

Researching Homosexuality in Difficult Contexts

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Abstract: Homosexuality is a sensitive issue in Africa that inspires a great deal of public contention and controversy, and attracts much social science research interest. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, conducting empirical research on homosexuality in Africa or within African population groups could be subject to several challenges. This article presents an autoethnographic account of my experiences conducting empirical research on attitudes towards homosexuality among Cameroonians based at home and those living in Switzerland. The paper highlights the key challenges, surprises, and lessons learned experienced in the different stages of the research process, from design to data collection, analysis, and publication of findings. Drawing on these experiences, the article calls attention to some aspects that young researchers embarking on research in sensitive topics should be aware of and should plan for upfront. It proposes practical coping approaches that can support young researchers to navigate the difficult waters of researching homosexuality in challenging settings so they can achieve their research goals within the timeframe and resources available to them.

Keywords: sensitive research; homosexuality; African context; autoethnography

1. Introduction

“On the return flight [from Addis in the two-seater plane], the motor sputtered and died. We were directly over the gorge—5000 feet... above the Blue Nile” [1] (p. 226).

Imagine that! Floating 5000 feet in a defective plane at the mercy of gravity, in the middle of nowhere. The above chilling account of mid-air engine problems experienced in Ethiopia vividly conveys some of the daunting challenges that the acclaimed epidemiologist Dr. Donald Henderson encountered as he led an effective global campaign for eradication of smallpox from 1967 to 1977. Henderson’s description of his personal experiences, otherwise referred to as autoethnography, in the book, *“Smallpox: The Death of a Disease”*, is particularly valuable in that it allowed him to share with the scientific community more than just the results of his work. Importantly, the autoethnography enabled him to ‘teleport’ others—figuratively speaking—into the overall journey of resilience, creativity, and rewarding lessons learned that carrying out his work occasioned. In doing so, he contributes useful perspectives that can help other scientists gain foresight, manage their assumptions, and plan better for success as they embark on related work.

Like the plane engine in Henderson’s account, which was thrusting with enthusiasm before choking and dying, the field of social sciences has its own share of research projects that started off with much vigor before running into trouble. Regrettably, some of them never recovered from such challenges and ended up abandoned and forgotten in unmarked graves. In particular, research projects that focus on sensitive topics tend to be predisposed to a myriad of challenges for the researcher [2–4]. “Sensitive research addresses some of society’s most pressing social issues and policy questions” [5] (p. 55). Consequently, despite the many challenges that researching sensitive topics might entail, researchers have a moral responsibility to address these topics [5]. As researchers, collectively documenting and sharing information on challenges we face, as well as coping strategies we use, during the process of conducting sensitive research can foster both aptitude and motivation in others to address research on sensitive topics. For this reason, several scholars have made a



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clarion call for publications that discuss researchers' lived experiences during the process of conducting sensitive research [6–8]. Accounts of negative experiences and failures are as useful as success stories because knowledge of what did not work can help others plan better for success by “properly anticipating and obviating failure” [9] (p. 5).

Researchers are increasingly heeding the call to publish reflexive accounts of their experiences in researching sensitive issues. A notable example is the collection of twelve papers published in the recent book titled *Practical and Ethical Dilemmas in Researching Sensitive Topics with Populations Considered Vulnerable* [10]. The growing body of literature on researchers' experiences in sensitive research includes experiences in diverse sensitive topics, ranging from homelessness [11] to alcoholism and substance abuse [12], workplace bullying [13], and sexuality [14]. In the field of sexuality, such publications that discuss the researcher(s)' experiences remain disappointingly few and far between. Particularly lacking are published accounts of researchers' experiences when conducting inquiries on homosexuality in the African context, a topic that has attracted much research attention in the past two decades. Only a few researchers, like Agyeman [15] and Lydia Namatende-Sakwa [16], have published their experiences of researching homosexuality in the African context, where sensitivities are particularly high due to norms, cultural beliefs, and laws that forbid homosexuality.

This article seeks to contribute to addressing this rather wide gap by presenting an autoethnographic account of my research on attitudes towards homosexuality among Cameroonians living in Cameroon and Switzerland. In autoethnography, “the base unit of analysis is... the researcher” [17] (p. 191), including the researcher's experiences as they worked through the process, principles, and values of the research paradigm. In this regard, this article responds to the growing call for more academic publications on ‘researching research’. When I embarked on the research, a senior research colleague cautioned that I was “*in for quite some suffering*”. Borrowing the words of Arthur Bochner, this autoethnographic account is a fulfillment of my “urge to speak to and assist a community of fellow sufferers” [18] (p. 161)—that is, those who choose not to be deterred from the challenge of taking up research on homosexuality in Africa or similar contexts.

The second section of this article discusses the definition of sensitive research within literature and why my research on homosexuality constitutes sensitive research. The methods section that follows summarizes how I systematically recorded my personal experiences during the research as data for this reflexive analysis or autoethnographic reporting. In the subsequent section, I use first-person narrative to discuss my research journey, from project design to data collection, analysis, and reporting of results, in a bid to “convey the wholeness of the experience[s]” [19] I encountered. In the concluding section, I reflect on some key takeaways for young researchers from my overall experiences in the research process.

2. Homosexuality as Sensitive Research

According to Raymond Lee, sensitive research is research that poses “a substantial threat” to both the researcher and the participants under study [20] (p. 4). While various subjects of research might embody some element of threat for the researcher and/or participants, sensitive research topics are those that pose significantly higher levels of risks to the researcher and research participants [8,21,22]. Sieber and Stanley defined sensitive research as “studies in which there are potential social consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research” [5] (p. 49). However, their definition is criticized as too broad and all-encompassing, given that almost all research has some consequence [23]. There is an ongoing debate in the literature about which attribute best qualifies sensitive research. While some researchers favor a classification of sensitive research by the nature of the research topic [20], others argue that the sensitivity of research is determined only when the researcher is already in the field. Condomines and Hennequin [24] (p. 7), for example, argue that “a researcher may think that a topic is sensitive and then go into the field and

realize that it is not. Conversely, the sensitive nature of a seemingly harmless topic may only become apparent when the study is underway". This argument is particularly true when one takes into consideration that sensitivity comes in different layers that include (a) the nature of the research topic, (b) the identity of the researcher, and (c) the context or population under study [25].

