



RESEARCH ARTICLE

PERCEPTION OF STUDENTS ON HOMOSEXUALITY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the knowledge of secondary school students on the meaning of the term homosexuality. It also investigated the students' perception of homosexual practice in secondary schools, the type of secondary school where homosexuality is most practiced, and the root cause of homosexuality. The sample comprised 258 participants (129 female and 129 male) who were Form 3 students drawn from 10 secondary schools in western Kenya. A biographical form and homosexuality questionnaire were used in data collection. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used in data analyses with alpha level set at .05. The results showed that majority of the participants (93%) knew the meaning of homosexuality; that homosexuality is practiced in secondary schools in Kenya; that homosexuality is mainly practised in single sex boarding secondary schools; and that sexual starvation is perceived as the main root cause of homosexuality in secondary schools. Stakeholders in the educational sector and policy makers could find these findings useful in addressing legal and moral issues on homosexuality in secondary schools in the country.

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INTRODUCTION

Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was generally believed that people were either heterosexual or homosexual. Today, it is more accepted in some parts of the world to view sexual orientation along a continuum from exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality rather than as either/or proposition. It is also believed that some individuals are bisexual, being attracted to people of both sexes (Santrock, 2004). But, in most countries in Africa it is still believed that people are born heterosexual and that homosexuals are sexual psychopaths who should be prosecuted. One such country is Kenya, where homosexuality and same-sex marriages are criminalized by law (Anderson, 2007). Homosexuality, which according to Byrd and Olsen (2002) is a sexual activity between two partners of the same sex, is prohibited in Kenya. In the Kenyan law, sections 162 to 165 of the Penal Code criminalize both actual and attempted homosexual behavior between men, which is referred to as "carnal knowledge against the order of nature". The penalty for homosexuality is five to 14 years imprisonment. Section 162 states that: Any person who has carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature; or permits a male person to have carnal knowledge of him or her against the order of nature, is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment for 14 years. Whereas section 165 states that: Any male person who, whether in public or private commits any act of gross indecency with another male person, or procures another male person to commit any act of gross indecency with him, or

attempts to procure the commission of any such act by any male person with himself or with another male person, whether in public or private, is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment for five years (The Republic of Kenya, 2009). It is noteworthy that the Kenyan Penal Code is silent about lesbianism, a state which may be construed to mean that lesbian relations are not prohibited by law. But, in practice it appears that the government officials believe that lesbianism is also outlawed in Kenya. For instance, the Prime Minister of Kenya, Raila Odinga has called for lesbians to be arrested along with gay men because their behaviour was unnatural (Barasa, 2010, November 28; BBC News, 2010, November 29). Moreover, the Permanent Secretary Ministry of Education stated that "homosexuality, lesbianism and drug abuse are widespread in learning institutions in Kenya, and that students found to be involved in these vices would be expelled from learning institutions and prosecuted." He also blamed immoral practices on ignorant parents who fail to discuss sexual matters with their children and on bad socialization process which according to him is the root cause of homosexual practices in schools (Munene, 2011). The new Constitution of Kenya which was ratified through a referendum on August 4, and promulgated on August 27, 2010 does not talk about homosexuality, but it bans same-sex marriages. Article 45 part 2 under the Family section of the constitution states that: "Every adult has the right to marry a person of the opposite sex, based on the free consent of the parties" (The Republic of Kenya, 2010). This article of the constitution is being interpreted to mean that same-sex (both gay and lesbian) marriages are proscribed in Kenya. The Kenyan Constitution and Law prohibiting same-sex marriages and homosexuality

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respectively seem to be based on the natural law ethics. According to the natural law ethics, homosexuality and same-sex marriages are immoral because they are unnatural – they go against the purpose of sex and marriage, which is the procreation of the species (Finnis, 1970).

Although homosexuality is prohibited by law in Kenya, it exists in the country and some individuals involved in this practice are not cowed by the law. They have come out in the open and are demanding their rights. For instance, in the year 2007 gay men and lesbians came out openly to demand their rights during the World Social Forum which was held in Nairobi. At this Forum, the Kenyan gay men and lesbians publicly declared that they were not ashamed of their sexual orientation. One of them, a 20-year old University of Nairobi law student Judith Ngunjiri said that she realised she was lesbian at age 10 and in Standard 3. “I had a crush on a girl. I liked girls and not boys. I did not just sit and decide that I am lesbian. Some people think that one just decides to be lesbian or gay. It is how you are born, either heterosexual or homosexual,” Ngunjiri said. She added that her parents and closest friends at the University knew that she was lesbian. During the same Forum, a young man, Emmanuel Kamau confessed that he was gay, and he alleged that one in every five Kenyan men is a homosexual and that homosexuality is genetic in origin (Barasa, 2007).

