

A New Paradigm in Social Work Research: It's Here, It's Queer, Get Used to It!

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Abstract: This article recounts the development of a qualitative study regarding the response of school social workers to gender-variant students. Specifically, it discusses the use of a Queer theoretical framework, still quite rare in social work research, and its implications for research design and methodology. In conclusion, it suggests the relevance of Queer theory in exploring issues related to flexible and non-normative forms of identity, and in describing “difference” as positive.

Keywords: Queer theory, qualitative research, orientational research, research methodology, identity.

Introduction

Decisions about how to proceed with a research idea, especially with respect to relatively uncharted territory, are typically idiosyncratic. This article explores the development of my dissertation study regarding the response of school social workers to the phenomenon of gender variance among students. In particular, it examines the rationale for the Queer theoretical framework that I utilized, and the implications of this choice for research design and methodology. To avoid having the reader's eyes glaze over at this point, let me recount one interesting anecdote that happened early on in the process. As I met with a number of faculty members to explore their willingness to serve on my dissertation committee, one of them (a professor who ended up not serving) made a vague suggestion for me to examine certain epistemological considerations in my relationship to the topic of gender variance and Queer theory. In essence, I believe, he wanted to make sure I was sufficiently “queer.” I don't know what caused his concern, but I now wish I would have responded something like this: “It's not only about sexuality or gender anymore, important as these topics are. More generally, Queer theory is about the acknowledgment and the appreciation and the power of the non-normative.”

This paper describes a process, the particular approach I took to in examining a topic that is just beginning to get the attention it warrants. My interest in the topic of gender variance among youth came from my experience as a school social worker, my knowledge of several gender-variant and transgender children and teens, and my attendance at the national Trans Health Conference in Philadelphia for a number of years. The term gender variance covers a broad spectrum of feelings and behaviors, ranging from gender nonconformity to cross-gender identification. As I was deciding on a dissertation topic, I knew that gender-variant students were

becoming more known and visible at all grade levels in schools across this country and, in fact, many other countries. My initial curiosity about the manifestation of gender variance in school settings concerned the divergent views about whether or not transgender students ought to “come out” or remain “stealth.” After reviewing the literature and upon further reflection, I developed a second strand of possible inquiry by considering the concept of “school climate” as an antecedent variable, contributing to a student's decision about whether or not to come out. Thus, it seemed to make sense to refocus my research on the perceptions, attitudes, and practices of school staff (social workers in particular) with regard to the issues of gender identity, gender socialization, gender expression, and gender variance. This shift in focus to the response by school staff was also consistent with the view that gender variance is not an issue of individual pathology, but is instead only a problem because of the way gender-variant people are marginalized.

With few exceptions, inquiry into the manifestation of gender variance among youth has only begun over the last decade (for example: Davidson, 2006; Renold, 2004, Russell et al., 2011; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012; Wyss, 2004). These studies were primarily conducted in school settings (but not by social work researchers) and were typically informed by concepts from Queer theory, particularly its critique of heteronormativity (suggesting ideals of femininity and masculinity based on the norm of heterosexual relationships: Butler, 1993) and the rigid gender binary (according to which gender identity exists only as “woman” or “man”). Queer theory emerged in academic circles in the early nineties, coinciding with the decline of identity politics, and influenced by postmodern feminist writings, like those of Judith Butler. Butler became one of the founders of Queer theory, proposing that gender and sexual identity are “performative” and flexible, with the potential to “resist” social norms (Butler, 1990, 1993). By contrast, earlier notions of “doing gender” (West &

Zimmerman, 1987) reinforced rather than questioned existing social categories.

A Queer theoretical framework

Due to the relative paucity of research about transgender students, it seemed to me that the topic needed to be explored by way of a qualitative study. While some qualitative approaches eschew a priori explanations, support for theoretical frameworks in qualitative research has been provided by Anfara and Mertz (2006), who described their use as the application of “lenses” in the exploration of phenomena. Similarly, Patton (2002) noted the role of theory in qualitative data analyses, and Charmaz (2006), in her description of constructivist grounded theory, acknowledged the functions of interpretation, context, and reflexivity. Given the existing literature on gender variance in schools, concepts from Queer theory (heteronormativity, gender binary, silencing of differences) seemed to offer an appropriate framework for my study, as well as guidance in terms of data collection and data analysis. More importantly, from my perspective it seemed impossible to discuss or even conceptualize gender variance without critical reference to the traditional gender binary and the related concept of heteronormativity.

