ETHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL COMPLEXITIES IN RESEARCH INVOLVING SEXUAL MINORITIES

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Abstract

While there is growing attention to sexual minorities in adult education (AE) and human resource development (HRD) literature, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people have received very little attention in AE or in HRD research. This article captures methodological issues and concerns from LBGTQ-related research from psychological, sociological, social work, and related bodies of knowledge, as well as lessons learned from the author's empirical research, to inform and prepare AE and HRD researchers regarding the greater complexities in conceptualizing research on LGBTQ populations, potential ethical dilemmas, and specific safeguards that may be appropriate for LGBTQ research participants.

Brekhus (2003) alleges that mainstream social theory has tended to ghettoize theoretical issues relating to sexual minorities (as well as those relating to feminists and multicultural concerns) into special enclaves of knowledge about specific groups rather than integrating them more broadly into general theory development. He argues that studies of gays and lesbians should inform the structuring of the social world more generally, but "this argument has so far been ignored" (p. 72). As LGBTQ issues have become more a part of the public discourse, understanding of some aspects of the lives of sexual minorities, however, has begun to accrue. While still relatively uncommon, the social sciences have seen both an increase in research attention to sexual minorities, as well as a shift from "less on why people are LGBT, and more on how LGBT people live their lives" (Meezan & Martin, 2003, p. xx). As an example, economists have also begun to examine the experiences of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals in less traditional research sectors including the labor, housing, credit, and retail markets (Badgett & Frank, 2007). Concurrently, there is a growing recognition that because research on LGBT populations "always occurs within a complex, changing, and often hostile sociopolitical environment" (Martin & Meezan, 2003, p. 197), such research can be beset with methodological limitations and concerns. Consequently, researchers may need to take additional measures to protect participants from harm and to ensure relevance and usefulness of findings.

Statement of the Problem

The fields of AE and HRD have also undergone significant change regarding LGBT issues (Hill, 2008, 2009; Hill & Grace, 2009; Rocco, Gedro, & Kormanik, 2009). Indeed, Brekhus' (2003) concern about lesbians' and gays' exclusion from broader theory development seems to echo Brooks and Edwards' (1999) contention that it is not the sole province of those who identify as non-heterosexual to disrupt and challenge cultural assumptions and societal

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expectations regarding sexual identity and gender identity. Yet, to date, there has been little related AE or HRD empirical research that specifically focuses on sexual minorities or that analyzes the need, concerns, and issues affecting LGBT individuals vis a vis broader categories of adult learners or workplace participants. Nevertheless, as more AE and HRD researchers come to view LGBT-related research as more than a “special topic” contributing limited insights and to appreciate its “possibilities for learning more about *all* people through thoughtful and enlightened investigation” (Silverschanz, 2009, p. 4), the stage is set for expanded opportunities for LBGT-related research both in its own right as well as a component of broader, more inclusive research. The purpose of this article then is to introduce some unique issues or concerns that may accompany such research. Armed with issues to consider, researchers undertaking LGBT-related studies may be better able to plan for and potentially mitigate limitations, methodological complications, and ethical dilemmas that might otherwise arise. Several caveats are in order: (a) an exhaustive list of issues that might arise does not exist as this topic as a line of inquiry is itself in its infancy, and (b) no attempt is made to offer a checklist of “do’s” and “don’ts” or providing definitive answers that arise in such research. Doing so would be dismissive of contextual factors and the complex sociopolitical reality of LGBT lives.

Changing Landscape of LGBT Research

Prior to the 1970s, the prevailing approach to studies of homosexuality was an illness model. Several assumptions are implicit in this view: (a) sexual orientation is a binary construct, existing only in two opposite, discrete forms: heterosexuality or homosexuality; (b) sexual orientation is a one-dimensional construct based solely on sexual activity; that is, what one does sexually defines one’s sexual orientation; and (c) sexual orientation is assumed to form at an early age and is an enduring, unchanging disposition. After the American Psychiatric Association’s removal of homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in 1973, new paradigms to conceptualize and define sexual orientation began to emerge. Researchers began to see sexual orientation in new light and in much more complex ways than had previously been the case. Sexual orientation (as well as sexual identity and, later, gender identity) began to be understood as continuums that vary in degree, diversity, and intensity. Sexual orientation also was seen as encompassing multiple dimensions in addition to sexual behavior—including erotic-affectional behaviors and fantasies, emotional attachments, self-identification, and current relationship status. In what later became a foundational premise of queer theory, people began to argue that sexual identity is potentially fluid, changeable over time, and varies across social contexts and cultures.

