

**SEXUALITIES ON THE MOVE:  
A COMPARISON OF THE WORK EXPERIENCES  
OF GAY MALE EDUCATORS TEACHING OVERSEAS<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper expands on the extant research on gay male educators by comparing two research projects on such educators who taught in international settings. One study focused on five gay, male, adult educators who relocated to Canada from countries in the Global South and the second study focused on eight gay, male, adult educators who relocated to Kosovo from countries in the Global North. Both projects demonstrated that (1) study participants are concerned with the safety and inclusiveness of their work environments, and (2) “sexual orientation” can be a self-limiting concept when used in education policy and practice. Recommendations for educational administrators conclude this paper.

The global expansion of teacher mobility (Arber, Blackmore, & Vongalis-Macrow, 2014; Bates, 2011) has led to educators from all areas of education (primary, secondary, post-secondary, and adult education) taking advantage of opportunities to teach in different countries. Referred to as “transnational educators,” this particular group of teachers generally cross national borders for a multitude of reasons: 1) economic and professional gain (Reid, Collins, & Singh, 2014); 2) cross-cultural experiences (Stanley, 2013); 3) better work and life conditions (McGregor, 2008); 4) as a spousal hire (Hayden & Thompson, 2011); and 5) employment as a result of grim job prospects in the country of origin (Penson, Yonemura, Sesnan, Ochs, & Chanda, 2011). For queer transnational educators, this ambition to teach overseas may be

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complicated due to variances in social, political, and legal positions toward gender and sexuality differences across the globe (Baird, 2007; Herdt, 1997). For this paper, I use the term *queer* as a representation for the spectral community of sexual and gender difference, rather than the “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender” (LGBT) identity-categories often used in Western literature, politics, and practice. I acknowledge that both approaches (LGBT and queer) are problematic in their deployment, as both function as imprints of a Western perspective on sexuality and gender difference and create further distance from understanding indigenous perspectives of sexuality and gender. Despite this controversy, queer allows for a spectrum of sexual and gender diversity that is useful for this paper.

Significant problems exist in international education from the perspective of sexual and gender diversity. In an adult education context, the key issues include 1) ongoing homophobic and transphobic violence that affects everyone, and those with foreign citizenships are not immune to such acts in the new context (Mizzi, 2009); 2) a scarcity of queer themes and topics in international education literature (Pattison, 2010); and 3) heteronormative values that remain dominant in education discourse in general (Hill, 2013). This paper is based on two studies that explore these subsets of the problem: heteronormativity and homophobia. It also addresses homophobia’s marginalizing effects on queer transnational educators and their responses to this marginalization. The purpose of this paper is to unravel some of the complexity that nuances the teaching overseas experience for queer educators. As teaching becomes increasingly globalized, queer transnational educators too can aim for a teaching career overseas, but they may need to be aware of and prepare for complex legal, social, and political contexts that may limit and regulate expression of sexuality and gender difference (Gedro, Mizzi, Rocco, & van Loo, 2013).

Questions driving the purpose of this research are these: *What are the challenges facing transnational, gay, male, adult educators as they cross national borders for work purposes? How do differences in work context shape the research?* The significance of this research is to extend the current scholarship that focuses on gay male educators to include transnational professional mobility. The results of these two studies have been presented elsewhere (Mizzi, 2013; Mizzi, 2014). A comparative analysis of both studies enables a secondary analysis of both projects from two ontological directions: Global North educators relocating to the Global South and Global South educators relocating to the Global North.<sup>2</sup> It is not my intention to sweep both study perspectives into one unit of analysis, given that power plays a completely different role in each situation, and often to the detriment of people who are based in or are from the Global South. Rather, a comparative view allows for an exploration of the encounters that shape work experiences in both contexts, followed by an observation and analysis of what was different or similar in each perspective. Below I provide a summary of what currently exists in the literature. A research design follows this section that profiles the methodology and the data. A discussion with recommendations for educational administrators concludes this paper.

