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## **Questioning Identities/Shifting Identities: The Impact of Researching Sex and Gender on a Researcher's LGBT+ Identity**

Qualitative research is a complex area, with many competing political, social, institutional, and impact-oriented queries emerging in the course of developing a methodology. Amongst feminist, queer, and healthcare research scholars, there is a growing focus on the way in which conducting qualitative research impacts upon the researcher themselves (Hochschild, 1979; Browne and Nash, 2010; Jamie Heckert, 2010; Rooke, 2010; Carroll, 2012). In particular, some authors have drawn on their experience researching LGBT+ populations as LGBT people (Walby, 2010; Hayfield and Huxley, 2015). However, the extant research on what it means to be/do LGBT+ research is limited, and there is scope to develop it further. Additionally, much of the work looking at the experience of researching fails to address the positive feelings associated with research.

This article uses an analytic autoethnography to explore my experiences as a bisexual/queer non binary person researching LGBT issues. Informed by queer and feminist theory, this article ruminates on how the field impacts the researcher through reflecting on interview excerpts and field diary entries. I conclude that doing/being researching LGBT+ populations can result in a significant degree of introspection for the researcher. This introspection can result in a range of emotions and outcomes including retraumatisation, euphoria, querying oneself, and a change of researcher identity.

This work contributes to scholarship surrounding emotion-work, insider/outsider divide, and power dynamics. This piece concludes by asserting practical methodological ways in which researchers may be able to care for themselves and maintain their wellbeing during the research period. Furthermore, counter to many narratives around both emotion-

work and being LGBT, this paper offers an opportunity to explore the feelings of euphoria that can stem from studying/being LGBT.

### **The Self in Research: Insider/Outsider, Emotion-work, and Power**

Numerous scholars – particularly feminist and queer scholars - have considered the impact of research on the researcher. Insightful discussions have been generated concerning insider/outsider position, emotion work, and power dynamics, which inform this article.

#### *Power Dynamics*

The power dynamic implicit in a researcher-participant relationship have been discussed at length (Adams, 1999; Riley, Schouten and Cahill, 2003; Ganga and Scott, 2006; Smith, 2006; Eide and Kahn, 2008; Gailey and Prohaska, 2011; Huckaby, 2011; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2012; Muhammed *et al.*, 2015). In creating emancipatory research, many scholars – particularly queer and feminist scholars - have suggested methods to alleviate the hierarchy of power between researcher/participant such as mutual disclosure, less formal interview styles, and a use of reflexivity (Oakley, 1981; England, 1994; Finlay, 2002; Riley, Schouten and Cahill, 2003; Muhammed *et al.*, 2015). Reflexivity has become popular, with researchers emphasising the importance of reflecting on one's position and relationship with the participant based on identity, power, and status (Finlay, 2002; Riley, Schouten and Cahill, 2003; Watt, 2007; Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009; Muhammed *et al.*, 2015). Reflexivity encourages researchers to interpret their status amidst systems of power and acknowledge that one is not a neutral observer, but rather, someone existing in a social world. However, many have concluded that although power dynamics are not static, the power dynamic between researcher/participant will exist regardless of attempts to escape it through reflexivity (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009).

Power dynamics will exist regardless of the methodology used due to institutional expectations. In describing their experience of researching LGBT topics, Heckert wrote:

of the power felt between themselves and their participants;

“I have a memory of expressing concern to one of my research partners that I might be exploiting them by taking their stories. She reminded me that by listening, I was giving something as well” (Jamie Heckert, 2010, p.51).

Heckert’s concern over exploiting their participants is important, as their participants’ words form the basis of a PhD project. The researcher’s concerns over how to mediate the relationship between participant and researcher, are indicative of the need to work against these power dynamics to ameliorate the expanse of power.