At the same time, the social sciences were undergoing a paradigm shift “from a modernist, medical, deficit-oriented model, toward a more eclectic, post-modern, contextual, social constructivist orientation” (Wahler & Gabbay, 1997, p. 15). Research shifted from viewing sexual minorities as pathological to much more of an affirmative approach focused on helping LGBT cope adaptively with the impact of stigma, minority status, and difference from the heterosexual mainstream. New themes began to emerge in the LGBT-related literature including rebuking long-established stereotypes of sexual minorities; “coming out” or the process of becoming aware of and eventually accepting a non-heterosexual sexual identity; and disclosure and community involvement. Certain themes have also emerged regarding ethical, methodological, and general issues that are often faced by those researchers who study LGBT populations. Although presented here as distinct categories, these issues overlap and influence each other throughout the research lifecycle. They will be briefly discussed about first acknowledging the contested terrain of terminology and labeling.

LGBTQ: Negotiating Labels and Semantics

Among the most fundamental issues with which one must grapple is that of terminology. Language "aids in the construction, marginalization, or privileging of individuals" (Hill & Davis, 2009, p. 186); as such, terminology used to identify as or refer to sexual minorities can be most vexing, quite dynamic, and assuredly contextual. Seemingly innocuous words are oftentimes fraught with implicit and unexamined heterosexist and homophobic notions or may be perceived by an LGBT individual as offensive or defamatory. Hill (2006) provides a listing of terms related to gender, sexual orientation, and gender expression—while simultaneously pointing out the problematic nature of such terms. Hill and Davis (2009) reaffirm that definitions are "always provisional and untrustworthy, but define we must if we are to communicate" (p. 186). With that awareness, they then inform *how specific terms are used in study* (italics added), which is an important consideration in planning and conducting LGBT-related research.

Following suit, in this article I am using *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *transgender,* and *queer* somewhat generically and quite simplistically to refer to (respectively): (a) gay--a male whose sexual or affectional orientation is primarily to men and who incorporates such orientation into his sense of self or his identity; (b) lesbian--a woman whose sexual or affectional orientation is primarily to women and who incorporates such orientation into her sense of self or her identity; (c) bisexual--a person of either gender whose orientation is towards both women and men; (d) transgender--an umbrella term for people whose gender identity, expression, or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth, including but not limited to transsexuals, cross-dressers, androgynous people, genderqueers, and gender non-conforming people; and (e) queer—used in two different senses-- an umbrella term (synonymous with how I am using the term *sexual minorities)* inclusive of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender or trans-identified persons; and to refer to those who disavow the notion and categorization of static sexual or gender identities such as gay, lesbian, and so on. Any and all of these terms and how they are used in a given context can, and often should, be contested.

It's important to note that although LGBT is a frequently used acronym, variations which include more nuanced layers of sexual or gender identity are common. Examples include adding an "I" reflecting intersexed persons to avoid conflation with transgender individuals; an additional "T" to represent *two-spirit,* a traditional term used by Native American and Canadian First Nations indigenous peoples to refer to those with both a masculine spirit and a feminine spirit living in the same body; or an additional "Q" or a "?" representing those who *questioning.* Even the terms by which sexual minorities choose to self-identity (if they so choose at all) can be ripe with emotion and controversy and influenced by contextual factors. Along with a comprehensive listing of trans and sexualities terms, Green and Peterson (2006) note:

> each person who uses any or all of these terms does so in a unique way (especially terms that are used in the context of an identity label). Asking people for further information and/or clarification about the way in which they use the terms is encouraged. This is especially recommended when using terms which…can have a derogatory connotation. (¶ 1)

While there is no "right" term that works in every context or infallible guide to follow, those contemplating studies of LGBT populations should be aware of the complex and dynamic nature of related terminology and careful not readily dismiss any associated concerns that may arise as a matter of semantics.

