

# A Call for “Insider” Community-Engaged Research: Considerations of Power Sharing, Impact, and Identity Development

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## Abstract

The transgender community is rich with wisdom about how to live authentically, embrace duality, and embody intersecting identities, but our stories have been widely missing from or misrepresented in research. “Insider” community-engaged research offers a framework for boundary-spanning researchers to blend their “insider” and institutional knowledge to redress the harm of erasure through power sharing and community building. We offer vignettes from boundary-spanning researchers and participants to unpack the question, *what becomes possible when research is conducted by, with, and for one’s own community?* We detail the significant methods and processes that positively impacted participants and provide implications for fellow researchers.

*Keywords: community-engaged research, transgender, intersectionality, qualitative, power dynamics*



*[This] feels like research for the trans community rather than research of the trans community for cis people . . . trans people want to hear about [this] because it’s for them. It’s about the trans community. It’s by the trans community. It feels like a collaboration of experiences.*

—Finnley, a participant

The transgender (trans) community is rich with embodied wisdom about how to live authentically, embrace duality and fluidity, and span intersecting identities. In 2023, the first and second authors conducted a qualitative community-engaged research (CEnR) study to document this wisdom. This study was our response to today’s anti-trans sociopolitical climate and was grounded within the trans community’s needs and interests. Specifically, we wanted to know how trans people in Western Oregon with diverse gender, racial, and sexual identities navigate the pressures to conform to White, heterosexual, and binary gender expectations when socially transitioning (e.g., changing their name, pronouns, gender identity). This research project brought together trans researchers and trans participants, demonstrating what

is possible when research is conducted *by, with, and for one’s own community*. The powerful nature of this experience led us to form a collective, including researchers (first, second, and final authors) and participants (second through fifth authors). The opening quote captures the beginning of this collaborative journey; what follows is a reflexive account of the study methodology and resulting experiences from the perspective of participants and researchers.

As a collective, we meet regularly to continue learning from one another, reflecting on lessons learned inspired by our “insider” (i.e., member of the community being studied) approach to research, and identifying creative means of dissemination to ensure that participants and the broader community continue to benefit from this work. Data from our study, coupled with

collective reflections on our process, have led to unique insights with methodological implications that can serve as an example of how to redress academia's history of extraction, marginalization, and erasure of many communities (Gaudry, 2011; Rosenberg & Tilley, 2021.) A thematic analysis of interview data underscored the overwhelming importance of spending time in community for holistic, intersectional identity development. This finding, which echoes and builds on previous identity development literature (e.g., Devor, 2004; Rosenberg & Tilley, 2021), emerged early on, so we intentionally let it inform our evolving community engagement practices, the formation of our collaborative, and the recommendations we share for others to integrate community knowledge into their research practices (e.g., structuring interview environments to nurture comfort and safety).

In this article, we strive to model through example the potential for research that is grounded in shared identities and guided holistically by a community's wisdom. We blended principles from CEnR and critical qualitative research (CQR) to design a study that, by definition, attempted to confront social inequalities that trans people face with the hope of facilitating change (Bhavnani et al., 2014; Cannella & Lincoln, 2015; Korth, 2002). Our methodological approach ultimately fostered intersectional identity development, irreplaceable community connectedness, and soulful findings that aim to give back meaningfully to our community. In this article, our collective weaves current CEnR and CQR literature with vignettes as a call for more insider CEnR with institutionally marginalized communities. This article is a methodological process paper, an example of "insider" research, a collection of participants' reflections, lessons learned from researchers, and a felt analysis (Million, 2008) of why insider CEnR, from our perspective, best nourishes the needs of the community by investing in the participants themselves.

