My Cisgender Comeuppance

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Abstract: The author, a cisgender (i.e., not transgender) white, gay male, describes his experience as a curriculum consultant on an HIV-prevention intervention for young transgender women. In spite of being well-read on the subject of the perils of nonaffiliated researchers doing sensitive research within oppressed populations, he unwittingly commits a gaffe that is illustrative of those very perils.

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In a 2001 Matthew Diffee cartoon in *The New Yorker*, two homicide detectives stand looking down at a corpse. “From the violent nature of the multiple stab wounds,” one says, “I’d say the victim was probably a consultant.” At the time I saw this cartoon, I was working as a clinical consultant for a number of child and adolescent mental health agencies in a large Midwestern city. Although I am not aware of having stirred up homicidal fantasies among those for whom I consulted, I do recall saying to friends, “You know what consulting is, right? It’s when people pay you lots of money and then *don’t* do what you recommend”–which is to say that the work was not always satisfying.

So I was intrigued when I received a call about a different kind of consulting assignment. The Director of Research at a large LGBT Health Center had been given my name by a professor of Psychology under whom I had trained as part of a fellowship in HIV Prevention Research. As part of the fellowship, I had collaborated on the creation and writing of manualized curricula for federally-funded HIV prevention studies with youth. The director had received a small feasibility grant from a federal agency to create and test an HIV-prevention intervention for young transgender women. Transgender women are considered a high-risk population for HIV infection: a 2008 meta-analysis by Herbst and colleagues from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated an HIV prevalence rate of 27.7% (Herbst et al., 2008). A study focusing on young transgender women suggested similarly high infection rates (Garofalo, Osmer, Sullivan, Doll, & Harper, 2006).

During my interview, the director, who was the Principal Investigator (PI) on the grant, explained that the project’s original consultant, a white cisgender heterosexual women, had been let go because the two curriculum writers–a young white lesbian and a young white trans woman whom I will call Elizabeth–felt that they couldn’t work with her. Truth be told, he explained, “They don’t want another consultant; they think they can do it themselves.” In fact, he reported, I might encounter a little hostility because I am a white, cisgender male.

This sounded exactly like the kind of challenge I relish. Some of the work I had found most gratifying in the past had been with teams of unwelcoming, dispirited, and even antagonistic human service workers. I’ve never presented myself as an expert (though some of the people who hired me did); it’s the workers who are the experts. My goal has always been to help them come up with solutions to seemingly intractable problems.

When the two young women were brought into the office, I laid down my weapons: “I have no interest in taking over this project,” I told them. I’d written curriculum for two different federally-funded manualized HIV-prevention interventions for youth, but I assured them that it would be them “in the driver’s seat.” I’m sure that being gay gave me a little bit of credibility (at least I bested the previous consultant in that regard), but my experience with the transgender community was limited, and I couldn’t pretend it wasn’t. Something must have clicked, because I was hired immediately.

Shortly thereafter the young lesbian left the project to go to graduate school. An additional but similarly inexperienced curriculum writer, a young African-American transgender woman I will call April, was hired as her replacement. We quickly dove into the work, since we were on a strict timeline. Our charge was to create a six-session HIV-prevention intervention manual tailored to young transgender women. We decided straightaway to make the sessions experiential rather than didactic. I met regularly with the writers to brainstorm ideas, divide up the work

(they did the majority of the writing), and schedule deadlines. We created games and role plays, used lots of humor and creativity, and incorporated media and audiovisual materials. I proofread the scripts and provided feedback, but what I mostly did was learn a lot about transgender culture and how to work with the population. I am ashamed to admit how little I had heretofore known about trans folks, their challenges and resiliencies. In the past I had even questioned the appropriateness of the "T" in LGBT. After all, the "L," the "G," and the "B" are about sexual orientation while the "T" is about gender identity: shouldn't these be two *different* movements? With "Ellen" and "Will and Grace" America had finally begun to accept gay people; acceptance for transgender people seemed eons away. Now I was working elbow-to-elbow with two members of the community, and the work was exhilarating.