Homosexuality which is found throughout human societies is a matter of concern to everyone (Ruse, 1988). It is a concern because nobody is certain about what determines whether people become homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual. The cause of homosexuality is still a topic of much speculation and numerous theories have been advanced about its origin. An early and unsupported biological view proposed that homosexual and heterosexual males differ in their levels of sex hormones (McFadden, 2002). Other early theories hypothesized that male homosexuality develops when boys grow up with a weak ineffectual father and identify with a domineering mother, or that being sexually seduced by an adult homosexual causes children to divert their sex drive toward members of their own sex. A recent theory proposed that there may be a “gay gene” on the q28 region of the X-chromosome (Hamer, 1999). All these theories have taken very serious scientific beating and have been dismissed for lacking in evidence, in fact, none has proved completely satisfactory (Passer and Smith, 2007; Feldman, 2009). Because of the difficulty in finding a consistent explanation, most researchers reject the notion that any single factor orients a person toward homosexuality (Bem, 1996). Moreover, researchers have recently recognized that the aetiology of heterosexuality is equally puzzling, and scholarly inquiry now addresses the broad question of how sexual orientation develops in any given individual. A satisfactory answer to this question has not yet been found. It is possible that scientists will eventually identify multiple ways in which a person comes to be homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual, with biological, psychological and cultural factors all playing a role in this complex process (Herek, 2004). From the literature reviewed it is certain that there are still more questions than answers about homosexuality, particularly about whether it is a normal or deviant sexual behaviour or whether it is treatable or not. The purpose of this article is to contribute to our understanding of homosexuality by exploring the perceptions

of secondary school students in Kenya about it. Kenya is an ideal context for this study because the laws of the land prohibit homosexuality and ban same-sex marriages, yet there is overwhelming evidence that homosexuality is practised and cases of same-sex marriages among Kenyans have been reported (Njenga and Weru, 2009, October 17). In a country like Kenya, it is beneficial to find out the opinions of young people on this sexual behaviour because it is outlawed yet practiced. Moreover, most of these young people attend same-sex boarding schools where they are likely to observe homosexual relationships, if they do exist.

For many decades homosexuality was considered as a deviation from the norm and was classified as a mental disorder by the mental health community. In fact, some State laws allowed homosexuals to be detained indefinitely for treatment as sexual psychopaths. The psychologists and psychiatrists were mandated to “cure” it; that is, to convert homosexual people into heterosexuals (Plummer, 1996). This belief that homosexuality is treatable was reinforced by Freud’s psychosexual theory of human growth and development. According to Freud, male homosexuality develops when the child fails to resolve the Oedipal conflict and misdirects his libido toward members of the same gender. By loving males, the boy does not violate the incest taboo against his unresolved sexual desire for his mother (Freud, 1905). Thus, for a long time the mental health community unquestioningly adopted Freud’s assessment of homosexuality as a perversion and a mental disorder. Whether homosexuality is curable or not is a subject which has been debated for many decades and has not been fully resolved. There are research studies which have revealed that change of sexual orientation does take place. The authors of these studies do report that the conversion of homosexuals into heterosexuals is possible but it is not a quick or easy process. They also note that as with any other therapeutic issues, varying degrees of change from homosexual to heterosexual are achievable through therapy and other means. In fact, today, there are church ministers, counsellors and psychotherapists who practice conversion therapy. For instance, a group called Exodus International formed by a coalition of church ministers believe that they can help people give up their homosexual identity (Spitzer, 2003; Byrd and Nicolosi, 2002).

On the other hand, mainstream psychotherapists have reported that conversion therapy is immoral and rarely successful in changing the behaviour of homosexuals (AMA, 1994, December 22). For instance, the American Psychological Association opposes the use of reparative therapy, arguing that homosexuality is not a mental disorder and that there are possible harmful effects of the therapy on homosexuals (APA, 1997). In fact, in 1974 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders (Cameron, 1978). From this date, psychotherapists have rejected treatment for homosexuals because they are usually ineffective, often harmful to the client, and ethically questionable. Instead, most mental health practitioners working with gay and lesbian clients try to assist them in developing positive feelings about their sexuality, establishing meaningful intimate relationships, and coping with societal stigma (Herek, 2004). The purpose of this article was not to argue whether homosexuality is a normal or deviant sexual behaviour, or whether it is treatable or not. These arguments

are beyond the scope of this article. The purpose of this article was to explore the perceptions of young Kenyans on homosexuality in secondary schools in the country. Kenya offers a good research population for this study because the laws of the land prohibit homosexuality and ban same-sex marriages, yet there is overwhelming evidence that homosexuality is practised and cases of same-sex marriages among Kenyans have been reported (Njenga and Weru, 2009, October 17). In a country like Kenya, it is informative to find out the opinions of young people on this sexual behaviour which is outlawed yet practiced.