### *Emotion-Work*

Emotion and affect are concepts that have been discussed at length, particularly by feminist, queer, and health researchers (Hochschild, 1979; Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer, 2001; Ahmed, 2004, 2014; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007; Rooke, 2010; Wetherell, 2013, 2015; Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015; Hanna, 2018). Affect and emotion are increasingly studied to foreground the body and emotion in analyses of the physical and social world to understand relationships between people. Hochschild suggested a concept of emotion-management to interpret the self, interaction, and structure (Hochschild, 1979). Emotion-management is when “we actively try to manage what we feel in accordance with latent rules” (Hochschild, 1979, p.571). Individuals follow the ‘conventions of feeling’, whereby individuals respond to one another in appropriate ways by “fulfilling the emotive requirements situations call forth” (Hochschild, 1979, p.572). This emotion-management can be commodified, for example, an airline host/ess might adopt a pleasant, calm, and approachable countenance regardless of how tired they are feeling, or how irritated they are

by passengers. The concept of emotion-management can be applied to the role researchers adopt when completing qualitative research.

Qualitative researchers conduct a significant amount of emotion-work/management when going into the field (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007). Dickson-Swift *et al.* highlight how researchers engage in emotion-work when building rapport, managing self-disclosure, becoming desensitized to traumatic topics, feeling vulnerable, and developing attachments to participants, and more (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007). Scholars have begun to emphasise the role of emotion-work/management in researcher wellbeing, and the impact that emotion-work has on shaping data, analysis, and output (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015). Where research has involved collecting sensitive data, authors can experience anxiety, feeling isolated, and conflict in their role as a researcher where they sometimes felt more like a friend (Johnson and Clarke, 2003). The emotion of the researcher cannot be divorced from the processes of research when researcher emotions actively transform and affect data, and researchers are emotionally impacted in one way or another.

In short then, emotion-management/work can result in changes for the researchers' emotional state, and – in some cases - in their identities. In thinking of these processes of self-management and emotion-work in a queer and feminist research context, Rooke wrote that:

“[Queering ethnography as a method] demands that the ethnographer work from an honest sense of oneself that is open and reflexive, rather than holding on to a sense of self which provides an ontologically stable place from which to enter into the fieldwork and subsequently come back to” (Rooke, 2010, p.35).

Rooke wrote about how ethnographically researching LGB identities caused her to reflect on her identity, transforming her vision of herself, and pushing her to consider whether the label

of lesbian fit. The implications of emotion-work and identity change in the course of conducting qualitative research cannot be understated, and I will explore these further in conceptualising my own experiences as a LGBT researcher.

### *Insider/Outsider Research*

Power dynamics amongst the researcher/participant are further complicated by the way in which the parties perceive one another. Insider/outsider research has long depicted the struggles of sharing (or not) identities with participants. Insider research is often depicted as allowing researchers insightful understandings of participant experiences, providing experiential ‘hunches’, and easing rapport with participants (Watts, 2006; Muhammed *et al.*, 2015). Insider research has also been characterised as problematic due to difficulties researchers may experience in reporting negative findings from a research population they are close with (Islam, 2000), or creating situations where researchers have pre-existing friendships with participants problematising reportable information versus what is said to a friend (Taylor, 2011).

Being an outsider in research has been seen as beneficial due to researcher neutrality, and due to the comprehensive data secured as outsiders require often require more explanation to understand context (Kanuha, 2000; Bridges, 2001). However, outsider researchers may experience difficulties, including finding accessing a sample due to perceptions of them as exploitative or untrustworthy (Bridges, 2001). Although binary distinctions have been made between insider and outsider researchers, this binary is often meaningless, as insider researchers do not share all identities with participants (Bridges, 2001; Sherif, 2001; Ganga and Scott, 2006; Breen, 2007; Obasi, 2014). This muddled binary approach is most adequate in describing the position I occupied in undertaking fieldwork. Nash (2010) spoke of how she as an ‘old-time lesbian’ had to navigate relationships with

trans men in LGBT spaces, finding herself as both an outsider and an insider. For Nash, the transphobia associated with ‘old-time lesbians’ meant that her status as researcher was accepted cautiously given the experiences trans men had had with other lesbians (Nash, 2010). Simultaneously, Nash was aware and an active participant in LGBT spaces and community politics, and felt an experiential sameness with those she was researching (Nash, 2010). This muddied insider/outsider status is notable in LGBT research given the variation of genders and sexual identities that is said to belong to a single community.

