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Article:
Rogers, M. orcid.org/0000-0002-7214-4375 and brown, C. (2024) Critical ethical reflexivity (CER) in feminist narrative inquiry: reflections from cis researchers doing social work research with trans and non-binary people. International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 27 (4). pp. 447-461. ISSN 1364-5579

https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2023.2187007

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International Journal of Social Research Methodology

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tsrm20

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To cite this article: Michaela Rogers & Claire brown (2023): Critical ethical reflexivity (CER) in feminist narrative inquiry: reflections from cis researchers doing social work research with trans and non-binary people, International Journal of Social Research Methodology, DOI: 10.1080/13645579.2023.2187007

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2023.2187007

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2023.2187007

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Critical ethical reflexivity (CER) in feminist narrative inquiry: reflections from cis researchers doing social work research with trans and non-binary people

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores issues of reflexivity and knowledge production when cisgender researchers conduct social work research, using feminist narrative methods, to advance understanding about trans and non-binary people's identities and experiences. Cisgender (or 'cis') refers to people who identify with the gender identity assigned to them at birth. The paper examines cis identity, privilege and positionality arguing for a reflexive engagement of the ways in which these influence ethical decision-making and research praxis. In this way, we speak to existing critiques that suggest that only trans and non-binary people should research their own experiences and identities. To address the neglect of gender diversity in education for social work practice and research, we propose that doing social work research with trans and non-binary communities requires cis researchers to adopt critical ethical reflexivity (CER) to scrutinise the impact of gender normativity and its effects in knowledge production for social work.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 June 2022
Accepted 27 February 2023

KEYWORDS
Epistemic humility; gender diversity; insider/outsider research; narrative; transgender

Introduction

Despite rapidly shifting socio-cultural and political attitudes, and the recent increase in scholarship on trans and non-binary identities, Bradford and Syed (2019) claim that existing research on gender diversity has been theoretically isolated from the broader study of identity. This raises epistemological, methodological and ethical concerns for social work research that explores how the intersection of trans and other identities shapes experience. Moreover, advancing ethical research in this area is critical as the lack of curriculum content on gender diversity in social work training is widely reported and results in a knowledge gap in both social work practice *and* research (Hudson-Sharp, 2018; Stevens, 2022). This paper explores the ethics of cisgender social work researchers exploring the identities and experiences of trans and non-binary people through feminist narrative methods (Woodiwiss et al., 2017). Cisgender (hereafter 'cis') refers to people who identify with the gender identity assigned to them at birth, whilst trans and non-binary people identify with a gender identity that is different to that ascribed at birth (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). 'Trans' is used hereafter as a shorthand, but includes people who identify with a multitude of identities across and beyond a gender spectrum.

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We approach the complexities of conducting qualitative social work research, using narrative interviews, with trans people by exploring the contingencies of positionality and privilege. We draw on our experience as doctoral researchers. Rogers' study (2010–13) was an inquiry of trans and non-binary people's experiences of intimate and family violence, help-seeking and interactions with social care. Brown's study (2017–2020) sought to examine the experiences and perspectives of trans and non-binary people and social workers in relation to fostering and adoption social work. Both doctoral projects foregrounded the effects of cisgenderism in the lives of the research participants. 'Cisgenderism' refers to the prejudicial ideology that gender identities differing from that ascribed to a person at birth and defined by social conventions are less valid than cis identities (Ansara & Hegarty, 2014; Rogers, 2017, 2020). Cisgenderism is underpinned by the concepts of gender normativity: first, that gender is binary (constituted by the categories of man and woman), and second, that it is natural and immutable. A related, and useful, concept is that of cisnormativity, defined as the normative component of the cisgenderist social system, a system made for and by cis people that discriminates against trans people (Baril, 2019).

Using a critical lens to examine gender normativity and understand the multiplexity of gender identity was fundamental to an ongoing, iterative process of ethical reflexivity in the authors' projects on domestic abuse, and fostering and adoption (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2006). We are social work researchers and a critical stance also helped to ensure scrutiny of the normative discourse and environments that underpin everyday social work practice. In this paper, we seek to equip other cis researchers to undertake future social work research on gender diversity using critical ethical reflexivity (CER); a tool for ethical sensitive research (Alexander et al., 2018; Sage Dickson-Swift et al., 2008).

This paper develops the concept of CER, originally applied to a phenomenological understanding of language (Murray & Holmes, 2013), for application to anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive research praxis, specifically focusing on the tensions of 'insider/outsider' positionality that can be amplified when conducting narrative inquiry as single researchers. We build upon Murray and Holmes' ideas of critical self-reflexion as a condition necessary for bioethical inquiry and, specifically, upon their conclusion that an embodied theoretical gaze is essential to any endeavour aiming to produce contextualised ethical analysis. In developing the notion of CER, we assert that because the nature of identity is dynamic and constantly evolving (Poulton, 2020), CER must be prioritised as an iterative practice.

