On The Outside Looking In? The Experience Of Being A Straight, Cisgender Qualitative Researcher

By: **Denise L. Levy**

Abstract

Research with disenfranchised and marginalized populations is often completed by those traditionally considered outsiders who are not part of the studied population. The history of outsider research has been somewhat tumultuous, and some outsider researchers have manipulated participants or carried out unethical studies. However, the insider/outsider dichotomy is overly simplistic and does not always accurately reflect the researcher position. Using lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals as an example, this article will review the literature on insider/outsider researchers, suggest a more fluid concept of researcher positionality, and identify several recommendations for qualitative researchers.

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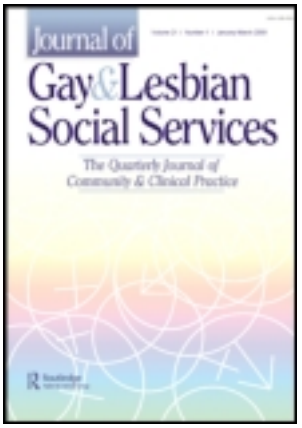

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Research with disenfranchised and marginalized populations is often completed by those traditionally considered outsiders who are not part of the studied population. The history of outsider research has been somewhat tumultuous, and some outsider researchers have manipulated participants or carried out unethical studies. However, the insider/outsider dichotomy is overly simplistic and does not always accurately reflect the researcher position. Using lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals as an example, this article will review the literature on insider/outsider researchers, suggest a more fluid concept of researcher positionality, and identify several recommendations for qualitative researchers.

KEYWORDS qualitative research, outsider, insider, sexual identity, gender identity

INTRODUCTION

Research with marginalized populations spans several decades and continues to be a growing field of study. This type of research may be challenging for scholars, particularly those who are not part of their population of study (Evans, Mejia-Maya, Zayas, Boothroyd, & Rodriguez, 2001; Koller, Raffaelli, & Carlo, 2012; Nelson & Gould, 2005; Rugkasa & Canvin, 2011; Schinke, Enosse, Peltier, Watson, & Lightfoot, 2010; Silva, Goering, Jacobson, & Streiner, 2011; Warr, 2004). For instance, researchers may have difficulty accessing and developing trust with overstudied, marginalized populations. Despite these difficulties, contemporary scholars, such as those just mentioned, utilize reflection, discussion, and collaboration to address challenges that arise.

Although researchers today may consider their own privilege and power when working with disenfranchised populations (Nelson & Gould, 2005), this has not always been the case. Numerous ethical violations have occurred in studies of marginalized populations, including experiments in Nazi concentration camps and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (Williams, 2005). Early research on sexual orientation had a heterosexual bias, and most studies labeled gay and lesbian individuals as sick and disordered (Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, & Melton, 1991; Morin, 1977). In fact, there is "ample history of medical and social science research involving LGBT populations that violated contemporary ethical standards" (Meezan & Martin, 2009, p. 20), including everything from castration to shock therapy. One of the most well-known violations of ethical standards is Humphreys' (1970) study. He observed a public restroom known for same-sex activity, documented participants' license plates, and went to these individuals' homes to ask for an interview, all without prior consent.

Just three years after Humphreys' study, in 1973, "homosexuality" was notably removed from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*). Rather than focusing on pathologizing and attempting to change sexual orientation, sexuality research moved toward acceptance of personal accounts. For instance, Cass' (1979) model of sexual identity development was based on her work with lesbian women and highlighted their unique experiences. Still, some contemporary researchers continue to violate professional standards related to ethical research (Jenkins & Johnston, 2004). These include researchers who promote unethical conversion or reorientation therapy (Jenkins & Johnston, 2004) as well as those who use faulty methodology to "prove" that homosexuality threatens children, families, and society in general (Herek, 1998).

