

The background of the cover features two mannequins in a dark room. The mannequin on the left is smaller and stands on a three-legged metal stand. The mannequin on the right is larger and stands on a four-legged metal stand. Both mannequins are wearing ribbed, sleeveless tops. Two spotlights are visible at the top of the frame, casting light on the mannequins. The floor is a light-colored, textured surface.

Jacketed Women

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES
ON SEXUALITIES AND GENDER IN AFRICA

Edited by Jane Bennett
& Charmaine Pereira

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United Nations
University Press

TOKYO • NEW YORK • PARIS

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Introduction: Sexualities and gender – research methodologies and the questions which compel us

Jane Bennett and Charmaine Pereira

The year is 2005, and 15 of us are sitting around a long table in a seminar room at the University of Ghana in Accra. The air is hot, sweet and dry, and there are cascades of orange bougainvillea trailing down the walls outside. Most of us have kicked off our shoes. The occasion, the brainchild of Amina Mama (then based at the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town), and hosted by Takyiwaa Manuh, the then-head of the Institute of African Studies at the university, has been convened to bring together feminists working in the contexts of African higher education, who are committed to an integration of political strategy, pedagogies and knowledge creation. The idea is to explore our understandings of ‘sexualities, cultures and identities’ as concepts capable of transcending the beleaguered, and ever-narrowing, spaces into which discourses of ‘gender and development’ or ‘empowerment’ have taken us as activists, writers and teachers (Sabea 2008). Over those seven days of the seminar, not only do we become a collectivity of debate and provocative argument, but also a group which, despite individual differences, reaches consensus on a number of points about what it takes to imagine teaching environments in which young men and women can engage with, and produce, knowledges of gender, sexualities, class, race, ethnicity and context.

One of the most interesting points of consensus was that, despite the recognition that over the past decade research on sexualities had had to take the analysis of gender dynamics as a core problematic (Parker 1997), debate on the ‘hows’ of such research were few and far between, especially in our own contexts, and within the circles of feminist writers and activists. Given this situation, we decided to initiate a series of research projects, and to devote particular attention to the exploration of methodologies as core terrain for the theorisation of feminist strategy and practice. Hand in hand with this, we committed ourselves to three-week-long residential seminars, hosted by the African Gender Institute, to which African-based writers, researchers and activists with an interest in researching the politics of gender and sexualities could apply. The seminars were intended to expand the debates initiated in Accra, to include many more voices and ideas, and to address our

concern that—on the continent—so little of our own exploration of research methodologies as a political process seemed to be current.

The seminars, hosted twice a year in Cape Town, ran from 2006 until 2009. These were attended by women and men from a very wide range of countries, contexts, disciplines and backgrounds. Charmaine Pereira and Jane Bennett designed (and re-designed) and co-facilitated the core curriculum for all the seminars, but the vitality of each seminar was driven by the participants, as well as by those who joined the seminars as guest facilitators, trainers, writers and activists (mostly from South Africa, given that the seminars were held in Cape Town).

From the outset, the seminars focused on three objectives: firstly, mapping theories of gender, sexualities, and political change in a way that contextualised and placed African-authored theories at the centre of discussion about the meaning of ‘feminist research’; secondly, creating opportunities for those with particular interests or contexts to share their skills and experiences of creating viable knowledges; and, lastly, to unpack the meaning of research methodologies. In order to address the third objective, the seminar designers decided—after prolonged discussion—to concentrate on qualitative research methodologies in their work with participants.

The choice here had nothing to do with the old-fashioned notion that feminist research methodologies are *qua* qualitative; it was both pragmatic and political. Fluid and intelligent deployment of quantitative methods is essential if one is to grapple with the full range of dominant research in science and medicine, but such deployment demands intensive training. The decision to work with a broad range of participants from NGOs as well as universities meant that engagement with quantitative methodologies (a core skill to which many had not been offered access) would come at a heavy cost to our time, especially given that each seminar was restricted to three weeks because of limited funds. While we were uncomfortable with this situation, we were also aware that the challenges of engaging in qualitative research, which interrogated the politics of gender and sexualities, deserved in-depth exploration. As we discuss later in this chapter, there is plenty of feminist research on the continent which has used qualitative methodologies to respond to questions of gender-based violence, sexual citizenship, the dynamics of HIV and AIDS, the economies of heterosexism, as well as the interplay of class, ethnicity, race and urbanisation on the meaning of ‘becoming gendered’ and ‘sexual’ within diverse contexts. One would be hard put, however, to find new writing which discusses the processes of qualitative research methodologies themselves as being politically interesting or theoretically critical. There is a classic (by now) tradition of research orientation, which works at/on the meaning of ‘voice’ and the politics of privilege and location, and a rich legacy of writing which illuminates the significances of African feminist epistemologies for framing knowledge creation.

Designing research processes, however, needs more than the recognition of the politics of gendered knowledges, and more, too, than the illumination of what ‘feminist eyes’ may bring to the environment. New researchers (or ‘learning researchers’, a community to which we all belong) find ourselves stymied by questions which operate at visceral and direct levels: how do we negotiate the ways gendered and sexual identities (as ‘mothers’, ‘wives’, ‘not married’, ‘young men’, ‘transgendered’) prescribe access to research processes? What does it mean to ‘research’ questions which concern intimacy, pain, pleasure, privacy and change as core realities? What is ‘talk’ as a resource, when ‘talk’ concerns questions of sexualities? Why do discussions about qualitative methodologies, in the academy and beyond, so often proceed as though translation between different languages offered an unqualified possibility of connection ‘across’ interlocutors? How do we orient ourselves as ‘researchers’ in a field dominated by ideas about sexualities which are generated in contexts very different from our own?