In the course of conducting my PhD fieldwork, issues of power, belonging, and emotion-work all interwove as I grappled with my own identities as a bisexual/queer person. To explore this, I will first discuss the analytic approach in this paper before describing the research context and giving an account of my experience.

### **Analytic Autoethnographies**

Conducting an autoethnography is a helpful methodological choice for researchers whose work impinges on their identities or experiences. Given that, “from a poststructural perspective, experience is never quite unified, knowable, universal, or stable,” autoethnographies can pose a way of communicating a located example of experience that speaks to other social currents and concerns (Gannon, 2018, p.23). However, autoethnographies are not of much scholarly use unless authors use them “to make linkages between the micro and the macro” through providing a statement regarding one’s purpose, a detailed analysis of the data, and considering the ethical issues of conducting an autoethnography (Wall, 2016, p.5).

I intend to highlight the issues pertinent to an LGBT person being/doing LGBT research through reflecting on my own experiences as a PhD researcher in the field. To do so,

I explore the most emotional entries in my field diary and interviews with participants. I am aware that as Wall (2016) suggests that the implications of me writing this article mean that my feelings will be captured in print, leaving an impression of myself and my emotional state to be reflected upon in years to come. Although this is exposing, and although things may change in how I view this period of my life, this article is the one I wish I had read before embarking on my own PhD research.

This analytic autoethnography contributes empirically to qualitative methods, emotion-work, insider/outsider status, and reflections on power. Furthermore, it discusses an oft-omitted topic of researcher euphoria, and develops this as an additional component to theories on emotion-work. Finally, this analytic autoethnography contributes to the conceptualisation and theorisation of what it means to be an LGBT researcher. I shall explain the research context of my project before analysing the outcomes of fieldwork.

## **Research Context**

I became interested in studying plurisexuality – the attraction to more than one gender - due to my own bisexual/queer identity. Growing up, I experienced discrimination, which led me to seek my identity in scholarship to validate myself. There is little scholarship on plurisexual identities (Monro, Hines and Osborne, 2017), and I often turned to studying lesbian and gay literature. This was frustrating as it did not represent my experience, and was connected to people telling me I *really* was a lesbian. Furthermore, I did not know many other bisexual/queer people, and often felt responsible for educating others about my identity. I decided to do a PhD project to satiate my curiosity and to stimulate discourse that could help other plurisexuals.

I used a theoretical framework informed by queer theory, and with an emancipatory aim. I believe that identities are illusory, categorisations are unhelpful and limiting in the main, and sexuality cannot be captured in words (Burrill, 2001; Butler, 2007; Green, 2007; Callis, 2009). Furthermore, I believe that hostile cisnormative, transphobic, heteronormative, homonormative, and biphobic social currents are at work in shaping ‘appropriate’ ways of performing and doing sexuality and gender (Rich, 1980; Weiss, 2003; Gilbert, 2009; Lombardi, 2009; Eisner, 2013; Worthen, 2016). Although categorisations are broadly unhelpful, given the current social dynamics that punish non-normative sexualities and genders identifying by certain labels can help validate one another, and build a site of resistance to an overarching homogenizing social current (Rust, 2000; Rostosky *et al.*, 2010; Huxley, Clarke and Halliwell, 2014). However, communities reinforce internal standards that leave many LGBT people doubly discriminated as they fit neither in heterosexual communities or in LGBT imagined communities (Weiss, 2003; Formby, 2017). These beliefs and theoretical conceptualisations are shared in the writing of this article.

