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Invisible Desires in Ghana and Kenya: Same-Sex Erotic Experiences in Cross-Sex Oriented Lives

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Abstract

This article explores the tension between same-sex sexual practices and eroticism, on the one hand, and theoretical investigations on sexual diversity, on the other. The author's analysis is based on research in Ghana and Kenya over the last two decades. A significant proportion of the people she met have (had) experience with same-sex sexual practices at some point in their life. Their choice to start and continue with it and in what form differed considerably per person and over their life course. These diverse possibilities throw an interesting light on the question of sexual diversity, which tends to be locked in a Western paradigm based on binary oppositions of female vs male, homosexual vs heterosexual and non-Western vs Western. While this paradigm has been criticized, theory on sexual diversity nevertheless inclines towards focusing on difference from the norm as its standpoint and therefore always implies non-heterosexuality. The author argues that African contemporary realities suggest innovative analytical directions of global heuristic value. Rather than focusing on self-realization based on notions of individualization, she explores the notion of well-being as put forward by Michael Jackson in *Life within Limits: Well-Being in a World of Want* (2011). She explores how realizing gendered and sexual well-being is a constant struggle rather than a linear path, and how diversity comes into being as erotic practices that are generated through phases in life course.

Keywords

Gendered and sexual well-being, heteronormativity, homosociality, same-sex erotic practices, sexual diversity

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Introduction

This article looks at the tensions between same-sex sexual practices and eroticism on the one hand and theoretical investigations into sexual diversity on the other. It explores the diverse range of same-sex experiences and eroticism that I came across in my research in Ghana and Kenya over the past two decades.¹ A significant minority of the people in my studies had engaged in same-sex encounters at some point in their life. Choices about the form that such practices took differed considerably from person to person, as did decisions about whether to continue with such encounters over time. In Ghana and Kenya, the hegemonic framework structuring sexuality is not based *per se* on the notion that sexual desire is part of one's social identity (as in 'I am homo- or heterosexual'); rather the importance of parenthood is more formative to notions of personhood. This provides space to engage in same-sex eroticism without necessarily having to self-search whether the meaning of erotic practice indicates a particular identity. As I will describe below, same-sex erotic encounters are tacitly (known to be) occurring. In the light of representations of Africa as a homophobic continent (see Awondo et al., 2012), the diversity of forms that such sexual practices take is notable. This article attempts to understand the range of same-sex erotic experiences that exists and to rethink, if not queer, the notion of sexual diversity.

The debate about sexual diversity has various angles. Disputing the global heuristic value of the discourse of sexuality, scholars have tended to show how sexuality is organized differently in the global South (Boellstorff, 2007). Yet, arguing for (cultural) difference does not necessarily critically engage with the hegemonic perspectives of how sexual diversity is talked about in academia and in activism (see Clarke, 2013). When focusing on the African continent, it appears that there are relatively few in-depth studies on same-sex erotic intimacy that research such experiences and practices as a subject in its own right, as opposed to a component of sexual health and rights (see Tamale, 2011). Consequently, knowledge, representation, and discourses about sexual diversity have been pioneered by scholars working on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) studies, activists of LGBTQI social movements and organizations, and development agencies (see also Williams, 2012). In this body of work, the notion of sexual diversity became related to the idea of sexual subjectivities, specifically subjectivities that are suppressed or otherwise inhibited. As scholars working on Africa have shown (see Dankwa, 2009; Epprecht, 2008; Gaudio, 2009; Gunkel, 2010; Tamale, 2011), much same-sex eroticism happens non-verbally and is therefore not readily observable. Moreover, these erotic practices are not necessarily discursively policed by a sex/gender structure which, despite its profoundly Western cultural roots, is sometimes assumed to be universal.

The lived experiences documented in this article show a more complex organization of space to manoeuvre, (self)discipline and breach normative patterns. The invisibility of particularly female same-sex sexualities has been described and analysed as both a limitation as well as providing possibilities for manoeuvring norms (Dankwa, 2009; Gunkel, 2010). Inspired by such work, I would like to shift the

focus to another area of invisibility: same-sex erotic practices that are part of a cross-sex sexually-oriented life.² Thus, rather than showing how erotic practices are differently organized in Ghana and Kenya, I argue that African realities provide analytical directions that are of global heuristic value for theorizing sexuality. I do not want to contrast it with a Euro-American system, as previous work on cultural difference may have (unintentionally) done, and consider the latter as one of many possibilities.