Compared to educational research, there have been few qualitative social work studies that employed Queer theory as a conceptual framework. To illustrate this rather stark contrast: A recent data base search (Academic Search Complete, December 2014), using the key words “education” and “Queer theory”, resulted in 231 matches, while the key words “social work” and “Queer theory” produced only 22 matches. Of course, it is quite possible that there is just more research regarding educational settings than social work settings. However, Queer theory is also typically absent from textbooks on social work research. The general lack of attention to Queer theory may, at least in part, have been due to social work’s historical embrace of “the oppression model and the identity politics it generates” (McPhail, 2004, p. 5). However, the potential impact of a Queer perspective on social work practice has been noted at least by some (Burdge, 2007; McPhail, 2004; Peterson, 2013).

I would argue that Queer theory is the framework of choice for an investigation into gender variance. While there may be other frameworks that can accommodate such a study, they do not seem to have inspired a deluge of social work research. To the

contrary, a search in Academic Search Complete (again in December of 2014) provided these results, using the following key words: “social work” and “heteronormativity” yielded 29 matches, “social work” and “gender binary” 6, and “social work” and “gender variant” 13. In the sentence above I purposely used the phrase “inspired research”, because I believe that, in part, this is the role of theory. Thus, the lack of Queer-inspired social work research and the paucity of studies into such topics as heteronormativity and gender variance may not be coincidental.

In terms of my study, Queer theory provided – first of all – the concepts of interest and the language to talk about them, as was reflected in the research question:

How does the heteronormative environment of public education affect the perceptions, attitudes, and self-reported practices of a sample of school social workers in the Northeastern United States with respect to gender variance?” Sub-question: “How are the perceptions, attitudes and practices of the social workers in this sample mediated by professional and personal experiences?”

Clearly, the research question alone would not have carried the same meaning without the term “heteronormative”, since its use implied a lack of accommodation of gender-variant persons by the environment, rather than pathology on the part of the individual. Additionally, I would suggest that the topic of my study was queer, or more accurately, was queered by me. Writers in the field of queer studies have noted its “... intellectual and political relevance to a wide field of social critique...”, describing “... queer as a political metaphor without fixed referent” (Eng et al., 2005, p.1). Accordingly, I argue for the applicability of Queer theory to social work research, particularly as a critical lens through which to view issues of identity. For me, Queer theory helped me envision my dissertation study, providing at least the broad outlines, as well as the parameters of my literature review. While I had quite a bit of knowledge about gender variance going into the project, Queer theory provided a new intellectual context. Throughout, it challenged me, fueled and sustained my interest and curiosity and self-reflection. How great is that, considering how many doctoral candidates burn out on their dissertation study!

From Queer framework to research design

As mentioned, I believe that Queer theory is about the acknowledgment and the appreciation and the power of the non-normative. If so, how did that assertion

inform my research design? Given the stated research question and the theoretical framework, I explored various study designs and approaches. Because of my focus on the response from school personnel, I first considered a phenomenological study, inquiring about the “lived experience” of school social workers in terms of heteronormativity, gender socialization, and gender variance in public education. However, as I started to develop an interview protocol, it became obvious that I was interested not only in experiences, but also in perceptions and attitudes, perceived knowledge and skills, ethics and personal feelings. While seemingly broad-ranging, my draft questions were focused on a narrow slice of professional practice and not open-ended enough to suggest a purely phenomenological interview.

Subsequently, I explored the idea of a case study approach, centered around a social worker dealing with a clearly identified issue of gender variance in a school setting. However, given the sensitive nature of the research topic, issues of access and confidentiality loomed large, issues which also have been noted in terms of school-based studies regarding sexual orientation (Donelson & Rogers, 2004). Moreover, due to the relative intrusiveness of a case study approach, I was concerned about the ethics of letting others deal with the potential fall-out of my research after data collection had been completed. I was about six months into the project, still enthusiastic, but also frustrated as logistical and ethical problems conspired and caused an inability to operationalize my study.

Then I hit gold! After further reading and consultation, Patton’s description of “orientational” research (Patton, 2002, pp. 129-131) seemed to fit the purpose and theoretical framework of my study. Commenting on the role of critical theory in this kind of research, Patton notes:

Within any of these theoretical or ideological orientations one can undertake qualitative inquiry, but the focus of inquiry is determined by the framework within which one is operating and findings are interpreted and given meaning from the perspective of that preordinate theory (p. 131).