### Research Questions

Four research questions were posed and answered in this study. These questions were:

- 1) Do secondary school students in Kenya know the meaning of homosexuality?
- 2) Do secondary school students believe that homosexuality is practiced in schools?
- 3) In which type of secondary school do students believe homosexuality is most practised?
- 4) What do secondary school students believe is the root cause of homosexuality?

### METHODS

The study was conducted in Nyanza, Western and Rift Valley provinces in the western part of Kenya. This region was chosen for the study because it has registered several anecdotal reports on homosexual practices in secondary schools. The anecdotal reports came to the notice of the researchers during guidance and counselling practicum assessments. The authors of this article are lecturers at a university in western Kenya and are involved in training and assessing guidance and counselling degree students who are mandated to undertake a three-month practicum in secondary schools before graduation. The authors received several reports from their students on practicum about homosexual practice among secondary school students. In one of the reports, a school principal mandated our student on practicum to counsel students involved in homosexuality in school and attempt to change them into heterosexuals. From such reports, the researchers postulated that students in secondary schools in western Kenya have some knowledge on homosexuality and would provide informed responses to the items in the questionnaire used in data collection.

### Research Design

This study was a quantitative research in which a survey research design was used to answer the research questions posed in the study. The survey design was most appropriate because this was an exploratory and descriptive study meant to assess the beliefs of students on homosexual practice in secondary schools in the country. The researchers also adopted a balanced research design whereby equal numbers of male and female participants were involved in the study. This was done so that the perceptions obtained were not skewed toward male or female participants.

### Population and Sample

The research population comprised Form 3 secondary school students in western Kenya. Form 3 students were chosen for

this study because they were mature and had stayed in secondary schools long enough to know whether or not homosexuality is practised by students in schools. Form 4 students who were also mature and had stayed in secondary schools longest were not involved in this study because by the time data was being collected they were busy preparing for their final national examination. Ten secondary schools randomly selected from the schools in the geographical location of the study participated. Both boarding and day secondary schools were involved in the study. From these schools, simple random sampling technique was used to select a sample which comprised 258 respondents (129 male and 129 female students). The participants were adolescents within 15 to 17 age bracket.

### Instruments and Procedures

Two research instruments developed by the researchers were used in data collection—a biographical form and homosexuality questionnaire. The biographical form contained items which generated data on gender, age and type of secondary school. The homosexuality questionnaire contained multiple choice items in which the participants were given two to eight alternatives to circle one. The clarity of the items in the questionnaire was ascertained and it had a test-retest reliability of .89. The researchers administered the two research instruments to the participants. The permission to collect data was obtained from the Ministry of Education, head teachers and from class teachers whose students were involved in the study. Permission was also sought from the participants.

### Data Analyses

The completed instruments were coded and the responses scored and keyed into a computer data file. There were no missing data perhaps because the researchers administered the instruments in person. All statistical analyses were run using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) computer programme. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used in data analyses. The descriptive statistics which were used in this study were frequencies and percentages, whereas the inferential statistics used was Chi-square. The alpha level was set at .05.

### Ethical Considerations

The researchers explained the objectives of the study to the head teachers, class teachers and to the participants. The participants were informed that there were no physical or psychological risks involved and that their participation in this study was voluntary. The participants were requested to read and sign the informed consent letter before engaging in the study. The respondents had the freedom to decline or withdraw from the study at anytime they deemed fit. They were also assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, and they were not required to write their names on any of the research instruments used in data collection.

### RESULTS

#### Knowledge about the Meaning of Homosexuality

The first research question posed in this study stated that: Do secondary school students in Kenya know the meaning of homosexuality? To answer this question, the participants were asked to respond to item 1 in the homosexuality questionnaire by circling the letter corresponding to one of the two choices given, which represents their knowledge. The item 1 read: What is homosexuality? The two choices given under this item were: A. It is a sexual relationship between two people of the same sex B. It is a sexual relationship between two people of the opposite sex. The responses of the participants to this item were scored and the results are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1. Responses about the Meaning of Homosexuality**

Choices	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
A (Correct)	240	93
B (Incorrect)	18	7
Total	258	100

The frequencies of the participants who ticked the correct choice (A) and of those who ticked the incorrect choice (B) were compared using Chi-square test. The result of the analysis showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the number of correct and incorrect choices,  $\chi^2(1) = 191.02, p = .000$ . It was then concluded that an overwhelming large number of secondary school students knew the meaning of the term homosexuality.

