

# **An Insider Perspective on a Research Study Entitled: How Black Men Who Have Sex with Men (BMSM) Learn to Cope with Homophobia and Racism**

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***Abstract:** Being an insider in conducting qualitative research (interviews) is oftentimes more multifaceted and complex than usually recognized. However, many researchers agree that this positionality has many benefits. One such benefit is greater insight and awareness not afforded to outsiders.*

## **Introduction**

There is an absence of discourse and scholarship in the field of adult education related to insider/outsider issues in conducting qualitative research. In this article I will examine issues related to my experiences as an insider during my doctoral research journey. My doctoral research was a qualitative study entitled: **How Black Men Who Have Sex with Men (BMSM) Learn to Cope with Homophobia and Racism**. I will provide an overview of three paradigms to describe my research experience. They are: methodological considerations, reflexivity, and my story.

Researchers agree that being an insider in conducting qualitative research is oftentimes more multifaceted and complex than usually recognized (Ganga & Scott, 2006; Foster, 2009; Styles, 1979). However, many researchers agree that this positionality may afford the researcher greater insight and awareness not possible for an outsider (Foster, 2009). By "insider" research, we mean social research and interactions conducted between researchers and participants who share a similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national and religious heritage (Ganga & Scott, 2006). What makes me an insider? First, my ethnicity and cultural background is African American, Secondly, in the process of doing this research, I self-identified as an openly gay man with my study participants. I also shared my story as part of the research process.

## **Research Focus**

Oppression in its many forms is so ingrained in the fabric of the legal, social, economic, educational, religious and political systems in America that it often goes unrecognized (Delgado, 1989). Because homophobia is so prevalent in the Black community, BMSM have a much more extensive maze to navigate regarding their sexuality and sexual orientation. The focus of this research study was to investigate the experiences of BMSM around homophobia and racism.

The theoretical framework that guided this research includes nonformal learning, critical race theory, and the literature related to coping. Although most research dealing with sexual orientation is limited to White gay males (Hill, 1995), a few scholars have examined social issues that impact Black men and masculinity. Some of these issues include racism, oppression, and homophobia (Alexander, 2008; Malebranche, et. al, 2007).

A qualitative approach using one-on-one face-to-face interviews was employed in this research, this is an investigative tool designed to discover meaning about different life situations and phenomena. The central focus of this type of research is to examine facts about people through their stories, their opinions, life experiences and attitudes (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Findings relative to participant experiences underscore the heartache many of these men face as

they seek to navigate a society ingrained in a tradition of homophobia, racism and demasculinization of Black men. These issues have a significant impact on the coping and learning strategies this population utilizes. This two year journey is the lens from which my insider experience emanates.

In the sections that follow, I will explore my insider experiences using the paradigms mentioned above to illustrate my thinking about my position as an insider researcher:

(1) methodological considerations in being an insider, (2) insider personal reflexive experiences during the journey, (3) my story as part of the research.

### **Methodology (Insider/Outsider Dichotomy)**

There are many advantages to using qualitative inquiry. Some of these benefits include, providing opportunities for respondents to share their life story, explore how people make sense of their life experience, and assess the quality of the outcomes they produce in their lives (Bryant, 2008; Brown, 2003). Oakley (1981) supports this contention that being an insider to certain communities enables researchers to empathize with participants viewpoints. However, this methodology is not without potential bias. Because qualitative research into real life experiences defies precise measurement as in quantitative research, the road toward clarity of interpretation may be somewhat convoluted at times. For example, a barely noticeable nod during an interview; may in fact be interpreted as distance between research and the researched regardless of insider status (Foster, 2009).

There is a rich body of literature that investigates effects of race as an insider effect (Hatchett & Schuman, 1975). This literature on race-of-interviewer effects indicates that White respondents and Black respondents are both susceptible to race-of-interviewer effects. For example, Hatchett and Schuman (1975) noted that in cross-racial interviewing the process for both races seems to be one of avoiding responses that might offend the interviewer of the opposing race and of being frank (or at least franker) with interviewers of one's own race. Schaeffer (1980) found that the race-of-interviewer effects were large enough to justify the practice of matching interviewer and respondent race for interviews on racial topics. Although the literature is slim on this topic as it relates to BMSM, there may be similar methodological implications for insiders who share similarities in terms of sexual orientation and race.

Historically, Blacks have had a tumultuous relationship with the medical, science, and academic communities. One such example is the Tuskegee syphilis study (where Blacks were denied medication for treatment of syphilis for research purposes). Blacks have often been the target of unscrupulous scientific inquiry that has caused many to be distrustful of the scientific community's motives and intentions. Being an insider may help alleviate some of these outsider fears. An outsider is someone who comes into a community to do research. There are distinct advantages and disadvantages to being an *outsider* when conducting research. Researchers admit they possess an unequal power status when they come into a community. These imbalances have the potential to encourage insensitivity, dominance, and aloofness toward that population. Wilson and Hayes (2000) remind us that researchers have often invaded communities and taken valuable information without benefiting those communities in ways that are defined by the people in that setting. In contrast, Wilson (1994) lists the advantages of being an outsider:

1. We bring a certain passion and commitment to the research process that is based on experience and a desire for social change.
2. We bring the abilities, knowledge, and skills of the research process and adult education principles to the community and society at large.
3. Often the researcher and the community share identification based on empathy and shared experiences with oppression, discrimination, racism, and homophobia.
4. The level of trust between the researcher and the community can be unique and close.

