

ESCAPE ARTIST, FRAUD, OR NEGOTIATOR? MY SEARCH FOR THE AUTHENTIC ME

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Despite the liberal nature of many institutions of higher education, the decision to identify as a sexual minority in academia can be a difficult one. This personal account explores the author's inside-out narrative written during his first year of teaching in a Bachelors of Social Work program in a rural area of a Midwestern state. Through a gradual process of coming out, first to his colleagues and then to his classes, the author explores the risks and assets inherent in coalescing his personal and professional selves, an endeavor that ultimately leads to authenticity.

Introduction

My reflection on the inside-out narrative, the intersection of my personal and professional selves, begins with the personal. I am a 44-year-old white male in a domestic partnership of nearly eight years. A year ago my partner and I took on the daunting and incredibly rewarding task of fostering and then adopting two ten-year-old boys. Despite any tendency to want to retreat back into the closet, I could no longer do so easily. After all, there were teachers, family members, neighbors, and co-workers who had to contend with the nature and reality of our nontraditional family.

Now the professional. Two years ago I transitioned from a career in social services to one in higher education. Hired as an assistant professor in a department of social work on a union campus, I relished in the liberating rush of job security and satisfaction; I was finally doing what I was destined to do. My previous job as an administrator and counselor for a substance abuse treatment center was fraught with identity partializing. I was "out" to my bosses and supervisees, but not to my clients. "It would get in the way of my work if I presented as gay," I justified. "It's not about me; it's about them."

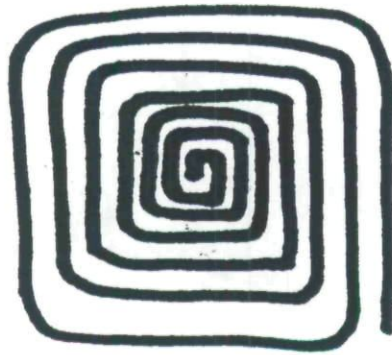
The move to higher education was permission granted to "make it about me," not in a way that superseded the needs of my students, but in a way that allowed me to be

once and for all the authentic me. As a card-carrying member of the National Association of Social Workers and a regional representative of the statewide office of this agency, not only did I have license to practice tolerance and acceptance of diversity, I had an obligation to do so. The NASW Code of Ethics (2000) states: "Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, and mental or physical disability" (p. 9). If I couldn't be authentic in higher education, where could I be?

With these charges, both professional and personal, how is it that I still hesitate to be out to my students, colleagues, and supervisors? Is it internalized homophobia rearing its ugly head as it had so many times earlier in my life? Is it the prospect of being hired in a part of my state that had the reputation of being conservative? Is it the relative newness of the situation, simply not knowing the rules of the game as played by those with whom I worked?

As I reflect on the answers to these questions, I am aware, as others (Sedgwick, 1990, for example) have noted, that coming out is a constantly evolving, never-ending process. With each new experience, the gay/lesbian individual reencounters the trauma of earlier experiences of coming out. The

intersection of our personal and professional lives is not immune to such retraumatization. In fact, it is at this juncture that vulnerabilities may emerge the most. I account for this phenomenon in my assumption of three personas, all of which hopefully lead to the “authentic me:” the escape artist, the fraud, and the negotiator.



The Escape Artist

Gays and lesbians tend to define themselves in and by their work. Work identity is that safe equalizer that we use to prove ourselves to dominant culture. To bring the gay/lesbian identity into that safe haven is to risk that very identity.

As I reflect on my past work history, I am painfully aware of my tendency to hide in my work, to use it as an escape tactic from the risk of being out. As a high school educator and social worker in the field, I was conditioned to do so: “Parents wouldn’t understand,” I rationalized. I reasoned further that my remaining in the closet was in the best interest of my students/clients. Why make them the innocent pawns of a heterosexist, homophobic society I could not control?

I recognize now that while it is always wise to consider the ramifications of our actions and choices on our clients/students, it is easy to use them as scapegoats for complacency. What are the consequences of such a decision? One onerous result may be what Figley (1995) dubbed, in another context, compassion fatigue. Also called secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue refers to the cost of caring for others in emotional pain. The effects on the practitioner—which may

include decreased self-esteem, anxiety, or sleep disturbance; increased interpersonal conflict; and a pervasive sense of hopelessness—are potentially damaging both professionally and personally.

