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SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social institutions and same-sex sexuality: Attitudes, perceptions and prospective rights and freedoms for non-heterosexuals

Padmore Adusei Amoah^{1*} and Razak Mohammed Gyasi¹

Abstract: Religious and cultural values have been used as a yardstick to disregard the rights and freedoms of people in non-normative sexual relationships in many African countries. However, little is known about the extent to which this assertion is empirically buttressed by public opinion in the Kumasi Metropolis in Ghana. Employing in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion, this study sought public opinion on how religious and cultural precepts informed attitudes and perception on same-sex sexuality. Twenty people who were aged 19 to 60 years participated in the study. The phenomenon of same-sex sexuality was expressively distasteful to majority of participants on grounds of religious and cultural values. Same-sex sexuality was considered as something orchestrated by the “devil” and a cultural taboo. Participants either directly—being friends, or by inference—living in the same house, generally detested association with non-heterosexuals. Legitimation of rights and freedoms for homosexuals was therefore not an option for majority of the participants except for those that had attained tertiary level education who demonstrated some level of tolerance despite their religious and cultural inclinations. Notwithstanding the religious and culturally founded despise for same-sex sexuality, some participants justified the need to embrace non-heterosexuals based on same values. These social institutions largely prohibit same-sex sexuality. However, they also offer opportunities to tactfully address discrimination and stigmatisation of sexual minorities within the confines of the prevailing value system in Kumasi.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Padmore Adusei Amoah is currently a PhD candidate in Social Policy at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. He embraces both qualitative and quantitative methods. He has interdisciplinary research interests including population health and health service research (especially regarding access to health care and health literacy among general population and youth), social capital and sexuality. This paper is part of an attempt to expatiate on the burgeoning public discourse on same-sex sexuality in Ghana.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The present study highlights how people in Kumasi, Ghana rely on religious and cultural ideologies to act and make decisions as regards same-sex sexuality. The study elicited public opinion through three scenarios namely: whether one would be willing to befriend and/or live in the same house as a homosexual and whether one would subscribe to laws that extend rights and freedoms to non-heterosexuals. The paper demonstrates that religious and cultural values rather than personal principles underscored attitudes and perceptual experience on same-sex sexuality. In general, the participants loathed the phenomenon of same-sex sexuality in its entirety. Of interest, however, is the finding that some religious and cultural values could create avenues for addressing the concerns regarding non-heterosexuality instead of meting out harsh sanctions such as ostracism and perhaps physical abuse on people who prefer same-sex sexual relationships.

Subjects: Social Sciences; Sociology of Culture; Sociology of Religion

Keywords: religion; culture; same-sex sexuality; heterosexism; social integration; human rights; public opinion; Ghana

1. Background

In many African states, the phenomenon of same-sex sexuality is unthinkable at least in the public spaces (Dankwa, 2009; Essien & Aderinto, 2009). People have been maimed, imprisoned and even killed in some countries (Sandner, 2014). Some African leaders have for instance openly made homophobic comments claiming that non-heterosexuality is un-African (Essien & Aderinto, 2009). In Ghana, sex in itself is reticently discussed even in educational settings (Norman et al., 2016). Heterosexuality is traditionally the preferred sexual orientation. Traditionally, sex is linked to biological reproduction and it is expected of married couples (Essien & Aderinto, 2009). Ghana is one of the many African countries where same-sex sexuality is illegal (Essien & Aderinto, 2009). Homophobic sentiments are prevalent in Ghana especially within religious circles (Dankwa, 2009; Essien & Aderinto, 2009). Regardless of the institutionalised disapproval of same-sex intimacies in Ghana and many other African states, there is no denying that such sexual practices exist (Baisley, 2015; Nelson et al., 2015). Quaye et al. (2015) for instance estimate that there are over thirty thousand male homosexuals in Ghana. Disapproval of same-sex sexuality consequently limit rights and access to basic services such as health for non-heterosexuals in many contexts including Ghana (Green, Girault, Wambugu, Clement, & Adams, 2015).

