pen and paper in a field notebook or into a note taking application via iPhone. The note taking application, MomoNote, has both a mobile based component as well as a web-based interface¹⁹. Notes taken by pen and paper were later transcribed into MomoNote so they could be organized and stored electronically. Notes were later used for data analysis using various coding methods. During the course of the observations the primary researcher made note of any references to sexuality either loosely (such as love) or specifically (such as sexual morality).

Key informant interviews were conducted with various influential leaders in the community²⁰. Like the participant observations, interviews were conducted in various locations around the

community, but primarily took place in four locations: on the university campus, the church ministry headquarters' chapel, the hospital owned by the church and the multi-family compound where the primary researcher lived. Twenty six interviews were conducted over the period of four months. Attempts were made to reach as many sectors of student and young adult life as possible in order to cover a wide breadth of perspectives. The primary researcher recruited key informants from the university administration, student services, both the campus and church religious leadership, campus life, local faith-based medical providers, and student leadership. Key informants were chosen through both convenience and snowball sampling with some informants being introduced by previous informants and others being approached directly by the primary researcher based on the participant's job title and responsibilities in conjunction with the university or church. Interviews were conducted with informants from university administration, including members of the research committee, the student services department, and religious leadership; several student chaplains and resident assistants; several church elders; several foreign-born missionaries who have lived and worked in Nigeria for several decades; and several church members who were keenly interested in discussing research study.

In order to safeguard the confidentiality of information shared and to enable key informants to discuss delicate issues, all interviews were carried out in the third person with no personal behavior questions addressed. Interview notes were taken via pen and paper in a field notebook and were later transcribed into MomoNote for organization and storage. All interviews were conducted in English. Interviews were unstructured, informal, and conversational in style and all began with a brief introduction of the primary researcher and the focus of her research followed by a grand tour question²⁰: "I would like for you to give me some of your thoughts on what current issues young adults that you know are facing in the realm of sexuality. Speak from your experiences as a [insert job title or position] and if I have clarifying questions I will jot down some notes and follow up when you feel that you have covered the issues you think are most important." Dialogue would continue until all issues had been exhausted or a maximum of two hours. If

there were still issues to be covered, a follow up interview would be scheduled so all topics could be covered. Participants were encouraged to be exhaustive in their thoughts and as the primary researcher spoke with additional participants previously mentioned topics would be inquired about in subsequent interviews.

Document analysis was conducted using primary source materials gathered from both the local area as well as from various church publications published throughout all of Nigeria. Document analysis included reviewing various print publications published by the church as well as many books and magazines published by leaders connected to the church. These leaders were either members of the chapel of the church headquarters or were members of the church from other congregations across the country. The documents reviewed for this portion of the research included two university produced manuals for students, four hospital-produced brochures related to HIV, 5 conference handouts, 5 weekly message handouts produced by the university, 6 sexual education curriculum manuals, 6 bible study handouts, and 7 published books; some were a few pages in length and others were over one hundred pages. Some publications were free through church events; others were either purchased or given complimentary by the authors of the publications. Some of the publications were general in nature, while others were specifically focused on various sexuality related topics. Publications were initially read in their entirety to gain an overview of the material, and were later reviewed using open coding and thematic analysis. Analysis was conducted by hand, and notes were later transcribed into MomoNote for organization and storage

Emerging themes

Using a grounded theory approach, various themes began to emerge from key informant interviews, observations, and document analysis. The primary researcher continued to interview participants and study events and documents for additional insight throughout the course of the study, but as themes began to surface and solidify, the researcher focused on these ideas more specifically and followed up with lines of inquiry directly paying attention to

these themes. Themes were determined using an open-coding process where the primary researcher reviewed the notes from the interviews and created initial categories. Through an iterative and on-going data analysis process subsequent interviews were open-coded and then compared to previous interviews using a selective coding process that focused on predominant issues that were raised across multiple interviews. The following result section is sub-divided by the dominant themes that emerged during the course of this research.

Results

Theme One: There is a proper way to discuss sex

Religious communities, particularly those deemed more “conservative” such as Evangelicals, are often stereotyped as either being unwilling to discuss the taboo topic of sexuality in public spaces or only focusing on the negative aspects of sexuality when it is discussed. Many people assume that since sex is highly regulated within church doctrine to be something that occurs only between a husband and wife in the privacy of their marriage, that sex is not something that would be discussed freely and openly in community settings unless it is to discuss religious doctrine related to sexual behaviors. However, this assumption turned out to be remarkably incorrect during the course of this research. The primary researcher anticipated it would take some time for the community to acclimate to her presence before open discussions of sexuality could be initiated. Much to her surprise, sexuality was discussed openly and frequently both in private one-on-one conversations as well as in church sermons, religious-related documents, and in casual conversations.

