From "Mesearch" to "Wesearch": The Role of Community in Developing Identity-Centric Research

Joseph Winberry[a] and LaVerne Gray[b]

[a]University of Tennessee, U.S.A.

[b]Syracuse University, U.S.A.

jwinber1@vols.utk.edu, lgray01@syr.edu

ABSTRACT

The term "mesearch" has sometimes been used pejoratively to refer to topics of study of personal interest and importance to the individual conducting the research. This paper argues that a valuable research project can emerge from the inherently subjective but also recognizes that the views and experiences of one person are not necessarily representative of others of the same social identity, or community. Using a collaborative autoethnography approach, two researchers from different communities examine their own dissertation journeys, resulting in the conceptualization of three themes (e.g., community presence, social ideation, and group checking) useful in considering what role a person's social group may serve in the development of identity-centric research. Beyond exploring these themes, the researchers apply the identity-centric perspective to the future of Library and Information Science education, asking what role social identity can serve in developing research that is valuable to community members and to academic literature alike.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Community engagement; Intellectual freedom; Social justice; Sociology of information; Specific populations

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Collaborative autoethnography; Community; Doctoral education; Identity; Social group

INTRODUCTION

The term *mesearch* has sometimes been used pejoratively to refer to topics of study thought to be of personal interest and importance to the individual conducting the research (Rios and Roth, 2020). The connotation is that because a topic may be related to the researcher's own identity—such as the researcher's position in a particular social group—the researcher is unable to maintain post-positivist notions of objectivity; the resulting subjectivity is thought to undermine the validity of the study results (Gardner et al., 2017). Several others have discussed the flaws of the notion of absolute objectivity in research (Eisner, 1992; Letherby, Scott, & Williams, 2012; Ratner, 2002). This paper moves beyond the objectivity versus subjectivity debate by adopting the view that a valuable research project can emerge from the inherently subjective: the individual thinking and personal experiences (Song, 2018) which are shaped—at least in part—by the group identity of the researcher (Terry, Hogg, & White, 1999).

We contend that there is value in research which emerges from an identity-centric perspective; we also recognize its limits. No one person can be representative of the views of everyone who shares that identity (Douglas, 2017). Researchers open to conducting identity-centric research would benefit from engaging others who share the same social identity—what can also be called *community*. Community is essential to understanding emerging ways of recognizing, fostering, and sharing knowledge in library and information science (LIS) research, education, and practice. This reflects the "Go back and get it" theme in reference to a Ghanaian metaphor which speaks to "the importance of reaching back to knowledge gained in the past and bringing it into the present in order to make positive progress" into the future (ALISE, 2022, Go Back and Get It: From One Narrative To Many). Each author of this article reaches into the past to bring back knowledge and recognizes the importance of engaging their respective communities in the identification and application of knowledge in order to go from one narrative to many. This conference paper engages a single research question:

(R1) What role can a researcher's community serve in manifesting identity-centric research?

APPROACH

The authors use collaborative autoethnography in order to answer the research question. Collaborative autoethnography refers to a "reflective process of telling, analyzing, and representing" which "provides a space to narrate stories and study them rigorously for what they have to offer others" (Cann and DeMeulenaere, 2020, xxiii). Specifically, the authors examine the origins and development of their respective dissertation projects in order to discuss the role that their community played in its evolution. In telling, comparing, and contrasting their stories, each author recognizes their own positionality within the LIS discipline (Cooke and Kitzie,

2021). Each author approaches the research question as members of different communities and through distinct relationships to the dissertation journey. The first author is a member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender plus (LGBT+) community who at the time of publication is a Ph.D. candidate in the process of completing the dissertation while the second author is a member of the African American community who has already completed the dissertation, graduated, and holds a faculty position.

LEARNING FROM OUR STORIES

In cross-examining our narratives, we recognized three central themes: community presence, social ideation, and group checking. Each theme is named, described, and represented by vignettes of each author's doctoral journey.

