



What Does The Q Mean? Including Queer Voices In Qualitative Research

By: **Denise L. Levy** and Corey W. Johnson

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What does the Q mean? Including queer voices in qualitative research

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Abstract

Despite much of the fear and ambiguity over the use of the term queer in professional and academic settings, we recommend researchers include the language and the population in the study of sexual identity. During our own recent research endeavors, where we both recruited and focused on Queer participants, we learned some important lessons. Based on these experiences we explore the existing methodological literature about accessing and including Queer participants, provide an overview of two studies that both invited Queer participation and examined the population's experience, discuss the benefits and challenges of incorporating people who identify as Queer, and finally present recommendations for future research.

Keywords

methodology, queer, sexual identity

The term queer, historically used as a slur against non-heterosexuals, was reclaimed in the early 1990s when the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) became known as Queer Nation. A political frenzy ensued. According to Cohen (2000), the lesbian and gay political agenda, rooted in civil rights, only allows for assimilation or incorporation into society's dominant or normative structures. Queer politics, on the other hand, focuses on eliminating oppression by radically disrupting and transforming society's norms and hierarchical structures altogether. Cohen explained:

If there is any truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in

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opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin. (Cohen, 2000: 495)

Incompatible with normative society, queer is inherently political (Kemp, 2009).

For nearly two decades since the reclamation of the term, the number of people identifying as Queer has grown profoundly. Within the academy, queer theory has emerged as a valid and valuable worldview, condemning conventional understandings of sexual binaries (Blasius, 2001; Jagose, 1996). 'With its post-structural roots and keen eye for deconstruction, queer theory can be described as a critical standpoint for tearing apart dominant ways of knowing about sex, gender, and sexualities' (Willis, 2007: 183). Queer theory 'teaches that identity is a cultural construction' (Talbur and Steinberg, 2000: 17) and troubles essentialist notions of identity. In fact, queer theorists often hesitate to define the term queer, other than to say that it refers to non-normative sexuality (Halperin, 2003); the term 'undoes itself, refuses a set taxonomy or stable definition' (Corber and Valocchi, 2003: 27).

Given the ambiguity of the term queer, how does one begin to include Queer voices in qualitative studies without defining the term? During our recent research endeavors, which utilized queer participants, we were repeatedly asked this question. Unfortunately, extant literature does not adequately prepare researchers to do queer research nor does it explore the implications of queer studies (Browne, 2008). Consequently, this article will explore existing methodological literature about accessing and including Queer participants, discuss two studies that invited Queer participation, explore the benefits and challenges of incorporating people who identify as Queer, and finally present recommendations for future research.

What does Queer mean, anyway?

According to Jagose (1996), 'there is no generally acceptable definition of queer; indeed, many of the common understandings of the term contradict each other irresolvably' (p. 99). It is precisely this unpredictability that allows queer to maintain its political struggle against normative sexuality. Queer has certainly brought complexity to the concept of sexual identity. In contrast to gay and lesbian movements, which relied on identity to obtain political gain, queer highlights the 'limitations of identity categories' (Jagose, p. 77) and challenges heteronormativity (unquestioned, essentialized and privileged heterosexuality). In effect, queer 'disrupts identity claims, positioning identity as inadequate for describing what it claims to embody. Queer tells U/s that identity is a construction that traps, blocks, stifles, retards – therefore Queer refuses terms of identity' (Grace, Hill, Johnson and Lewis, 2004: 303). Instead, queer 'embraces the multi-dimensionality of human existence, arguing that the self is a patchwork of multiple identities and situational subjectivities' (Epstein, 2005: 68). In other words, queer disrupts traditional (and binary) notions of identity as fixed and unitary and replaces them with a

conceptualization of self that is constantly changing, multi-dimensional, and fluid (Valocchi, 2005).