The qualitative project took place over two phases. Phase I consisted of 30 one-on-one semi-structured interviews, whilst Phase II involved nine two-week photo diaries and follow up interviews. Sampling was conducted through adverts on social media and snowball sampling. The sample was diverse, with 30 participants taking part in Phase I, and nine participants taking part in Phase II. Participants were aged between 20 and 57, represented multiple genders, sexual identities, nationalities, ethnicities, and social classes. Interviews explored the sexual and gender identities that people identified with and their reasons for identifying as such. Interviews also explored previous and current romantic and sexual relationships, as well as how participants felt they related to others in their lives on the basis of their sexual and gender identities. I wished to disrupt the power imbalance between researcher/participant (Oakley, 1981; England, 1994), and adopted a queer feminist approach

which prioritised mutual disclosure, reflexivity, and an openness to warmth and humour in the interview. Interviews were transcribed and sent to participants for checking, before being analysed using a thematic analysis.

I kept a field diary throughout the research process. Initially this was used as a place to jot down ideas, however, as time went on it became a site of reflection and a place where I began to unravel my preconceptions about sexuality and gender, and question my own identity. To demonstrate the impact that research had on me, I will use extracts from this field diary and interviews to highlight the impact on myself.

### **Shifting Identities: Euphoria, Power, Trauma, and Outsider-status**

In the course of this research and in keeping with many other researchers' experiences, I experienced many shifts in my personal and emotional life. I will discuss five aspects of this; (i) the euphoria of connection, (ii) relationships with participants (iii) retraumatisation through listening, (iv) finding oneself on the outside, and (v) the researcher's shifting identity.

#### *The Euphoria of Connection*

Contemporary methodological reflections acknowledge the emotional effect that research can have on the researcher (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer, 2001; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007). This research is typically concerned with negative emotion, focusing on trauma, anger, and sadness. However, in my experience conducting fieldwork was euphoric at many points. The greatest highs of research came from moments of connection with participants. Interviews included diverse responses that detailed people's pride in their

identities, and emotive stories of love and desire that people had experienced. This had a significant impact on my own queerness:

I love being queer, this research is consolidating that feeling throughout all the time I spend speaking to others [...] What is the point of traditional? Why do we bother doing anything like that?

Field Diary Entry 07/06/18

The euphoria of connection and the pride in my queerness would pique after interviews where participants were content with their plurisexuality. As participants described the way in which they connected with queer culture, forging paths and finding their own chosen families to celebrate their identities, I grew increasingly happy with my own identity, feeling fortunate to be part of an experience that united so many. These connections would continue outside of fieldwork, such as when I was working in a public space with my books on display:

[S]omeone who just saw I was connected to sexuality and gender asked to speak to me so that they could talk about their identities with me. It was good [A trans woman spoke about her inability to] present as a woman in her workplace, and is forced to dress as a man [...] she spoke about [...] trans women being made to go into sex work as they are rejected from all possible job opportunities

Field Diary Entry 7/11/18

This particular connection, although initially stressful and upsetting, was ultimately positive in terms of finding people who could discuss similar experiences where their gender and sexuality was an issue for them (or rather, for others). Often, these encounters required a lot of emotional energy to support people. However, I was pleased to be able to listen to and connect with people.

This euphoria of connection, of being in on a ‘secret’, of understanding someone’s troubles, and of – in many ways – being invited to help someone feel at ease with their identities was a privilege of this research. This help was reciprocal, with a number of participants referring me to plurisexual cultural touchstones I might not have been aware of, such as musicians, movies, TV series, books, articles, and social media meme groups, all of which fostered in me a sense of belonging to a something bigger. This enabled a contentment with my identities and I felt the reciprocation of understanding between myself and others, and - when one has been raised in an environment hostile to one’s sexual identity - this is a critical and necessary part of feeling human.

