

Chapter 10

Performative Heterosexuality: A Gay Researcher Doing Fieldwork in Central Asia



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Abstract This chapter explores the challenges faced by a foreign gay researcher in Central Asia. Drawing on personal experiences, the author reflects on the limited choices available to LGBTQ+ researchers to protect themselves, the practicalities and consequences of hiding one's sexuality, and the limitations of performing a heterosexual male identity in the field. The author explains the strategies employed to protect their safety and the ethical consequences of silencing their own identity and values. The author also emphasises how choices made by researchers studying Central Asia become permanent features of their professional life due to long-lasting involvement in the region.

Keywords Positionality · LGBTQ+ · Masculinity · Fieldwork · Safety

Introduction

The situation of LGBTQ+ rights in Central Asia is troubling and “social stigma, homophobia, and harassment are widespread” (Talant, 2022). Caravanistan, a popular tourist guide for travels along the Silk Roads reports that “stories of homosexuals being beaten, raped (if a woman) or ultimately murdered are depressingly common” and that “you would not want to be too open about your sexual orientation anywhere [in the region]” (2019). In two out of five Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, male homosexuality is even punishable by law (Dall’Agnola, 2023b). It is in this context that my experience as a gay researcher doing fieldwork in Central Asia took place. When confronted with the question of personal safety, I decided to hide my sexuality to protect my safety in the field, a common choice for LGBTQ+ researchers (Hughes, 2018; Ragen, 2017). The challenges that my choice produced and the consequences arising from it are the topic of this article.

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Recent research in queer studies has focused on sexuality and membership in the LGBTQ+ community in discussing the intersectional challenges in social research (Browne & Nash, 2016; Heil, 2021; Stenson, 2022). However, it is far less common to discuss the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ researchers outside queer studies (Zebracki & Greatrick, 2022). In the field of post-Soviet studies, many women researchers, some of whom are part of the LGBTQ+ community (Kamarauskaitė, 2023), have researched the position of a woman doing fieldwork in Eurasia, however, there is no research that combines area studies with a discussion on the positionality of a gay man, particularly in Central Asia.

After collocating my journey in the literature, I will use some anonymised stories from my fieldwork to discuss my positionality as a gay foreign researcher who is hiding his identity. My reflections expose the consequences of my performative heterosexuality in the Central Asian context, as well as the effect of applying a preconceived idea of masculinity in Central Asia in limiting the space for the expression of personal ideas and values, therefore empowering heteronormative behaviours. I will also discuss the limited choices that an LGBTQ+ researcher is confronted with and the effects of the compromises we need to accept. Finally, I will underline how alternative choices could have been possible, particularly given that the status of Central Asian studies makes some of these choices a permanent feature of my professional life.

Performing Heterosexuality During Fieldwork

I agree with Zebracki and Greatrick's (2022) critique that the distinction between being inside and outside the field for members of the LGBTQ+ community is not clearcut. In the context of Central Asia, the researcher-respondent relationship is even more complex. The status of "area expert" muddles the distinction between being inside and outside the field, where the entrance in the field is clearcut, but the exit disappears. The field involves the entire professional life of a researcher and does not necessarily stop when the fieldwork ends.

Feminist scholars have described gender as performative and socially constructed (Butler, 1990; Cupples, 2002). Some important research has been dedicated in Central Asian studies to female researchers and the influence of being a woman doing fieldwork in Central Asia (Thibault, 2021; Turlubekova, 2023). Taking from this precious work, I turn to discuss the challenges of performing the role of a heterosexual man to hide my LGBTQ+ identity, resting on the concept of performative male gender. When discussing the importance of sex and sexuality in fieldwork settings, Cupples (2002, 383) writes that "when we go into the field, we often go as members of a group of people of which our researched community already has a preconceived image". This means that going into the field as a Western heterosexual man will not only create expectations about my race and nationality, around for example liberal values, but also about my masculinity, which will in turn be influenced by culturally specific ideas of what it means to be a man in Central Asia. At the same time, attempts

at being “culturally sensitive” mean that male foreign researchers might decide to stress or hide aspects of their identity depending on their preconceived idea of what is expected from them in the cultural context (Cupples, 2002; Linneken in Flinn et al., 1998).

The hegemonic status of heterosexuality influences the expectations around what it means to be a proper man, or woman, in a heteronormative sense. Jackson (2006) provides a complete account of the normative aspects of heterosexuality as a complete social act. According to him, being a heterosexual man does not only imply having sex with women, but also a full set of behaviours that make a specific and culturally connotated heterosexual man. The use of “heterosexual normative behaviour” to construct an idea of a traditional man is very common, and is a known phenomenon in the post-Soviet space (Kudaibergenova, 2019). My act in the field can be considered performative heterosexuality, but this conceptualisation of heteronormativity implies that mine might not have been the only performance. When leaving the public space, however, the role of my homosexuality as a hidden identity has formed part of my experience of the field. In this discussion, I take from the literature on clashes of values and other personal circumstances between researchers’ and their participants or assistants (Dall’Agnola, 2023a).