The term queer, rather than just a 'shorthand name for lesbian and gay studies' (Giffney, 2004: 74), is a political term that is broader than identity itself. According to Eaklor (2008), 'its great potential lies in its vision of true sex and gender liberation. That liberation rests on the idea of fluid rather than fixed genders and sexualities' (p. 244). As a noun, queer is often used as an identity category, albeit one that resists categorization. In this instance, queer is 'primarily an inquiry into the truth of individuals and the questions about self-understanding they are called to answer' (Wilchins, 2004: 109). People who identify as Queer often do so to make a political statement about the very nature of sexual identity categorization. In addition to its use as a noun, queer can also be an adjective or verb. Corber and Valocchi (2003) explain:

As an adjective, 'queer' describes a process of 'queering', a distorting, a making the solid unstable. . . . Thus, the 'queered' position is related to and dependent upon the stable position, rather than being a separate position in itself. It undermines the stability of the primary term and opens up the possibility that the solid has never been solid at all. (Corber and Valocchi, 2003: 25)

When we queer something, we trouble or question its foundations.

Research with non-heterosexual and queer participants

In recent years, research on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (GLBTQ) populations has steadily grown. Historically, studies have focused on gay men, to lesser extent lesbians, and, even today, it is difficult to find bisexual, transgender, queer, and other voices.

Exemplar studies with queer inclusion

The first author's study was queer in several ways. Not only did the study design include queer participants, but it also examined two aspects of identity that are often viewed as conflicting: gay/lesbian/queer identity and Christian upbringing. The purpose of the study was to understand the process by which gay, lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing, resolve the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs (Levy, 2009). Four research questions guided the study: (a) how do participants define the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs? (b) what personal and contextual factors shaped their efforts to resolve this conflict? (c) what is the process by which individuals resolve this conflict? and (d) how do participants describe their resolution of this conflict?

Using grounded theory, the first author interviewed fifteen participants. Analysis of interview transcripts led to a theory of the process by which gay,

lesbian, and queer identified individuals with a Christian upbringing, resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. This process includes an awareness of the conflict, an initial response to the conflict, a catalyst of new knowledge propelling participants forward, steps of working through the conflict, and a resolution of the conflict. The entire process was affected by two core categories: (a) personal factors including reflective abilities, strength and resiliency, anger, creativity, and humor; and (b) contextual factors including family, community resources, and church doctrine (Levy, 2009).

Frequently people would ask her why she was including Queer participants. 'Why not just gay and lesbian individuals?' 'Why isn't your study more inclusive? Why aren't you including people who identify as bisexual or transgender?' Using queer theory and including Queer participants shaped her study in several ways. First and foremost, it laid a pathway for distinguishing between sexual desire, behavior, and identity, and allowed for 'paradoxes that are present when examining different aspects of identity' (Levy, 2009: 55). Because many participants defied the culturally constructed binary of non-heterosexuality and Christianity, in essence, they queered both faith and sexual identity. Therefore, it seemed only natural to include Queer participants. There were three participants in this study who identify as Queer: Sarah, Logan, and Jake. Interestingly, only Sarah actually identified as queer when asked about sexual identity during pre-screening. Although she is attracted to both men and women and identifies as queer, Sarah explained 'everyone assumes that I'm straight because I'm in a heterosexual relationship'. Unlike Sarah, Logan and Jake described themselves as queer during the interview, but identified primarily and in the pre-screening as gay. In fact, when noticing Logan's reference to queer in his interview transcript, the first author followed up to ask him about his identification. Logan then explained that he identifies sexually as gay and politically as Queer.

The second author has also focused recently on the inclusion of Queer identified people in his research. The study (Singh and Johnson, 2009) came about when a local school counselor reported that on 4 March 2008, three youths circled a 17-year-old Queer-identified student and punched him in the back of the head, while shouting anti-gay epithets at him. What was even more concerning was that it happened at the local high school.

Inspired by this incident, the second author sought to explore how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer youth make meaning of their sexual identity through their high school experiences. His guiding research questions included: (a) what high school experiences positively informed student's sexual and/or gender identity? (b) what high school experiences negatively informed student's sexual and/or gender identity? (c) how do individuals learn to negotiate the experiences of high school when they are marginalized sexual and gendered identities? (d) what can school administrators, teachers, and counselors learn from the experiences of marginalized youth in order to make schools safer for LGBT youth?