To my knowledge there is no literature that connects the experiences of GLBT professionals in the workplace to compassion fatigue. But it is a logical, if not evocative, link for me to make. As a gay practitioner-professor, I am more prone to give than to receive. The therapeutic (or student-professor) alliance becomes one sided: I play a game whereby I take on the concerns of my clients/students as a way to avoid my own issues; I am likewise not willing to share with colleagues and supervisors how my clients’/students’ journeys intersect with my own. Depriving myself of a voice that articulates this connection is a slippery pathway to compassion fatigue—and justification for my being a fraud.

The Fraud

Social work as a profession is an introspective endeavor. We teach our students to get in touch with their “angels and demons” before they can help their clients do the same. In some respects, the same is required of social work educators. Perhaps the act of coming out is more difficult when 35 staring undergraduates are involved. There is something both empowering and disempowering about coming out en masse. It turns the personal into the political, the intimate into the public.

My partner, also an educator in special education, begins each of his classes with an invitation: “Ask me anything you want to know about me,” he says. Interestingly, no student thus far has asked him about his sexual orientation. This void speaks to the ever-present fear that the issue brings up in the classroom. Can we mention the “g” or “l” word—the elephant in the classroom?

Two studies conducted in the late 1990s indicate that students are becoming more tolerant of gay and lesbian teachers who come out in the academy. Liddle (1997) compared the teacher evaluations from sections of a course in which she had revealed herself to be lesbian with evaluations from sections in

which she had not. Contrary to her hypothesis, there was no evidence of sexual orientation bias across the two groups. Waldo and Kemp (1997) tested the premise that more interpersonal contact with gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons is related to less prejudiced attitudes. Students of the gay male instructor in the study showed the sharpest decline in prejudiced attitudes.

In their dialogue "Difficult Dilemmas: The Meaning of Being Out in the Classroom," Bettinger, Timmins, and Tisdell (2006) struggle with the notion of when and how to come out in the classroom. On the question of coming out in a course that has little relevance to the personal (such as math), Bettinger states, "Our sexual orientation or identity is part of who we are (even as it may shift) in every context. It has an impact on what we learn (teach), how we learn (teach), why we learn (teach), and what we do with the learning (teaching)" (p. 69). The author adds: "Heterosexuals don't have to choose to be silent. They are not expected to shut off any aspect of themselves" (p. 69). Perhaps, then, the decision of when and whether to come out is in and of itself a reflection of heteronormativity.

Yet, I feel that I must justify my coming out. As long as it serves a purpose that relates directly to the curriculum, it is justified. Case in point: I came out to one of my classes this past summer. "Human Behavior and the Social Environment II" is a core curriculum class that covers issues related to privilege, multiculturalism, and diversity competence in the field. The topic of the day was the many ways we define "family" in a postmodern society. I elicited discussion on this topic by surveying the myriad of family configurations my class members represented. I recorded these on the board. Without hesitating, and noting the wide array of diversity represented, I said, "I feel like I have to include my own family on this list." I turned to the board and wrote the words, "gay couple with two adopted children."

My teachable moment was part of a lesson plan that addressed a core program objective: my students' relationship with dominant culture. We are all negotiating our relationship with the dominant culture all of the time.

African Americans must do so in an inherently racist society. Women must do so in a patriarchal system. Schriver (2004), in distinguishing between the alternative and traditional (dominant) paradigms, states the power of diversity in understanding the human experience: "Only by recognizing both our differences and our similarities as humans can we proceed toward reaching our full potential. The search for an alternative paradigm is at its core a search for diversity" (p. 73).

My hope in actively constructing the inside-out narrative in the classroom is to show how my journey as a gay man is in a tangible sense my students' journeys. Accordingly, my students will see that their clients' journeys are theirs. We are all at once victims and beneficiaries of the dominant culture we simultaneously co-construct and resist.

And yet there is something about the matter-of-factness of this event that may cause some gay activists who claim we have an obligation to be "out and proud" to our students to wince. To submerge it in a lesson, they may say, is to reinforce the shame that works toward its denigration. Notwithstanding the validity of this argument, I also would like to believe that doing so relays the message that gayness is "no big deal" and, in fact, ubiquitous in the social work world. I hope I am training students to not blink an eye when a client comes out to them. I hope I am normalizing gayness so that it is on an equal par with the many other strengths I possess.

