Bare: A conscious choice as a researcher

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Abstract

Through autoethnographic reflections this paper explores the problematic discourses for those entering the academy in "becoming a researcher". These problematic discourses broadly include (1) the notion of "researcher" as an identity rather than a performance base on social constructions, (2) the privileges associated with norms of acceptable research, (3) distancing of self, and (4) messages which devalue the significance of how lived experience is essential in understanding the process of becoming a researcher. I attempt to enhance awareness and contribute to growing knowledge surrounding the experience of becoming a researcher in the academy through detailing the relationships between my 'coming out' journey, my experience as a psychotherapist and the evolution of my view of a 'researcher'. Through personal, evocative writing toward inquiry I weave specific interactions and introspection with theoretical positioning. I highlight the inextricability of the roles I perform, the collision of discourses and how both vulnerability and rigorous introspection have paved the way for me in embracing the experience of 'becoming a researcher'.

Introduction

The gifts I have received in relationship with my father are immeasurable. I can only begin to describe them through story. During the course of our relationship as father and daughter, mentor and student, friends and confidants I have been visible and invisible, understood and misunderstood and always fiercely loved. These experiences along with many others, a few of which I will further explore here, have brought me to my present understanding of 'becoming a researcher'.

Galileo's head was on the block
The crime was looking up for truth
And as the bombshells of my daily fears explode
I try to trace them to my youth – Galileo (Indigo Girls, 1992)

1984: Venice Beach

The air at the Culver City ice-skating rink was different on competition days; it was colder, still and full of tension. My long auburn hair pulled tightly back in a French braid wearing new tights, skating dress and polished skates. I came off the ice. My first glance was to my coach, Doug. I was looking for approval, confirmation that I had just locked in the high score for the figure portion of the competition. He said nothing only nodded his head and I knew I had performed well. My next thoughts were, *"Where's my Dad? Where are my skate guards? What does he think, does he think it will be enough to get me through tonight's freestyle competition and still end up 1st overall?"* Then I saw him,*" Dad"!* He holds me tightly, squeezing me and

warming me under his big bear like arms. "*I think you did it Sarahdoo. I knew you would. Now, what do you say we get out of here for a little bit?" he says.* This was not my Dad's typical role. He did not manage my competitive skating career- that was my mothers' job. She would have had a plan of how we were going to prepare for the evening competition: likely visualization, rest, nutrition, off-ice practice of my routine and most importantly nothing overly stimulating.

Doug: (walking over to my Dad and me) *Oh good Ed, you're taking her out of here for a while, remember to keep her relaxed and save up her energy for tonight- she goes on late, I don't want her tired.*

Dad: *Come on Sarahdoo, I have somewhere in mind for us to go.* (He hands me a doughnut making sure that my coach doesn't see it and I run to gather my things for our adventure. Eight hours later we return).

Doug: *Hi Sarah, you ready for this?*

Me: *Absolutely! (*Excitedly jumping up and down) *We ate fried bread, saw a man juggle chainsaws and people watched, oh and I practiced my routine barefoot in the sand.*

Doug: (looking at my dad in disbelief) *Ed, where did you take her?*

Dad: *Venice Beach*

Doug: *I thought you were taking her somewhere to relax and reserve her energy?*

Dad: *She's 10, she doesn't need to relax, she has an abundance of energy. Venice Beach was an experience she'll always remember.*

Me: (thoughts) *Wow! My dad loves me, he gets me, he sees me.*

From that point forward my Dad was forbidden to take me on his own to a competition. I do remember it, this early experience of love, visibility and understanding by my father.

