

Chapter 44. Bisexual Research Frameworks: Navigating Insider-Outsider Identities of Power

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In my mid-30s, I experienced a shift in my sexuality, from straight to queer. While fulfilling in many ways, this unexpected change in my identity required much internal processing, ranging from exhausting to affirming. Because I was not yet an insider to any queer communities, I sought academic sources to help me navigate my new bisexual identity. However, even this process of reading affirming research-based texts was complex: bisexual scholars highlighted concerns of bisexual erasure, of not being fully accepted as queer within queer communities, of being accused of perpetuating normative gender binaries (Serano; Yoshino). During this same time, my professional identity also shifted. I was working part-time on my PhD in Cultural Studies while serving as a full-time WPA at my former institution, a role that never required me to engage in formal research. Once I graduated and accepted a tenure-track position, research, for the first time in my 15-year contingent-faculty career, became essential to my identity—a shift that was also affirming and exhausting. As a newly queer and newly tenure-track researcher, I discovered that these developing aspects of my identity shape each other in powerful ways.

In this chapter, I provide a critical approach for foregrounding bisexuality as a researcher. To clarify, my analysis relies not only on my positionality as a researcher who identifies as bisexual but also as a scholar who intentionally applies a framework of bisexuality—that is, a method for navigating insider and outsider identities—to uncover inherent forms of power within research. While I recognize that multiple affirming career trajectories exist, here I focus on shifting to the role of tenure-track faculty, as that has been my lived experience to date. Given the length of this brief chapter, I focus on three aspects central to research and my storied positionality: complicating insider-outsider perspectives, questioning power in research design, and disrupting binaries of rejection and acceptance for publication. In each section, I provide emerging researchers with approaches they can use to examine the complexities and tensions within their own intersecting identities, particularly as they shift from graduate student or contingent faculty to a new research-centered positionality.

A Bisexual Framework: Complicating Insider-Outsider Perspectives

When I first began my role as tenure-track WPA, I soon realized that one of my identity markers had involuntarily shifted, a shift that came with some loss: I could no longer use the pronoun “we” when speaking with either graduate students or lecturers. An early lesson for many graduate students of critical pedagogy is to question: “Who do we mean when we say ‘we’? Who is being privileged? Whose perspective ‘counts’? Whose is overlooked or dismissed?” As a long-term contingent faculty member, I was used to questioning certain power structures within academia, including hierarchies inherent in a tenured/contingent labor binary. The “we” I used at that point in my career signaled both a critique of power and immense pride in belonging to a group with deep expertise in teaching.

While I have a long history of being a contingent faculty member, I do not hold that same insider status now—and yet my role as WPA affords me with daily opportunities to collaborate with contingent faculty. I must constantly—and with care—navigate this insider-outsider positionality in ways that honor the fact that my previous embodiment as a lecturer cannot be equated with current lecturer or graduate student lived experiences. Yet I do not want to uncritically suggest that I am now on the “opposite” side of the power binary. Instead, I am occupying an alternative (and lonelier) space: one where I can draw on past lived experiences and use them to guide and critique my responses to current and, in many ways, unearned privilege.

As a researcher who is white and who teaches graduate courses influenced by both queer theory and critical race theory (the actual theories that promote critical analysis—not the misrepresentations of these theories), relying on shifting identities is crucial for examining systems of power that typically remain fixed or unquestioned. The change in my sexuality to an arguably less-privileged position requires that I simultaneously work to challenge whiteness and other forms of privilege within graduate research practices. Given the recent national conversations both decrying and affirming CRT and queer theory, including conversations within my own state of Utah, I recognize that challenging such binaries carry various forms of risk for different bodies and positionalities.

However, scholars like Stephanie L. Young, who identifies as both bisexual and biracial, provide us with additional models for how to engage with a bisexual research framework and navigate this simultaneous insider-outsider status. As Young writes, “To be a ‘bi- and bi-’ queer woman of color means continuously managing, communicating, and performing multifaceted identities” (p. 45). Young emphasizes that “queering is about transgression and subversion and a means for addressing the contradictions, tensions, and dissonances in our daily lives” (p. 46). For example, as my sexuality shifted, I became aware of a new tension, one that Young would agree required continuous negotiation: leaving my new sexuality

unmarked could potentially be used as a strategy to resist oppressive systems; however, leaving my whiteness unmarked communicates a very different meaning. Through intentional reflection, a bisexual framework allows me as both a newly queer person and a newly tenure-track person to continuously monitor contradictions and power imbalances within my multiple insider-outsider identities. With similar critical reflection, graduate students can also draw from their own shifting insider-outsider positionalities to help them navigate power in research.