In recent years research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) populations has steadily grown. Historically, studies have focused on gay men, and to a lesser extent lesbians, and, even today, there is less of a focus on bisexual, transgender, queer, and other voices in research involving sexuality and gender. Given the tumultuous history of sexuality studies, it is important for researchers who do this work to attend to ethics and be sensitive to participants' situations. This is especially true for researchers who do not identify as LGBTQ and consider themselves to be "outsiders." This article will review the literature on researchers who are not affiliated with their populations of study, calling to question notions of solely insider and outsider researchers. Attending specifically to research with LGBTQ populations, the article concludes with several recommendations for qualitative researchers.

INSIDER, OUTSIDER, OR BOTH?

According to Rhoads (1997), researchers have traditionally viewed themselves as pursuing objective and discoverable knowledge through a neutral,

disconnected process. In the past, researchers have also been categorized as solely insider or outsider. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) explain that although the majority of the discussion around insider/outsider status has occurred in fieldwork, observations, or ethnographies, this discussion is relevant to all types of qualitative research. They further argue that qualitative researchers are unique in that they often have considerable contact with participants and very rarely take on the role of a distant and neutral researcher. In the following sections I provide information on traditional definitions of insider and outsider researchers and question the false dichotomy present in historical views.

Insider and Outsider Researchers

Griffith (1998) defined an insider as "someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her a lived familiarity with the group being researched" (p. 362). Insiders have historically been viewed as more authentic and trustworthy. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) explained that insider status "automatically provides a level of trust and openness in your participants that would likely not have been present otherwise. One has a starting point (the commonality) that affords access into groups that might otherwise be closed to 'outsiders' " (p. 58). However, they point out that this insider status may negatively affect the research if participants assume researchers understand their experiences and leave out more detailed explanations. Similarly, insider researchers may make assumptions about participants based on personal experiences and fail to ask important questions (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

When studying groups and populations as an outsider, many questions arise. How will I gain access to the population of interest? What ethical dilemmas will I experience? How can I ensure that I am sensitive to the needs of a disenfranchised, marginalized, underrepresented, and perhaps overstudied group? What if I unintentionally say something offensive? What if I misunderstand and misrepresent the participants? Because marginalized populations are at risk of being abused or exploited while participating in research (Collet, 2008), it is especially important for outsider researchers to wisely design their research and attend to issues of power, positionality, and representation (Merriam et al., 2001).

A False Dichotomy?

Although researchers have traditionally been positioned as either insiders or outsiders, many scholars question the dichotomy of the insider/outsider and maintain that researchers can be both (Collet, 2008; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Griffith, 1998). This is due, in part, to the fact that populations are not homogeneous. For instance, the "G" in LGBTQ represents a diverse group of gay men, not a single, common experience. Dwyer and Buckle explain: "Holding membership in a group does not denote complete sameness within that

group. Likewise, not being a member of a group does not denote complete difference. It seems paradoxical, then, that we would endorse binary alternatives that unduly narrow the range of understanding and experience" (p. 60). Moreover, positionality, or where one stands in relation to another, can shift over time (Merriam et al., 2001) and researchers may view themselves as both insiders and outsiders at different points in their work.

Literature on Positionality

Existing literature on positionality and insider/outsider research includes articles and texts by Allen (2004), Bridges (2001), Collet (2008), Dwyer and Buckle (2009), Gasman and Payton-Stewart (2006), Griffith (1998), Hing, Breen, and Gordon (2010), Jensen (1997), Le Gallais (2008), Meezan and Martin (2009), Merriam and colleagues (2001), O'Connor (2004), and Rhoads (1997). Guidelines for researchers in these articles tend to focus solely on outsider researchers. In fact, of the authors mentioned here, only a few extensively question the insider/outsider dichotomy.

For instance, Allen (2004) looks beyond the classifications of insider and outsider in discussing her ethnographic research in health care settings, providing a rich description of her dual experience as both insider and outsider. Also acknowledging the complexities in insider/outsider status, Merriam and colleagues (2001) explore the concepts of positionality, representation, and power using four research studies. Finally, O'Connor (2004) discusses the evolution of her complex positionality while studying contemporary Irish immigrants. Although these three accounts provide valuable information, none offer any direct suggestions for researchers operating as both insiders and outsiders.

