CHAPTER FOUR

Homosexual and bisexual labels: The need for clear conceptualisations, operationalisations and appropriate methodological designs

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The title of this chapter is somewhat ambitious. Fully addressing the various issues mentioned would require a much longer chapter. Fortunately, what we want to discuss is not new. Several people have written intelligibly about this topic (see Asthana & Oostvogels 2001; Boyce 2007; Caceres & Rosasco 1999; Muñoz-Laboy 2004; Parker & Caceres 1999).

Our aim is to critically assess the labels that we use to identify men who engage in sexual behaviour with other men, and to challenge the underlying assumptions. We will conclude with recommendations for future research.

'Gay' and 'bisexual' labels in cross-cultural contexts

The idea for this chapter came up while reading a study about what was called 'men who have sex with men' (MSM) (Allman et al. 2007). The study was carried out in Nigeria. In the description of the sample, the authors mentioned that a third of respondents identified themselves as 'gay' and two-thirds of respondents identified themselves as 'bisexual'.

It is not our intention to criticise this particular study, because almost all studies about the so-called MSM population report these kinds of percentages. Besides, the study is very informative. But these percentages make one wonder: how did these answers come about? And what do they actually mean?

Let us first explain that the data were collected in focus groups, and the focus group discussions were conducted in English. Even though English is the official language in the country where the study was done, many other languages are commonly spoken, including Yoruba and Igbo. The researchers explained that while the focus groups were conducted in English, informal translation between English and these two indigenous languages constantly occurred between group members while the focus group discussions were in progress.

We might assume that the researchers used the words 'gay' and 'bisexual' when they asked the participating men about their sexual identity. Did they actually use the term 'sexual identity' as well? We do not know this.

But what about the participants? It is very likely that several if not most knew the words 'gay' and 'bisexual'. But what about 'sexual identity'? Participants might have known these words, but how likely is it that these words had identical meaning for the researchers and the participants? What happened with the translation of these words into Yoruba and Igbo? Assuming that the words 'gay', 'bisexual' and 'sexual identity' do not exist in these languages, what kind of local concepts were used to replace these words, what is left from the meaning that we usually attach to these words, and what got lost in translating the local terms back into English? We do not have answers to these questions, but our conviction is that the correspondence is limited.

Let us illustrate this with an example from a study by the South African anthropologist Graeme Reid (2006). He observed a series of workshops organised in Ermelo, a town in the north of South Africa. The workshops were organised by and aimed at 'homosexual men and lesbians' (words used by the researcher himself).

The word 'gay' was indeed used by the participants at the workshops; however, it did not have the same meaning as it has in industrialised societies. Reid writes, 'being gay in these environs is almost invariably synonymous with being effeminate or, in local parlance, a "lady" or *sis-Buti*' (Reid 2006: 139). Cross-dressing is a substantial part of what is being defined as gay in this community. Cross-dressing actually seems to promote acceptance of these men's homosexuality. While we assume 'gay' men to have sex with each other, this is definitively not the case in Ermelo: here gay men do not have sex with each other. The idea itself seemed hilarious to the participants: to them, two 'ladies' having sex with each other is akin to lesbianism.

So whom do these gay men in Ermelo have sex with? They have sex with so-called '*Injongas*' and 'gents'. An *Injonga* is a man who is 'attracted to and involved with other men, but who maintains a male social and sexual role in a same-sex relationship' (Reid 2006: 139). 'Gents' are straight men who are, as the local people call it, 'somewhat bended'. These men are straight, but are known or suspected to be available as sexual partners for homosexual men. These straight men's defence for what, from a Western perspective, is homosexual involvement, is that they do not have sex with men but with ladies.

The situation becomes even more complex when we also look at gender. While Western gay men (homosexual men who identify as gay) have few, if any, doubts about the maleness of their sex, gay men in Ermelo see themselves as belonging to a third gender category, separate from men and women. One of Reid's informants said: 'In my family it is my mother and we are six [children]. I would say that at home there were three boys and two girls. Then it is me, who is gay' (Reid 2006: 140).

The experiences of these South African MSM are likely to be completely unrelated to the experiences of the MSM in the Nigerian focus groups. This is sufficient reason to doubt that we understand what it means when researchers report about the gay and bisexual identities of the study's participants. These reservations go beyond the words 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'sexual identity'. They also apply to concepts such as 'sexual attraction' and to the meanings men attribute to sexual activities.

The diffuse meanings of homosexual and bisexual identities in an African context might seem obvious. But we started to wonder: do we not have the same problems when we are dealing with Western countries?

Concepts of 'gay' and 'bisexual' also limited in the West

Quite early in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, research (re)discovered that not only men who identify as gay had sex with men. This became clear when we stopped asking about orientation and identities, and focused on behaviour. One of the first major studies to do so was outlined in the paper *Homosexually and nonhomosexually identified men who have sex with men: A behavioral comparison* (Doll et al. 1992). This discovery sparked an interest in bisexuality, both as behaviour and cultural practice, resulting in new research and critical publications (see Aggleton 1996; Tielman et al. 1991). This interest was driven by the idea that bisexually behaving men might form a bridge from the gay population to what was called the general population.

Research into bisexuality made it clear that in industrialised countries too, the meanings of labels such as 'gay' and 'bisexual' are not uncomplicated. We would like to illustrate this with a study we recently completed at the HIV Center (Dodge et al. 2008; Sandfort et al. 2007). The goal of the study was to understand the HIV risk behaviour of black men in New York who have sex with men and with women. All 30 men who were interviewed had had sexual interactions with both men and women in the year preceding the interviews. We also discussed with the men how they perceived and labelled their own sexuality. And their accounts are revealing.