Throughout the project I remained more than aware of my privileged status as a white male, as cisgender, and–in a relative sense–as gay. At one of our meetings I recall telling Elizabeth and April that I felt conflicted about being a consultant on a project focused on a community of which I was not a member. Both women told me that they considered me an ally–that I had essentially proven my mettle and good faith. For better or worse, we all realized that the research community–those who give and get the grants and those who publish academic journals–do not deem people credible unless they have advanced degrees and academic affiliations. But trans individuals are not always welcomed in educational settings, including postsecondary education: more than a third report abuse and harassment by students, instructors and staff (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, & Keisling, 2011). In spite of their mistreatment, they persevere: trans people are nearly twice as likely as the general population to have earned a four-year college degree (Catalano and Shlasko, 2013)–a tribute to their determination. But until they gain access to academic posts and research funding streams, the grants will continue to go to members outside of their communities, and the publications will be written by the cisgender elite.

When we submitted the draft of the completed manual to the PI, the feedback was excellent, and the writers and I felt extremely proud of what we had crafted. The next phase of the project was piloting the curriculum; Elizabeth and April would act as the co-facilitators of the intervention. I had grown so close to them and so attached to the project that I decided to continue working with the team throughout the pilot and intervention phases, providing weekly clinical supervision to them as well as guidance and support regarding the running of groups.

The pilot was a success. The six 90-minute sessions, held at a drop-in center that catered to homeless and street youth, were spread over three weeks with two evening sessions per week. In spite of the fact that many of the participants were homeless or in unstable housing, retention was remarkable; the participants were really responding to the material. There was some minor tweaking of the curriculum based upon feedback from both the participants in a post-pilot focus group and from the facilitators, but we were able to make revisions in fairly short order. The intervention phase of the study began, and by the time the last cohort completed the intervention the proposed N of 50 had been attained.

By this time I had defended my doctoral dissertation and started my first job as a tenure-track assistant professor. The study's PI asked me to begin a manuscript that would focus on the process of developing the intervention's curriculum, which was unique and worthy of dissemination. I was of the mind that the manuscript should be written by the curriculum writers, who had, after all, written the bulk of the material and were members of the transgender community. But the PI felt that neither had the expertise to write a scholarly manuscript fit for a peer-reviewed journal: Elizabeth had her Bachelor's degree and April was currently pursuing one at a local university. The truth was that, although I had written plenty of long academic papers in my Ph.D. program, I too did not yet have a single publication under my belt. I could certainly collaborate with my colleagues, the PI told me, but I should be the first author.

When I approached the two women about joining forces to work on a manuscript (carefully leaving out what the PI had said about their inexperience), they were agreeable. But they also expressed frustration and resentment about what they felt was a general lack of confidence in them on the part of the PI (as it turned out, they were well aware of what I was trying to avoid sharing with them). The marginalization and

lack of respect they felt was all too commonplace: this was familiar terrain for members of the transgender community. I tried to put a positive spin on the situation: we would make it a collaborative effort and we'd all end up as published authors in a scholarly journal.

However, I definitely felt conflicted about moving ahead. I avoided getting started on the process. I think Elizabeth and April were similarly ambivalent. The few half-hearted attempts I made to convene meetings went nowhere: all three of us had moved on to other projects, and whether it was logistics or avoidance or a combination of the two, we never managed to find a time to get together. Weeks stretched into months. Every now and again I would get an email from the PI saying "Where are we on the curriculum development manuscript?" and I would have to send a sheepish but upbeat reply: "Scheduling is a nightmare! But we're committed to the task. It'll happen!"

At the same time I was settling into my new role in academia, with its mandate to "publish or perish." The university where I was employed was not a Research One setting, but if I wanted to be successful and be awarded tenure and promotion, I needed to get some articles published. I felt stuck and uneasy. After yet another inquiring email from the PI, I locked myself in my house one weekend and wrote the paper. I listed myself as first author, with Elizabeth and April directly below me on the title page. I felt a mixture of accomplishment, relief, and even a little bit of pride. Eager to share my excitement, I immediately emailed a copy to Elizabeth and April.