Who Does Research? Questioning Power in Research Design

In seeking to foreground a bisexual framework, one that questions various forms of power and intersecting positionalities, my goals now as a researcher are to help both graduate students and contingent faculty navigate their own position with research—something I recommend those who are transitioning to a tenure-track position also prepare for. At our university, lecturers typically do not have a research expectation. This has created, in my view, a harmful separation between those who do research and those who “do not,” particularly within a writing program where teachers naturally engage in various forms of classroom and participatory action research. This research may often be informal and formative—but it is deeply valuable when communicating the expertise of a composition program to the university.

Because a binary has been created around who “does research” and who doesn’t, those new to the tenure-track role will have to be intentional about deconstructing this binary. For example, I designed several professional development sessions where we introduced action research in the classroom, identified areas where we as teachers already engage in meaningful research, and discussed how the sharing of our data, both formally and informally, could enhance the composition program. I invited IRB to present on classroom research, which also provided lecturers the opportunity to meet with IRB about their individual research interests—a conversation that does not always occur given power differences between contingent faculty and campus offices created to support research faculty.

Answering questions of who does research also requires navigating institutional barriers. At our university, only research faculty are allowed to submit an IRB; lecturers who want to be a PI must seek an exception through our Associate Dean of Research. Recently, the Associate Dean asked which composition teachers should qualify for this exception—and I said “all of them.” Our institution is fortunately quite supportive, and so all lecturers in our department are now fully qualified to lead an IRB study. This was an important advocacy move, yet my experience as a former contingent faculty member allowed me to understand when not all lecturers felt the same about this new status: while some wanted to pursue research (both formal and informal) and were excited about the support, others

interpreted suggestions of formal research as an implicit expectation for unpaid labor not required of their role—and they were naturally concerned. To address these concerns, we discussed how all forms of research, including simply learning about research, are helpful for our teaching; we also clarified that research need not be published in order for it to “count” as research. Graduate students whose career paths will include partnering with contingent faculty can engage in similar conversations and actions to disrupt binaries of who “counts” as a researcher.

Submitting Your Research for Publication: Disrupting Binaries of Rejection and Acceptance

Disrupting binaries in research takes many forms. When I first began sharing my new sexuality with close friends and family, I was (I realize now) giving them all the power to affirm—or reject—my identity. Fortunately, most times when I confided in someone, the response was positive. Once, however, the answer, from someone who also identified as queer, was not affirming. I have written elsewhere about how shattering that response was for me, but here I highlight how my *framing* of both types of responses, a dualism of either positive or negative, was equally problematic for my identity as a researcher.

Several years ago, I submitted a manuscript on bisexual literacies to a journal on queer literacies. This was one of my initial articles, and because of the content and venue, the stakes were personally and professionally very high. I do not remember the specific feedback I received from reviewers, other than I needed to make significant revisions, but I deeply remember my embodied physical reaction: a panic attack, one that lasted several weeks. Only in retrospect can I understand why my body reacted this way. My new identity as a researcher was deeply shaped by the additional expectation to *publish* my research—which often equates to publicly disclosing multiple aspects of my identity and offering that knowledge to anonymous peer reviewers and multiple unknown readers.

Just as I once gave others the power to affirm or reject my identity, I now realize I was treating any review *of my research* in a similar manner: as a way for outsiders to decree whether or not I belonged on this tenure-track path, to determine whether or not I “counted” as a researcher, to bestow upon me the honor of someone who had insider status in this academic identity. I also categorized their feedback as an equally unforgiving binary: enthusiastic acceptances with few requests for revision were “positive”; requests for major revision or outright rejections were “negative.” Notice how the need for revision and full rejection were equated in my mind, leaving no room for complexity—or learning. This harmful categorization not only conflated the range of nuanced and thoughtful (and, admittedly, sometimes not-so-thoughtful) responses from reviewers, but it also hindered my ability to develop my own nuanced identity as a researcher—one who could simultaneously learn from the experiences and perspectives of others *and* one who has embodied expertise of her own to share.