We define and develop the parameters of CER later in this paper but, in essence, our framework emphasises three conjoined reflexive states: the *critical mode* whereby researchers remain alert to normative ideologies and structures; the *ethical mode* which requires reflection on the ways in which socio-cultural and political beliefs of the researcher and that are dominant in society influences the research and the researched community, and vice versa. We emphasise the need for both the critical and ethical models of reflexivity as distinct from other feminist methodologies which do not examine current divisions in feminist thinking around gender diversity which, we argue, must be considered in contemporary gender research. The final mode is that of epistemic humility which requires scrutiny of knowledge production.

We begin with a brief introduction to feminist research and trans communities, before outlining our shared approach to narrative methodology. We then discuss issues of cis identity, positionality and privilege in relation to research with trans people drawing on the insider/outsider distinction. Acknowledging this as wider than debates in feminist methods, we argue for its relevance here as engaging with the insider/outsider binary involves questioning whether being an insider (that is, being considered to be part of the community within which the research is being conducted) takes primacy over outsider research (research undertaken by someone outside of the group they are studying). We offer some personal reflections from two

interviews, from our respective projects on domestic abuse, and fostering and adoption, to illustrate the value of CER in social work research.

Feminist research on trans and non-binary people's lives

As the spatial and temporal conditions for knowledge production are much explored in literature on qualitative and feminist research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hesse-Biber, 2012), it is important to locate our arguments within the context of a step change in social science research with trans people. Ten years ago, research in this field was modest (see Mitchell & Howarth, 2009), but subsequently there has been an explosion of activism and scholarship in this area with various drivers including shifting social dynamics and the well-reported social inequalities and human rights violations faced by trans and non-binary people (Hines, 2019; Serano, 2007; Stryker & Aizura, 2013). To contextualise this explosion of activity, it is necessary to highlight the ongoing antagonism between some factions of feminism and trans communities, which is not straightforward but highly visible in academic and public contexts. Indeed, there are hierarchies and borders within feminist scholarship, but there is a strong body of feminist allyship (to which both authors belong) with trans people which rejects gender-critical views about the constitution of 'woman' (and 'man'), and which questions the policing of feminist identities and spaces and bodily autonomy within a trans context (Hines, 2019). The ongoing division necessitates and validates the adoption of a reflexive model for ethical research in this field to promote rigorous scrutiny of the intersections of researcher influence/experience, trans subjectivity and objective conditions. Moreover, because activism and scholarship is buoyant and expanding, we argue for the adoption of the proposed reflexive framework, as a matter of urgency, for future feminist research on gender diversity by cis researchers.

Some feminist researchers have scrutinised gender diversity and knowledge production albeit much of this scholarship is easily troubled by social constructionist perspectives as it mostly reflects a paradigm in which sex is an objective, natural and binary distinction, while gender identity is socially constructed. Social constructionist perspectives regard all knowledge, including that pertaining to sex and gender, to emerge from social interactions (Butler, 1990; Fausto Sterling, 2012). It is important, however, to consider that there is a need to avoid conflating the concepts of gender and sex, and that we need to retain these as distinct, meaningful categories (Sullivan, 2020). Sullivan (2020) argues that without accurate data on sex, we lose the ability to understand differences and to design evidence-based policies tackling problems facing women and men, as well as the ability to gain an accurate understanding of issues facing trans people of both sexes. Fogg Davis (2017), on the other hand, questions the need for gender classification at all. Such challenges to knowledge and its utilisation are not new in feminist research, but keep us rooted to the research dilemmas such that engaging in feminist research requires an acknowledgement of the tensions in epistemologies highlighted through these three recurring questions: 'who can be a knower?', 'what can be known?' and 'how do we know what we know?' (Code, 1991; Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). This paper addresses the first two questions.

Narrative methodologies

In our respective research on domestic abuse, and fostering and adoption, we undertook narrative interviews. Narrative research is located within an interpretivist paradigm, which embraces subjectivity, and is rooted to the perspective that reality is dependent on the meanings that people give to their experiences (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Phoenix et al., 2021). Bold (2012, p. 16) asserts that 'narratives necessarily tell of human lives, reflect human interest and support our sense-making processes'. Indeed, telling stories is a meaning-making activity in which knowledge is derived from, constructed through and maintained by social interchange (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Social constructionist ontology explains how concepts of gender become

habituated into roles, performed in and through everyday social interactions, and their meaning embedded into society.