Silverio et al. describe sensitive research as comprising a broad spectrum of topics that range "from the seemingly benign to the deeply intrusive, intimate, or morbid" [26] (p. 2). Sensitivity differs from one context to another [27], and contexts and their accompanying issues of sensitivity evolve over time [28]. Moreover, broad and fluid aspects, such as culture, age, gender, and the feelings of both the researcher and the participants under study, influence what counts as sensitive research or not [23,29]. The jury is still out on what the best definition of sensitive research is, as finding a 'one size fits all' definition remains problematic. While the point of this section is not to resolve this debate, Lee's definition stands as the most popular and widely cited in the current literature, as it highlights the peculiarities of sensitive research. Apart from its emphasis on threat, Lee [20] outlines three distinct attributes of topics that can be classified as sensitive. These include (i) topics that tend to invade an individual's privacy, (ii) topics that raise issues of stigma, and (iii) topics that are highly controversial or politically threatening. Sensitive research, therefore, encompasses inquiries on those issues that are considered "private, stressful or sacred" [27] (p. 1), life-threatening, politically threatening, and/or socially stigmatizing [20,30].

Researching homosexuality in Africa has all three attributes of sensitive research outlined above, as homosexuality is still criminalized in most African nations. To use Kadushin's [31] (p. 2) explanation, "homosexuality is... a sensitive topic because it is not only a private behaviour but also a behaviour that is widely condemned and frequently carries serious legal and social ramifications". In Cameroon, for example, homosexuality is considered a taboo and strongly associated with occultism [32–34]. Religious groups, notably Pentecostal churches, are very vocal in their condemnation of same-sex sexuality [35]. Article 347 of the country's penal code prohibits homosexuality and imposes sanctions on individuals involved in homosexual acts [36,37]. Given that homosexuality is criminalized and socially stigmatized, gay and lesbian people in Cameroon would prefer to keep their sexual identity secret for fear of social condemnation and persecution. The few prominent Cameroonian activists for gay rights, such as Alice Nkom and Michel Togu , who openly defend homosexual people in court, have been targeted with anonymous death threats due to their advocacy roles [38,39]. Although a number of research studies have addressed the issue of homosexuality in Cameroon, research on homosexual rights in Cameroon, and more generally in Africa, still falls within what Serrant-Green categorizes as "screaming silences" [25] (p. 347), a notion that denotes under-researched and unconventional areas of inquiry. Research on such issues is usually emotionally laden [27,40] and full of challenges.

As Phellas [41] (p. 6) highlights, researchers working on homosexuality are commonly confronted with "awkward silence or hostile and often insulting denunciation". Building trust during the data collection phase on sensitive topics could be arduous [42,43]. Agyeman [15], for example, notes that his identity as a Black African researching the gay population in Ghana exposed him to disparaging questions about his sexual orientation and research motives. Chances of misinterpretation of the researcher's motives could be high in sensitive research. In some cases, researchers may be perceived as proponents of homosexuality or spies, especially in contexts that forbid homosexuality, or they may be perceived as exploiting the topic for personal gain. For example, Namatende-Sakwa explains how one of her colleagues suggested that her research on homosexuality in Uganda could easily win her asylum in the US; this, as the author notes, left her feeling like her passion for engaging in homosexual studies was reduced to an opportunistic intention of "taking advantage of marginalized groups" for her personal benefit [16] (p. 337).

Closely related to the issue of trust is the risk of harassment in the course of the research. Researchers working on homosexuality could be exposed to physical harm due to hate crimes, especially in contexts where homosexuality is criminalized. Likewise, research

participants, especially those who identify with same-sex sexuality, risk being implicated or stigmatized if the research does not include adequate safety measures. Researchers addressing sensitive topics must, therefore, ensure that their findings do not “further stigmatize or marginalize the population under study” [23] (p. 3) or implicate the participants [3]. The World Health Organization and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) have proposed strategies [44,45] to avoid this risk, such as obtaining informed consent from research participants, establishing a good rapport with them, and maintaining participants’ confidentiality in the course of research [3,21,46]. However, Carey Noland [29] notes that Institutional Review Boards sometimes exaggerate their protection of participants by constantly denying approval to researchers or requesting that they change their research process to the detriment of the initial research goals [29].

Apart from the risk of harassment, sensitive research could have an emotional toll on researchers and participants. Generally, sensitive topics, such as those relating to stigma, death, terminal diseases, child abuse, or domestic violence, could expose researchers to sensitive information that causes “vicarious traumatization” [13] (p. 27) [40] (p. 72). Furthermore, participants in such research risk reliving past traumatic experiences during the interview process, which may affect their psychological wellbeing [47]. Dickson-Swift et al. note that researchers need to figure out when to show emotion and empathize with participants during emotionally charged interviews and when to manage or conceal their emotions [23,30,40,48].

Another challenge that could confront researchers addressing sensitive issues is securing funding, as they sometimes “[overestimate] the level of support and interest in [their] inquiry” [49] (p. 1). Funding challenges may leave researchers with inadequate resources to pursue their research goals and compel them to modify their research design to less expensive methods. Considering the challenging nature of some sensitive research topics, the use of traditional methodologies may be insufficient for successful data collection. Therefore, methodological flexibility may be required when addressing sensitive issues, especially those that pertain to intimate aspects like sex [29] or vulnerable participants, such as children [50]. Sensitive research “illuminates the darker corners of society. . . [and] challenge[s] taken-for-granted ways of seeing the world” [20] (p. 2). Given the importance of sensitive research, sharing experiences on how researchers have navigated through its challenges is crucial. In this paper, I contribute an autoethnographic account of my experiences in managing the challenges of sensitive research. Autoethnography provides a window into practical “social realities through the lens of the researcher’s personal experiences” [51] (p. 108).

