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Carving Out Qualifications: Mastering Ph.D. Problems in Post-graduate Gender & Sexuality Study

Tiffany Jones, Alison Rahn, Lucille Kerr, Paulina Ezer,
Mandy Henningham, Andrea del Pozo de Bolger,
Chloe Parkinson and Jessica Ison

Introduction

The international research literature on people working in gender and sexualities, including literature on LGBTI people, addresses the key issues emerging education research, gender studies or sexualities studies aca-

T. Jones (✉)

Department of Educational Studies, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW, Australia

e-mail: tiffany.jones@mq.edu.au

A. Rahn · A. del P. de Bolger

BCSS, University of New England, Armidale, NSW, Australia

L. Kerr · P. Ezer

ARCSHS, La Trobe University, Bundoora, VIC, Australia

M. Henningham

University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia

C. Parkinson

School of Education, Griffith University, Griffith, QLD, Australia

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demics face in limited ways. This book chapter considers the difficulties of studying gender and sexualities as higher degree research (HDR) students—including honours, Masters and Ph.D. candidates for example. It first reviews the literature on working in this area and second provides a series of individuals' most difficult experiences of being an HDR in gender and sexuality (G&S) research, and how they creatively overcame key obstacles. The chapter concludes by drawing together key learning from the literature and the HDR learning experiences, which can be applied when studying G&S topics.

Literature Review: Problems Working in Gender & Sexuality Issues

The literature on problems for working around G&S issues mainly stems from America [1–7] and Europe [8–12], with occasional examples from elsewhere such as the Western Pacific and Middle East [13–16]. It mainly considers examples of discrimination [3–6, 8, 9, 11], the legal and financial status of marginalised LGB employees across particular countries in Western regions [1, 12, 13] and other regions [9]. There is an emphasis on research in nursing and policing over education research [6, 7]; and a focus on qualitative work. Studies mainly use a small number of focus groups and interviews with individuals from some key organisations [6, 8–11, 14], legal or policy analyses [1, 9, 13], and/or psychological frames for 'coping' with work discrimination [3, 4]. An especially wide-reaching international project funded by Norway and Sweden considered LGBT workers' experiences of discrimination in Argentina, Hungary, Thailand, Costa Rica, France, India, Indonesia, Montenegro and South Africa [9]. Interviews showed experiences of discrimination included exclusion from the workforce on the basis of non-normativity, harassment and invasive personal questions, and in a few extreme cases being bullied, mobbed and sexually or physically assaulted. Studies particularly on women's experi-

J. Ison

Social Sciences, La Trobe University, Bundoora, VIC, Australia

ences hinted that discrimination against gender and sexual orientation could compound in particularly restrictive ways [5, 8, 11], however generally lesbians fared better than their heterosexual counterparts in purely financial analyses [12]. Indigeneity or being transgender could also be a factor which complicated an individuals' access to resources or research supports, particularly for higher degree research students, even when they were academically gifted [15, 16].

Overall, there was no recent or detailed work on the complications of research for women and LGBTI researchers, or education workers' own views of the problems in G&S research in education as a field specifically. There was also a problematic sense across the literature that discrimination was simply inevitable; something women and LGBTI people and other researchers must simply 'adjust' to—rather than any exploration of positive contributions of being a woman, or an LGBTI or alternately not belonging to such groups can make to research. The complication of all these issues particular to being an early career, or a student, in academic environments is also overlooked. This book chapter aims to overcome this gap and create greater networking in a local academic community in G&S studies in education and beyond, through a collaborative creative reflection exercise exploring:

- the greatest difficulties individuals experienced as higher degree researchers (HDRs) in their past or present student work;
- how they overcame the difficulties they faced as higher degree researchers; and
- how they can give advice which empowers others in the collaboration or in G&S research in education could overcome similarly problematic situations.