Ethical Considerations

Researchers should always consider the consequences of their work as if research is not conducted responsibly and ethically, its findings cannot be deemed valid. Meezan and Martin (2003) assert that studying stigmatized populations such as sexual minorities heightens ethical questions and potential dilemmas in the conduct of research. Due to the marginalized and devalued societal position accorded to sexual minorities, these populations are at increased risk for experiencing violence, discrimination, and exploitation in a variety of contexts—as well as the negative effects of such experiences. Because research involving sexual minorities generally occurs in such contexts, there may be greater potential for exploitation and harm to the participants or the communities of which they are members than in studies of less vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Heterosexist and Binary Gender Biases

Being socialized in a heteronormative environment entails learning certain myths, stereotypes, and expectations regarding sexual minorities. Thus, regardless of the sexual orientation of the researcher, he or she should be on guard for evidence of *heterosexist bias*—defined by Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, and Melton (1991) as:

> conceptualizing human experience in strictly heterosexual terms and consequently ignoring, invalidating, or derogating homosexual terms and sexual orientation, and lesbian, gay male, and bisexual relationships and lifestyles. (p. 957)

The assumption that gender consists of two mutually exclusive categories of male and female can lead to *binary gender bias* (Meezan & Martin, 2009, p. 32.). Each type of bias can affect research at any stage of the process. These are sometimes in obvious ways (e.g., demographic questions that ask whether participants are male or female with no alternative categories) as well as in less obvious ways in how research questions are framed, how the sample is selected, and how data is analyzed. To reduce the potential of such biases, Martin and Meezan (2009) suggest using samples that are representative and diverse and avoiding instruments that assume heterosexuality or binary gender

Use of Research

Many sexual minorities are justifiably suspicious of “research” because it has traditionally labeled them as sick or deviant (Herek et al., 1991). Martin and Meezan (2003) cite the “ample history of medical and social science research involving LGBT populations that have violated contemporary ethical standards” (p. 183), including examples ranging from lack of informed consent and invasion of privacy to castration and pharmacologic shock to “cure” homosexuality. Although the latter may seem extreme, the philosophical offspring of these measures continues today in the form of “reparative therapy” and “transformational ministry” Grace (2002) likens these efforts to “convert” or “transform” sexual minorities into heterosexuals to “theocratic terrorism” and “therapeutic terrorism”, respectively (p. 124). Other studies have resulted in harm to LGBT communities more so than individuals in that the results were “used to promote stigma and to foster unfounded stereotypes of lesbians and gay men as predatory, dangerous, and diseased” (Herek, 1998, p. 247). According to Martin and Meezan (2009), researchers should never report results without sufficiently acknowledging their limitations “or without anticipating and confronting ways in which the popular media or public might distort or misinterpret them” (p. 33).

Protection of Participants

Various authors assert that LGBT participants require special attention and vigilance to ensure confidentiality and to preclude exploitation (Meezan & Martin, 2009). Additionally, Radford (1998) notes that the area of sex differences is especially sensitive, provoking as it often does “very strong emotionally charged controversy” (p. 13); often polarized between those who believe it is wrong to study sex differences because the results may confirm negative stereotypes and those who “believe that ignorance can never be preferable to truth” (p. 13). Research in this area might also “touch upon painful life events [which] may generate considerable emotion and even distress” (deMarrais & Tisdale, 2002, p. 191), in both researchers and participants. Such factors underscore why researchers must be particularly committed to serious consideration about possible consequences of their engagement with sexual minorities during and after the research process. Otherwise, they could generate what Gerrard (1995), a White researcher who was surprised by the reactions of some women of color she wished to interview as research participants, refers to as r*esearch abuse*—“the practice of researchers parachuting into peoples’ lives, interfering, raising painful old feelings, and then vanishing, leaving the participants to deal with unresolved feelings alone and isolated” (p. 62).

