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Prospecting for gold: finding your guide

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Lyndsay is a senior lecturer in Teacher Education and Applied Theatre, whose PhD research brought these disciplinary fields into fruitful dialogue with Trans Studies. She is currently co-researching trans+ inclusion in education, particularly in PE, Sport and Dance.

LGBT+ research can be a highly specialised area and therefore it is important researchers locate institutions and supervisors that have the necessary expertise: this section will discuss what could be involved and how to seek out potential supervisors.

Denial, self-doubt, displacement/distraction are not the exclusive preserve of LGBT+ people or indeed anyone considering research, but we do know that LGBT+ people often anticipate rejection. Ilan Meyer in 2003, in a frequently cited article, describes how prior experience of prejudice events, rejection or its anticipation and sometimes internalised homophobia, result in what he terms 'minority stress' (Meyer, 2003). This concept helps explain the accentuated level of challenge, effort, time and soul-searching I experienced as I edged towards the possibility of undertaking a PhD. It put a name to the impact of the stigma, prejudice, and discrimination I'd known about, lived with and navigated for roughly four decades previously.

Like many LGBT+ people, I was aware that whilst the Gender Recognition Act (2004) and the Equality Act (2010) combined to create a much-needed legal framework of recognition and protection in the UK, it was no guarantee of general acceptance, including in university spaces and by academics. I started to read, research and explore, gradually becoming more conscious of how my personal biography sat within a wider context of our LGBT+ history, and of the tensions, controversies, and multiplicities within it. My approach was to 'edge in' and test the water with LGBT+ support networks and public engagement

events, particularly those hosted within academic institutions/contexts. I attended two events hosted by Gendered Intelligence, a trans led, trans involving UK based charity that works to increase understandings of gender diversity and improve the lives of trans people (Gendered Intelligence, 2024). One event was about trans+ playwrighting/scriptwriting – as a route towards a more trans-authored/trans informed representation of Trans and Non-Binary (TNB) people, and the other was a talk by the trans author-activist Kate Bornstein, whose classic text *Gender Outlaw* (Bornstein, 1995), I had read. Through these small steps, I gradually gained sufficient confidence to attend the *Trans Studies Now* conference at the University of Sussex, in 2015, which provided me with a contemporary ‘map’ of the intellectual territory, informed by writers, speakers and researchers with lived experiences related to their areas of enquiry. I felt re-assured that this was an environment that I could, potentially, step into; controversies and differences were discussed, ideas and views critiqued, interesting and challenging questions were posed, but no one was attacked intellectually, emotionally (or physically). My conference experience was not only positive and welcoming but helped me further survey the territory and start to orientate myself personally as well as intellectually within it.

Despite Brighton's reputation as the 'LGBT by the sea' capital of the south, and the University of Sussex, policy of being LGBT+ inclusive (signposting of all gender toilets, as an illustration of this in practice), and given that the *Trans Studies Now* 2015 conference was hosted there, did I feel I had struck gold? Not yet. However, **all** these events opened up in person conversations and insights that I would never have benefitted from, if I had *only* used the internet. This was, for me, vital, in searching beneath generic institutional/organisational policy, important though that is, to work out when it *actually*

means that you'll feel welcomed and could belong in a particular space: again, LGBT+ people especially have, regrettably, a backlog of lived experiences that create doubt and caution.

I was mindful of finding a place and a space where I might be welcomed and understood, both personally, and professionally. Where might I find somewhere that had expertise in my areas of interest, namely Applied Theatre, Education *and* Trans Studies? Manchester's gay village around Canal Street was not unknown to me: the world's largest free-to-attend celebration of gender diversity, the 'sparkle weekend' is held in Sackville Gardens, where the national transgender memorial is located. The *Sexuality Summer School* is a five-day event for postgraduates, which has been organised by the Centre for the Study of Sexuality and Culture (CSSC) at the University of Manchester since 2008 and is funded by the Faculty of Humanities, Manchester Pride and *Screen*. It brings together postgraduates, international scholars, as well as artists and filmmakers, to facilitate dialogue that speaks to contemporary debates in queer and feminist sexuality studies, with a particular emphasis on the interdisciplinary study of culture. Manchester University also has one of the most significant, well-established drama departments in the UK, including expertise in the field of Applied Theatre.

So, was there someone in Manchester who might be prepared to supervise my research? I deduced from dipping into several 'how to get a PhD' type books, that your relationship with your supervisor is probably the most crucial variable that will affect your research journey. After reading the Manchester University drama department research profiles there didn't (at that time) seem to be anyone specifically committed to LGBT+ research. However, I was drawn towards *Refugees, theatre and crisis: performing global identities* (Jeffers, 2012). Polite emails were exchanged about my interest in this work, which explores the

kinds of bureaucratic performance in which refugees can become enmeshed, casting them as people who confirm to cultural expectations of suffering, passivity and silence. I arranged to meet the author to discuss what I might be interested in researching and a conversation began then, which continued through my seven years of part time PhD study. Combined with the generous expertise and guidance of 2nd and 3rd supervisors (with lived experience and/or research expertise in the field of gender performativity, sexuality, and applied drama) my 'prospecting' had struck gold. This gold supported me to continue to shift the historical arc of research from minoritized people as objects of enquiry towards TNB people becoming authors of research, highlighted by the editors of *Transgender Studies Reader 2* as a plea to contest the ways in which the 'university assumes its faculty, staff and students to be non-transgendered' (Stryker & Aizura, 2013, p. 6). I went on to propose adopting Sara Ahmed's position from *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) to cite work in my research, which has contributed to what she calls the genealogy of the discipline. Her citational policy, that this is how we acknowledge our debt to those who 'came before' and those who 'helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 15) is a helpful steer for LGBT+ research and researchers.

Key Takeaways

- **Survey the territory:** events; conferences; blogs; publications and research!
- **Prospect for gold** - look beyond institutional policy, for evidence of LGBT+ inclusion as a lived and felt reality.
- **Seek your guide(s)** who will 'get you' and support, guide and challenge you through your research.

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