1998: Key Decision

Internal dialogue: *Today is the day, it has to be, I can't wait any longer. I am so tired of hiding, of feeling invisible and lying either directly or by omission. What if it doesn't go well, what then? You can't worry about that right now, Sarah or you will never go through with it. Just pick up the phone; he loves you, he gets you, now let him see you.* Tammy walks by me sitting in the kitchen, holding the phone. *"Are you going to call or just hold the phone for a little while longer?"* she says. *"Stop it",* I say. I pickup the phone, dial the number and take a deep breath, *"Dad I have been trying to connect with you for a while, there is something that I want to talk with you about. I'm ok, don't worry I'm not sick or anything life threatening like that",* I say. The truth is what I was about to share did feel life threatening. My foot begins to shake, my eyes shift and my voice cracks as I go on, *"Dad I'm gay, Tammy is not my friend, she is my girlfriend."* My eyes focus on the I Love Lucy pajamas I am wearing and the smoke from the cigarette in my hand fills the air around me as I anxiously wait for his reply. *"Oh, well that's not too much of a surprise Sarahdoo; I love you no matter what your sexual preference. Do you think that this might have something to do with your mother; I mean her dying when you were 12? Do you think you missed something that you are now trying to find?"* he says. Heartache. In one swift moment I am both relieved and enraged. He still loves me, I breathe a little easier; but he doesn't

understand or see me, I begin to cry. I try to explain, give voice to my experience. The notion that I would *choose* to bring upon myself the agony, the pain I have felt in living a double life, and the fear I've walked with for years is unfathomable.
The decision I made to 'come out' to my father and my family has set the stage for how I have navigated many mainstream discourses. In that moment I was both attempting to stabilize my identity to be consistent with my attraction for women and destabilize it, away from assumptions about my sexuality. Both heteronormative and lesbian discourses require that I explain my behavior; they demand that I claim my sexual identity through the paring of my sex, gender, attraction and behavior (Butler, 1999). I responded accordingly, completely unaware of the notions of "fixed" sexuality and gender identities influencing my self-perception (Warner, 1993). For most of my childhood I had assumed that sex, gender and attraction were pre-scribed. As a young child these relationships posed no notable dilemma for me in that my performance of gender was consistent with societal expectations of my sex. I liked dresses, had long hair and like many of my peers thought that boys had 'cooties'. I did struggle at times with being an athlete and the expectations that I be a strong competitor and yet demure. Perhaps this was my first questioning of 'society's' pairing of gender and sex. I was fortunate; my parents were quick to highlight a wealth of examples for me to look toward that were both athletic and female. My walls were graced with Dorothy Hamill, Nadia Comaneci and Peggy Fleming. As I moved through adolescence the dilemmas began to simmer. I was aware that I no longer had the same experience as my peers. I liked boys and I even went so far as to keep a picture of Kirk Cameron on my bedroom wall for a few years, yet I knew that my experience of sex, gender and attraction differed from most of my peers. Unable to understand my experience and with the only visible models reflecting parings of sex, gender and attraction in binary forms I assumed it would come, attraction to the opposite sex. Perhaps I was a late bloomer. It never came.

My inability to reconcile my unlabeled, unrepresented, invisible experience grew until I met Chad. Chad and I worked together as servers in a local restaurant and had become fast friends during my late teens and early twenties. I had reached a level of comfort with Chad in sharing my feelings of confusion about dating, attraction and gender and for many months now he had listened patiently to my struggle. He had gone with me to my first lesbian club and watched me squirm with discomfort while at the same time breathing a sigh of relief that a place like it existed. He offered comic relief sharing how uncomfortable he was as a large statured gay man in a lesbian club. In all my confusion, I knew he 'saw' and 'got' me, even though I didn't quite understand myself. Thus, it was fitting that it would be Chad who would gently, humorously and warmly nudge me toward a more rigorous reflection of my experience of gender, sex and attraction. It was a warm night in West Hollywood and I was feeling particularly comfortable in the 'gay' community with Chad by my side. After an evening of dancing, we stood outside devouring Polish hotdogs from our favorite street vendor:

Me: *So, I think I've figured it out. I'm bisexual. That's why I look the way I do. Why I look like most of my straight girlfriends and like most of the same things as they do, and don't want to date anyone who looks like them or me. I'm bisexual; I like women and men, but only women who look more androgynous.*

Chad: *Really, you think? So, are you going to call the girl who gave you her number tonight? What about that other girl, the lawyer, are you still dating her? Oh, and who was the last guy you dated?*

Me: *I don't know; maybe I'll call. I don't know about the lawyer yet, and what do you mean who was the last guy I dated?*