LGBT research may require “additional measures in order to ensure the safety of the participants and the relevance and usefulness of the study’s findings” (Martin & Meezan, 2003, p. 197). Specific measures may include consulting with the participants and conducting member checks; anonymous surveys featuring questionnaires or phone interviews, in which consent is implied rather than written; and use of naturalistic or participant observation approaches only after justification based on the expected value of the study and its findings, the lack of alternative methods, “and the assurance that no harm will come to the unsuspecting participants” (Martin & Meezan, 2003, p. 190).

Martin and Meezan (2003) also suggest that flexible rather than predetermined methods and the “use of new and innovative techniques” (p. 8) may be appropriate for at least some LBGT research. Similarly, McClennen (2009) advocates adopting “innovative, unconventional methodologies…if research on sensitive topics within stigmatized communities is to be relevant and useful” (p. 234). Guiding principles she espouses include: (a) a critical examination of cultural insensitivity within the research process, (b) giving voice to members of the marginalized population, (c) rejecting the hierarchal relationship between research and researched to instead act in a mutual relationship, (d) making both a political and a moral commitment to reducing social inequality, and (e) taking action on that commitment (McClennen, 2009).

Methodological Issues

Although a detailed discussion of various methodologies is beyond the scope of this article, several common issues that can present challenges and complicate LGBT-related research are presented for awareness and consideration.

Defining the Research Population in Light of Within Group Variation

Much early research on gay issues conflated the experiences of gay men and lesbians, but doing so is “artificial and misleading…and has the effect of diluting our understanding of each and trivializing the experience of both” (Wahler & Gabbay, 1997, p. 2). However, as may be apparent from the previous discussion of terminology, neither the term sexual minority nor any of the subgroups generally presumed under that category (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) is monolithic and static; rather, such status represents the confluence of multiple experiences, processes, and relationships—with variable results and impacts for individuals and groups. The LGBTQ spectrum is actually comprised of numerous heterogeneous communities and subgroups made up of individuals with overlapping identities. Given that important variations exist between and among subgroups (and certainly among individual members of those subgroups), generalizing can be “a dangerous and misguided enterprise” (Nardi, 1999, p. 96). This is particularly relevant given the multiple oppression of those LGBTQ individuals who are also people of color (Croom, 2000; Wheeler, 2003) and whose life experiences are likely disparate from their White counterparts. Racial and ethnic minority individuals who are also members of sexual minority groups often feel they must choose one identity over another or straddle two worlds (Parks, Hughes, & Werkmeister-Rozas, 2009). As Sullivan and Losberg (2003) caution, a lack of awareness of or ignoring these sorts of differences between people and group identities “runs the risk of producing conclusions that are misleading or simplistic” (p. 159).

Another complicating factor is that both bisexuality and transgender remains poorly understood and rarely researched phenomena. Most scholarly research either does not address bisexuals at all or collapses bisexual subjects into the lesbian and gay subject pool because of small sample size (Dworkin, 2006); yet there is speculation that adult development may vary widely among bisexual individuals and that lived experiences of bisexuals may vary considerably from those of either heterosexuals or other sexual minorities (Bettinger, 2009). Rust (2009) contends that the inclusion of bisexuals in research cannot be accomplished merely by adding a third category to sexual orientation; rather it requires “changes in theoretical approaches, measurement, sampling, data collection, and statistical analysis” (p. 100). Such is the case with transgender individuals as well. Because transgender populations are particularly marginalized (even within the LGBT community), there is an enhanced need for that could increase understanding and lead to better services and protections for them (Rachlin, 2009). Furthermore, the lived experiences and spectrum of gender identity/expression among transgender persons warrant consideration in itself (Witten, 2003). Colloquially, one might say that the inclusion of bisexual and transgender individuals does not occur merely by tacking on a “B” and a “T” to the “LG” acronym. Green and dickey (2007, ¶ 1) offer some considerations for research with transgender subjects and communities as follows:

> 1. The trans umbrella houses a wide variety of gender diverse identities. It is essential to be inclusive of the entire spectrum of identities when conducting research. While it is not necessary to include the entire spectrum in each study, it is important to accurately and sensitively record the experiences of those studied. Each identity area within the larger trans community deserves dedicated research and representation, particularly those which are often considered less visible. Further, it is important to avoid creating or enforcing hierarchies among trans identities.
>
> 2. It is paramount that appropriate, sensitive, and inclusive language that is reflective of and validates chosen identities be used when describing participant demographics. Participants should be given every opportunity to self-identify themselves, and have those identifications included and respected regardless of complexity.
>
> 3. It is mandatory that transpeople be respected by researchers and presented in a non-pathologizing manner that preserves a person’s right to self-determine their identities regardless of origin.
>
> 4. It is essential that cultural differences, including language and identity preferences, be respected. Extreme caution should be taken to examine one’s own cultural bias and make every effort to avoid imposing this bias on other cultures.
>
> 5. Transpeople exist at the crux of many multiple identities and related oppressions. Research must consistently include, address, and confront these multiple identities in all stages of the research process. Additionally, it is important to contextualize results as it is likely that studies will not be able to be inclusive of the experiences of such largely stratified and diverse communities.
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> 6. Studies that are trans-inclusive in name (e.g., LGBT) must be inclusive in practice or should not be labeled as such.
>
> 7. All aspects of the research process should be informed by transpeople and various trans communities. Transpeople should consistently be included as leaders and collaborators on research.

8. As with all research, it is important to examine all research presumptions. Because gender is one of the most universally pervasive of all social constructs, this examination must be particularly thorough and thoughtful.

9. Just as it is important to actually report on the trans experience when conducting LGBT research, it is important to accurately reflect the trans experience. For example, the MTF and FTM experiences are not simply the opposite of one another. It is not safe to assume that because something applies to one part of the community that it will apply as well another part of the community.

Although written to address research with transgender subjects, many of these considerations—with little or no modification—would apply to other sexual minority groups and, in some cases, perhaps to LGBTQ research across the board.

Lacking any standardized, consistent, and reliable measures of sexual orientation and gender identity, researchers often rely on simple or naïve operational definitions if they are defined at all. Yet the operational definitions of such constructs exert considerable influence throughout a research effort, certainly in determining likely participants, strategy to select them, and the results that are obtained. As such, one should strive to provide explicit conceptual and operational definitions and to consider potential impacts of those definitions.

Sampling and Recruitment

Determining the sampling design, or the ways in which cases or subjects are drawn from a specific population, can be as confounding as the issue of an operational definition. In fact, identification of LGBT populations and access to participants for research are among the largest challenges to those engaged in studies of sexual minorities. According to Sullivan and Losberg (2003), "in practice, sampling is fraught with dilemmas, particularly with populations that are difficult to define, hard to reach, or resistant to identification because of potential discrimination, social isolation or other reasons" (p. 148).

There are a number of methods to identify and select subjects each with its own distinctive advantages, and none is inherently preferable over others. Various factors are typically involved in the selection of a sampling design. Some strategies will likely be dismissed as too impractical given time and cost constraints. If generalizability of findings is desired, probability based samples are preferred. These are particularly hard to achieve with LGBT populations. In line with the qualitative bent of much LGBT research at least in the social sciences, generalizabilty isn't a paramount concern. As such, sampling designs that are based on *convenience* (sample is drawn from that part of the population close at hand) and/or *purposive* (subjects are selected based on a characteristic) are much more prevalent. *Snowball* sampling, in which subjects are asked to refer people like themselves, is one of the most commonly used techniques. One consequence of such techniques is recruitment efforts tend to rely primarily on friendship networks and LGBT social or community organizations. In this regard, recruitment is somewhat dependent on individual's affiliation to the LGBT community at large. This helps to explain the common and frequently cited limitation throughout much research dealing with sexual minorities of an over-reliance on participants who are White, well educated, urban, have above average income, and are typically *out* in regards to their sexual orientation (Meezan & Martin, 2003; Peacock, 2000). Calls to move beyond “easy to find” samples and to reflect broader representation of LGBT populations and individuals are common (Meezan & Martin, 2009). Some researchers (Bettinger, 2007; Hash & Spencer, 2009) have suggested innovative ways in which the Internet may aid in this effort. Nevertheless, Sullivan and Losberg (2003) caution that given the difficulties associated with quantitative sampling of sexual minorities, the “continued use of haphazard, purposive, and snowball sampling techniques” (p. 158) is likely.