Although sexuality was a dominant subject throughout the project period, it should not be assumed that the discussions were necessarily unhindered and all-inclusive. While conversations were generally very open and frank discussions about almost any conceivable sexuality related topic, certain discussions were amongst only close friends in private conversations. Particularly in public spaces or church-related events discussions of sexuality were open to include only sexuality-

related topics that directly intersected with church-related doctrine. Discussions included the differences between moral behaviors, e.g. sexual behaviors that glorify God, and immoral behaviors, e.g. sexual behaviors that are strictly prohibited in the bible or that are “not part of God’s plan for man.” Church members were often reminded that behaviors such as masturbation, pre-marital sex, engaging in the viewing of pornography, and homosexual acts were strictly prohibited by the church and that if a member is found engaging in one of these behaviors, they should immediately stop those behaviors, repent to God and vow to not succumb to these behaviors again. These messages were present in all types of church related activities from weekly sermons to special events such as the youth conference. As an alternative to these behaviors, waiting until marriage to engage in sexual relations, encouraging marriage for all church members, and being loving and supportive partners in a marriage were all discussed frequently in all types of church related activities. Many of the documents analyzed during the course of this research focused on the differences between moral versus immoral sexual behaviors and tips on how to resist temptation and live within the guidelines set by God.

Theme Two: Developing a Closer Relationship with God

When asked why people participated in sexual behaviors that the church had deemed immoral or against God’s wishes, most often the answer given was that the person was not as close to God as they should be, because if they were, then God would strengthen their resolve to not behave in that manner. Participants felt that people who were close to God would know clearly what His plan was for humankind, including one’s self, and that their closeness with God would help them to remain strong in the face of temptation. In an effort to explore this topic further, participants were asked to define “closeness to God” in their own words. The answers that were given fell into two categories: specific actions and vague cognitive actions. Examples of specific actions included things such as daily Bible study, regular church service attendance, and daily devotional prayer. The more vague

cognitive actions included examples such as “carrying God in your heart,” “loving God above all others,” and “strengthening your faith in God so that He may help you to overcome temptations.” Overall participants felt that if someone was struggling with temptation and making or considering immoral choices, their first steps to avoid this path would be to increase their efforts to become close to God through ritual and practice, which often included the specific steps mentioned, and through these steps the vague, more cognitive efforts to become close to God could be more easily achieved. This theme was repeated often in church-related events and sermons, and in the documents that were analyzed by the primary researcher.

It was often stated that if one’s primary relationship was with God, then the temptation to behave immorally with another person could be easily be avoided because “God is the one person you would never want to let down.” If a relationship with a romantic partner began to tempt someone to act immorally, that person should re-examine their relationship with God and try and understand how their romantic relationship with another person could be interfering with their relationship with God and God’s clear desire for them to avoid immoral behavior and instead chose behaviors that glorified Him. This idea was repeated continually throughout many conversations the primary researcher had with key informants as well as in church sermons and various publications distributed across campus and the church. The continual revisiting of this discussion seemed to be a cue to action to any person present who may be struggling with the issue of temptation and immoral behavior.

Theme Three: Western influences drive immoral behavior

In addition to not being close to God, one of the other commonly cited major influencing factors for people not obeying church doctrine related to sexuality was the influence of Western values as portrayed primarily through the media. The elder Church and university participants often lamented that today’s youth seemed to be very engaged with Western media, whether it be through movies, music, or Internet technologies such as Facebook, and this engagement with Western media was

leading youth to forget both their traditional cultural values as well as their religious values. Participants frequently cited that they felt there were overwhelming messages of immoral behavior present in US distributed movies and music. This immoral behavior was not only that related to sexual immorality, but also immorality, generally speaking, such as gun violence, unearned or ill-gotten wealth, and over-the-top consumerism. Most participants felt that all of these aspects of immorality worked in synchronism to continually perpetuate all of these attitudes and behaviors and led young adults to a life of sin that included making immoral sexual choices.

The question then became “What does your community do about these negative Western influences? Attempt to isolate students from the wider world in order to protect them? Or continue to accept these influences to the detriment of the youth?” This question seemed to cause the most trepidation amongst interview participants. On the one hand they could appreciate the advances that have been made due to technological advances and closer ties with Western countries that would make it painfully impossible to fully isolate and reject Western influences, but on the other hand they lamented the rapid loss of culture and tradition that they saw present among current college students. Participants struggled to present a unified and clear idea of how to balance these two colliding ideas in a way that was beneficial to young adults and fostered the types of behaviors that they held most dear. Once again the only answer that made sense was to encourage students to become closer to God and turn their faith over to Him that he would help students to make the right decisions and lead them away from the path that lead to immoral choices.