This methodology enables one to develop a relationship with members of the community that will be investigated; thereby, promoting understanding and communication with this population (Wilson, 2000). What is most important to this researcher is maintaining relationships with the communities I research that is based on respect, beneficence, and justice, Deshler & Grudens-Schuck (as cited in Wilson and Hayes, 2000). These are ethical standards for how each researcher, whether insider or outsider should conduct him or herself.

In a rare visit to Cornell University in the early 1980s, Paolo Freire was asked by community organizers if they would have to become insiders in order to become effective in their community efforts at conducting participatory research. Freire (as cited in Wilson and Hayes [2000]) is quoted as saying: “We are all outsiders and that cannot be changed. Insiders do not want us to give up our connections to the outside; the real question is whether we are going to be invaders” (p. 599).

What Freire is saying in this statement is important to researchers. We must remember that we are guests in the communities we research and should conduct ourselves accordingly. Brookfield & Heron (as cited in Wilson and Hays (2000) clarified this point when they stated: “Aware outsiders may catalyze action in a way that may be more difficult for insiders to accomplish by themselves” (p.599).

It was with some trepidation that I chose to undertake qualitative research as the lens to view the lives of BMSM. First, our voices have been silenced for so long, that I felt it was time for their stories to be told. Secondly, the literature is rife with complaints and examples of gay related social issues being considered unimportant. According to Hill (2007), the problem is that, it’s difficult to get people to think critically about the topic of homosexuality (and to learn how to learn), and it is even more difficult to help them learn how to care. Lastly, although reluctant at first, my personal story is reflected in my research; this “outs” me as a Black gay man to the entire world. Nevertheless, this journey has helped reconcile much of the torment, pain and confoundedness that I have experienced as a BMSM

### **Reflexive Experiences**

I will reflect on two dynamic experiences that impacted my position as an insider and as a qualitative researcher: 1) my experience visiting my hometown of Philadelphia attending a home going and, 2) my own story as part of the data. In my dissertation I talked about the emotionally transformative experience I had while attending a memorial service for a transgendered person in a gay bar in Philadelphia. After much reflection on this experience, I must admit that I initially had to confront my own bias toward transgendered persons. After attending this event my entire perspective toward this group changed. My friend informed me that he was invited to say a few words commemorating the passing of a friend and community activist at the bar.

At first I thought, why on earth would anyone have a memorial service at a bar? However, when I arrived at the bar and began observing the environment, I was utterly amazed at the outpouring of love, compassion, and respect for this individual's life. This is a powerful example of how BMSM learn to cope with societal oppression and homophobia using social networks. In reflecting on this situation, I considered how wonderful it was for this individual to be remembered by her friends, family, and the bar staff who knew that, because of racism and homophobic attitudes, she might not have received this much deserved recognition anywhere else.

### **My Story**

My dissertation advisor interviewed me as a participant. Although initially reluctant, I am now glad that through this study my personal story could be told; most importantly this allowed me to be frank about my positionality on the research topic and my sexual orientation. As an academician and researcher I feel my honesty and clarity about who I am lends more legitimacy and integrity to my research.

What was most astonishing about being a part of this research is that some of the questions that were asked during my interview compelled me to reflect on issues that I had not previously thought about. For example, I struggled with determining what was more important, my sexuality, or my race. Although most respondents in this study weighed sexual orientation and race equally, I consider my race as a more salient issue in my life. What I discovered is that, I live my life consistent with this reality. The significance here is that my identity as an insider forced me to reflect on the same issues (sometimes uncomfortable) as the other respondents, providing a more empathetic and understanding lens.

### **Conclusion**

My positionality as an insider in no way relieves me from the rigor or integrity demanded of sound quality scientific investigation that is required of qualitative research. Continuous personal self reflexivity helped explore my feelings, emotions, and attitudes so that any subjectivity would be kept to a minimum.

While there are many disadvantages of insider research, my experience in conducting this study was a very positive one. From a methodological perspective I do not think I would have been able to obtain the rich data that ultimately emerged from the study using any other research paradigm. Engaging in the process of reflexivity supports this contention.

Most compelling was having the opportunity to share my own story in this research process. This allowed me to become an integral part of this research in a way that was more than empathetic. As a result, I have a deep connectedness to this study that has rarely been experienced by other researchers. This connection has not only made me an insider, but brought a level of understanding that has placed me on equal footing with the study participants.

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