Methodology: Creative Collaborative Community Co-publishing

This book chapter draws on key tenants of the critical education paradigm, including feminist and queer work. It privileges empowerment through communal engagement with peers with the objective of empowerment

of the group through collaborative reflection work [17–20]. It is particularly informed by research on the value of de-constructive feminist group co-reflection on the barriers and biases within academic institutions for HDR students’—and particularly female HDR students’—progress [21, 22]. Specifically, we as eight early career G&S researchers (mainly HDR students) came together to reflect both informally and formally on, and improve our position within the academic work discipline and to contribute to improving the position of G&S researchers broadly. All of us are women; some of the group are members of LGBTI, indigenous, low socio-economic or other community sub-groups. As a collaborative community, we reflected on key issues by both email and the exchange of notes and phone calls. We agreed to communally create a publication (as publications are privileged in our workplace) reflecting on and empowering ourselves around key research problems we have faced in studying G&S issues in and beyond education. Publishing collaboratively was considered a primary goal, since publication collaborations and the building of informal support networks are essential particularly to the academic progress of female research students, who cannot rely on merit alone to progress in academia but must draw on their extended networking and collaboration skills and experience to be upraised [21, 22].

The reflective exchanges we shared as a group considered a range of difficult experiences we had undergone as female/LGBT/diverse HDRs, and took place over meetings and in group emails over a six month period. The following reflections in this chapter were samples of some of the key problems we faced and overcame, and then reflected on for a group solution and co-empowerment. Individuals in our group chose to name ourselves to give the reflections a narrative quality, however this collaborative approach could be used with anonymity if preferred in publications (in this case the group felt giving other G&S and education researchers a ‘real world’ figure who overcame a problem as an HDR would be more inspiring than anonymous reflections). We also chose, for this book chapter, to focus on problems that were more likely to be experienced by larger groups of people than problems, which stemmed only from the more unique specificities of our own projects.

Experience Review: How Gender & Sexuality HDRs Overcame Key Problems

TIFFANY JONES—Responding to Senior Bias

A senior staff member at the university where I once started a Ph.D. told me to change my thesis topic from exploring policy on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) students to something less controversial. They said I should change the topic, specifically, so people wouldn't assume I was *'lesbian'*. After failed conversations attempting to change the minds of my seniors, I changed universities instead. I did my Ph.D. project on policy on LGBTI students; got published (books, reports, articles); got grants (from the Australian Research Council and UNESCO for example); got jobs (at UNE, La Trobe, & Macquarie); and even promotions... not despite, but *because of* the unique focus of my research. Sometimes I missed certain promotions or job offers in contexts that may have been more homophobic or sexist—one can't always know. Like many younger women, LGBTIs and G&S experts I am also subject to increased unpaid labour demands by senior staff (including seniors *at my own senior level*) due to the perception that my own work is less important. Sometimes there is a special value in *not even engaging* in the additional unpaid and pointless labour of responding to disproportionate requests for additional unpaid and pointless labour. It is however worth doing the work to find and co-create contexts in which such discrimination will occur less and less—equity efforts have a long-term pay-off and 'point'.

The legal context for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) employees continually shifts. In 2012 the United Nations called for non-discrimination approaches to LGBTI employees through clarifying the application of international human rights legislation provisions reaching around the world [23], at a time when under one-fifth of all countries had some kind of protection in place for any LGBTI employee group [24]. In countries like Australia, governments introduced landscape-shifting federal legislative protection for LGBTIs and for gender expression broadly in employment [25]. Yet despite these significant steps, recent anecdotal Australian media coverage has suggested that some people might be remaining closeted at work regardless of any protections for their dis-

closures of LGBTI status, and questioned the potential of harmful mental health impacts that may stem from making—and also from not making—LGBTI identity disclosures [26]. This questioning has mimicked uncertainty in other industries on LGBTI employees' disclosures in protected contexts since the mid-nineties from Africa [27, 28], the Americas [29–31], the Eastern Mediterranean region [14], European [32], South-East Asia [33] and the Western Pacific [13]. This questioning also echoes more complex considerations in thinking about multinational academic and business contexts, travel and being deployed in transnational settings where rights recognition varies greatly [34].