Wheeler (2003) contends there may be no simple resolution to this dilemma and researchers may have to continue:

> to make critical decisions based on their skills, resources, intent, passions, and convictions, in partnership with members of the study population…[while being] mindful of at least three things: the need for inclusion, the need to avoid tokenism, and the need for statistical power. (p. 309)

Under any circumstance, researchers are encouraged to think carefully about sampling design before beginning a study, to subsequently describe how samples were selected, and to comment on the character of the sample and potential sampling bias (Sullivan & Losberg, 2003). Those relatively unfamiliar with LGBT culture should confer with LGBT colleagues and friends who may be able to provide insights on gaining access to and securing the cooperation of potential research participants.

A Need for More Complex and Expansive Research

Perhaps due to the shifting sociopolitical context and concomitant changing LGBT research, those engaged with LGBT research over the past few decades have reflected a strong affinity for qualitative approaches. This is not surprising given what Gamson (2000) characterizes as a “well-founded suspicion that positivist sciences…have been at odds with the interests of self-defining homosexuals—pathologizing, stigmatizing, seeking the ‘cause’ of deviant sexualities and, by implication, their cure” (p. 348) and given the transgressive potential of qualitative methods through making space and giving voice to those whose views and experiences have largely been underrepresented in traditional research. In particular, narrative strategies (e.g., life histories or story telling) are widely utilized in research dealing with sexual minorities (Cohler & Hostetler, 2002; Grace & Benson, 2000). Having participants tell their own stories allows them to know that others care about them and value their experiences; this can be especially empowering for members of oppressed groups, many of whom appreciate the opportunity to be heard (Hash & Cramer, 2003). It also often yields rich data that can be particularly poignant and compelling in illustrating exclusion or marginalization of sexual minorities in the workplace, in academia, and in society at large. Yet, while critically important, qualitative research alone can provide only some knowledge about these groups.

As is the case with other complex individual and social characteristics and attributes, incorporating a non-normative sexual identity is multi-determined and multifaceted thereby indicating a need for various layers of research and understanding. Using a variety of different data collection strategies (including large scale surveys) and broadening the span of inquiry to include more quantitative and mixed methods research (to include direly needed longitudinal studies) could yield new insights that might otherwise remain obscured. Multiple methods of measurement could help to yield the clearest picture of the phenomena being investigated, thereby raising the possibilities of more contextually valid understandings. Such strategies would also posture sexual minority research efforts to “answer more sophisticated questions in more rigorous ways” (D’Augelli, 2003, p. xxi). Swindell and Price (2009) believe that LGBT research has thus far relied too heavily on “inadequately developed and insufficiently complex explanations” (p. 169) and assert the need for complex explanatory models, containing mediating and moderating variables. Swann and Anastas (2009) also call for greater complexity—and greater precision— in the conceptualization of key concepts and propose that testing theoretically derived measures can result in more complex constructs and how these interface with cultural, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic force thereby furthering understanding of variations among people with different characteristics and in diverse circumstances. Additional considerations that may help engender more sophisticated research include: (a) proposing more complex questions; (b) ensuring measurements are reliable, valid, and when necessary, multidimensional; (c) acknowledging the temporal aspects of findings, that is, age and cohort effects; (d) reporting the measures used in referenced materials; (c) inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity measures in national studies (Bettinger, 2007; Meezan & Martin, 2009).