Le Gallais (2008) also discussed her researcher status as both insider and outsider. Le Gallais, however, goes beyond description to identify several tools that were helpful to her in reflecting on her changing positionality: writing an autobiography, utilizing a research journal, and developing tables based on insider/outsider status and attitudes/identity. Building on Le Gallais' work, this article provides recommendations for researchers that encompass all stages of the research process.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

Only a few articles/texts on positionality focus specifically on research with LGBTQ individuals (Jensen, 1997; Meezan & Martin, 2009; Rhoads, 1997). None of these extensively question the insider/outsider dichotomy and two are dated. In order to update the literature on this topic, I offer a fresh perspective for researchers who identify themselves sometimes as insiders, sometimes as outsiders, and sometimes as both. In the remainder of this

article, I provide guidelines for researchers studying underrepresented and marginalized groups. Following the research process, guidelines are organized into planning the study, recruitment and initial screening, data collection, analysis, and dissemination.

My Research

My research focuses on understanding the process by which LGBTQ individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve conflict between sexual or gender identity and religious beliefs. As a researcher, I bring several aspects of my identity to my research, including sexual identity, gender identity, and religious identity. Other identity factors, not necessarily conveyed in the subjects of my research, also impact my interactions with study participants. These include age, race and ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, educational background, employment status, accent, spoken language, personality, and others I may not even recognize.

I am a straight, female, cisgender researcher who is also an ally. In today's society, my identity as straight and cisgender (my gender corresponds to my sex assigned at birth) means that I am often privileged. For instance, I can marry my male partner in all 50 states in the United States, I am able to find my gender on forms, and I do not have to worry about being fired due to my sexual orientation. In many ways, I am an outsider to LGBTQ populations. Still, my research is motivated by my status as an ally, and I seek to challenge social injustice and foster understanding about the experiences of LGBTQ individuals.

I grew up in the Catholic Church, but have also participated or been involved in other faiths during my life (Pentecostal, Methodist, nondenominational Christian, Unitarian Universalist, and Earth-based spirituality). Today, I do not identify with any one religion or dogma, viewing myself as more of a spiritual person who believes in questioning and appreciating the world around me. My involvement with multiple religious communities means that I often have had faith experiences in common with participants. This is especially true because my projects to date have all focused on people (like me) who grew up as Christians. Some participants in my studies have left the Christian faith and some continue to identify as Christian; I have found commonalities with both groups.

Other aspects of my identity which impact my research include age, race and ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, educational background, employment status, accent, spoken language, personality, and others I may not even recognize. I am in my mid-thirties and White, and I have lived in Louisiana, Georgia, and North Carolina. Living in these three states has exposed me to Southern, Cajun, and Appalachian cultures. Even in the South, I have been told that my Southern accent is particularly strong, and English is my first and only spoken language. After working as a social worker for

several years, I earned a PhD in social work. I currently work as a social work faculty member at a university, allowing me to live comfortably. I am also presently taking classes toward a graduate certificate in expressive arts therapy. People have described me as a good listener, capable facilitator, hard worker, detail-oriented, open-minded, progressive, and sometimes quiet. My hobbies include listening to all kinds of music, cooking and baking, watching collegiate and professional sports, and spending time with my partner and our two cats.

Social workers often talk about people in the context of their environment. The roles in my life include being a partner, daughter, sister, aunt, friend, student, and teacher. Although I revealed much about myself in the preceding paragraphs, I hardly scratched the surface of my identity in the context of my home, family, work, community, and beyond. Yet, in examining even basic aspects of my identity, readers may find shared components or experiences as well as differences.

When I began my research, I viewed myself solely as an outsider and as someone who does not identify as LGBTQ. However, I realize today that this simplistic position discounts many of the similarities I have with participants and discounts the diversity within these populations. In examining my insider/outsider status now, I find that I identify sometimes as an insider, sometimes as an outsider, and sometimes as both.