Chad: *Well, I can't remember the last time you dated a guy? In fact, in all the time we've been friends I can't really ever remember you dating a guy. You talk about it, but that seems like something you think you should do because of how you look, not something you actually want to do.*

Me: *Really, that can't be true.*

Chad*: Ok, maybe it isn't true, that's just what I see. Only you really know what it's like to be you.*

Me: *Hmmmmmm. (both intrigued and wanting to run from the conversation)*

Chad: *You know, it's ok if they don't all add up how we are told they should you know. I mean, how you look, who you like, what parts you have. Look at me, I'm built like a bear, can 'act' either gay or straight, love women and I'm really only physically attracted to men. You just are who you are and society is the one who doesn't get it. It's their loss if they don't get to know and love you like I do.*

Me: *Lesbian, huh? But the lesbians I know don't think I am a lesbian, they think I am straight and if I tell my straight girlfriends I am a lesbian, I think they might laugh. Does this mean I have to start wearing Doc. Martins, or overalls, or like team sports? I don't really like any of those. I don't know anyone like me. Who looks like me and is physically attracted* ***only*** *to women, and I can't think of anyone on TV or any example. I'm not a 'lipstick lesbian', or 'androgynous' or 'butch'- I'm a lesbian who most people assume is straight.*

Chad: *Then I guess that means that you better get comfortable with who you are since you'll probably have to explain yourself a lot, but pretending to have feelings of attraction that you don't or trying to act like a 'stereotypical lesbian' isn't who you are. You have never intentionally been fake, so please don't start now. What I love about you is your bravery and honesty.*

Me: *Ok, so a lesbian- or at least a woman who looks straight, but likes girls. This will be interesting Chaddy. Can I just say I am gay? I like that much better.*

It was because of this conversation with Chad and the realization that I needed to be brave and honest that I decided to declare my 'lesbian status' to those I loved; hoping, praying, and cringing a little as I awaited varying responses.

What does this have to do with my developing identity as a researcher? Everything. Although without self-awareness, at the time I was laying a foundation for how I conceptualize the process and purpose of research. At the beginning of my journey as an 'out' lesbian I discovered a central tenet in honoring others and myself: *lead with vulnerability.* Leading with vulnerability has been an evolutionary process, shaped by both my personal and professional relationships. Up to now, *leading with vulnerability* in the process of 'becoming' a researcher has meant trusting my gut or intuitive knowledge, following my passions, attuning to my experience – particularly feelings of fear, taking a deep breath and forging forward.

Listening to intuitive knowledge

The language we choose to use and the meanings of words are important. Sexual *preference* implies a degree of voluntary choice, which is inconsistent with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual person's experiences (American Psychological Association, 2008, *What causes a person to have a particular sexual orientation?* para 1; Herek, Kimmel, Amaro & Melton, 1991). Whereas sexual *orientation* refers to an "enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions" (American Psychological Association, 2008, para 2). The term preference is ambiguous, it suggests that I simply like women more than men; that the strong feelings of attraction, intense draw and magnetism I experienced in 2005 when meeting my now partner Kathy, I chose to have and therefore I might have been able to choose not to have them as well. Preference implies that affectionate attraction is akin to which shoes I decide to wear for the day. 'Preference' does not articulate the embodied sense of knowing, connection and exhilaration I feel in her presence; so much so that I would decide to move to Newfoundland and serendipitously to becoming a 'researcher'. This early experience of invisibility, insult and invalidation through my father's use of the term preference has been instrumental in shaping my research interest in microaggressions and LGBTQ equity and experience.