A number of factors account for these discrepancies between and within nations as regards positions on same-sex sexuality. Featuring prominently among these factors are those relating to conservative traditions (culture), religious culture (Hunsberger, Owusu, & Duck, 1999), economic development and educational attainment (Adamczyk & Cheng, 2015), etc. On the cultural and religious front, governments have over the years relied on cultural and religious values as “common knowledge” to deny and protect the rights and universal access of sexual minorities (for instance, Essien & Aderinto, 2009).

The majority of studies conducted on same-sex sexuality in Ghana have often considered the public health implications for homosexuals as regards diseases such as HIV/AIDS (Anarfi & Owusu, 2010; Nelson et al., 2015; Osafo, Asampong, Langmagne, & Ahiedeke, 2013). Moreover, related studies (for instance, Essien & Aderinto, 2009) have focused on the reactions and discourse on the subject matter in the media as opposed to opinion of ordinary residents. However, little is known about how religious and cultural precepts serve as the fundamental shapers of attitudes and perception on same-sex sexuality and how it may account for the rights and freedoms available to non-heterosexuals. Using elements of Durkheim (1897) social system integration theory as elaborated by Turner (1981), and the concept of heterosexism, this paper empirically explores how two social institutions—culture and religion—shape attitudes and perceptions on same-sex sexuality and consequently on the constitutional provisions on rights and freedoms for people in same-sex sexual relationships. The study sampled the opinion of ordinary residents within the Kumasi Metropolitan Area in the Ashanti Region in Ghana.

1.1. Culture, religion and same-sex sexuality

Culture/traditions shape and dictate the behavioural patterns as well as how people within a given context perceive different aspects of the socio-economic and physical environment (Ayithey, 2006). It constitutes the beliefs, values and behaviours that a social group share (Ayithey, 2006). Religion constitutes a system of beliefs, norms, values and related symbols and rituals that a person or group of people hold sacred or considers to be spiritually significant in this world or in any future world (Ayithey, 2006). Cultural and religious precepts are two of the most prominent social institutions that shape individual attitudes and perception especially in Africa including same-sex sexuality (Essien & Aderinto, 2009).

A study in selected communities in United States of America (USA) shows that heterosexual women have more positive attitudes towards gays and lesbians than heterosexual males. However, this association is mediated by religiosity, and gender role and traits as dictated by traditional norms (Doyle, Rees, & Titus, 2015). Opposition to same-sex marriage is usually higher in communities where traditional values are held in high esteem (Doyle et al., 2015). Sexual conservativeness has also been shown to predict intolerance among both males and females towards homosexuality as Nguyen and Blum (2014) observed among Vietnamese youth. Heaven and Oxman (1999) therefore concluded from a study among Australian youth that perception towards same-sexuality is largely imputable to prevailing cultural precepts. However, this is not to say that the influence of culture acts on the same wavelength across contexts. It is quite common to find heterosexually identified individuals share different perceptions regarding same-sex sexuality even in the same cultural milieu (Preciado & Peplau, 2012). Dissent positions—of individuals, political leaders and religious leaders—on same-sexuality in Ghana are generally ascribable to cultural and traditional values as Essien and Aderinto (2009) gathered through the local media.

Across the globe, the majority of mainstream religions tend to oppose same-sex sexuality. Non-heterosexual relationships are often labelled as “unnatural”, “ungodly” and “dissident” (Yip, 2005). In her study in Romania, Adela (2010) found that the more religious a person is, the more intolerant he or she is about homosexuality. McFarland, Uecker, and Regnerus (2011) report that among Americans, religious integration exhibits negative association with premarital sex especially among women. In a study among youth in two cities in Flanders in Belgium, Roggemans, Spruyt, Droogenbroeck, and Keppens (2015) observed negative attitudes—such as exclusion and stigmatisation—towards homosexuality among both Christian and Muslim believers, even after controlling for authoritarianism and a more traditional view on gender roles. In comparing Ghanaians and Canadian samples, Hunsberger et al. (1999) observed an association between religious fundamentalism and negative attitudes towards homosexuals. Human rights debates as regards sexual minorities in Ghana are also fraught with religious and cultural connotations. Baisley (2015) gathered through events in the local media that religious and even political leaders often counteract proposals of rights of non-heterosexuals in Ghana by comparing homosexuals to “deviants” and animals.