All the reflections above on being a male LGBTQ+ Western scholar in the discipline of Central Asia studies rest on the assumption that the “stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political concept of the study” and “the researcher’s insider or outsider relationship to the community engaged with the enquiry” (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, 1) influences their research. The insider/outsider aspect of my positionality is a central aspect of this research in that, by hiding my real position as a gay man for my personal safety, I played with the boundaries of privilege and reduced the intersectional challenges that can impact fieldwork research. Intersectionality is defined here as “the assertion that social identity categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability are interconnected and operate simultaneously to produce experiences of both privilege and marginalisation” (Smooth, 2013, 11). However, as expressed above, the personal and private side of my choices entails the alienation of a real personal connection with the field, the choice of research over personal connections. These theoretical reflections will be explored through a number of model situations that I will modify sufficiently to prevent recognition by anyone involved while retaining enough to maintain their reflective purpose.

Hiding in Plain Sight

During the process of attaining ethical approval at my university, I soon noticed that no guidance was available for LGBTQ+ researchers on protecting their own safety during fieldwork, and that much of the literature was related to LGBTQ+ researchers doing research on queer communities, and thus often focussed on respondents more than researchers (Anonymous, 2021; Dodd, 2013; Heil, 2021). Through my funding

body, I was put in contact with a network of LGBTQ+ researchers, which was in the process of producing a handbook for LGBTQ+ researchers doing research in difficult contexts, and to which I have contributed (Zebracki & Greatrick, forthcoming). Through engagement with this community, I was finally able to design a strategy for my fieldwork.

The first step of my strategy was to polish my online presence by removing any reference to my sexuality from social media, something which has now become a permanent choice due to my professional connection with Central Asia. This resulted in my political engagement in the LGBTQ+ community being relegated to the personal sphere in an act of self-censorship (Ho, 2008). The second aspect of my online strategy was to protect my personal information through the use of security apps, such as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), password managers and constant vigilance on my profiles. In one case, I received a suspicious public comment under a post on one of my social media profiles referring to the treatment of homosexuality in the place where I was about to do fieldwork. While I have no proof that the person who wrote it was aware of my sexuality, this episode imposed a reflection on the potential danger of cybersurveillance of researchers' online presence, and the impacts of this on physical and mental safety, particularly in the case of LGBTQ+ researchers.

In the offline realm, my decision was to be as open as possible with local authorities in terms of what my research was about. This is not the preferred choice for many researchers as it implies a scrutiny of one's research project, as well as a connection with local institutions, often expressions of the local government. In my case, this choice arose from the strategy of "hiding in plain sight", where public engagement with local authorities functioned as a safeguard for my own personal safety. This, in turn, played with my insider/outsider perspective, giving me privileged institutional access with which to conduct my research.

Moving to the personal consequences of my safety strategy, getting back into the closet had an important effect on my perspective on the fieldwork. In particular, the personal connections that I have built throughout my time in the region, although very developed in some cases, were based on a partial sharing of my own identity. At the same time, however, a partial polishing of LGBTQ+ identity is perfectly common in European societies. According to Greatrick (2021), members of the LGBTQ+ community have been trained all their lives to hide and are, therefore, uniquely equipped to be able to assess the extent of compromises they are going to accept in the context of fieldwork. It is, therefore, important to note that my personal experience is based on specific choices that were not imposed on me by any institutions, nor should they have been. This implies consequently that other choices could have been made. One night when I was in the field, a friend who was and still is not aware of my sexuality invited me to a performance. When I sat down to a two-hour narration of an LGBTQ+ story, I was hit by a mix of amazement, fear and admiration. LGBTQ+ communities and people exist everywhere, and my choice to go back to the closet removed the agency of my local contacts to accept my sexuality and engage positively with my identity (Sou, 2021).

Comradery and Rituality in Central Asia

While I made sure never to directly lie to anyone about myself, I have misled my contacts to assume that I was a heterosexual man. In the society that I found myself in, women and men tend to socialise in separated groups. Hence, the core of my social activities happened among men. Some of these contexts involved discussions about women that assumed everyone in the room was attracted to women. Every time I engaged with a woman in professional terms together with a male colleague, comments on their physical appearance would follow that put me in the position of having to reply to direct questions on women's appearance. During meals, the flirting with women colleagues, usually Central Asian, would be relentless, while I would receive gazes from male colleagues looking for a comrade, an insider, with whom to share appreciation for women. While I would never accept such behaviour in my home University, I found myself neutrally commenting on women's physical appearances, as well as responding to men winking at me about their female colleagues. The performative character of my heterosexuality led me to assume that, if I refused to comment on women's appearance, as I am sure many heterosexual colleagues do, I could have endangered my performance.

