

# Researchers' Positionalities and Experiences Mediating Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans-identified and Queer Research as a Personal and Cultural Practice

André P. Grace, Fiona Cavanagh,  
Candice Ennis-Williams and Kristopher Wells  
University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

In presenting an example of reflexive autoethnographic research, this paper investigates researchers' positionalities and how researchers mediate LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified and queer) research as a situated research practice. It uses narratives of four co-researchers' identity positions and experiences to explore each researcher's *self-reflexive personal*, which is a term we use to name our engagement with issues of presence, place, acting, trust, rapport, authority and authenticity in the narrative-inquiry process. In taking up Rosaldo's (1989; 1993) theme *the researcher as the researched*, the paper challenges researchers to scrutinize contexts, relationships, dispositions, constructs and affiliations that limit research to the parameters of heteronormative assumptions. Here the paper examines issues of researcher legitimacy in relation to researchers' identity positions, experiences and relationships, and the social responsibility of researchers in relation to situated LGBTQ research. As well, the paper considers the political and professional ramifications of challenges, possibilities and risks associated with mediating LGBTQ research in the intersection of the personal and the cultural.

## SITUATING OUR LGBTQ RESEARCH AS A REFLEXIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ENGAGEMENT

During a study of welfare-and-work issues impacting LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified and queer) teachers in school settings in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, we – André as principal investigator and

Address for correspondence: Dr. André P. Grace, Department of Educational Policy Studies, 7-104 Education North, University of Alberta, Canada, T6G 2G5; Email: andre.grace@ualberta.ca

Fiona, Candice and Kris as three graduate research assistants – worked together as co-researchers. In the first phase of our research, we examined national and provincial legal, legislative and educational policy changes with import for the welfare and work of Alberta’s LGBTQ teachers. In the second phase, we ascertained the degree to which these changes have influenced the everyday lives and work of six LGBTQ teachers who taught in the Edmonton area. We conducted open-ended interviews and focus groups with the research participants, and engaged them in writing poetry and narrative vignettes as we explored these teachers’ socially and culturally constructed identity positions, their lived and variously represented experiences in schools, and their self/institutional relationships.

This research was supported by two university operating grants intended to advance social-science scholarship, as well as by an operating grant from the Alberta Advisory Committee for Educational Studies. As part of our research proposal, we built in a facet to enable us to explore our connections as researchers to the research process and to one another. Inspired by Rosaldo’s (1989; 1993) emphasis on *the researcher as the researched*, we felt it was vital to investigate the impact of our researcher subjectivities and positionalities on our involvement in this LGBTQ research project. We researched ourselves so we could discuss our perspectives, impressions, feelings, thoughts and reactions within a reflexive autoethnographic engagement where the sharing and questioning of personal and cultural experiences as well as the interpreting of the experiences of co-researchers were integral parts of engaging the researcher as the researched. As well, we wanted to explore mediating LGBTQ research in terms of particular purposes, intentions and strategies that link research to advocacy and cultural work. In this light, Fiona describes our starting perspective.

To engage in LGBTQ research is to embrace and question fluid identity positions and to be committed to openness. Researchers – both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ – have to develop high degrees of self-awareness, exploring their individual capacities to know and understand sex, sexual, and gender differences. Perhaps most importantly, researchers need to be self-reflexive, linking knowledge and understanding gained to actions taken to give LGBTQ persons presence and place in education and other communities where they can be visible and proud, respected and valued.

Exploring this perspective engaged us in reflexive autoethnographic research in which interpretive ‘stories [are] written in an autobiographical genre about the relationship of self, other, and culture’ (Ellis and Berger, 2003: 467). In writing about ourselves as researchers, we wanted to engage in an investigative process that would help us build deeper and richer collective understanding of our identity positions and research

interests and experiences (Ellis and Berger, 2003; Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Thus we shared 'reflexive, experimental, autobiographical, and vulnerable texts' that each co-researcher constructed about being involved in the Alberta study (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 735). Collectively, these textured stories provided a focal point for our introspection and an authentic way to access researchers' voices (Clandinin and Connelly, 1998; Grace and Benson, 2000; Grace *et al.*, 2004; Lather and Smithies, 1997). Moreover, as autoethnographic accounts, they also created a focal point for LGBTQ consciousness-raising and interpretive analysis of connections between the personal and the cultural. Ellis and Bochner (2000: 739) describe this kind of analysis:

Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations.

As we researched ourselves, we examined the challenges and risks of engaging in LGBTQ research from our respective locations. Our deliberations are captured here as we bring together each researcher's narrative vignettes to form a co-constructed narrative. As Ellis and Berger (2003: 486) relate, 'Co-constructed stories sometimes retain individual voices ... but the co-constructed version presented is still the agreed-upon collective story.' For the four of us, this is our shared and agreed-upon collective story. It takes up the intricacies of mediating LGBTQ research space, and it reflects upon the degree to which each researcher felt affiliated with one another and the LGBTQ research project. The process of co-constructing our narrative started with the notes from the individual journals that each co-researcher kept during the study. It continued with individual reflective writing of narrative vignettes, which became sites for personal and cultural analyses. After we drafted our vignettes, we shared them with one another in researcher discussion groups, which served as dialogic encounters aimed at building knowledge and understanding of the self and other as researchers. We were guided by an ethics of mutual respect that required openness in terms of sharing feelings and engaging tensions, which we viewed as integral parts of presenting honest and encompassing reflection. As we shared, we tried to keep personal/experiential aspects of engaging in the research in dynamic relationship with the culture of LGBTQ research, a culture we were trying to understand and describe. This involved us in an iterative process in which each co-researcher considered the interpretations and feedback of colleagues as the writing-and-editing process continued. Throughout this process interpretation was integral, helping us to interrogate our experiences so we did not see them as sufficient explanations or uncontested evidence (Lather and Smithies,

1997; Scott, 1992). In adhering to the perspective that ‘all research is interpretive’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 19), we were also guided by the perspective that theorizing and telling ought to be in dynamic equilibrium, mutually informing one another in the intricate process of narrative inquiry and interpretation (Grace and Benson, 2000; Grace *et al.*, 2004).