In our first seminar in 2006, Karabo Mohlakoana (now Karabo Mosala), then working at the National University of Lesotho, spoke of her own experience of doing PhD research on teenage motherhood in an environment in which conservative, Catholic norms about marriage and reproduction dominated the meanings of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women. Mohlakoana tells the story in Chapter 1, but she does not include the representation of herself and the dilemmas she faced as a ‘good woman’ researching ‘bad women’, which she shared with the seminar participants. She explained that she was a member of very high standing within her church, someone recognised as having given enormously of herself for years to the community. In honour of this, the church had awarded her a special jacket—a jacket which could be worn only by women who had been given special recognition by the community. Mohlakoana explained that she was a ‘jacketed woman’; a woman ‘jacketed’ by tributes to her respectability, but ‘jacketed’, too, by constraints as she worked through and with the implications of that position. As seminar participants, we fell in love with this metaphor, returning again and again to what it meant to be ‘jacketed’ women: honoured and privileged by access to education and resources, and by the ways in which others perceived us as ‘good’ women. Our ‘jackets’ could also affect our intellectual and imaginative selves, organise our bodies and minds in ways which sat awkwardly with our own aspirations and dreams, and present us to the world in ways which could damaged any communication with those we most wanted to hear. The work of exploring those research methodologies valuable to understanding the politics of gender and sexualities became, in part, the work of negotiating the ‘jackets’ of convention, the surveillance of moralities, categorisation and fear.

The negotiation became a way, too, of laughing at—and with—the ‘jackets’, which, in turn, gave us a sense that a focus on the *processes* of research illuminated critical patterns of discernment, insights about deixis, embodiment and the fluidity of the ‘socio-

cultural’, which were frequently more valuable than completed articles, book chapters or research dissertations. As a result, we decided to collect a number of pieces from participants in the seminars to share some of our ideas, but, primarily, to share some of the moments of pleasure we experienced in one another’s tales of drama, confusion, determination and ironic self-deprecation.

Sexualities and gender research

Globally, over the past 30 years, research focused on questions to which an understanding of sexualities is core has grown enormously, and is located in several disciplines, such as demography, health, sociology and cultural studies. There are leading international journals, grounded in very different approaches, ranging from the renowned *British Journal of Medicine* (a Google search of the journal’s contents over the past 20 years using the term *sexuality* comes up with 1 034 hits) to *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, which regularly publish research on the politics, cultures and dynamics of sexualities. *Culture, Health and Society* and *Sexualities*, in particular, are well known for their editorial support of research that recognises the importance of medically grounded work (such as the need to prevent the transmission of the HI virus between homosexual men). However, they insist that sexualities research is always engaged with the micro-politics of local, stubborn and complex contexts, in which the possibilities of ready categorisation or straightforward generalisation are rare. In these journals, academics have insisted, too, that while the urgencies of the HIV pandemic continue to deserve the attention of researchers, sexualities research cannot be imagined solely in terms of questions of viral transmission, ‘vulnerability’ and ‘risk’. The range of topics catalysed by an interest in sexualities is, of course, formidable, and their constellation into fields of allied enquiry is directed by political questions of epistemology. Within the medical field, of course, research around sexualities may readily deploy concepts of dysfunction, atypicality and illness. Within postmodern cultural studies, communities of researchers accept ideas about race, intersectionality, marginality or economy as critical points of entry into a new question or concern.

We would argue that the concept of gender has suffered in very specific ways from the politics of knowledge-building about sexualities, most powerfully through health-focused research on HIV and AIDS over the past 20 years. On the one hand, feminists and sociologists sensitive to the politics of gender have insisted that gender dynamics are central to issues of viral transmission and of access to treatment, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. On the other hand, these dynamics quickly came to be homogenised into a profile of a poor woman, usually racialised as ‘black’, located within an environment of family and cultural abuse, and deprived of information and education. The

corollary of this image was one of a man: heterosexual, with many sexual liaisons and partnerships, often a migrant worker, usually insensitive to his own or others' health, and economically either corrupt or irresponsible, or both. Despite the essential integration of gender analysis into much HIV-focused qualitative work, we argue that, in this work, gender has become a somewhat static framework through which the largely conservative norms, understandings and practices of heterosexualities can be scripted, that is, 'women' as victims and 'men' as dangerous.

In international zones hospitable to the political impetus of feminist work, such as the critical research of Richard Parker, Gary Dowsett and others, the consideration of gender dynamics is more subtle. In the introduction to *Researching Sexual Behaviour* (1997), a book resulting from a symposium in 1996 on the practices and politics of methodologies in a rapidly growing field within the USA, it is suggested that the demand for information (driven by the HIV and AIDS epidemic) led to an explosion of studies, using a wide range of methods, such as quantitative surveys, interviews and questionnaires, often implemented on a large scale by major research organisations (Bancroft 1997: 7). In this collection, the authors reflect on the methodological choices made by some of these studies. They ask questions about the reluctance of young, gay men to respond to questionnaires on their sexual behaviour and discuss useful ways of accessing the politics of ethnicity in surveys. They also look at the difference between listening to the voices of 'out' lesbian and gay people and trying to understand the experiences of those who may be threatened by the transmission of the virus, but whose sexual lives, norms and ideas may be invisible to the scientific eye. While the collection is interesting in that it makes explicit connections between policy-making and research in order to maximise the possibility of public and accessible resources in the fight against HIV and AIDS, it is one of very few which takes the processes of research as seriously as the findings. Such processes involve the politics of gender. In *Framing the Sexual Subject: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality and Power* (2000), a collection that aims to 'reconfigure existing notions of gender and sexuality, so as to link them more effectively to understandings of power, resistance and emancipation' (Parker 2000: 10), there are, nonetheless, very few chapters which acknowledge that the terms 'women' and 'men' are merely products of dichotomising discourses, and incapable (beyond the most general of scenarios) of keeping up with the actual kaleidoscope of embodied and sexual realities. Parker has, of course, worked with a range of extraordinary feminists (such as Sonia Correa, Ros Petchesky, Ann Snitow and Carol Vance) and is no stranger to debates on what it will take to shift the production and consumption of hierarchised gender dynamics away from their current intransigence. These debates rarely appear within the collection, however, as powerful as it is: 'women' are usually portrayed as victims and reproductive, while 'men' are usually gay and marginalised.