3. Autoethnography as Method

“Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience (“auto”) to describe and interpret (“graphy”) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (“ethno”)” [52] (p. 1). It differs from traditional research methods because it takes into account other relevant details during the research process that “require a deeper level of critical self-reflection” [3] (p. 2). In research, traditional methodological presentations have been dominant when compared to autoethnography due to the perception of the researcher as completely objective and devoid of any form of subjectivity. As Spry figuratively puts it, we tend to rely on “the myth of the researcher as a detached head—the object of Thought, Rationality, and Reason—[that is separate from the body]” [53] (p. 720). Autoethnography, however, challenges this myth with sound arguments about the subjectivity of the research process or, better still, the involvement of the body in research. Autoethnographers argue that researchers make choices and decisions that tend to influence the research process, from the basic point of the choice of topic in itself and throughout the entire research design [54]. Autoethnography, therefore, encourages researchers to direct their research lenses on themselves [18,55], which is what this paper is about.

In researching attitudes towards homosexuality among Cameroonians based at home and in Switzerland, I made use of surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions to assess levels of homophobia within the two groups [56]. Though instrumental in achieving

my research goals, these traditional methods were insufficient to capture my everyday research experiences [52]. As Philaretou and Allen [57] explain, “autoethnographic research is conducted by interpreting personal documents, letters, and recollections of important events in a person’s life”. The autoethnographic account presented in this article draws on data collected through memos and journal notes during the research.

Throughout my research, I made use of memos to keep track of changes in my research design and tools, including aspects that needed further probing or modification during the data collection [58]. Meanwhile, I documented my personal experiences during research in journal notes. The kinds of personal experiences documented included shocking and exciting moments during my interaction with research participants, moments of ambiguity, my emotional dilemmas, and discussions with my supervisors and colleagues. I documented experiences in terms of what, when, and how they occurred and my feelings about them. By relying on memos and journal notes, my autoethnographic account is based on data captured over time in a systematic manner rather than relying solely on my memory or ability to recollect experiences [59].

Similar to other qualitative research approaches, autoethnography follows a systematic approach that includes coding and analysis of qualitative data [60], albeit in a more flexible style that allows for the inclusion of personal reflections [18]. I coded data from the memos and journal notes by categorizing them in terms of challenges experienced, my feelings about them, and actions taken in response to these experiences. This organization of the data facilitated a narrative analysis in the form of autoethnographic storytelling, where the use of the personal pronoun, I, is typical. The use of composite first-person narrative in autoethnography enables “the reader to have an increased sense of contact with the phenomenon” being described [19] (p. 3). That said, autoethnography is sometimes criticized as having a risk of being “self-indulgent and narcissistic” [61] (p. 1); [62]. This critique is valid if the autoethnographic account takes the form of an autobiography and focuses solely on the ‘self’ instead of describing personal experiences and linking this to the broader context of the issue under study. Writing autoethnography is a tricky balancing act where the researcher must robustly reflect on their experiences while not veering into self-indulgence or, worse still, letting their ego off its leash. In this autoethnographic account, I discuss some realities and dilemmas researchers may face when conducting research on homosexual rights in Africa by reflecting on my own experiences in the different steps of the research process, namely, the research design, data collection, analysis, and publication stages.

4. Discussion

4.1. Experiences in the Project Design Stage

Autoethnography is phenomenological in nature in the sense that it aims “to understand human experience from the individual’s perspective” [63] (p. 108). As such, in autoethnography, it is important to disclose information about oneself before proceeding to discuss one’s experiences during the research process. The intention of talking about me is not to torment you with the long and winding story of my life and my likes and dislikes. Rather, the purpose is to share what I see as relevant information that would help contextualize the discussion of my experiences in carrying out sensitive research, which I present in this section. During the research process, the most frequent question about me that various people I encountered asked was: ‘why I chose to focus on homosexual rights as the subject of my doctoral research’. The first instance when I was asked the question was by a close family member who disapprovingly inquired: “Hm! What ‘really’ brought you to this topic, my sister”? The phrase ‘my sister’ is typically used as a term of endearment in the sub-Saharan African context. However, when used in conjunction with the exclamation ‘Hm!’ and with a single clap of hands, as in that instance, it is meant in a sarcastic sense to communicate shock, pity, and disapproval. I believe providing a response to this question is the pertinent starting point for discussing my experiences during the research process.

I am guilty of the tendency that controversy courts research attention. Like many other researchers before me, I gravitated towards research on homosexuality because I was intrigued by the highly controversial and emotionally charged debate around homosexual rights in Africa. It was difficult not to be intrigued. Homosexuality in Africa has been so contested an issue that it got certain African leaders to briefly emerge from their lavish living and stupor of failed governance to make public statements in which they denigrate gay and lesbian people. Notable examples are the late Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe, who referred to homosexual people as “worse than dogs and pigs” [64] (p. 1), and the former president of Gambia, Yahya Jammeh, who vouched to “cut off the head of any gay or lesbian [person]” in the country [65] (p. 57). Intrigued by the contestation around homosexuality, I wrote in my Ph.D. application letter that “Africa is in need of bold research that can break the silence” on stereotypes that form the basis for a great deal of marginalization and discrimination within societies; this, in essence, summarized my motivation and enthusiasm for embarking on sensitive research on homosexual rights in Africa.