### *Relationships with Participants*

Throughout this research process, I was often regarded as an authority in sex and gender due to my research, putting me in some uncomfortable positions where people asked for my advice as this extract from an interview shows:

**Rosie:** Is there anything you want to ask me? [...]

**Participant:** It was how do I talk to girls? How do I chat up girls?

**Rosie:** (Laughs) I have the opposite problem, how do I chat up men?

Other researchers (Oakley, 1981; Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer, 2001) have documented this experience of being put into a position where one is regarded as an authority-friend and consequently asked for advice. With little knowledge on how to approach this, I somewhat dodged questions, or did not go into detail. Walby has commented on his experience of being sexualised in his interviews, with a few participants propositioning him for sex (Walby, 2010). Although nothing as explicit happened to me, there was a definite recognition of myself as a sexual being who was dating multiple genders in the course of my

fieldwork, which had the benefit of creating a more ‘human’ image and subsequent rapport, but put me in danger of fielding many questions asking for advice.

Where participants asked me a personal question about my own life, I shared. Many participants were curious about why I chose to do this research, and how it interacted with my own sense of identity. This took its toll:

The mutuality [of these interviews] is making me feel very vulnerable. I’m exhausted and know that between me and my participants we are carving things out for each other – but I’m carving out so much for so many participants, that I need to be careful to keep some back.

Field Diary Entry, 03/05/18

This was an early lesson for me, as the previously mentioned euphoria of connection could lead into a heightened mutual disclosure between my participants and I, which led to an opening of the conversation which was often off topic and emotionally charged. The work required both in allowing a participant to feel at ease with their own sexuality and gender, whilst carving out portions of my personal experiences is indicative of a particular kind of emotion-work that LGBT researchers undergo and that is similar to other emotion-work documented elsewhere in the literature (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007).

Throughout the research process, I questioned the power dynamics implicit in fieldwork, analysis, and writing. I had power in that I controlled the questions asked, redirected conversations, transcribed, and I have written up what the interviewees lives mean in a research context, and I will profit from this research in terms of gaining a qualification. These dynamics seem impossible to escape from given that, on a personal level, we will largely profit from a successful (i.e. publishable) research project. In attempting to navigate these power dynamics I answered any participants’ questions

honestly and openly, I sent transcripts back for participants to amend as they wished, I encouraged participants to get in touch if they wished to change anything, I sent my themes to participants for checking and confirmation, I will send both my PhD and an abbreviated document of findings to all participants, I will disseminate this research amongst sexuality and gender activist communities and I gave participants the space to disclose anything they wanted, with many commenting they found the interview cathartic. The trading of power between the researcher and the participant is simultaneous and unequal, with the researcher having the power to frame people's lives according to their own interpretation of participant experiences. The final word rests with the researcher, but, in my case, I gave a little along the way that left me feeling emotionally vulnerable and exhausted as I was forced to confront questions that I had buried deep inside of me when the participants asked. One such incidence was when a participant asked me about my gender identity:

**Participant:** Have you ever done the gender questioning thing?

**Rosie:** Yeah. Absolutely.

**Participant:** Do you still do it?

**Rosie:** [...] seeing the increase in non binary identities, then I have been thinking about it more. I've been thinking what that might mean for me [...] I'm not sure that it's important to change my pronouns or change my name or change anything about me because I don't have a body dysphoria or anything [...] it has been brewing for a while that I've started to rethink things a little.

I had not spoken about these feelings before to anyone. This conversation led to a lot of soul-searching as the participant led me to confront something I had not vocalised before. I have since questioned my gender, resulting in me coming out as non binary in recent months.

I did not equalise power in the relationship between myself and participants during fieldwork, however, there were points that I felt vulnerable in ways that the participants may have felt whilst being interviewed. In a sense, the relationship I had with participants required vulnerability on both of our parts, and a careful consideration of power to ensure that I respected my participants as individuals sharing deep insights for a project that might only tangentially enact positive change in their lives.

### *Retraumatism Through Listening*

As has been listed at length in many scholars work, the emotional labour of conducting qualitative research is significant when dealing with distressing topics (Johnson and Clarke, 2003; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007; Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015). By the nature of exploring what it means to be plurisexual, I knew that I was going to hear participant experiences of discrimination and possibly sexual violence. After a distressing interview I wrote the following on the long train journey home:

“I’m exhausted [...] the emotional and physical energy that these interviews take is something I had not anticipated. The necessity to listen to people’s trauma, and absorb their feelings and experiences leaves my feeling entirely spent. I feel like I’m a big vase that’s being filled up with everyone else’s feelings and it’s a lot to contain and look after until I can spill it into the form of my dissertation. It’s also lonely [...] It’s like I have to relive all of my own experiences and traumas again via other people’s stories – I’m so tired, and so emotive.”