Planning the Study

In planning the study, researchers should first develop knowledge about the population of study. Even if they consider themselves to be primarily insiders, scholars must be familiar with a population's history, educating themselves on the culture, values, and traditions of the group (Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006). Knowledge can be developed through research, consultation, or immersion (Meezan & Martin, 2009), and may also include developing an awareness of the politics involved in researching a particular subject area (Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006). For instance, Rhoads (1997), who considers himself to be an outsider researcher, worked to "develop the cultural competency and confidence necessary to engage in constructive and meaningful conversations with gay and bisexual men about their identity struggles" (p. 13). In my own research, which began with my dissertation (Levy, 2008), I began by writing a comprehensive examination report and a prospectus which both included extensive information on the history of, theories about, and previous studies with LGBTQ populations. In addition, I spoke with members of the LGBTQ populations and researchers who study these individuals in order to develop my knowledge. As my knowledge grew, so did my understanding of my own positionality as researcher. I realized that I was not solely an outsider, and had many experiences in common with LGBTQ individuals. Researchers, therefore, are encouraged to examine

their positionality as they develop knowledge about their population of interest.

In addition to developing knowledge, researchers should involve the population of study in the planning process. This is especially true for those who view themselves primarily as outsiders. Involvement may include incorporating instruments in the research that are designed by the population of study and engaging affiliated members in every stage of the planning (Meezan & Martin, 2009). In my own work, I have included affiliated members in the research team or as consultants. These collaborations are priceless, and individuals have often brought up issues or questions that I had not previously considered. For instance, one consultant encouraged me to include participants identifying as queer in my study, and advised me to develop my own knowledge related to queer theory (Levy & Johnson, 2012). The same consultant asked me to consider how being female might impact my work. Whether a researcher identifies as an insider, outsider, or both, consultants often bring up new ideas and perspectives for contemplation.

Planning for the study should also include personal reflection. All researchers benefit from carefully considering their interest in the population of study. In doing so, they will be able to better explain their research to others and be prepared for possible objections (Meezan & Martin, 2009). Contemplating why they are interested in this population will also assist scholars in uncovering any personal assumptions or biases and challenging their motivations (Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006). As a straight, cisgender researcher, I am often asked about my interest in the experiences of LGBTQ individuals. These questions have helped me in examining my own motivations, and my personal interest in my research. As a social worker and therapist, I have counseled clients who experience this conflict, but my interest in these topics began before then. It started when, growing up in rural, southern Georgia, several of my friends came out to me as gay. Observing their experiences of being stigmatized and oppressed in their families and churches made me a passionate advocate. Based on my experience, I suggest that researchers incorporate personal reflection in all stages of research through writing memos and journaling (described in more depth in the next paragraph), and that they begin by reflecting on their interest in this topic.

A second aspect to personal reflection is exploring subjectivity and insider/outsider status. Le Gaillais (2008) encourages researchers to write a brief autobiography, assessing and comparing their experiences and values to the population of study. In addition, scholars may opt to write in a research journal throughout the study, and examine their insider/outsider positionality (Le Gaillais, 2008). I decided to write a subjectivity statement, which included information about my own sexual orientation, gender identity, and religious background. By examining my own identities, values, and experiences, I acknowledged my subjectivity as a researcher. Moreover, I frequently write memos throughout the research process and continue to

address my subjectivity and positionality. I have found the following prompts to be helpful in exploring these topics: instances when I agreed or disagreed with participants, instances when my own experiences are similar to or different from the participant's experiences, and instances when my privilege was highlighted.

Finally, it is important for scholars to gain experience and establish themselves as researchers and scholars (Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006). In addition, when working with marginalized populations, it is important to develop an identity as an ally. I often tell coworkers and friends that "my research agenda is my life's work." I want to continue to study the intersection of religion with gender and sexual identity, and use my research to promote understanding. As mentioned earlier, researcher positionality often changes over time, and it is important for scholars to continually assess their own subjectivity and status.