Noting the epistemological and temporal limits of working with personal narratives, Bold contends that narrative methods do not facilitate 'a search for truth but an acknowledgement of personal experiences as recounted at that moment in time' (Bold, 2012, p. 122). In this context, interviews are 'narrative occasions' which produce a contextualised, subjective account and a 'narrated subject'; both which are situated in time and space (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008; Riessman, 2008, p. 23; Woodiwiss et al., 2017). Self-narratives (stories that portray aspects of identity and personal characteristics) are similarly contingent and they are relational. Narrative identity is a person's internalized and evolving story integrating a reconstructed past and imagined future with narrative identity work offering a sophisticated meaning-making strategy (McAdams & McLean, 2013). In an analysis of narrative identity, it is important to centre the storyteller's autonomy and decision-making when constructing a narrative which is told to a particular audience, often for a specific purpose.

Finally, the concepts of dominant and counter-narrative are integral to narrative research with marginalised communities (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Bradford & Syed, 2019) offering a means of achieving narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The concept of dominant narrative refers to dominant stories of events, individuals or groups. It functions as a means of offering people a way of identifying with what is assumed to be a canonical experience and/or identity, as well as serving as a blueprint to understand the stories of others (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). Stories which contest, resist or misalign in some way with dominant narratives can be delineated as counter-narratives. In this sense, narrative work which analyses counter-narratives has a particular appeal to marginalised groups or identities. Usefully, research with trans and non-binary people produces rich knowledge reflecting 'practices of gendered agency and narrative construction, reconstruction and production of "counter" narratives' (Miller, 2017, p. 40).

Cis researchers exploring trans people's experience: insider/outsider positionality

While much debated in relation to feminist, ethnographic and other methodologies, the insider/outsider dichotomy is germane to the study of trans people's experiences as previous claims include that cis researchers produce research that is inaccurate, or lacks nuance (Bouman et al., 2016; Wierckx et al., 2012). Claims of appropriation have been made against cis researchers in making claims to 'know' the experiences of others (Bernstein Sycamore, 2006) and capture a fundamental tension that accentuates the power imbalances within the researcher/participant dynamic. Galupo (2017) highlights how ordinarily cis people are rarely asked to account for the ways in which their cis identity impacts upon their research.

Our perspective explicitly troubles arguments that an insider position is critical to the success of a study. For example, Lee (2008) asserted that his identity as a gay man researching other gay men was a catalyst to gaining access to research participants and that his study's participants felt valued and empowered which aided data generation and analysis. Indeed, we acknowledge the challenges faced by outsiders in relation to access, negotiating with gatekeepers, establishing rapport and overcoming suspicion (Ryan et al., 2011). These are not insurmountable and as the limits of standpoint approaches are fairly widely examined, we argue that research with trans and non-binary people is not a special case in this regard. In fact, as experienced social work practitioners, we draw upon interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence (in particular, use of empathy) in our research praxis.

While not discounting claims which privilege an insider in the context of research with trans communities, at the same time, we problematise this distinction as it adheres to a rigid, narrow view of identity and people do not experience single-issue lives (Crenshaw, 1991). Therefore, reflections on power imbalances pertaining to positionality and social characteristics other than gender (including ethnicity, social class, age, sexuality, religion or education) must also be accounted for

when making claims of a non-hierarchical relationship in the research endeavour (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008; Phoenix, 2020). People do not experience the world solely through a gendered lens, nor are they defined only by their gender identity. Indeed, in her study, Brown (2021b) found that adoption and fostering applicants expressed that while being trans was an important part of their identity, this was neither the *only* nor the *most* important aspect. Instead, we emphasise that researchers and participants have dynamic, intersectional identities, and that narratives are themselves multiple, situated and contingent. This is reflected in the principles of narrative methodologies in which narratives are considered to be polyvocal, fluid, and located in time and space. Moreover, the importance that individuals place upon gender identity should be determined by *them;* it is not for us to determine as researchers.

To develop this line of argument involves an analysis of multiple identities and positionalities; apropos for an analysis which argues that one aspect of social location may not help to gain fuller or better understanding of people's stories. An intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1991) has advanced understanding of subjugation as relational and interconnected, albeit much intersectional theorising is limited by the commonplace focus on the categories of race, class and gender to the neglect of the multiple other identities that impact lived experience (Rogers & Ahmed, 2017). We recognise the fluidity and breadth of identities and positionalities in relation to: social categories (e.g. 'the aged' and 'the disabled'); social role (e.g. 'mother', or 'researcher'); experience (e.g. 'domestic abuse victim'); or by action (e.g. 'domestic abuse perpetrator').

Feminist narrative research focuses on the meanings that people attach to their gendered experiences in the context of the social processes and circumstances that influence them (Oakley, 1979; Woodiwiss et al., 2017). Identifying as cis does not preclude a narrative researcher from attempting to understand the subjective experiences of trans people. By engaging with narrative methodology, a cis researcher can explore the co-created expression of stories related to gender *and* a range of other matters; for example, positionalities, experiences, individual characteristics, and social backgrounds (Andrews et al., 2013). Indeed, facilitating the co-creation of stories through a trusting, relational process in which researcher and participant create meaning together is central to narrative interviewing (Woodiwiss et al., 2017). We accept that co-creation does not completely resolve ethical conflicts but that in part it addresses 'moral tensions in interpretation and representation' (Riach, 2009, p. 367). In a sense, through co-creation, the storyteller is enabling the researcher to become a 'knower', albeit they are censoring what it is that the researcher can know (Code, 1991).

