

Main Article:

Reclaiming Queerness: Self, Identity, and the Research Process

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Abstract

This article explores some of the challenges and benefits of doing a dissertation with participants from a population to which I belong and on a topic some consider controversial, that of gay and lesbian educators. I describe the homophobia I experienced and how that homophobia affected my choice of topic, the research process, and my job prospects. Each step of this research journey presented me with a variety of delicate decisions. I discuss my thought processes in resolving these dilemmas and some of the practical solutions I used to address a variety of difficulties. Although written specifically about doing research with gay and lesbian teachers, many of the lessons I learned throughout this process can be applied to a range of research situations. For example, many researchers share cultural backgrounds with their participants. This presents both the opportunity to establish rapport with participants quickly but also the danger of the researcher reading his or her own experiences into the data. I describe some of the ways I addressed this issue as well as others commonly faced by those doing dissertations. I conclude that doing a dissertation on a topic I feel passionately about sustained me throughout the dissertation process.

Keywords: sexual orientation; gay teacher; homophobia; cultural congruity; active listening; heteronormativity

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1. Introduction

Many doctoral students over the years have done “mesearch,” i.e., research on a topic that reflects their own identities. For me, though, because the “me” in my mesearch is considered controversial, it infused every aspect of my research journey with challenges. As a lesbian and a former high school teacher, I knew working with gay and lesbian teachers would be fraught with difficulties.

2. Making the Decision

Before I even entered graduate school, a friend warned me that doing my dissertation on anything queer would doom me to the lower echelons of academia. He cited a number of professors he knew who had done their dissertations on gay and lesbian topics and were teaching at universities he considered beneath their abilities. Despite my issues with making judgments based on a perceived hierarchy of universities, I know homophobia first-hand so his warning sat heavy with me. I grappled with whether or not I should take that risk by doing research on a subject where my passion lies. I also worried about people seeing my research as self-indulgent, self-serving, and attempting to further the “gay agenda.” I then thought, if we do not study ourselves, our stories will only be told by others, or worse, never told at all.

Another person advised me to choose a topic as I would choose a girlfriend--after all I would be “living with” the topic for many years. I knew from talking to others that some people chose a dissertation topic they liked but then got burnt out on their topic, making it difficult to finish their dissertation and ending their interest in that topic forever. I also knew that I would never tire of doing research on gay and lesbian teachers.

On the other hand, I knew I faced the very real dilemma of finding professors to be on my dissertation committee. I had an indication of how that might go when consulting a professor about choosing a topic for a written assignment. She expressed shock when I mentioned that I wanted to explore the effects of teachers “coming out” (i.e., disclosing their gay or lesbian identities) in class. I tried to explain that teachers would only do so in the context of their curriculum using the example of a teacher in Fairfax County, Virginia, USA, who came out during a unit on the Holocaust. If I had taken a moment to gather myself, I would have pointed out all the ways this professor had come out in class as heterosexual. When I talked about bringing gay issues into an elementary classroom, this same professor expressed horror. Once again I floundered and managed to spit out, “It would be in terms of teaching about different types of families.” At least this time I had the content, but my stammering lacked conviction. Although both my written assignments received decent grades, realizing that even some college professors still subscribed to the double standard of heterosexuality being about family and homosexuality being about sex made me realize that getting a supportive committee could be a challenge.

I had already experienced some homophobia prior to doing my doctoral research. Once, when I invited a friend in my program to go to a gay bar, she said, “It would take me a couple of weeks

just to prepare myself to do that.” I tried to be lighthearted about it by asking, “What are you so afraid of?” but it hurt. Another time when I met a fellow lesbian in my program, I asked her if anyone else was gay. She responded that she did not feel comfortable asking anyone to reveal their sexual orientation. I quickly replied that I was not asking her to disclose anyone’s gay or lesbian identity (although truthfully I was) but that I was merely expressing a curiosity regarding our numbers. She vaguely hinted at one person who might be comfortable with her revealing his status to me, but that she would have to check with him first. This sent a strong message to me. What I previously thought was going to be my safe haven was turning into a closeted prison. Not only was I afraid I would not have support from my professors, these experiences suggested that I might not even have support from my peers.