Community Presence

Community presence refers to the state of the researcher's consistent engagement with other members of their social group. In discussing community engaged research—studies often done in partnership with geography-based communities—scholars have argued that it is important that researchers build relationships with community members before embarking on research activities (Israel et al., 1998; Ortiz et al, 2020). The same is true in the case of conducting identity-centric research. The process of building community presence begins with conscious recognition of a person's membership in a larger social group such as that when a person recognizes they are a member of the LGBT+ community (Mehra and Braquet, 2011). Beyond recognizing one's membership in a community, there has to be a willingness to participate among fellow members. Membership does create ties between people which often encourages a willingness to participate in the said group (Saviolainen, 2009). Participation among members of the same social group can take many forms, in person and online, and could require overcoming real or perceived barriers to participation (Kitzie, 2018; Vera, Wagner, and Kitzie, 2020).

First author: "As a gay man who grew up in a religious fundamentalist household in the Southern United States, coming to terms with my sexuality was a difficult and protracted journey for me. My first real, sustained engagement with other members of the LGBT+ community was rooted—at first—in my identity as a service provider rather than as a LGBT+ person. I spoke to a community group of older gay men about the threat of elder abuse. Talking with and getting to know them made me think for the first time about what I might be missing out on by not being among my own. Soon afterwards, I began regularly participating in the group and in other activities in the community, such as the LGBT+ PRIDE parade. Any fears I might have had about being seen as one of "them" was overcome by my desire to take part—as well as the privileges I had, acknowledged or not."

Second author: "I was the child who listened. During family gatherings at my grandparents' home in Chicago, I heard them speak of a place called Henry Booth House. In my imagination, I pictured a sprawling mansion like those seen in old movies on late night TV. The house was a community social service center. It was located in the "Ickes," which I later discovered was the Harold Ickes Homes, a governmental low-income housing project. They spoke of their memories of the community, and in my curiosity, I felt a need to carry it forward. I grew up on the Southside of Chicago, a sprawling Black area where migrants, like my grandparents, escaped the Jim Crow South. My world consisted of my intimate family unit led by a single mother and two other siblings, Catholic school, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and my grandparents. My grandmother played a significant role as she guided both our daily care and religious education. I accompanied her to many community and church meetings, discovering how Black self-determination operated at the grassroots level."

Social Ideation

Social ideation is the series of community-level conversations which can result in identifying topics worthy of addressment. These topics are rooted in the inequities faced by members of a specific social group and may not be representative of challenges faced by people experiencing vulnerabilities that were not related to their identity (Potnis and Winberry, 2021). Beyond the scope of topic, social ideation can also bring attention to issues that may not be addressed by wider society (Conradie et al., 2016). Lastly, since it involves recognizing issues that affect certain communities, social ideation by researchers of the same community may reduce research fatigue and contribute to new ways of thinking about research topics in formats that makes them useful for those in the study (Ashley, 2021).

Second author: "My Blackness and femaleness is a source of pride. Black in my experience is always beautiful and womanhood is rooted in immeasurable power. However, like other Black women, I soon discovered that society's response attempts to diminish that beauty and power. My development was in the comfort of the immenseness of the Black community in Chicago and later at a HBCU (Historically Black College & University). The sheltering protected me from a White world that limited Black women to tropes like: Mammy, Jezebel, & Sapphire (Collins, 2000). Those stereotypes in my intimate community experiences were nonexistent. Once faced with the punitive way in which Black womanhood is regulated by white patriarchy to limited expression of themselves, I sought to explore the empowerment and agency I was so familiar with. Out of the familial experience in public housing and the uniting force of the settlement house, my topic found me. Women, like my grandmother, forged together for the betterment of children in the community. The meaning of such in the library and information science theoretical landscape is absent. The topic found me, and in examining their experience, I found myself."