Field Diary Entry, 03/05/18

This extract alone references many scholars’ work who detail how emotional labour and emotion-work impacts the researcher (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer, 2001; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2006, 2007). Previous research has highlighted the vicarious trauma that

researchers may experience as a result of studying distressing topics (Johnson and Clarke, 2003; Connolly and Reilly, 2007; Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015). Previous researchers have discussed their feeling of failure as they were unable to feel objectively about the research, and their sense of compassion for trauma upset them further (Connolly and Reilly, 2007). All of these issues came into play in my experience. Hearing stories that were sometimes difficult caused me to be emotionally affected and brought up a number of historical experiences I had undergone as a bisexual/queer person. Through hearing stories of other people who were struggling, or people who recounted their experiences of discrimination, I was left remembering things that are sometimes best left to rest. This had a significant impact on my personal life but I was fortunate to have a wide and supportive network to talk about these issues with, and supervisors who were willing to have impromptu meetings so that I could hash out the way this research was impacting me. I began counselling appointments to acknowledge the issues that were raised in this time. In retrospect this was a useful lesson in building boundaries, as previous scholars have detailed the problems in over-emphasising with participants which can compromise professional boundaries and lead to wishing to support participants beyond the scope of the interview (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer, 2001; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2006). Fortunately, this field diary entry was the most extreme entry I made. Following this, and following conversations I had with supportive colleagues, friends, supervisors, and counsellors, I erected emotional boundaries and a sense of distance in order to avoid emotionally engaging to the degree I had previously. I adapted my interviews to ask for less detail in these matters. Although I feel a loss in terms of how this impacted on a queer/feminist/emancipatory research ethic, this was necessary for myself as a PhD student and novice researcher.

The impact of hearing people's trauma was retraumatizing for me and had an effect on how I viewed the research overall. Having heard the intimate details of people's pain, I began

to feel intimidated by the enormity of attempting to privilege and position people's stories in a way that lended them respect:

I feel a lot of responsibility for having heard [about a participant's sexual assault], and feel honoured that they chose to tell me, but equally worry about the dynamic of the relationship given that they cracked themselves open to me and this is for research. It feels a little wrong or uncomfortable and I don't know whether I should include it in analysis [...] I am feeling anxious writing about this even.

Field Diary Entry 29/04/18

The context of the above quote was that, after wrapping up an interview, a participant told me of their experiences with sexual assault. This was not something I was exploring in my study, but it came up when I offered the participant the chance to tell me anything they wish I had asked them. I did not discuss the details of this disclosure in my final project, given that it was not linked to the themes I was exploring. I have presented it here in a methodological paper, floating on its own, with little context, depth, detail, or narrative. This continues to raise questions for me on how we can treat and honour data when it is not related to our own investigations, given that – in this case – a participant trusted me enough to disclose their history and I did not include their story that they had been building up to tell me throughout the interview. This, if nothing else, references the power implicit in a researcher-participant relationship. In one way this story was thrust upon me and I had to adopt a position of listening regardless of how this might affect me. In a larger sense, I had the power of negotiating the retelling (or not) of this story and deciding on whether or not the fact that I bore witness to the story necessitated including it in the final project. Regardless of the power dynamic of the relationship, it is important to note that here researchers have experienced similar things to their participants, the possibility of retraumatisation emerges, as well as the

possibility of being affected by participants own trauma regarding things alien to the researcher.