### **Insider Community-Engaged Research: An Example**

The purpose of this article is not to share this study's research findings in detail (we invite you to read them here: Blodgett, 2023). Instead, the purpose is to share examples of how leading with an insider perspective shaped our methodology, created uniquely positive experiences, and

deepened our intersectional identity development. Participants and researchers wrote their own vignettes, reflecting back on their experiences, to demonstrate the impact of these decisions. We synthesize relevant literature as well as offer reflections from our collective, share implications for fellow researchers, and argue for the need for insider leadership within CEnR.

### **Being an Insider and Intersectionality**

For this study, we defined being an "insider" as having a shared identity within the trans community. We are always insiders *and* outsiders to the communities we are studying. When and how researchers and participants decide on a level of insider/outsider is dependent on each person's vulnerability and visibility, the research and interview questions, and more. For example, consider the insider/outsider complexities for White-presenting people of color or folks with nonapparent disabilities. Our place on the insider/outsider continuum is rarely static—it is a bidirectional meaning-making process that is not often verbalized. An in-depth discussion of the complexities of defining one's position as an insider/outsider or somewhere in between is beyond the scope of this essay but has been well-documented elsewhere (e.g., Kerstetter, 2012; Rosenberg & Tilley, 2021). Instead, the foundation of our discussion rests on how transness was the necessary connection to each other's shared language and embodied understandings about living under (and in resistance to) oppression that served as a bridge between me (first author) and participants.

The study that inspired this reflective essay was conducted as the first author's doctoral dissertation. Given the first author's leadership throughout the project (including conducting interviews), when "I" is used, this denotes the direct experience of the first author. Because of the collaborative nature of this work, "we" will also be used when reflecting the views and experiences of multiple authors and the larger collective.

### **On Being a Boundary Spanner in Academia**

I (first author) experienced being an insider and outsider in academia in unique ways as a White queer and trans person as well as a first-generation college student at the time the study was conducted. I also spanned the boundaries of a social science researcher and a gender studies scholar by blending

theories and methods from one field (e.g., intersectionality and decolonizing methodology) with those of another (e.g., critical qualitative inquiry). Through this specific intersectional training, I learned to lean into my history of activism and community service to conduct justice-oriented research that tends to power dynamics and benefits my community (i.e., critical qualitative research; Koro-Ljungberg & Cannella, 2017).

This study's research aims were born out of my involvement in my local queer and trans community as well as my own and my coresearcher's (second author) lived experiences. Our aims were further supported by research showing that trans people of color and nonbinary trans people are particularly pressured to conform to the gender binary because of White supremacy, heteronormativity, and the overly emphasized medical model of transition (Barbee & Schrock, 2019; Darwin, 2020; Desmeules-Trudel et al., 2023; Fiani & Han, 2019). Having spent years deeply supporting the transitions of other trans people in our community, my coresearcher and I noticed that, as a community, we were having many of the same conversations and experiences over and over again: How do we deal with the incessant pressure to conform in a society that intends to erase us? How can we genuinely come to know ourselves and our communities when the pressure to conform makes us feel like we are not cis-, queer-, trans- or anything enough in nearly every space we enter? Many of us find ways to cope, but the specifics of what we must cope with and which institutions pressure us most are tied to our identities. These concerns, we knew, were what our community wanted to talk about, so the aim of this research project became to understand (a) how the pressure to conform to the gender binary emerges for trans people as they socially transition and (b) how their gender, race, and sexual identities uniquely shape their experiences.

### Embodied Knowledges

In this study, I applied an intersectional (Combahee River Collective, 1981) and felt (Million, 2008) theoretical perspective to critically document how the pressure to conform to (cis)gender stereotypes—and resisting that pressure—shaped transgender young adults' intersectional lived experiences. With the establishment of intersectionality and felt theory has come an institutional recognition that the composition of our identities and lived and

emotional experiences creates unique embodied understandings of the world we live in (Combahee River Collective, 1981; Crenshaw, 1991; Million, 2008). Indigenous scholarship and activism call embodied knowing “felt knowledge” (Million, 2008). Felt or embodied knowledge can mean knowing without having the language to name *what* you know or emotional learning that invents new language. For example, I would posit that new and emerging transgender identity terminology could be considered a kind of trans felt knowledge.