First author: "At first, my meeting with the gay men was similar to those I had with other groups. But while most of the groups I had spoken to before kept their questions related to the specifics of elder abuse, the attendees from the group moved the conversation to a larger topic: What is going to happen to me as I age? Participants shared how they had lost their jobs—

sometimes in a very public fashion—because they were gay. Others described how coming out to families resulted in permanent disownment. A few described their own battle with AIDS and what it was like to see friends die by the dozen with minimal response from their own government. This was the first time I had heard directly from older members of the community themselves about the struggles they encountered and the strengths they harnessed. I was so moved by the discussion that I would tell other people in my life about the experience. More than one person said to me, upon hearing the story, that they did not think of gay people as getting older. It was around then that I realized that no wonder the group took the conversation where they did; straight people might have little problem in moving to a supportive facility as they aged. But what if that facility refused to serve older LGBT+ people or what if prejudiced caregivers would not provide good care to these individuals once they were in a facility? The initial conversation with the gay men—and the reactions I got in telling people afterwards— brought me to my ultimate dissertation topic."

Group Checking

Member checking in qualitative research refers to sharing your interpretations of the data with the study participants in order to ensure that it is representative of their experiences (Candela, 2019). Group checking, as described here, is similar in the sense that it involves engaging with members of your shared social identity in order to strengthen your own ability to analyze identity-centric data. Specifically, it involves multiple components, the first being early checking or engaging with community members prior to collecting your data; this is a common activity in community-based participatory research (Viswanathan et al., 2004). Even after data collection begins, however, group checking can provide a useful opportunity for refreshing one's community lens in continuing the data analysis (Cupid, 2020). Lastly, once the study is complete, it is important to connect back with community members in order to disseminate findings which may reinforce or identify new areas of research needed (Chen et al., 2010).

First author: "My dissertation journey is still unfolding. As someone who came across the idea for his dissertation project on LGBT+ older adult information needs while in his twenties, it is likely that I would not have uncovered this important topic without engaging with older members of the LGBT+ community. As I went about preparing my dissertation proposal, I was sure to reach back out to this group and to others in the local LGBT+ community for their thoughts, opinions, recommendations, and above all else, their voices. This work continues because of their example through the generations and as they enter their golden years, all members of the community—and beyond—should ensure that LGBT+ older adults can age with dignity. My dissertation is one contribution to this effort."

Second author: "Armed with a topic that reflected my identity as a Black woman, community spirit, and familial legacy—I crafted a dissertation out of a consciousness of resistance. I released a new way of thinking of information in the context of the Black women's collective existence. In the lines of the text, I express a complete picture of activism, race, history, family, community, womanhood, and information. I realized through the effort that I had been theory making all my life. In the company of women in the LIS profession, I brought

forward that way of knowing and operating in the world that nurtured my development. My struggle with the self in research was reconciled by the conviction to imagine the contours of my Black womanhood reflected in the LIS landscape. The resulting product reflected myself and a tribute to my identity, elevating the discourse on the meaning of information in so-called marginal spaces. The collectivism of women of color sustained me in that journey and supported a vision that uncovered an under-investigated area of information experience. The "me" communes with the "we" to expand identity and cultural connections to information studies."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic increased scrutiny of the challenges that members of some groups face in society (Gibson et al., 2020; Pionke, 2020; Winberry, 2021). In considering where LIS education goes from here, the discipline must continue to be innovative in how it approaches the numerous challenges as well as opportunities that exist for members of marginalized populations. This includes continually recognizing and spotlighting the legitimacy of marginalized ways of knowing which benefits both the people in our discipline and those we serve (Patin et al., 2020), growing social justice inclusive research (Colón-Aguirre and Bright 2022), and keeping a critical eye on doctoral education (Gray and Mehra, 2021). This paper has focused its energy on the latter, bringing attention to how a community approach to identity-centered research can benefit both the individuals who participate and the discipline itself.