Recruitment and Initial Screening

In recruiting and screening potential participants, researchers should first develop relationships with gatekeepers. As Rhoads (1997) points out, the most challenging part of any study for primarily outsider researchers can be the "initial phase of 'getting in' " (p. 9). Gasman and Payton-Stewart (2006) suggest reaching out to gatekeepers in the population of study throughout the duration of the study. I have also found gatekeepers to be vital during the recruitment phase. In fact, more than three-quarters of the participants in my studies learned about my research through consultants, gatekeepers, support group leaders, or previous study participants. Although not mentioned in the existing literature, researchers who consider themselves to be primarily insiders should not solely rely on their existing contacts, but should also develop gatekeeping relationships and try to ensure that participants represent diverse subgroups (and not just those known to the researcher).

In recruiting participants, it is also important to explain why the researcher is interested in this area of study. This should come naturally if researchers follow the previous guidelines regarding reflection on this topic. Researchers must be prepared to disclose their insider/outsider status and explain their interest in the population (Bridges, 2001; Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006). In my research, it has been important to disclose my status as a straight, cisgender ally. I have found that it puts potential participants at ease when they learn that I am an ally and an advocate. Because many of the participants in my studies have been hurt by religious leaders and church members, it is important to let them know that I am seeking to promote understanding within faith communities through this research. I have had several phone conversations during recruitment in which individuals have literally breathed a sigh of relief when I explained my research interests and goals. In addition, scholars should "be open, respectful and understanding

of those who challenge your research" (Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006, p. 145).

Although the recruitment process should always include a review of the study processes and procedures, this is especially true when working with marginalized populations. This includes mentioning the purpose of study, data collection procedures, confidentiality, dissemination, criteria for participation, and so forth. In particular, researchers should ensure that individuals understand that they can decline participation at any time. I have found it helpful to review information about the study during the recruitment process, data collection, and beyond. In addition, I always provide participants with a hard copy of the study information.

Finally, researchers should attempt to develop rapport with individuals during the recruitment and screening process by demonstrating "care and respect for research and research participants" (Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006, p. 146). Creating relationships based on trust and mutual respect is essential. Moreover, developing a sense of equality in the relationship is important and can empower participants (Merriam et al., 2001). I have found that all three of the previous recommendations—developing relationships with gatekeepers, explaining interest in the research topic, and reviewing the study procedures—can assist in developing rapport. As I discuss next, involving participants in the analysis and dissemination, as well as the data collection, can assist in balancing the power in the researcher/participant relationship.

Data Collection

First and foremost in data collection, researchers should create a comfortable space for the interview. Because researchers may be asking vulnerable participants to talk about sensitive and very personal information, it is important that participants feel safe. The environment should be private and confidential, and I always let the participant select the interview location. I have interviewed participants in their homes, in their places of employment, and in my office. If we meet in my office, I will arrange the space so the participant has a comfortable place to sit and set their belongings. Tissues, a trash can, and bottled water are within reach, and I remind participants that we can stop the interview at any time for a break, no questions asked. Finally, I put up a "meeting in progress" sign on my office door so that we are not interrupted.

Data collection should include listening attentively to the participants, knowing what questions to ask, and knowing when to ask them. These suggestions are important for researchers regardless of positionality. Those who view themselves primarily as insiders should not make assumptions about participants' experiences. Furthermore, all researchers should use the language and terms that participants use to describe themselves, asking

questions about meanings behind these identifiers. Interviewers should also be comfortable asking for clarifications when needed rather than making assumptions about what participants mean. For instance, participants will sometimes ask, "Do you know what I mean?" When this happens, I like to respond with, "Tell me what you mean."

In addition to creating a comfortable space and listening, researchers should again review study guidelines and develop rapport with participants. These can be completed throughout the study, and were discussed in more detail earlier.