To address Code's (1991) questions of who can be a knower, and what can be known, we argue that neither insider nor outsider identity take precedence in the production of knowledge as the storyteller decides what aspects of the story to share and with whom, dependent on factors such as the identities of the audience, and the exigencies of time and space. Whilst there are benefits of insider positionality (shared experiences, ease of access), being an insider does not lend itself to better research, or more accurate or truthful accounts. Indeed, in narrative interviewing there can be many versions of 'narrative truth'. An insider or outsider positionality is just one aspect of multiple processes and practices that contribute to the production of narratives and their ontological specificities.

Acknowledging positionality and privilege

What is most influential within the researcher/research participant dynamic is the relation between positionality and privilege. In researching the experiences of trans people as cis researchers, it is imperative to question strategic essentialism (which creates political solidarity among a marginalised group) as the risk here is of denying heterogeneity in attempts to build strength in numbers when positioning lived experience as 'expert' knowledge (Pattadath, 2016). Indeed, it is common in research for trans and non-binary people to be subsumed into the overarching lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) umbrella which results in the glossing over or

neglect of specificity and difference (Rogers, 2013). Serano (2007) contends that processes of assimilation are problematic and mirrors a gender hierarchy in which trans people are positioned in the lower stratum with trans women at the very bottom (an effect of everyday sexism and cis privilege). This gender hierarchy does not operate in isolation but intersects with the hierarchies and mobilities associated with identity categories such as ethnicity, age, ability, sexual orientation, and educational achievement.

Further, the wide-ranging privilege that being cis provides within wider society (Serano, 2007) must be considered in relation to *all* aspects of the research process such as sampling, recruitment, access and, rapport-building (Galupo, 2017; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). Proponents of insider research may claim that trans research participants may feel more comfortable interacting with a trans researcher. Holloway and Jefferson (2000, p. 31) purport a general rule of choosing a male/male or female/female interviewer/interviewee combination to 'minimise the defensiveness brought on by sex differences'. We are not entirely convinced by this argument and during our projects while some gender matches naturally occurred, we also interviewed men, trans masculine and non-binary people without, we perceive, any arising issues or barriers to participation. Our main argument, therefore, is that as cis feminist researchers it is imperative that we acknowledge the dominant and normative ideologies and structures in society which, inevitably, afford us privilege that is denied trans and non-binary people. We need to recognise this and its effects on the research that we do.

Personal and intersubjective reflexivity

Within the literature, reflexivity is discussed as a contested, multidimensional concept with a range of meanings and interpretations (D'cruz et al., 2007; Watts, 2019). In ethical decision-making and qualitative research praxis, reflexivity is commonly understood as a method for self-reflection and self- awareness, used to enhance the quality of research (Murray & Holmes, 2013). Gilgun (2008) describes reflexivity as a personal endeavour requiring scrutiny by the researcher of the influence that they have on the people and topic being studied, while simultaneously reflecting on how the research experience impacts them. Although reflexivity in qualitative research is well defined, most scholarly engagement is descriptive; Folkes (2022) argues that such descriptions merely offer a cursory list of positionality statements that seek to theorise researcher and research participant identities. Further, this body of work is limited in focusing on definitions and typologies (e.g. D'cruz et al., 2007; Finlay, 2002) and on utility (e.g. Ben-Avri & Enosh, 2011; Probst, 2015).

Describing reflexivity is relatively easy, going beyond pragmatic reflection to integrate critical depth, interrogating the very conditions under which knowledge claims are constructed and accepted, is more complex (Kinsella & Whiteford, 2009). Finlay (2002, p. 209) describes reflexivity as 'full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self-analysis and self-disclosure'. Without guidelines and boundaries for reflexive praxis, it remains entirely possible for researchers to become submerged in navel gazing, immersed in narcissistic self-preoccupation, or engaged in protracted emoting (Finlay, 1998). Probst (2015) questions whether reflexivity produces better research; an idea that we reject without a viable alternative. However, Bishop and Shepherd (2011) argue that there is insufficient interrogation of what 'doing reflexivity' means and how a researcher can establish rigour in this process.