In this paper, we consider each researcher’s *self-reflexive personal*, which is a term we use to name our engagement with issues of presence, place, acting, trust, rapport, authority and authenticity in the narrative-inquiry process. Having challenged one another to scrutinize contexts, relationships, dispositions, constructs and affiliations that might limit our research to the parameters of heteronormative assumptions (Honeychurch, 1996), we reflect on our social and cultural positionalities in relation to LGBTQ research as a situated practice, and we take up the issue of researcher legitimacy. We examine how researchers’ identity positions and experiences impact on research practice and ensuing co-researcher relationships. We consider the challenges, possibilities and risks associated with mediating LGBTQ research in the intersection of the personal and the cultural, which have political and professional ramifications.

#### **MEDIATING LGBTQ RESEARCH: TAKING UP MULTIPLE ROLES AS RESEARCHERS**

##### ***Researchers as advocates and risk-takers***

Throughout the Alberta study we examined how researchers influence the research endeavour as both knowledge production and a situated practice (Lather and Smithies, 1997). Since we wanted our research to be reflexive, we analysed the role of the situated researcher who ‘approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that he or she then examines in specific ways (methodology, analysis)’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 18). Writing three years earlier, Britzman (1997: 32) had already described such analysis as ‘exploring the tangles of implication’. This means that researchers examine how they are located in research practice and how their self-interests may generate challenges, risks and possibilities for the research participants, the readers of research reports, and indeed themselves. In this context, speaking, listening, being heard and writing during a research endeavour are political processes with their own deterrents or motivations.

Fine *et al.* (2000) believe that social-science researchers ought to conduct useful research and be advocates for the disenfranchised. We agree, asserting that our collective political task in this study has been to link our research to advocacy so LGBTQ teachers are supported in policy and practice in schools as teachers’ workplaces. LGBTQ research should

be about building our capacities to know and act so we can engage in ethical, just and democratic work to counteract those elements of a dominant moral and political that still subjugate LGBTQ identity positions. This work involves challenging the power of a dominant culture–language–power nexus to pigeonhole LGBTQ persons in moral and political terms that variously defile, demean, or dismiss an array of sex, sexual and gender differences. From this perspective as researchers, we challenge the traditional ‘bracketing of the researcher’s world’ (Fine *et al.*, 2000: 108), and we work to be more responsive and responsible cultural workers for social justice. However, we proceed cognizant of the specific risks that LGBTQ research poses. For example, Taylor and Raeburn (1995), in a study that focused on just LGB sociologists, examined academic career outcomes as possible effects of taking risks to confront heteronormativity and engage in advocacy. They found that more visible LGB sociologists often have explicitly political intentions as they engage in LGBTQ research and publishing, and that their resistance can have personal and professional consequences. Furthermore, they found that these sociologists also became easier targets of discrimination and retaliatory career consequences that included: ‘1) discrimination in hiring; 2) bias in tenure and promotion; 3) exclusion from social and professional networks; 4) devaluation of scholarly work on gay and lesbian topics; and 5) harassment and intimidation’ (Taylor and Raeburn, 1995: 262). Thus personal and professional risk-taking requires courage, persistence and resilience. Moreover, vulnerability comes with visibility. In this light, André speaks about his own risk-taking in terms of his hopes, needs, and concerns.

I am always conscious of the risks associated with doing LGBTQ research not only in terms of how they might affect me, but also in terms of how they might affect graduate students who work with me. If I am principal investigator on a research project in which graduate students have roles as co-researchers, then I have to be responsive and responsible, and consider how their engagement might translate into specific consequences for them in terms of their career paths. Indeed on several occasions in the past I have helped graduate students cope with instructors or supervisory committee members who were variously homophobic, ignorant of LGBTQ identities and differences, or at best oblivious to them. As they questioned these students about their LGBTQ research, they asked such homonegative questions as: ‘Do you have to use the word “queer”?’ and ‘Isn’t your research too political?’ I have to respond in these situations. When I started doctoral studies I swore I would never be closeted again. For me, hiding my gayness as a schoolteacher had been an erosion of my whole self, my true self. I always felt like a hypocrite living a fraudulent life, an impostor still sending the message historically cloaked in ignorance and fear that being

gay is wrong. I had to change that. As I thought about being an academic, I knew that I wanted to be visible and present to LGBTQ or questioning students.

Thankfully, I work in a university setting where I have that luxury. I work to advance queer in theory and in practice, but like many academics I question queer as a still emerging way to understand sex, sexual and gender differences. Vicars (2006) notes that queer, as the name of a theory and a way of being, is much contested. I believe such contestation is necessary to expose the absences in queer theorizing. For example, queer declares that sex, sexual and gender differences are fluid, which helps move us away from the limits of binaries like male/female and heterosexual/homosexual. Paradoxically though, in advancing the notion of fluidity, queer limits the possibility of action by denying the possibility of closure of identity positions, even if only in particular moments and spaces. Despite the risk of essentialism, such closure is needed to enable discussions that link subjectivity to agency in action planning for social and cultural change that abets full LGBTQ citizenship. From this perspective, queer is not only fickle about identity positions, but it is also fickle, by default, about action abetting LGBTQ inclusion.