The truth of the matter is that it is difficult to manage the politics of gender and sexualities together, especially in policy-oriented research. However, within African feminist writing over the past two decades, there has been a strong thread of research and writing which seeks to combine epistemological commitment to ‘undoing’ patriarchal and colonial versions of gender with the recognition that sexualities comprise a critical terrain for theory and activism. Leading contemporary research voices here are Charmaine Pereira, Kopano Ratele, Sylvia Tamale, Desiree Lewis, Elizabeth Khaxas, Patricia McFadden, Zanele Muholi, Bibi Bakare Yusef and Akosua Ampofo, although many others contribute (in both disciplinary and transdisciplinary work) to the discussions. The researchers named here do not share foci or approaches. But what a survey of their work will show is a passionate engagement with the activism of research and an urgency to tackle the politics of gender and sexualities within African contexts, attuned to the fact that researching these politics has often been done in the name of ‘culture’, the exotic and the subhuman. As Lewis says in the introduction to her piece on ‘Representing African sexualities’:

Although the American cartoon [this cartoon is reproduced] ... was produced in the nineteenth century, it features images that still haunt our conceptual landscape, whether within or beyond Africa. The cartoon portrays recurring stereotypes of black bodies and sexuality: the image of the lewd black man; the pure white female body; the portrayal of the black/African body as grotesque, uncivilised and crudely sexual, even when formally dressed. (Lewis 2011: 199)

It is not only the hegemony over the meaning of ‘gendered sexuality in Africa’ that needs deconstruction. The very long legacy of anthropological, epidemiological and development-oriented research that exists, rehearsing notions of gender as static, ‘traditionally’ brutal, irrational and superstitious in matters of sexualities, and identically deployed across African contexts, also needs to be seriously examined.

In the past few years, a small number of volumes edited by feminist writers, presenting research on the politics of gender and sexualities in African contexts, have been published. These include two volumes edited by Steyn and Van Zyl from South Africa: *Shaping Sexualities in South Africa: The Pride and the Price; Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa* (edited by Signe Arnfred of the Nordic Africa Institute); *African Feminist Politics of Knowledge* (edited by Akosua Ampofo and Signe Arnfred, published in 2010); and, most recently, Sylvia Tamale’s *African Sexualities: A Reader* (published in 2011 by Pambazuka Press). These collections profile the possibilities of research which is unafraid to tackle questions of gender and sexualities outside the

framework of HIV transmission and ‘traditional’ rites: questions of who is having sex, and with whom; questions of pleasure; questions on the impact of post-flag democratic change—or militarism—on sexualities; questions about masculinities; questions about sexual commodification, and about queer theory and experience. As research, these collections offer an enormous amount to those of us working as writers, and especially to those of us working as teachers and supervisors of younger writers and researchers, whether we are independent, in universities or in research-inclusive NGOs. *African Sexualities: A Reader* opens with two chapters that address the question of what it means to research the politics of sexualities and gender in African contexts, both with a sense of the colonial (and indeed occasionally current) gaze (which configured African embodiment as simultaneously exotic and bestial) and a commitment to exploring the ethics and methodologies of contemporary work. Tamale writes, ‘a good sexuality research project does not view methodology as a mere appendage ... or a “way of carrying out an enquiry”’ (Tamale 2011: 29) and argues that ‘researching and theorizing sexualities beyond the tired polemics of violence, disease and reproduction and exploring their layered complexities beyond heterosexual normativity and moral boundaries will lead to fresh conceptual insights and paradigm shifts’ (Tamale 2011: 30).

Research methodological processes: Core questions for feminists

Personally, privately, I do not fear death, but I find myself unwilling to face a sudden and violent ending ... Who am I? What am I? In past and in present, the answer lies in Africa; in part it lies within the whole timeless, limitless, eternal universe. How can I discover the meaning and purpose of my country if I do not first discover the meaning and purpose of my own life? (Bessie Head 1993)¹

Bessie Head, one of the giants of African philosophy and creativity, chose for herself the title of an autobiography she never wrote: *Living on a Horizon*. We would argue that horizons connote not simply vision but a way of being in the world—with, and despite, the angle of location. A ‘researcher for life’, if ever there was one, Bessie

¹ Head, B. (1993). ‘A personal view of the survival of the unfittest’. In B. Head. *The Cardinals, With Meditations and Stories*. Cape Town: David Philip, p. 149.

Head's relationship with the representation of inner and outer experiences, as a sign of her love for Africa, speaks to a key challenge for African feminists. This is, of course, the need to create knowledges which both emerge from the diverse and complex contexts in which we live and work and speak to such contexts with sufficient resonance to sustain innovative and transformative action (Bennett 2008).

Designing research methodologies capable of addressing the questions which compel us constitutes a politics in its own right, demanding a re-evaluation of received approaches and sophisticated reflection on the intersections of theory and practice as researchers and writers. The challenge of exploring research methodologies, not simply as adjuncts to issues of epistemology or as bridges between the conceptualisation of an inquiry and its outcome, but as spaces in which the constellation of context, voice, ethical and political depths, and the comprehension of discovery as a process, as capable of horror as of illumination, deserves our feminist attention.