We're sculpted from youth, the chipping away makes me weary
And as for the truth it seems like we just pick a theory
The one that justifies our daily lives
And backs us with quiver and arrows - Deconstruction (Indigo Girls, 2002)

Microaggressions are the ordinary daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities that communicate hostile, disparaging or harmful sexual orientation, race, ability, gender and religious slights and insults to the target person or group. They chip away at my assumptions and expectations of visibility, equality, understanding and value. Microaggressions may be verbal, non-verbal, environmental and intentional or unintentional (Sue, 2010). I am surrounded, embedded and intertwined in my personal life, research and daily experiences with both microaggressions and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) experience. Historically, as lesbians I have been scrutinized within the academy with research focused on seeking truth about the origins and suitability of my 'condition'. Homosexuality was not removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder II until 1974, the year I was born (Fox, 1988). In subsequent editions this was replaced with equally harmful measures of human experience, sexual orientation disturbance and ego dystonic homosexuality (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, 1987). In an attempt to repair the harm caused by the pairing of LGBTQ persons with pathology and deviance the term sexual orientation was adopted and promoted by the American Psychological Association. Sexual orientation has become the recommendation for appropriate terminology to include lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual persons within psychology (Herek, Kimmel, Amaro & Melton, 1991). I do wonder though if in an attempt to pair LGBTQ person's expressions of gender, sex and attraction with perceptions of 'normal' behavior did we reinforce the notion of 'normal' and cause more harm? Did we further reinforce the 'normal' discourse, exclude experience, and limit room for deeper understanding of the relationships between sex, gender and attraction as performances required by social constructions (Butler, 1999). Perhaps we did and these constrictions are presently harming

others; and still I find comfort in having a label, a way to quickly describe generally how I experience sex, gender and attraction. Although, over the years I have become increasingly aware of how my performance may change depending on the discourses around me.

Whatever has happened to anyone else
Could happen to you & to me
And the end of my youth was the possible truth
That it all happens randomly
Who is teaching kids to be leaders
and the way that it is meant to be
the philosophy of loss - Philosophy of Loss (Indigo Girls, 2007)

Who am I? Why does my experience matter?

I wonder how I will ever define what it means to be a researcher? How can I describe the elusive concept of a 'researcher', when I can't quite seem to grasp it? What do I have to contribute to this dialogue? The story I have carried about research is that I am a consumer of research not a producer. This is most clearly linked to my course of study as a Doctor of Clinical Psychology, Psy.D., which focused on educating psychology practitioners. I have been 'schooled' in the belief that research is something I digest from afar, not something that I inhabit. It was my automatic assumption that the title of researcher may only be granted to those engaged with a positivist conceptualization of empirical knowledge that initially paralyzed my entrance into the academy. From this position, I am unable to comprehend meeting the academy's performance expectations. Consequently, since entering the academy as an assistant professor roughly three years ago, I have often walked the building halls feeling disconnected, lost, confused, and fearful. In believing my only access into the academy's 'researcher club' was to perform in a specific manner, as is honored, valued and praised within the academy, I became smothered. How could I ever begin to contribute in a meaningful way to a greater awareness and understanding of LGBTQ peoples' experiences, dilemmas, and lives while measuring, quantifying and judging LGBTQ people, couples, families and communities' experience? I attempted many times to write grant proposals and conceptualize projects with a basis in measuring, solidifying, and quantifying outcomes to no avail. I consistently felt as though my voice, intuitive knowledge, and lived experience was overpowered and marginalized through the process.

Conversely, my professional identity has been well developed and firmly rooted as a counselor, psychologist, teacher, and mentor. I am challenging the social construction of my professional identity and my understanding of the title 'researcher' in attempting to create/perform as a researcher in a way that is consistent with my experience and worldview. As a counselor, one of the aspects I enjoy most is the 'research' involved with understanding the lived experiences of those with whom I work and having the privilege to be involved in other's lives in often intimate ways. Yet, upon entering the academy I had not considered my approach to therapeutic work of relevance to the discussion of 'becoming' a researcher. I am naturally curious and have learned the value in becoming comfortable with both ambiguity and multiple meanings. It is here, in alignment with the social constructivist counseling theories which are concerned with meaning, knowledge construction and the ways in which we story our lives that I found a home (White & Epston, 1990; Freedman & Combs 1996).