Second, I am interested in exploring whether the debate on sexuality and its diversity can move beyond the assumption that social pressure is the primary driving force determining how people fashion their erotic desires and practices. I would like to explore the notion of well-being as an analytical vantage point to tease out how people fashion the relation between their bodies, gender and erotic desires and how this relates to their social identities. Rather than focusing on an idea of self-realization based on notions of individualization, I consider gendered and sexual self-realization through the notion of well-being as put forward by Jackson (2011). Jackson emphasizes the intersubjective negotiations at the heart of all relationships and argues that being-in-the-world consists of endless dilemmas and constant oscillations in consciousness that admit only temporary, imagined, narrative or ritualized resolutions (i.e. 'culture'). Sexual desire and erotic practices are therefore a part of daily concerns and enjoyment and thus need to be studied within this wider range of experiences. Furthermore, focusing on gendered and sexual well-being will show that problems and pleasures are intimately linked in people's sexual lives, and are not mutually exclusive (Spronk, 2011). While I would like to push the debate on sexual diversity to look beyond the question of identity politics and sexual rights debates, I certainly do not want to deny the horrible violence directed at non-conforming persons in different countries that human rights questions focus on.

Based on my extensive ethnographic fieldwork, I will explore how the realization of gendered and sexual well-being is a constant struggle that can take different possible directions and is not accurately represented as a linear path. I will show how, through daily pleasures and problems, people have varied interpretations of their life-worlds which cannot be captured by singular approaches to sexuality. Sexuality is, after all, relational: an empirical focus on the unexpected twists and turns in the practice of erotics facilitates a focus on gendered and sexual well-being that emphasizes its situationality and context-dependence. Here we need critical empiricism (Boellstorff, 2007).

Beyond binaries

In theorizing sexuality, the question of whether sexual desire is central to social identity and, hence, whether it needs to be visibly demonstrated as the core of one's being, remains central (Moore, 2012; Ward, 2015; Wekker, 2006). The tenacity of this debate proves that it remains difficult to undo the underlying dominant grid of thinking about sexuality.

Investigations of sexual diversity tend to reproduce a Euro-American paradigm of binary oppositions: female vs male (genders, bodies, identities), homosexual vs heterosexual, global non-Western vs global Western. This binary tendency is the result of the Euro-American transformation of cultural forms of sexuality, and it relates to both the history of the modern public sphere and its modern discourse on sexuality. One of the latest reconfigurations is the inclusion of citizenship rights for sexual minorities. What we have learned from Foucault is that sexualities have genealogies (Foucault, 1990[1976]). What we have also learned from Foucault is that in the global West sexuality has come to be understood as the basis of one's social identity, or inner truth. In contrast, in many other parts of the world sexuality is considered to be what one *does* rather than what one *is* (see Wekker, 2006), while at the same time a younger generation increasingly identifies with global LGBTQI rights discourse (on Africa, see Ekine and Abbas, 2013). Ironically, in critiquing heterosexuality through identity politics, heterosexuality has remained out of the research focus of sexuality scholars, and has been able to maintain its naturalized status. The Euro-American emphasis on the mutually exclusive structuring mechanism of sexuality, as being either homosexual or heterosexual, has prevented investigation of the blurry line between the two (Ward, 2015), and of the binary structure's disciplining power on opposite-sex lived experiences. Moreover, the dominant paradigm epitomizes the idea of the human subject as individualized. But, as aptly phrased in the editorial to this special issue, 'models anchored in singular frameworks based on identity politics and individualized selfhood' provide a limited framework for understanding experiential realities.