Those HDRs dealing with senior staff or supervisor bias can for example:

- change supervisor,
- change qualification,
- change education context,
- advocate for change within their current situation,
- study less direct G&S topics,
- study G&S later in their career,
- or take many other options including choosing not to study G&S or other topics sometimes interpreted as indicating an LGBTI identity (...an unsupported but nonetheless prevalent assumption in some homophobic contexts).

Whilst the two very separate questions of either having LGBTI identities at work or the 'career-safety' of studying G&S education research will always have very contextually specific nuances considering local laws and research cultures, the myth that G&S issues can 'never' be studied or that LGBTI identities can 'never' be held anywhere or anytime in academic spaces... should themselves be 'fired'. They only serve to perpetuate their 'truths' through fear-mongering in contexts where some protections do exist. Increased policy protection in contexts lacking such statements, and regular equity training where protections do exist could aid both women and 'out' LGBTI academics as well as diverse researchers of G&S; across contexts.

ALISON RAHN—Negotiating Recruitment Resistance

Having embarked on a project addressing attitudes to sexually active couples at different ages including in residential aged care settings, the main challenge I faced was recruiting willing participants. As part of my work, I aimed to interview 25 informants with expert knowledge of intimate relationships in nursing homes but faced two significant hurdles, the first of which was obtaining potential participants' contact details. Being new to the field, I began with no industry contacts. Furthermore, my university's ethics committee had given approval for me to make contact with potential interviewees by email only.

However, obtaining email addresses was not always straightforward. Initially, this limited me to potential participants who had publicly listed email addresses. From this pool, suitable participants were selected and invitations were sent to industry experts who (a) were listed on government agency websites, aged care organisations and consumer advocacy groups; (b) had authored reports or academic publications; or [3] were listed on the social media site, LinkedIn. There were three main responses to this 'cold calling' approach—some responded enthusiastically, some declined and others simply did not respond. It seemed my topic was a politically charged one [35], a point reinforced during my attempts to recruit public servants and politicians. When undertaking sensitive research, 'privacy, confidentiality and a non-condemnatory attitude' are important for building trust [36]. Since older age sexuality is still largely a taboo topic [37], I attempted to be non-threatening with participants. Through trial and error, I discovered that people felt safer talking if they had already met me or if they had been recommended by someone they knew. Snowball sampling of participants using LinkedIn and word-of-mouth referrals worked much better than advertising in industry newsletters, for instance. To facilitate this response, I joined industry associations and attended conferences to gain networking opportunities.

During the interviews, I consciously focused on building rapport to facilitate participant disclosure [38]. This paid dividends. After completing the initial interviews, several participants became advocates for the study by providing me with referrals or discussing their interviews with industry

contacts. Through word-of-mouth recommendations, snowball sampling overtook purposive sampling.

This turn of events highlighted the second (larger) hurdle, the challenge of obtaining a balanced range of perspectives. Perhaps due to the sensitive nature of the data being sought, it became apparent that I had no perspectives from individuals who were opposed to sexual behaviours in nursing homes or who were uncomfortable discussing sexual subjects. In an effort to overcome this sample bias, I enlisted the support of interviewees, who made contact with resistant individuals on my behalf. However, attempts to interview people with divergent views were in the main unfruitful. By way of example, one interviewee contacted a colleague who was an advisor to a relevant political figure. She then contacted someone in the Department of Health and the Department subsequently allocated a staff member to be interviewed. However, that person had previously declined my invitation to participate so I was unsuccessful in penetrating this organisation. In order to prevent future students encountering similar difficulties, it would be helpful if government websites displayed their official policy in relation to being contacted for research purposes.

LUCY KERR—Researching in an Understudied Area

It is challenging starting research in an understudied or emerging field. Literature reviews, intended to provide inspiration for the direction of a study and identify gaps in the research area, are problematic when there is a paucity of papers to draw on. My fields are cancer and the trans and gender diverse community, and I am exploring how surgical and hormonal interventions affect risk. Cancer has an abundance of evidence from which guidance may be found, and research on the trans and gender diverse community is growing. However, the two fields rarely meet. The vast majority of data collection on cancer assumes that participants have normative gender experiences, and most of the studies conducted with the trans and gender diverse community focus on particular ‘problem’ areas (e.g. mental health and HIV/AIDS) [39]. It seems that researchers are under the illusion that trans and gender diverse people do not experience the common ailments of the general population, or that these are somehow

less important for this community. Whilst there is some excellent evidence on the various issues faced by cancer patients generally, trans and gender diverse individuals have a variety of unique characteristics that remain understudied, and thus knowledge and awareness is absent from practical cancer care.