Using collective memory work, a participatory-action research strategy, 11 co-researchers were recruited from LGBT resource centers on two college

campuses in the state of Georgia. Five of the eleven participants identified as Queer, three as gay and three as lesbian. The five who identified as Queer were all under the age of 22 and all were under the age of 25.

Inclusion of queer identified individuals and use of the term had several implications for the outcome. First, like the first author, many adults (colleagues, school personnel, etc.) were surprised about the inclusion of the word queer in the recruitment materials; however, the young participants were not surprised at all. 'I think it's just a generational thing', said Nicholas. In fact, all of the participants knew at least one Queer identified person in their social circle. The Queer identified youth also indicated an appreciation for inclusion, noting, 'I avoid campus programming and social events that only focus on lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, so I likely would have avoided your project too'. The other noteworthy implication of the inclusion of Queer people was that most of the youth wrote high school memories that reflected a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity, even though some of them now identify as Queer. This reinforces the problems with rigid binaries of gender and sexual identity and highlights the political nature of adopting a non-heteronormative identity, while simultaneously resisting the cultural essentialism/stereotypes that go along with categories of lesbian, gay and bisexual historically. Queer helped trouble those categories and reconcile a non-heterosexual identity for some of the youth. All of the youth, however, said that 'Queers are a part of the larger LGBT community. . . . it is now LGBTQ'.

Methodological considerations in queer research

With the popularity of queer theory and the increasing number of queer-identified individuals in our society, queer research is growing (Halberstam, 2003; Meezan and Martin, 2009). This research, which often disrupts notions of 'homo/heterosexual binary in contemporary life. . . puts the spotlight on interpretive issues especially suited to qualitative research' (Gamson, 2000: 348). Drawing on our own research experiences as well as relevant literature, this section will include methodological considerations for qualitative researchers working with Queer participants and/or queering their research.

Benefits. There are many benefits to using Queer participants in qualitative research. First and foremost, this type of research highlights Queer voices. With the increasing number of people identifying as Queer and with most research on sexual orientation to date being limited to gay and lesbian individuals, there is a need. Participants in our studies seemed pleasantly surprised that we provided a forum for Queer voices. Many agreed that the types of discussions surrounding the notion of queer are precisely the dialogues that are important when discussing religion and sexual identity or how non-gender conforming youth are treated in high schools.

A second benefit is political in nature. The strategic choice to do queer research is certainly political in that it challenges traditionally binary notions of sexuality (Ruffolo, 2006). 'The use of queer theory as a critical research lens can resist

normalization and reject assimilationist politics in order to bring about an equitable and democratic society where binary discourses are reworked' (Ruffolo, 2006: 4). In the first author's study, the politics of queer were evident in discourses surrounding both sexual identity and religious beliefs. Participants queered conventional views, creating a new, uncertain, changing dynamic between sexual identity and religion. For example, participants distanced themselves from religious institutions and, for those that remained religious, formed a more personalized faith.

Finally, using Queer participants can be an educational tool for society. In both academia and society at large, this term draws attention. Many people have said in disbelief, 'I thought that term was considered offensive!' Others want to know why we decided to include this population in our studies rather than only interviewing gay and lesbian individuals. Regardless of the particular question, queer research invites discourse that challenges heteronormativity as well as binaries related to gender, sexual orientation, religion, and so forth. This is one of the joys of doing queer research – to be in a position to educate others and to have meaningful discourse about a range of topics.

Challenges. In addition to the benefits of completing research with Queer individuals, there are a number of challenges. The first challenge to including Queer participants has to do with the non-definition of queer. Jagose (1996) explained that 'fundamental indeterminacy makes queer a difficult object of study; always ambiguous, always relational' (p. 96). Gamson (2000) also noted that, with the popularity of queer theory, 'the lesbian and gay subject has become, in a different way, increasingly hard to recognize, let alone research' (p. 348). Sample selection can be difficult when the conceptualization of sexual identity is unclear (Meezan and Martin, 2009). In the first author's study, it was important for her to understand participants' own understandings of queer to ensure goodness of fit with the study. In order to address this challenge, she asked a participant who identified as queer in the pre-screening, Sarah, to describe her identity further and to explain how she came to call herself queer. Sarah explained that she used to identify as bisexual, but now prefers to identify as Queer. She believes that it better describes her sexual identity and offers an additional political message. In the second author's study, the use of queer allowed youth to talk about an ever-evolving identity as they had relationships with transgender people or others with gender non-confirming behavior. For example, one young woman who previously identified as lesbian now identifies as queer because of the relationship she was having with a (male to female) trans woman.