Introducing critical ethical reflexivity

Central to our framework (and the development of Murray and Holmes' (2013) concept of CER), is the proposition that doing sensitive research with marginalised groups when occupying, or perceived to occupy, an outside identity requires an additional level of scrutiny. We begin by centring Gewirtz and Cribb's (2006) notion of ethical reflexivity which requires transparency about researcher influences in shaping research design, data collection, analysis and writing, in addition

to an acknowledgement about ethical, social and political influences. We go further to identify three key components to our CER framework: epistemic humility; the critical mode; and the ethical mode. First, is *epistemic humility* (Goetze, 2018) which is an intellectual virtue and means that our knowledge of the world is always partial. It recognises that such knowledge is always interpreted, structured, and filtered by the observer and this requires admitting the gaps in one's own interpretive tools 'especially with respect to the experience of the marginally situated' (Goetze, 2018, p. 84). To adopt epistemic humility is to acknowledge that most epistemic environments are informed by dominant norms and ideologies. Epistemic humility requires a critical engagement with the notion that 'those who are differently situated may know better [. . .] when it comes to their own experiences' (Goetze, 2018, p. 84). In this way, Goetze reminds researchers to be cautious when making knowledge claims on behalf of another (Code, 1991).

Second, the *critical mode* of reflexivity builds on epistemic humility to surface pre-contemplative questions about gender normative ideas, gender identities, and gendered experiences. This is fundamental in achieving the identification and deeper scrutiny of those normative structures, such as stigmatising and oppressive cisnormative environments, that influence a person's positionality and experiences. It requires reflection on the connection between agency and structure (from the perspective of both researcher and the research participant). We maintain that the critical mode is fundamental to ethical research praxis while also recognising that this is only one means of doing skilled, sensitive research and that there are different ways of achieving this.

Third, the *ethical mode* necessitates reflection on the ways in which a researcher's social, cultural and political beliefs influences the research, and the ways in which the social, cultural and political background of the researched community influences them as researcher. Engaging in both modes of reflexive thought should sensitise researchers to the impact of socio-cultural and political ideologies on research decision-making, data creation, analysis, knowledge production and dissemination. Moreover, the iterative nature of both reflexive modes is fundamental in enabling researchers to recognise shifts in identities and positionalities, and to recognise similarities and differences (between the researcher and the research participant). A commitment to reflexive engagement also enables the researcher to establish the need for any reflexive action to ensure they do not impose identities or locations upon the research participants or reinforce forms of oppression. Reflexive action can take the form of changes to presentation, expression and performativity as well as through other material, social and emotional adaptations. It can be practical and result in changes to research questions, design, conduct and dissemination.

An application of CER to our research results in the recognition that our cis identity equates to cis privilege (Serano, 2007). This privilege translates in ways that commonly mean that we lack problems and barriers in life because we identify in normative ways with the gender which was assigned to us at birth (Galupo, 2017). Cis privilege means we have not routinely experienced verbal or physical abuse when using public spaces. We may have never been questioned about our genitalia, been misgendered or deadnamed (referring to a trans person by a name they used prior to transitioning, such as their birth name). We problematise research about gender differences in which cis is seen as the default identity and not examined (see, for example, Endendijk et al., 2017; Jung et al., 2019). We invite cis researchers to connect with and accept the idea of being privileged in line with Serano's (2007) argument to notice the otherwise invisible advantages they receive as compared to the minority group (trans and non-binary people). This is critically important in an ethical and reflexive engagement with the epistemological and ontological accounts given of research with any element of gender, or gender diversity, as a unit of analysis. As such, we argue for a CER to achieve deeper reflexions on cis privilege and positionality.

Applying critical ethical reflexivity

In each author's narrative research projects, the epistemic frameworks foregrounded the notion that narratives are themselves interpretations *and* require interpretation from researchers (Ahmed,

2013). Our analytic approach was to remain grounded in the worldview of participants exploring how each constructed meaning about their gendered experiences in the world (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008). In common, we adopted social constructionist epistemologies which underpinned our conceptualisation of gender and cisgenderism. However, the contexts for gender politics differed as Rogers' work was firmly grounded in the field of gender-based violence and Brown's project reflected sociological work on the family.

Detailed below are personal reflections that illustrate 'doing reflexivity'. For each reflection, we have purposively selected one narrative, from our interviews with trans people, to highlight the value of CER. Rogers' research (2010–13) was an inquiry of trans and non-binary people's experiences of intimate and family violence, help-seeking and interactions with social care (Rogers, 2013). Fifteen trans people were interviewed, along with nine practitioners representing areas including homelessness services, and the domestic violence sector. All interviews were analysed using a voice-centred relational approach which requires multiple readings of the data to 'listen' for different, multiple voices. In Brown's study (2017–2020), eight trans people were interviewed, along with two social workers who were employed in fostering or adoption agencies (Brown, 2021a). The study sought to examine the experiences and perspectives of both samples in relation to fostering and adoption social work. Brown analysed data using a thematic approach. Recruitment in both studies included the use of social media, online forums, attendance at social groups and by word-of-mouth. Ethical approval was gained from the University of Sheffield for both projects.