In this paper the four co-researchers talk about being gay men and heterosexual women as identity positions that enable us to think about our roles in research and advocacy. However, we still value queer theorizing so we can link queer reflexivity to reflexive autoethnography. Vicars (2006: 23) suggests that a 'Queer reflexivity raises the significance of employing ontology for unsettling thinking about reality, agency and ways of being and relating.' I would also suggest that a queer reflexivity can raise the significance of employing epistemology for disturbing belief systems and individual dispositions tied to heteronormative tradition and other limits of history.

### ***Researchers as witnesses***

In addition to taking up roles as advocates and risk-takers, those who mediate LGBTQ research should also consider their roles as witnesses in the research process. Here a turn to poststructural practices of educational inquiry is helpful. St. Pierre (1997: 279) depicts such practices as a 'search for other language and other philosophical and political positionings that might produce more ethical and useful work in a postfoundational world'. Like these research practices focused on transformation, LGBTQ research as a situated practice can place research in a political realm of possibility. In this open realm, the provisional and contingent are welcomed replacements for the ordering and structuring of people, politics and ideas through scientized language and practices that can do

damage to unprivileged lives (St. Pierre, 1997). This requires a 'theory of situated methodology' (Lather, 1997: 233) that places LGBTQ research in dynamic equilibrium with LGBTQ theorizing (as a series of lenses to examine outsider subjectivities, positionalities, knowledge, language and cultural politics) and LGBTQ histories (as spaces to explore advocacy, risk-taking and social-justice issues over time and tides). Within a theory of situated methodology, researchers are positioned as witnesses, not experts. Witnesses give 'testimony to the lives of others, with subtextual and intertextual practices that displace direct commentary on such testimony' (Lather, 1997: 252). As Lather (1997) describes it, this process of witnessing the situated and the particular is a postfoundational repositioning of research as practice. It becomes a way for researchers to question researcher subjectivities and positionalities as a key question is raised: Who should witness in conducting LGBTQ research? André's narrative vignette takes up this question as he speaks to the issue of acquiring research assistants to conduct the Alberta study.

My reflection begins with a discussion the four co-researchers had at the end of the Alberta study. We had all met for a final sharing of personal thoughts and feelings about our involvement. I felt tired, emotional and pensive that day as I thought about how doing this research had affected me. I also thought about how much this research served as a profound reminder of my teaching experience as a closeted, gay teacher in Roman Catholic schools for fifteen years. I associate aspects of that experience with mental anguish, emotional stress, guarded behaviour, bad decision-making and physical sickness.

In retrospect, when I started this research project I had only limited understanding of its parameters and effects. I did have personal fears about working with my co-researchers. I was particularly concerned about ending up with non-LGBTQ research assistants who might prove to be uncomfortable or disconnected to the point of incapacity in the process of conducting LGBTQ research. I wondered, 'What biases will they bring to the research project? What if they're homophobic? What if they're just insecure?' (Of course, these were questions I also had to ask myself. As the research unfolded, I came to think more deeply about my personal investment in the research project, and how my attitudes, values, beliefs and internalized feelings impacted my involvement.) I also wondered, 'Would non-LGBTQ research assistants have reservations about engaging in LGBTQ research? Would they decline for fear of being labelled queer? Was I overreacting?'

The fact that I had had these reservations was revisited during the group discussion. At one point I acknowledged Candice, a co-researcher who identified as a heterosexual married woman and mother of a young son. When I affirmed her commitment and courage in her work as a co-researcher, Kris, the only queer research assistant working on the project

and someone who had worked with me prior to doing this research, interjected, ‘That’s not what you said at the start!’ In that moment I felt very uncomfortable and lost for words. Yes, I had – perhaps understandably, perhaps unwittingly – shared my reservations about Candice with Kris. However, I thought, ‘Why did Kris have to bring this up now?’ After all, things had worked out. From the time I contacted Candice to arrange a meeting to discuss my research, she had expressed interest in working with me. She came to my office several times to chat about the research before we started the project. Once she brought her son. I liked Candice’s energy. She always asked questions, and she also asked for books and journal articles so she could read more about LGBTQ theorizing. From the beginning she was honest about coming to the research process fearful, not knowing a lot, and wanting to learn.

It is a testament to the rapport, trust and ability to share that had come to mark interactions among the co-researchers that Kris’s comment provided impetus for dialogue. Candice took the lead and asked, ‘How do you both feel now about our involvement?’ The ‘our’ was in reference to Fiona, another research assistant who identified as a heterosexual woman. Fiona joined the research team a term after Candice had begun her work. Both she and Candice had sensed that Kris and I were not convinced that they, as heterosexual researchers, should be engaged in LGBTQ research. Indeed, they acknowledged that they had not been convinced themselves. Throughout the research process, they wondered if they could claim knowledge and understanding since they had not lived queer, which involves being queer and acting queer. Living queer also involves becoming and belonging as a queer person, and contesting, resisting and enjoying moves and moments that bring LGBTQ persons closer to experiencing the rights and privileges of full citizenship.

