

Young Queer People Doing Young Queer Research: Critical Reflections on Community Engagement with LGBTQ+ Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Kentucky

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Introduction

More than 2 million youth experience homelessness in the United States, and of that number, 40% identify as LGBTQ+ (Maccio & Ferguson, 2015). Interning at OutMemphis marked student SQ's first opportunity to work at the intersection of youth, LGBTQ+ identities, and homelessness. When SQ's undergraduate mentor proposed bringing what they had learned back to the University of Louisville (UofL) through community-engaged research, SQ had little understanding of what that would entail or how it would evolve. Determined to advocate for their community, SQ contacted Sweet Evening Breeze (SEB), a nonprofit based in Louisville, Kentucky, dedicated to supporting LGBTQ+ youth surviving homelessness. Our research team was made up of student (SQ, LF, and TM) and faculty (CKS) researchers from UofL as well as the executive director (GM) and program director (SW) of SEB. Our research aimed to examine the unique experiences of these youth, delving into their personal histories, current realities, and imagined futures.

Throughout the research process, it felt imperative to debrief and discuss our work. This led us to develop reflection questions. Each team member answered these questions to explore what it meant for us to be young queer people doing young queer research. The following article offers a critical reflection on the need to transcend traditional notions of identity in scholarship, develop innovative research approaches that address community needs, and confront the pressing challenges posed by the current political climate. Additionally, this reflection emphasizes the psychological strain community-engaged work can impose on those involved, highlighting the importance of supporting both the research participants and the researchers themselves.

Critical Reflection

What have been the key challenges throughout the stages of this research process (before receiving

IRB approval, during survey/focus group/photovoice collection, and now as we are reflecting back)?

CKS: I appreciated that we had gift cards and care packets to give to participants, but the project never managed to include youth experiencing homelessness as part of the research core. If that had happened, I'm sure our questions and goals would have looked different (and for the better). That is certainly a challenge of a project like ours—folks experiencing homelessness are in survival mode. Understandably the focus is on pressing needs of food and shelter, so that is a challenge for the sort of collaborative research we initially aspired to.

SQ: The key challenges were that we knew the statistics of queer houseless youth were significantly high, but we had such a difficult time finding them for our study. I think we forgot to account for the fact that houseless agencies and other locations where houseless folx stay are not usually safe spaces for LGBTQ+ folx. So, by attempting to survey and recruit participants in the same spaces other houseless organizations do outreach, it was not fruitful.

GM: For me, the challenge has been finding out where or learning how to be in touch with our queer demographic population. Specifically, the houseless population between the ages of 18 and 24. For me, that has been the difficult part. Trying to find this ground, reach out to them, and have them be a part of this process.

SW: The most difficult aspect of the research project was logistics. Specifically, we had trouble organizing group meetings because of the unpredictability of schedules and transportation for our youth participants. We tried to mitigate this by overcommunicating with reminders about when and where to meet. We also offered bus passes and Uber rides to people who had unreliable transportation. This helped, but scheduling remained an issue, and eventually we landed on a nonlinear approach to groups where we accepted whomever we could get whenever we could get them, even if not all the participants were at the

same stage of the project.

LF: When awaiting IRB approval in the planning stage, it was a challenge to balance two contrasting needs in how we were to conduct this research. On the one hand, our university researchers needed valid data to analyze for published findings. On the other hand, the needs of our nonprofit partners at SEB and the urgency of the political climate around transgender issues in Kentucky led to a desire for the research processes to be supportive and helpful to our participants by themselves, rather than just a means to an end of good research.

How has working on this project affected the way you understand the communities that you belong to?

CKS: I'm inspired by the members of the research team, LGBTQ+ people who care about the most marginalized among us (those without homes) and who are working to do something to help those members of our community. Through this project I have also become more familiar with engaged research that brings together university researchers, community members, and others on campus who are interested in models of research that facilitate social transformation.

GM: I have come to see even more how diverse the LGBTQ + community is. And it is diverse on many different levels. The queer community is diverse within its own right. However, when you take into account the population we are working with in regard to our survey and collection of data, you have to recognize that the queer community is made up of so many different factors. Things like age, generation difference, economic status and background, social implications, where someone is from or their environmental background from which they were raised, all have an impact on who they are as a person or people. So, yes—understanding that this population is so much more than just queer.

SW: While administering surveys and leading focus and photovoice groups, I was acutely aware of the privilege I hold as a person belonging to the White middle-class community. Hearing the stories and experiences of poor young adults of color reminded me of the systems of racism and class that I benefit from. This includes access to health care, a basic level of respect from service providers, and especially the ability to fall back on a stable support system should I experience instability.

TM: I was able to see that a lot of queer people

understand the importance of working in their community and giving back but aren't sure how to get started or are unable to dedicate time. . . . Among the other trans people I met, I was able to see how interconnected our community was. Everyone I met knew someone else that I already knew, or had a few degrees of separation from, and many of them had done similar volunteering with similar populations to those we were working with.

LF: Working on this project and as a part of this team has greatly broadened and deepened my understanding of what it means to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community as well as what it means to be a part of the Louisville community. . . . Before this project, I thought of this community as something clearly defined and easily understood. Working alongside unhoused people whose lives and survival behaviors change constantly, and being in a situation where I was talking to them about their gender and sexual identities, gave me a whole new look at how these labels we attach to our communities and ourselves can be truly vague and transient when it comes to people's material realities. For about 4 months in 2021—before I began working on this project—I myself was housing insecure. . . . The project taught me a lot about how queerness, transness, and destabilizing of resources such as housing are all intertwined.