### Coresearcher Partnerships

Shared trust and a common understanding of living in a society that was never built with the trans community in mind was the foundation on which I formed meaningful connections and engaged the community. Recognizing the intersectional identities that were not shared was equally critical to acknowledge, and it was fundamentally (and methodologically) imperative to collaborate with community members who had identities different from my own. I invited the second author, an international Hispanic college-aged binary trans man, to be my coresearcher. Our partnership as coresearchers was an application of this study's critical approach that emphasized a nonhierarchical collaboration with participants (Levitt et al., 2017). We designed this study hand-in-hand. He defined his role on the project, exercising his agency to lean into our collaboration as a thought partner and lean out when he was not available or interested in a particular phase of the research. For example, he was not interested in analyzing data using qualitative software. Instead, we took long walks where we discussed emerging findings and cocreated meaning. The second author's story is a great example of what becomes possible when research is conducted *with* the community:

I was in my junior year of undergrad when I was invited to be a co-researcher. I have never seen or worked with someone who I could relate to or look up to that held the same identity as I do. Being in spaces that are not the trans community, especially academia, can feel isolating and hard to navigate. Academia is exclusive enough, even for those who don't hold identities that are marginalized. Nonetheless, being a co-researcher in a study led

by another trans person made me feel free enough to dive into exploring and expressing who I am. I knew my voice mattered because I was making decisions and having input about the research that mattered. I got to receive two years of mentorship through the research process where Jey taught me what recruitment and within-community research meant, how to identify meaningful research questions, and ask the right interview questions to answer those research questions, and now that is giving me a leg up as I start my Master's program in a related field.

Community collaborations can take many forms, and other critical and community-engaged scholars suggest strategies like taking implicit bias training and engaging in consistent reflexivity to facilitate healthy coresearcher partnerships (Andress et al., 2020; Bhavnani et al., 2014; Gaudry, 2011). Ours was transformative for both of us, and a rich area for power sharing, including mentorship, research training, and decision-making power (Andress et al., 2020). By sharing the knowledge—and thus power—that I had about qualitative research and the broader academia system from my perspective, the second author grew to better understand his own career goals, creating the possibility for future collaborations and resource sharing.

When we (first and second authors) started working together, we immersed ourselves in the literature on trans people. We found examples of research that honored our stories (e.g., Cuthbert, 2019; Kichler, 2022; Stone et al., 2020; Sumerau et al., 2019). These studies were exemplary. Research often treats our diversity monolithically, as if we were one community, one experience. Although becoming more visible, stories of trans people on the asexual/aromantic spectrums, trans people of color, and trans people from cultures that already recognize more than two genders (e.g., Two-Spirit and Hijra people) are still vastly underrepresented (Ripley, 2020). Particularly missing are sensitive, intersectional portrayals of these stories wherein their transness does not eclipse the rest of their intersecting identities (Bowleg, 2013; Cuthbert, 2019). Whitewashing and other forms of silencing have replaced a rich chorus of diverse voices with a more “streamlined” trans narrative

that often conflates transness with struggle, hardship, and illness (Burnes & Chen, 2012). The need to center these voices has been identified by the trans community and gender studies scholars alike (GLAAD, 2023; Moran, 2023).

In the context of this study, we developed a different way of listening to the transgender literature as insiders than our colleagues who did not share our trans identity. We know the impact that academic erasure and exclusion can have, so we found creative ways of working hand-in-hand with our community. As this research came into focus and we grew more confident in our felt knowledge about the significance of community connectedness, we recognized that being boundary spanners meant identifying and integrating methodologies that allowed us to live values of shared power and honoring of community.