The global movement for LGBTQI rights has been effective in bringing attention to non-normative sexualities. The current dominant role of the global rights discourse has been important in bringing matters of sexuality onto the agenda, but it also raises questions about the way the neoliberal idea of the individual as a citizen has become the basis in debates about sexuality (Nguyen, 2010). The challenge of a rights-based approach to sexuality is that sexuality tend to remain limited by virtue of its antagonism and/or subordination to normative structures. Also, the research focus in many reports and articles on Ghana and Kenya tends to be narrowed down to studying persons who speak English and are able to present themselves in line with the global discourse, and it places the focus on verbalized and explicit difference in order to uncover non-normative relations and inequalities. Particular variations in sexuality will therefore not be recognized given that in Ghana and Kenya certain forms of sexual diversity exist by grace of cultural forms of indirectness and discretion (Dankwa, 2009), and by virtue of an understanding of erotic behaviour as practices rather than a component of social identity (Onyango-Ouma et al., 2005). My exploration investigates the reality of a continuum of sexual and emotional intimacies that people enter into, which are without labels or clear markers. Specifically, I will not focus on same-sex communities in Kenya and Ghana, nor on people who have been conceptualized and sometimes self-identify as men-having-sex-with-men (MSM), or who are part of the emerging self-identifying gay or queer scenes.

Lives, identities and selves are relational and come about in practice, and studying intersubjective sexual encounters will uncover these. According to Jackson (1998, 2011), we must pay more attention to the fundamentally unstable and ambiguous nature of our relationships with others and with the world. Jackson has shown the importance of intersubjectivity as the standpoint for understanding people and their motivations, behaviours and emotions as embedded in mundane daily realities of problems and pleasures. What emerges in the course of any relationship is not reducible to templates of cultural, social and political discourse or ideology. In short, in contrast to current popular (and sometimes scholarly) ideas of authenticity or 'being oneself' as the basis for fulfilment, he emphasizes that people realize themselves in relation to others, and that fulfilment comes from 'being more than merely oneself, but of being part of a greater whole' (Jackson, 2011: 161). Gender and sexuality take shape and acquire meaning in intersubjective encounters that may escape existing analytical and popular categories.

Sexuality scholars working in African societies have emphasized the importance of discretion (Dankwa, 2009) and of 'unnaming' (Gunkel, 2010) in describing relationships that are known within society, although the actual meetings between two persons (in casual encounters or in a relationship) are kept veiled. Such 'open secrets' should not be taken as evidence of internalized homophobia, lack of agency, or being silenced and in the closet (see Engebretsen, 2009). Engebretsen's assertion that 'what is tacit is neither secret nor silent' (p. 3) is a powerful challenge to rethink and take seriously non-normative sexualities from a global cross-cultural perspective. Whereas she coins the term 'marital terrain' to describe an intensely politicized heteronormative site for claiming rights and societal inclusion that assigns status, inclusion, and equality based on legitimate relationships (in China), I would like to look into ways in which people understand marriage and reproduction as fundamental to their gendered self, while, at the same time, engaging in same-sex relationships does not contradict this. There are many people in Ghana and Kenya for whom the simultaneous experience of their family's and society's marital expectations is extremely problematic and which, therefore, is a constraining and derided heteronormative duty. But there is also a group for whom this pressure is less onerous, and where ambiguity is a common feature in expressions of non-normative sexuality and relative compliance with socio-familial normativity.

Below, I explore the intermediate space between homosociality, erotic practices and gendered and sexual well-being. I consider sex as it commences through the body in sensations, lacerations and articulations beyond the spoken word and its lexical and discursive constraints (Spronk, 2014a), and in doing so I use a phenomenological approach to show how becoming sexual is a diversified and uneven process.

Situating the studies and approach

The empirical material in this article stems from three studies. In 1997–1998, I studied how secondary school students in single-sex boarding schools in

Nairobi, Kenya, grew up sexually in the context of a rising epidemic and its moral, social and physical implications. The second study also took place in Nairobi, in 2001–2002, focusing on the love and sexual lives of young urban professionals, some of whom I had met at one of the secondary schools of the previous project. Subsequently, I continued to follow this cohort and met with them again in 2015. The third took place in Ghana in 2011–2012 and focused on roughly three generations aged, respectively, between 20 and 40, between 40 and 60, and 60 and above. Here I was interested in shifting patterns of gender and sexuality, investigating people's family histories and the personal stories embedded therein. In all three studies there was an equal focus on women and men.