On surviving abuse and help-seeking: reflections from rogers

Rogers (2013) doctoral research built upon a small empirical study conducted for a master's degree in social work. As a survivor of DVA, my personal values were deeply rooted to a political and ethical position in which a victim/survivor, whatever their gender or intersecting characteristic, should receive the professional support and resources needed to escape, recover and rebuild their lives following abuse. Being a survivor of DVA was an aspect of my identity that overlapped with that of my research participants and provided me with an insider status. I also set out to conduct my doctoral research with the insider professional knowledge (from a lengthy career in the DVA sector) that gender diverse people rarely approached single-sex, gender-sensitive DVA services for support.

I spoke at length with Gemma, who identified as a trans woman and who was employed as the chief officer of an organisation for LGBT people. Early in our exchange Gemma set the scene for the stories that she went on to tell. She said:

> *The broader community does not want us to talk about [DVA] as a subject because there is still a culture that gay is wrong. That being trans is wrong. That being a lesbian is wrong. That being a bisexual is wrong. It's not part of the broader culture. We still have a very heterosexist, heteronormative approach to relationships and we have that to bypass. Gay relationships do not have the same value as straight relationships. Trans relationships are even less valuable because they're not even seen as proper people in many, many cases.*

Here, Gemma clearly articulated the everyday exclusionary effects of cultural cisgenderism. What she described was the positioning of trans and non-binary people as not valid or deserving compared to cis people. Gemma's narrative mirrored Serano's (2007) treatise on trans sexism and the gender hierarchy. I reflected on my own experiences of oppression and sexism as a woman but knowing that I had protection from more extreme effects of exclusion because of my cis, heterosexual identity and white privilege (and subsequent positioning within Serano's gender hierarchy), along with my privilege as a university-educated doctoral researcher.

Gemma's characterisation of trans people and their relationships was central to the stories set within a particular cultural context. She said 'let me tell you about case 1':

> *A trans woman (Vera) was in a civil partnership with a guy from South East Asia [. . . Vera] came over with her partner [. . .] She was legally male. No access to [free healthcare] because of her status in this country. She had*

> *a female identity. Nobody knew she was trans, around them, all their friends in their network. He was a serial abuser. He throttled her. He threatened to send her home. Her right to remain was entirely focused around the civil partnership.*

I too had been a victim of DVA in a relationship with a serial abuser and experienced controlling behaviour and physical violence. We had a shared identity as a victim/survivor, but different gender identities, meaning different eligibility for professional help. The contrasting identities and circumstances of Vera and myself were not merely associated with our gender identities however. I had agency and social capital. I owned my own home. I had employment and access to public resources. Vera lived in a house that was rented in her partner's name. She had no independent income, relying on her partner's income. She was in the country on a spousal visa and had no recourse to public funds (Dudley, 2017). My abuser lived in my house and with the help of the police, I got him out. Again, my privilege was centred and brought to the fore as I was acutely aware of the resources (personal, political and public, both financial and material) that I had to in order to achieve this end. Gemma continued:

> *That's where I came in, and her partner was arrested for violence. The local services didn't know what to do because she was trans. So I then had to go through the laborious task of explaining to them: "right then, take the trans identity, you have basically the same as marriage, legally speaking for your purposes, slightly different. Your relationship is this. You have a woman with no right to remain apart from her marriage. What would you do with a heterosexual woman?" That was a very short version of the conversation we had. It was a very long conversation with a DV coordinator [. . ..] They worked with the client to do the legal stuff around the right to remain [in the country] due to exceptional circumstances and duress [. . .] She didn't get deported.*

When I needed help from criminal justice professionals, they gave it willingly and there was no need for advocacy or negotiations. I had support from the police at my request, although they had no legal powers in my particular situation, and an officer told me that it wasn't their job to do so, but they stayed to give me moral support. It was the mid-1990s and the police did not have the powers they do now. My story and that of Vera contrast sharply in terms of the unfolding plot. This, I claim, is down to the difference in the temporal and socio-political setting for our stories and, more importantly, in our contrasting social locations, power, privilege and social capital. I am a cis White British woman and Vera is a trans woman of colour.

I have previously highlighted the ways that cisgenderism has influenced empirical studies and knowledge production about DVA arguing that research is mostly rooted to a gender paradigm positioning men as perpetrators and women as victims (Donovan & Hester, 2014; Rogers, 2013, 2017, 2020). This paradigm supports the feminist project that positions DVA as a gendered problem, but it neglects of people who exist outside of the dominant narrative, including trans and non-binary people (Cannon & Buttell, 2015; Rogers, 2013, 2017, 2020). The invisibility of trans and non-binary people results from cisgenderism. Adopting CER draws attention to the ethical and political imperative of social work research (which is concerned with neutralising the effects of social inequalities and exclusion) and to undo the effects of prejudicial ideologies such as cisgenderism. Adopting CER helped to shape my reading and interpretation of Gemma's narrative as I was more alert to the complex amalgam of structural influences that impacted the characters that she described.