Analysis

Many studies end participants' involvement after data collection. However, some researchers involve participants in analysis, and this involvement can be crucial when studying marginalized populations. In my research, for example, I have completed member checks. I send participants their one-page participant descriptions, a one-page summary of my analysis, a lengthier description of each of the findings, and participants' quotes supporting each finding. I invite them to contact me with their feedback, additions, clarifications, and comments. Because of these member checks, one participant asked me to make a correction to his participant description, noting that he sought therapy during his time in college rather than after graduation. Several participants commented on themes they had not previously mentioned in the initial interview, explaining that these findings were true for them as well. Another way to include member checks is through focus groups, where individuals meet to discuss their reactions to the findings. Finally, researchers may invite participants to actively participate in the initial analysis rather than just providing reactions after analysis is complete.

Regardless of who participates in the analytic process, researchers may analyze data using multiple perspectives or theories (Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006). Through this type of analysis, researchers can review their subjectivity and become conscious of their limited worldviews (Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006). In my study, in addition to obtaining member checks, I had multiple consultants assist in the analytic process and I viewed the interview data through several different lenses or theories. These included Cass' (1979) theory of sexual identity development, queer theory, Fowler's (1981) stages of faith, and Mezirow's (1991) transformational learning theory. This theoretical triangulation encouraged new and different ways of looking at the data, and I found it helpful in making conclusions about the findings.

Dissemination

Many researchers, like me, use their research to advocate for equal rights and to promote understanding. Jensen (1997) notes an obligation to

participants' struggles against injustice. In fact, researchers and allies may be better received by some audiences and thus may have a better opportunity to change minds (Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006). Rhoads (1997) explains that "researchers play an active role in creating specific discourses about various identity groups, such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual people" (p. 16). In my own research, I have found situations in which churches, religious groups, and religious individuals are more likely to engage in a conversation with a straight, cisgender woman, than they would with someone who is LGBTQ. For instance, I recently presented at a national conference for a Christian-based organization and received very positive reviews, even from those who held views differing from my own. One gentleman noted that he felt more comfortable hearing about my research than he would have felt talking directly with someone who is LGBTQ. He explained that he did not feel pressured to respond immediately, and enjoyed having time to reflect on these topics.

In disseminating research, it is also important to present the findings to those who are part of the researched population (Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006). In fact, welcoming and seeking comments from research consumers in general allows for a more interactive and equal relationship between the researcher and consumer (Merriam et al., 2001). I have spoken at several local PRIDE events as well as national conferences with LGBTQ themes, and have had wonderful comments and questions from LGBTQ individuals. These conversations have led me to explore new topics in my research, and have been extremely helpful. I have also published my research in journals focused on LGBTQ subjects.

Finally, in disseminating research, it is important to always disclose the researcher positionality (Jensen, 1997), to explain interest in the population of study, and note subjectivity. According to Merriam and colleagues (2001), "every researcher struggles with representing the 'truth' of their findings as well as allowing the 'voices' of their participants to be heard" (p. 414). One way to reduce subjectivity is for researchers to present direct transcription without commentary (Bridges, 2001). In my own articles and presentations, I tend to disclose my identity as straight and cisgender, my subjectivity, and my interest in LGBTQ issues. In addition, I present findings accompanied by numerous participant quotes. Sharing themes in participants' own words is not only powerful; it also presents the experiences through their perspective rather than through my subjective lens or interpretation.

CONCLUSION

Historically, much of the research with marginalized populations has been completed by researchers who consider themselves to be outsiders and do not identify with their population of study. This article argues that the notion

of insider/outsider is overly simplistic and the positionality of the researcher in relation to the population of study is often fluid and complex. In addition to providing an example of my own positionality in studying experiences of LGBTQ populations, this article provides suggestions for qualitative researchers studying historically marginalized populations. Researchers should reflect upon their own positionality and subjectivity, provide this information to participants, and involve gatekeepers and consultants in the research.

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