The narratives arising from these studies cannot be read as examples of what sometimes appears in the literature as 'African sexuality' (see Tamale, 2011). Instead, they convey information based on case studies to further theorize sexuality from a transcultural perspective (Spronk, 2014b). It is beyond the scope of this article to deal with historical and geographical particularities in the two countries. In fact, the comparative element of my research reveals how different colonial experiences, political reconfigurations and economic changes have impacted in diverse ways on people's lives. Moreover, my work focuses on what can be labelled the middle classes and is thus not representative of the populations of either country. The people featuring in my work have at least college education but many times university education and are generally social climbers.

To understand my interlocutors' practices, ideas and experiences, I designed a research methodology that used progressively more personal ways of interviewing, which included my sharing daily activities with them. I usually started with a chronology of their life story focusing on family background, reflections on childhood, puberty and adulthood, career and lifestyle, religion. When I felt there was enough rapport, the interviews shifted to sexuality matters. These personal meetings were supplemented by participant observation at their homes, with their families, in their social lives with friends, on social occasions like weddings and funerals, and so on. In this second phase of the research, participant observation became the leading method and it is during this second phase that I came across unspoken practices.

The experiences described below are grouped into chronological order of the life course, which is the effect of the way I grouped the three studies together. Yet, in my research with older people, the same chronology tends to appear, which is also the effect of the life story method that focuses on shifts and continuities over the life course. In the first part of the section below that focuses on adolescence, same-sex sexual practices were mentioned as part of school life. In the second part, which looks at campus life, it becomes clear how sexual practices diversified due to changing contexts and social expectations, and challenges. The final part shows how the process of becoming adult implied a continuation of same-sex sexual encounters for some.

(Boarding) school life

In the 1990s, lesbianism in school figured substantially in the mass media in Kenya (this was in the wake of the early 1990s liberalization of the media when this so-called 'vice' was widely discussed). Typically, the girls in the boarding school where the research took place would ask me what the word 'lesbian' meant, or what I thought about lesbianism. Sometimes they would share their experiences of same-sex intimacy/closeness and usually they did not link the two at all. Friendship was considered crucial as it helped them to adapt to the strict school regulations, to feel more at home and to alleviate loneliness. It was common for a senior girl to adopt a more junior one to help her navigate her way through the school. These relationships were often mentioned as being 'special'; that is, intimate in the sense that the two girls would share chores and much time together. Sometimes these relationships were hierarchical, with the older girl dominating and expecting the younger one to work for her in return for protection from other senior girls. When we discussed sexuality in relation to HIV/AIDS, the topic on sexuality dominating the media in the 1990s, the girls never mentioned these relationships between older and younger girls; however, they did mention them when talking about friendship or feeling lonely, when discussing conflicts and insecurities, and when answering my questions about dormitory life.

Leisure time was an important theme in our discussions; physically and emotionally hanging out together was an important form of relaxation. Girls were generally physically affectionate in their social encounters: when walking to the classrooms, during breaks, and when grooming each other's hair or clothes. The dormitories were the only places where the school authorities were not perpetually present, so reading, talking and gossiping on the beds was common practice. For good friends, sleeping in the same bed was considered logical, and the majority of the girls did so, perhaps not every night, but regularly, with some always sleeping together. Discussing intimate matters, such as menstruation or growing breasts, and showering together, 'soaping' each other, were all part of daily life. Following this, girls started fondling one another, discovering each other's and their own bodies.

I had to piece together from what they considered to be 'sleeping', or 'showering', or 'fussing over each other', what the erotic practices were that they enjoyed. These consisted of engaging with each other's bodies – feeling, sensing, discovering – which developed into fingering, kissing and having orgasms. Some girls engaged in longer-term physical relationships, while others would only occasionally engage in these erotic encounters. A few girls distanced themselves completely and refused to participate with me in discussions verging on the topic of sleeping together or showering. A few told me they were 'in love' with their best friend and wrote each other love letters, gave presents and spent much time together. In 2001, I again met one of the girls and in recalling the time I had spent with them at school we also discussed the grooming and fondling.

According to Bernice (22 years in 2001):

Of course it was sex, we never called it that way because... well, I guess we didn't realize it was actually sex... I mean, you know how close girls' friendships can be, very tight, so it was part of being good friends, trusting each other. And it has been very important for me, I learnt a lot... about my own body, how to appreciate it... it's good not to be taken by surprise when you start having sex with men. So... yes, I keep fond memories of X [school name].