### **Borders, Queerness, and Transnational Work**

In a metaphorical sense, queer people are not new to the notion of navigating borders. In a Global North context, the act of “coming out” as LGBT represents crossing over from one sexual or gender identity to another. The social borders in this context are sometimes guarded by gatekeepers, such as family members, colleagues, peers, and community members—whether or not they will “accept” this difference. The plight of queer educators being fired from their jobs or

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<sup>2</sup> Countries located in the Global North are generally defined by their economic over-development, including the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. Countries located in the Global South are generally defined by their economic under-development, including Africa and Latin America (Odeh, 2010).

otherwise marginalized at work as a result of their sexual or gender difference are examples of where gatekeepers reject non-heterosexuality (e.g., Callaghan, 2007).

Borders represent a familiar, yet problematic space to queer people. In a broader sense, queer people have faced ridicule and rejection from border guards when they try to cross national borders (Luibhéid, 1998; Sin, 2015). Sometimes this ridicule and rejection has led to queer persons identifying as “friends,” “cousins,” or “(straight) singles” to customs officers (Fisher, 2003). During large queer pride events, customs officers have been known to become extra vigilant at their national borders to deter in-coming queers as asylum-seekers, perverts, or party-goers (Luibhéid, 1998). On one hand, national borders could represent a promising new path towards receiving opportunities and insights that improve one’s life situation. On the other hand, national borders are places where gatekeepers assert their dominance as decision-makers and power-holders. This controversial role of national borders and their gatekeepers may explain why there is a scarcity of literature on the experiences of queer transnational workers in general. Queer transnational workers may very well be concerned with their treatment during and after their experience of crossing national borders. For example, in a study of immigrant, Middle-Eastern, male sexual minorities living in Canada and the United States, Eichler and Mizzi (2013) identify ongoing encounters with structural and social racism (e.g., prejudice or discrimination targeting someone of a different race), which counters what is communicated about Global North countries through pop culture (i.e., popular Global North television programs depict a “gay heaven” in its major cities) and “official” discourses (i.e., there are multicultural societies that embrace difference). In another example, Fassin and Salcedo (2015) illustrate how the French immigration system identifies homosexuality through a pre-described “gay identity” and requires evidence of such a “true identity.”

Largely situated in the field of immigrant studies, the literature suggests there is some struggle for immigrant professionals when it comes to 1) Global North employers recognizing prior learning and work experience obtained in Global South countries (Andersson & Guo, 2009); 2) identifying personal and social factors that are key to a successful adaptation to change (Koert, Borgen, & Amundson, 2011); and 3) engaging in “bridging programs” and other forms of re-training as a means to improve employment prospects (Shan, 2009). The literature also describes difficulties in the classroom between students adjusting to their foreign educator’s identity, second language ability, and accent (Amobi, 2004) and the educator trying to navigate through differences in classroom practices and broader institutional directives (Collins, 2008). With this work context in mind, it becomes clear that there are difficult challenges that lie ahead of immigrant workers.

While racism is a significant theme in the literature relating to immigrant studies, the work in expatriate studies (international development, business, administration) paints a different picture. In this context, foreign identity is not a safeguard against prejudice from colleagues and clients given that 1) expatriates work within a highly-structured, multi-cultural employment context that cuts across differences in identity (Mizzi & Rocco, 2013); 2) identity is often a controversial marker in politicized contexts (e.g., conflict zones) (Thomas, 2004); and 3) certain identities, such as sexual identity, could be too controversial and therefore have serious consequences on work and life overseas (Payne, 2008). Given the history of Global North imperialism in the Global South, a foreign presence might be interpreted as an attempt to colonize or to assist the “enemy” (Thomas, 2004).

Indeed, teaching in an international workplace means adult educators are engaging with a structured work circumstance that operates across differences in identity, citizenship, history,

religion, language, and culture (Mizzi & Hamm, 2013). For example, English (2004) reported that her study participants, who were transnational, female, adult educators who worked in the Global South, felt dislocated, disconnected, and displaced in their classrooms because they came from a white, Western, world that has a history of colonialism. They could not sever the weight of their own colonizer histories and positionalities while in the classroom. In effect, they were continually negotiating a complex mix of identity and culture by mingling their past experiences with their present work circumstance as a form of resistance to feeling disconnected with their students. Practically speaking, such resistance strategies included keeping silent, negotiating difference, creating connections, and seeking out each other for support (English, 2004). Mizzi, Hill, and Vance (in press) also describe how crossing into the Global South as educators engaged in queer organizing means running up against indigenous understandings of sexuality, which requires a decolonizing approach to the educational process. On one hand, queer sexualities or gender identities may also act as a type of “boundary marker” that will reflect how far transnational workplaces will accept liberalism and freedom in the workplace. On the other hand, in his book about lifelong learning and critical action, Grace (2013) interviews scholar Robert Hill who describes a “McPinking” of the sexual minority world as being an act of “cultural (homo)genization and commodified identities” based on “Western lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer constructions” (p. 188). Both perspectives are significant because it becomes clear that sexuality or gender identity may be a political marker in the workplace.

