

A Self-Reflexive Narrative of Queer Insider-Outsider Social Work Research

Reflective Narrative

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None.

Abstract

This article outlines a self-reflexive narrative for queer social work research students navigating the dynamics of conducting queer-led “insider-outsider” research. Personal reflections of conducting queer-led research as a queer gay man within the context of Nelson’s novel queer insider-outsider reflective framework are provided. Key insights involved: (a) The author’s felt sense of joy, belonging, and purpose from connection with other queer Folx; (b) navigating disclosure of the author’s sexuality and positioning as “expert” of their lived experience within a shared queerstory; (c) the meaningful emotional labour of listening to and reading participants’ queerstories; (d) continual vacillation between an “insider” and “outsider”; and (e) a shift towards reclaiming the word “queer” in the author describing their identity. Essential to this experience was challenging the notion of absolute researcher neutrality and being open to questioning and shifting identities in social work research. This article further adds to embedding queer voices and the value of insider-outsider perspectives in the teaching and learning of research in social work education.

Keywords: *Insider-outsider; Research; Education, Queer; LGBTQ+; Identity*

Introduction

In research, social workers can find themselves an “insider” sharing similar experiences and community kinship with the research participants; while concurrently being an “outsider” coming into the participants’ personal worlds as an external researcher (Eaton et al., 2019). A shift in this insider status may then occur when research participants’ intersecting identities and lived experiences differ from the researcher’s, thus throwing the researcher back into a state of not-knowing and feeling the weight of their “researcher” title in not betraying what participants disclose to them (i.e., “outsider” status) (Nash, 2010). This insider-outsider status can also provide deeper, more nuanced understandings of the social phenomena under study (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015; Levy & Johnson, 2011; Parson, 2019; Rosenberg & Tilley, 2021). I sought to understand this experience further through my own research to then document this experience to serve as a learning tool for social work research students and educators.

Context

From October 2021 to March 2022, I was undertaking a research project about the potential loss of belonging and social connection that people faced during the Covid-19 pandemic and the role of primary healthcare (PHC) as a first point-of-call for support. In scoping the project, a key piece of the puzzle remained – who are the “people” to whom I am referring? In answering this question, I was drawn into personal reflection of my experiences of belonging and social connection as a gay man during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lucas, 2021). I wanted to know – what are other queer people’s experiences of belonging and social connection during the Covid-19 pandemic? Do they resonate with my own lived experiences? In this process I realised that my queer identity was wanting voice through the project.

At this stage, it is important to note that my use of the word “queer” is the product of my reflections during and after the course of the research project. Initially, during the project scoping, the language I was using to communicate the project to myself, and my academic mentor, was the shorthand “LGBTQ+” to encapsulate my own identity as gay (the “G”), as well as lesbian, bisexual, trans, queer, and any other non-cis-heterosexual sexuality and/or gender identity (see note on terminology in Lucas et al. (2023). For me, LGBTQ+ and queer are interchangeable, although I recognise and respect that for some people the term queer still holds a derogatory meaning. I say more about this later in this narrative.

At the conclusion of the research (Lucas et al., 2022, 2023), I sought to document key learnings from the research process in the form of this self-reflexive narrative that may serve as a learning tool for social work students and educators. Nelson’s (2020) queer insider-outsider reflective framework was utilised to organise my reflections and key learnings. Those parts of the following sub-headings “within quotation marks” represent the key elements of Nelson’s framework followed by my extension on these.

A self-reflexive narrative on queer insider-outsider experiences

From a “euphoria of connection” to a joyful belonging and connection

Nelson (2020) felt a sense of euphoria arising from the connection in interviewing queer people for their research. This euphoria was associated with Nelson feeling pride in their queerness, a happiness with their own identity. I experienced too what could be viewed as a euphoria of connection while undertaking my project, although I would probably label these states more in terms of a Joy. The reason I choose “Joy” (no doubt a choice influenced by my Buddhist spiritual beliefs) is that I associate this concept more with a calm, grounded, and hopeful feeling of interconnection between myself and others that motivates myself to effortlessly learn and know more. For me, Joy comes from within. In contrast, I associate “Euphoria” within a feeling of pleasure within which I could lose myself and sense of interconnections with others. For me, Euphoria is dependent on external sources and can perhaps therefore be unreliable.

In this context, I felt a joy emanating from within myself as I connected with my own queer lived experiences throughout the project, as well as feeling an interconnection with other queer people in the university and local communities. At times, this joy was experienced with a shade of vulnerability as I knew that to share this connection throughout the project meant I had to in-essence continually “come out” to other academics and collaborating partners. It was through these acts of coming out and the associated vulnerable joy however, that I found connection with something long buried under what felt like layers of internalised homophobia – a sense of pride of and agency in my essential queerness.