Searching for connections

January 11, 2013: I pull out an article from the stack on my desk searching for a way to describe the intertwining roles that I experience as I perform the role of lesbian, therapist and researcher. As I read I am reminded by Ellis and Bochner (2000) of the importance of arguing for and valuing research "that will allow readers to feel the moral dilemmas, think with our story instead of about it, join actively in the decision points that define an autoethnographic project and consider how their own lives can be made a story worth telling" (p. 735).

In an attempt to carve out this 'researcher' space I find I am engaged in a process personally which I relish in with clients. As a counselor I have co-collaborated and co-constructed meaning with others in attempts to aid in the re-authoring of their life stories. Problem identification, story deconstruction, looking for unique outcomes, shining lights on dormant aspects of the self/experience, reconstruction of meaning, preferred identities/alternative stories and thickening of plots are all ways of co-collaboration and therapeutic work in which I position myself (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). I perform the role of counselor, teacher and mentor from this approach (Butler, 1999). It is from this narrative theoretical perspective to counseling, with its' post-structuralist, post-modern and feminist roots that I am beginning to see how my researcher identity is emerging and may evolve. "In reflexive ethnographies the researcher's personal experience becomes important primarily in how it illuminates the culture under study" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740). Perhaps I am a reflexive ethnographer. My experience as a lesbian, therapist and researcher is inextricably interwoven with how I approach, interact with and choose to reveal or illuminate the experiences of LGBTQ persons as part of my ongoing research explorations.

Ellis and Bochner, 2000 suggest, "psychotherapists are ethnographers of the self" (p. 760). That resonates with me, as it is what I do with others as a therapist. As a therapist my work depends on my capacity to achieve a level of intercultural understanding along side the social skill required by ethnographic empathy (p.760).

Confirmation of intuitive knowledge

In 'coming out' to my family I was fortunate, for the most part it was smooth, supportive and relatively rejection free. Although most thought it was no 'big deal' I was aware that I would no longer be afforded the privilege of being perceived as 'normal', that society did not have the intimate relationships with me that my family did and that 'society' may not be as willing to accept me and the voicing of my 'lesbian status' with the same relative ease. In a heterosexist and heteronormative society LGBTQ persons aligning themselves with gender identities and/or sexual orientations other than heterosexual or cisgender (where an individual's self-perception of their gender matches their sex) may experience a number of losses of privilege (Chernin & Johnson 2003; Ritter & Terndup, 2002; Rust, 1996). Unfortunately, I was right. I lost friends and job opportunities, and learned to read the environment for signs of danger to personal safety while holding a lover's hand in public or discussing my sex, gender, attraction and behavior. I can't avoid microaggressive waters; they are all around. In my early twenties the following song was a favorite of my LGBTQ peers and mine.

I'm not radical when I kiss you, I don't love you to make a point.
It's the hollow of my heart that cries when I miss you
And it keeps me alive when we're apart. – Radical (Curtis, 1995)

Catie Curtis's lyrics shine a light on microaggressions. Microaggressions can be further broken down into three broad categories (1) microinvalidations (2) microinsults and (3) microassaults. As Curtis's lyrics suggest they are often environmentally embedded in culture. Additionally microinvalidations are regularly outside the aggressors' awareness and operate to "exclude, negate and nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of certain groups" (Sue, 2010, p.37). Often these actions are justified through apparently non-biased and compelling arguments since well-intended and thoughtful individuals frequently communicate them (Sue et al., 2007).

Through my father's line of questioning when I initially came out to him, "*Do you think that this might have something to do with your mother; I mean her dying when you were 12? Do you think you missed something that you are now trying to find*?" an "assumption of abnormality" (Sue, 2010, p. 195) was made. In trying to identify how I became a lesbian, he was unknowingly pathologizing my experience. One would not ask of their heterosexual daughter, *"how did this happen?" or question how come she is heterosexual or suggest that she is so because she is missing something.* His response and responses like his measure, judge, compare and define my experience as deviant from the dominant heterosexual discourse. I am left to decipher what these questions mean, what it means that they are asked and how to respond. The power of sexual orientation microaggressions often rests in their invisibility to both perpetrator and target person or group (Sue, 2010). How do I negotiate my early experiences of visibility with my father as a young child with the invisibility and attack I experienced in coming out? Assumptions of abnormality are subtle, so subtle that at times it is not until much later after an act occurs, when my stomach is still in knots and the internal nagging I experience of replaying the situation over and over again in my mind will not quiet and finally when I cannot sleep, that I am then forced to reflect on what has transpired.