Theme Four: Forgiveness of wrong behavior

As one of the main tenants of Christianity is forgiveness, it should not be a surprise that forgiveness of sexual immorality is a major theme that emerged during this research. After discussing why youth may engage in sexually immoral behaviors and how they could either stop or prevent these from occurring, most people wanted to discuss forgiveness of these immoral behaviors once they had occurred. Participants discussed at length the core belief of forgiveness and its importance to their

religion. No matter what the circumstances and what acts had been committed, people will always be forgiven if they repent and admit their wrongdoings. When questioned whether or not this tenet of their faith could be used as a scapegoat for people to participate in sexual immorality, for example, someone will knowingly participate in an activity they know is immoral and as soon as they have the opportunity they will ask for forgiveness but continue the cycle over and over, participants appeared to feel conflicted about that idea. They acknowledged that on the surface, someone could hold that view, but that if someone were a “true Christian” they would likely not engage in that sort of dishonesty. As discussion would evolve most participants would come to the conclusion that God knows what is in a person’s heart, and even if someone was trying to fool others by being dishonest about their intentions and deeds, they would never be able to fool God so most people would realize that they had to be sincere about asking for forgiveness and make true attempts to repent and change their ways. This idea was echoed as a major theme throughout church related activities and publications; believers can always change their ways no matter what and if they seek forgiveness the church will always be there to accept them with open arms.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how religion may influence discussions of sexuality in an Evangelical Pentecostal community and potential effects this may have on future public health interventions. Rather than working under previously established assumptions as to how this population feels about sexuality this research attempted to conceptualize these thoughts and feelings. One of the most challenging aspects of this line of research is the gap between religious beliefs and actual behavior. Most, if not all, church members could tell you what they are supposed to believe and support according to the Bible and the Church’s stance or religious doctrine. However, most people will agree that humans fall short of these expected standards. As the study results show, the answers for why this occurs are many, and often these answers are hard to operationalize in a way that is easily translatable to

a public health intervention.

Contrary to previously published research, the religious community involved in this study was more than willing to engage in discussions about sexuality. Throughout the course of this study sexuality was a common topic addressed at the university, in the church, and in related events and activities. The research did not need to be conducted in secret, nor was it difficult to engage participants or make observations. This research should not however be construed as an unlimited discussion with no boundaries. There were certain topics that were frowned upon and would not come up in general conversation; these topics formed the boundaries of acceptable sexual behavior as approved by church doctrine. Any discussions that fell outside of these boundaries occurred only to discuss why these behaviors were immoral and unacceptable. These findings support that faith partners can play a key role in public health interventions, particularly ones that relate to reproductive health and HIV prevention. The biggest potential challenge would be negotiating the desired public health messages with the acceptable guidelines for discussing sexuality established by the church.

This study identified two major threats that participants and the other data sources identified as obstacles to students and young adults maintaining healthy sexual outcomes: not being close to God and giving in to negative Western influences. Participants believe that the shared common goal of sexual morality as defined by church was clearly defined and if not for these two threats could be achieved with little difficulty. While these threats were primarily loosely defined constructs, results from this study showed that there were many efforts to conceptualize these constructs in tangible terms that could be identified and then acted upon in order to affect change. Future sexual health interventions must take these threats into account and include methods for reducing their influence through strategies that are acceptable by both the church and by students and young adults.

Finally, one of the most important results to come out of this study is the emphasis on forgiveness. Throughout the research this theme was continually repeated. No matter what ideals are held up by the community and how many threats may be

present to deter someone from reaching those ideals, regardless of the choice someone makes they know that they can “erase” that mistake in the eyes of God and the church, even if the sexual health outcomes cannot be erased. This theme shows that the church community is prepared to assist its members for the long haul and though a path to sexual morality may be long and filled with pitfalls along the way, the church community will not give up on one of its members no matter how many times they stumble. This is an important concept for those in the public health and intervention workforce to understand. It demonstrates the deep commitment of a potential future partner, and can also point out the limits of operationalizing and enforcing deterrents for behavior that may lead to negative health outcomes. Besides the direct consequences of health conditions, discussion of social or religious consequences may be weak and therefore rejected.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of this research, the primary researcher was left with looming questions that seemed challenging to answer and many paradoxical in nature. However, not all questions can be answered simply, and are far beyond the scope of this initial research. This first step in a longer research trajectory seeks to answer some questions related to working with religious communities on sexual health interventions. Future collaborative research with faith communities must seek to answer the difficult questions that they may be afraid of answering or may be difficult and complicated to unearth.

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