

Chapter 24

Working with Intention and in Tension: Evolving as a Scholar-Activist



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Abstract In this chapter, I recount the pathways I followed in developing a line of LGBTQ research and my identity as a queer researcher. I study higher education, specifically college students, and do so in ways that connect to my professional background as a university administrator. Here I trace the parallel pathways of becoming an LGBTQ activist and focusing my research on LGBTQ topics, in the process coming to terms with the ways that I was socialized to follow rules, not draw attention to myself, and not cause trouble. I describe how I came to understand myself as a scholar who works intentionally to create a more socially just version of higher education while also being in tension with the idea that higher education is itself inherently unjust.

I work in a fairly small field within education research: I study higher education, and in particular I study college student learning, development, and success, broadly defined. My research centers on students who are minoritized by their social identities, with a long-standing commitment to conducting studies of LGBTQ student experiences and identities. My commitment to this topic arises from my own experience as a White, lesbian, cisgender woman and my belief that colleges and universities can be places of transformation for students. After my own transformative experience as an undergraduate at a women's liberal arts college, I knew that I wanted to work in higher education and started down a path into student affairs administration. While pursuing a PhD in higher education, with the goal of becoming a vice president of student affairs, my head was turned in the direction of research on higher education and the possibility of a faculty career as an education researcher.

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My career in the academy has existed in the tension that forms where my urge to conform meets my urge to refute, resist, and reject injustice. This professional space is a continuation of the same tensions I experienced as a young person trying to work out how to be a respectable Connecticut girl while enacting a youthful feminist agenda. From kindergarten onward, I never cared to fit gender norms very well, and with my sporty demeanor I took charge of the classroom and playground, always with an eye to step in and speak out when someone—first me, then increasingly I saw others—was being treated differently, unfairly, unjustly. Yet, I still wanted to conform to social norms of the well-behaved suburban girlhood that dictated one should not draw attention to oneself or make trouble for others. I carried these dispositions forward into my work as a student affairs professional, my doctoral program, and now into my scholarship, teaching, and mentoring as a faculty member. I live within the tension or misalignment of enacting a social justice agenda from within an unjust system of higher education that is not equally accessible to all and that perpetuates racism and social stratification, even as it serves as engine of social mobility for some. I wonder and worry about how my scholarship and subject positions as a White, lesbian, cisgender woman who is a tenured professor at a public research university act to reinforce the inequities and injustices I seek to illuminate and eliminate. Can I simultaneously be a participant in and critic of the neoliberal academy? Is my scholarship *enough*?

I conduct a lot of research in the areas of queer theory and the experiences of LGBTQ people in higher education. In these projects, I am an insider and bear negative and positive consequences of insider positionality, such as familiarity with cultural norms (positive) and risk of taking for granted what I know about the topic (negative; see Chavez, 2008). I am keenly aware of how my ability to be an out-lesbian academic and conduct queer research was enabled by a generation of scholars before me (e.g., Bill Tierney, Toni McNaron, Tony D’Augelli) and is now elaborated, challenged, and supported by scholars of my generation and those after us (e.g., Cris Mayo, Juan Battle, Catherine Lugg, Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, s. j. Miller, Erich Pitcher, Ed Brockenbrough, Carrie Kortegast, and too many more to name).

Because LGBTQ people remain the object of substantially inequitable treatment, discrimination, and violence, my scholarship itself reinforces my desire to resist norms and work for justice. Early in my professional career as a student affairs professional at Brown University (from 1989 to 1999, critical years in queer civil rights and AIDS activism, as well as campus climate improvements), in graduate school (Boston College [BC], 1994–1998), and even early in my faculty career (beginning in 1999), queer research and work in what was at the time called “gay and lesbian issues” pushed boundaries. It entailed professional and personal risks and interacted in uncomfortable ways with my enculturated disposition to work within the system, my inclination to seek a seat at the table as a well-behaved White cis lesbian who was sure she would “lift as she climbed” and make space for other (well-behaved) queer folks. Yet daring as it seemed, it was still well within the boundaries of acceptability, as demonstrated by those institutions’ willingness to co-opt the work as evidence of *their* progressive commitments.