While most of these men, in line with their actual behaviour, saw themselves as bisexual, two men said they see themselves as exclusively gay. Many men used more than one label, including 'straight'. A third of the men were very explicit about their preference not to use any labels. When probed, these men came up with several somewhat elusive labels, such as 'freak', 'bi-curious', 'free', 'open' and 'just me'.

We discussed with the men why they used specific labels. Their reasoning was rather varied. Some men said the label reflected their behaviour. For others, the label reflected their feelings, sometimes regardless of the fact that their relationship status did not match their feelings. But there were other reasons as well. Some men said they preferred the label 'bisexual' because it was less stigmatising than 'gay'. For some men the label 'bisexual' also had a strategic meaning; these men said that it

helped them to accept homosexual feelings and practices and that 'bisexual' instead of 'gay' made it easier to sell homosexual behaviour to others. The men who did not want to use labels used arguments such as: 'Labels are limiting', 'I don't want to be categorised', and 'people are more than their sexuality'.

We would like to highlight something a 25-year-old man said:

> Gerald: Are you gay, are you straight? You know. I would say it depends on who you're with.
>
> Interviewer: Depends on who you're with. Do you ever use 'bisexual', 'straight', 'gay'?
>
> Gerald: I've used bisexual. And I've used straight. And I've used gay… Because it's like, you know, if you have sex with a girl, then you're straight. And if you have sex with a guy, then you're gay.

This quote destabilises our notion of sexual orientation. This man does not seem to have a stable orientation. The label that he uses depends on whether he is sexually involved with a man or a woman. These findings suggest to us that notions of bisexual and gay sexual identities are also not as self-evident in the Western industrialised world.

While thinking about these issues, we also started to wonder about social-scientific research that was done in the Western world under the label 'gay and lesbian studies' before AIDS started to dominate the research agenda.

Pre-AIDS research presented a limited perspective on homosexuality

Looking back, it seemed that there was a moment in history when self-identification as gay or straight meant a lot and it was pretty obvious what it meant: men were either gay or straight and men knew exactly which category they belonged to.

Researchers were aware that there were MSM who did not label themselves as gay or homosexual. These men were thought to constitute a minority however, and there were even labels to describe their behaviour: 'situational homosexuality' and 'pseudo homosexuality'.

To be really homosexual, a man had to feel attracted to men and this sexual attraction was supposed to be an integral part of his self-identification. 'True' homosexuals had a fixed sexual identity, clearly specified as the final outcome of the models about homosexual identity formation. Research used to have a very essentialist understanding of sexuality. One way to understand the dominance of this perspective is the political role that a lot of research used to play: gay and lesbian studies were an important ingredient of identity politics.

So for our research we recruited men using the concept of 'gay' or 'homosexual'. Of course, most of these studies used convenience instead of probability samples.

We wonder now, though, who was being left out by the recruitment procedures we used and how that has affected our understanding of male same-sex sexuality. The inclusion of sexual behaviour data and measures of sexual attraction in large scale probability samples made clear that our perspective was biased (Sandfort 1997, 2007). One such comparison made clear that a convenience sample usually captures men:

- with higher levels of education;
- who tend to live in urban areas;
- who are more likely to be in an intimate relationship;
- who are less likely to be, or to have been, legally married to a woman; and
- who are less likely to have children.

The health status of gay men in the convenience sample was on average better than that of homosexual men in the probability sample (Sandfort & Bos 1998).

This example shows that there is tension between the researcher's terminology, especially as used for the recruitment of participants, and the population he or she is interested in.

The concept of MSM is only partially helpful

To circumvent the problems of sexual identity, researchers started using the concept of 'men who have sex with men'. This concept became popular at the end of the 1980s. It was intended to describe men who engage in same-sex sexual practices. Nothing more and nothing less. The homosexual behaviour of these men could be exclusive or they could be involved in sexual interactions with women as well. The homosexual behaviour of these men could be permanent, temporary and situational. It could be practised in the context of a gay identity, any other identity, or without a clearly defined identity.

The concept of MSM has been criticised (see Dowsett et al. 2004). In their critiques, the concept was attributed more meaning than it was intended to have. However, the concept has started to live a life of its own. The funny thing is that, although the concept was invented by researchers, men involved in same-sex sexuality started to use MSM as a label for themselves. For some men, MSM became a category that they identified with. This even happened in countries where English is not the official language and the acronym MSM is meaningless. It should be clear, though, that whenever researchers use the label MSM, we do not know anything yet about the men involved: how they see themselves; what their homosexual practices mean to them, or to the men they are sexually involved with; and how their practices are seen in the culture in which they live.

This leaves us with two major conclusions: (1) When we ask men about their sexual self-identification, we do not know what their answers mean unless we also assess what the answers mean to the men themselves; and (2) Circumventing the issue of

self-identification by adopting the label 'men who have sex with men' is meaningless if we do not also assess what the behaviour means to these men.

Recommendations

Instead of using existing sexual identity categories or adopting the all-encompassing MSM label, researchers of same-sex sexuality may consider the following set of recommendations:

- Researchers should pay explicit attention to how their recruitment methods include some MSM and exclude others, and try to develop strategies that fully capture the population of interest.
- Researchers should be clear about the labels that they use: are these labels 'scientific' labels, imposed on the research participants' accounts, or are these labels used by the participants themselves?
- Whatever labels participants use for their sexual behaviour, attraction or orientation, the meaning of that label should not be taken for granted. Even if researchers and participants use the same label, it does not automatically follow that the meaning that researchers and participants attach to these labels is identical.
- In order to effectively reach and involve men who engage in sexual behaviour with other men, it is essential to understand the meaning of that particular behaviour for these men: how do they understand that behaviour as part of who they are? How do they see their sexual practices and themselves as sexual actors in the context of their social environment? And how do other people see them?

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