On motherhood: brown's reflections on a narrative interview

Brown's (2021a) study developed from her specialist area of adoption and fostering social work. Although my personal values were influenced by growing up in a cis heteronormative-headed family, my friendship network was more diverse. This allowed me to observe the high level of care and support that LGBTQ parents could provide to adoptive, fostered or step-parented children. I approached my doctoral research with insider professional knowledge, including that trans and non-binary people rarely made adoption or fostering inquiries, and that the small number who did

were often unsuccessful in moving beyond an initial visit to assessment. However, I lacked insider status as an adopter or foster carer, and indeed lacked parenting experience during fieldwork, becoming a mother to my first child as I began analysis.

Participant Alice (trans woman) and I shared a mother identity, however the relative ease at which I had conceived and given birth differed markedly:

> *Sadly, we had 6 miscarriages . . . it kept being losses and losses . . . . all early term, 6, between 6 and 8 weeks really. Even pregnancies we didn't even know about. It's very strange, you know it's er . . . a very odd situation that we only knew something when passed a cot of blood and we thought that's not great.*

I reflected on my own experience of perinatal services, considering that while Alice shared my white, educational and socioeconomic privilege, my family aligned with cis heteronormative stereotypes that undoubtedly afforded me considerable privilege. I entered motherhood benefitting from the focused maternity support that as a cis female giving birth is automatically allocated, whereas Alice's counter-narrative of motherhood reflected a stigmatised positionality as the trans partner of a cis female birthing parent. I sensed through the distanced way in which Alice described her experience that it had been so painful she had to some extent dissociated from the emotion of it to recount the story.

> *It's never predictable but the 7th we were successful and had a child . . . . The child we had, little Emmeline, she was so little she could fit in a glass . . . What a weird period of time that was . . . that was tough, but we had her and she survived just 9 weeks . . . It was completely . . . life was just stopped over there, and it was just our entire existence over there.*

Had I experienced a loss such as Alice's, I would have been offered mental health and social support groups and services aimed at mothers as the birthing parent, and my cis male partner father's groups. However, Alice was not offered access to support that could have helped her process the complexity of emotion associated with her loss.

The stress and joy associated with Alice's parenting journey (Louie et al., 2017) was affected by the stigmatising views of others from the outset: for example, the cisgenderism exemplified in Alice's parents' response to the sharing of her news that she planned to have a child with her partner Victoria:

> *I think [Victoria is]ok now but certainly initially, you know, even when we started talking about, talking about kids naturally, it was sort of, ooh, this is a bit strange.*

The experience of a cisgenderist response is an aspect of Alice's story that sat outside of my realm of lived experience as a cis person with the wide-ranging privileges it entails. One such privilege could be the assumption of others that I would and could become a mother. There was no shocked response to my voicing a desire to become a parent; rather, it was assumed I would do so, and it may have elicited a more surprised response if I had expressed a lack of desire.

Alice's parents' initial response exemplifying cisgenderist attitudes notably changed when Alice and Victoria had their baby:

> *But it has been . . . actually they have been very supportive, you know, that time when we were in the hospital, they would come up and see us, and for a good few hours every other day. It was amazing, it was . . . it did change them quite a bit . . . Yeah, when we went through that process, because you know it was such a harrowing experience. They sort of, had never experienced anything like before and so . . . lots of support.*

It may be that the significant loss was the catalyst for setting cisgdenderist views aside to enable emotional support to be given to Alice. However, this effect was not sustained.

Although I did not specifically ask about employment and education to begin with, Alice talked extensively to me about these matters. Upon reflection, at the time I was heavily absorbed in part-time PhD study alongside full-time work as a social worker. I had also shared with Alice that I worked in an adoption team. I considered if this would have restricted some of the responses Alice gave me, as I represented a 'gatekeeper' to her family desires and could be perceived as holding

additional power because of it. However, Alice appeared to identify with me as a researcher more so than a social worker, as indicated by the way she talked about the adoption process and ease at which she expressed dissatisfaction about it.

Through undergoing a process of ongoing CER, I aimed to avoid making assumptions regarding how Alice would perceive and relate to me. I aimed to prioritise Alice's voice and avoid placing myself at the epicentre of my research interpretations and output (Alvesson, 2003; Riach, 2009). Conversely, I did not wish to distance myself from Alice's story. Rather, I aimed to engage in a process of continual reflexivity that identified the way in which my evolving personal experience of motherhood as a cis person was impacting upon my interpretation of Alice's story (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011). Indeed, as Bishop and Shepherd (2011) argue, processes of interpretation that resist following a discrete trajectory may be more ethical forms of engaging in meaningful reflexive practice. Embedding analysis of how my positionality as a cis mother influenced my interpretation of Alice's experience as a person who experienced cisgenderist stigma was essential in the aim of interpreting her story with CER.