In making my decision, I also thought about why I went to graduate school. Hiding my sexual orientation while teaching had worn me out. I felt like I could not strive towards self-actualization when I was splitting myself in two. I needed to find a way to become an integrated whole instead of a false dichotomy. I saw graduate school as a chance to realize my hopes of being myself. Although I will probably always regret not coming out when teaching in high school, psychologically I was not ready for all the repercussions I feared at the time. Perhaps the desire to do research with gay teachers was an attempt to heal old wounds or to vicariously experience the liberation I failed to pursue. I knew, though, that if I had done any other topic, my heart would not be in it, so I decided to follow my heart. Throughout the drudgery of transcribing and coding, I retained the excitement of doing research on a topic I love. That is not to say, though, that there were no struggles on the way.

3. Doing the Research

Despite these experiences of homophobia and self-doubt, I found very supportive professors to be on my dissertation committee. Every time, though, a committee member described the population of my study as “at-risk” or the topic as “controversial” I cringed. Gay and lesbian teachers are still at-risk of being fired or harassed in a society where full equality has not been achieved. One has only to read the news to see the controversy, but these words also described me and I do not think of myself as at-risk or as controversial. Keeping these feelings in mind when I did my research helped me make sure I did not treat participants as at-risk or their lives as controversial.

Because of the vulnerability of this population, my committee made it very clear that participants must contact me, not the other way around. In order to do this, I posted introductory e-mails in local electronic mailing lists geared towards gay and lesbian teachers. In these e-mails I described who I was, including that I was a lesbian and a former high school teacher, and why I was doing the research. Although I got wonderful participants through this method, I do worry that it may have limited the diversity of them. My committee also stated that I could not observe participants teaching because disclosing why I was doing the research to school officials could pose a risk to participants’ careers. Although this limitation threatened the *triangulation* of the

data, I did collect artifacts such as syllabi, handouts, and student work. I also had each participant do a stimulated recall session where they used their lesson plans or daily planners to walk me through a typical day. In these ways I got a sense of their teaching.

Although my dissertation was about participants' stories, my own story framed my approach to the question and the research process. My research question--What are gay and lesbian teachers' perceptions of how their experiences as gays and lesbians inform their teaching?--came from my own professional experiences as a gay teacher. My experiences enabled me to relate to the fear and loneliness participants expressed when describing their suppressed identities and to understand the actions they took as a consequence of those feelings. I empathized with their feelings of hypocrisy and worries about sending messages of shame by not being honest about their identities. These background experiences largely informed the questions I asked, the rapport I established with participants, and the shape of my final study.

Reflection on my own role as researcher led me to realize that my past experiences as a lesbian educator served as both an asset and a liability. Sanlo (1999), a lesbian researcher who conducted a grounded theory study of gay and lesbian teachers, describes this beneficial dilemma:

Heshusius described the term *participatory consciousness* as "the awareness of a deeper level of kinship between the knower and the known," adding that such recognition of kinship--the seeing of self in one's participants--is an issue not only of obligation, but also of ethics. It is wanting only to understand and not to impose the self on the participants; however, it is also a process of not denying that self as researcher is present. (p. 28)

Although my past experiences provided "kinship" with both the topic and the participants of this study, it also imposed potential barriers to understanding the *emic* perspectives of participants, i.e., how they made sense of their experiences.

By being out to my participants, the participants in my study and I had a shared understanding of what it means to be gay, to be a teacher, and to be a gay teacher--a huge asset when working with persons who may feel vulnerable participating in a research study. This *cultural congruity* (Reissman, 1987) was reflected in the participants' language when they used the word "thing," for example, "the whole discrimination thing," to indicate a whole set of feelings and experiences with which they assumed I was familiar. Shared understanding was also assumed when participants used teaching concepts and gay references without explanation. For example, one participant referred to Fred Phelps without further explanation. Because of my familiarity with current gay events through reading the gay press, I knew immediately that she was talking about an anti-gay church-leader who travels across the United States attending funerals and gay rights events holding signs that read: "Thank God for AIDS," "Fags Die, God Laughs," and "Matthew in Hell," the last sign referring to Matthew Shepard who was killed for being gay. Participants also made explicit these assumed shared understandings, as one did in this excerpt:

