

Ezeh, P.J. (2014). Sex, Custom and Population: A Nigerian Example. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 6(3): 105–109.



Chapter 11

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

In Chapter 11, we look at the ways societies change in response to crises, through social movements, and as a result of globalization. Throughout the chapter, we make reference to significant changes in sexual practices and attitudes towards sexual minorities. In Western cultures, attitudes towards sex, sexuality and private sexual behaviours have become increasingly liberal as we can see through, for example, the legalisation of same-sex marriages in many countries and the opening-up of reproductive rights to lesbian women.

However, this story of liberalisation of sexuality is not universal. Peter-Jazzy Ezeh (2014) shows the ways that changing attitudes toward sexuality is complex in cultural contexts with specific norms around sexual behaviour, and where globalization has taken the form of colonization. Ezeh (2014) specifically focuses on the Orring, a minority ethnic group in south-eastern Nigeria. Using ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews, Ezeh was able to understand the specific norms governing sexual practices for this group.

Through his ethnographic approach, Ezeh found out the different expectations of men's and women's sexual behaviour and the ways transgressions of these expectations are dealt with. He shows that sex among the Orring group is closely tied with kinship and local beliefs about *Lose*, the earth force which is the 'central divinity of the Orring' (page 106). As such, in contrast to contemporary Western approaches to sexuality where casual sex for pleasure/leisure is more acceptable (e.g. Claxton and van Dulmen 2013), for the Orring 'sex is seen in strictly reproductive terms' (page 106) as a way to shore up family groups and a means to recruit new members into the community. Ezeh shows that there are different rules around sex for girls/women and boys/men; while unmarried girls who become pregnant are 'treated harshly', promiscuous boys' only punishment is to be the subject of community gossip. Such unequal treatment also extends to adult women and men – while women only have one husband and are expected to have sex only with their husband, men have many wives and have, as Ezeh (2014: 107) puts it, 'the same liberties as a bachelor that is looking for his first wife'. While these sexual norms are deeply engrained in Orring society, Ezeh also discusses the changes brought about through colonization and the work of Christian missionaries. Specifically, he suggests that modernity poses a threat to the 'autochthonous way of life' of the Orring (Ezeh 2003: 202), particularly as women

look to the Church as an ‘escape’ from traditional Orring punishments for sexual transgressions.

Using ethnography was perhaps the appropriate way for Ezech to be able to access information about sex and sexual practices within this community. As we talk about in Chapter 4, ethnography is centred on researchers becoming embedded within a particular population and building a high level of rapport so that they can access (through observation, but also interviews and more informal conversations) some of the most private and intimate aspects of people’s lives such as their sexual practices. Wamoyi et al. (2010) also took a similar approach in their research on young women’s sexual practice in Tanzania where the researchers ‘lived in villagers’ households and engaged with young people in their daily activities, in particular doing farm work and, for the women, collecting water and firewood and cooking’. The logic here is that participants would be much more likely to open up to researchers about their sexual practices if they had built a rapport through these everyday kinds of interactions.

Ezech’s spent a year living among the Orring community in Eboyni State, visiting key places and attending important events. This ethnographic method of living closely with research participants has a long history in sociology and overlaps with our closely related discipline of anthropology. A key difference between these two disciplines is their focus – while anthropologists have traditionally studied non-Western societies where cultures and traditions are vastly different from those ‘at home’, sociologists have used ethnography to study more local communities and populations. For example, anthropologists Margaret Mead (1928, 1935) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) studied tribal communities in Papua New Guinea and Samoa, while William Foot Whyte (1955), was a sociologist who undertook participant observation to examine gang culture and local organised crime in a deprived area of his home city of Boston, USA. In his recent ‘manifesto’ in favour of ethnographic approaches, Paul Atkinson (2015) argues that immersion into a research field isn’t just about what researchers *see*, but also what they hear, taste, sense, touch and smell. He suggests that researchers need to holistically pay attention to their surroundings in order to gain a deep sense of everyday life within a given community.

Given this deep immersion, ethnography offers a good way for researchers to gain insights into private lives that would be very difficult to obtain from other methods like interviews or questionnaires. But, going to live within a community for an extended period of time presents several challenges. For example, in Chapter 5, we draw attention to the problem of covert research where participants do not know that they are being researched. While Ezech wasn’t a covert researcher, there are limits to how well-informed any community can be about ethnography. Did Ezech inform *everyone* he met that he was a researcher, tell them what his research was about, and inform them how their data might be used? Probably not because this is unfeasible and would disrupt the natural flow of a conversation or meeting. Therefore, we can see an ethical challenge of deception even in overt research (see Roulet et al. 2017).

In an earlier article about the same research Ezech (2003) discusses another challenge of ethnography – being an insider or an outsider, and what these terms actually mean. ‘Insider’ usually refers to a researcher conducting ethnography on a

population that they are already a part of. Being an insider can mean that access is much easier and that there is a greater rapport with research participants. In his research on prison management Jamie Bennet's (2013) insider status as a prison manager granted him complete access to his participant population and enabled him to untangle some of the more complex facets of that population (because, for example, of a shared language and understanding of the pressures of the job). But being an insider can also mean that researchers find it harder to be objective about their observations because it is harder for them to step outside of their own cultural norms and ask 'what might be going on here?'.

But being an 'outsider' is also challenging. It can be very difficult to negotiate access to a community as an outsider, especially if that community is marginalised or discriminated against in some way and so may be sceptical of outsiders. Ezeh (2003:203) also draws attention to the challenges that come 'where an ethnographer is carrying out a participant observation among a people whose social systems differ from those of his group [sic]'. Given Ezeh is not from the Orring community, he misunderstood their customs around sharing of material goods. As such, while sharing is 'a sign of acceptance and expression of cordiality of association at all levels' (Ezeh 2003: 201), Ezeh turned up empty-handed which was a cultural faux pas. Although Ezeh states that many of his participants still called him 'brother' which suggests that his mistake didn't impact on his ethnography or data collection, it might have done.

Yet, Ezeh also draws attention to the complexity of defining whether a researcher is an 'insider' or 'outsider'. So, while Ezeh was a cultural and ethnic *outsider* (he was an Igbo studying the Orring), he was a national *insider* (both Igbo and Orring are Nigerians and live in the same part of the country). Ezeh's reflections on these complexities of insider/outsider are not new but nonetheless are a useful reminder of the huge amount of work that goes into navigating identity and custom issues during ethnography.

QUESTIONS:

1. Was ethnography the best method for Ezeh to study sexual practices among the Orring community? What other methods might he have used? Why?
2. What might go wrong for an ethnographer who doesn't understand the local customs of the community that they are living with?
3. Is it easier to be an insider or an outsider when doing ethnography? Why?

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