Both Fiona and Candice acknowledged that they had struggled with feelings of being outsiders, intruders and even impostors. Fiona also related that her involvement in the research project had made her aware that she is caught up in heterosexism to the point of being oblivious to it. She wondered if she might be homophobic because she felt uncomfortable when friends asked her why she had queer theory books in her office.

Kris and I participated in this dialogue, speaking to issues and tensions involved in doing LGBTQ research. We recognized and acknowledged that both Candice and Fiona had gone through quite an experience as co-researchers finding space and place in this project. We drew parallels to what LGBTQ persons go through everyday as they negotiate their way in a heteronormative world. I spoke about ways in which we all grapple with heterosexism and homophobia. Kris wondered how the dynamics might have changed if, among other intersecting differences, one of the co-researchers had been Two Spirit (historically a bisexual Aboriginal leader and medicine person), a lesbian, or a heterosexual male.



Why was I so affected by Kris's comment? While I accepted it as a product of his desire and commitment to engage in LGBTQ research, I was, in an immediate sense, hyper-aware of how difficult it was for Candice and Fiona to talk about their roles as non-LGBTQ researchers during the co-researchers' discussion. Their distress was evident in their facial expressions, their body language, the pausing, the careful choice of their heartfelt words, and the emotion in their voices. In a broader research sense, I was reminded how much I have to learn about my role as a queer researcher who wants to build open, strong relationships with colleague researchers and research participants – LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ. Kris's comment also reminded me that, as a queer researcher who comes to LGBTQ research with particular interests and good intentions, I have to research myself continuously. I have to question what I bring to the research process, including my biases and resistances. Only then can I begin to witness.

Researchers who include a focus on the self-reflexive personal in conducting LGBTQ research acknowledge the impact of their subjectivities and positionalities, including the ways heterosexism and homophobia are imprinted and internalized in their dispositional profiles. In keeping with Honeychurch's (1996) perspective that all researchers are part of some socially and culturally constructed world in space and time, researchers can see themselves as never insulated, never isolated from the research process. Since they perform research acts from situated, lived bodies, researchers can investigate how the authenticity of their research is, in part, 'dependent upon and relative to the individual sexually embodied researcher(s)' (Honeychurch, 1996: 346). From the perspective of the researcher as the researched, researchers should ask: What are the social, cultural, political and ethical implications of naming one's sex, sexual and gender differences in the research process? How will such naming add to the intricacies of speaking and being heard? Does naming mean more trouble in light of Britzman's (1997: 31) assertion that 'the difficulty is in understanding one's own voice even as one strains to hear the voice of the other'? How should researchers write about their research in regard to presenting findings, representing themselves and others, and reaching desired audiences? How might they advocate for those whose lives and experiences are studied?

### ***Problematizing a researcher's non-LGBTQ positionality in conducting LGBTQ research***

When researchers who engage in LGBTQ research are non-LGBTQ, key questions arise: Can non-LGBTQ researchers study LGBTQ lives? Or do you have to be and live within the LGBTQ spectrum in order to participate in LGBTQ research? Since non-LGBTQ researchers do not intimately

know about LGBTQ subjectivities and positionalities in terms of being/desiring/acting, how connected are they when they conduct LGBTQ research? Those who take up these questions deliberate whether a non-LGBTQ researcher can really be in tune with LGBTQ contexts, dispositions, and relationships, and whether they can function outside of 'privileged heterosexualized theory and practice, [which] has been [historically] constituted as the entirety of epistemology and praxis' (Honeychurch, 1996: 344). While non-LGBTQ researchers may know enough about LGBTQ theorizing to negotiate complex LGBTQ terrain (albeit as a difficult and unpredictable journey), some researchers who have not lived queer question whether they can engage methods and write texts that truly transgress the boundaries of historically and culturally constituted heteronormalized discourses and research models. For example, in his study of the identity struggles of gay and bisexual college men, Rhoads (1997a; 1997b), a non-LGBTQ researcher, attempted to address what he perceived as the limits of his heterosexual positionality in conducting gay and bisexual research by turning to a circle of queer students whom he knew at his university. This queer advisory panel shared knowledge and insights that helped him to develop research strategies and questions. They also helped him by providing advice as he framed his research, and by providing feedback as he analysed and wrote about his research findings.

Non-LGBTQ researchers, like LGBTQ researchers, have to acknowledge their subjectivities and positionalities, including their dispositional profiles, in conducting LGBTQ research. They have to avoid the pitfalls of using heterosexual/homosexual and male/female binaries, which reinscribe particular sex, sexual and gender differences as *the* normal ones. Non-LGBTQ researchers have to examine how the constitution of their lives and locations within a heteronormative context impacts their capacities and abilities to engage in LGBTQ research. At the same time, they have to consider 'how the researcher maintains and legitimizes his [or her] own (sex, sexual and gender) coherency' (Britzman, 1997: 33). As they move on to LGBTQ research terrain, non-LGBTQ researchers may discover that they need to learn more about their own sex, sexual and gender differences as they research in new contextual and relational settings. They also have to expand their learning about LGBTQ perspectives, and how a spectrum of desires, orientations and experiences contributes to the discursive construction of LGBTQ subjectivities and positionalities in particular times and spaces.

During the Alberta study, Fiona and Candice were non-LGBTQ researchers who had many questions about themselves, LGBTQ research, and their presence and place in it. Their narrative vignettes recounting how they negotiated their entry into the research project provide reflexive analyses of their roles as outsider researchers navigating LGBTQ research terrain.