### **Integrating a Community Engagement Framework**

The project that inspired this essay did not start with community-engaged research named as the guiding framework. CEnR is a term used broadly to describe the process of working with a community to ensure the community's perspectives are embedded throughout the research process. Community engagement came naturally to us as insiders, but learning about CEnR as an already established framework complemented the language and frameworks we were familiar with at the time (e.g., applied and translational, feminist and antiracist research practices) and guided our strategies for how to uplift, affirm, and involve our community from a critical perspective. With grounding in activist participatory research and Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy and empowerment education (e.g., Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988; Wallerstein et al., 2020), CEnR that is participatory (e.g., community-based participatory research; CBPR) is rooted in praxis that aims to shift the narrative and power dynamics away from researchers as all-knowing “experts” and participants as “subjects” to be studied. CEnR from a critical perspective aims to do just that: affirm the inherent expertise of individuals and communities; share power; and honor participants' humanity, autonomy, and leadership throughout the research (Mikesell et al., 2013).

Our approach to community engagement mirrors Key et al.'s (2019) CEnR framework, particularly the notion that the level

of community engagement moves along a continuum from community-invested to CBPR. In this way, CEnR has the potential to mitigate the harm of extraction (taking from a community for perceived academic benefit) and instead to contribute to meaningful research that affirms and benefits a community in a way they value. Our engagement with the community, including study participants, increased as our study progressed. In the following section, we describe our strategies and process for how we blended our felt knowledge as insiders and the wisdom from our community to adapt our methodology.

### Methodology

This study was deemed exempt by Oregon State University's institutional review board in fall 2023. The study was under the leadership of the first author for their doctoral dissertation with support from faculty advisors who recognized the critical need for insider leadership and intentionally played supporting roles. Every decision has been and continues to be informed by the trans community, including participants. As insiders and boundary-spanning researchers, my coresearcher and I designed a qualitative research project that prioritized the needs and interests of our community, particularly those whose voices have been institutionally underrepresented, including Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other trans people of color, trans femme people, and sexual minorities.

The present study began with a CQR approach, which is a contemporary feminist genre of qualitative research that aims to confront social inequalities in hopes of facilitating change (Bhavnani et al., 2014; Cannella & Lincoln, 2015; Korth, 2002). Conceptually, this meant our study was responsive to the sociohistorical/political context; accountable to participants; and deeply concerned with understanding the influences of power—who has it, who is denied it, and how power imbalances are reproduced, undermined, and resisted (Bhavnani et al., 2014; Cannella & Lincoln, 2015). The conceptual nature of our CQR approach proved to be well-suited to guide our analysis and development of interview questions, but we quickly found that more intentional community engagement was necessary to move from theory to meaningful impact. Our insider and boundary-spanner knowledge are what helped us bring flexibility, creativity, and responsiveness to our methodology. Our

community engagement practices merged with our critical qualitative approach, so our research could move fluidly across the continuum of CEnR approaches (Key et al., 2019) from community informed, at times, to a CBPR project. In the following section, we share specific examples that demonstrate the impact of our insider critical CEnR approach on participants.

### Participant Recruitment

We stayed tethered to the community's interests and need for comfort and safety by understanding what it took to conduct a study that really mattered to them. In response, our recruitment flyer included a huge pride flag, the first author's non-binary pronouns, and an explicit note that we wanted to prioritize hearing from trans people of color. We displayed our flyers where we knew queer and trans people liked to spend time in our community, such as our community's favorite bars, coffee shops, and a dedicated LGBTQ+ hair salon. We knew the when, where, and who was hosting for LGBTQ+ community events (e.g., drag shows) where we could hand out flyers. We introduced ourselves to community members. A member of our collective (fourth author) reflects on how seeing evidence of our investment in our community on our flyer made them want to participate. As a trans fem, asexual, Arab and White person, they have plenty of experience navigating the pressure to conform to identities they are not:

When I saw the opportunity to participate in a study about being pressured to conform—one whose flier said that they specifically wanted to hear from trans people of color—I wanted to challenge the self-doubt I had about my identities and put myself out there to find community. As a trans fem person, I was still raised to embody “traditional” masculine gender roles; being queer, I was still told to love the gender “opposite” to me; and as a half-white half-Arab person, I was still told to live as a white person. I saw this interview as my chance to be “enough”—trans enough, queer enough, Arab enough.

