Chapter/Section Title: Ethics

Title: Rethinking and Reconceptualising Ethics in LGBT+ Research

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Author Biography: Charlotte Feather (she/her) is an early-career academic, with specialisms in LGBTQ+ inclusion, identity theory, and critical thinking for social justice. Charlotte is a programme leader and module tutor, teaching and supervising MA Education students. She is also the creator of the LGBTQ+ Primary Hub, a website that supports primary teachers in creating inclusive classrooms.

Introduction

In academia, ethical guidelines and expectations are often perceived as restrictive hurdles that impede the process of inquiry. As researchers, the initial enthusiasm we feel when designing and planning a research project may wane as we navigate complex ethical approvals, rigorous consent processes, and stringent confidentiality measures. Institutional requirements and research body frameworks can feel as though they are slowing down the research process, adding bureaucratic layers, and limiting the scope of exploration. However, it is vital that we do not overlook the fundamental importance of ethics in ensuring that the research we conduct is both academically robust and socially just.

This chapter not only explores the importance of ethics in LGBT+ research, but it also acknowledges its place and value in shaping the research journey. Through the lens of critical-anticolonialism (Lincoln & Cannella, 2009) and anti-heteronormative ethics (Taylor & Dwyer, 2015) a reconceptualisation of what ethically sound LGBT+ research could look like is proposed.

Importance of Ethics

In recent decades, participatory research that actively involves marginalised communities in its decision-making processes has gained momentum and helped centre the voices of often overlooked and hard-to-reach populations. This is a significant shift from the more traditional Western approach of undertaking studies *on* a community rather than *with* its members. These studies, known to result in pathologised and sensationalised understandings of LGBT+ people, were littered with misrepresentation and misconceptions that further marginalised an already stigmatised group. While the lack of authentic LGBT+ voices across research fields may be attributed to the pervasive influence of heteronormative and cisnormative discourses in academia, it could be argued that the omission of minority voices was a deliberate act to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and maintain control over the narrative. This omission, whether intentional or not, highlights the need for robust ethical frameworks to prevent future exclusion in research.

Ethical research practices should ensure that studies contribute positively to the understanding and acceptance of LGBT+ communities and experiences. By adhering to ethical standards, we can help redress historical injustices and support the creation of knowledge that is inclusive, accurate, and empowering.

Key Considerations

LGBT+ research spans several disciplines, employing a range of approaches and paradigms. Consequently, there no single, universal code of ethics that governs our work. Nevertheless, there are certain fundamental principles – related to upholding an ethic of respect for the person, knowledge, and quality of research- that are crucial to most LGBT+ studies. Key ethical principles include informed consent and autonomy, confidentiality, social and cultural sensitivity, and protection from harm. These principles ensure that the dignity and rights of LGBT+ participants are respected throughout the research process, as well as empowering them to make informed decisions about their involvement. Confidentiality is particularly important in LGBT+ research as it helps safeguard participants' identities to protect against discrimination and stigma. Given that LGBT+ individuals belong to a minority group, it is also essential to consider intersectional characteristics - such as race or disability - and the structural inequalities that may arise from those characteristics, as a vital ethical principle.

It is important to remember that ethical decision-making should not be confined to the planning and proposal stages. It should be an actively deliberate and continuous process throughout the research journey, involving ongoing assessment and reassessment (BERA, 2024). Despite its significance, aftercare is rarely recognised or discussed in Western research. However, it can be crucial in studies focusing on sensitive topics such as trauma, discrimination, or mental health. As part of our duty of care, we should facilitate debriefing sessions and signposting to support services rather than the 'parachute in and parachute out' approach (Kara, 2018, p. 151).

Complex Dilemmas

Despite the existence of ethical frameworks designed to help us identify and address common concerns, we may encounter complex ethical dilemmas that do not have straightforward solutions. These dilemmas tend to lack a single right answer, necessitating confidence in our ability to interpret, assess, and apply various research frameworks that are both ethically and morally sound. For example, most ethical guidelines require parental consent for research involving individuals under 16. However, there is also a critical need to safeguard LGBT+ young people who may not be 'out' to their parents or guardians. This situation creates a significant ethical dilemma: how do we respect the legal and ethical standards for obtaining consent while also protecting the privacy and safety of young LGBT+ participants whose voices need to be heard?

