

Ethnography in the cyberspace of sexuality: Participant-observation among the online erotic circumcision community

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Introduction

Erotic circumcision?

...many men who seek circumcision as adults do so for reasons related to sexuality, ranging from an aesthetic preference for the circumcised penis to an erotic fascination with the act of circumcision itself.

Online community?

...a network of internet based communication organized around particular shared interests, activities, or beliefs and not necessarily limited to online interactions.

Participant-observation?

...despite fundamental similarities to conducting ethnographic research in geographic communities, certain methodological adjustments unique to an online environment have been necessary.

Methodological adjustments?

...communication techniques and technologies; informed consent; respecting the privacy and limits of both informant and investigator.

Positionality

I am...

- a medical anthropologist
- researching parental decision making on neonatal circumcision in the U.S.
- now researching adult circumcision in the U.S.
- not a sexuality researcher before undertaking this project.

My Informants...

- are men circumcised as adults.
- participate to some extent in online discussion groups related to circumcision.
- are not a representative sample.
- are primarily (but not all) white.
- identify as gay, bisexual, and straight in that order of prevalence.
- tend to be well-educated.



Homepage of one of the largest erotic circumcision discussion groups on the Yahoo! Groups network.

New Methodologies

"Internet phenomena are leading us to ask new questions, and new media research requires adapting ethnographic methods to new technological environments...For some researchers, the statements made in publicly accessible discussion boards or other communication spaces are in the public domain and may thus be freely used by researchers. For others this is a form of electronic eavesdropping that violates the speaker's expectation of privacy" (Wilson and Peterson 2002:461).

An online discussion group is not a private space, but it is not an entirely public space either.

If someone has not explicitly given their informed consent to participate in the research then their statements from discussion groups are never quoted, although the content or topic of their posts is included in general analyses such as how many messages are posted on a given topic.

Technical issues related to communicating and participating in online environments and ethical considerations unique to online settings each require different methodologies than traditional ethnography.

Technical Issues and Interview Techniques:

I use email and instant messenger programs because these are the typical forms of communication within this online community.

Even though some informants could be met in person or interviewed by telephone, such interactions are inconsistent with the typical interactions that take place between members of these groups

Informed Consent:

An online discussion group is not an entirely private communication (like a personal email message) space, but it is not an entirely public space either (like a posting on a standalone website).

I try to manage my presence in the discussion groups to ensure that people are aware there is an anthropologist in their midst.

I always make contact with the moderator or group owner to explain my position and ask permission to join, as well as permission to solicit informants, even if membership approval is not required.

Somewhere in my posts I usually make a reference to who I am or what I am doing, or include a sort of disclaimer like "even though I'm not into circumcision, I think that..."



In this screenshot of a posting and my response, in which I introduce myself to a group, I have removed the name of the other poster and of the group itself. Not referring to the groups directly by name is one of the strategies I use to protect the anonymity of my informants. In all group interactions I always use my own full name in the interest of transparency.



This screenshot from an actual interview has the screen name and location of the informant removed. Every informant receives an informed consent document by email, but I also reiterate the informant's rights at the beginning of every interview.

Medicine and Sexuality

My project set out to explore men's experience of interacting with the medical system around their choice for adult circumcision.

It became clear through the course of the research that men's sexuality is intimately involved in their choice for circumcision and in their evaluation of their outcome.

While men usually have specific outcomes in mind, surgeons frequently understand the goal of the procedure to simply expose the glans, overlooking many of the factors important to the man seeking the circumcision.



In this email the informant reports a typical experience of disjunction between his own desire for specific outcomes and the approach of the urologist who, in this case, did not provide the desired outcomes.

Conclusions

The erotic circumcision community exists primarily as an online community.

Collecting ethnographic information about these men and their experiences requires methods that take into account the particular characteristics of online communities.

Beyond the technical aspects of online communications, issues of privacy and informed consent require special consideration given the ambiguous nature of cyberspace.

These considerations are especially important when using discussion groups as a site for participant-observation.

Acknowledgments

I am most grateful to the men who have welcomed me into their community and shared their stories with me. My goal is to give voice to their experiences.

I would also like to thank Len Glick, Dolores Koenig, and Noel Gazzano for their guidance, inspiration, support and love throughout the course of this project.