RESEARCH COMMENTARY

How Being Trans Superpowered My Research For The Better

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THE PROMISE OF SCIENCE

The idea of being a doctor seemed impossible to me until I entered the twilight of my undergraduate career. Before this time, I imagined graduate school as a hub that was exclusively for geniuses involved in the disciplines of medicine, engineering, physics, and what people consider the "hard sciences." However, this preconceived image and my academic trajectory expanded when I took a required research methods class. What I greatly appreciated about the class was that instead of learning very deeply about a topic or an overview of a discipline, I was learning about the process of creating and understanding scientific knowledge. My research methods class, in addition to other interests, displayed just how I could be more than a consumer in the process of truth seeking, but an active agent.

FINDING MY RESEARCH LANE

My first few years of graduate school mostly involved figuring out my lane as a researcher. I had some inkling that I wanted to study some aspect of popular culture, but I did not necessarily feel a gravitational pull to any particular topic. Even when I settled on my thesis topic, it felt more as if I was taking the path of convenience than truly exploring something that spoke deeply to me. Simultaneously, I was blossoming into my trans identity and increasingly becoming aware of the numerous ways in which transness was (and still is) stigmatized. I worried about whether I would become a victim of fatal violence at the hands of a person who felt "deceived" by my transness. I wondered if my newfound access to women's bathrooms would always be permitted. I also contemplated how society characterized trans and non-binary people generally, and the implications of such characterizations. Media coverage of transfeminine athletes, particularly regarding the tone and angle of such coverage, was unflattering and negative, or not, was just one of the ways I started to understand how trans, non-binary people, and gender diverse people were characterized. As a trans person, I wanted to understand the mechanisms fueling such coverage. Thus, the seeds of my dissertation research were born both from my growing level of social consciousness as a trans person and a curiosity to explore and understand the mechanisms fueling media coverage of trans athletes.

CHALLENGING THE CISNESS OF IT ALL

Although the seeds of my dissertation research originated with a desire to examine media coverage of trans athletes, my topic eventually shifted to the much broader topic of exploring trans inclusion in sport. Through my regular expeditions into academic and non-academic spheres, I observed not only the lack of research and content related to trans inclusion in sport but also the dissonance between the scholarly literature and media coverage, as well as political narratives. A great amount of nonacademic content centered on the

perspectives of cisgender people and their feelings towards trans inclusion in sport, particularly if it was skeptical of or against such inclusion. In primarily focusing on cis people as the subjects, trans people were generally being talked about as objects and not being fully seen for who they were. While this reality was not exactly surprising to me as a trans researcher who was increasingly understanding how marginalization functioned within society, I knew there was a fundamental issue in having the weaponized voices of some cis people, particularly those of some cis white girls and women, overshadow the lived experiences of those belonging to the trans and gender expansive community.

What I had observed and knew deeply from my own gender transition and that of others, as well as from a mixture of scholarship and nonacademic work, was that being trans was more complicated and less nefarious than what cis-centric media headlines and public figures presented to the public.

FACING AN UPHILL BATTLE

On some level, when initiating my dissertation research, I knew that researching trans inclusion in sport would be an uphill battle. In part, I recognized this again because of how the topic was generally framed in the media and the political realm. I also understood this in terms of coverage, especially since I observed how incredibly sparse the academic literature on trans inclusion in sport was during the preliminary period leading up to my dissertation research. Location was another obstacle that made conducting research difficult. Though I was a graduate student during a paradoxical period of rising levels of trans visibility and of transantagonism throughout the United States, I had the added misfortune of spending the entirety of my time in a part of the country that was more anti-trans than most areas in the country.

Understandably, directly and indirectly experiencing the impacts of anti-trans discourse and legislation made it difficult to conduct research for a while. I increasingly felt like the life that I had scraped and fought for was evaporating. I was concerned that anti-trans legislation would make it harder for me to access

HRT and force me to drive hundreds of miles just for my three-month refills of estradiol and spironolactone. I was concerned that trans and gender diverse people dressing in affirming clothing would eventually be outlawed because the government would define trans people and anything associated with or in proximity to drag as illegal. Generally, I worried that the hope and harmony that many others (including myself) had gained from finding and honoring our truest selves would be crushed by the will of the state simply because we dared to exist.

RESEARCH AS ACTIVISM

Despite feeling and internalizing an overwhelming degree of despair and powerlessness at the state of the world for trans and queer people, I ultimately came to realize that my dissertation research was one of several remedies for these feelings. My research was a remedy because it was one of the most tangible ways that I could serve and uplift the trans and queer community. This did not mean that I would utilize research as a way to ask questions but to ultimately circumvent those questions with predetermined answers. Instead, it meant utilizing the years of deep diving into academic texts, news stories and media headlines, my lived experiences, and more to develop a knowledge base and toolkit to do research on the community and to do it well. It meant doing the hard work and being open-minded to where my dissertation research could go, in terms of the topic, research design, theory, scope, or anything else. It also meant allowing the connection, understanding, and love that I had (and still have) for the trans and queer community to bolster my work, rather than ignore those things out of desire to appear respectable and "truly scientific" in the eyes of some.

Care and hope were the fuel for my research in the sense that both helped me see how the powerlessness and despair (and other feelings) of many trans and gender diverse people could be aggregated into power and validity, even in the face of a country and world that has greatly devolved in its treatment of

trans and queer folks over the past decade. There is resistance and resilience in trans and queer people asserting who we are and how we experience the world, even when it seems like few people are for us. Admittedly, needing to resist and be resilient should not be a reality that exists for trans and queer people, and for anyone. Still, both have played a fundamental role not only in my everyday life as a trans person but also as a trans researcher in the U.S. who wants to use rigorous and responsible academic research to uplift and support the trans and queer community, while also speaking truth to power.