A couple of days passed without a response, and I knew something was wrong. When I opened the reply from Elizabeth that appeared in my mailbox a few days later, my heart dropped. She was hurt and angry that I had unilaterally gone ahead and written a manuscript. To have included the names of her and my other "co-author" was doubly insulting. In fact, my entire effort was emblematic of how non-trans community members dominate and muzzle trans peoples' voices and agency. The manuscript was replete with bias and with assertions–such as the one extolling the virtues of community-based participatory research–she found scathingly ironic.

I felt devastated. How could I have been so stupid? I was entirely aware of the resentment and resistance that festered within the trans community after decades of "having [trans] identities and realities defined by nontrans researchers/gatekeepers" (Serano, 2008, p. 491). Elizabeth's feedback made total sense, so why hadn't it occurred to me beforehand? I had actually been under the impression that I was doing everyone a favor by pounding out a draft; now at least we had a document to fine-tune instead of having to parcel up the writing and start from scratch. I was overwhelmed with shame and self-recrimination. Writing about practice guidelines for those working with the trans community, Richards, Barker, Lenihan and Iantaffi (2014) stress that "it is important that writers and researchers, including graduate students undertaking dissertation projects, reflexively consider their agendas before embarking on their work," (p. 255). An ugly question hung over my head: had I put publishing and careerism ahead of deeply valued relationships? Just thinking about it made my stomach roil.

A second email arrived from April–the tone less overtly angry but just as affronted. I sent both women an email asking if we could meet to talk about what happened. They were both stinging from the incident and were not especially interested in discussing it, but with a little more persuasion they agreed to meet me at a local coffee shop.

The meeting was painful and tense. I apologized repeatedly, haltingly trying to explain how I had come to do what I had done. But my rationalizations sounded hollow and inadequate. The women had brought along a copy of the manuscript and began pointing out myriad offending passages. In addition to the factitious title page, even the very first sentence of the manuscript was a blunder (I had referred to transgender women as being "born anatomically male" instead of "assigned the male gender at birth").

Much of the rest of the paper seemed hypocritical: "Hill (2005) provides a number of caveats for non-trans researchers," I had written, "urging them to approach their studies 'with a sense of humility and recognition that trans people are experts on their lives' (p. 103)." In the same article I had referenced, Hill had cautioned cisgender researchers to "avoid '747 Research,' where they fly in, fly out, publish, and get tenure, never to return" (p.103). This sentence now struck me as blistering.

For me, the goal of the meeting had been to repair my relationships with Elizabeth and April. I told them that our friendship meant far more to me than a publication; for that reason, I would shelve the manuscript. I hoped that I could earn their trust back, but I left feeling dejected and hopeless. The next time I was at the research site I talked to the PI's research assistant (I was too mortified to speak to the PI directly) and told her what had transpired: I would no longer be working on a manuscript. My latest project–with the same PI–was assisting on an HIV-prevention intervention manual aimed at young men who have sex with men (YMSM). The work was pretty time-consuming and I more or less fell out of touch with Elizabeth and April.

A couple of years later I left my job at the university to work in Central America. Upon my return to the U.S., I relocated to the southeast and began a new faculty job. My partner on the YMSM project, a cisgender male community psychologist, contacted me to discuss collaborating on a curriculum development manuscript (*déjà vu*!) related to that project. As we embarked upon the literature review, we dug around for papers about developing ground-up HIV prevention interventions and found next to nothing. I even put my graduate assistant on the case–to no avail. When he lamented to the PI's research assistant about the dearth of curriculum development papers, she encouraged him to ask me about the manuscript I had shelved years before. To my surprise, I managed to actually locate the file and sent it to him.