Doctoral students interested in identity-centric research should be encouraged to look beyond the Ivory Tower in finding role models and mentors for dissertation work. More mentors are needed who recognize the value in this work and encourage their students to follow through on projects that can make a difference for their communities. As LIS programs make decisions around hiring, tenure, and promotion, they should ask if blanket diversity and inclusion statements are enough; sometimes the best way is to turn words into actions by investing in faculty, students, and projects which have real world benefits for social justice, such as identity-centric research. By applying and expanding the three themes put forth in this paper, future researchers can expand the impact of community, grow the body of identity-centric studies, and affirm the value of collective understanding of knowledge.

REFERENCES

ALISE. (2022). "Go back and get it: From one narrative to many." *Association For Library and Information Science Education.* Retrieved from https://www.alise.org/2022-annual-conference

Ashley, F. (2021). Accounting for research fatigue in research ethics. *Bioethics*, *35*(3), 270-276. https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.12829

Cann, C., & DeMeulenaere, E. (2020). The activist academic: Engaged scholarship for resistance, hope and social change. Gorham, Maine: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Candela, A. G. (2019). Exploring the function of member checking. *The Qualitative Report*, *24*(3), 619-628. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/exploring-function-member-checking/docview/2213787326/se-2

Chen, P. G., Diaz, N., Lucas, G., & Rosenthal, M. S. (2010). Dissemination of results in community-based participatory research. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *39*(4), 372-378. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2010.05.021

Collins, P. H. (2000). Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment. New York, NY: Routledge.

Colón-Aguirre, M., & Bright, K. (2022). Incorporating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) into Research. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 63(3). DOI: 10.3138/jelis-2021-0013

Cooke, N. A., & Kitzie, V. L. (2021). Outsiders-within-Library and Information Science: Reprioritizing the marginalized in critical sociocultural work. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24449

Conradie, P. D., Herregodts, A. L., De Marez, L., & Saldien, J. (2016, December). Product ideation by persons with disabilities: An analysis of lead user characteristics. In *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Software Development and Technologies for Enhancing Accessibility and Fighting Info-exclusion* (pp. 69-76). https://doi.org/10.1145/3019943.3019954

Cupid, S. (2020). *"It Felt Like Home:" Exploring Practices and Mentoring Experiences among Black Doctoral Women and Black Faculty Women in Sister Circles at Mid-Atlantic Universities* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, Baltimore County).

Dym, B., Brubaker, J. R., Fiesler, C., & Semaan, B. (2019). "Coming Out Okay" Community Narratives for LGBTQ Identity Recovery Work. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *3*(CSCW), 1-28. https://doi.org/10.1145/3359256

Douglas, T. R. (2017). My Reasonable Response: Activating Research, MeSearch, and WeSearch to Build Systems of Healing. *Critical Education*, *8*(2). https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v8i2.186223

Eisner, E. (1992). Objectivity in educational research. *Curriculum inquiry*, *22*(1), 9-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.1992.11075389

Gardner, S. K., Hart, J., Ng, J., Ropers-Huilman, R., Ward, K., & Wolf-Wendel, L. (2017). "Me-search": Challenges and opportunities regarding subjectivity in knowledge construction. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, Vol. 8 No. 2, pp. 88-108. https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-D-17-00014

Gibson, A. N., Chancellor, R. L., Cooke, N. A., Dahlen, S. P., Patin, B., & Shorish, Y. L. (2020). Struggling to breathe: COVID-19, protest and the LIS response. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, *40*(1), 74-82. https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-07-2020-0178

Gray, L., & Mehra, B. (2021). Going Against the Current of Hegemonic "White-IST" Discourse: A Doctoral Program Journey from Critical Student+ Guide Perspectives. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, *62*(2), 182-200. DOI: 10.3138/jelis.2020-0056