A lack of data can be frustrating, particularly if the research that does exist is inadequate. The limited evidence that exists on cancer and the trans and gender diverse community is overwhelmingly biomedical in nature. It often fails to consider social aspects of what it means to be gender diverse. Added to this, biomedical literature uses biomedical language, which is potentially objectifying and commonly insulting to trans and gender diverse individuals (e.g. ‘cross-sex hormones’ which reinforces normative experiences of gender and sex) [40]. There are also articles that completely misgender the participants of their study—e.g. calling a trans woman a ‘man’ in the title of the paper [41]. It can be disheartening when researchers fail to understand the needs of the people they are studying, and it is important not to fall into a similar trap.

To supplement the lack of research, I turned to the media and found films, newspaper articles and other ‘grey literature’ [42]. Many of these are profoundly moving pieces, particularly the documentary film *Southern Comfort* which follows Robert Eads, a trans man with metastatic ovarian cancer, during his last days [43]. Other grey literature provides important examples of strong community advocacy (e.g. the Canadian website www.checkitoutguys.ca for cervical cancer screening in trans men). Exploring the grey literature has been helpful and inspiring; however, my hope is that more attention will be paid to this area of significance. On the flip side of the difficulties that arise from doing research in an understudied or emerging area is that you have the excitement of forging your own path, which means that this challenge is also a great privilege.

PAULINA EZER—Researching a Politically Controversial Topic

Sex education research comprises many varying topics ranging from more to less controversial. Of course, the level of controversy assigned to any

such topic depends on one's own political standpoint: a conservative individual may view any and all sexuality education research as controversial and inappropriate whilst a progressive individual may view some sexuality education research as 'vanilla' and others as more 'piquant.' My research—and you can judge for yourself how controversial it is—involves understanding what type(s) of sex education is included in the recently released and mandatory Australian Curriculum as well as understanding teachers' experiences with and thoughts on teaching sex education to their students in light of the release of this curriculum. In order to obtain teachers' opinions, I created and distributed a survey using various means, one of them being Facebook advertising.

My data collection took place at a time in which Australians had experienced and become involved in passionate debates over two main sexuality-related political discords: the Safe Schools programme and the national gay marriage plebiscite [44, 45]. Both topics had permeated Australian society with television, print and online media to the extent that it became sensationalised with many distorted facts. The Safe Schools media frenzy became so popular to discuss that it became associated with sex education as a whole. Anecdotally, when explaining my research topic in general terms to anyone outside of my research centre, reactions invariably consisted of questions focusing solely on my views of the Safe Schools programme and 'transgender issues' even though these were not topics that I had mentioned myself and were unrelated to my project.

In these ways, the salaciousness of these debates overshadowed the less sensationalised research that I was engaged in, which was also evident from comments on the Facebook advertisements that I used for survey participation. These advertisements made no mention of any other ongoing political conversation, such as the Safe Schools programme or the gay marriage plebiscite; however, they appeared in one of the most popular online media platforms in which these debates were taking place. Many commenters assumed that the survey advertisements were disguised as 'yes vote' propaganda or that the survey was actually regarding research on Safe Schools. Many negative comments were left for these advertisements, and this may have dissuaded some already wary teachers from completing the survey. It may have also done the reverse and fuelled passionate sex education teachers to have their say in the survey. Whilst we will never

know which types of teachers were most encouraged by such comments, the decision was made to hide any discriminatory comments and keep the remaining ones, to protect LGBTI communities and not link the survey unreasonably to irrelevant issues.