For the first time since my time volunteering as a peer support worker when I was a gay adolescent man helping other young gay men find pride in their own queer identities amidst the most horrendous of queerphobic oppressions, I spontaneously felt a strong sense of belonging to something bigger than myself; something I had always felt was lacking in my work as a practitioner and later, an academic. From this sense of belonging arose a euphoric sense of purpose and meaning that made all past challenges and pains of being gay in a straight world worth it. In this way I experienced clarity in what I was meant to do – voice and embody belonging and connection to queer life and lives in cis-heteronormative society. I also experienced a clarity on the internal source of my purpose and meaning – queerness.

From “relationships with participants” to pride and power in seeing my queerness

Nelson (2020) described how their relationships with research participants posed unique experiences relating to being “regarded as an authority in gender and sex due to my research” (p. 916) while at the same time placed in positions of sharing personal information about their gender identity and sexuality, why they chose to undertake this research and in what ways the research interacted with their own identity. Similarly, I felt a navigating of not only relationships with participants, but also the new relationships with queer networks/communities helping with promoting research within their networks, who were also potentially “participating” in the research, and themselves having their insider-outsider experiences identifying as LGBTQ+ and a worker in the area of LGBTQ+ health and wellbeing.

I indeed experienced a sense of vulnerability in navigating the power dynamics arising from creating and nurturing these new relationships. I was forced to consider how I was presenting myself not only as a queer researcher, but also what and how much I would disclose of my identity as a queer gay man and of my queer life – two factors I had not previously considered due to my conventional research training that separates the “insider” to maintain the “outsider” status.

The path I carved for myself through these power dynamics included not naming myself as an “expert” in queer health and wellbeing and all things “queer”, but rather as an expert in my own lived experience as a queer gay man. I wanted to use this positioning, along with my positioning as a mental health social worker, to connect with other queer people whose sense of belonging and social connectedness was affected during the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, when talking about my research project (via Zoom due to social distancing requirements in place) I made the conscious (and vulnerability arousing) decision to disclose aspects of my queer life before and during the Covid-19 pandemic with the use of photographs showing me, my husband (with his permission), and greyhound ‘daughter’ and how I have always been on a search for belonging and connectedness within a world where my queer family and I are seen as different, strange, or “queer” in a derogatory sense. It was in this process that I saw queerness, my and my family’s queerness, as a source of pride and power.

From “re-traumatisation through listening” to the unnamed, silent witnessing participant

Nelson (2020) described how listening to participants’ stories involved an emotional labour and risk of vicarious trauma coupled with a sense of failure in not feeling objectively to the research. Nelson (2020) also described a sense of intimidation from the responsibility of how best to present the data collected in ways that did justice to participants’ lives and lived experiences. For me, I would not say that my listening resulted in any re-traumatisation. Although the research methods I utilised (i.e., qualitative evidence synthesis and group model building) were different to those of Nelson (i.e., semi-structured interviews and photo diaries), there was still the potential for participants sharing their trauma stories that could have resonated with those of my own. A potential I had planned for through my participating in counselling, peer supervision, and participants having a “psychosocial support person” present at each group model building workshop. As such I found myself connecting and listening to my social-worker-self guiding me in how to prepare, what to expect, and how to guide the research participants through their involvement in my project. I listened to and drew upon my practice wisdom accumulated within the clinical and academic worlds – the traumas, the losses, the celebrations, the hopes, the fears.

The emotional labour of listening, listening to participants and to my own self within, left me at the same time tired and emotive (as per Nelson) alongside excited and joyful akin to the earlier feelings of euphoria, purpose and meaning from connection. This occurred not only during the group model building workshops, but also in conducting the qualitative evidence synthesis prior whereby I would read and re-read the queerstory of others, who like me seek belonging and connection amidst a world not made for us.

At times I would feel my heart touched by their queerstories, the tears would well-up, and the responsibility descend to ensure I, like Nelson, honour the participants not only in my project but also of those I drew upon in the previously published literature. In this way, there were the research participants and then there was that unnamed, silent witnessing participant: me. This “insider” me was always taking part inside the world of the project and yet remaining on the outside.

From “finding oneself on the outside” to leaning into the queerness

The comfortability of an insider-researcher status, Nelson (2020) described, was owed to an expected familiarity with what the participants would share of their experiences in the research. They were also “struck” (p. 920) by how they shifted from a comfortable insider to a frustrated outsider owing to the fact that Nelson’s intersectional social identities (e.g., gender, sexuality, culture, and class) differed from those of the participants. In my research, I too experienced a shift between a comfortable (and proud) insider to a frustrated and at times lost outsider researcher. While I felt a sense of initial joy and ‘euphoria’ from connecting with other queer people through my research, I quickly became mindful not to assume a homogenous “queer experience”.

I am a White Anglo-Saxon Australian cis-man who identifies as gay and queer. On the one hand I was an insider along the binary of “cis-heterosexual” versus “not cis-heterosexual” – with my identity falling within the right-hand side of this binary under a single “queer” umbrella. However, when considering who then is also under this umbrella (sheltering and resisting the cis-heterosexual ‘rain’) the unique expressions of ‘queerness’, Queerstory, and intersectional queer identities are beautifully diverse. My intersectional queer identity is but one sliver of this diversity. I must therefore possess both an insider and outsider status to know and share with this diversity. This part of my experience was perhaps one of the most challenging as I continuously vacillated between insider-outsider – neither essentially one nor the other and yet in a “queer” turn of events, inhabited both spaces. Perhaps, on later reflection, this vacillation is what made for a genuinely “queer” research experience.