The sentiment described in the above quote was echoed by most participants: Being interviewed by another trans person meant “finding community.” For the fourth author

and other biracial participants, they also needed an insider to the trans community who would intentionally elevate QTBIPOC (queer, trans, Black, Indigenous people of color) voices. The risk inherent in sharing one's precious and personal story (which some noted they had not previously spoken out loud) pointed them toward community where they could be their whole selves. This result would not have been possible had the research been conducted by an outsider or without a commitment to decentering Whiteness.

### *Engaging Diverse Voices (Demographics and Sample)*

We had been cautioned by other researchers that obtaining an “adequate” sample size would be time-consuming and especially challenging in the trans community. This advice, while sensible and common, came from researchers who neither did within-community research nor identified with the trans community, and it ultimately did not apply to our study. In less than 2 weeks, 100+ trans community members had completed our study's interest form and demographic questionnaire. Our demographic questions remained completely open-ended to reflect the changing sociopolitical landscape regarding our country's conception of race, ethnicity, and gender categories (Orvis, 2023), and was critical to ensure that diverse voices would be represented.

We were successful in recruiting a diverse sample in large part because of our responsiveness to the community and our insider status. Although I (first author) was eager to hear from every prospective participant, I systematically selected and interviewed 20 trans young adults with diverse identities (i.e., no two participants shared the same combination of gender, racial/ethnic, or sexual identities) to meet the needs of the proposed study. In brief, 45% of participants self-identified as multiracial; 25% identified on the asexual/aromantic spectrum; and most had unique gender (60%) and sexual (74%) identities not shared with other participants.

### *Creating a Sense of Belonging and Comfort*

**Interview Location.** Interviews took place in person ( $n = 13$ ) in a university library study room or over Zoom ( $n = 7$ ). We prioritized privacy and accessibility when choosing an interview location yet anticipated that library study rooms would be a

symbol of power and hierarchy. We rearranged the furniture and decorated the room to be warm and welcoming. When participants arrived, they saw the first author's well-loved pride flag hanging on the wall. They were welcomed into the space by a trans researcher and offered refreshments and fidget toys to create a comfortable environment that honored neurodiversity. Every participant played with the fidget toys and nearly all commented on how “queer and comfortable” the room was, creating a much-needed sense of belonging.

The interview location was a creative site to gain richer data while extracting less from participants. The influence of interview location on rapport, including being a symbol of power, has been well documented (Bjørvik et al., 2023). More recently, attention has been given to how participants' experience of the interview location and setting can serve as important data itself (Leverentz, 2023). Queering the environment (e.g., bringing fidget toys, pride flag) led to more comfort and rapport, reduced harm, and richer data. We invite others to consider what might you be “taking” from participants in any study, and how can you use the interview location to give back in small yet meaningful ways.

**Before the Interview.** Showing up for an interview is a vulnerable act, and in our study, that vulnerability was palpable. Before beginning, we almost always started with conversations about how “gay” our outfits were. This was not planned, but it immediately broke the tension. We were quickly smiling and sometimes even doing a theatrical hair flip. This is how queer and trans people talk to each other; it is certainly not how researchers are trained to interact with participants. Fashion continues to be deeply relevant to and ingrained in queer and trans culture (Batista & Guedes, 2023; Carbone, 2021), but I did not need research to know this. Many in-person participants brought up how their pronoun pins, binder, cuffed sleeves, leather crop top, or denim jacket with patches was an intentional choice for this interview (I wore my gayest outfits, too). But in the next breath, most participants offered some sort of backstory about being worried that they did not *really* qualify to be part of the study (they did). In an instant, it felt as though imposter syndrome and gender dysphoria had merged in an academic environment, and I knew what they were saying to me: I don't know

if I even belong here. I then watched each of them visibly shrug their shoulders and say they reminded themselves that, of course, they belonged here because I was trans, too. These interactions were just a few seconds long and were captured only in jottings and memos, but I knew we had just built the trust necessary to talk about the topic of this study, being made to feel not “trans enough.” I reassured them that they certainly belonged, and I was happy they came.