Gedro et al. (2013) and McPhail, McNulty, and Hutchings (2014) emphasize how queer, expatriate workers face unique challenges, such as engaging with heteronormative language in workplace policies, securing visas for same-sex partners, or determining a queer-positive culture internal and external to the workplace. For example, Wright (2000) described

how he was reduced to a “technical/scientific” role that rejected his queer knowledge and expertise in working with male sexual minority cultures in Bolivia. He writes:

As an openly “homosexual” AIDS expert, an agent/object all at once, I was viewed as a somewhat ambiguous figure by the people who hired me, especially by the national director. As time passed, considerable effort was made by the project leadership to reduce this disturbing duality and re-establish the conventional order, that is, to the extent possible, to make me a scientific/professional agent with substantial distance from the objects I was to study and help. (p. 98)

In this case, having a queer identity at work becomes controversial, and, as a result, there can be organizational efforts to restrict agency and expression. There needs to be some direction regarding how to unravel some of this tension.

### **Research Design**

In virtue of their being male, gay men retain some degree of privilege in a global society. However, their homosexuality causes them to have an uphill battle that can result in exclusion from workplace practices and relations. There may be different degrees of “outness” (openly identifying as a gay man), or what Yoshino (2006) refers to as “covering” (practicing homosexuality in secret). One of the two research studies presented in this paper examined the experiences of Global North, gay, male, adult educators who crossed national borders into Kosovo to assist with the “development” efforts. The second study examined the experiences of Global South, gay, male, adult educators who crossed national borders into Canada to seek out better personal and professional opportunities. The differences between these studies have to do with socio-cultural context, educator citizenship, flow of knowledge (Global North ↔ Global South), and perceptions of power in the work circumstances. For instance, study participants in Kosovo may be automatically granted a privileged “expert” status because of their Global North

backgrounds, whereas study participants in Canada may be perceived as second-class citizens given their Global South backgrounds. Indeed, there are stark differences in context and power, but both studies reveal experiences of inclusion and exclusion practices in educational workplaces.

Data collection was facilitated through in-depth, informal interviews in both studies. I used in-depth, informal interviews because they allow a researcher to obtain greater insight into the human experiences that make up the social phenomenon being researched (Lichtman, 2010). The interviews were based on sharing stories of working transnationally, which consisted of describing difficulties, successes, and lessons learned. According to Lichtman (2010), in-depth interviews

hear what the participant has to say in his own words, in his voice, with his language and narrative. In this way, participants can share what they know and have learned and can add a dimension to our understanding of the situation that questionnaire data or a highly-structured interview does not reveal. (p. 143)

Questions, then, act as a “flexible checklist or guide” that invites a greater emphasis on study participants’ voices (Lichtman, 2010). A thematic analysis allowed me to move my analysis of the interview responses from a broad interpretation of the data towards uncovering certain patterns and developing themes (Lichtman, 2010). The actual names of the study participants and their work situations have been omitted to protect confidentiality.

### *Teaching in Kosovo*

I examined the work experiences of eight Global North, gay, male, adult educators (United States [5], the Netherlands [2], and undisclosed [1]) teaching in Kosovo. For six of the eight study participants, the presence of homophobia (acts of violence and expressions of

hostility towards homosexuality) and heterosexism (heterosexual bias in systems, practices, or values) created disjunctures for them in the workplace. One participant from the Netherlands commented:

I think just after a few months there was some anonymous letter sent to the [British] Operations Director at Agency 1's mission who heard all kinds of stories of me that was sent to his mailbox. So I was called to the Operations Director there and I thought it was about something completely different. I came in, and his first question was, "Are you gay?" And, this Director made a case that gay members were not allowed in this mission.