As a term, *research* conjures up as many scenarios as it does emotions. The academic expectations of universities around the kind of thinking, working and representation (usually, but not always, writing) which lead to the recognition of research as professional (qualifying the creator as a Doctor or Master of Philosophy within a discipline) bear almost no relation to the kinds of work expected of those working as, for example, parliamentary researchers. The difference here lies not only in conceptions of valid information and the overarching purpose of the work, but in questions of time, the identity and context of the researcher, the parameters of engagement with others (and with others' creation of knowledge). For example, the parliamentary researcher may have to produce a gender analysis of the state's proposed Bill on electrification of the lower regions of district x by the following day. The PhD researcher, however, is expected to show command of a library of others' work before she (or he) is recognised as 'ready' to have an idea herself, and this process is usually supposed to take at least a year. Researchers constitute a large and complicated congregation, but one riven with differentiation, not only of discipline, but much more powerfully of status and privilege (medical is more valuable than historical; pure is better than applied; quantitative is stronger than qualitative; positivist is more credible than feminist/indigenous/post-anything) (Bennett 2008).

Feminist work has always been particularly concerned with the relationship between *research* and *activism*. Although many would struggle to be completely clear about when they were definitively engaged in the one activity and when in the other, the legacies and contemporary realities of privilege (of class, of race, of ethnicity, for example) continue to live out across definitions of roles, identities and the value of feminist work (Lewis 2004). There is an ongoing necessity to be vigilant about the ways in which notions of *research* and *activism* can become deployed in the rehearsal

of brutal and demeaning legacies. At the same time, however, Jessica Horn's discussion of the African Feminist Forum dialogues, held in Kampala in September 2008 (Horn 2008), suggests that the animating questions for the forum did not primarily involve identities (researcher or activist, southern or western, religious or not). They involved debate on strategy, participation and the meaning of decades-long work for the design of future directions, and women from myriad locations, positions and experiences entered these debates with vigour, humour and insight. That *research* and *researching* are vital processes within the project of transforming conditions of war, misogyny, injustice and poverty in African contexts remains indisputable: *research* as discovery, *research* as forensic analysis, *research* as detective work, *research* as cosmology, *research* as witness, *research* as voice, *research* as undercover strategy (Bennett 2008).

One of the dilemmas facing feminist work on research methodologies is that it is tricky to draw a line between a theory (a way of approaching realities and experiences) and research methodologies (the 'how' of the engagement with those realities and experiences, which is directed towards both understanding them differently and, where injustices emerge, making alternatives possible).

This is especially true, given several decades of African feminist research whose fundamental concern has been to address and transform the impact of androcentricity on scholarly mindsets, practices and writings, and to engage directly in work aimed at addressing discriminations and injustices (Imam, Mama & Sow 1997). The weight of this mandate can blur the fact that good research production needs to distinguish between the conceptual framework governing an initiative and the approach to creating new knowledge which flows from this. And, especially in the work of researchers on commission, under tight crisis-driven deadlines or working towards degrees, it is often in the concrete engagement with methodologies and methods that ideas about the value of taking gender seriously disappear as conventional qualitative and quantitative approaches to 'the field' are deployed. Thus, we find PhD candidates with radical, and feminist, ideas about the need to interrogate sexuality education in schools being required to explore the context through standardised questionnaires, or feminist researchers being asked by donor-driven agendas to submit findings 'with recommendations', as though 'recommendations' from the author(s) of a research report were likely to be useful (sometimes, they are, of course. But any feminist worth her/his salt knows that only decisions reached collectively, over much time and difficult negotiation, have any genuine hope of addressing complex problems.) The demands of our work, and the institutional and organisational conventions through which we channel it, frequently leave us neither time nor direction in terms of how to *actually* think through the meaning of 'doing research' in our contexts.

It is not that there is no feminist legacy of thought on questions of doing research in African contexts. Awa Thiam's astonishing and radical *La Parole aux Nègresses*

remains inspirational in its methodological experiment: getting the voices of women as close as possible to the reader's ear. The publication of this book was predated by the formation of AAWORD/AFARD,² which turned its mind towards questions of both the theory and the practice of research from the early 1980s. Since then, there have been numerous occasions, collectives and publications³ in which the practicalities of methodologies have received critical attention, and context plays a role in the narrative of the decades-long growth of a rich and provocative tradition of African feminist thinking on the nature, shape and processes of research work.

It is true, though, that the dominant themes of this legacy concern epistemology and theory. Overwhelmingly, debate has entailed the deconstruction of the colonial and patriarchal gaze on 'African women', and the strategic orientation towards location, context and paradigms, which demand consideration when one takes on research work. There are icons here: Bolanle Awe, Ayesha Imam, Patricia McFadden, Amina Mama, Marjorie Mbilinyi, Desiree Lewis, Ruth Meena, Guy Mhone, Dzodzi Tsikata, Fatou Sow, Filomina Chioma Steady, and the list is much longer. There are substantial debates among these voices, and these concern priorities, modes of analysis and differences of ideology and vision. They comprise, nonetheless, a dense conversation on the meanings of *research* and stimulate their interlocutors (virtual or real) into questions about reflexivity, the eradication of stereotypic lenses and the power of gender analysis. What very few of them do, however, is write at length about the concrete processes of methodologies—*how* to imagine a 'field' (in an African context!), *how* to strategise a relation between methods (statistical ratios *and* poems?), *how* to work across languages, *how* to protect, respect and be accountable to those with whom we work, *how* to select research foci and methodologies which are capable of dialogue with worlds we want to change?