After reading the manuscript, he urged me to re-open a dialogue with Elizabeth and April about revisiting and reworking the paper. His contention that it was imperative to disseminate scholarship about our unique curriculum development process echoed that of Cosgrove and McHugh (2000): "research that is not accessible, that is not distributed to the communities involved or that is not even published has little chance of affecting women's lives" (p. 832). The PI had been apparently asking about the abandoned manuscript as well, since the outcome of the trans intervention feasibility study had proven so successful that a new grant had been written and funded, and a two-city randomized control trial was currently underway.

I found Elizabeth's email address among my contacts and reached out. While acknowledging that our past experience with the manuscript had been painful, I shared that in our research for the YMSM paper, my colleague (whom both she and April knew) and I had realized that there is a gap in the literature about developing grassroots HIV prevention intervention curricula. Might it be possible to resuscitate the manuscript "in a fashion that would feel more collaborative and less insensitive?" (Cotten, personal communication, April 18, 2013):

> The development of [the intervention for young transgender women] was a major accomplishment, and one that deserves to be accessible to future scholars–especially since the intervention has continued. A paper could be an important contribution to a gap in the professional literature …Think about it. And then let me know.

More than two weeks passed. Then came a reply. To my surprise, Elizabeth had been under the impression–for years now–that the PI and I had moved forward with the manuscript and that it had already been published. She had counted it among a host of betrayals she and April–as well as other trans colleagues and clients–had endured at the hands of the LGBT Health Center where the study had originated. She avowed that–in spite of everything–the intervention manual represented one of the things in her life that she was proudest to have been a part of. Moreover, she agreed that a paper on the curriculum development really deserved to be represented in the literature. But she had spoken to April, who had said she was not interested in participating in a revision. And she had concerns that the manuscript would consequently be written by the two white members (she and I) of the team, leaving out the very important voice of the African-American team member. She ended, however, by saying she would be open to a conversation via Skype or phone.

A short time later I was contacted by April, who had apparently reconsidered and decided she was willing to join the dialogue after all. By then it was the end of a semester and I was neck-deep in grading and prepping for classes for the subsequent semester, so I told them I would be in touch. When I emailed a few weeks later, I didn't get a reply.

Two months passed and I found myself back in a familiar position: the PI was asking me about the

status of the manuscript. I jotted out another email to Elizabeth and April, which I titled “Reaching Out” (Cotten, personal communication, August 7, 2013):

> “I wanted to check in and see where you stand regarding getting this … article revised and out for publication … I fear if we wait much longer it could be rejected by journals as being ‘too old.’”

I would soon be leaving town to bring some of my students to Central America for two weeks, but I heard back affirmatively from both Elizabeth and April. Upon my return I sent an email proposing a conference call at the end of the week. I never got a reply.

What to do? Had I tried hard enough to forge a new and improved collaboration? Was I beating a dead horse? Had I said or done something to offend the two women again? If I moved ahead on the manuscript without Elizabeth and April was I once again flexing my cisgender privilege? Could I ethically defend pursuing publication based on the potential benefits that would accrue from the contribution to the professional literature?

Rescue came in the form of an email from an LBGT listserv I am a part of. It was an announcement for a one-day conference on LGBT research methodology. The organizers were requesting proposals for presentations, including the topic of ethical issues. I submitted a proposal based on my experience as a cisgender researcher on a transgender study. It was a case study/cautionary tale, but I also planned to pose the question regarding whether to move ahead on the manuscript. Perhaps members of the LGBT research community could give me some guidance concerning what my next step should be.

The presentation was accepted. I am normally not nervous about public speaking, but on the day of the conference I was full of anxiety. My biggest fear was that the audience would judge or condemn me. That didn’t happen. On the contrary, the attendees–cisgender and transgender–were compassionate and empathic. One person told me to stop beating myself up. “I can’t help it,” I replied, “I’m a recovering Catholic: guilt and shame are in my DNA.” The consensus was that I had done my due diligence and that I should move forward with revising the manuscript and submitting it for publication. The emotional relief, however mild, was immediate.