Bernice's reflection shows how sexual practices were part of broader processes of adolescence and are understood within a broader framework of comfort and happiness; in other words, well-being.

In the public debates in the 1990s, there was no such thing as the 'question of gayism' as there had been for 'lesbianism'. If there was any mention of the subject it was referred to as 'paedophilia', and the focus was mostly on a male teacher and pupil, not on boys amongst themselves. For the boys I met at the boarding school, friendships were as important as to the girls. Many recounted how the school was a harsh environment and how one needed trusting relationships to get by. Although boys also had a great deal of physical contact with each other, unlike the girls, it was mainly in the form of pulling, pushing and mock fighting; intimate encounters that led to erotic practices followed a different course. They often had 'peeing' or sperm spurring competitions by masturbating together. While this happened in silence so as not to invoke attention it was conducted with great bravado. These encounters were discussed with much laughter and bellowing afterwards, for example in my company after school hours. I believe it was partly done to see if they could shock me. As I understood it (from conversations I had when being walked back to the bus station by two boys) there was a distinction drawn between masturbating in a group and doing so with only one or two close friends. In the conversation with the two boys it was mentioned in passing that they preferred to 'play with very good friends' and that they only 'played' in a larger group if forced to do so.

Boys also slept together in the same bed, mostly explaining that it was necessary during cold nights as the school did not provide enough blankets. There were fewer very close friendships between the boys, compared to the girls, with whom literally everything was shared from food, to clothing, to school chores to sleeping together. Nonetheless, the boys saw friendships as crucial to surviving the harsh and bullying environment, mentioning the (fighting) competitions between dorms or abuse from 'bullies'. So every boy made sure he had a few trusted friends to fall back on when in need or trouble. During that year (1997–1998), I observed a few couples who were very close and about whom it would be joked that they were 'mashoga': a derogatory term, indicating a receptive sexual position for non-conformatively gendered men. According to Alex, whom I met again in 2001 (then aged 22 years):

We all learnt sex from each other, doing it, sharing [pornographic] pictures and talking about it to teach each other. Hahaha... some of us liked it too

much . . . together . . . and there was this guy who always wanted more and I did with him, we played together.

The terms ‘playing’, ‘dancing’ and ‘eating’ are all Swahili words commonly used to indicate erotic practices. In both Kenya and Ghana, almost everybody who mentioned same-sex erotic encounters mentioned the school space as the place to be introduced to it. As adults, many reflected back to those school years as a time of experimenting, awakening, and learning. Some still held very fond memories, while for others it was a phase in life. It was often considered as part of becoming sexual, growing up into adulthood, like menstruation or wet dreams.

Campus life

Almost all participants in the three studies attended university or some kind of college where they had to travel and leave their family home or the home of a relative. Campus life was never easy: most people were financially constrained, felt lost without the daily care and advice of their relatives and were often duped by conmen. In addition, they suffered a lack of books, electricity cuts and chaotic university administration. Many recalled those days as a time of constant hustling for finances, friends and networks: always on the lookout for something better while repaying debts and managing expectations. Despite having been a time of enormous challenges, many people looked back with nostalgia to their days on campus, remembering it as a time when they enjoyed a sense of freedom to party, listened to music, engaged in drama, and date – in short, enjoyed the pleasures of being unattached and carefree. Partying was often mentioned, commemorating an intense time of shifting contacts and pleasurable sexual encounters. As in their schooldays, good friendships were crucial, but these friendships were not necessarily ones that involved erotic intimacy. Same-sex encounters tended to become diversified to particular spaces, groups or times. For women, their same-sex encounters tended to be considered as non-sexual in nature, whereas for men this was not the case. Campus life was considered a kind of extension of secondary school and many women and men described their same-sex erotic encounters as part of further growing up sexually. Watching pornography with a casual lover was similarly seen as part of this.