### *Finding Oneself on the Outside*

This research began from the position of an insider, and the comfortable assurance that I – as a bisexual/queer person – would be familiar with the experiences that my participants would share with me. This has many implications, as previous insider researchers have spoken about the pressure they felt to not ‘betray’ or misrepresent their communities (Islam, 2000). Furthermore, researchers have discussed the blurring boundaries between being considered as a friend or an equal and being seen as a researcher (Taylor, 2011). Although these considerations all came to mind as I was undertaking the research, what most struck me was the points at which I was an outsider who could not understand the experiences of my participants. Discussions of racism or the experience of growing up in conservative areas were important conversations which I came away from feeling frustrated that I could not entirely understand the experiences participants shared with me. At points, participants would describe those who were racist and they would parallel my identity markers. In discussing a previous racist partner, one participant described them as:

[A] person who is a doctor within a university and [...] saying I'm too sensitive, grow a thicker skin, racism isn't all that anymore, just really kind of clueless. And these are people who have a very good education but no life experience of anyone who isn't white or middle class.

#### Interview Extract

I felt the parallels with my own identity as a white, highly educated, middle class person when this participant described the perpetrator of racist action, and understood that there was

no way I could comprehend the recurrent racism that this participant had experienced. Similar conversations happened with cis men, trans people, people of different social classes, and people of other nationalities. One participant discussed how, when they had first come out as bisexual to their parents in another country, they had been afraid that their parents would kill them. Cis men often referenced the fear of physical violence they felt if they went out dressed in feminine clothes. A few trans and non binary people referenced their fears that they would never be loved as they are or recognised as the gender that they present as, and that any partner would in some way fetishize or deny their gender identities. These stories recurred throughout the interviews and marked the distance between me and my participants on a level that I had not anticipated. Previous research has pointed to the way in which a researcher can never fully be an insider, as there will always be things that mark them as different from their participants (Sherif, 2001; Obasi, 2014). I had not comprehended how being different from my participants would affect the things that I would fail to understand. This is indicative of broader debates relating to the 'LGBT community', where in reality, the homogenous image of an 'LGBT community' is dissembled when a closer look is taken at racist, ableist, transphobic, biphobic, acephobic, sexist dynamics that occur within the 'community' (Formby, 2017). In reality, there is no homogenous 'LGBT community' to understand, given that a diversity of sexuality and gender does not result in groups becoming not racist for example.

As a result of the differences between me and my participants, my field diary reflected a little of my discomfort:

I'm not sure I delved enough into the gender fluid [identity of participant],  
perhaps not knowing the right questions

Field Diary Entry, 29/04/18

This desire not to offend and the desire to get it right marked myself as an outsider to their experience. Many participants had said that they would not have spoken to me had I not identified as bisexual/queer, and one participant said ‘no research about us, without us.’ Other research has commented on the difficulties of attempting to co-produce activist research given the multiplicity of identities and power dynamics (Kara, 2017). In the context of researching plurisexuality, Muñoz-Laboy has demonstrate how researchers of plurisexuality fail to address the systemic oppression based on ethnic and racial differences, thus reproducing a colonialist and discriminatory research ethic (Muñoz-Laboy, 2019). I considered the ethics of my sometimes-outsider position at length given the way in which participant groups often see outsider research as exploitative and disrespectful (Bridges, 2001). This involved expanding my reading list to incorporate sociological works on identities outside of LGBTQ+ people, ensuring that participants had the space to talk about these issues, and not overburdening participants with educating me on the backgrounds to classism, racism, transphobia and other interlocking systems of oppression. This also required identity work (Cassell, 2005) – the management of expectations and adoption of an appropriate role in response to the participant’s identities in the interview – to be open to negotiating my role in the interview dependent on how the participant wished to discuss their experience.

### *The Researcher’s Shifting Identity*

The most significant aspect of having conducted this research was the impact that this has had on my identity. Prior to embarking on this research, I identified as a cis woman and bisexual/queer. Now I identify as non binary and the way in which I experience my queerness has transformed. These identity shifts are evident in my field diary entries, having heard a variety of experiences from participants:

[I]nterviewing people has left me in the position where I'm questioning my own identities around my sexuality and gender identity [...] In many ways it has been affirming to note that people have the same struggles as me, and that my experiences are not unique. This has also left me with greater confidence in my own identity [...] Fieldwork] has shown me that so many people have so many different life paths, different relationship styles etc. and that has been also great in terms of expanding the possibilities I saw in my dating life [...] In essence, I'm learning from my participants, and they're shaping the way in which I see myself and others around me.