Inside Versus Outside Researchers

An emic perspective represents the viewpoint of the members of a culture being studied or observed, that is, the “insider” standpoint, while an etic viewpoint is one that represents more the perspective or values of the researcher, that is, an “outsider” stance (Pike, 1990). Inside researchers studying their own groups start with certain advantages as they can use their emic understanding arising from shared group membership to communicate the expressions, sentiments, and goals of the group, to establish rapport, and to formulate salient questions. They may also bring special knowledge to their research, which can facilitate data collection and analysis (LaSala, 2003). Thus, researchers who are themselves sexual minorities (inside researchers) *may* be more likely to use context-appropriate terminology. They might also offer more insight on targeted participant recruitment strategies and be more attuned to capture emic perspectives of the participants than might be the case with outside researchers. McClennen (2009), herself an outsider researcher of LGBT issues, cautions that gaining access to and securing the cooperation of members of sexual minorities communities requires researchers to “adopt culturally-sensitive strategies enabling them to be considered as other than intrusive outsiders” (p. 223) and adds that an inability to overcome the challenges of inclusion “tends to result in oversimplification and overgeneralization of findings, creating a disservice to the oppressed community” (p. 223).

Inside research also has inherent potential for some disadvantages such as the assumption of shared understandings or lived experiences when such is not the case (Bettinger, 2008). Such a situation could lead an inside researcher to “fail to adequately explore certain respondent perceptions because they take for granted that they understand how their informants view common cultural phenomena” (LaSala, 2003, p. 19). Although some LGBT participants may be more open to engaging in research and be more honest in their reporting with an inside researcher (Hash & Cramer, 2003), Bettinger (2007) contends such findings are influenced by the context and a host of researcher attributes and not due merely to the researcher's sexual orientation. Similarly, Kong, Mahoney, and Plummer (2002) found that regardless of the insider/outsider status of the researcher, participants "want to know where both the researcher and the teller of that life are coming from, what kind of relationship they are having together, and how intimate details will be used and represented" (p. 249).

At issue is not whether one perspective is "better" than another, nor is the point to privilege either perspective; indeed "each is weak in and of itself, and if one is favored over another, the research can seem shortsighted or biased" (LaSala, 2003, p. 16). There are also important practical and philosophical implications raised by relying exclusively on either insider or outsider research. Too much emphasis on whether one is an insider or an outsider fosters a "we/they" dichotomy and helps to perpetuate the "special topic" view towards LBGT research. As Taylor (Edwards, Grace, Henson, Henson, & Taylor, 1998) explains: "it is important to conduct research across cultural borders. To leave research only to the 'insider' is an essential trap to view cultural borders as concrete and static" (p. 320). Just as women contribute to masculinity studies and men to feminist theory (Gardiner, 2002), so too should there be no artificial or capricious barriers on either who can contribute to LGBTQ studies or to the focus of research conducted by sexual minority researchers. Once again when acknowledging the great diversity within the sexual minority communities and the interplay of other social locations and factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, educational level, etc.), it is important to be cognizant that "even when researchers are members of the target group, based on demographics or other characteristics, the process of conducting the research places them in somewhat of an 'other' category" (Wheeler, 2003, p. 67).

Recognizing the potential influences of both emic and etic perspectives and striving not to operate from either exclusively would seem to be a prudent approach when involved with research on sexual minorities. Collaboration with outside researchers can help provide clarity and insight around research questions or strategies and generate new conceptualizations and understandings. It can also help to mitigate the inherent disadvantages of insider research and to dispel the still too pervasive view of LGBTQ research as the sole purview of those who are themselves sexual minorities. Such an approach also contributes to the establishment and sustenance of relationships that are so vital to the coalition building, which in turn is so necessary to face the many challenges resulting from varying viewpoints and perspectives in workplaces and learning environments.