Fewer women engaged in same-sex intimacies compared with the time in secondary school. Campus life was also the time to engage in opposite-sex sexual encounters as part of becoming an adult woman and there was much debate, gossip, worry, joy and sorrow concerning opposite-sex sexual relations (Spronk, 2012). The women visited friends in other dormitories and spent many hours doing each other’s hair, flipping through and discussing magazines, watching TV, and studying of course. In 1997, I spent half a year living at the YWCA where students of the University of Nairobi were boarding, and in the second half of the year I shared a one-bedroom apartment with my friend Nsiza. She and her friends were senior students who enjoyed the Nairobi nightlife to the full. Their rooms, and our

apartment, were a place to meet, hide and recuperate with close friends, in short ‘crash’. Many times they shared the same bed. A minority quietly engaged in same-sex erotic relations, and while this was not done openly in view of their roommates, it was also not fully hidden.

Men also spent a lot of their time together in their rooms, mentioning that looking at pornography magazines and films was an important pastime. As they put it to me, they watched ‘everything you guys [Westerners] make’, from ordinary pornography to group sex, sex with animals and gay porn. They explained that it was ‘fun’ as they ‘learned a lot’, and it made them ‘curious’. As Alex remembered, such evenings and nights could get ‘hot’ and they masturbated together, and when they were with a few trusted friends they sometimes had sex. Kamau (aged 25 in 2001, Kenya) was very open about it and explained:

The first time it happened it was all in a kind of trance, we didn’t intend to do... Me, I had never given it a thought. We never talked about it. But then, as it was good, we found ourselves organizing an evening like that again, and we did so every now and then throughout our studies. I look back at it with mixed feelings, I enjoyed it, I cannot deny that, but I am also scared that someone will find out.

In Ghana, there is an interesting opportunity for same-sex erotic practices for men; the annual cross-dressing events on campus (Geoffrion, 2013), which are a variation of the annual festive events in southern Ghana where local costume- and cross-dressing are important markers of the cultural parades. These events are keenly anticipated and widely enjoyed as a time for letting go, drinking and partying. They are chaotically organized with a tinge of threatened violence from the dressed-up participants. They also provide a unique space in which to engage in male same-sex encounters. Whereas same-sex oriented guys (sometimes self-identifying as *kodjo besia*, a term indicating gender non-conformism) discussed with each other this time of chances to enjoy sex with ‘real men’, opposite-sex oriented young men quietly anticipated the same chances. Some older men like Kenneth (aged 65 in 2012) recalled it as a ‘special time of campus life. It was exciting... Nowadays they would call it gay but it is different.’

As young adults in their 20s who were not yet married, the women and men anticipated that they would in the near future be faced with the expectations that come with adulthood and that are translated into the gender norms of parenthood and spouse-hood. However, they were not yet bound by these responsibilities and gendered self-perceptions, and they still enjoyed a sense of relative freedom. For them, part of growing up sexually was getting involved in opposite-sex sexual encounters and campus life was typically a space to experiment with these; at the same time, same-sex erotic encounters continued to be possible as part of their erotic experiences, similar to watching porn.

Becoming adult

A watershed in many people's life was finishing education and starting employment. They often referred to this as the moment 'to take up one's responsibilities', 'become responsible', or 'become a woman/man'. As Miescher (2005) has outlined in his book on becoming a man in postcolonial Ghana, men have had to negotiate social and economic transformations in relation to mounting obligations and responsibilities as leaders in their kinship groups, churches and in other public functions. However, women also equated adult status with becoming more accountable (Clark, 1994). No matter what people's aspirations were, the one thing they all had in common, whether they were in Kenya or Ghana, was a desire to build a family and become a parent.

From the study on Ghana it can be concluded that less people continued with same-sex erotic encounters over their life course and those who did, did so in specific spaces and locations, mostly beyond their immediate social circle. As adults, many kept extensive networks of friends, and some of these networks were decidedly homosocial. Travelling for work, business or social purposes such as church was common and people recounted how such occasions sometimes facilitated same-sex intimacy. It would not be easy to study these practices as they were hardly discussed. I know about the encounters between men only because I was told about them by some of those involved, whereas I came more directly across erotic encounters between women simply because my female gender allowed me easier access to their homosocial lives. Some of the people told me about incidental encounters while others engaged in longer-term relationships.