Given my intended focus on a fairly circumscribed practice domain and my interest in finding data with clear social work implications, the orientational approach seemed compatible with the need for feasibility and relevance in qualitative research (see

Yardley, 2000). Also, with regard to transparency of my overall design, I wanted to be clear about my personal (queer) take on the research topic. According to Patton (2002), “Reflexivity has entered the qualitative lexicon as a way of emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one’s perspective” (p. 64). Consequently, I wrote an introductory chapter, explaining my identification with “queer” in terms of its non-binary conceptualization of gender and my hopes for alliance building consistent with queer politics (see Taormino, 2003; Schlichter, 2004). At this point I felt on solid ground, confident that I would successfully complete the dissertation and learn something meaningful about the topic of interest.

Queering the methods?

The sample that I recruited for the study was purposive, consisting of fourteen school social workers from the Northeastern United States, employed in public elementary and secondary schools. The data for the study were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews. The interview questions asked about experiences and perceptions of gender socialization and gender variance in the school setting. Based on a secondary theoretical framework provided by multi-cultural practice theory (Fowers & Davidov, 2006), other questions asked about the social workers’ personal attitudes toward gender variance and their actual or hypothetical response to gender-variant students. The interview data were analyzed according to a two-tiered approach, first applied in British health psychology. This model of “interpretative phenomenological analysis” (IPA) examines the personal accounts of study participants, while accommodating prior theoretical conceptions which the researcher uses to interpret these accounts (Smith, 1996).

Given the methods of sampling, data collection, and data analysis described above, what - one may ask - makes this a Queer study? Considering Queer theory’s emphasis on the constant challenging of normative ideology, how do the various components of my study form a cohesive methodology that reflects resistance to the normative? For the sake of internal consistency, is it necessary to queer the research methods of a study framed and informed by Queer theory (see Browne & Nash, 2010)? If so, what would such research methodology look like? It seems that this question cannot be answered definitively. After all, queering research methods can never result in a prescription of what such methods must be. Put differently: “...there can be no one queer research methodology, but many

methodologies.” (Warner, 2004, p. 334; Italics in original).

One principle I did try to honor in my study, consistent with Queer-informed research if not unique to it, concerned an effort to give voice to the research participants. Thus, I asked them to describe aspects of their identity that they considered important in terms of their relationships and interactions with other people, and to their work. This was my attempt to elicit an “authentic profile” without imposing pre-conceived parameters, congruent with Queer theory’s opposition to fixed identity categories. The resulting information was included in the study’s final report as an appendix titled “The social workers in their own words.” In addition, I reported my findings by presenting lengthy verbatim quotes from the interviews, resisting a temptation to overanalyze the data. The method of interpretative phenomenological analysis that I employed seemed appropriate to such a cautious approach, since it is “strongly idiographic” (Smith, 2004, p. 41) and based on a “study of persons-in-context” (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton, 2006, p. 105). Consequently, interpretation of the data was qualified by the unique features of individual cases and by contextual considerations.

Afterthoughts

Queer theory, with its historical ties to feminism, its linkages with activists among sexual and gender minorities, and its role in an expanding universe of queer studies, is a critical theory. Relative to the field of social work research, it allows one to reconceptualize identity in the context of power and resistance to power. This endeavor is inherently political and involves a call to action. As such, it is congruent with the historical mission of social work and with emerging social movements. Thus, Queer theory is about gender variance, but it also speaks to the Occupy movement, which is notably different from social movements of the past in terms of its lack of identity politics (we don’t need to judge others’ queerness, for example). Queer theory is about a new paradigm. Get used to it!

On a more personal note: I completed my dissertation in two years, while working full time. This was important to me, as I wanted to make a contribution to the discussion about a very timely topic. Along the way, there were the typical challenges with respect to participant recruitment, and the process of interview transcription was rather tedious. However, I am happy to report that my use

of the ideological perspective of Queer theory did not run afoul of doctoral dissertation requirements. In fact, the dissertation earned an award of distinction. In terms of the study’s findings, they helped elucidate how the discourse about gender variance is silenced in schools and uncovered the confusion about gender and sexual identity among well-intentioned school social workers. This was documented in two articles that were accepted for publication within ten months of successfully defending the dissertation (de Jong, 2014, 2015).

These observations are made here only to suggest that there is indeed a place for Queer theory in social work research (and, by extension, in social work practice). The phenomenon of gender variance is important to social work because of the human rights issues involved. Moreover, thinking about it in the context of Queer theory leads us to question much of what we have taken for granted about fixed forms of social categorization based on assigned identity. As suggested by Davidson (2006), the application of Queer theory helps in our analysis, by foregrounding “difference” as positive rather than deviant. I believe that this aspect of Queer theory is particularly relevant to future social work research regarding alternative/intersectional forms of identity and emerging patterns of social and political organization.

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