I am not intending to be radical when I kiss Kathy; however, in the absence of visible lesbian affection in the media, in public places, at social and family gatherings, and in the presence of questions such as, *"what point are they trying to make by flaunting their sexuality?"* or statements such as, *"I don't care if someone is a lesbian, I just don't want to see it",* Catie Curtis' lyrics reveal microaggressions and give voice to the demand for a response.

2007: More decisions

Almost 10 years after my initial "coming out" I made the difficult choice to move away from my family, friends and support systems in California to move to Newfoundland to legally marry Kathy and equally parent our two children. From the time I first 'outed' myself and possibly earlier I began learning to attune to the subtleties of how those close to me, acquaintances and those with whom I had relatively no relationship, responded to my performance as a lesbian. These skills continue to be relevant today. Many feminist, poststructuralists, postmodern and queer theorists suggest that we "perform" identities in accordance or deviance from the dominant discourse rather than embody identities (Butler, 1999; Warner, 1993). Through my performances of lesbian and therapist, my ability to attune to experiences in the context of dominant discourses has become well developed. These roles demand that I "pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts and emotions" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 737). I try to understand both past and present experiences, and similar to autoethnographers "by exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life" (p.737).

Lived experience and intuitive knowledge: influencing research

January 20, 2013: The opportunity to reflect while in the shower presents itself as my two young children graciously nap at the same time. I ponder recent readings, interactions with colleagues, relationships and music that narrates my life. I wonder why the academy "doesn't insist on personal accountability in research, why we give weight to categorical knowledge rather than to direct testimony of personal narrative and first person voice" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 734). I must remember in the work I do with LGBTQ school personnel in trying to understanding their experiences, my personal knowledge of microaggressions and how these relate to school communities and cultures; that they must not be considered as objects. I am not an object, nor are those who open themselves in researching with me. I think about how I expose myself as a therapist, how I am fierce in my commitment to the process of co-creating, co-exploring and honoring the clients who choose to work with me toward their desired alternative stories. How can I hold to this practice as I become a researcher within the academy? I reflect on a comment a colleague made recently to me, "perhaps you are more comfortable with vulnerability than most of us in the academy, maybe this is because you have already faced the fear that comes with great risk, such as 'coming out' and because of societies' requirement that you expose yourself daily in living an 'out' life". Could it be that I see vulnerability differently than others, as a source of strength rather than weakness? Again, I must remember to make every effort to try to see and understand those who participate in research with me. How do I remain open? How can I suspend assumptions, avoid labeling and make room for stories? As a researcher I need to become a better listener, to others and myself. I must bring with me my 'therapist self' to become the researcher I want to be.

The Indigo Girls come to mind again; their music has streamed alongside my life. As the water beats down over me and my eyes fix on the lightly red colored water from my recently dyed hair, I reflect on how the honesty, vulnerability, ambiguity and dilemmas in their music evoke emotions, questions and thoughts which cannot be ignored, they require my attention and draw in the 'whole me'. They use personal ethnography when they open themselves to themselves and to their audience. They allow others to drop resistance to different ideas through their music (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The Indigo Girls must be ethnographers of the soul; their music opens up conversations with both my mind and spirit.

Unforeseen gifts

In 1998, I made the decision in a heterosexist and heteronormative society, to take what seemed like an enormous risk. It was a time when Ellen DeGeneres' sitcom had just been canceled shortly after both she and her character 'came out' in real life and on screen, before *Will and Grace* - the longest running sitcom with principle gay characters; and long before the *"It Gets Better Project,"* a response to several teens taking their own life after experiences of bullying at school. (About the It Gets Better Project section, para. 2). I was living in the United States, it was the year the Defense of Marriage Act was signed into law and when same sex marriage was not legal in any U.S. State or any other country. It was at this time when lesbian parents were often featured in the news fighting for legal rights to parent their children and LGBTQ hate crimes were being frequently reported, that I decided to 'come out' to the people most important in my life. These peoples' opinions mattered to me; whose beliefs about me I would struggle to dismiss if they rejected my 'lesbian status'. In that one moment I decided to face my ultimate fear, dismissal of my worth, my experience and my humanity. I found a life worth living.