I managed to both stay grounded in my communal LGBTQ+ identity during our brief exchanges about fashion and question what I had been taught about “professionalism” as a researcher. A positive thing about being an LGBTQ+ person and a qualitative researcher was that it helped me embrace the duality of this method and our shared cultural experiences. The response from my community and the richness of our interview conversations were my compass for knowing that our methodology was working. For other researchers, regardless of identity, how can you stay grounded in your shared humanity with participants rather than as interviewer/interviewee in the moments before an interview?

**Conducting Interviews as an Insider (and Outsider).** When conducting interviews, I shared with participants that I was a first-generation student finishing my doctorate program and that I was a White, queer, and nonbinary trans person from a rural town. Because our research was about trans experiences (albeit through an intersectional lens), it did make it easier to feel like insiders. There were times, however, when I slid along the insider/outsider continuum even within the same interview. For example, in some interviews with Two-Spirit participants, we discussed how transness is deeply embedded in Whiteness. I am familiar with this topic because I have learned about it in a classroom and can easily find relatable representation. Several participants brought this up but would start by saying, “No offense, but most nonbinary representation looks like you.” I would agree, responding lightheartedly, using humor and honesty to bridge our racial differences and diffuse discomfort. Their openness, my nondefensiveness, and our shared familiarity with this intersection of gender and ethnoracial identity, though qualitatively different, created trust. Our conversations then could move on, focusing almost exclusively on their experiences.

Decentering Whiteness is an ongoing task for White researchers, and I would recommend incorporating antiracist research practices as we did, such as those recommended by Goings et al. (2023).

**One-on-One Interviews.** I began by asking participants to describe what they learned from traversing binary boundaries of gender, and for 2 hours we talked about their other influential identities, their most treasured experiences as trans people, and how they wanted this research to benefit our community. Here, the third author identifies as a Hispanic queer trans man and reflects on his experience as both a participant in this study and a researcher at his job:

Right away, I notice I’m being interviewed by someone with nonbinary pronouns. It was a really big deal to see that because there is a sense of safety that comes with simply seeing another person’s pronouns. Even so, I start to anxiously anticipate being asked the typical “what-kind-of-transgender-are-you” questions, like “How did you know you were trans?” Those kinds of questions usually come from people who are not transgender. In all my experiences as both a participant and a researcher, I have learned that when I am questioned by researchers who do not share or understand my identities, instead of being able to share my story, I have to explain and justify my existence as a trans person.

During this interview, I was asked about all parts of me—my other identities, my feelings, what I wanted the researcher to do with my story. In other studies when I was asked, “How did you know you were trans?” I could only talk about my experience coming out. It is so easy to misrepresent trans people and other institutionally marginalized people when researchers do not prioritize connecting with the community they are researching. Throughout the research process, we became a collective of trans people, participants, and researchers who use our connections, platforms, and energy to creatively uplift each other’s voices.

Sharing identities and authentic moments of connection, whether through humor, mutual language, or a shared fashion sense, was clearly important for participants' interview experiences. As the third author describes, knowing to avoid questions that "other" our shared and unique experiences led to a completely different experience than he has had with other researchers.

