Accessing sexual minorities in Uganda-an exploration of methodological challenges and ethical considerations

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Ugandan historical and current state of state-sanctioned homophobia

• Uganda’s criminalization of its sexual minorities dates back to colonial days.

• 2009 Uganda attempted to introduce one of the world’s harshest anti-homosexuality legislations.

• International criticism managed to stall the Bill, but not stop it from being passed in 2013. 2018 – MP proposing a re-launch after a IPU position.

• Does the anti-homosexuality Bill mark the beginning of a new era of persecution of sexual minorities (Russia, Chechnya, Indonesia …)?
Not only state persecution-Media homophobia

Mainstream media’s engage with sexual minorities ranges from denial and silence to active persecution and outings.
Ugandan historical and current state of state-sanctioned homophobia

- Public opinions on homosexuality are consistently and almost universally negative since 2002, with 96% of the population reporting that homosexuality should not be accepted by society (PEW 2014).
- Strong policing of heteronormative ideals
- Hate crime common and increased at the time of the 2009 Bill.
Multiple vulnerabilities: economic, social and physical

Recent study (Sexual Minority Uganda, 2016) documents 264 verified cases of discrimination in healthcare, housing, economic activities, and community settings, as well as police arrest, blackmail, family banishment, and 48 acts of violence between May 2014 and Dec. 2015.
What is a vulnerable group?

- A vulnerable group, is perceived and assigned “reduced social and economic capital” in a particular society, which impede their freedom and capacity to act independently (von Benzon & van Blerk, 2017).

- Vulnerability is not only material (such as poverty), but also *relational* (in relation to the local legislations, religious and political elites, urban vs rural).

- A relational approach highlights that vulnerability is context-dependent thus varies across context and within contexts.
Seeking and exploring the narratives of vulnerable/voiceless populations

• General trend using research, and in particular participatory research, as a tool for social justice-giving the voiceless a voice.

• Vulnerability is socially-constructed and dependent on the way in which power relations manifest between marginalized groups and dominant groups in a given context.

• Change is possible—distinct changes in attitudes and recognition of sexual minority rights since Stonewall riots
Vulnerability studies and their ensuing vulnerabilities

- **Institutional vulnerability** (local or Int. university or academic networks, host organization/s/, funding and non-funding inst.). Universities and funding organizations act to minimize risk to both the vulnerable population, and themselves and their reputation. Fear of potential litigation is a deterrent to engage with vulnerable populations (Haggerty 2004).

- **Researcher vulnerability**: the risk of harm (in its broadest sense) from participants. Emotional stress often forgotten (Anderson & Smith 2001).
The golden standard within qualitative participatory research design

- Inclusion of participants in planning and all stages of conducting participatory research (recruiting participants, selecting research methods, analysis and dissemination and use of final results).
- Participants as decision-makers.
- Participants as researchers themselves.
- Genuine willingness to do research “alongside with”, rather than “on” a particular group.
- Aldridge (2014) argue for transforming research from a ‘top-down’ researcher-led encounter to a ‘bottom-up’ participant-led encounter.
Methodological challenges – experiences from Uganda

• The entrenched perception of inherent vulnerability distorts the relationship between researcher, making participatory research tricky waters to navigate (even with Golden standards in mind).

• The high level of poverty (material vulnerability), makes information and time spent with the researcher a potential commodity to be sold for a meal, other types of remuneration.
Methodological challenges – experiences from Uganda

• When access is dependent on institutional gatekeepers at local organizations (due to research fatigue and wish to stay in control), makes ensuring privacy in interview situations challenging.

• Risk of silencing oppositional voices who lack the independence to engage without ‘permission’ from gatekeepers.

• Informed consent important, but tricky as research process evolves, conflicting perspectives, gatekeepers vs single participants.

• By highlighting vulnerability, the research may entrench a social label with sense of disempowerment as a result.
Methodological challenges – experiences from Uganda

- The researcher as a potential escape to Europe
- Blackmail
- Surveillance
Methodological challenges – experiences from Uganda

- Local research institutions may also consider themselves “vulnerable” (due to the illegality, societal stigma and institutional homophobia) and act to minimize risk to themselves (decline cooperation, reject conference submission).

→ perceived potential institutional vulnerability, despite significant agency, will result in action to mitigate risk. (also Haggerty, 2004).

→ Recently one our paper was rejected at a local conference in Kampala (and Zambia) due to the sensitivity of the topic.
Some lessons learned from the field

• Despite participatory research design - Ugandan LGBTQIs vulnerability as a group impede individuals’ capacity to act independently and participate in research projects.

• Important to stay clear of paternalism (despite research participants obvious socio-economic and relational vulnerability).

• Practice empathetic engagement within the role of a researcher, but dont intervene/meddle.

• Epistemological benefits of openness around both participants and researcher vulnerability - diminish relational vulnerability.
Some lessons learned from the field

- Special attentions to ensure privacy for individuals when working thorough a local host org..
- Field diaries to document and process the raw and unedited emotional experience of research.
- Seek the input of participants concerning the broader duty of researchers to raise awareness. Engage participants on how use research outcomes and expose mechanism behind vulnerability by dissemination outside academia. Lancione, M. (2017), argue that research of this kind come with special responsibilities. For ex. Publishing outside academic outlets and support activism.
Questions and comments?

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