Energized by intrigue and the above motivation, I felt at the beginning of the research process that the relevance of my research for the African continent and, more broadly, for social sciences, was evident and would be appreciated and welcomed by my peers in academia, as well as by my friends and family members. However, I learned progressively during the research journey just how wrong this assumption was. As I worked in the first year of the doctoral program on fine-tuning my research design, I received several comments from peers and friends that aimed to diminish the value of my research. For example, upon learning about my research topic, a close relation sighed in Pidgin English: “Ashia-o-o-o my dear”! Literally, this translates into ‘Very sorry my dear’, but in the cheeky sense it was communicated, it really meant ‘Good luck in your absurdity, my dear’. In a similar fashion, one of my friends mockingly asked, “So now, if homosexuals are allowed to roam free and have sex, how will this help Africa?” She did not elaborate on how the sexual exploits of heterosexuals have helped Africa so far. In another instance, a colleague remarked, “Where will you work in Africa after undertaking such a research subject?” These comments, which were each accompanied by a soft smile, did not require a response as they were posed more as statements than as questions. A common undertone in these statements/questions was the allegation that my research was inconsequential (i.e., a non-issue), as homosexuality was considered “Un-African” [66] (p. 10). One of my colleagues in the broad field of African Studies was more forward in his remarks when, in response to my presentation about the focus of my research, he cautioned that I should “be careful of Western normativity”. In his comment, the allegation that I had bought into Western viewpoints was clear, though tacit. I smiled in response to the comment, as his presumptive advice itself smacked of normativity.

These multiple demotivating and dismissive comments, which I encountered right from the design phase of the study, viewed me as a sellout or traitor to Africa and its values, especially as I was African, heterosexual, and married. These discouraging comments were a huge contrast from the encouraging comments I obtained from peers and friends in my previous research that focused on protests for democratic rights in Cameroon. Researcher demotivation is rarely touched upon in research literature, even though low researcher motivation is an issue that could hinder the completion of research or dissuade young researchers from venturing into research on sensitive topics. Stephen Murray, for instance, highlights his experience as a graduate student in an environment where “research about homosexual men was seen as illegitimate advocacy” [67] (p. xix). He highlights that the comment, “no one is interested in your lifestyle,” penned by a professor on his seminar paper, was one of many pressures that aimed to discourage him from taking up research on same-sex sexuality [67] (p. xix). Meanwhile, Namatende-Sakwa [16] notes that fears of being rejected, rebuked, and humiliated by close relations and friends threatened to discourage her from taking up research on homosexuality in Uganda.

Faced with repeated incursions on my motivation from friends, family, and colleagues in my immediate research network, I felt a growing sense of loneliness in the initial phase of my research. Doctoral research has sometimes been described as a “solo journey” [68] (p. 52) or a “lonely walk” [69] (p. 236). In my experience, working in the African context on a socially unwelcomed issue, like homosexuality, while dealing with recurrent demotivating remarks could exacerbate feelings of loneliness in the researcher. In such circumstances, isolation is a trap that researchers should be alert to and should actively avoid. In isolation or loneliness, demoralizing remarks about one’s research may sow self-doubt and erode the researcher’s resilience to stay the course of the research journey. Attending conferences and broadening one’s research network are measures that can mitigate researcher isolation or feelings of loneliness [70,71]. In my experience, targeted networking with other researchers working on similar sensitive topics (same-sex sexuality and queer studies) helped sustain my motivation and commitment to my own research. For instance, in research conferences on sexuality, the potential contribution of my research was warmly received, validated, and appreciated. I felt at home in such circles of sexuality researchers. In the backdrop of the demotivating comments which I had become accustomed to receiving, my interactions with fellow researchers working on similar issues felt like drinking at an oasis after a journey across parched lands. In this group, I felt seen and heard rather than passively acknowledged, and I received constructive feedback that was useful for strengthening my research design.

Notwithstanding the positive responses from peers in the area of sexuality studies and their validation of my research as being appropriately designed and relevant, I faced difficulties securing full funding for this study. As I struggled with conducting my research with partial funding, I looked wistfully at colleagues whose research on ‘not-so-sensitive’ topics was fully funded, and I wondered whether funding decision panels had been put off by the perception of my research as risky or challenging. Considering the several remarks from peers who questioned the worthiness of homosexual rights in Africa as a research topic, I wondered whether the funding decision panels also perceived my research as less relevant in comparison to less socially awkward topics. Whether these conjectures are accurate or mere products of my disappointment, it is worthwhile for researchers who plan to take up sensitive topics like homosexuality to bear in mind the possibility that their expectations of securing funding might not materialize, which could affect the feasibility of their research. This consideration is important, as some studies have established that competitive funding mechanisms tend to show a bias towards “low-risk, mainstream, ‘cheap’, applied, [and] inflexible research” [72] (p. 502).

With partial funding, success in the research project required that I pay careful attention to delimiting the scope of the inquiry and striking a balance between defining research objectives that can make meaningful contributions to knowledge and, at the same time, are feasible to accomplish within my available means. While delimitation of the research scope is a fundamental consideration when designing research in general [73], researchers addressing sensitive topics may need to pay even greater attention to this aspect, given potential challenges with securing funding. On the one hand, my interest in the research topic inspired a temptation to design an ambitious study that addressed several facets of the topic. However, faced with funding challenges, I took the cautious approach of not biting off too much in terms of the research scope than I had resources to adequately chew on or address. I managed this balance by breaking down my overall research objective into discrete sub-objectives or questions; this helped me to better judge what would be required in terms of resources to cover the overall project, particularly the data collection stage, which is usually the most resource-intensive stage of empirical research. Furthermore, for feasibility reasons, I delimited the regional scope and sample size of the surveys that were part of the research. Specifically, to compare attitudes towards homosexuality among Cameroonians based at home and in Switzerland, I set an objective to administer 400 questionnaires in the Northwest and Southwest English-speaking regions of

Cameroon and 100 questionnaires among Cameroonians based in the Geneva municipality in Switzerland [56].

Another important action during the design phase that helped me to navigate through the challenge of working within funding constraints was conducting a pre-test or pilot study of the survey before embarking on the full-scale data collection. Pilot studies allow researchers to assess the appropriateness of data collection tools and identify potential risks and bottlenecks in the research context, thus reducing unpleasant surprises, waste of resources, and time [74] and avoiding frustrations during the data collection phase. Based on lessons learned from the survey pre-test in Cameroon, I revised some of the survey questions to improve clarity and avoid misinterpretation. Furthermore, from the pre-test, I realized that participants in the Cameroonian context generally preferred that the researcher administer the questionnaire to them as opposed to having them fill it out on their own. Accommodating this preference during the main data collection phase greatly contributed to my success in achieving the goal of administering 400 questionnaires in Cameroon.