Issues of research methodology in the field of sexuality and gender studies are as challenging and interesting as the findings and new theorisations themselves. Issues raised by researchers in the African Gender Institute's 2005 project included the difficulties in breaking up concepts into the local language of the research communities; breaking up 'sexuality' into familiar elements to facilitate entry into data gathering;

² The Association of African Women for Research and Development/Association des Femmes Africaines pour la Recherche et le Développement, founded in 1977.

³ One history of these moves from AAWORD/AFARD to the 1992 SAPES publication, edited by Ruth Meena, in which Marjorie Mbilinyi's still useful piece on research methodology is located, through to the CODESRIA 1992 conference, which led to many publications and seminars (including Arnfred, S., Bakare-Yusuf, B., Waswa Kisiang'ani, E., Lewis, D., Oyewumi, O. & Chioma Steady, F. (eds). (2004). *African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms*, CODESRIA). Signe Arnfred's 'Gender research in Africa: Dilemmas and challenges as seen by an outsider' appears in this 2004 collection.

defining core concepts in sexuality such as ‘desire’, ‘virginity’ and ‘rape’; getting accurate language equivalents of core concepts—from colonial into local languages and vice versa; understanding the use of metaphors or a language style peculiar to issues surrounding sexuality; dealing with issues of contradiction; identifying the policy implications of research findings for educational programmes that touch on sexuality, such as national HIV/AIDS campaigns; gaining access as ‘researchers’ into communities that are hostile to interaction with individuals identified as ‘different’ (because of faith affiliation, for example); protecting interviewees’ confidentiality; the meaning of research ethics in contexts in which security is an issue; and the complexity of understanding gender and sexuality beyond familiar frameworks in which women’s bodies and lives are organised through explicit relationship to gender-based violence. It was recognised, through the workshops, that the project had uncovered a need to prioritise research methodologies as a key zone for discussion.

Feminist research on sexualities is not unique in posing particular methodological conundrums for African-based researchers. The meaning of multilingualism, the ethical dilemmas raised by the economic chasms between writers and those whose lives matter to them as part of their research and activism, the actual complexity of living out feminist principles around the relationship between *research* and *action* (in contexts in which the possibility of action may be compromised at numerous levels), the impact of the interests of donors, the haphazard and unreliable attention of state actors, and the demands for emotional endurance would affect research on agriculture, militarism, urbanisation, land, reproductive health—any zone, in fact, in which gender needs to be taken seriously.

It would be possible to concentrate at length on any one of the methodological issues above. Language alone constitutes a zone of such intricacy and such potential challenge that one sometimes wonders whether the almost complete dearth of theory on research in multilingual contexts in Africa constitutes a shadow space—the space just too hard to contemplate head-on, but which stalks over every analytic insight reached within English, French, Portuguese or Arabic.⁴

The influence of located misogyny, too, presents methodological challenges across disciplinary divides: notions of what ‘women’ may say, to whom, and with what consequences, structure the meaning of ‘hearing voices’ and impede the impact of what has, in fact, been said.

Perhaps the issue that most fundamentally challenges the design of research methodologies is daily life. Crude as that sounds (and open to charges of gross

⁴ There are several excellent journals on African languages and linguistics, but very rarely do these include material specifically focused on what it means to do research (let alone feminist research) in contexts in which people are engaged with multiple forms of literacy and linguistic forms.

generalisation), the realities of transport, the intricacies of lives negotiated through violence and poverty, the arduousness of work and family engagements, the frustrations of wrestling a pathway between a sponsor's (for example, a supervisor's, a donor's or a state's) expectations and one's own insights, the frustrations of resources, the implacability of life's capacity to surprise, befuddle and infuriate, all bedevil the hope of clean methodological journeys. And this in contexts of 'peace'.⁵ In contexts of military siege or natural or human-made disasters, daily living constitutes a strategic negotiation from one moment to another—not a terrain on which a long-term research plan can be mapped. It is not that research cannot be undertaken in conditions of relative chaos, gross economic disparities, displacement, uncertainty and surprise—it is more that methodologically focused writing and thinking on these conditions as *the norm* is rare.⁶ Texts on research methodology tend to assume a stable environment, one in which it is possible to plot sampling, interview processes, quantification and data collation within a logic rendered seamless, partly by sheer a-contextuality and partly by the notion that the researcher is not multi-tasking and is largely impervious to the impact of whatever he or she is engaged with. No feminist, whether working in a shelter for abused women, within a farmworkers' union, within a teaching environment or within a parliamentary office finds his or her life 'stable' environmentally. Indeed, instabilities and uncertainties⁷ are often the grounds from which the most interesting insights and intuitions about realities and possibilities for change emerge.

Specifics and foci

In Tamale's *African Sexualities: A Reader*, there is a chapter entitled 'Sexuality, gender and disability in South Africa' co-authored by Washiela Sait, Theresa Lorenzo, Melissa Steyn and Mikki van Zyl. This chapter explores the experiences of disabled girls' mothers in the poverty-stricken Northern Cape in South Africa, and illuminates the anxieties of these women as they witness their daughters' growing into sexual maturity in communities in which constant supervision is impossible. The authors locate their study in two ways. Firstly, they position their work within the growing critical field of disability studies, which has revolutionised social science's approach to embodiment (by revealing that 'disability' functions as a political choice in the environments and

⁵ Given the prevalence of gender-based violence in our contexts, we are not sure this is a useful term.

⁶ There is some feminist writing in contemporary ethnography that attempts this; see, for example, the work of N. Naples or K. Visweswaran.