In other sub-Saharan countries such as South Africa, non-heterosexuality is associated with spirituality (Visser, 2013). Same-sex sexuality is thought to bring with it, a curse—a divine punishment for individuals who indulge in same-sex sexual relationships and the societies in which they reside (Adamczyk & Cheng, 2015). However, across the globe, the extent to which cultural and religious precepts influence perceptions on same-sex intimacies somewhat depends on sociodemographic factors. Factors relating to education and training (Adela, 2010; Gürşimşek, 2009; Nguyen & Blum, 2014; Riggs, Rosenthal, & Smith-Bonahue, 2011), the locality of a person—either urban or rural (Nguyen & Blum, 2014)—and social status and structure (Preciado & Peplau, 2012) tend to influence the magnitude of impact of religion and cultural precepts on attitudes towards same-sex sexuality. Others include gender (Brown & Henriquez, 2008; Doyle et al., 2015; Heaven & Oxman, 1999) and age (Adela, 2010).

Despite the religious and culturally founded oppressions and disdain shown towards non-heterosexuals in many countries, Carone and Barone (2001) assert that the foundations of many religions advocate for order, understanding, forgiveness and tolerance. These traits are often required to ensure societal transformation towards acceptance and incorporation of non-heterosexuals into heterosexist societies. Cultural elements and religious practices therefore have the propensity to influence perceptions and attitudes of even people who may not be directly involved with a particular religion or culture. Leaders in conservative societies may be inclined to prioritise the religious and cultural precepts of their respective settings rather than the rights of sexual minorities. Given the profound religious and conservative cultural environment in Ghana and particularly the study area (Ayittey, 2006), it is expected that heterosexism (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1988)—in its variant forms—will be demonstrated by participants.

2. Theoretical framework

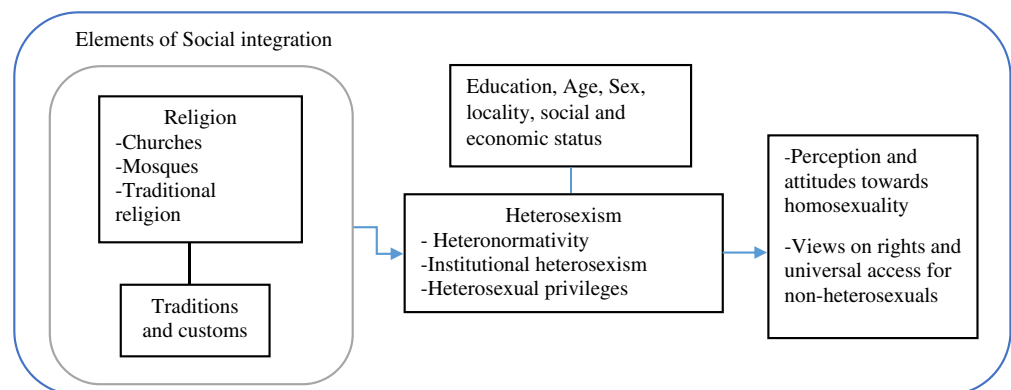
The paper leans on Durkheim’s social integration theory (Durkheim, 1897, 2005) and the concept of sexual prejudice—put simply here as heterosexism (McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011)—to explore the relationship between cultural and religious precepts, and same-sex sexuality. Cultural and religious precepts are regarded as elements that integrate and set parameters for behavioural change and attitudes in societies. In his attempt to translate Durkheim’s work into substantive theoretical principles, Turner (1981) described social [system] integration as a matter of attachment to group morals—ideals, norms and values. According to Turner (1981), the integration is characterised by the following:

- A “normal” condition where individual passions are regulated by shared cultural symbols;
- Rituals and mutually reinforcing gestures boost social collectiveness;
- Actions of individuals are regulated and coordinated by norms and legitimate political structures and;
- Inequalities are considered legitimate and correspond to the distribution of talent.