Navigating such dilemmas requires a nuanced understanding of ethical principles and the specific contexts in which they are applied. In such cases, an alternative strategy might be considered, such as implementing procedures to ensure confidentiality while adhering to ethical standards. This scenario, which is one of many, underscores the importance of ongoing ethical deliberation, often involving collaboration amongst multiple stakeholders.

Researcher Reflexivity

Integral to the continuous process of ethical decision-making is the practice of researcher reflexivity, which involves the self-examination and critical evaluation of our identities, experiences, and biases. Reflexivity enhances self-awareness, helping to mitigate the reinforcement of stereotypes and power imbalances that could compromise the validity and ethical integrity of our research output. A critical component of reflexivity is the need for comprehension and compassion. While some may suggest that these qualities can function independently, I believe both are indispensable for truly authentic and ethical research in this field.

Researchers who self-identify as LGBT+ occupy a unique position when engaging in LGBT+ research. While being part of the community does not guarantee an understanding of the breadth of diverse lived experiences, it often brings a heightened awareness to some of the unique challenges and strengths within the community. Comprehension empowers researchers to anticipate potential ethical dilemmas, drawing from their own lived experiences. Compassion, on the other hand, helps foster genuine empathy with participants, ensuring their experiences and views are respected and validated throughout the research process. Having increased comprehension and compassion enables LGBT+ researchers to navigate ethical dilemmas with sensitivity, placing the wellbeing of all involved at the forefront whilst maintaining ethical integrity.

Self-Protection

Safeguarding participants is paramount in ethical research. However, it is equally crucial for researchers to establish clear boundaries and implement proactive strategies to support their own well-being, particularly when engaging with sensitive and potentially distressing topics. For researchers who identify as LGBT+, there may be heightened risks of discrimination and emotional strain when exploring LGBT+ themes and populations. To mitigate these risks, there are several approaches that can be employed.

Using the oxygen mask analogy, we must prioritise our own well-being first to ensure we are able to support our participants. Maintaining an awareness of available well-being services ensures access to professional support when needed. Engaging in mindful supervision practices, including regular check-ins with supervisors or mentors, provides guidance and emotional support that can help us manage challenges that arise. Furthermore, fostering robust support networks within and outside the academic community can help create a sense of solidarity and shared understanding, enabling us to draw on collective experiences and resources. These self-protection strategies are essential for navigating complex ethical dilemmas with resilience and integrity. By taking care of our own needs first, we can better support participants and contribute to more ethical and authentic research outcomes.

Reconceptualising Ethical Research

If nothing else, I hope this chapter has prompted you to reflect on the place and value of ethics within the research journey. Rather than viewing ethics as a barrier, we should see it as a vital element that can enrich the research process and promote the inclusion of authentic LGBT+ voices. This

reconceptualisation advocates for the deconstruction of oppressive structures and the promotion of inclusivity by weaving ethical considerations into the very fabric of our research practices.

Decolonising research methodologies involves addressing the power dynamics and biases embedded within them. This requires us to recognise our positionality as researchers and move towards methodologies that are participatory, collaborative, and community-centred to ensure authentic LGBT+ voices are heard throughout the research process. We must also adopt an intersectional lens, particularly during ethical decision-making. Furthermore, we must ensure flexibility and responsiveness by being continuously reflexive as researchers. This involves not only adhering to established ethical guidelines but also being willing to question and critique these guidelines when they fall short of addressing the unique ethical challenges of LGBT+ research. Finally, whilst there may be a greater need for self-protection, it is vital that we recognise the value of LGBT+ researchers undertaking LGBT+ research.

Embracing a reflexive, compassionate, and collaborative approach to ethics can transform the research process into one that is enriching for both the researchers and the participants. Through this lens, ethical LGBT+ research becomes a powerful tool for social justice, empowerment, and meaningful change.

Key Takeaways:

> **1. Challenge your Perception:** Shift your view of ethics from a hinderance to an essential element that enriches the research process and helps address historical injustices.

> **2. Be Reflexive:** Engage critical self-reflection and continuous ethical decision-making by assessing and reassessing concerns, bias, and researcher positionality.

> **3. Embrace Collaboration:** Lean into collaborative and community-centred approaches that address power dynamics and foster authentic, ethical, and socially just research.

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