A second challenge, related to the first, has to do with the uncertainty of working with a population whose identity is so fluid. With no fixed definition of queer, researchers must be prepared for anything. A Queer participant may be a female who formerly identified as bisexual (but no longer likes that word) who is married to a Queer-identified male. It might be someone who identifies as both queer and gay (such as the second author) or someone who identifies as a non-normative heterosexual. The list goes on. Researchers must be prepared to broaden their own conceptualizations of identity. Identity 'cannot be taken as a starting point for

social research, can never be assumed by a researcher to be standing still, ready for its close-up' (Gamson, 2000: 356).

Third, as with any under-represented group, it is often difficult to recruit participants. Ryan-Flood and Rooke (2009) explained that many individuals 'may feel uncomfortable exposing their lives to a researcher or they may feel over-researched and scrutinized' (p. 116). Further, participants are often limited to those who are out or 'open enough about their sexual identity to receive or respond to recruitment efforts' (Meezan and Martin, 2009: 85). In both studies described here, there was more interest from gay and lesbian communities than from Queer-identified individuals. In order to reach queer participants, specialized recruitment efforts may be required.

Fourth, queer research is frequently unsupported by colleagues, departments, universities, and communities because it seeks to disrupt heteronormativity and challenge traditional notions of sexuality (Grace et al., 2004). Researchers must be willing to take this risk (Johnson, 2009) in order to do queer research. This risk was apparent when the first author applied and interviewed for positions at several universities throughout the Southeastern, Bible belt region of the United States. When inquiring about the Universities' and broader communities' reception of her research agenda, she was informed more than once that there would likely be some resistance. In addition, conservative legislators in the South targeted scholars on the second author's campus (Kelderman, 2009) with efforts to end their careers, destroy their reputations (cast them as pedophiles) and perpetuate to the public that this research was part of an agenda to recruit children to become homosexuals.

Finally, it is worth noting that the term queer continues to be viewed as offensive to some GLBT individuals and heterosexual people (Browne, 2008; Eaklor, 2008). Because historically GLBT individuals have fought to legitimate their sexual identities, some (mostly older generations) believe that queer theory actually diminishes the efficacy of their sexual identity categories (Jagose, 1996). Thus, queer research might exclude some GLBT subjects who would otherwise be interested in participating. In addition, many older heterosexual individuals still cling to the conventional wisdom that queer is derogatory and can and should never be used to describe people, and thus are unwilling to name the identities of Queer people.

Discussion and conclusions

We have identified six recommendations for future research with people who identify as Queer. These recommendations encompass some of the benefits and challenges posed in the previous section, but are certainly not inclusive of all of the considerations.

Be comfortable with fluidity

Fluidity is inherent in queer research. Social work researchers must be comfortable with and attentive to conceptualizations of identity (and of other topics) that are

fluid and resistant to definition. There is no one Truth in this kind of research. 'In queer qualitative texts the researcher's authoritative voice is increasingly positioned as one among many competing, partial voices – none and all of them "authentic"' (Gamson, 2000: 359). In the first author's study, participants queered normative conceptualizations of sexual and religious identity. For example, Luke explained that he has often questioned his faith and sexual identity and that 'those two questions informed each other'.

Be attentive to identity

Undertaking queer research requires an attention to identity politics. In queer research, identity is not fixed and stable. Social workers understand that individuals do not suddenly 'find themselves' and then become locked into a single identity. A foundational theory of social work, the person-in-environment approach recognizes that people change with time, experiences, and their environments. Several participants in our studies commented on this notion of ever-changing and fluid identities. For example, Mark commented, 'I don't think that we're static individuals' and William said: 'Life is a journey... So, I just feel like that's part of what I'm here for, and I'm going to be open to the journey'. Gamson (2000) explained that one strategy to address the methodological challenges to doing queer research is to 'build on the long-standing tradition of making identity itself the focus of research while integrating the instability, multiplicity, and partiality of identities into the research program and analysis' (p. 358).