On the other hand, I recognize the significance of giving voice to such an integral part of me. What message am I giving a student who is struggling with his or her own sexuality by talking about mine in such an off-handed manner? Am I a fraud for "hiding behind a lesson plan?" Perhaps a better way to see myself is as a negotiator.



The Negotiator

As a semi-out professor, I must contend with the expectation that I will be a role model for my students whether I like it or not. But is coming out “loud and proud” in their best interest all of the time?

I am aware of the recent research (Swank & Raiz, 2007) that suggests social work students are comfortable with GLBT persons or issues as long as they operate from a heteronormative context: “Levels of comfort depend on degrees of social power, as many BSW students limit their comfort and tolerance to settings where heterosexual privilege seems to prevail” (p. 278). In other words, homosexuality is tolerable as long as heterosexuality is prioritized and homosexuality is considered subservient to it. Similarly, I am aware of the phenomenon that subtle prejudice against gay men and lesbians might be increasing as blatant prejudice is decreasing. Ewing, Stukas, and Sheehan (2003), for example, found that socially desirable responses to gays and lesbians hid true attitudes towards them, which were decidedly negative.

This research reminds me that my students’ attitudes about homosexuality may not always be what they appear to be. Put bluntly, how much are my students merely being “politically correct” in their assumed acceptance/tolerance of me?

Furthermore, while my department colleagues openly express their acceptance of all types of diversity, the same may not be true of my colleagues in other disciplines, not to mention those in administrative positions. In my brief stint at my place of employment, I have encountered a couple of instances of possible institutional heterosexism. The university denied the lesbian partner of a colleague a job because of supposed nepotism, despite the fact that prominent in that department is a husband-wife team. Another university professor consistently claims that she gets overlooked when it comes to funding for research projects.

It is possible that these individuals may not be qualified or “the right persons” for these jobs. It is also possible that our university administration says one thing and does another when it comes to freedom and protection of

sexual orientation and gender expression. I worry that my research agenda—studies of those living “on the margins” of gender identity—will inhibit rather than enhance the promotion and tenure process. I have to this point relied on university funds to present my research at conferences, for example. But I have to stop to think how I am wording the titles of my presentations. In the back of my mind is the daunting thought, “If they *really* knew what I was presenting...”

I am caught in a fissure that sometimes feels impenetrable. Blessed by a profession and department that support me, I must tread a thin line with the more conservative administration, those who ultimately will decide my future. I am forced to negotiate my gayness. On one hand, I have to “watch my back,” as my partner at times reminds me. On the other hand, in order to establish myself as a researcher and academic, I sense a need for colleagues, mentors, and the academic world to know me as a gay man. How do I be a gay academic without appearing “too gay?” How do I negotiate that sense of “me” and “not me?”

Identity negotiation is in some ways more difficult than combating outright, clear-cut homophobia. I teach my macro students, after all, that it is easier to fight when you know exactly who the enemy is. More poignant, perhaps, is how exhausting partializing my sexual orientation is. My negotiator status forces me to think about every decision I make in the classroom, office, and meeting room. Do I place a picture of my family on my desk? Do I put that “safe ally” sticker on my office door? How much do I use examples of GLBT families and individuals in class case studies? Do I chime in at campus meetings when a discussion of weekend activities with spouses ensues?

These are not atypical questions for gays and lesbians in the workplace. Certainly, they don’t make me unique. They challenge me, however, to deeply consider what my responsibility is as a social activist around this issue. Because of the generally liberal atmosphere of higher education, not to mention the protection of a union campus, I have the opportunity to push the envelope a bit. But what

does that mean exactly? How much do I push the “out” without distorting the “in?” I may profess to avoid making waves, but doing so may preclude institutional change. It’s a short journey from “live and let live” to complacency.

The Authentic Me

So am I an escape artist, a fraud, or a negotiator? Allow me to turn that question around. How has being any of the above impacted my personal identity? If the personal is always the political, and vice-versa, to borrow a phrase, who is the authentic me?

I am a life partner of a man with whom I parent two children and my workplace inside-out narrative has impacted both roles. In his classic model of homosexual formation, Cass (1984) identified identity synthesis as the culminating stage of gay/lesbian development:

Positive contacts with non-homosexuals helps create a sense of not being able to simply divide the world into good homosexuals and bad heterosexuals. With this comes a sense of people having many sides to their character, only one of which is related to homosexuality. One develops a way of life in which homosexuality is no longer hidden and public and private selves are integrated into a positive identity. (cited in Schriver, 2004, p. 271)

As this narrative has shown, my workplace identity isn’t a testament to identity synthesis as Cass envisioned it. There are students who still believe (and will say) that homosexuality is a sin. My colleagues, though accepting, may be regarded as complicit in the complacency of gay politics. A “don’t ask, don’t tell” mentality still pervades the halls of the administrative offices.