I have written elsewhere that a bisexual identity, rather than reinforcing a perceived gender binary, might actually mean that those who identify broadly as bisexual have deep expertise in *questioning and complicating* binaries (Buyserie, 2022). Therefore, instead of reinforcing a harmful binary of authentic researcher/broken researcher (which is unfortunately still my knee-jerk reaction), I am cognizant of my need to actively challenge this narrative each time I interact with editors and peer reviewers. Therefore, I have developed strategies to help me read feedback through a bisexual research framework—to actively question binaries, whether established by others or those I create for myself. Below are three questions I ask graduate researchers as they engage with the “final” step in the research process.

Are You in a Receptive Space to Receive Feedback?

Some people, from a variety of identities and backgrounds, can read peer reviewer criticism or requests for revision through a more “objective” frame of mind. I cannot. My background and my research content, which often reflects my identities, are too intertwined to ever be able to simply compartmentalize the emotional labor of reading an editor’s feedback. If you are like me, I recommend *not* reading an editor’s feedback the moment it arrives in your inbox. Instead, ask yourself: am I in both the mental and physical space needed to be receptive to their feedback? To prepare myself to read their feedback and not lose a sense of who I am? What can I do to create a productive space?

Can a Supportive Colleague Help You Interpret the Response?

I often initially interpret reviewer feedback as “we do not want or value your research.” To clarify, this is *not* what the feedback usually means (although one memorable reviewer could certainly have framed their feedback differently). Unfortunately, I once conveyed my (mis)interpretation of reviewer feedback to trusted colleagues solely to ask if I should withdraw my work from consideration. Withdrawing an article can be a legitimate strategy, so I do not want to suggest that a new researcher should never take this tactic, particularly when the reviews dismiss or belittle one’s lived experiences. However, new (and experienced) researchers can also be untrustworthy readers of reviewer feedback. Therefore, I recommend first asking a colleague to read and interpret the response so that the conversation can foreground the potential of your research.

Can You Frame the Editor as a Collaborator on Your Research?

In the instance above, I wrote to the editors to thank them for their feedback and to respectfully let them know that I would be withdrawing my article to pursue other venues. They responded by saying they were saddened I had withdrawn my research, and they hoped I would reconsider; they also encouraged us to meet

so that we could discuss my decision. During that conversation, these particular individuals helped me understand the true role of an editor: to serve as a research mentor, regardless of the result of the final product. From them, I learned my interpretation of the reviewers' feedback was not completely accurate—and even in the places where I interpreted their feedback correctly, that I did not have to default to the binary of acceptance/rejection.

Not every editorial team will be so generous, so I do *not* recommend withdrawing a submission in hopes that someone reaches out. I have been in other situations where the response from reviewers was very clearly a “rejection,” so I also do not share this story to simply tout one success (or pretend that rejections aren't real). Instead, I want to stress the importance of reaching out to editors for their guidance and collaboration: is the narrative that is running through my/your head an accurate narrative of the potential for the research? Can the editor please interpret what this feedback means? How does the editor suggest that I apply the reviewer feedback in a way that still allows me to communicate my message and honor my lived experiences? We teach these concepts to students every day in our writing classes, but we often need to learn these lessons anew when we begin our careers as researchers.

Conclusion: Framing Your Own Narrative

Graduate students are often encouraged to draw from their lived experiences, and we rightfully seek to foreground perspectives that are often erased, tokenized, or silenced. However, the shift in my sexuality and faculty status inspired me to ask additional questions about the role of our lived experiences, ones that I hope are transformative for graduate researchers: What does it mean for a new researcher to question their whole worldview in the process of their research? To recognize that their lived experiences are shifting and perhaps temporary? To be in a constant state of flux between insider and outsider status, between holding privilege and negotiating simultaneous marginalization?

These questions are challenging to answer—and perhaps even more challenging to ask. Yet my goal with this chapter has been to provide graduate researchers with tools to ask these types of questions and to apply their possible responses to their research journey. As a bisexual researcher whose sexuality *and* career shifted quite unexpectedly, I recognize the need for additional models to do this work. Rather than merely decry the lack of affirming bisexual frameworks, I hope my positionality story helps expand existing conversations on research practices—and that graduate researchers learn more about frameworks that can help us navigate and question our research practices.

References

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