#### Belief about Homosexual Practice in Schools

The second research question posed in this study stated that: Do secondary school students believe that homosexuality is practiced in their schools? To answer this question, the participants were asked to respond to item 2 in the homosexuality questionnaire by circling the letter corresponding to one of the two choices given, which represents their opinion. The item 2 read: Do you believe that homosexuality is being practised by some students in your school? The two choices given under this item were: A. Yes B. No. The responses of the participants to this item were scored and the results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Responses about Homosexual Practice in Schools**

Belief on Homosexual Practice	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
A (Yes)	144	55.8
B (No)	114	44.2
Total	258	100

The frequencies of the number of participants who believe that homosexuality is practiced in their schools and of those who believe it is not were compared using Chi-square test. The result of the analysis showed that there was a statistically non-significant difference between the number of those who believed and those who did not believe that homosexuality is practiced in their schools,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.49, p = .062$ . It was then concluded that although the percentage of the participants who believed that homosexuality is practised in schools (55.8%) was higher than the percentage of those who did not believe (44.2%), the numbers of those who believed and those who did not were close.

#### Belief about Type of Secondary School where Homosexuality is most Practiced

The third research question posed in this study stated that: In which type of secondary school do you believe homosexuality is most practised? To answer this question, the participants were asked to respond to item 3 in the homosexuality questionnaire by circling the letter corresponding to one of the eight choices given, which represents their opinion. The item 3 read: In which one of the following types of secondary schools do you believe homosexuality is most practised? The eight choices given under this item were: A. All types of schools B. Boys boarding schools C. Girls boarding schools D. Mixed boarding schools E. Boys day schools F. Girls day schools G. Mixed day schools H. None of the schools. The responses of the participants were scored and the results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Belief about Type of School and Homosexual Practice**

Belief	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
A (All types of schools)	52	20.1
B (Boys boarding schools)	113	43.8
C (Girls boarding schools)	68	26.4
D (Mixed boarding schools)	10	3.8
E (Boys day schools)	3	1.2
F (Girls day schools)	1	0.4
G (Mixed day schools)	6	2.3
H (None of the schools)	5	2.0
Total	258	100.0

The frequencies of the number of participants having different opinions about the type of secondary school where homosexuality is most practised were compared using Chi-square test. The result of the analysis showed that there was a statistically significant difference among the number of participants having different beliefs about the type of school where homosexuality is most practised,  $\chi^2(7) = 226.84, p = .000$ . It was concluded that a large number (70.2%) of secondary school students believe that homosexuality is mostly practised in single sex boarding (boys and girls) schools. Very few participants (3.9%) believe that homosexuality is practised in day (girls, boys and mixed) schools. Whereas only a small number (20.1%) of participants believed that homosexuality is practised in all types of secondary schools.

#### Belief about the Root Cause of Homosexuality

The final research question posed in this study stated that: What do secondary school students believe is the root cause of homosexuality? To answer this question, the participants were asked to respond to item 4 in the homosexuality questionnaire by circling the letter corresponding to one of the six choices given, which represents their opinion. The item 4 read: Which one of the following do you believe is the main root cause of homosexual practice? The six choices given under this item were: A. Genes inherited from parents B. Socialization process in family C. Sexual starvation D. Demons/Satan E. Western culture influence F. Other (Specify). The responses of the participants to this item were scored and the results are reported in Table 4.

**Table 4. Belief about the Main Root Cause of Homosexuality**

Belief on Root Cause	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
A (Genes Inherited from Parents)	8	3.1
B (Socialization Process in Family)	46	17.8
C (Sexual Starvation)	165	64.0
D (Demons/Satan)	8	3.1
E (Western Culture Influence)	31	12.0
F (Other)	00	00.0
Total	258	100.0

The frequencies of the number of participants having different opinions about the root cause of homosexuality were compared using Chi-square test. The result of the analysis showed that there was a statistically significant difference among the number of participants having different beliefs about the root cause of homosexuality,  $\chi^2(5) = 331.73, p = .000$ . It was concluded that a large number of secondary schools students believe that homosexuality is mainly caused by sexual starvation (64%) followed by socialization process in the family. Fewer participants believe that homosexuality is caused by genes inherited from parents or by the demons/satan or by the influence of the Western culture. It was also concluded that secondary school students do not know any other cause of homosexuality because none suggested other causes.