A participant from the United States also shared:

There have been some incidents of homophobia, but the ones I remember involved international, not Kosovars. For instance, in a trip to Thessaloniki with four other colleagues (three female, one male) there was some confrontation between the Italian guy and me. On the way back to Kosovo, the guy started making negative remarks about gay people and referring to me in a rather aggressive and somehow pejorative way.

As a result of experiences like these, gay men in this study reverted back into the closet about their sexual identities and navigated through awkward encounters around sexuality. They covertly sought out a queer positive network, often through gay-themed websites.

In addition to the homophobic encounters described above, educators also revealed examples of heterosexist encounters and marginalization. Such examples included only providing information on "family involvement" for heterosexual transnational educators, not training staff counselors on the effects of homophobic encounters (e.g., one participant was asked to report his homophobic encounter with "finance" and not with human resources as they were not prepared), or ignoring sexuality as being a cultural trope of multiculturalism in pre-departure orientations. One significant finding from this research suggests that the inclusion of "sexual orientation" within anti-discrimination policies only narrowly functions as a reactive anti-discrimination measure in an overseas teaching context. Organizational perception of sexual

orientation in this way meant that study participants felt compelled to keep their sexual identity secret. The second Dutch participant illustrated this secrecy:

I informed my employer that I'm a widower (which, in fact, I am more or less) for 20 years. In order to prevent further questioning, I also informed them that my former "wife" was killed in a car accident and, to make it even more dramatic, on Christmas Eve. That prevented all further questioning.

When I asked study participants for positive examples of sexuality inclusion in their workplaces, there was no indication that employment sites engaged sexuality as a proactive means to address homophobia.

### *Teaching in Canada*

I explored the work experiences of five gay male transnational educators who re-located to Toronto from their Global South countries (Slovakia, Malaysia, Philippines, Croatia, and Jordan). Some had arrived initially as students and later became adult educators, but all were considered "immigrants" according to official Canadian legal and social discourse.

Data from this study indicated that finding work–life balance was a priority for this group of participants. First, their motivations were to work in Canada without harm and to seek out opportunities to find satisfaction with a same-sex partner or specific career opportunity. This is different from the broader literature on educators from the Global South, where the focus is on economic development. For example, when all study participants described coming to Canada and learning of queer culture within the first week of arrival, I interpret this initiative as researching the country to understand the "borders" of queer safety and inclusiveness. Four out of the five participants saw their workplaces as being unsafe and restrictive. For example, when the Filipino participant came out to his students, he explained that, "My student started talking about the bible and gay people are going to hell and stuff like that. At that time, when you're still

nervous, you're still feeling uncertain with the group." Study participants also perceived standardized systems and procedures as locking out opportunities to promote individuality and develop teaching practices that blend their cultural backgrounds with the work circumstance. The Filipino participant further commented on how it is "hard to fit into distinct competences" identified by his administrator. Fitting into competences pulls time away from thinking about his teaching practice. Further, it was also shared with me that this participant was given "approval" to be "out" in the workplace, but not to his students.

Second, in four of the five interviews, there was a perceived mistruth about Canada's openness to queer people. These participants described how homophobic and racialized violence surfaced more in Canada than in their home countries. The Malaysian participant needs to "recharge" himself by leaving Canada and returning home to Malaysia every year. Typically, there is a common misperception in media and public discourse that portrays Canada as a safe haven for queer people and a welcoming space to immigrants in general. However, upon arrival, the study participants experienced racism and homophobia in their workplaces. This countered their perceptions that they would be *free* to be open about their identities without recourse. For an example of systemic racism, the collective agreement only takes bereavement leave from a Global North perspective. The participant shares: "So the fact that actually I had to put this [explanation of how funerals are done in Malaysia] down in writing and that there are many of us from other cultures, and the powers that be here [the administrators] didn't really get it. Sometimes you just have to say the simplest things to make people understand that it's not all the same everywhere." An example of homophobia is when the Slovakian participant faced outspoken students who did not want to hear his "gay agenda" when he started to teach a seminar on queer literacy.