4.2. Experiences during Data Collection

I stepped into the data collection phase with two conflicting feelings: excitement and anxiety. Having worked on my research design ad nauseam, I was excited and itchy to move on to administering the planned survey and conducting interviews to hear what the research participants had to say. However, I was also anxious as I was aware homosexuality was a socially unaccepted and thorny issue in the Cameroonian context around which emotions were high and vested interests and powers were at play. Concerns about whether people would be open to providing me with data and worries about my safety during fieldwork were on my mind. Forefront on my mind was a warning that a senior colleague with much research experience on homosexuality in the Cameroonian context had jokingly given me when we met for the first time in Basel:

“My God! Is this you? Why on earth will such a young person engage in homosexual research in Cameroon? Look at me! You can see that I am already old and retired so it’s not so bad if I should die now. But you are just starting your life”

(laughter).

In a similar vein, prior to my fieldwork, another colleague familiar with the Cameroonian context cautioned: *“I hope you will put on your wedding ring when you go for data collection”*. These well-meaning words of caution were in recognition that homosexuality was considered a quintessential affront to masculine identity in the Cameroonian context.

I took the warnings seriously, especially as I was a woman stepping into the patriarchal Cameroonian setting [75] to research a sexual practice that “challenge[d] dominant definitions of patriarchal masculinity” [76] (p. 6). As a precautionary measure for safety, I ensured I was accompanied by a male chaperone when I administered questionnaires or conducted qualitative interviews in localities I did not know well. The chaperone was only intended as a deterrent against harassment. As such, he stepped away after I introduced myself to the research participants, thus allowing space for one-on-one confidential discussions, which was an important principle of the study. In instances where I was unaccompanied during data collection in familiar neighborhoods, I stayed alert to the demeanor of the research participant and calmly exited the researcher–participant interaction if I sensed hostility. In one case, for instance, a male subject whom I approached to participate in the survey waved me off contemptuously and said in anger: *“Don’t disturb me, I am a Christian and this is the Lent period; I don’t want to hear about homosexuality”*. Sensing hostility, I calmly apologized and walked out of his view before approaching another person.

While the safety measures of being accompanied by a chaperone and avoiding friction with unreceptive research subjects may seem excessive, they helped achieve my survey objectives without a major security incident. In sensitive research on homosexuality, success in fieldwork is not about fearless martyrdom but about achieving the data collection target safely so that analysis can proceed. To my surprise, establishing trust with research

participants in Cameroon proved easier than with Cameroonians in Switzerland. Many research participants in Cameroon showed interest, and sometimes even excitement, in participating in this study, as they saw it as an opportunity to make their voices heard on the topic. This interest in participating was a manifestation of the status as a juicy topic for gossip [77], which homosexuality has gained in the Cameroonian context. This appeal as a topic for gossip was particularly incited in 2006 when some privately-owned newspapers published a list of top government officials allegedly engaged in homosexuality [34,78] without presenting a shred of evidence to support their claim. Therefore, despite the sensitive nature of the research topic, the strong interest in homosexuality as a subject of discussion in the rumor mill in Cameroon proved beneficial during the data collection process.

Compared to the research population based in Cameroon, Cameroonians living in Switzerland showed much hesitation to participate in the survey and required additional reassurance regarding confidentiality. Specifically, the concern within this group was that, if not kept confidential, their responses to the survey could put them in an awkward position in their social circles or even cause them to lose their jobs in the Swiss context, where discrimination against gay and lesbian people is illegal. An initial low response rate of 4% in this research group made me realize that an internet-based survey (i.e., sending the survey as a link in an email) was not an appropriate approach for administering the survey. While internet surveys offer distinct advantages in terms of providing greater anonymity, convenience, and cost efficiency [79], Cameroonians in Switzerland found email surveys to be too aloof. To participate in the research, they desired a rapport with the researcher in the form of an introduction from a mutual acquaintance, followed by an in-person meeting or a phone call to learn some personal details about the researcher and obtain more information about the objectives of the study. Making small talk and sharing information about my family situation and my life in the diaspora proved to be a necessary foreplay to build trust and successfully recruit participants. It was only when I incorporated this aspect in my purposeful sampling and snowballing approach that I made progress in the survey and achieved the objective of 100 completed questionnaires in Switzerland. Therefore, while practical aspects, such as wide access to the internet and a limited research budget, may point researchers toward using a certain survey approach (e.g., internet surveys), the cultural predisposition of the research participants may dictate that a different approach should be used (e.g., researcher-administered surveys). Being attentive to this aspect in the context of sensitive research is important, as it can help researchers avoid the pitfall of investing too much time and effort in the wrong approach before course-correcting.

Conducting qualitative interviews brought forth different experiences during the research process when compared to survey-based data collection, as interviews entailed longer and closer interactions with research participants. I realized during my first semi-structured interviews in Cameroon that, for many research participants, the issue of homosexual rights was a war of cultures where there were two sides and where Africa's very existence, identity, and future were at stake. In their view, you were either for Africa, meaning having zero tolerance for homosexuality, or against Africa. During qualitative interviews, research participants frequently urged that I declare which side I stood for. Participants asked questions like: "What is your own opinion"? "Are you a Christian"? "Tell me, how do you see this Whiteman's 'thing'"? The frequency of these questions from research participants speaks to the highly sensitive nature of homosexuality in the Cameroonian context. I found myself in a dilemma about whether to share my views or not.

On the one hand, I valued the viewpoint that "an interview is an exchange" [80] (p. 342) and felt a strong wish to demonstrate reciprocity by sharing my personal views. However, on the other hand, I was conscious that homosexuality was highly sensitive in the Cameroonian context. In this context, there was no way of telling if my personal view would not influence or bias the participant's responses or whether it would not put the relationship with the respondent in an awkward or antagonistic dynamic. In this dilemma, I decided to err on the side of caution by not disclosing my personal views. I truthfully

explained to respondents that the objective of my study was to hear their views in their purest form and that I wanted to avoid influencing or tainting their views with my opinion. This candidness satisfied respondents, and although it did not stop them from asking about my views again during the interview, they did so lightheartedly. When they did, I responded by smiling, and they continued sharing their views.