## DISCUSSION

The result of data analysis pertaining to the first question on the knowledge of the participants about the meaning of homosexuality revealed that an overwhelming majority of the secondary school students (93%) know the meaning of the term homosexuality. This finding reassured the researchers that participants involved in this study knew the meaning of homosexuality. The participants responses to the items in the homosexuality questionnaire used in data collection were therefore construed to be accurate reflection of the students' beliefs on homosexuality as practised in secondary schools in Kenya. The finding that majority of the participants knew the meaning of homosexuality is not surprising because Form 3 students involved in the study were mature and likely to have learned about the meaning of homosexuality in class or through reading news papers and/or from the internet. In addition, the students may have learnt the meaning of the term homosexuality during the campaign period for the referendum on the draft new constitution in the year 2010. There was a heated debate in the country about homosexuality during the referendum because the clergy and some citizens opposed the draft constitution on the notion that homosexuality and abortion were permitted in the document. During the debate between supporters and opponents of the draft constitution, the meaning of the term homosexuality was elucidated.

The fears of the clergy and some citizens that homosexuality was permitted in the draft constitution were unfounded because the term homosexuality does not appear at all in the new constitution. It seems that those who opposed the draft constitution simply wanted the drafters to state in the constitution that homosexuality is illegal in Kenya. The result of data analysis on the second question about homosexual practice in secondary schools indicates that most of the

participants (55.8%) believe that homosexuality exists in schools. The finding confirms the fear of some parents that their children are engaging in homosexuality in schools. It also supports the statement made by the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education that homosexuality and lesbianism are widespread in learning institutions in Kenya (Munene, 2011, April 11). It brings to the fore the need for educators and policy makers to re-examine the legal and moral issues about homosexuality in the country. Mere prohibition of homosexuality in law may not deter secondary school students from engaging in homosexual practice.

The data analysis on the third research question about the type of secondary school in which homosexuality is most practised showed that a large number of the participants (65.9%) believe that homosexuality is mostly practised in single sex (boys and girls) boarding secondary schools. This finding is supported by the result of data analysis on the fourth research question in which the participants were asked to indicate what they believe is the root cause of homosexuality. The result indicated that majority of participants (64%) believe that homosexuality is caused by sexual starvation. These two findings are related because assuming that homosexuality is caused by sexual starvation, students in boarding secondary schools are more heterosexually starved than students in day secondary schools, and are therefore more likely to engage in homosexual relationships. In boarding secondary schools in Kenya, there are strict rules governing visits by the opposite sex. For instance, in boys' boarding schools, visiting female students are not allowed into the dormitories. In addition, girls are not allowed in boys' school compound after 6 pm. These regulations limit the chances of students in boarding schools engaging in heterosexual relationships during the school term. Thus, sexually active heterosexual students in single sex boarding schools may feel sexually starved during the school term. It may be posited that during the school term when students in single sex boarding schools are less likely to relate to their peers of the opposite sex, they may be tempted to engage in homosexual practice. This scenario may be construed to mean that secondary school students who engage in homosexuality are actually bisexual – they act homosexual during school term and turn heterosexual during school holidays. The reason behind this perception is not clear and needs further investigation. Perhaps the youths in secondary schools believe that a bisexual identity is a transitional identity to a subsequent heterosexual identity. This is contrary to the report by Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, and Braun (2006) that bisexual identity is a transitional identity to a subsequent homosexual identity.

The finding of this study that sexual starvation is the main root cause of homosexuality in schools contradicts the general belief in the country that homosexuality is mainly caused by the influence of the Western culture. There is a common claim that homosexuality is a product of Western culture, and that it is being spread to young people in the country the way Christianity was spread in Africa. The data analyzed in this study did not support this claim. Moreover, the data did not support research report that homosexuality is genetic in origin. A paltry number of participants (3.1%) believe that homosexuality is caused by genes inherited from parents. However, the findings of this study confirms that there are still more questions than answers about aetiology of homosexuality

and that the search for the cause of this sexual behaviour is far from complete.

## Conclusion

This was an exploratory and not confirmatory study because very few systematic studies on homosexuality have been done in Kenya. Homosexuality is a topic loaded with emotions and researchers in the country tend to shy away from it. However, there is need for investigation on homosexuality because it is still poorly understood and paucity of data about it may affect the quality of decisions made in the country. This study has made a contribution to our understanding of homosexuality in the country by reporting that secondary school students know the meaning of homosexuality; it is practised in schools; it is common in single sex boarding schools; and that its primary cause is perceived to be sexual starvation. A follow up study should be done to systematically explore in detail why students believe that sexual starvation is the main root cause of homosexual behaviour in schools.

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