**Fiona:** A letter sent via campus mail provided a paid opportunity to work on a research project. The research assignment is lucidly captured in a moment of concern. I would be working on a queer research project. My first reaction – I am an anxious heterosexual woman, wondering and wanting to protect herself. How will I be affected by this research? My predominant emotion – a raw fear of being attached to a project that others might view negatively. Will my involvement affect the achievement of my academic goals? Will it be seen as a dark stain on my curriculum vitae? The preoccupation with me is overwhelming! Why do I feel the need to protect myself?

Prior to taking up this work as a research assistant, I tried to rationalize my involvement. My thoughts – I can gain valuable qualitative research skills and experience. Maybe something tangible can be extracted from the research topic itself. My precise emotions were those of complete detachment and an obsession with the maintenance of my position solely as an outside researcher. I would be a good researcher, and I would complete assigned tasks. LGBTQ co-researchers and research participants were irrelevant to me at this point, removed from my thoughts of self-concern.

However, I felt emotional and a little bewildered as I started on a research journey I sensed would be multi-faceted, complex and contradictory. When André used the phrase 'being/desiring/acting queer', I started to wonder what I really knew about LGBTQ people. I worried. As I was exposed to the lived experiences of LGBTQ persons, would I, in turn, be exposed as someone too ignorant of that experience to be studying it? I have always felt that doing qualitative research is like a movement within a rhythm that is constructed by a social reality, embodied relationships and a language in which that reality is embedded. Would I be in tune with a queer research rhythm? Would I be able to contribute in meaningful ways as a heterosexual researcher, and perhaps even enhance the research process? Would I be comfortable researching me and reflecting on my sexual orientation, which would be in the minority in this research project?

Many more questions came as the research project unfolded. The project opened up a window into a queer lifeworld that was a new experience for me. Oh yes, I told a few people that the office I shared with two gay graduate students was an LGBTQ positive space. However, as I came to terms with my discomfort around engaging in LGBTQ research, I wondered if I was an LGBTQ positive space. Confronting my own heterosexism and homophobia became a key moment for me in the research process. It enabled me to explore how I was implicated and embedded in the stories, the analysis and the evolution of the project. Confronting came, in part, through listening to the sheer emotion, pain, courage and realities of the LGBTQ persons engaged in the research process. I came face to face with their real lives and the psychological and emotional burdens that queer individuals carry because heterosexuality is so historically and culturally sacred, so seemingly impenetrable.

Confronting my own homophobia has been a catalyst for engaging new lenses to examine language, power, justice, culture and human actions. It is an ongoing process. It happens when I examine who I am and how I come to knowledge in a heteronormative world. This engagement helps me see how I am involved and implicated when I conduct educational research. It reminds me that I need to be self aware, and to think continuously about what I'm doing.

**Candice:** The month before I began work as a research assistant, I realized that the term to come would be no ordinary one for me. I received a phone call from André who wanted to chat about the upcoming research project. I had learned a few months earlier that I had been successful in securing a departmental research assistantship for January to April – news well received since I'd be returning to school full-time after a maternity leave. I really needed the extra financial security and a more flexible work schedule.

'Hi, this is André,' the caller announced, 'and I'd like to tell you a little about the research we'll be doing together.' 'Okay,' I responded excitedly. I was anxious to find out who André was and what we would be investigating. During the conversation, I remember reassuring André that I would be quite delighted to participate in a study of welfare-and-work issues for LGBTQ teachers. However, I also admit that after the phone call I spent most of the afternoon contemplating whether I wanted to get involved in this type of research. I wondered whether it was 'appropriate' research for me – after all, I'm heterosexual, a new mom with a baby son, and a Roman Catholic. I felt that maybe I should pull out of this research completely. Surely there must be other research assistantships available to me. What if people start to think that I'm gay, by association? Moreover, how can I be an effective part of this research team? I'm heterosexual. I don't really understand. And they will know that I don't understand.

Suddenly I felt very ashamed and somewhat embarrassed. Here I am agonizing over what I should engage in as a 'suitable' research activity – me, the same person who a month ago felt she was losing touch with herself amid dirty diapers and feedings. Me – a new mother who wants to raise her son to respect and value others. How can I not do this? Of course, I will meet with André next Wednesday.

### **And a few weeks later, when the interviews begin ...**

The day begins with the alarm failing to go off at 6:00 am. I awake in a panic. I need to be on campus early this morning. The first interview with a research participant happens today, and I want to have another chance to chat with André to review some aspects of the open-ended interview process. I still have questions. What if there's some unconscious bias coming through as I engage the research participant with my questions? What if the way that I choose to word my questions or comments offends the research

participant, shuts him down, or puts him on the defensive? (The first research participant – all had agreed to be interviewed by the whole research team – was a retired teacher who identified as a gay male. Research participants were not told about the sexual orientations of the researchers prior to the interview. However, the co-researchers provided each research participant with an opportunity to ask us questions about our identities and the reasons we were involved in this research during the interview warm up and in subsequent conversations.)

On the way to campus, my husband breaks the silence first. He interjects, 'You must be excited about doing the first interview today.' I respond, 'Excited, yes, but nervous too!' I knew that, in many ways, I still felt like an outsider. This feeling was perhaps even stronger now. What I thought I understood about LGBTQ experiences seemed only a surface understanding. This realization embarrassed me. Yesterday, as we sat in André's office, going over details for today's interview, André and Kris bantered back and forth, making comments about being queer. I found myself suddenly being cautious. How should I respond? How might they interpret my response? I'm still getting to know them.