Respondents' views sometimes took the form of unrestrained vitriolic hate speech about gay and lesbian people. A large body of literature on sensitive research notes that conducting research on sensitive topics can have a significant emotional and psychological impact on researchers [27,40,81,82]. Specifically, the process of data collection could expose the researchers to witness the tough realities of people's lives, and they may find it hard to maintain a professional distance or remain unaffected by the information they are exposed to. Awareness of these emotional risks helped me to mentally prepare prior to beginning interviews. I steeled myself emotionally by accepting with humility that I did not have the power to change the social order automatically in one direction or another or in the interest of any individual. With this acceptance, I was able to engage participants in interviews without the guilt of feeling powerless and without embodying their experiences and stories or taking their views personally.

Upfront mental preparation was effective in helping me maintain professionalism while listening to and discussing vitriolic homophobia with interview respondents in Cameroon. However, such upfront mental preparation was not foolproof. In two instances during the qualitative interviews, I found myself morally conflicted and struggled inwardly before maintaining professional detachment. In the first instance, a respondent in Cameroon spoke to me about gay men in a particularly degrading way. Although I had become used to hearing homophobia in interviews, this instance was different because as he spoke, the participant laughed loudly while beckoning me with the expectation that I should find it funny and laugh along. While the researcher in me wanted to demonstrate active listening by reciprocating with "nods, smiles [and chuckles to] encourage further elaboration from the interviewee" [83] (p. 6), another part of me was concerned I would be validating hate speech inadvertently if I showed such a response. I felt my throat dry as I battled with my internal conflict and ethical discomfort. As the interviewee continued to laugh, I turned to the note pad on my lap and took notes intently; this gave me a few much-needed seconds to get my conflicting emotions under control and to clear the hoarseness from my throat without revealing my discomfort. I lifted my head from my scribbling, took a sip of water, and said: "*Tell me more why you feel this way about homosexuality*". With my emotions back in check, I carried on with the interview, which yielded rich data on antigay stereotypes in Cameroon.

The second instance during data collection, when my professional detachment was unsettled, was in an interview with the pastor of a Pentecostal church in Cameroon. At the start of the interview, the pastor asked if I was Christian, and when I responded in the affirmative, he requested that I join him in prayer before we began the interview. In his prayer, the participant thanked God for the day and many other things, and to my surprise, he said: "*Thank you, heavenly father, for sending your daughter to come and research about how our country can be free of this evil of homosexuality*". I remained calm outwardly, but inwardly, I cringed at his presumption that because I was African and Christian, the goal of my research should naturally be to help fight against the advocacy for homosexual rights in Africa. Apart from being unsettled by the incorrect assumption, I wondered if this presumption of the objective of my research would not influence his responses to my questions. More specifically, I was concerned it could produce a problematic scenario in qualitative research where "interviewees tell the researcher what they believe she or he wants to hear" [84] (p. 125). At the end of the prayer, I thanked the pastor for making the time to talk with me, and I proceeded to clarify that the objective of my study was to understand his views on homosexuality in relation to the wider context in Cameroon that limits rights for gay people. Taking up the invitation to probe, which the respondent had

provided in his prayer, I then began the interview by asking: “*You referred to homosexuality as an evil, can you tell me why you consider it as such?*”

Regarding assumptions, I realized during the study that I held a few of my own that turned out to be fantasies. One such mistaken assumption was thinking that human rights organizations in Cameroon would be more inclined to support or speak favorably on the issue of rights for gay people. In one instance, when I walked into the office of a human rights non-governmental organization (NGO) in the city of Bamenda in the Northwest Region of Cameroon and introduced myself and my research topic, I was unexpectedly met with a chorus of “*Wohhh!*” (a Pidgin English expression of alarm) and “*Tufiakwa!*” (a Nigerian expression for abomination) from the three staff present. Amused by my look of bewilderment, one of the staff members elaborated: “*We don’t deal with those kinds of rights here [in our organization]*”. In other words, the NGO did not hold a perspective of human rights as a universal standard but rather subscribed to a ‘human rights a la carte’ approach, where they only selected and identified with dimensions of human rights that were socially acceptable in the cultural context.

In another example, I received an angry and rude response when I approached the manager of a human rights NGO in Bamenda whose objectives included the provision of support to populations who were most at risk of HIV. In this case, the respondent tried to intimidate me by asking that I present a government-issued permit to conduct research in the country. I responded calmly that as a Cameroon national, I did not require formal government authorization to conduct research, similar to when I conducted research as a student in one of the state universities prior to moving abroad. Sensing that the respondent’s adversarial reception was too strong to be surmounted through further explanations, I thanked her for giving me an audience and wished her a good day. The succinct journal entry, “*Assume nothing!*” that I made after leaving the meeting reflects how the experience somewhat inoculated me to be more aware of the baggage of assumptions I carried along as I conducted the research.

My affiliation with a European University somewhat played to my disadvantage during the data collection, as some research participants, like the NGO manager, perceived me as an outsider and were suspicious of me. My foreign affiliation also led some participants to assume I was paid to conduct the research, and therefore, they expected to be remunerated for participating. However, such disadvantages were compensated by my identity as a Cameroonian and by my familiarity with the culture and research context. These factors enabled me to effectively manage intimidating dynamics that arose in the interaction with some participants and facilitated my ability to build rapport with participants in qualitative interviews. I took the opportunity of this great rapport-building potential to organize and facilitate a focus group discussion with four participants in Switzerland. The focus group serves as a suitable forum in which “participants engage in a range of argumentative behaviors, which results in a depth of dialogue not often found in individual interviews” [85] (p. 367). In this regard, the focus group was an effective approach not only for stimulating discussion on homosexuality as a sensitive and controversial issue but also for triangulating or validating some of the research findings arising from the analysis of the research data.