Because I was working half-time (at Brown) while going to my doctoral program (at BC), I had the opportunity to explore when and where in academe I might behave differently as a scholar-activist. Brown students were far more adventuresome in their activism than I was as an undergraduate. My Brown job, which was in the administration and therefore not protected by tenure, entailed inaugurating what is now a full-fledged LGBT campus resource center, and so I often found myself well on the “well-behaved” side, negotiating between activist students and an administration that was fairly liberal but wary of rapid change. At the same time, as a student at BC—a university that featured paradoxically liberal Jesuit values and conservative Catholic administrative viewpoints—I embraced whatever degree of academic freedom graduate students enjoy to push the university to be more inclusive of LGBTQ students. The unusual opportunity to contrast these two academic personae, often on the same day, opened up space for thinking about how I could perhaps take more risks in my research with LGBTQ topics and queer theory.

I also hit a turning point when being well behaved seemed to have hit a limit. After an article appeared in the Providence newspaper about my LGBTQ work at Brown, resulting in my being let go from a summer job at a Girl Scout camp, I testified four years in a row at the Rhode Island legislature to help convince them to pass non-discrimination bills. This experience was enough to get me over the misconception that being well behaved was going to be a satisfying way to have a career. Whether in the hearing room or rallying in the capitol rotunda with hundreds of queers and queer supporters, I was disrupting the status quo—perhaps not in the same way as street activists in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP)—but the shiny suburban gloss of respectability politics was wearing off. I faced a decision point, whether to continue my career in university administration—fulfilling work in which one can make a real difference in policy and programs that benefit LGBTQ students, but which does require a lot of “good behavior”—or turn to a faculty career. The decision to take up the latter was based in part on the opportunity to focus less on being a well-behaved bureaucrat and more on undertaking scholarship that could also make a real difference in supporting policy, programs, and curriculum to benefit LGBTQ students. That I could be considered at least somewhat edgy among education scholars in my choice of topic was an added appeal for a reforming follower of convention.

Twenty years later, LGBTQ research in higher education has reached a point at which it is no longer edgy or particularly risky to undertake, at least for someone like me who is a tenured professor in a good-sized and generally good-natured department. Out-lesbians and gay men—though not necessarily scholars of other minoritized sexual orientations and certainly not transgender scholars—are fairly commonplace in my field (higher education), and each generation brings forward more talented queer scholars. Observing their scholarship, it seems to me that the edginess, the riskiness, has shifted from simply conducting research on LGBTQ topics to pushing epistemological and methodological frames through more explicit use of queer theory and by posing challenges to established, “acceptable” LGBTQ research. When Darris Means (2017) “quares” his analysis of spirituality among Black gay and bisexual college students he not only risks seeming like a less-than-

well-behaved Black man, but he also risks being seen as an early career scholar who takes on established queer scholarship, holding it to account for its epistemological racism. Z Nicolazzo (2017) pushes back on the cisnormativity and cisheterosexism of social science research—even ostensibly queer scholarship—by arguing for a trans* epistemological stance in higher education research. And while they are unlikely to lose their jobs for doing queer research, it is indeed a risky decision to point out epistemological shortcomings of (or, depending on one’s perspective, simply differences with) the very scholars who are likely to have opportunities to promote (or derail) one’s career.

So if I have contributed in any way to the possibilities for these newer scholars to challenge and re-shape the field, where is the tension I feel now? It lies at the point where I have become if not well-behaved at least “established” as a scholar and in ways that make me wonder if I have perhaps fallen behind in my duty to use the privileges granted institutionally through tenure and systematically by my race, social class, ability, cisgender identity, and nationality. I feel the tension when I design my own studies and consider where to publish the results and think, “Is *that* journal a little...too...‘out there’?” and “What will establishment scholars—even those on the ideological left—think of my work if I do it in an unproven way?” These questions, of course, really mean, “What will they think of me? Am I too ‘out there’?” My press to do cutting-edge work that matters in improving the lives and life chances of LGBTQ people runs up against the press to stay in the lines, or mostly so.