Discussion and concluding comments

In response to the current, and rapidly, changing socio-cultural and political contexts, and ongoing claims about the limits of existing research on gender diversity (Bradford & Syed, 2019), this paper explores some of the complexities of cis researchers conducting research into trans and non-binary people's identities and experiences. It highlights problems with the insider and outsider distinction, emphasising multiple identities and polyvocal narratives. This is germane to social work research and practice both of which are concerned with complex identities and lives, and complicated problems within shifting, uncertain contexts. These factors undergird our argument for iterative, reflexive praxis in social work research on gender diversity. Moreover, the need for such praxis is clearly made at the start of this paper which highlights the lack of training (and current understandings) on gender diversity across the social work profession. As a framework for reflexive praxis, critical ethical reflexivity (CER) is a tool that centres critical analysis and ethical reflection to consider the influences of normativity underpinning the socio-political contexts in which knowledge production for social work practice take place.

In developing the framework for CER, we considered that because the nature of marginalised communities is dynamic and constantly evolving (Poulton, 2020), the *critical mode* of reflexivity – whereby researchers remain alert to stigmatising and oppressive normative discourse and environments (including all forms of normative ideology and structures should be considered, not just those associated with gender – must be an embedded and iterative practice. In addition, the *ethical mode*, requires a researcher to reflect upon the ways in which their social, cultural and political values and beliefs influences the research, and the ways in which the social, cultural and political background of the researched community influences them as researcher. This is our conceptualization of critical ethical reflexivity which we offer as fundamental for cis researchers doing research with trans and non-binary people, but we also suggest this framework is adaptable and can, in fact, embed any aspects of privilege (white, class, age, and ability) and normative ideologies. Combined the critical and ethical modes facilitate a consideration of how structure interacts with individual agency, in relation to the self (researcher), and the researched community.

Prior to the critical and ethical modes, we foreground the need for epistemic humility (Goetze, 2018) requiring a researcher to set aside what they think they know (Code, 1991). This facilitates a more objective stance in the research endeavour. Epistemic humility requires the researcher to be mindful of their outsider identity, positionality and lack of/or shared experience with regards to the research topic and community of interest. Adopting epistemic humility enhances the recognition most knowledge production is influenced by dominant norms and ideologies, and in social work research, being alert to such bias is critical as many people who engage with social work have counter-narratives of experience. Epistemic humility

requires a critical engagement with the notion that 'those who are differently situated may know better [. . .] when it comes to their own experiences' (Goetze, 2018, p. 84). In this way, Goetze reminds researchers to be cautious when making knowledge claims on behalf of another (Code, 1991). This was evident in Rogers' reflections of privilege and access to social capital as a DVA survivor compared to those of Vera. Epistemic humility also enabled Brown to consider different interpretations of 'family' and 'parenthood' and the links to cisgenderism within the context of familial interactions and experiences.

In terms of methods, despite the contentions about what narrative 'is', a useful starting point is the notion that narratives are themselves interpretations *and* require interpretation from researchers (Ahmed, 2013; Riessman, 2008). For cis researchers studying trans people's identities and experiences, we centre CER as fundamental to the interpretation process. Moreover, central to the analysis (and a political and ethical imperative) is an acknowledgement of cis privilege. Acknowledging privilege, however, does not ameliorate all the challenges of cis researchers seeking to understand trans people's identities and experiences. Galupo's (2017) reflection remains central to this issue; that being a cis woman directed everything from the way her research questions were formulated, design choices were made, interview questions phrased and data analysed. Relatedly, an obvious critique is that these very decisions and processes stem from initial choices about a research topic chosen by a researcher, and debates about who gets to do research – that is, who can be an academic and create knowledge (Code, 1991) - should be frequently asked.

Finally, as noted earlier, while the socio-cultural, political, spatial and temporal conditions for knowledge production have been widely debated in the research and feminist literature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hesse-Biber, 2012), the surge in activism and scholarship with and by trans people is notable and drives the need to reflect upon current social work practice, and the ways in which knowledge for practice evolves from social work research. That some of this territory is contentious (and characterised by the ongoing divisions in feminist thinking about gender diversity), only serves to reinforce our arguments about the need for rigour in reflexive praxis that specifically engages with socio-cultural, political influences (and, in particular, dominant narratives and normative discourse). Moreover, CER reminds researchers that social work research, like practice, has both an ethical and political imperative. It is concerned with the connections between structure (e.g. gender normativity) and subjective agency, and this concern is underpinned by the values of social justice, equality and social inclusion. Therefore, we offer CER as a framework to facilitate social work research underpinned by rigorous and iterative reflexive engagement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Claire Brown is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work with 20 years' experience supporting children and families. Claire is therapeutically trained and remains in independent Social Work practice part-time. She specialises in preparing and supporting carers to provide loving homes for children who have experienced abuse, trauma and instability. Claire has a particular interest in research, support and empowerment for LGBTQ+ carers and young people.

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