Guzik, E. (2013). Representing Ourselves in Information Science Research: A Methodological Essay on Autoethnography/La représentation de nous-mêmes dans la recherche en sciences de l'information: Essai méthodologique sur l'auto-ethnographie. *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, *37*(4), 267-283. 10.1353/ils.2013.0025

Israel, B. A., Schulz, A. J., Parker, E. A., & Becker, A. B. (1998). Review of community-based research: assessing partnership approaches to improve public health. *Annual review of public health*, *19*(1), 173-202. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.19.1.173

Kitzie, V. (2018). "I Pretended to be a Boy on the Internet": Navigating Affordances and Constraints of Social Networking Sites and Search Engines for LGBTQ+ Identity Work. *First Monday*, *23*(7). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v23i7.9264

Letherby, G., Scott, J., & Williams, M. (2012). *Objectivity and subjectivity in social research*. London: Sage.

Mehra, B., & Braquet, D. (2011). Progressive LGBTQ reference: coming out in the 21st century. *Reference Services Review*, *39*(3), 401-422. DOI 10.1108/00907321111161403

Nash, R. J., & Bradley, D. L. (2011). *Me-search and re-search: A guide for writing scholarly personal narrative manuscripts.* Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing.

Ortiz, K., Nash, J., Shea, L., Oetzel, J., Garoutte, J., Sanchez-Youngman, S., & Wallerstein, N. (2020). Partnerships, processes, and outcomes: A health equity–focused scoping meta-review of community-engaged scholarship. *Annual Review of Public Health*, *41*, 177-199. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-publhealth-040119-094220

Patin, B., Sebastian, M., Yeon, J., & Bertolini, D. (2020). Toward epistemic justice: An approach for conceptualizing epistemicide in the information professions. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, *57*(1), e242. https://doi.org/10.1002/pra2.242

Pionke, J. J. (2020). COVID-19, accessibility, and libraries: A call to action. *College & Research Libraries News*, *81*(8), 398-399. https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.81.8.398

Potnis, D.D. and Winberry, J. (2021), "Seven information practices for alleviating information vulnerability", *Journal of Documentation*, *78*(4), 835-852. https://doi-org.utk.idm.oclc.org/10.1108/JD-05-2021-0106

Ratner, C. (2002, September). Subjectivity and objectivity in qualitative methodology. In *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (Vol. 3, No. 3). https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-3.3.829

Rios, K., & Roth, Z. C. (2020). Is "me-search" necessarily less rigorous research? Social and personality psychologists' stereotypes of the psychology of religion. *Self and Identity*, *19*(7), 825-840. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2019.1690035

Savolainen, R. (2009). Small world and information grounds as contexts of information seeking and sharing. *Library & Information Science Research*, *31*(1), 38-45. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2008.10.007

Song, H. (2018). "Sources of research ideas." In Allen (ed.). *The Sage Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods.* Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Tatara, T. (Ed.). (1999). *Understanding elder abuse in minority populations*. Psychology Press: Hove, United Kingdom.

Terry, D. J., Hogg, M. A., & White, K. M. (1999). The theory of planned behaviour: self-identity, social identity and group norms. *British journal of social psychology*, *38*(3), 225-244. https://doi.org/10.1348/014466699164149

Vera, A. N., Wagner, T. L., & Kitzie, V. L. (2020). "When it's Time to Come Together, We Come Together": Reconceptualizing Theories of Self-efficacy for Health Information Practices within LGBTQIA+ Communities. In *Roles and Responsibilities of Libraries in Increasing Consumer Health Literacy and Reducing Health Disparities*. Emerald Publishing Limited.

Viswanathan, M., Ammerman, A., Eng, E., Garlehner, G., Lohr, K. N., Griffith, D., ... & Whitener, L. (2004). Community-based participatory research: Assessing the evidence: Summary. *AHRQ evidence report summaries*.

Winberry, J. (2021). Student perspectives of LIS education in an aging society: Initial findings. 2021 ALISE Conference, virtual. https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/items/118793