Field Diary Entry, 15/05/18

The way in which my views on relationships and identities have changed over time has been both wonderful – as in the extract above – and uncomfortable. Through hearing the diversity of stories and experiences of people who were like me/not like me, I saw a variety of opportunities, experiences, and feelings that I had never had the time to consider in such depth before. Landen commented on the way in which their identity was often built in response or in relationships with other participants in an ethnographic study (Landén, 2011). Although Landen did not suggest a lifelong identity change based on personal identities like gender or sexuality, their suggestion of a relational negotiation and influence of identity fits in with my experience of conducting fieldwork. These developments in my identities and perspectives required discussions with a strong and supportive peer group. Fortunately, a colleague and I had developed a Critically Queer Working Group, which became a strong source of support my perspectives on the world changed. In addition, as I write this article, I have left my home for three months to visit another institution and am finding the space clarifying as I experiment with my gender expression and test out different pronouns to see what fits. Now, almost a year

after I began fieldwork, I am still working through some questions around my identity and I remain in a tumultuous state. Whether this will pass over time and I will revert to cis womanhood, or whether I will solidify my identity as non binary is unclear. It is important to consider this element of research – the fact that, as researchers, we are all human and through thrusting ourselves into the lives of others, there is plenty of opportunity to find dark corners of ourselves that we never knew before.

## **Conclusion**

The implications of this article are many. In practical and methodological terms, many suggestions can be gleaned from this article. As other researchers have noted (Mccosker, Barnard and Gerber, 2001; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2006, 2007; Connolly and Reilly, 2007), researchers of sensitive topics require a significant level of institutional support. Supervisory pastoral care and a debrief counselling service could allow for significant space for researchers to unpack the experiences that they have listened to. This support should continue to be available through the duration of the research, including transcription and writing up, as these processes involve thinking of the issues that researchers came across in their fieldwork. It would be of benefit for insider researchers to have a more extensive ethical review procedure that demonstrates a more comprehensive understanding of how researching one's own identity may make them feel and whether there may be a retraumatising effect. If this is found to be the case, then more extensive support should be offered, including peer researcher discussion groups to share the highs and lows of the research process. Many of the emotional boundaries I built in the research process were as a result of trial and error, and – to an extent – this is all that is possible before a researcher knows what they are going to come across. I found that the way in which my views on relationships and identities

expanded and changed required me keeping a field diary to have a space where I could meditate on the tumultuous thoughts I had throughout the research.

Theoretically this article has contributed to literature on power dynamics, emotion-work, and insider/outsider status. This article has shown that, although an insider in many ways, LGBT researchers being/doing LGBT research must consider how their concept of community is counter to other LGBT people's communities, in line with Formby's (2018) thought. Outside of one's shared LGBT identity, one must consider whether - through my participation in academia and other privileged institutions - I am perpetuating differences amongst my participants and reinforcing systems of oppression. Given that the research we conduct benefits us, we must consider Murray's conclusion of "I am a spy, a shill, a go-between and (consequently) a sociologist" (Murray 2003, p.392).

This article has contributed to theoretical work around emotion-work to ruminate on the positive aspects of research - finding connection, similarity and shared experiences can be as important to the researcher as to the population at large, and the buoyancy of research should not be underestimated. This research has given me a true and lasting pride in my bisexual/queer identity that was only partial prior to embarking on this project. Furthermore, in line with emotion-work, this article has reflected on how these emotional journeys can impact a researcher's own identity, in my case, helping me along the path to identifying as non binary. There were many transformative points in the course of fieldwork, but coming out as non binary was not one I saw coming. The way in which participants and researchers can shape one another's stories, emotional landscapes, and identities cannot be understated - research can be a journey of self-exploration as well as a mode of creating emancipatory work.



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