Where those lines are depends a lot on one’s field and method, and I am not alone in trying to understand what it means to cross them. Jay Garvey (see Garvey et al., 2017; Garvey, Mobley, Summerville, & Moore, 2018), for example, is mapping the terrain of queer-inclusive critical quantitative research in higher education. In this vein, I am co-leader of the National Study of LGBTQ Student Success, a mixed-methods study that includes critical quantitative methods (see Nguyen, Brazelton, Renn, & Woodford, 2018; Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, & Woodford, 2017; Pitcher, Camacho, Renn, & Woodford, 2018; Woodford, Chonody, Kulick, Brennan, & Renn, 2015).

This project has also become a place in which I can deal with and work out the tension between being a “well-behaved” researcher (Look at those *p* values! Check out our qualitative trustworthiness!) and challenging neoliberal academic norms that are now as much an object of my resistance as homo-, bi-, and transphobia have been. For example, adopting the example of National Study co-lead investigator Michael Woodford, we developed an open stance to participation in the research team (e.g., to design protocols and collect data) and use of data by colleagues and students across a number of US states, Canadian provinces, academic programs, and institutional types. By queering the traditional practice of holding data close in a competitive market for publishing, we serve LGBTQ students better by letting more people use the data and press back against norms that would pit us all in competition. It is a way to use the privileges of my position (which comes with resources to conduct large-scale LGBTQ research) to benefit others. I am aware that this method of creating seats for others at the academic table is just that—creating seats, not changing out for something other than a table—but it feels at least somewhat better

than throwing elbows to keep others from coming to the table at all. Getting them to the table while we and others continue to chip away at the table itself is something, though not enough.

I end where I began: in the tension of trying to work for justice from within a fundamentally unjust structure. I was socialized to be comfortable working within the system, and, to a great extent, my academic career reflects this approach. I was also socialized to see injustice and to try to act upon and against it, and my ongoing research projects—both the topics and the ways that I undertake them—reflect to an increasing degree my will to do so. If an end goal of the field of education research is to create better lives and life chances, then I think it is best served by a steady supply of “well-behaved” scholars, scholar-activists, activist educators, students, and communities who demand more and better knowledge, and by people like me who walk in and across those lines.

Suggested Readings

Ladson-Billings, G., & Donnor, J. (2005). The moral activist role of critical race theory scholarship. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 279–301). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This chapter provides several examples of moral and ethical dilemmas imposed on minoritized scholars and calls the reader to re-consider the role of the academic and intellectual. The authors argue that a critical race theory perspective requires engagement in activist scholarship and offer a view of a “reconstructed university” (p. 295) that would reflect this approach.

Quaye, S. J., Shaw, M. D., & Hill, D. C. (2017). Blending scholar and activist identities: Establishing the need for scholar activism. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 10(4), 381. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000060>

In this article the authors provide and analyze an example of scholar activism, specifically the case of Black faculty taking up a call to address racism and injustice on their campus and beyond. The authors participated in an activist group on their campus and offer insight into the challenges and rewards scholar-activist work entails.

Rasmussen, M. L., Gowlett, C., & Connell, R. (2014). Interview with Raewyn Connell: The cultural politics of queer theory in education research. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 35(3), 335–346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2014.888839>

In this article, a dialogic interview of Connell by Rasmussen and Gowlett, Australian sociologist Connell traces how she has theorized gender from the 1970s women’s movement through present conceptions of queer theory. The interview provides an historical overview of the emergence of queer theory and demonstrates the complexity of defining it as a static term.

References

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- Pitcher, E. N., Camacho, T. P., Renn, K. A., & Woodford, M. R. (2018). Affirming policies, programs, and supportive services: Using an organizational perspective to understand LGBTQ+ college student success. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 11(2), 117–132. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000048>
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