“Well, I mean, no big surprise to you, the one unique thing about being gay is, unlike racism, you can try to disguise the fact that you’re gay.” Some participants even asked me to share my own story. Coming from a similar background enabled me to connect quickly to participants as one participant stated: “I know you said that you have been in the classroom before. I think that helped because I figured you’d understand what it was I was saying or you’d kind of empathize.” These assumed shared understandings facilitated conversations and helped me establish rapport with participants.

These assumed shared understandings, however, also served as a liability as my understanding of a concept may have had a different nuance from that of the participants. I tried to keep this in mind, asking participants to explain themselves further or give examples by using words like, “Say more about that” or “What does that mean to you?” or “What does that look like for you?” Another awareness I took into the research process was that my own experience was not the same as the participants’ experiences. In other words, I had to be careful not to impose my feelings onto their stories or read my thoughts into their words. To avoid this, I used *active listening* (Gordon, 2003) throughout the interview process, echoing what I thought I heard back to participants to check for understanding. I explicitly did this in the last interview when I summarized each participant’s life story and participants responded to clarify or amend my renderings. Fortunately, participants felt comfortable enough to ask for clarification, correct me when I misinterpreted what they said, and shape the emerging theory. For example, one participant suggested that the model should show interconnectedness and non-linearity. Between interviews, another participant sent an e-mail alerting me to the influence of being single versus being partnered. Another one helped me frame my argument, changing it from “being gay or lesbian” to “the experiences related to being gay or lesbian in a heteronormative society” when he gave me a note after the focus group that said, “I do worry that your initial question will draw early (and unfair) fire. To ask the impact of ‘being gay’ on my teaching is dangerous . . . Coming out or being closeted are more precise experiences unique to gays.” In these ways I brought an awareness of what it is like to be a gay teacher but attempted to prevent this awareness from clouding my understanding of the participants’ experiences by asking them to be explicit.

In addition to the above techniques, I asked participants how they thought I shaped the interview process as a researcher. One in particular gave a detailed answer:

You ask incredible questions, pay such close attention to detail and, when you were explaining this to me, I was sitting here going through it in my head. You’re just repeating it. I mean you were exactly on word for word and it was awesome. And so I think you just always knew the next question to ask to probe deeper and to make connections without leading me. I never felt like I was being led. I felt like you were asking me to connect. You were asking me to investigate possible connections but I never felt like you led me down a path.

The cultural congruity I had with participants allowed me to generate data with a high level of detail and intimacy; Sanlo’s (1999) warning allowed me to make sure the interpretation of this

data reflected the perspectives of participants and not my own.

Throughout the interview process, participants reflected on how the study affected them. My hope was that both I, as the researcher, and participants would gain from the research process. Based on their feedback, this seemed to be the case, as one participant stated: “One of your initial hopes for your participants was that they would get something out of the process and I would say that would be very true for me.” For her, this meant making connections between gayness and teaching explicit: “One of the things that has become clearer to me through this project, just participating in your study, is how much more being gay has influenced my life than I realized, that certain events had happened but I didn’t connect them to being gay which was probably my own self-defense or something.” She specifically tied this to teaching:

Just participating in this study I started to realize that being gay does really influence my teaching whereas, like I said earlier, I think if someone had asked me before this study I would have said, “No, not really. Probably a little bit.” Like this whole notion that I’m a person who happens to be gay rather than realizing how intertwined and enmeshed those things are that you can’t really pull them apart.

Other participants also remarked on how participating in this study led to introspection: “That’s why I love these conversations because I think about things I never thought about before.” Just as I pushed them to reflect on themselves as gay teachers, they pushed me to reflect on my responsibility as a researcher to tell their stories in their voices.