Be prepared for the unknown

As discussed above, one of the challenges to doing research with queer participants is the unpredictability of the research process. In fact, as Jagose (1996) explained, the future of queer theory itself is unknown:

Queer's impact on identity politics has yet to be determined. It is probable that identity politics will not disappear under the influence of queer but become more nuanced, less sure of itself, and more attuned to those multiple compromises and pragmatic effects that characterize *any* mobilization of identity. ... It does not offer itself as some new and improved version of lesbian and gay but rather as something that questions the assumption that those descriptors are self-evident. (Jagose, 1996: 126)

So, how can researchers prepare for the unknown? Certainly, it is helpful to take time at the beginning of any study to think through likely scenarios. Researchers cannot plan or know what will happen during a particular study just as social workers cannot always predict treatment outcomes. Queer scholars, especially, must be willing to let the research process take its course rather than resisting the unknown or uncertain areas of inquiry. In the first author's study, for instance, she did not set out to queer religion and spirituality. However, after listening to

participants' experiences, she realized that their lives not only exemplified queer sexual identities, but queer religion as well.

Be ready for questions

Although the term queer has been reclaimed for nearly two decades and has been highlighted in mainstream media through television shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Queer as Folk*, some individuals will hear the term in a positive light for the first time when talking with you about your research. When you talk with others about queer, think about your own introduction to the concept and be patient. Queer is not an idea that is easy to understand. It challenges the fundamental notion of who we are as individuals. As social work researchers, such questions provide opportunities for education and advocacy.

Be sensitive

According to Ryan-Flood and Rooke (2009), 'writing about minority groups brings certain expectations and responsibilities. The researcher may grapple with exposing the lives of a vulnerable group to a hegemonic audience who may be unfamiliar with or unsympathetic to their difficulties' (pp. 115–116). They explain further:

As queer theory has illustrated, sexual identities are fluid and mutable. Sexual practices may not conform to conventional understandings of identity categories. Writing about a minority group can also present dilemmas in writing up – how to represent this group in ways that are sensitive to the wider homophobic context in which their lives are lived. (Ryan-Flood and Rooke, 2009: 116)

As queer researchers, we must be sensitive to our participants. One way to accomplish this is through member checks in which we confirm tentative understandings and analysis with participants in order to verify interpretations (Bhattacharya, 2007). Also known as respondent validation, member checks allow researchers to guard against misinterpretations and biases (Maxwell, 2005). This is especially important with under-represented groups that are subject to misinterpretation and misrepresentation in research.

For researchers who do not identify as queer, it is especially important to be sensitive in undertaking queer research, particularly if the topic of study is personal. As a straight woman studying queer individuals with a Christian upbringing, the first author found participants to be open, friendly, and interested in her research. This could be because, during the pre-screening interview, she disclosed her own identity, explained why she was interested in this line of research, let individuals know that they could discontinue participation at any time, discussed the process of member checks, and genuinely and warmly expressed her appreciation for participants' willingness to talk with her. All of the participants articulated

their relief in being able to talk about both sexual identity and religious upbringing in a safe environment; many said that the interview was therapeutic.

Be an advocate

Finally, it is important to note that our society continues to be homophobic and heterosexist. So long as this is the case, social work researchers can play a vital role in advocacy and education. Scholars are often asked ‘So what?’ when presenting research. Queer studies are uniquely positioned to challenge society’s binary views and bring queer voices to the forefront. Advocacy begins with the queer research project, but it does not end there. Through presentations, scholarly writing, editorials, discussions, and so forth, we can continually strive to make a difference with our research. As Halberstam (2003) stated, ‘queer public intellectuals are people who refuse the boundaries between community and campus, activism and theory, classroom and club’ (p. 363).

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