Data collection continued during and after the plebiscite occurred, and after gay marriage was clearly supported by the majority of Australians. Interestingly, once gay marriage had been legalised in Australia, all negative and discriminatory comments had stopped. Instead, tagging relevant Facebook friends and potential participants became increasingly common and enabled a snowball sampling effect to take place. In the end, the political tension over sex education that I had anticipated challenging survey participation became, unexpectedly, an advantage.

MANDY HENNINGHAM—Recruiting from Small Marginalised Populations

The ‘I’ in LGBTIQ research is often overlooked in broader studies and as such, there is a great need for intersex-specific research including in schools and other education settings. Given that intersex is an umbrella term for a number of divergences of sex characteristics, it is difficult to obtain the depth and breadth required to be an inclusive and comprehensive researcher in this field. Recruiting people with intersex variations, like any rare population in G&S, comes with its own challenges. Obtaining a large sample size may be difficult, and it is vital to consider terminology and community involvement when determining an estimated sample size. Obtaining a sufficient sample size for a mixed-method survey is also complex. The original aim for this study was to obtain a population sample based on the incidences of intersex variation within the general population. However, it would be extremely difficult to reach or even accurately calculate these values as there are inconsistencies regarding the incidences of intersex variations and the voluntary participation of participants. Further, there are discrepancies regarding the current incidence of intersex variations as some clinicians do not consider certain variations of sex development (such as those with ‘typical’ genitalia) to be intersex [46]. These inconsistencies add to the complications of finding the num-

ber required to obtain a true population sample figure. Additionally, some people with intersex variations may never have known about their intersex status if they received early interventions and were never given access to their medical records, or may never have been diagnosed.

If the population you are studying are often forced to live in secrecy and shame—like the intersex population I studied—then they may not be forthcoming with the details of their lived experiences, or even want to identify as a candidate for studies [47]. This apprehension to participate in research is furthered by the disconcerting historical relationship with researchers a population may have had; such as how intersex people have often been forced into research participation by medical researchers in times gone by [48]. Despite these factors, 81 participants self-selected for the study. Whilst far from a population sample figure, it is currently the second largest sample of this population conducted in the southern hemisphere [49]. As these participants were recruited via a snowball effect from support groups and networks, social media advertising, communications to relevant clinics and health services, diversifying recruitment avenues such as other media advertising, and schools or universities may be beneficial.

Terminology also plays a key role in recruitment strategies. For example, the term ‘intersex’ may carry stigma or misconceptions; some parents also find the term distressing, as it may imply a third gender or that their child is neither male or female and therefore not ‘normal’ [50]. Similarly, some support groups for specific intersex variations do not align themselves under the intersex umbrella and instead align with a medical condition. For example, one intersex variation specific support group that was approached for this study declined participation as they stated they were a condition support group and not an intersex support group, despite the condition exhibiting a divergence in typical sex characteristics. Therefore, broader terminology is recommended for research tools and communications. Researchers [51] who used the phrase ‘congenital variation in sex characteristics’ identified 40 intersex variations ($n = 272$) compared to the 16 variations identified in my own study ($n = 81$) which used intersex-specific language.

The development of the research tools themselves plays a role in the success of recruitment of the intersex population for research. Given

the historical conflict between researchers and the intersex community, there needs to be a greater inclusion of people with intersex variations involved in the research process. Involving community members to develop future projects regarding intersex variations is crucial to minimise insider/outsider dynamics and restore a sense of ownership over intersex research. Further, this inclusion ensures the research instruments are developed with the sensitivity and accuracy required to comprehensively explore the lived experiences of people with intersex variations [50, 52]. Conducting a reference group of community members and conducting a pilot study of a small group of intersex participants are examples of how this may be achieved [49, 51]. It is also vital to consider the degree of freedom and control participants would have interacting with the study [51]. Participants were able to opt out of the survey at any time and were not required to answer some questions they did not want to or that did not apply to their individual circumstances or variation. This, in addition to including open-ended questions allowed for the study to account for the diversity of intersex experiences without pigeonholing this diverse population into limited classifications or life experiences. For example, questions regarding specifics around surgical intervention, or transgender questions should be kept optional as this is not reflective of all intersex experiences. In summary, whilst there are difficulties in recruiting participants from small or sometimes hidden groups within the G&S area (such as intersex people, or perhaps sex workers or other groups who can be subjected to social shame or misuse by researchers) there are strategies that may be implemented, going forward. It is recommended that researchers consider diverse recruitment methods rather than only using one avenue (for example, only recruiting through clinics); involve the group in the research process to ensure the correct terminology and the sensitivity of research tools; and overall to aim at empowering this marginalised population through your recruitment rather than trying for more participants in any way that harms them and further disenfranchises them from engaging in research in future.