From “the researcher’s shifting identity” to (re-)claiming queer and coming-out...again

The impact on their identities and the way in which their queerness was experienced was for Nelson (2020) the most significant part of having undertaken their research. One of the most important experiences for me was the personal (re-)claiming of the word “queer” when describing my identity. Prior to undertaking my research project, I would describe myself (in the personal spheres of my life) as “gay” – I am a gay man. Any reference to queer arose a distinct resistance within me against the term and its historically derogatory uses and my own personal experiences of being bullied for the apparent “crime” of not being like the other boys (i.e., I hated sports, my voice was “gay”, I wore jewellery and a side-strap bag at school, and I was overall “too feminine” – whatever that meant! – for everyone’s standards). Apparently, everyone else knew I was gay before I did (!) – and to be gay was not right, you were “different”, you were “queer”. I therefore internalised that I was not right, I was different, I was queer – everyone was saying it, so it must have been true, right?

In this context, I started the project with this internalised homophobia as a little (yet compelling) voice in the back of my head resisting any action of mine to bring the queer aspects of my identity into my work. By the end of the project however, when talking to others about my research and my insider-outsider relationship to it, I started almost instinctively to describe myself as a “queer” gay man. I went so far as to change my email sign-off to “In kindness and queerness”. No longer did I feel a resistance and in fact it felt natural – my queerness was voiced and owned. In this way, it was almost like another form of “coming out”. Each time I spoke to organisations and interested parties about my research and why the research was important to me I spoke of my identity as a queer gay man.

On reflection, like Nelson (2020), I too felt affirmation and greater confidence together a sense of wonderfulness and uncomfortability that came with this shifting identity. Although “shifting” (for me) does not entirely capture the experience, I shifted in how I described my identity that now included aspects previously excluded by (perhaps) my own internalised queerphobia developed over the course of my life. The importance in voicing queer, my queerness, arose from the vacillating insider versus outsider status in the research project. I was an outsider in that being gay was but one expression of queerness in our society; however, the insider connection came from the queer, the queerness, that connected us all as a resistance against the dominance of common cis-heterosexist social norms.

My existence, my being, therefore, was a resistance. As Duran and Miller (2023) stated in their positioning of queerness as form of being, “queer as being marks existence as resistance and an embodied critique of oppressive structures, practice, and policies” (p. 4). Here, claiming queer claimed a united front against a collective and intersecting oppressions and strengths. In this way, my research became an opportunity for meaning making through making sense of my relationship to the research, finding benefit in that relationship, and being open to identity change in that process (Neimeyer, 2016; Neimeyer et al., 2014).

Epilogue: Pathways for ongoing self-reflexions

Nelson’s (2020) reflective framework, grounded in their own insider-outsider research reflections, was beneficial to navigating my queer insider-outsider researcher experiences. There are a couple of considerations in reading and interpreting this article. Firstly, its contents are my own interpretations of Nelson (2020) rather than speaking for Nelson. Their work was the framework on which I based my own reflections. I cannot know exactly Nelson’s experiences and intended meanings on the topic. Secondly, this article includes reflections from my positioning at this point in time and is open to shifting as too my experiences and identity shift. Ongoing reflection is therefore warranted to understand future evolution as a queer social work researcher.

Implications overall for the teaching and learning of queer social work research practice includes being mindful of insider-outsider dynamics in research and being open to questioning shifting ideas of what it means to be queer doing queer research. In applying the lessons learnt in these reflections, I pose the following reflective questions for queer social work academics and aspiring queer social work research students:

1. How might a joyful sense of connection and belonging arise from undertaking your research?
2. How might the intersection of your queer lived experiences (i.e., your “queerstory”) intersect with your professional social work identity help you navigate the insider-outsider power dynamics in your research?
3. How might your “insider” me (that “unnamed silent witnessing participant”) take part in your research alongside your “outsider” social work researcher identity?
4. How could you “lean into” your queerness to inhabit an insider-outsider position, while remaining neither essentially one nor the other in your research?
5. How might your queerness be a “form of being”, whose existence is a collective resistance and opportunity for meaning making in your research?

Finally, work is needed from academic institutions and accrediting bodies in genuinely fostering the safe spaces necessary for queer social work academics and aspiring queer social work research students in a way that goes beyond tokenism. For example:

- (a) providing funding support for queer research and community-building initiatives such as Deakin’s queering-Up Equity and Equality Research Spaces (Q-UEERS) network (www.deakin.edu.au/q-ueers);
- (b) research expectation models that include more creative, non-traditional research outputs in calculating research workload allocations; and
- (c) queer-specific research teaching and learning curriculum that includes exploration of queerness, queer lived experiences, and navigating insider-outsider research experiences.

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