Far from being an impediment in my journey toward identity synthesis, however, my workplace has inspired me to explore the integration of my private and public selves. I

do not feel compelled to come out in every setting in the workplace. Nor do I feel pressure to hide this part of me. My gayness is part of my identity that at once is worth speaking up for and for keeping silent.

This uncomfortable agenda has been reflected in my journey to fatherhood. The process of fostering and adopting is yet another venue that forces one to make decisions about how much and when to open the closet door. If we want to be role models for our boys, my partner and I cannot live or act out of shame. We must support our boys who, in a real sense, may be victims of discrimination or harassment. We do so by forging honest relationships with those most relevant to their development: principals, teachers, and neighbors, to name a few.

At the same time, we must teach our boys about the appropriateness of self-disclosure. There is a time and a place for discussing coming from a blended, gay family. There are appropriate and inappropriate ways to do so. My professional identity has clarified these boundaries for me. I am called to build bridges in the workplace, not because of any obligation to come out, but simply because of the need to be authentic.

I am grateful that my partner challenges me to find authenticity in all of my relationships. Because of his witness, I see the connections. Just as I am able to matter-of-factly come out in the classroom, I can interweave feelings and thoughts of being gay with my parents. Because of the role models I have in accepting departmental colleagues, I understand the importance of forging alliances with heterosexuals in my neighborhood. Because I am wary about being out to my supervisors, I carry a healthy sense of caution when it comes to my boys’ basketball coaches, who may not be ready or comfortable with our family.

How has my workplace-identity construction impacted me personally? It has reminded me that to be authentic is to live with forethought, caution, and the courage to self-disclose. If I can negotiate the trips and turns of a workplace that at once inhibits and affirms who I am, I can do so in other areas of my life.

Conclusions?

As I conclude this essay, I am struck by how uncertain I remain about my inside-out narrative. I am left with some questions that uncomfortably impose on the synthesis of my professional and personal selves. As I reflect on how much further to open my workplace closet door, I must consider the following.

First, from a power dynamic, how much do I use my gayness for my benefit? In other words, do I use my Whiteness and maleness to compensate for the inferiority of being gay? Given that we are both the oppressed and the oppressor all of the time, how aware am I of the equivalencies between heterosexism and the other "isms?" Am I an ally with those who are oppressed like me or do I, like so many others throughout history, use my oppression to oppress others, even my own students? How might that dynamic play out in the classroom?

Second, in constructing my inside-out narrative, am I defying others' expectations about what it means to be gay? For example, I realize the uniqueness of my being a father who adopted children with my partner. How do I share this example without appearing to be, as others might perceive, "flaunting a lifestyle?" Do I have a responsibility to challenge others' stereotypical notions of what it means to be gay?

Third, what truly is the impact of being in and out on my students and colleagues? There is some value, after all, to maintaining critical professional distance. I don't want my students to feel as if they have to assume a certain attitude about homosexuals because their professor is gay. What do I do with that pressure that I implicitly (and perhaps intentionally) put on my students? How is it reflected in my use of curriculum? In my advising students?

Fourth, what is the impact of my inside-out narrative on my professional disposition? I have been accused of being rigid and inflexible at times in the classroom. Is this tendency related to how out I am? Will being "more out" loosen me up as an educator, advisor, and colleague? Will a more relaxed attitude influence my praxis regarding personal topics students bring to the classroom experience?

Finally, what responsibility do I have to my department and the larger college community? Swank and Raiz (2007) suggest that classroom interventions to heighten awareness of GLBT issues must be augmented by extracurricular experiences. How can I be part of a more holistic and systemic effort to combating homophobia and heterosexism in the workplace? How can I proactively model a macro practice model in an effort to initiate institutional change?

This paper has heightened my awareness of the challenge of writing about and living out the inside-out narrative. My hope is that readers can place themselves in this trajectory in a way that inspires analysis of their own inside-out narratives. I remain the escape artist, fraud, and negotiator. But it is in the conscious blending of these personas that I can be most authentic. It is a struggle that represents, in Zinn's (1994) words, the smallest act of protest. In that act are the invisible roots of the most profound social change.

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