ANDREA DEL POZO dE BOLGER—Researching a Psychologically Sensitive Topic

I studied FtM transgender peoples' identities and education in my psychology Masters project and continued on to a Ph.D. [53, 54]. The challenges faced by researchers from the disciplines of education and psychology in transgender issues centre on the topic's many sensitivities. When recruiting 'transgender' participants for a study, the nature of the 'Transgender Umbrella' attracts a heterogeneous group of people whose identity greatly differs from others in the same sample. That is, some participants portray themselves as being born in the wrong body and have a strong desire to have this fixed, whilst others define themselves on a psychological continuum that changes with time and circumstances. This is also reflected in the labels participants choose (or resist) for themselves (e.g. transgender, transsexual, queer, male-to-female, female-to-male, etc.). Therefore, from a research perspective you may end up with a large but very diverse sample that for analyses purposes needs to be collapsed in a number of small categories. Whilst this may be a reflection of the nature of the field of study, quantitative research with small samples is not attractive to reputable psychology journals. Labels to refer to transgender people is a sensitive issue and participants sometimes express their dislike or even offence about the choice of words. Consequently, the wording of data collection tools (surveys or interviews) is subject to criticism from participants and sometimes complaints. Participants may feel sometimes understandably threatened or suspicious of the researchers' motivations, especially when the latter are not recognised within these groups. This leads to some defensiveness or animosity towards researchers. I overcame this with my supervisors by actively working with transgender people to ensure the sensitivity in the project, and by the ways we allowed participants' own feedback during the study (on the discussion-boards where we collected data, and in the survey) to shape the terminology we used directly. We listened and responded to the participants' preferences for words, and added these to the study's questions as the study progressed—this was a great way of turning what could be a negative or a complaint, into an inclusive feature of the study.

There will also be difficulties to ascertain the aetiology of emotional disorders in transgender people (e.g. depression and anxiety). That is, to what

extent these issues are the consequences of environmental factors specific to being part of this minority group (e.g. discrimination, misunderstanding, difficulties accessing specific professional services, legal recognition, social isolation in regional areas); hormonal treatment; dissatisfaction with physical appearance; or other issues unrelated to being transgender. Researchers should provide several options in structured questions on contributing factors to mental health issues, or should allow extended written responses or interview sessions which allow the complexity of these topics to be better explored. The process of submitting a manuscript on transgender issues to peer-reviewed journals in psychology or education is somewhat more intense than when the focus of research is on topics outside of G&S, due to the continued controversial nature of these topics especially in psychology circles. Whilst it could be argued that this situation applies to most fields of research, reviewers' comments tend to be more emotionally laden and the chances of publishing in the field largely depend on how much the manuscript aligns with the reviewer's position on the topic of transgender people. I worked with my supervisors to select the right publication opportunities where my work would likely align with the journals' overall approach to transgender themes; I did not submit to journals where we knew there was a bias against this topic.

CHLOE PARKINSON—Researching Marginalised Communities as Outsiders

Essentialising categories of 'insider' and 'outsider' may not convey the complexity of variables such as age, gender, class and colour that impact upon a research relationship, but the question remains: Who should conduct research with marginalised communities? [55]. As a non-Indigenous person undertaking research with an Indigenous community, navigating my 'outsider' position was central to my doctoral work and other work on Indigenous and gender issues in education [56]. Difficulties included undertaking culturally appropriate research, and how to best represent the perspectives of Indigenous community members (as informants).