Potential Costs and Ramifications

Another important consideration regarding LGBTQ research is that researchers, regardless of sexual orientation, may face costs and risks for engaging in inquiries involving sexual minorities (Edwards et al., 1998). Berger (1996) relates that when he was entering graduate school, he was cautioned "becoming identified with the topic of homosexuality is dangerous…it could lead to ostracism, academic difficulties, and future employment problems" (p. xiii). Similarly, McClennen (2009) advises that the same social and environmental pressures placed on the stigmatized group—such as individual and institutionalized homophobia—are exacted upon researchers studying those groups. She cites examples of both the personal and professional stresses she faced as an outside researcher including (a) citizens in the community questioning her university administration as to the appropriateness of her research; (b) apprehension about being denied tenure; (c) prejudices of family members and friends; and (d) innuendoes alluding that she may be lesbian being spread to students, other faculty, and her male partner. She found it necessary to make "a conscious decision as to the amount of personal and professional risk I [she] was willing to take to continue my research" (p. 233) and to reflect upon her "commitment to the ethical contract that exists between the researcher and those being researched" (p. 234). Yet unexpected benefits may also accrue for those who opt to engage in sexual minority research. McClennen (2009) explains that as a heterosexual going "through this process, my [her] theological and philosophical foundations were shaken, torn apart, and rebuilt. I [she] have gained in spiritual peace within myself and through fellowship with others who are open to diverse populations" (p. 235). Likewise, as Hill (Edwards et al., 1998) notes, LGBTQ researchers engaged in such research can "garner esteem, increasing one's cultural capital within the sphere of equity specialists, and may allow the researcher [to] inhabit a privileged location" (p. 317).

Cramer (2009) also acknowledges that LGBT-focused research may offer both benefits and limitations. For those considering undertaking such efforts, she offers issues to consider segregated by where one is in one's career path. For instance, someone contemplating an LGBT-focused dissertation should consider the perceived level of support from potential committee members, additional hurdles that may be faced in the Institutional Review Board process, and which journals are likely to publish the results of their dissertation. Those engaged in job searches should assess the LGBT "friendliness" of schools, workplaces, and communities in which they are seeking employment. Finally, those seeking tenure and promotion may want to consider which mainstream journals with solid reputations will be amenable to publishing their work. She also suggests joining professional associations and committees that would view LGBT scholarship and research as an asset and finding a mentor whose judgment can be trusted.

Conclusion

While knowledge about and open societal recognition of sexual minorities are increasing, LGBTQ lives remain largely uncharted. Very little AE or HRD research deals explicitly with sexual minorities. Too often researchers, even those genuinely committed to equity and social justice, remain blind to the need to explore the experiences and circumstances of LGBTQ people. Research is an important avenue to discern and document specific concerns or oppressive outcomes across a wide range of policy areas that fail to take into full account the needs and issues of sexual minorities. Furthermore, it can help convince policy makers, service providers, and those allocating funding of changes that are needed and how they might be affected. Inside researchers cannot do this in isolation. The skills, expertise, and passion of outside researchers who are or would be allies are needed to both enhance scholarship around LGBTQ issues and, importantly, to help bring about real-life changes that contribute to more equitable workplaces and learning environments.

It is important for any researchers (inside or outside) on LGBTQ issues to develop a sense of LGBTQ culture and to adapt research methodologies and ethical considerations accordingly. However, the potential complexities inherent in such research do not warrant inaction. Tierney (2000) advises that however flawed the research endeavor, the possibility exists that in some of our work we might be able to bring about change. Although Tierney is discussing life history, by extension his comments would seem to apply to broader AE and HRD research when he states:

> the challenge becomes the desire to change the more oppressive aspects of life that silence and marginalize some and privilege others. One certainly cannot will away power. But [we]…ought to try to understand the conditions in which people live and work and die, so that everyone…has the possibility of reconfiguring his or her life. (p. 549)

It is in this possibility that a hope arises—that of researchers across the spectrums of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression collaborating on relevant, meaningful, and LGBTQ-inclusive research. This area of inquiry offers not only an opportunity to contribute to a sorely deficient but growing body of literature and knowledge, but also the tremendous potential to better lives as well.

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