Durkheim (2005) argued that societies exert a strong force on individuals. The lives and choices of individuals are shaped by a collection of invisible institutions—beliefs, values, norms and concrete institutions—schools, small community groups, families, religious organisations and social classes. These social institutions have implications for attitudinal change through continual interactions and interdependence, which leads to the formation of an integrated society (Durkheim, 1897; Turner, 1981). These factors propagate different aspects of heterosexism—an ideological system that denies and stigmatises homosexuals usually on the grounds of customary beliefs, norms and values (Adela, 2010; Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1988; McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011), and consequently on perceptions and attitudes towards non-heterosexual individuals as shown in Figure 1. However, the extent to which the social institutions fuel heterosexist views and attitudes somewhat depends on educational attainment, social and economic status, sex and age of a person or a group as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Religion, culture and same-sex sexuality: a heuristic framework.

Source: Author.



In accordance with Durkheim's deviance thesis (Durkheim, 2005; Turner, 1981), non-heterosexuals are touted as deviants as their actions are deemed contrary to expected sexual behaviours (McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011). McGeorge and Stone Carlson (2011) categorise heterosexism into three constructs namely: heteronormativity, institutional heterosexism and heterosexual privilege. Heteronormative or normalisation of heterosexuality is defined as the myriad ways in which heterosexuality is proclaimed as a natural, unproblematic phenomenon as opposed to non-heterosexuality (McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011). Heteronormative societies hail heterosexuality as the norm while regarding all other experiences as abnormal. Institutional heterosexism is systematic disdain, stigmatisation and discrimination against non-heterosexuals informed by a given societal policies and institutions—e.g. culture and religious institutions actions (McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011). Lastly, heterosexual privilege refers to unearned civil rights, societal benefits and social advantages granted to heterosexuals by virtue of their sexual orientation (McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011). Heterosexism—backed by precepts of social integration such as religion and cultural values, thus sums up the phenomenon that occurs in societies that abhor same-sex sexuality as shown in Figure 1.

3. Methods

3.1. Context

Ghana presents a peculiar setting to study this phenomenon especially considering the country's culturally and religiously diverse population (Gyimah, Kane, & Oduro, 2009; NCC, 2004). Three major religious denominations namely: Christianity (71.2%), Islam/Muslims (17.6%) and African Traditional religion (5.3%) are found in Ghana. These faiths are practised throughout the entire country (GSS, 2012). Christianity (78.8%) dominates in the Kumasi Metropolitan area. Islam (16%) and African traditional religion (0.3%) follow suit as the most dominant religious groups (GSS, 2012). Ghana has over 50 ethnic groups whose common values and institutions represent a collective national heritage. Owing to its nodal location, Kumasi harbours people from all walks of lives including people from Ghana and neighbouring countries (KMA, 2013). Consequently, religious and cultural heterogeneity are a key fabric of the society. This makes the city a viable location for a study of this nature.

3.2. Participants

Participants were selected from five suburbs in five of the nine sub-metropolitan areas in the Kumasi Metropolis namely: Old Tafo area, Bantama area, Oforikrom area, Asawase area and Nhyiaeso area. Each of these localities presented unique population set as regards the ethnic, economic activities and religious characteristics of the study area. Purposive sampling (Bryman, 2008) was used to select participants based on four major criteria: location, age (18 years and above), sex, religion and ethnicity. The criteria were meant to select a balanced sample as regards the characteristics of the study population. Sexual orientation of participants was not a criterion. The data collection took place intermittently between August 2015 and March 2016. Twenty people participated in the study including 16 individual interviews and a group interview consisting of four people. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants. Twi—the dominant local language—was used to conduct all the interviews. The ages of participants ranged from 19 years to 60 years. The majority (45%) of participants fell between the ages of 30 and 39 years. Participants consisted of 55% females and 45% males. Junior high school was the highest educational level attained by majority (55%) of the participants. The majority of participants were from Tafo area where the group discussion also took place.

3.3. Interviews and group discussion

The authors conducted all the interviews. The study used semi-structured interview guide (Bryman, 2008), to ensure that participants could freely express their views while remaining within the scope of the discussion. The interviews took place at homes and work places of the participants. The group interview, however, took place at a neutral place to both the participants and the researchers.

Discussions bordered on the views of participants on same-sex sexuality, and how they understood it. Attitudes towards same-sex sexuality boarded on two scenarios: (i) whether or not

participants would befriend a homosexual, and (ii) whether or not participants would live in the same compound house as a homosexual. The study also elicited the views of participants on [potential] laws geared at extending rights and freedoms to homosexuals in Ghana. Each interview session lasted from 40 to 60 min. The interviews were tape-recorded with permission from participants. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Permission was sought from local political leaders of the suburbs within which the study took place before the commencement of the interviews. HyperResearch software version 3.7.3 was partly used to analyse the data. The research objectives and the theoretical framework primarily informed the coding of the transcripts.