However, in more in-depth discussion where the level of proximity and comradery was higher, the space for discussions also got larger. For example, when on one occasion, one of my comrades argued that Central Asian women differ from women in Europe in their desire for gender equality and rights, I felt safe enough to disagree. However, even in that situation, I was very careful to refer to men and women in the context of heterosexual relationships and to not talk about my own experience in relationships with women as a gay man. As such, I was stressing the similarities between heteronormative behaviours in Europe and Central Asia without allowing for alternative discussions to permeate our conversations. In playing the role of a liberal Western man, I limited the discussion between my respondents and myself to the heteronormative context. However, through these compromises, I was actually silencing them and myself, avoiding some specific topics of conversation. In short, by performing my role as a heterosexual man, I created obstacles and allowed for those performative behaviours to prevent real/deep connections from forming between my interlocutors and myself.

Another aspect of my heteronormative performance involved my physical interpretation of manhood in Central Asia. I usually wear a long beard, which in Central Asia is perceived as a symbol of religiosity. I discussed this issue with Central Asian colleagues before going to the region and I was advised to cut my beard shorter. Furthermore, the formality of the academic sector in the destination of my fieldwork made it easier for me to disguise my queerness in a smart suit. However, for as much as I was trying to adopt the Central Asian physical appearance of a (heterosexual) man, I was still perceived as a Western man and judged accordingly. While the choice of cutting my beard as well as being overly formal was not fundamental, other expectations of Western men became more central. For example, the habit of drinking alcohol among male colleagues.

Even if Central Asian society is for the majority Muslim, attitudes towards drinking alcohol remain very liberal (Ro'i & Wainer, 2009). This is particularly true at the elite level, with celebratory meals involving several shots of vodka. My sobriety was met with surprise and some disappointment in the region. Drinking has an important role in post-Soviet societies and the decision not to drink comes with consequences in terms of comradery (Hervouet, 2019). In my own story, the decision to quit drinking was to avoid loss of inhibition and control. While alcohol is routinely used by researchers in the post-Soviet space to create rapport (see Hervouet, 2019 and Driscoll, 2015, footnote 38 on page 21 for a good narration), my peculiar position as performative heterosexual stopped me from doing so, as drinking could have revealed sides of myself that I had decided to hide. My decision is also connected with ethical issues arising from the use of alcohol by white men doing research in the Global South, such as power differentials or the effects of alcohol on judgement, as well as the social implications of drinking in terms of gender, class and race (Gillen, 2015). However, renouncing the drinking culture of Central Asian elites surely impacted the depth of connections that I made in the region and any future links that I could use for my career. These career-related obstacles are part of the many aspects of inequality that LGBTQ+ , female and BAME researchers face on a daily basis.

Conclusion

As I have tried to show in this essay, the compromises and contradictions of being an LGBTQ+ researcher in a Central Asian context where LGBTQ+ rights are restricted by law are rarely discussed in written form. While reflecting on my chosen safety strategy before, in and after my fieldwork in Central Asia, I expose the lack of preparation on the side of my university in guiding me in the process of building an ethical strategy and highlight the importance of peer-to-peer networks of support for LGBTQ+ researchers doing fieldwork. I also stress the fact that none of my choices were inevitable and that many of the safety measures I chose to apply to my fieldwork arose from compromises and choices that felt right in my own case, and thus should not be used as a model. My choices will have consequences that go beyond the fieldwork. As an area studies scholar, my engagement with the field did not stop after going back to Europe. Therefore, many of my strategies have become permanent features of my professional life.

At the same time, my decision to hide my identity has removed agency from the Central Asian people I engaged with to interact with my real identity. Sou (2021) writes how the choice of hiding one's own identity withdraws any possibility of people in the fieldwork destination engaging with one's sexuality and contributes to silencing them. I would add that, in the personal sphere, hiding my homosexuality from my peers has made it impossible for my local friends to know me for real. My public position in the field was that of a heterosexual man, which opened the door to a number of privileges, such as access to situations of heterosexual comradery, for me.

At the same time, I performed a heteronormative version of a foreign heterosexual man. While the appearance, behaviour and political ideas of a European heterosexual man are given much larger room to manoeuvre in the Central Asian context, my performative identity restricted my perception of this room and led me to use it only where the conversations happened in a private space.

The choices that LGBTQ+ researchers are forced to make, although contestable, need to be taken into account when discussing inclusivity policies in academic spaces and the ethical considerations of fieldwork research. The effects of being a member of the LGBTQ+ community on researchers' lives and careers, such as renouncing a publication by writing under a pen name, should function as a reminder of the obstacles that our community faces inside and outside the field.

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Marius Honig is a pseudonym, a German translation of the name of the Italian revolutionary queer theorist Mario Mieli. Reading the abstract, it is easy to understand why the author decided to cover up their identity. It suffices to say that the country where the researcher was doing fieldwork is a dangerous place for LGBTQ+ people. The only relevant detail about the researcher that will be shared are that they are from a Western country, they are white, and they are in their 30s and doing research in the social sciences at an early career stage in a European University.

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