4.3. Experiences at the Data Analysis and Publishing Stage

Sally Thorne notes that “unquestionably, data analysis is the most complex. . . of all of the phases of a qualitative [research] project” [86] (p. 68). Based on my own experiences, I could not agree more with this assertion. However, I would add that data analysis can also be the most rewarding phase in sensitive research, especially when the analysis yields new insights or interesting perspectives that contradict or challenge hegemonic positions or voices in the research context or field. But how do we obtain the most out of data during analysis? While there could be many responses to this question, I learned one key response to the question through the “*So what?*” question, which one of my supervisors persistently asked me. In almost every project update meeting where I presented the design or preliminary findings of one of the components of my research, he would ask

the brief and perplexing question: “*So what*”? And in the subsequent meeting, when I felt I had adequately reflected and considered the question, he would again ask: “*Okay, so what*”? After one such meeting, I found myself biting my fingernails as I inwardly asked myself in stupefaction: “*So what is his problem actually*”? However, subsequently, when I cleared my head of the momentary cloud of ego, I realized that through this ‘so what?’ question, he was nudging me towards a practice of applying critical thinking to my research data. Critical thinking became the single most important skill I developed during the research project, which enhanced my ability to prepare articles with compelling analytical discussions for publication.

William Huitt defines critical thinking as “the disciplined mental activity of evaluating arguments or propositions and making judgments that can guide. . . beliefs and . . . action” [87]. Applying critical thinking means recognizing that the role of the researcher is not limited to just collating and reporting quantitative data trends or recurrent codes in qualitative data, but it is also to robustly interrogate the data collected. Such interrogation entails asking questions like: What are the implications of the trends or positions evident in the data? On what assumptions are these positions based? Are there contradictions in these assumptions or positions? What silences jump out from the analysis? What mechanisms are implicated in silencing other positions? [88,89]. Browne and Kelly note that “it is easy to just stick with current beliefs, particularly when many people share them,” but critical thinking safeguards against hasty conformity to dominant beliefs, including the researcher’s own beliefs [88] (p. 10). In research on sensitive and controversial issues of sexuality, it is paramount that the researchers’ analyses ‘go deep’; otherwise, there is no point in engaging intimately with the controversial subject in the first place. In thinking critically about my research data, I effectively straddled the dual role of the researcher as an involved participant and the researcher as a detached observer. In other words, as a participant, I sought to understand how research subjects construct meaning within their given context. As a detached observer, I critically evaluated the premises and assumptions behind research participants’ views, as opposed to taking them at face value [90].

Bailin and Siegel aptly note that critical thinking “leads to the questioning of assumptions, the breaking of rules, the rearrangement of elements—and thus results in products that exhibit considerable novelty” [91] (p. 187). While researchers would agree that science is advanced when research generates novel findings, I learned through experience in the research journey that the research community is sometimes not always welcoming of innovative perspectives outside the mainstream, even if these are robustly supported by data analysis. For instance, when I submitted one of my research articles entitled “Shades of Homophobia: A Framework for Analyzing Negative Attitudes towards Homosexuality” [92] for journal publication, the paper was rejected outrightly by all three reviewers selected to assess it. From the reviewers’ comments, I noticed some concerning elements. The first was rigidity or reluctance to entertain the possibility that mainstream perspectives can be questioned; this was exemplified by a comment from one of the reviewers that characterized my critical analysis as “*straw-person critiques of literature on homophobia which are rigorous and empirically grounded*”. The second element of concern took the form of efforts by the reviewers to steer the paper away from its stated objective and towards more comfortable or non-controversial areas. For instance, one reviewer recommended I “*reframe the article. . . to look at contemporary discourses around homophobic attitudes*”. Another reviewer recommended that I “*reframe the work*” towards understanding “*homophobia as a social artifact*” and move away from querying the conceptualization or definition of homophobia. The third element of concern was confusion in the peer feedback, which hinted that the reviewers were unfamiliar with the paper’s specific subject matter; this manifested as brush stroke critiques that were not substantiated. A telling example was a comment that the paper “*does not unpack the difference between states or conditions of ‘homophobia’ and what can be described as ‘homophobic’*”—a comment that I struggled unsuccessfully to decipher and which made me wish for the code-cracking Enigma machine.

As the journal in question (Impact factor 2.494) was one that covered the broad social sciences, I speculated that perhaps the ultimate reason why all three reviewers missed the point was that homosexuality research was not a topic of their specialty. I therefore wrote a detailed rebuttal of the reviewers' feedback to the editor, but I received a brief response that the rejection decision was final. Convinced of the merits of the paper, I submitted it with minimal changes to a journal focused on homosexuality research (Impact factor 2.496), and the reviewer responses were overwhelmingly positive. One reviewer, for instance, commented:

"I tried very hard, but could not find any point of weakness in this manuscript. The intro is without a doubt one of the best I have ever read, and the framework is presented in a way that attracts the reader and provides him/her with a convincing overview of evidence".

Another reviewer remarked:

"Overall, I think this paper makes a very interesting contribution to how we can think about the 'shades of homophobia.' I can see how researchers would be able to take this as a starting point, either to expand on the different typologies outlined within, challenge them, or suggest new ways of thinking."

My objective in sharing these experiences or challenges at the analysis and reporting stage of my research on a sensitive topic is not to whine, gloat, or revel in self-gratification. My intent in reflecting on the experiences is to encourage young researchers to think critically about their data during analysis and to have confidence in innovative perspectives that materialize from the data analysis. Based on my experience, I encourage that when confronted with dismissive critique from mainstream perspectives, researchers addressing sensitive topics should not hastily fold and align with popular viewpoints. Rather, they should reassess the robustness of their analysis and stand their ground when the innovative perspectives emerging from the study are evidence-based. Understandably, young researchers might struggle with issues of self-confidence during their research, and it is important that they stay open-minded to learn from the works of experienced researchers; in other words, they learn to "stand on the shoulders of giants" [93]. However, they should also bear in mind that conducting critical analysis and bringing up innovative perspectives does not have an eligibility restriction in terms of years of research experience or age.