4. Findings

The results are categorised and discussed under three themes derived from a combination of properties of the theory of social integration and the concept of heterosexism. The first part discusses the general perceptions and attitudes towards same-sex sexuality. The first part is categorised into two themes viz.: the role of religious and cultural values on attitudes towards same-sex sexuality. The second theme addresses the role of religion and cultural precepts in addressing inequalities regarding sexual rights and preferences. The last theme relates to the influence of educational attainment on connection between religious and cultural precepts and attitudes towards same-sex sexuality.

4.1. Perception and attitude towards same-sex sexuality: the role of culture and religion

Same-sex sexuality did not sound new to the participants. All the participants were familiar with the subject. However, the actions and sentiments they expressed while talking about the subject generally depicted a disdain towards same-sex sexuality.

4.1.1. Individual attitudes, shared cultural norms and institutionalised heterosexism

Societal norms emerged as a major determinant of attitudes towards same-sex sexuality. The prevailing cultural practices partly constructed social reality for participants as regards same-sex sexuality as can be gleaned from these statements:

... No man can propose love to my son, I will kill that person ... It is a curse ... our culture forbids that ... sex between a man and a man is a big taboo (Participant 1, Female, 45 years)

... I cannot befriend a gay or lesbian because we have different ideals concerning the issue (same-sex sexuality). ... I cannot befriend him/her and risk being talked into it (homosexuality) ... (Participant 2, male, 40 years).

Some participants thought of same-sex sexuality as an infectious illness, a disease so shameful that some people would “kill” to avoid. Others were even ready to break-up strong social bonds due to differences in perceptions on non-heterosexuality:

Interviewer: Would you befriend a gay person?

Participant 3 (Female, 29 years): No, I will not even go near him/her ... I will not go close to such a person lest he/she will lure me to enter into such kind of life ... when you do that [being gay or lesbian] you lose respect from others. It is not something I would like to be tagged with.

Participant 4 (Male, 28 years): I will not even talk to the person in any way My friend had a friend who always behaved like a gay person. I asked my friend if the person was truly gay ... my friend later confirmed that the person was gay I ceased being friends with him from that period until date because of the company he kept. ... But my friend was not gay. I realised that he could have changed my mind on the subject with time.

The social stigma associated with being non-heterosexual did not only affect non-heterosexuals but also people that associated with them. The biases against non-heterosexuals meant that people were not prepared to support their friends and family members who openly declared themselves as non-heterosexuals:

... In my family, I won't allow that to happen. I won't allow any of my children to do that [be gay or lesbian] ... why should I tolerate such an abomination ... it will even bring shame to my family (Participant 1, female 45 years)

However, some participants demonstrated some degree of acceptance. These included people who were ready to share a house with non-heterosexuals despite the utter rejection of same-sex sexuality in the society:

Interviewer: Would you rent a room in the same house as a gay or lesbian?

Participant 5 (Male, 19 years): I will live there. If someone is gay, it does not mean the person is not a human being. ... The only thing to do is to counsel the fellow for him to change his life style. ... That is not how our elders thought us ... I do not think it is right

Participant 12 (Female, 30 years): ... I can live there. They [the gay or lesbian persons] will do their thing in their room so it will be their own issue ... I will not care ...

Many participants were unwilling to physically harass non-heterosexuals although the phenomenon was culturally unacceptable in their view:

Interviewer: Would you physically attack a self-identified homosexual in your neighbourhood?

Participant 2 (Male, 40 years): No, I will not do any bad thing to the person ... it is just the person's character I do not like ... you see, homosexuality is not our culture. It is the white people and the Ghanaians who have travelled abroad that are introducing it here ...

4.1.2. *Individual attitudes and attachment to collective religious rituals and regulations*

Religious values also shaped attitudes towards same-sex sexuality. The interpretation and application of religious values, however, differed according to how strongly a person felt about same-sex sexuality. While some participants would try to "change" the ways of non-heterosexuals, others used same religious values as reasons to avoid non-heterosexuals:

Interviewer: Would you rent a room in a house where one of the tenants is homosexual?