Finally, on campus, I immediately hurry to André's office. It's too late! The research participant is already there. A stupid thought runs through my head – He doesn't look gay! I nonchalantly cover my wedding band with my other hand. Why did I wear that today? I want to be accepted. I want to participate in this interview openly. I quickly introduce myself, 'Hi, I'm Candice.' André starts the interview. I hang on every word spoken by the research participant. I want him to know that I'm a sincere listener. He isn't cautiously choosing his words. He speaks strongly, clearly, but with some sadness. I find myself feeling a range of emotions. Then it's my turn to participate. I ask my first question, feeling like the ground is about to break beneath me. The research participant smiles and makes eye contact. He begins, 'That's a good question.' I start to relax. He is accepting me as a researcher. I am a part of this interview process. He answers. I continue on, 'I have another question.'

For both Fiona and Candice, engaging in this LGBTQ research project proved to be a process of negotiating with self and others around issues of identity positions. As their involvement grew, they engaged André and Kris more, raising questions and seeking resources to enhance their LGBTQ knowledge and understanding. They also came to rely on the research participants as resources to enhance their learning. Through this LGBTQ immersion, their knowledge and comfort levels grew. They began offering perspectives that provided the research team with insights to help us all deal with the dynamics of the unfolding research process.

When non-LGBTQ researchers name themselves and focus on who will take up, read and interpret their LGBTQ research, they can provide an LGBTQ readership with a sense of their challenges and concerns about engaging in such research. Furthermore, they can connect, perhaps in a special way, with non-LGBTQ readers for whom LGBTQ subjectivities and positionalities may be unfamiliar. Indeed, as non-LGBTQ researchers share their own stories about finding ways into LGBTQ research, some readers may find they share similar challenges and struggles. Non-LGBTQ researchers can provide particular perspectives on heteronormativity and its impact on homes, schools and other institutions expected to perpetuate a heterosexualizing culture. Fiona and Candice share the following insights about their learning as non-LGBTQ researchers engaged in an LGBTQ research project.

**Fiona:** I began this project having to explore my own resistance and its roots. The stereotypes of LGBTQ persons that I had carried with me grew meaningless when I could not match them to the real lives and work of the people I encountered. In this research I engaged in a process filled with uncertainties. I stumbled over the right words to use in interviews as I confronted new terms and new ways – queer terms and queer ways of speaking about people and culture. I started to resent the education system, the media and everyone who had filled my head with stereotypes or left them unchallenged with their silence.

Being a heterosexual researcher in an LGBTQ research context has made me not only more aware of different sexed, sexual and gendered persons, but also more self-aware. Vignettes from the research participants' stories swirl in my head – stories of living a 'straight' life at school during the week and a more authentic queer life on the weekends; stories of being called faggot, dyke, or other less printable terms; stories of the daily fear of losing a much valued, much loved teaching job. These stories make you want to push boundaries, to question what has been unquestionable. They have brought new recognition to my daily life, and they challenge my understanding of what it means to live more fully in community. At the end of this research, I am left not merely with some descriptive or interpretive task. I am left with a political task, which is to take my new learning forward as I challenge educational interest groups to enable LGBTQ persons to have their rightful presence and place in education and culture.

**Candice:** During the research process, André encouraged us to share aspects of our reflective writing on our roles as researchers in the Alberta study. In one session Kris volunteered to read his first. His story recounted pains and struggles similar to what many of the research participants had endured. As Kris read his last paragraph, I felt what has become a familiar tension bubbling inside of me. I am angry – angry at myself for having, in the past,

laughed when degrading gay jokes were told; angry at myself for having participated in discussions that tried to intellectualize the cause(s) of homosexuality; angry at myself for buying into stereotypes that reduce being LGBTQ to certain behaviours, tendencies and looks. However, I learned that this anger is ok. It means that I'm thinking about LGBTQ differences now. It also means that I'm trying to understand how heterosexual works in relation to non-heterosexual, and what heterosexual takes for granted or fails to question.

My experience during this research project has deeply affected me as a person and researcher. As I read through my journal, the depth of emotion I have felt strikes me. I know I have grown as a researcher. Prior to this research experience, I never worried about positionality. I assumed my place. This experience was so different. It required that I question my assumptions and beliefs about my location. It truly challenged me – an outsider researching outsiders. And for that, I am forever grateful.

### ***Problematizing a researcher's LGBTQ spectral positionality in conducting LGBTQ research***

Like non-LGBTQ researchers, LGBTQ researchers live in a heteronormative world, so they also have to learn how to engage in LGBTQ research against the grain of heteronormativity and what they have internalized. Despite coming from identity positions with inherent and particular ontological and epistemological complexities along the LGBTQ spectrum, LGBTQ researchers are not exempt from the impacts of a heterosexualizing culture and a heteronormative society. In this light, considering both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ researchers' locations, they might ask: How might LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ researchers work together against the grain of heteronormativity to conduct LGBTQ research? What perspectives and qualities can both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ researchers bring to this research to enhance it? How might researchers' subjectivities, positionalities and perspectives enable or inhibit LGBTQ research possibilities? Does LGBTQ research have a tendency to become insulated, isolated, or even disconnected if only LGBTQ researchers engage in it?

When researchers who conduct LGBTQ research are members of the spectral community of queer Others (Grace, 2001), they have to consider how their identity positions and politics impact how they conduct research and produce knowledge. They also have to consider the intimate and real ways in which they may be caught up in an LGBTQ research process in which they have vested interests. Kris speaks to this latter issue.