Sharing a bed remained common, as it had been from school days onward (and before that they had often shared beds as children). When a male friend, Kwame (aged 29 in 2011), stayed for a while in the house I was living in during my stay in Ghana he invited one of his friends to stay. My partner had put an extra mattress in the room, but Kwame returned it after the first night announcing that they were good friends and that neither of them would let the other sleep on the floor. It was never clear to me whether or not they engaged in any kind of erotic practice. However, when discussing a funeral that required sleeping overnight in local guest-houses, Kwame mentioned how he was hassled by a male colleague. He explained how sleeping was a challenge as he was sharing a bed with this colleague who was 'disturbing me'. I asked what he meant, whether the colleague was snoring. Kwame looked at me and said 'No... he does that, he likes to... when you share a bed he likes to... crawl up and... you know', he looked at me knowingly and I responded 'Get intimate?' and he nodded. He was quiet for a while and then said 'before, I sometimes gave in, now I didn't feel like it'. And that was it, he moved on to discuss the funeral and it felt inappropriate to ask more questions.

Kenneth (aged 65 in 2011, see also above) was more personal. Once when we were having lunch, as he was browsing the newspaper, he mentioned how the controversy about homosexuality (in 2011, there was an uproar against suggestions

from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and UK Prime Minister David Cameron to tie development aid to global gay rights) was making things worse, and I asked what he meant. In response, he said: 'You know I am not homosexual, and you also know I . . . well, had my pleasures . . . as a young man' and he looked at me. He sighed and then said 'Ok, sometimes I still end up . . . well you know . . . have sex . . . with a man.' Likewise the fact that Simon (aged 24 in 2011) had a girlfriend did not deter him from engaging in same-sex erotic encounters. As Simon explained, 'It is exciting, differently exciting from with my girlfriend, and yeah, I just like it too.'

During an outing with a women's group, we were staying for several nights at a hotel. This trip was keenly anticipated as an opportunity for 'girls' to 'let things go'. Every evening the mood became boisterous as we had drinks and enjoyed good food. We shared beds to minimize costs and walked in and out of each other's rooms. On the first night, two of the senior women quietly disappeared into one of the rooms while we remained in another room talking about the day. When one of us asked where one of them was someone said: 'Oh, Grace and Faustina are resting.' No one reacted in any way. Later, Iris asked me whether I knew 'what they were doing in that room?' and I replied 'So tell me?' She replied: 'They are friends, very good friends, and like to pleasure each other.' Similarly, Sindoliwa (aged 42 in 2012) – who had never directly mentioned her interest in same-sex erotic practices but had often alluded to it – introduced me to her female 'friend' while looking knowingly at me. Sindoliwa was married, and in the course of my research I got to know her husband as well as her friend. She never openly spoke about her intimate life but she took me to different occasions and places where I could meet both her and her friend.

These narratives indicate that discretion, un-naming and non-classification are crucial in these sexual biographies. Many people alluded to the fact that the current gay rights discourse, and the virulent homophobic response to it, casts a new light on their experiences in ways they had not previously considered. At the same time, some felt that the discourse failed to capture their own experiences, or that it complicated the practice of tacit knowledge. For a minority, same-sex erotic practices remained part of their opposite-sex sexual lives as parent and as spouse. The concluding section attempts to understand this wide range of practices, encounters and experiences.

Homosociality, heteronormativity and gendered and sexual well-being

Becoming sexual is a varied and relational process that occurs in different contexts and with varied social groups and over the life course. Consequently, it is important that people's experience of growing up sexually is studied both as an intersubjective process (Jackson, 1998) and as an embodied and contextual process, thus highlighting the essentially intersubjective and social nature of bodily experience (Spronk, 2014a). As Gunkel (2010) has argued, becoming sexual in itself indicates a

certain, not necessarily sexual, level of intimacy. She shows the importance of female homosociality in enabling a diverse range of intimate contacts in South Africa. When growing up in socially intensive and extensive relations because of cramped housing, dense reciprocal relations, shared households or boarding school, sociality and especially homosociality play a constitutive role in processes of becoming sexual. Indeed, in one of the first edited books on same-sex eroticism in Africa, Kendall (1998) came to the conclusion ‘that women in homosocial environments are likely to explore homosexual expression’, while Moodie (1994) concluded that male intimacy can become a part of social life in male homosocial contexts. In the literature there is a clear distinction made between homosociality and homosexuality (Sedgwick, 1985), whereas the narratives presented here emphasize how homosociality, a cross-sex sexual life and same-sex erotic practices are not mutually exclusive. The notion of male homosociality is also often used as shorthand for male camaraderie where occasional ritualized male same-sex practices occur such as in fraternities (Ward, 2015), while the notion of homosociality bears more potential to rethink the relation between bodies, gender and desire beyond homo- and heterosexual binaries.