Participant 7 (Male, 24 years): If I were greatly in need, I would take the room but I would never talk with the person.

Interviewer: You are a Christian. Why would you not befriend such a person?

Participant 7 (Male, 24 years): The bible says, do not mingle with the ungodly. I would not even talk with him. That person has strayed from the word of God. ... If I associate with him, people will say that I am gay too. Being gay is the work of the devil.

Participant 15 (Female, 59 years): My children were born in [Jesus] Christ and I train them in Christ. My children will not do that (being gay or lesbian). ... They are all God fearing

Religious beliefs of individuals, however, did not only remain with participants. A significant number of participants were adamant for their immediate and extended relatives and even friends to adhere to their religiously grounded "acceptable" sexual behaviours. The conversation with "Participant 3" (female, 29 years), below, portrays how the social relationships contributed to transmission of religious values in shaping attitudes towards same-sex sexuality:

Interviewer: Would you rent a room in a house where one of the tenants is homosexual?

Participant 17 (Female, 29 years): If the house does not belong to the person, I won't have any problem with it. I would go ahead and rent but I will not befriend her/him. I would only greet him/her and pass by whenever I see the person. I would not even smile at him/her ... If I could, I would never greet her/him.

[A friend interrupts her]:

... have you forgotten that the Bible says a house with such a person is accursed? So why would you rent a room there?

Participant 17 (Female, 29 years) [Then changes her mind]: ... That is true. I would not live in the same house as a lesbian or gay person

The position of “Participant 3” and how her friend easily changed her perspective speaks to the degree of influence that religious culture and social environment drive perception of same-sex sexuality. However, based on same religious values, some participants demonstrated liberal attitudes concerning same-sex sexuality regardless of their discontent towards the sexual orientation. The opinion of Participant 9 (male, 33 years, below) who was a clergy exemplifies this finding:

Interviewer: Would you befriend a gay or lesbian person?

Participant 9 (Male, 33 years): ... I will befriend such a person (gay or lesbian) because the person is in darkness [sinful path]. So I have to throw light [Christian beliefs] on him ... to get him out the darkness

Religious adherents among the participants regarded non-heterosexuals as “sinners” and degenerates in the glare of religious values. Many deemed it their religious duty to turn non-heterosexuals away from “evil” ways. However, the readiness of some participants to engage with non-heterosexuals also stemmed from religious values. The extent of a participant’s faith and his/her understanding of the religious values inspired how religion was used as basis of attitudes towards same-sex sexuality. The said responsibility moreover had a latent methodology—a piecemeal approach to ‘converting’ a non-heterosexual person to a heterosexual through religious doctrines:

Interviewer: Would you rent a room in the same house as a gay or lesbian?

Response: Let me tell you something that ..., it may be that God has a purpose of sending me to such a house. ... It may be God is sending me, so I would go ... When I go there, I would befriend him. I will eat with him, talk with him. ... In doing all these, I would be introducing [Jesus] Christ to him and praying for him as well. (Participant 9, male, 33 years)

Interviewer: Would you befriend a gay or lesbian person?

Response: If he or she is not my family member, I would try to get closer to him, and before sharing discussion God’s word with him. Later, he/she would become my friend, they she would tell me [about their same-sex sexual preference] and I would tell them that they should stop that, this brought about the Sodom and Gomorrah curse [A popular incident in the Christian Bible cited by many participants]. I would advise the person to desist from that act [being gay or lesbian]. ... I would also remember them in prayers. (Participant 1, Female, and 45 years)

The cautious approach towards “converting” non-heterosexuals further demonstrates the disapproval of same-sex sexuality.

4.2. Heterosexual privileges and societal inequalities in sexual preferences: attitudes on rights and universal access for non-heterosexuals

The majority of participants, including religious leaders, dissented pro-same-sex sexuality laws based on cultural and religious values.

Interviewer: Would you agree, should the government legally consent to same-sex sexuality?