Memoing and other reflexive strategies helped me reflect on my positionality, including the limitations of my perspective as a White queer trans/nonbinary person. I needed time to learn how to decenter Whiteness as an interviewer without overly putting that burden on participants. I learned that rapport and shared identities gave me more mental space as a researcher to know how and when to take up space and when to leave space in an interview. Ultimately, I fell into a "listen more and talk less" approach with my participants of color who had a lot to say about their experiences with race, whereas I had to push some of my White participants to think more deeply about how their Whiteness shaped their experiences. When I was read as an insider (especially with regard to gender or sexuality), I had to push participants to elaborate when they would stop short of explaining something by saying, "You know." Usually, I did know, but having that discussion helped us both name and unpack their experiences. For other researchers wanting to engage in CEnR, what other strengths do you have for connecting with participants? How can you be your authentic self and encourage participants to do the same?

### **Meaningful Dissemination and Lasting Collaboration**

In most studies, the interview and "extraction" of data from participants is where the relationship ends. Critical and CEnR principles encourage extending that relationship to include member checking (e.g., review of findings by participants; London et al., 2022). We learned how to do more to engage participants when drawing conclusions or sharing findings so we could maximize the impact of this work. I welcomed participants to attend my dissertation defense and invited them to share creative ideas for how a defense could be meaningful or useful for them. Many participants were also artists, so the defense became a platform to share participants' and other trans community members' artwork (and Instagram handles on request), further offering an opportu-

nity to network as artists and connect with others in the community. In this way, my defense became another opportunity to benefit the community through shared power.

Power sharing is a practice from critical and CEnR approaches and can be achieved in creative ways that are ideally participant driven. To create an environment where participants drive power-sharing opportunities, we recommend regular check-ins, including normalizing and making comfortable participants' decision to step back and/or recommit without judgment, perceived or otherwise. Researcher-driven power-sharing practices are also powerful. We echo strategies similar to those of Andress et al. (2020), for example, who suggested tending to three specific areas: implicit bias (increasing awareness through implicit bias training), structural competency (awareness of systemic imbalances and risks), and positionality (becoming aware and transparent about the power inherent in one's position and the risk of perpetuating harm, dominance, and supremacy within relationships and research).

Moving into praxis, I asked if and how participants would like to stay connected, and several expressed interest in doing so, noting they were looking for new community connections and/or were curious about research, so we formed our collective. The collective has been an act of intentional power sharing. Through our collective, we learn from one another, offer support, brainstorm creative avenues for dissemination, and discuss our individual personal and professional goals. As our relationships have deepened, we have opened up to each other about new meaningful impacts of our collective on our lives:

Between forming this collective and beginning to write this paper, another series of bombs were dropped on Gaza, a place where I see myself, my family, and my community reflected. I felt comfortable enough within our collective to continue to come together to write and connect, even though, as a Levantine Arab, I have been grief-stricken while watching the violence escalate. Knowing that that part of who I am is represented in this project and collective is important to me but knowing that it does not have to represent my whole experience has been revitalizing. (Fourth author)



The fourth author found a sense of belonging, healing, and community within our collective, where they are welcomed and affirmed for all of who they are. Another member of our collective (fifth author) noted that “there isn’t a replacement for a community like this. This is a group that finally works for me and my energy levels.” These impacts would have gone unnoticed if not for the time we have spent together as a collective. In fact, similar positive impacts might be happening in other studies but may be left out of discourse without continued community and participant involvement. We ultimately created something more than what they (and we) knew to be possible within the constraints of academia.

### **A Call for More Insider Community-Engaged Research**

To honor the lessons learned from participants in this study, we are calling for more insider CEnR with all institutionally marginalized communities, particularly within queer and trans communities. High-quality community engagement that is sensitive to a community’s needs can be deeply meaningful to everyone involved, regardless of identity. For us, being LGBTQ+ insiders served as a natural antidote to some of the common roadblocks to implementing successful CEnR approaches, including time spent establishing trust (beyond a general sense of rapport) and understanding a community’s needs/interests. Elevating insiders as leaders in CEnR is particularly meaningful because of the felt connection for participants in being with and represented by community (e.g., participants’ trust in a trans researcher led to a sense of belonging before the interview), as underscored by the second and third authors. It can also protect against unintentional yet harmful “data extraction” and help to facilitate sensitive representation, as noted by the third author. Our call is echoed by other researchers, particularly feminist and gender studies scholars such as Rosenberg and Tilley (2021), and in this essay, it is echoed by participants themselves.