⁷ Thanks to Shereen Essof for reminding us of Ben Okri's words here: 'Certainty has always been the enemy of art and creativity; more than that it has been the enemy of humanity.'

architectures through which the world imagines ‘mobility’ or ‘access’ for some, while permanently excluding others). Those identified as ‘disabled’ (as people are frequently according to this body of work) are desexualised or sexually exoticised, which leads to a range of challenges: ignorance about sexuality, exclusion from sexual cultures and spaces, additional vulnerability to sexual abuse, confusion and loneliness around the process of becoming gendered, and helplessness when it comes to social interaction (Haroian 2000). Sait et al thus locate their research within a body of work seeking to destabilise hegemonic exclusion of ‘the disabled’ from questions of sexuality, by asking what kinds of support, information and understanding young teenage girls are receiving. The second aim of the research involves a relationship with the Disabled Children Action Group (DCAG) structures in the Northern Cape. Programme officers here, we are told, are concerned that disabled children are not receiving useful sexual education, and that their marginalisation as ‘sexual beings’ by parents and teachers needs to be addressed. The researchers write that their project was exploratory and aimed to support the DCAG by creating more information, especially about mother and daughter relationships. This chapter goes on to discuss the selected reflections and responses from eight women interviewed by the researchers, and argues that their discourses reveal high levels of anxiety among them. They were anxious about the practical needs of their daughters (for knowledge about menstruation and about wearing pads), about the sexual vulnerability of their girls, both within and outside their families, and about the girls’ future sexual and reproductive lives. They spoke of their difficulties in communicating with their daughters and their desperate need to protect them from violence, HIV and pregnancy.

When we shared this chapter with a group of young researchers, one of them commented:

... but these women sound exactly like my mother! She would sound just as freaked out, maybe not about the tampons, but she is way over-protective, and I don't see why these mothers are different, they just sound like mothers to me; they just fuss too much; it's not a big deal'.

The young woman making the comment would not have identified herself as disabled, and she lived in a well-resourced neighbourhood of Cape Town. In the heated debate which followed her interjection, it became clear that the tensions around the particularities of the interviewees’ context, the resonances of their words, the advocacy–research mission of the writers, and the importance of their conclusions were (partly) invisible to the young woman who spoke up, because the chapter (careful as it was) offers no hint of *how* the research was done. While it speaks of the broad area in which

the women lived, and about the theoretical and political framework animating the study, we learn nothing about the researchers themselves (of their relationship with one another), nothing about the challenges of meeting and working with the beleaguered mothers, nothing about the languages in which the interviews were held or about the process of selecting certain passages for analysis rather than others, nothing about the process of negotiating race, class, disability and geography as part and parcel of the work. There was nothing about the ways in which the process of undertaking the research might have transformed (troubled, delighted, worried or enchanted) the writers; nothing about what it brought in the end (perhaps through the DCAG) to the mothers and daughters themselves—or didn't, couldn't, bring.

The absence of such material from a valuable research piece is familiar—and even standard. It is, however, dangerous: where researchers do not engage with methodological concerns (which include reflexive and critical consideration of analytic positionality, questions of choice and compromise around engagement with strangers, enmeshment with local or national political sensitivities or stigmatised experience), the reader remains oblivious to what it means to create new knowledges, especially new knowledges on the politics of embodiment. In such oblivion, only the rehearsal of the already known, already catalogued, is possible.

The authors of 'Sexuality, gender and disability in South Africa' are all experienced and skilled researchers, and the anecdote above is not intended, in any way, as a dismissal of their work. We draw on it simply for the sake of illustration (some of our work includes the same lack of theoretical engagement with methodologies). The recognition of the complexity of theorising methodologies in researching sexualities and gender often starts (as it does in Tamale's *African Sexualities: A Reader*) with discussion about the status of the area (is it stigmatised?), the range of emotions which can be catalysed, the projections between researcher and his or her participants, the meaning of moving the 'private' into the 'public', questions of language and the difficulty of ethnographic and qualitative research in criminalised, hidden, pleasure-driven and/or marginal spaces: specialised clubs, initiation and wedding ceremonies, dark streets, frightened families, kaleidoscopes of night-life, people's own sexual spaces and relationships.

In the seminars we designed and facilitated, we discussed many of these issues at length. Our discussions took on board much of the contemporary literature on the politics of researching sexualities (much of it published in *Sexualities*). We read Gregory Tromso's 'Risky subjects: Public health, personal narratives and the stakes of qualitative research' in which he analyses the relationship between narrative and sexual subjectivity, arguing that the relationship between 'the analysis of personal narrative' and 'viable knowledge' concerning the vulnerabilities of men who have sex with men and HIV is far from clear, and demands critical theorisation, as opposed to the assumption that 'the

teller is in the tale' (Tromso 2009). We explored debates raised by Meezan and Martin in their *Handbook of Research with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Populations* (2009), which concentrate on the negotiation of stigma around 'research topic' and within the discursive construction of non-heteronormative experiences. We also recognised the value of Richard Parker's and Diane di Mauro's warnings about the ways in which sexualities and gender research foci have been driven more by 'issues' (contaminated by the idea that such 'issues' constitute 'social/health' problems within an otherwise well-functioning society: the 'issues' are constructed as the problems), such as 'teenage pregnancy', or 'sex workers' (Parker & Di Mauro 2004). One article that stimulated a great deal of discussion in a 2009 seminar was Katherine Franke's 'Thinking critically about strip club research' in which she theorises the marginalisation, and simultaneous exoticisation, of certain areas of research: 'If stripping research is demeaned, joked about, or sexualised inappropriately, this is a problem with which most sexualities scholars are familiar' (Franke 2007: 503). Seminar participants were drawn to the suggestion that research design begins as much with the recognition of the political construction of their 'topic' (maternal mortality, the use of condoms, shifts in legal approaches to homosexuality), and their own instantiation as 'researchers' within the space rendered 'respectable' (or not) by that construction. The 'jackets' of status which came with the responsibilities of becoming researchers with educational aspirations (and the desire to contribute to policy-making) did little, according to seminar participants, to prepare them—as men or women—for the ways in which their interests in sexualities and gender research positioned them among colleagues, peers, family and friends.