A Community Reference Group, led by a Traditional Owner, was established to guide research at the site, and provide cultural advice before,

during and after data collection. This input was invaluable. The Traditional Owner in particular assisted with issues around the timing of data collection (which occurred during young men's initiation), consequent difficulties associated with informant availability and appropriate questioning. Following their guidance was imperative to ensuring the research was sensitive to the community's cultural context.

Narrative portraits [57] privileged informants' voices in the reporting of results. With this method, the researcher attempts as much as possible to allow the narrative portraits (extended thematic statements drawn from interview transcripts) to 'speak for themselves', balancing the voices of the informant with the researcher's [57]. Compromises are still made, as through interview and analysis processes there exist elements of co-construction where what is said and not said is mediated and negotiated [58]. Despite this, narrative portraits provide researchers with a method grounded in socially critical work, which advocates the representation of marginalised groups' lived experiences [57].

In the reporting of results, juxta-texts [59] destabilised my researcher voice, by offering a layered text which spoke to the complexity of my outsider position. Juxta-texts serve to disrupt traditional Western research design chapter format and formalised thinking. They were used to explain the research experience and how data collection in the community required particular ways of being and doing. I avoided an allegedly neutral and detached, comfortable narrative of the research process, instead presenting a 'messy' example of the uncomfortable reality of engaging in critical qualitative research [60].

I thus adopted a reflexivity of discomfort [60], extending reflexivity beyond its now common and comfortable usage in qualitative research, where it offers a means of exploring representation, and legitimising and validating research practices. Confronting one's positioning within research with Indigenous communities (and marginalised communities in general), and the ways in which they may exercise authority and contribute to Western hegemonic processes is critical, to counter that the traditionally exploitative nature of research with Indigenous Peoples [61].

Challenges cannot be avoided if an outsider chooses this research path. To undertake critical research as an outsider is complex, messy work. The researcher must be aware of the precarious ground on which they

are positioned, and continuously challenge their perceptions, biases and intentions. At the very least, there needs to be space for those at the centre of the research to overtly critique the outsider's work, if not lead it.

JESSICA ISON—Navigating Academia as Class-Based Outsiders

When I get dressed for teaching I obsess over my outfit. I iron my shirt compulsively, smoothing every little crease before putting it on, taking it off, ironing some more, putting it on again. I have invested in some really nice shirts, and as I iron them I marvel at their texture, at the good quality. Then I walk into my sessional job and stress over my low bank balance and my fears about never getting tenure as privileged academics look at me in a patronising way, expecting me to be grateful. My nicely ironed shirt feels crumpled and cheap in their gaze. I am a white queer, femme, who was socialised female. The academy is hard when you occupy various oppressed categories and whilst this is made incalculably easier by my skin colour, the key issue I face in the academy is class. I come from a poor family, where I am the most educated person and one of the first people to go to university. I had no way to navigate the system when I entered it, and I chose a degree at random, not knowing what a 'Bachelor of Arts' meant. Some five years of study later I somehow found myself doing a Ph.D. Doing a thesis for me has been a constant stress about not being good enough. People tell me I have imposter syndrome, which I just need to overcome. But the truth is, I am an imposter: I should not be at university. Sure, I worked my ass off but meritocracy—pulling yourselves up by your boot straps—is a lie. Working class people all work their asses off; doing the 'wrong type' of work. The only people who really believe in meritocracy are invested in reproducing their own privilege.