Though significantly reduced, my conflicting feelings about the article–yes, it has now been published, with the PI as my co-author–will probably never go away. In my doctoral program I had studied the perils of nonaffiliated group members conducting research with disenfranchised populations; heck, I’d even quoted some of the caveats in my manuscript. But it was not until I committed some real and consequential missteps–in vivo–that the dynamics of privilege and oppression in research really sunk in: my cisgender comeuppance.

Lessons Learned?

“Claiming the authority to speak for another person,” write Richards, Barker, Lenihan, & Iantaffi (2014), “does violence to them in limiting their capacity to speak for themselves and to tell their own stories” (p. 252). Even queer academics, they caution, are not immune to exercising privilege when it comes to writing and research about trans people. Silencing my colleagues by stealing their voices was an individual act, but it was also illustrative of the kind of structural-level silencing “that [operates] in an invisible microcosm of power, privilege, and historical inequities” (Shpungin, Allen, Loomis, & DelloStritto, 2011, p.59).

Jacobs (2010) experienced similar challenges as a researcher for a community-based participatory action research project with low-income older adults in Rotterdam. “The existing power relations in society and institutional arrangements,” she warns, “will inevitably infiltrate a project” (p. 370). She and her well-intentioned colleagues added a participatory action research approach to a research proposal–despite having no experience in the method–in hopes that it would stand out from the crowd of grant applicants and thereby get funded. They got their wish, and also an object lesson in the pitfalls “practitioners face implementing a bottom-up approach in a context which is primarily top-down and bureaucratically organized” (p. 370). Jacobs and her colleagues struggled with sharing power with their lay colleagues, especially given the pressure to meet funder deadlines and generate publishable data. Community participation waxed and waned throughout the project’s phases, and resentment bubbled to the

surface; the researchers, for their part, felt conflicted and guilty. How then, asks Jacobs, do community-based participatory researchers reconcile the competing goals of community participation/empowerment, academic quality, and the practical usefulness of the project?

> At the start of the project, before the community was involved, there seemed to be consensus about the project aims and the importance of community participation to realize them. However, in the course of the project it turned out that participation did not mean the same for everyone and also that different conceptions of participation could be present within one person. (Jacobs, 2010, p. 377).

"It is one thing to be aware of privilege and still quite another to proactively work toward minimizing its deleterious effects," write Travers et al. (2013, p. 417). Professional codes of ethics may offer guidance, though in this case, as Martin and Meezan (2003) point out, "of the numerous elaborations, explanations, and applications of ethical standards in social work and psychological research .... [n]one examine the application of ethical standards to research involving transgender populations" (p. 182). The National Association of Social Workers code of ethics standard 5.02(b) states that "Social workers should promote and facilitate evaluation and research to contribute to the development of knowledge." Helpful, though general. The more pertinent standard in my case would be in section 4.08(a), which states that social workers should "honestly acknowledge the work of and the contributions made by others," and take "responsibility and credit . . . only for work they have actually performed and to which they have contributed."

The moral of the story? Participatory research is a lot more difficult–and fraught–than meets the eye. Hazards abound. It is incumbent upon researchers to be vigilant about privilege, power differentials and competing pressures and loyalties (institutional and academic, in particular). Cultivating and maintaining a climate of continuous dialogue and introspection is crucial, though very tricky indeed, since all of this research does not take place in a vacuum. Rather, it is embedded in the multiple systems that conspire to undermine and silence those whose voices most need to be heard.

I have not engaged in community-based participatory research since "my cisgender comeuppance," which is a shame, I suppose. I attribute this to the fact that I relocated from a populous metropolis with a vibrant LGBT community to a small municipality without a critical mass of LGBT subjects. But perhaps I'm fooling myself–rationalizing my cowed avoidance of the complexities and exertion of such a methodology. What might happen if researchers begin to avoid this approach because of the difficulty of executing it satisfactorily? We will all lose.

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