### **Implications Beyond Research**

Our call for insider CEnR is also a call for a shift in what is valued by academic/research institutions, particularly the need to invest in nonacademic means of dissemination with the greatest felt impact on communities. Universities must recognize and respect communities in this way

to remain relevant to them (Bell & Lewis, 2022). Acknowledgment of this need is beginning to emerge, providing a roadmap for translating well-intended structural changes into impact (e.g., funding agencies requiring grant proposals to include academic and nonacademic dissemination; Bell & Lewis, 2022; Grant & DaViera, 2023). To do so, however, the necessary elements for building and maintaining such relationships must be more generally recognized. Aspects of such recognition include (but are not limited to) grant timelines (e.g., building in time for the “invisible labor” required to do this work well), allowable expenses, and value in promotion and tenure requirements. Importantly, this shift in university priorities would also be an investment in researchers who are from the historically underestimated communities they are working within.

### **Conclusion**

In this reflective essay, we share lessons learned from a study conducted by, with, and for the transgender community, with a focus on our identities and use of boundary-spanning methodology. We learned that insider-led research facilitated trusting, nonexploitative, lasting relationships with participants, resulting in research- and non-research-related benefits. We also were reminded of ever-present challenges, particularly the task of White researchers to decenter Whiteness in their research and scholarship and elevate QTBIPOC voices. We recommend ongoing self-education, reflexivity to align values with actions, creative and meaningful power-sharing practices, and other antiracist research practices (e.g., Goings et al., 2023) to help translate positive intent into positive impact. Establishing our collective has helped us remain deeply accountable to our community and maximize the impact of this and future studies for the communities we represent. The vignettes included throughout this essay offer everyone an inside glimpse into what became possible for our intersectional identity development and sense of belonging. This study adds to a small but growing body of research that affirms and centers the diversity of identities and experiences within the trans community.

In this article, we argue that trans insider leadership helped break down institutional barriers that could have otherwise limited trust and risked perpetuating further harm.

With an initial grounding in CQR, intersectionality, and felt theory, we increasingly blended CEnR language and approaches to deepen our community engagement and power sharing. As we learned more, we did more, a process that we recognize is ongoing. Without this approach, we argue that the authenticity and richness of our findings would not have been possible. We hope our lessons learned about insider representation and cultivating meaningful, trusting, and

collaborative relationships with the community can be broadly applied by researchers, educators, policymakers, human service professionals, and others of all identities and positionalities. Ultimately, everyone deserves to see representation of themselves as leaders and in the history that research writes. This representation must begin with a sense of responsibility to communities.



### About the Authors & Author Contributions

**Jey Blodgett (they/them), PhD**, earned their PhD in human development and family studies from Oregon State University. They are passionate about applied social justice research that is responsive to a community's needs and interests. Their research interests focus on gender socialization and intersectional identity development, specifically how systems of power and oppression influence LGBTQ+ people's experiences.

**\*Ray Wolf (he/him)** has served as a student advocate at the Hattie Redmond Women and Gender Center for the last 2 years, where he developed a passion for advancing equity-based policies and practices, particularly for the BILPOC (Black, Indigenous, Latinx people of color) LGBTQ+ communities. His research interests include global humanitarian causes, particularly international catastrophe management through effective policy. Ray holds a BA in liberal studies and philosophy with an emphasis in political science from Oregon State University, where he is also currently pursuing a master's in public policy. Ray was a participant and coresearcher in the original study.

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