I came to this research with interests impacted by my life experience as a gay, white, well-educated, middle-class male and graduate student. I realize that

my ability to participate in and write about LGBTQ research is informed by these multiple subject positions, some of which privilege me, one of which subjugates me. Indeed the outsider location that marked my life as a queer teacher very much shapes my involvement in this research venture. As I listen to the research participants' stories, I feel like a comrade-in-arms, like someone who has found kindred spirits. What the research participants share so often resonates with my own memories and experiences. In fact the sharing has resurfaced my own messy narrative of life and work as a queer teacher. I became acutely aware of this as I listened to their stories of the classroom and the closet. I cannot escape revisiting my own feelings and experiences. When one research participant detailed his experience with repeatedly cutting himself over an extended period of time, I was deeply affected. I flashed back to a time when the razor blade was at my own wrist, when I wondered how deep I would have to make the cut to dull the pain inside me.

My narrative, like those of the research participants, is sometimes an uncomfortable story. Our stories share common elements as cover stories, as secret stories; sometimes stories of resistance surface. For example, one research participant related how he came out to his principal and students after a homophobic incident he could no longer ignore (or endure). He openly addressed the issue with colleagues and concerned parents, and he now has a picture of his same-sex partner sitting on his classroom desk.

What value do I place on these narratives? On a personal level, they are part of a process of reclaiming my own voice and person as a queer teacher and researcher. On a cultural level, I hope they can provide impetus and a basis to challenge and resist a dominant educational discourse that is built upon heteronormative certainty and institutionalized silence that erase queerness.

LGBTQ researchers have a profound responsibility in the cultural struggle for LGBTQ presence and place. Honeychurch (1996: 350) asserts, 'As a consequence of never-justifiable offenses of cruelty, we come to knowledge obliged to consider our [queer] bodies with a deliberateness not required of heterosexuals.' Thus, by virtue of their outsider positionalities and lived experiences, LGBTQ researchers are pivotal cultural workers who can enhance research and advocacy efforts to transgress heteronormativity. Whether they are best suited to conducting LGBTQ research, LGBTQ researchers can certainly be cultural mediators for the many LGBTQ teachers who are caught between their desire to be out and visible role models in schools and their need to be invisible so they do not experience workplace backlash or lose their jobs. When LGBTQ researchers are vocal and visible in the research process and in their educational and cultural work, they engage in a politics of hope and revelation that expose LGBTQ voices and perspectives to others for whom



knowing LGBTQ identities and differences can begin a process of respecting and accommodating them. As Kris speaks to his own personal resistance and learning as one of the co-researchers in the Alberta study, we can see how he engages in a politics of hope and revelation in which he links his research to his educational and other cultural work for change.

When I first became involved in the Alberta study, I was quite sceptical and resistant to the suggestion of involving non-LGBTQ co-researchers in this LGBTQ research project. This was our project. This research involved our lives, not theirs. I recall thinking that non-LGBTQ people have no place here. I needed this space. We LGBTQ teachers and researchers needed this space.

Due to this resistance, I initially challenged my non-LGBTQ co-researchers. I wanted to know what their personal interests and investments were. I was angry. I was tired of living and working in a heteronormative world. Graduate school had become a process of understanding and reclaiming my queer self. I was attempting to repair the damage that had been done to my body, mind and spirit, so I came on strong. I wanted this research project to be a uniquely LGBTQ space. I wanted my non-LGBTQ co-researchers to feel uncomfortable.

So what changed my perception? Stories. After sharing my own stories, my co-researchers responded with theirs. They expressed their own fears, desires and discomfort. I came to the realization that I wasn't really trying to do LGBTQ research. I wanted to shrink the research space, not expand it. Moreover, I was actively keeping the old binaries intact and, in turn, denying my co-researchers and me an important learning opportunity. I was being selfish. They shouldn't have to prove themselves to me. Furthermore, I have come to believe and know that we need allies. We need non-LGBTQ researchers doing queer research if we are truly doing this research in encompassing and inclusive ways across sex, sexual and gender locations.

As they write their narratives, LGBTQ researchers not only have to consider their relationships with non-LGBTQ researchers, but they also have to consider their relationships with the non-LGBTQ readers who might take up, read, and interpret their research. Non-LGBTQ readers may feel dislocated from LGBTQ research and doubt particular findings. Honeychurch (1996: 353) concludes: 'In the final analysis, reader subjectivities will ultimately determine the construction of meaning and attribute value to any research. Because any study of homosexualities may fall well outside personal experience, readers unable to believe outcomes that they themselves have not experienced as *truths* [his italics] may remain unconvinced.' Thus LGBTQ researchers ought to mediate the LGBTQ research process by asking themselves certain questions: How do their researchers' subjectivities and positionalities affect how they

communicate outcomes to a non-LGBTQ audience? To what extent is the language they use an issue? How might non-LGBTQ readers respond to the ways that LGBTQ researchers (re)present LGBTQ worlds to them? How do such (re)presentations affect how these readers see LGBTQ researchers as advocates? How do such (re)presentations affect reader desire to become advocates themselves? Should LGBTQ researchers translate for a non-LGBTQ world as they mediate LGBTQ research? Would this belittle non-LGBTQ readers? Of course, even if they translate, LGBTQ researchers must be aware that they themselves are variables in the translation process because they view and review the world from standpoints, offering perspectives and evaluating as they go (Corrigan, 1990).