In addition to the above excerpts detailing how participants became more sensitized to the topic, several mentioned enjoying the research process, expressing that the fun derived from the rare opportunity to talk about themselves for a sustained amount of time as one stated: “Of course we all love this. We probably all talk like this is the most narcissistic opportunity we have. It’s all about our story.” Because they got the opportunity to talk at length about themselves and respond to probing questions, a few participants remarked that this felt like “therapy.” For me, this confirmed that, no matter how it affected my career, the research was worth doing.

Being up front about what I brought to the research study opened up new possibilities instead of closing doors. Establishing this kind of rapport fostered a comfortable setting where participants felt safe sharing intimate details of their personal and professional lives. Although I realize that participants selected what they wanted to share and framed their stories to fit the context of the interviews, nevertheless, the insights generated from the data demonstrate the richness, depth, and intimacy of the data. I realized, though, that the title of my dissertation would impact my job prospects much more than the quality of my research.

4. Searching for Jobs

Whether or not my research endangered my job prospects is hard to ascertain. I am convinced that I was considered for one position because the person in charge of the search was a lesbian and therefore interested in my research and wanted another lesbian on the faculty. On the other

hand, I had someone ask me if I would be a militant lesbian if I were hired, not in so many words, but that was the gist of her line of interrogation. Because there are so many things unsaid during a job interview and you never know why you were or were not chosen to be interviewed in the first place, it is impossible to know how much of an impact the nature of my research had on my job opportunities.

After a series of job searches that did not yield any prospects that suited my needs, a colleague suggested that I “straighten up” my CV by leaving off everything after the colon of titles, allowing my CV to “pass” as straight. In other words, I eliminated any mention of gay and lesbian topics from my CV so it could not be used against me. For example, shortening my dissertation title, which is “Unmasking Identities: A Qualitative Study of K-12 Gay and Lesbian Teachers” by omitting the subtitle after the colon certainly leaves the topic up for interpretation. I struggled with the ethics of doing this for a long time, but she argued it would at least allow me to get the initial appointment. I thought back to when I wrote my graduate school application essays which I had tailored to different schools: for schools I perceived as liberal, I wrote about being a gay teacher; for the Catholic university where I ended up, I wrote about the digital divide. When I applied to graduate school and when applying for jobs, I wanted to be judged by my work, not by someone’s prejudices.

I admit that I did revise my CV by deleting the subtitles of my dissertation, papers, and presentations. I did submit this CV to some of the jobs I applied for, but not all. I used the same litmus test as before--whether I perceived the university as liberal or conservative. For one job in particular, I knew the university itself was very gay friendly, but the person in charge of the job search had done research on spirituality and education. I know that being spiritual does not mean being homophobic, but I did not want to take that chance. After getting and accepting that job, I found out she is very accepting. I realized that I had judged her unfairly based on her research, which is exactly what I did not want to happen to me.

I now have a job that I applied for with a complete and honest CV. I was hired because of, not despite, my research. Ultimately I found that being true to myself and to my passion resulted in a job with a department that values my identity, a dissertation I am proud of, and a sense of integrity.

5. Lessons Learned

I have often heard the graduate school adage, “The best dissertation is a done dissertation” and the common advice, “You can pursue your own research after you get your PhD; for now, just do what you have to do to get through.” Although I certainly understand the practicality and realism behind these sentiments, for me choosing a topic that was true to myself sustained me throughout the process and prevented me from either doing a “drive-by dissertation” that is rushed and unsatisfactory or from doing a “long haul dissertation,” where the dissertation takes forever because it takes too long and it becomes a burden instead of a joy. Throughout this

whole process, I have faced questions--from others and from myself--about whether or not it was prudent to pursue a topic with potential risks to my own professional career and possibly to the careers of my participants. Just as I found that being true to my own passion in my personal life was the only path to self-fulfillment, I found the same was true in my professional life as well.

After many struggles both internally and externally I have come a long way from the closeted high school teacher I was. Leaving off the subtitles on my CV erased a part of my identity and defeated one of my goals of going to graduate school--achieving a sense of wholeness. By omitting the subtitles of my work, I was denying a part of myself. By restoring the subtitles, I was being honest about who I am in my professional career. In querying myself, my participants, and the research process, I found a way to be true to myself and my participants.

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