What is particularly interesting about this consensus is that very few of the seminar participants were seemingly engaged in research that directly threatened the boundaries of 'respectable' academic enquiry. Unlike Franke, they were not researching the culture of strip clubs, nor were they thinking of exploring patterns of sexual networking. Most of their research questions were derived from a four-decade-long (development-oriented) interest in the politics of gender, law and health, such as education policies and adolescent girls' reproductive health and rights; the fluidities of 'sexual and gendered' initiations within contemporary rural and urban settings; the implementation of laws on the prevention of domestic violence or sexual violence; the socio-cultural management of HIV. While each question came with its own particular set of methodological challenges (such as the difficulty of access to police in a Zimbabwean study on the implementation of the 2008 Domestic Violence Act, or the complexity of working in clinics to research HIV-positive women's adherence to ARV regimes, where clinics themselves segregate HIV-positive clients, very publicly, and overburdened nursing staff are uninterested in working as any kind of liaison between themselves and their clients for the purpose of research), participant debate illuminated

the reality that methodological questions have to start at the point at which the writer/student/thinker/activist subjects him- or herself to the jacket of the ‘researcher’. The implications of working with feminist epistemologies, and researching the politics of gender and sexualities, have been explored in intriguing and powerful ways in Ampofo and Arnfred’s *African Feminist Politics of Knowledge* (2010) in which different authors consider their institutional, professional and activist trajectories, and analyse the processes of ‘disappearing’ university careers and collegialities (while often simultaneously creating new curricula, innovative research partnerships and NGO support systems). The concerns of the seminar participants about the reconstructions of their own identities, which accrued as a result of their research interests, had less to do with professional trajectories (although these were discussed) and more to do with the implications of such reconstructions for research methodologies themselves. The inter-subjective weave between ‘researcher’, ‘topic’ and ‘methodology’ was understood not simply as iterative, but as volatile, unpredictable, beyond preparation and certainly beyond the terrains of ‘qualitative methodological guidelines’ mapped by many social science research handbooks.

Jacketed Women thus seeks to explore the politics of qualitative research in sexualities and gender in African contexts, not through a rewriting of approaches to interview design or to the analysis of ‘data’. While such rewriting is possible, this collection takes as its starting point the act of self-identification as a ‘researcher’, and the recognition of that identification as a form of ‘coming out’ within highly politicised arenas. All the chapters in this collection were written by writers who have an association with the African Gender Institute, many through the seminars, and all were written by women. This was not planned (invitations to contribute to the collection went to many seminar participants, women and men, and because the process of creating the collection was fairly drawn-out, some participants who wanted to be included published elsewhere), but it also cannot be ignored. While the ‘jackets’ of status, constraint and cultural performativity around what is, and is not, ‘respectable’ influence the meaning of gender, *in situ*, for both women and men, people gendered as ‘women’ often risk more than simply unpopularity by moving against ‘respectability’—they may lose livelihoods and, indeed, lives.

This collection opens with an autobiographical discussion about the subjectivity and autobiography of a researcher, which are heightened in a research context in which status depends upon particular conventions of respectability and seniority. Karabo Mohlakoana-Mosala complicates these questions further through discussion of her initiation into PhD research, as a senior woman in her own professional community in Roma, Lesotho. Although her chapter is less academic than some of the others, it explores concerns about positionality, reflexivity and contextualisation, which are troubling in

all social science. Chapter 2, written by Charmaine Pereira when she was coordinator of the Initiative for Women's Studies in Nigeria, moves from Mohlakoana's exploration of her meaning of self-politicisation as a researcher into the implications of researching highly public 'gender and sexual' events. She takes as her starting points the furore that arose around the 2006 'sentencing' of a Northern Nigerian, Amina Lawal, for 'zina' in the Sharia court. The furore was rooted in a long and complex history of political conflict between Muslims and Christians within Nigeria, which escalated at an international level. Pereira's chapter approaches the 'case of Amina Lawal' through research on the meaning of 'zina', which meant her immersion into challenging debates about 'sexuality' and 'gender'. Such challenges included her own ability as a non-Muslim to approach the area at all, and the complexity of handling research in a highly charged political debate.

Chapter 3 addresses a facet of the research process rarely theorised as political—the challenge of constructing a literature review. Taking the subject of the termination of pregnancy in South Africa as her focus, Catriona Macleod explores the contemporary literature on the issue, revealing various constructions of identity, 'experience' and 'problem'. Her conclusion is that methodological concerns include the need to work with 'literature' as a simultaneously limiting and constructive space.

In Chapter 4, Awino Okech writes about aspects of her doctoral research on widow inheritance in Kenya. She tackles the difficulty of moving from a conceptual framework, which rejects Northern (or development) discourses on the 'harmful traditional practices among African societies', into one which can relocate discourses on widow inheritance within contemporary discussions of nationalism, political conflict and sexualities. As she writes, beyond the epistemological frameworks that encourage her perspective, she finds very few guidelines for working as a researcher in ways that do not, in fact, re-create her as a 'development worker' or 'a version of a Northern-influenced thinker'.

Chapter 5 examines the experience of widowhood in Zimbabwe, as a transitional space in which being gendered as a woman raises questions about respectability. Rekopantswe Mate, one of our first seminar participants, argues that the meanings of HIV, infidelity and sexuality become foregrounded upon a husband's death. Mate describes particular discourses in rural Zimbabwe around these issues and questions the meaning of agency and power for widows. She also raises the issue of the underlying anxiety in uncovering 'depressing' material and the researcher's own capacity to survive this: 'transcriptions proceeded slowly because of the sadness of the stories' (Mate).