... Our traditional laws and regulations do not permit that [same-sex sexuality]. They are taboos ... If we allow same-sex intimacies here then we have open our gates for the devil to reign. God is our Leader what he commanded is what we are following ... A friend of mine told me that one

pastor was asked to officiate a homosexual marriage the pastor refused and he was arrested. This was not in Ghana For me, I would never officiate such a marriage (Participant 9, 33 years) ... If that law is introduced in Ghana, no one [woman] can propose love to me ... I would kill that person. It is a curse. Why should we bring it here? God will punish us if we allow it ... those countries that have allowed same-sex sexuality will pay for it bitterly in the future. (Participant 15, Female, 59) Participant 10 (Female, 32 years): I would not support it in any way. ... I believe it is going to bring the wrath of God on the country. ... If someone did that [engage in same-sex intimacy] when I was young, their parents and community leaders punished them because it was shameful act

Cultural and religious sentiments rather than the import of the laws themselves shaped participants' understanding on human rights and their willingness to adhere to regulations on human rights. The society generally appeared unprepared to integrate non-heterosexuals into everyday lives given the dominant religious and cultural values that abhor homosexuality. For instance, a traditional ruler within the study area had allegedly banished someone from his community for being gay without considering the person's basic rights as a citizen:

... Some time ago there was an issue like that at Tafo [local community] whereby a man who always acted as a woman and was suspected of being gay threw a party. Unknown to the people at the party, he was planning to marry another man at that supposed party ... When some of the guests at the party realized that he was getting married to another man instead of a normal party, some of attendants reported the incident to the chief of Tafo. The chief banished the man from Tafo vicinity. Ever since, no one has seen the man in Tafo. (Participant 10, Female 26 years)

4.3. Educational attainment and heteronormative societal actions

Some participants declared an outright support for potential laws liberating the freedoms of gays and lesbians despite their shared religious and cultural values. Interestingly, these participants were the only ones with tertiary level education.

Interviewer: Would you agree should the government legally consent to same-sex sexuality?

Participant 19 (Male, 35 years): If everyone would agree with me, we should allow them (non-heterosexuals) because it is love. ... and when it comes to love, there is no benchmark on whether it has to be between only male and female. Love is a feeling. If it happens to be between people of same sex, it should be allowed because that may be their source of happiness. Love is about happiness. I do not have any problem with that.

Participant 14 (Male, 28 years): I would agree with that. Because it is part of democracy ... we should allow them because it does not abuse anyone's freedom. Once the two people agree We should allow them to be together

The account of these participants adds a twist to the generality of influence of religious and culturally founded values on same-sex sexuality.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study support the elements of social integration theory and the concept of heterosexism. It expands knowledge on how dominant and unifying institutions shape attitudes and perceptions on same-sex sexuality. The paper provides essential insight into paths towards maintaining social integration while embracing heterogeneity.

Indeed, the findings affirm earlier claims that same-sex sexuality is largely an unspeakable phenomenon in settings such as Ghana and other African countries (Adamczyk & Cheng, 2015; Essien & Aderinto, 2009; Teunis, 2001). The use of cultural values as source of disdain and stigmatisation towards non-heterosexuals is indeed common around the globe. Liu and Choi (2006) found in Shanghai, China, that culturally grounded factors such as social status, family values, perceptions of

immorality, and gender stereotypes of masculinity are associated with stigma against homosexuality. Heaven and Oxman (1999) also reckoned that values and conservative ideologies are linked to negative stereotypes towards non-heterosexuals in Australia. In a related study, Adamczyk and Cheng (2015) observed that concerns about keeping the family intact influenced intolerant attitudes about same-sex sexuality among people living in Confucian societies. In sub-Saharan Africa including Ghana, non-heterosexuals are often regarded as utter disgust, and are continually stigmatised, and ostracised (Essien & Aderinto, 2009).

Among the participants, religious values cast a double-edged impact on views on same-sex sexuality. While some religious adherents would shun non-heterosexuals, others used same religious values as basis to draw close to, and eschew discrimination against non-heterosexuals. Religious values in this context therefore did not entirely prohibit participants from associating with non-heterosexuals as earlier works (Essien & Aderinto, 2009; Hunsberger et al., 1999) assert based on studies in Ghana. Previous research (Carone & Barone, 2001) suggests that religious values transmit traits such as forgiveness and tolerance which are essential in advocating for people in “dissident” behaviours. These may be conflicting but not entirely surprising as interpretation of religious values has been known to differ among individuals as they try to construct spaces to reinforce personal identities (Yip, 2005). Moreover, recent works in Ghana suggest that social institutions such as schools and churches rather provide spaces for especially young people to openly deliberate about sexual issues—something that contrasts the ethical codex of decency (Bochow, 2012). One could thus argue that the dominance of religious values in shaping negative perceptions and attitudes towards same-sex sexuality may be somewhat lax than promulgated over the years.