Furthermore, before deciding on the journal to which they would like to submit their research for publication, I suggest, based on my experience, that the researcher check the journal review board to confirm it includes scholars with expertise in the specific topic that is the focus of the paper. I would also urge that to avoid the unintended outcome of stifling new perspectives, journal peer review processes should incorporate greater flexibility by providing an opportunity for authors to submit rebuttals to reviewers' feedback and to carefully consider and respond to such counterarguments. "The peer review process is considered sacrosanct in science" [94] (p. 1333), and critiquing the quality of peer review almost feels like crossing taboo lines—reminiscent of how it felt conducting sensitive research on homosexuality in Cameroon. I argue that in our collective pursuit of knowledge, such a taboo mentality should not prevail in the research community. As researchers working on sensitive issues like homosexuality, we walk into people's lives and ask them to discuss things close to their hearts for the benefit of research and the advancement of science. If we cannot openly discuss our own sensitivities and discomforts in the research process, including questioning the quality of peer review feedback when necessity dictates, then what are we about? Some of the experiences and challenges described above may not be uncommon in other types of research beyond studies that address sensitive topics. However, they are often exacerbated in sexuality research, where inquiry focuses on private and intimate issues around which there may be heightened polarization of views, entrenched perspectives, and considerable risks for some individuals.

5. Conclusions

Scientific research publications predominantly focus on reporting the results of the research conducted, especially those studies that are based on empirical data. This is not surprising, as a key goal of research is to find evidence-based answers to research puzzles that can advance our knowledge of the world. As Gastel and Day [95] (p. 4) unequivocally put it, the purpose of research is “to communicate new scientific findings”. Scientific journals tend to motivate this focus on results through instructions or guidelines to authors that encourage and sometimes require researchers to organize their articles in terms of introduction, methods, results, and discussion (the IMRAD structure). Consequently, most research articles that make it through the rigorous peer review process tell a very organized, elegant, and almost romantic account of how the researcher smoothly and expertly applied qualitative or quantitative methods to answer the research question they embarked on. However, in many cases, this neat cruise from the research question to findings that well-polished research articles (inadvertently) convey is not always the reality of research, particularly in the case of sensitive research on sexuality.

In effect, existing literature on sensitive research highlights that the research process could be fraught with difficulties when compared to non-sensitive topics. Even for experienced researchers, research on sensitive topics like homosexuality could be quite an eventful process, comprising setbacks, surprises, and lesson learning. Such experiences could include: (a) facing value-loaded discouragement from peers regarding the relevance of the research for society; (b) difficulty in securing funding for the research; (c) instances during fieldwork when the researcher’s assumptions landed them in a delicate or embarrassing situation; (d) good days during which the researcher bonded well with interviewees and left the interviews with a wealth of data; (e) tough days when a prospective research participant figuratively slammed the door in the researcher’s nose; or (f) that one time when the researcher unconsciously bit their nails sore while trying to zero in on the constructs and implications behind common themes identified in their qualitative data analysis. Hanssen and Larsen [96] have noted that the researcher’s level of experience positively influences the quality of the research. Consequently, beyond presenting research findings, there is value in publishing articles that discuss the researcher’s lived experiences during the research process, particularly for the benefit of researchers who are new to the research area.

In this article, I have presented an autoethnographic account of the experiences I grappled with as I carried out research on attitudes towards homosexuality among Cameroonians based at home and in Switzerland. While doing so, I have departed from the typical construct or depiction of the researcher as a master or ‘superbeing’ and have discussed the vulnerabilities I experienced while researching homosexuality. Through this approach of ‘keeping it real’, I hope the article provides young researchers with some useful insights to help them to (i) brace and mentally steel themselves against potential motivation-damping statements from peers as they pursue their research on sexuality, (ii) design meaningful research while balancing with feasibility considerations linked to challenges of securing funding, (iii) take personal safety seriously or err on the side of caution, (iv) develop the mental fortitude to remain professional while listening to interviewee responses loaded with vitriolic hatred towards LGBTQ people, and (v) believe in the innovative perspectives that their research analyses point to and strive to substantiate these, as opposed to immediately folding or defaulting to mainstream perspectives when faced with negative peer review feedback.

In the autoethnographic account, I have tried to describe my positive experiences and vulnerabilities in the research process while keeping in mind the caution that autoethnography should not spiral into narcissistic storytelling. Openness about the vulnerabilities experienced while conducting research on sensitive topics like homosexuality is empowering if it motivates others to not let sensitivities deter them from embarking on such sexuality research. I hope the article convinces young researchers working on homosexuality that the hiccups they may encounter are not uncommon and that they are not alone. I hope it motivates them to forge ahead through the research process, similar to how my

colleague Zinette Bergman once encouraged me to “keep swimming” by dangling a promise of “champagne on ice” waiting for me at the finish.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was approved as appropriate in the context of doctoral research at the University of Basel, specifically at the Graduate School of Social Sciences (G3S). This autoethnography paper is based on the researcher’s experiences in a study on attitudes toward homosexuality, where data was collected from research participants through surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions. Signed informed consent was sought from all participants in the study prior to their participation. The informed consent form (i) transparently disclosed the objective of the research to the participants, (ii) specified that they are invited to participate only if doing so poses no risk to them, and (iii) reassured participants that their identities will be kept confidential, and data will be reported anonymously.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study on which this autoethnography is based. In addition, in this article, the description of the researcher’s experiences with research participants and other stakeholders in the overall research process are anonymized to protect their identities. In one instance where the identity of a stakeholder was disclosed, signed consent was obtained.

Data Availability Statement: This paper is based on personal experiences documented in fieldnotes during my research. For confidentiality, the fieldnotes cannot be made publicly available, but anonymized extracts are available upon request.

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