What is important in people’s narratives is social adulthood and how it informs people’s gendered sense of self. In the life course, youth is a transformative phase, and as one matures from childhood into adulthood, one’s status is enhanced. What distinguishes youth from adulthood is not age specifically but becoming a parent especially and, related to that, marriage: self-definitions are grounded in terms of parenthood and spousehood, of gender and sexuality. In my studies, it became clear that while not marrying may be regretted, not becoming a parent is inconceivable. In the course of writing this article, I returned to Kenya to link up with the cohort of my 2000–2001 study. Initially I stayed with Pamela (aged 24 in 2001) and we talked extensively about her worries about not having children, which were becoming overwhelming. She explained: ‘To remain a girl . . . that’s terrible, Rachel, you know that . . . I would rather be a single mother than remain a girl.’ Pamela’s words articulate how parenthood is thus felt to be the basis of one’s social identity. Biological parenthood and kin role performance are central to notions of personhood in both Ghana and Kenya (Clark, 1994; Nelson, 1987). In other words, being a mother or a father constitutes one’s gendered sense of self. In addition, the importance of marriage resides in its status as proof of responsible gendered adulthood, as women and men are expected to take care of dependants as part of creating an (extended) family life. The importance of sustaining kinship bonds therefore is also an essential part of self-perceptions.

Lastly, in a heteronormative context where notions of homo- and heterosexuality are hardly used and have no vernacular synonyms, we need new concepts to understand the social organization of sexuality. When gender rather than sexuality is foundational to self-perceptions, and when gender is based on procreation rather than sexual desire, engagement in same-sex erotic practices does not exclude a cross-sexual oriented life. Being a woman or man is crucial to well-being and it is an uneven path during one’s life course; femininity and masculinity are relational

and shift over time and with social circumstances. Indeed, the narratives in this article have demonstrated how women's and men's identities and perceptions are informed by their simultaneous experiences of age and gender. Notably, they show how the invisibility of non-normative sexualities in heteronormative discourse is sometimes more productive than is generally assumed.

The global sexual rights discourse valorizes coming out as gay, or LGBTQI, as the ultimate act of authenticity. This discourse also endorses the idea that normativity is suspect. Rather than taking public social life for granted, and along with that also the unarticulated assumptions of heterosexuality, it is important to give more substance to the ways in which cross-sexual life takes form as part of sexual diversity. Towards this end, it proved helpful to study sexuality through the analytical lens of sexual well-being. Simultaneously, taking the idea of intersubjectivity as a grounding perspective proved helpful in differentiating how processes of sexual well-being are varied, relational and co-constitutive. Theories of sexuality can gain from looking at African realities (Spronk, 2014b), where homosociality, same-sex intimacy and erotic practices are themes that are just as likely to shed light on cross-sex sexuality as on same-sex sexuality.

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Notes

1. One of the reviewers of my book based on the Kenya study remarked quite rightly that it was surprising that I did not mention same-sex sexuality, which has become an important topic in Kenya since the 2010s. The reason is that the goal of the book was to describe and analyse people's self-perceptions, presentations and narratives and I had explicitly explained that I wanted to write a book about 'their lives as they saw it' (Spronk, 2012: 44). Same-sex sexuality was not an explicit part of this and when I included it in the portraits that featured in the book, the study participants objected to the inclusion of this topic. I decided to leave it out of the book and write about it in a later article, which is of course a hopelessly politically incorrect thing to do. However, my standpoint has always been to be accountable to my participants (Spronk, 2012; see also Boellstorff, 2007).
2. In this article I employ same-sex sexual and cross-sex sexual lives instead of homosexuality and heterosexuality as self-evident analytical terms.

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