In Chapter 6, Jessica Scott draws on research to look at the ways in which lesbian couples in South Africa have started to take advantage of the Civil Union Act in order to marry. The political force of the Civil Union Act lies in its suggestion that the rights of citizenship (including marriage) should be extended to lesbian and gay people. What

the research suggests, however, is that access to legal marriage may simply re-create opportunities for homophobia, both within the private (family) space and public, institutional spaces. This raises questions about the political ‘volatility’ of research, where environmental hostility to an issue (such as homosexuality) complicates the dissemination of complex and ambiguous ‘findings’.

Chapter 7, ‘Jacketed Women’, returns to the metaphor of the ‘jacket’ as a way of exploring the dynamics of qualitative research. By examining aspects of the 2006 South African trial in which Jacob Zuma was charged with rape (he was found not guilty of the charges), Jane Bennett argues for the links between ‘the jacket’, the politics of credibility and the work of feminist researchers in sexualities and gender.

Bennett also examines the presence of Zanele Muholi’s collection of photographs entitled *Faces and Phases*—a project undertaken between 2007 and 2011—through several exhibitions, publications and different forms of participatory activism. The photographs are included in *Jacketed Women*, thanks to Muholi’s generosity and, as Bennett suggests, they offer visual analysis of the meaning of ‘the jacket’ (constraint/opportunity; uniformity/creativity; familiarity/rebellion). Muholi’s work is hortatory in many ways: the multiple portraits create presence, beyond the idea of the individual, and enter the discourse of ‘portraiture’, a genre of art that historically portrayed kings, judges, colonial administrators, university principals, presidents, military officers—and queens. In the catalogue for her exhibition, Muholi describes *Faces and Phases* as the ‘present(ation) of our existence and resistance through positive imagery of black queers (especially lesbians) in South African society and beyond’, and we would argue that the ‘and’ in the title gets reconfigured within the actual images, which demand ‘presence’ as ‘resistance’; ‘resistance’ as ‘presence’.

Some analysis of the individual photographs seeks to link them with the overarching themes of the writers in this collection—themes concerning the constraints through which the politics of gender and sexualities are researched and theorised.

To be present as a feminist researcher working on the politics of gender and sexualities is, in many instances, to be resistant to projections about ‘respectable’ research, and to be willing to embrace the theorisation of methodologies as politics. It has been a great honour to work with the seminar participants between 2006 and 2009, and with those who chose to contribute pieces to this collection. We feel fully ‘jacketed’, as privileged members of the community of researchers built across the years of dialogue and debate, and we are committed to continued (analytic) rebellion against some of the other connotations of the ‘jacket’: straightened mindsets, narrowed horizons and homogenised regulation of gender and sexualities.

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Jacketed Women: Qualitative research methodologies on sexualities and gender in Africa

First published 2013 by UCT Press
an imprint of Juta and Company Ltd
First Floor, Sunclare Building, 21 Dreyer Street
Claremont, 7708, South Africa

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Published in 2013 in North America, Europe and Asia by
United Nations University Press
United Nations University, 53–70, Jingumae 5-chome
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 150-8925, Japan
Tel: +81-3-5467-1212 Fax: +81-3-3406-7345
E-mail: sales@unu.edu General enquiries: press@unu.edu <http://www.unu.edu>

United Nations University Office at the United Nations, New York
2 United Nations Plaza, Room DC2-2062, New York, NY 10017, USA
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United Nations University Press is the publishing division of the United Nations University

ISBN 978-1-91989-558-1 (Southern Africa)
ISBN 978-92-808-1227-5 (paperback) (North America, Europe and Asia)
ISBN 978-92-808-7196-8 (ebook) (North America, Europe and Asia)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jacketed women : qualitative research methodologies on sexualities and gender in Africa / edited by
Jane Bennett and Charmaine Pereira.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-9280812275 (pbk.)

1. Women's studies--Africa--Methodology.
 2. Sexology--Research--Africa--Methodology.
- I. Bennett, Jane, 1958 Mar. 18- II. Pereira, Charmaine.
HQ1181.A35J33 2013
305.4096--dc23 2012047403

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Project Manager: Glenda Younge Editor: Glenda Younge
Proofreader: Alfred LeMaitre Typesetter: PETALDESIGN
Cover designer: Monique Oberholzer Indexer: Cecily van Gend
Typeset in Times New Roman 10.5/14 pt Photography: Zanele Muholi
Printed in the United States of America and the United Kingdom

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This book has been independently peer-reviewed by academics who are experts in the field.

Jacketed Women: Qualitative Research Methodologies on Sexualities and Gender in Africa

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In 2004, the African Gender Institute ran a continental research project, Mapping Sexualities, among the objectives of which was the development of a research methodology suited to carrying out in-depth case studies of the dynamics of gender and contemporary sexual cultures in Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda.

This book is the result of this research. The chapters cover broad-ranging issues and include questions about what it means to research topics that are unpopular or fraught with the sense of the taboo that underpins much work in sexualities and gender studies. Overall, the diverse pieces within the collection offer the opportunity to see qualitative research not as the “poor cousin” of quantitative studies but as a zone which raises intellectual and political challenges.

“An invaluable and timely resource in the ways that it tackles conceptual and practical issues that most texts on methodology overlook or purposely ignore. It is a very welcome addition to the still young and growing scholarship on African feminist epistemologies and methods as well as African sexualities.”
—*Sylvia Tamale, Associate Professor, School of Law, Makerere University, Uganda*

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ISBN 978-92-808-1227-5
208pp US\$36.00



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