How have the current political climate and recent policy changes in Kentucky affected how you approach this work?

SQ: It feels even more important and urgent to do this work because the climate is getting increasingly catastrophic for LGBTQ+ folx. As more anti-LGBTQ+ policy is passed, the mental and physical health of LGBTQ+ folx will be negatively impacted, which can then lead to an increased risk of becoming homeless. This can be due to many causal factors such as increased levels of familial rejection, substance abuse, discrimination, lack of social support, and more. It made it more emotional to do this work because I knew that it was only getting worse for us. It sometimes felt hopeless because queer houselessness is so far off the radar and understudied, and there's not enough attention to this intersection of identities.

SW: The political climate in Kentucky motivates me to continue working with the LGBTQ+ youth population because they need support from service providers now more than ever. However, it also became overwhelming to the point of exhaustion at times. I found myself going back and forth with my willingness and capacity to continue the

research project. Hearing stories and analyzing the data we got encouraged me to move forward so that we could share what we were learning to the public, but it also became frustrating, as so many of the issues the participants were facing seemed to always point back to broader systemic issues that felt insurmountable.

TM: The political climate in Kentucky caused me to approach this project with increased fervor. I felt like it was more important than ever to be producing data that shows queer people are in need of help. Interacting with members of my community felt especially important and comforting due to how viciously we have been targeted. . . . On the other hand, I also did feel a little bit of hopelessness every so often, because I was conscious that numbers and proof haven't changed the minds of those who made those policy changes before. It was discouraging to know that although I knew what we were doing was important, it was going up against institutional bias against queer people and those experiencing homelessness.

LF: For one, recent legislative attacks on transgender health care and LGBTQ+ rights across Kentucky have made this work feel more urgent than ever before. From the community engagement approach, working on research amid this climate felt all but negligent if we did not simultaneously couple it with actively supplying helpful resources, information, or community to those we worked with. The feeling among our team was oftentimes not that we were just trying to answer a research question but that we were trying to scramble to find ways to be immediately and effectively supportive of our communities with the looming threat of legislative attacks.

From your perspective, how has your personal intersection of identities impacted how participants respond to you and the project compared to other members of the core research team?

CKS: When conducting survey research, my physical appearance as a cis-passing, youngish White woman impacted interactions. I spoke with more women and fem-identified folks, and they were open in speaking with me about past experiences with violence. I think that being a queer-identified faculty member working on an LGBTQ+ specific topic attracted queer students to the project.

SQ: As a person of color that is more feminine presenting, I think people were more vulnerable and open with me as they answered the survey questions. They also seemed more open to doing

the survey. I think participants who felt like they identified with me opened up more about traumatic experiences (e.g., sexual violence, discrimination, sex work, etc.). I think, also, not having personal ties to homelessness made me feel a little disconnected from others on the team and/or the participants, and possibly they felt disconnected from me.

GM: Many of our clients were Black, as I am. I think my engagement with some of the Black participants may have been different than others. Most Black Americans see being queer as inappropriate or nonexistent in the Black community. Therefore, for me, I might not get truthful answers from Black participants talking to me (another Black person), versus participants talking to others on my team who were non-Black.

SW: For the first time since transitioning with hormones (AFAB FTM), I became more aware of how I was being perceived socially with regard to gender and the implications and benefits of being seen as a cisgender male. Male survey participants, especially White males, seemed more receptive to me than to the women and femme presenting members of the research team, and whether true or not, I sensed that some women responded to me with skepticism and vagueness. This was an ongoing conversation among the researchers who all noticed and tried to account for our different backgrounds.

LF: For some participants, the fact that I was transgender certainly impacted how willing they were to discuss certain issues regarding gender, sexuality, and discrimination. I believe that some participants felt more comfortable using language associated with queer community when talking with me because they perceived that I would understand what they meant. Others were forthcoming about their many hidden identities with me in a way that I'm not sure they would have been if they feared I would be someone who would weaponize transphobia against them. During focus group sessions, my transgender identity made it easier for me to participate in and facilitate discussions around gender expression and gender discrimination.

Conclusion

Along the way, we encountered tensions. The need for research data considered valid in more quantitative fields and a community's need for service and support often felt incommensurate. This is especially true given that members of the community we were working with, LGBTQ+

youth experiencing homelessness, live in situations of extreme instability and structural violence. Consequently, those of us acting as both community partners and researchers must navigate these complexities by challenging traditional research norms through transformative methodologies. As such, we must question the notion that research is a “one-size-fits-all” endeavor in which participants are reduced to mere data points. Instead, community-engaged research should adopt a model of intentional service that prioritizes the needs of the communities we are serving by uplifting their voices and listening to their concerns and aspirations. By reevaluating how we approach research and community engagement, we seek to provide more immediate support while also challenging systemic barriers and disparities.

This project faced numerous challenges, from struggles with participant recruitment to the emotional toll of working within a politically hostile environment, which caused the project to deviate from traditional research protocols. However, these difficulties, combined with the diverse experiences and perspectives of our team, enabled us to forge more meaningful connections with participants and led to richer, more nuanced insights into their lives. Despite moments of frustration and feelings of hopelessness in the face of systemic barriers, the urgency and significance of our work remained unwavering. Ultimately, this project deepened our ties to both the LGBTQ+ and homeless communities, underscoring the critical need for continued advocacy and support among hidden populations.

Martin is the executive director of Louisville, Kentucky nonprofit Sweet Evening Breeze. Stuart Walker is the program manager of Louisville, Kentucky nonprofit Sweet Evening Breeze.

References

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