### **CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVE: LGBTQ RESEARCH AS A REFLEXIVE ENGAGEMENT**

In the wake of the narrative turn in qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) recount that it has become commonplace for researchers to research themselves. Moreover, increased attention to researcher subjectivity and positionality in using reflexivity as a methodological tool in qualitative research is one of the most significant trends in exploring questions and issues of representation and legitimization (Pillow, 2003). Researchers mediating LGBTQ research projects as a reflexive engagement with theory, self, advocacy and culture find themselves part of this trend. As participants in a dual engagement with research as culture and LGBTQ as multi-cultures, these researchers try to gain deeper and richer understandings of their LGBTQ research experiences and the risks they take to participate from different identity positions. Here, reflexivity becomes a political and conscientizing process in which researchers grapple with their self-locations (in terms of relationships of power) and their vested interests as they deal with matters of context, disposition and ethics in making sense of their experiences (Grace *et al.*, 2004; Pillow, 2003).

While reflexivity as a methodological tool may not enable us to know fully, at least it helps us to know self, other and culture in particular ways arbitrated by time and tides. This partial rendering in autoethnographic research is important because it acknowledges 'the political need to represent and find meaning' (Pillow, 2003: 192). In our LGBTQ research project, we strived to fulfil this need by variously using what Pillow (2003: 181) describes as four general, interdependent and frequently used reflexive strategies that work together in studying representation: 'reflexivity as recognition of self; reflexivity as recognition of other; reflexivity as truth; [and] reflexivity as transcendence'. These strategies

helped us situate each co-researcher's self-reflexive personal in terms of our perceived insider or outsider status and our ensuing relationships with one another. Hopefully, our reflexive LGBTQ research engagement exemplifies what Pillow (2003: 188) calls 'uncomfortable reflexivity – a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous [and disruptive]'. For us, it was through our collective discomfort and fragility in terms of knowing and acting that we grew as researchers, advocates, risk-takers and witnesses.

## REFERENCES

- Britzman, D.P. 1997: The tangles of implication. *International Journal for Qualitative Studies in Education* 10, 31–37.
- Clandinin, D.J. and Connelly, F.M. 1998: Personal experience methods. In Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S., editors, *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 150–78.
- Corrigan, P. 1990: *Social forms/human capacities: essays in authority and difference*. New York: Routledge.
- Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. 2000: Introduction: the discipline and practice of qualitative research. In Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S., editors, *Handbook of qualitative research*, second edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1–28.
- Ellis, C. and Berger, L. 2003: Their story/my story/our story: including the researcher's experience in interview research. In Holstein, J.A. and Gubrium, J.F., editors, *Inside interviewing: new lenses, new concerns*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 467–93.
- Ellis, C. and Bochner, A.P. 2000: Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity. In Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S., editors, *Handbook of qualitative research*, second edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 733–68.
- Fine, M., Weis, L., Weseen, S. and Wong, L. 2000: For whom? Qualitative research, representations, and social responsibilities. In Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S., editors, *Handbook of qualitative research*, second edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 107–31.
- Grace, A.P. 2001: Using queer cultural studies to transgress adult educational space. In Sheared, V. and Sissel, P.A., editors, *Making space: merging theory and practice in adult education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 257–70.
- Grace, A.P. and Benson, F.J. 2000: Using autobiographical queer life narratives of teachers to connect personal, political, and pedagogical spaces. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 4, 89–109.
- Grace, A.P., Hill, R.J., Johnson, C.W. and Lewis, J.B. 2004: In other words: queer voices/dissident subjectivities impelling social change. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 17, 301–23.
- Honeychurch, K.G. 1996: Researching dissident subjectivities: queering the grounds of theory and practice. *Harvard Educational Review* 66, 339–55.
- Lather, P. 1997: Creating a multi-layered text: women, AIDS, and angels. In Tierney, W.G. and Lincoln, Y.S., editors, *Representation and the text: re-framing the narrative voice*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 233–58.

- Lather, P. and Smithies, C. 1997: *Troubling the angels: women living with HIV/AIDS*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Pillow, W.S. 2003: Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, 175–96.
- Rhoads, R.T. 1997a: Crossing sexual orientation borders: collaborative strategies for dealing with issues of positionality and representation. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 10, 7–23.
- 1997b: Rethinking cultural borders: a response to comments. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 10, 39–44.
- Rosaldo, R. [1989] 1993: *Culture and truth*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Scott, J.W. 1992: Experience. In Butler, J. and Scott, J.W., editors, *Feminists theorize the political*. New York: Routledge, 22–40.
- St. Pierre, E.A. 1997: An introduction to figurations – a poststructural practice of inquiry. *International Journal for Qualitative Studies in Education* 10, 279–84.
- Taylor, V. and Raeburn, N.C. 1995: Identity politics as high-risk activism: career consequences for lesbian, gay, and bisexual sociologists. *Social Problems* 42, 252–73.
- Vicars, M. 2006: ‘Queer goings-on’: an autoethnographic account of the experiences and practice of performing a queer pedagogy. *Auto/Biography* 14, 21–40.

#### NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**ANDRÉ P. GRACE** is a Professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Alberta. **FIONA CAVANAGH** and **CANDICE ENNIS-WILLIAMS** are Master’s students, and **KRISTOPHER WELLS** is a doctoral student and Canada Scholar. Dr Grace and his co-researchers study inclusive educational policy and practice, especially as it focuses on mediating sex, sexual and gender differences in education and culture. Dr Grace’s national research, which is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, is a study of welfare-and-work issues for LGBTQ teachers working in Canadian schools.