Moreover, the need to banish non-heterosexuals buttresses Durkheim’s analogy that “deviants” are punished as a way of reinforcing social norms (Durkheim, 2005). In the light of this, ostracising homosexuals even at individual level was virtually a legitimate strategy to avoid being labelled as sexual deviant considering the religiously and culturally founded heteronormative social environment. The deviant discourse coupled with the vibrant and influential social environment made attitudinal change viable. People were more likely to be swayed from their personal beliefs given the constant portrayal and enforcement of religious values by neighbours, friends and families. However, the need to punish “deviants” in this context may arise from a deeper lying need to avoid sexual heterogeneity as it may threaten the long-standing conservative social forces such as procreation as Essien and Aderinto (2009) assert.

The traditional and religious culture did set the sail for how people perceived rights and freedoms for non-heterosexuals. Heterosexuals in the study context would enjoy unearned privileges. Heterosexuals could go about their business with neither fear nor panic given the freedoms and support system offered through the prevailing cultural and religious values. The unwavering preference for heterosexuals reinforced prevalence of fundamental inequalities concerning human rights and universal access for non-heterosexuals as Baisley (2015) has gathered from an earlier work in Ghana. Indeed, research shows that many low- and middle-income countries rarely report on issues of rights and universal access among people in non-normative sexual relationships (Persson, Ellard, Newman, Holt, & de Wit, 2011). It is not surprising that access to public services such as health is limited for non-heterosexuals as have been reported in similar contexts including China (Liu & Choi, 2006). Quaye et al. (2015) suggest that the religiously and culturally founded stigmatisation excludes homosexuals from public health services in Ghana. The glaring inequality is moreover substantiated by Durkheim’s assertion that if societal values (such as culture and religious values) are too rigid, too specific and too sacred, they cannot be relevant to the diversity of individuals’ secular experiences and orientations in differentiated roles (Durkheim, 2005). Inflexible societal values thus interdict human heterogeneity by reinforcing social inequalities which according to Turner (1981) are sometimes considered legitimate. Moreover, this observation presupposes that while same-sex sexuality has been recorded centuries ago, its acceptance may be far from reach within the context of this study.

Attainment of higher level education emerged as possible deflator of the strong bond between religious and cultural precepts and same-sex sexuality. People with higher educational attainment appeared likely to appreciate need for rights and freedoms for homosexuals regardless of their religious and cultural values. People with higher educational attainment tend to be conversant with principles of human rights and freedoms. This is consistent with arguments put forth by Adamczyk and Cheng (2015). Adela (2010) has also observed a similar occurrence in Romania, that the more uneducated a person is, the more intolerant he/she will be about homosexuality. In a related study in Ghana, Essien and Aderinto (2009) observed some level of abhorrence to the idea of censoring sexual behaviour of homosexuals among college students. Moreover, education is largely touted as a positive interventional measure in changing behaviours, attitudes and knowledge about homosexuality (Riggs et al., 2011), and sexuality in general (Gürşimşek, 2009).

The study took measures to ensure that participants had the privacy and comfort they needed during interview sessions. However, given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, some participants might have remained conservative with their opinion.

6. Conclusion

The paper has elucidated how social institutions such as religion and culture crucially account for attitudes and perception on same-sex sexuality. Surely, the position of public institutions and legal conventions on same-sex sexuality are a reflection of public opinion. The breakthrough, however, is that religious and cultural values could either subjugate or advance initiatives aimed at addressing gaps in perceptions and attitudes towards non-heterosexuals. Precepts of traditional and religious institutions such as churches, mosques and even educational curricular as the study reveals, should be situated at the heart of efforts geared at promoting sexual heterogeneity and the rights and freedoms of sexual minorities.

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