I am asked to speak on queer or women's issues, which is frustrating because I don't identify as a woman and I am sometimes just the token queer on the panel. Yet, I am rarely ever asked to speak about class; those platforms are taken by rich people. It is just something I am immediately judged for because no matter how neatly I iron my shirts. My accent immediately marks me as what Australians term a 'bogan' (of low socio-

economic background and cultural capital). Where I am from people don't go to university and as our teacher said to us in high school, 'why do you need to learn any of this when you'll just be working as a checkout chick', as though there is any shame in that job. I have dramatically tried to hide everything from my childhood, and even though I now eat kale and read Tolstoy, I stick out in the academy. My culture is not what the academy wants. I was from a family of readers, because yes poor people do read... I just wasn't reading the *right* books, and a lot of the *wrong* ones. There were no Marx or Foucault in the local library where I come from. Being working class in the academy means always trying to catch up on knowledge that middle-class people grew up with. I have learnt to hide my ignorance when I don't know what someone is talking about and to go home and look it up. Or now, with the aid of my phone, to go into the toilet and do a quick search. Being a bogan means you cannot show any weakness, because not knowing one important historical moment will shine a spotlight on how much else you don't know. One slip up and maybe you will be exposed. To alleviate these feelings I have searched for texts on being working class, white, queer, femme or Australian [16, 62–64], but rarely found academics inhabiting *the same* categories as me.

However, I do find people like me elsewhere, and I want to end on this. As Allan Bérubé [65] articulates, the 'rhetoric of hardship' when talking about being from a working-class background actually 'reinforces class hierarchies in the telling' of our stories (p. 154). To step away from giving a narrative of hardship, I want to end on the community that comes with being femme, working class and queer. Often a friend will call to talk a whilst and I will hear what they need in between their words. I will casually invite them for dinner because I can tell they are broke and need me to feed them, or they are lonely and need some company or they are just struggling. When we have grown up poor and queer and femme, we know we mask our pain and poverty in euphemisms and funny stories. We know how to hear each other's struggles. We know to come with food, a hug or a trashy film without ever acknowledging that this is what our friend needed. The academy rarely offers community; however, we do not need the academy for this and that is how I manage to keep going. I just take what I need from the academy; I *survive* because of my chosen working-class queer family. They are the family who sit in my lounge

room talking politics and respectfully not commenting as I compulsively iron my shirts. Sometimes, they iron them for me.

Conclusion

Drawing together points from the literature and the past and present HDR experiences, several useful processes can be applied by early career researchers and HDR students when studying G&S topics, to aid them in the difficulties they face. Firstly, we as a group believe we must not limit our research based purely on the support of existing senior staff or supervision teams; we must consider the possibility of doing groundbreaking work in the face of opposition. However, in making this consideration, we believe individuals should also consider taking small steps that can progress our field without risk to their own personal circumstances (dictated by laws, social support, financial opportunities and so on). Secondly, we argue that recruitment resistance in our studies should be negotiated using a variety of techniques (including using the snowballing effect and relying on contacts and networks rather than one's own immediate circles, as well as creating new contacts through direct means). Thirdly in approaching understudied areas we offer that one has to be realistic about what literature is available, and find alternate fields and sources upon which to draw. We must be willing to be pioneers; but we must also redefine the concept of pioneers beyond the old colonial notions.... pioneers can acknowledge when a territory does indeed have inhabitants, whose language and ideas are simply from a culture different to our own, no less worthy of consideration and likely more so.

Fourthly we need to understand when controversial topics may engender critiques of our work that are mostly invalid and purely antagonistic. We need to also consider the use of reference groups and greater engagement with G&S issues declared by potential participants, and to be willing to be critiqued when the critique is indeed valid. Understanding whether a critique is fair or politically motivated antagonism can require working with a group or ethics committees in extreme cases, and letting others be the arbiters; this is a key place in which collaborative communities are particularly useful. Finally, whether one is 'inside' or 'outside' a community; it

is possible to encounter difficulties particular to that position. ‘Outsiders’ may face increased ethical issues or difficulties in accessing communities or resources which they need to plan to manage well in advance of actually engaging in their work; whilst insiders need to think of positive ways to re-construct the communities they are part of. The collaborative community in this book chapter has itself shown the resilience and creativity that can come from simply sharing strategies for overcoming obstacles with people in similar positions, as a means to overcoming our own ‘rhetoric of hardship’ (the hardship of being a G&S researcher). We encourage HDRs and other emerging researchers around the world to share in this practice, whether you are insiders or outsiders in academies, so that you can empower yourselves and others to mediate the complex barriers of academic life together.

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