Undivided

Elrenna Evans (2008) describes the following concept in *Fitting In*: "the academy's 'floating head' syndrome; how people are expected to function as disembodied brains, not connected to bodies or families or any sort of life outside of academic pursuits" (p. 51). I am not a "floating head" nor are the students and research participants who choose to do this work. I strive for my research to be evocative, demonstrate reflexivity and affect the audience both emotionally and intellectually (Richardson, 2000a). I hope my expression of reality will promote empathy, encourage dialogue and contribute to better conversation about microaggressions and LGBTQ equity "in the face of all the barriers and boundaries that make conversation difficult" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748). I aim for the reader to generate new questions, be drawn to try new research practices, to write and be moved into action. Through their use of self-exposure, the Indigo Girls music, lyrics and accounts of culture, social, and individual stories offer a credible sense of lived experience, one that allows me to make my own judgments about their point of view and requires the 'whole me' (Richardson, 2000a, 2000b). As a researcher, I seek to evoke similar reactions and response.

At times I wonder if my vulnerability, my relentless self-exposure, my commitment to revealing the unexposed will result in harm to myself or to my family's well being? My answer: lead further with vulnerability and share this experience by naming these fears. Even as I write with sweaty palms and a rapid heartbeat, I am aware of how I reveal myself as a 'researcher' who is intimately intertwined with her 'research' and who is opening the door to significant potential criticism for my lack of objectivity and bias. I have chosen as a researcher, lesbian, partner and parent not to attempt to validate my relationship, my family or my worth through models of deviance. I refuse to engage in comparing LGBTQ and heterosexual people, couples and families as means of measurement aimed at deeming LGBTQ persons equal. This type of measurement sits in judgment of my existence, relationships, and suitability to marry and parent. My family and I, our children, our communities don't need approval, we need a better way to engage in difficult conversations, to collaborate, honor and be honored. I am excited about my alignment with a theoretical position that believes in a "radical transformation in the goals of our work" as researchers and academics, "from description to communication" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748).

Leading with vulnerability as a researcher, lesbian, partner, parent, and mother in the academy means taking risks. It means that if I find myself in a circumstance where there are no visible allies with more experience than I, then rather than doubt my own experience; I must trust it.

Through research I hope to aid the academy in moving toward conversations that will help all of us in society understand the pervasiveness and harm of environmental, behavioral and verbal LGBTQ microaggressions. Conversations that will offer insight, stimulate thought, and require reflection as to the role of microggressions in my experience. Specifically, in my experience of feeling visible and understood as a young child by my father, as a young adult "coming out" feeling invisible and misunderstood and as a parent why I strive to remain open to hearing, seeing and understanding my children the way my father sought to hear, see and understand me. Conversations that will engage us with the significance of understanding LGBTQ peoples' experiences of microaggressions, thoughtfulness about how we conduct research with LGBTQ people and what meanings can be drawn from mine and others' stories. Conversations that will cause us to pause when hearing that at my fathers' funeral two years ago, in my speech honoring

his life I reflected the following, " perhaps the greatest gift my father has given me is to remember that as a parent my role is to love my children, support them and make room for them to become. I received this gift through my experience of being his child." Conversations that will help us understand how I became visible again to my father, felt seen, heard and understood by him in my thirties, and always felt fiercely loved.

So how did I become a researcher? I showed up for my life, not as a 'disembodied head' as I thought would be required of me to claim the title of 'researcher' but with the 'whole me'. I tune into my experience and work to attune to others; I grapple with how to share these experiences in a manner that will be meaningful both to the world and to me.

How long till my soul gets it right?
Can any human being ever reach that kind of light?
I call on the resting soul of Galileo
King of night vision, King of insight - Galileo (Indigo Girls, 1992)

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