Third, “mobility” surfaced as a theme in this research as these participants revealed the multiple countries and regions that they have lived in. I interpreted this on-going mobility as being a purposeful act, where study participants conceptualized the world as a fluid space, rather than one limited by national borders. The Slovakian participant’s reflective comment on how “love moves mountains” cements this point as he continues to move around the world and within Canada following his passion to teach diverse groups of people. What runs up against this fluid perception of a workplace is the deployment of professional discourses in the workplace, such as the requirement for Canadian-recognized “competences”, which limits mobility (e.g., promotion, job transfer). The Filipino participant, for example, was told to reveal and change his computer login password because it contained “unprofessional” language that is commonly used in his queer culture.

### **Common Themes of the Work**

Given how gay male identities are often associated with being controversial and scandalous, there is a demand for a silent homosexual identity. This creates further distance between colleagues. If these gay men publicly wanted to stand outside of what is considered to be “normal” and “acceptable” by professional standards through an assertion of a queer identity (e.g., expression of gender difference or mention of a same-sex partner), then difficult experiences in the workplace emerged to correct them. These experiences came in the form of, among other things, threats to be relocated to another work situation and incidences of exclusion from their workplaces. Based on examination of both studies, I suggest two concerns for gay, male, transnational educators: 1) the prioritization of safety and inclusion; and 2) questioning the legitimacy of sexual orientation. I explain both in turn.

### *Prioritization of Safety and Inclusion*

Study participants of both research projects considered the safety and inclusion of their work situations a priority. A majority of participants in both studies did not reveal their sexuality to their students. Those who disclosed their homosexuality at work chose to only share with colleagues who they trusted, and some never disclosed at all. They took tremendous effort to understand the political and social climates toward homosexuality, how to access the gay male community for support, and how to keep off the radar of “gay-unfriendly” colleagues in the foreign context. Oftentimes, reading books about the host culture and speaking with peers functioned as a form of informal learning so that these educators learned how to negotiate their sexuality at work. Discussion of these topics showed that fear was a strong element. Despite strong equity language that suggests protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation, the majority of participants of both studies found themselves at a crossroads between being open about their sexuality and challenging heteronormativity. For study participants in Canada, this also meant balancing their openness about their ethnic backgrounds and disrupting what it means to have a “Canadian” identity. A majority of participants did not want to lose their jobs as a result of their identity-difference (and thought that this was indeed a possibility), but they also wished for acceptance and inclusion in their new international work setting.

### *Questioning Sexual Orientation*

Both studies reveal that the inclusion of sexual orientation in policy is self-limiting. For study participants who traveled to Kosovo, the protection of sexual orientation stops at their national borders, as they endured heterosexist and homophobic acts in the workplace and felt hopeless that their agencies would address the violence. The fact that administrators did not

know how to address homophobia or heteronormativity in the workplace is an indication that sexual orientation remains a reactive concept (i.e., only react to harsh encounters of homophobia), without much consideration of the benefits of a proactive stance towards sexual and gender diversity. If homosexuality were, indeed, a possibility in these workplaces, then why not showcase the process towards attaining this freedom?

For many queer persons who relocated to Canada, having a sexual orientation is a problematic concept given that some of their cultural backgrounds have strict gender-roles that include rules around sexual practices, rather than a sexual orientation. The historical practice of naming and categorizing a person's sexual identity has created a form of cultural hegemony that excludes different forms of sociocultural understandings of gender. The participants in this portion of the study largely come from countries that see the LGBT label as a Western phenomenon. In this sense, the term sexual orientation functions not only to *describe* (give an account of a group, in a specific context, location, time) but also to *inscribe* (relegate the subject to a set of predetermined and dominant judgements, behaviours, and characteristics that define and limit agency) Western understandings around sexuality difference. "Rules" (laws and policies) are not the only reasons to recognize and leverage diversity based on sexual orientation, but they may indeed form the bottom line for some organizations.

The use of sexual orientation then creates an expectation that social practices that make up Global South societies will "eventually develop into identity categories familiar in this part [Global North] of the world" (Khayatt, 2006, p. 220). The term sexual orientation is counter-cultural for Global South participants as it requires a declared (homo)sexual identity. Although over time, as Khayatt explains, the participants started to self-identify as gay as a means to "fit in" with Canadian approaches to sexuality (e.g., having a sexual orientation), it is still recognized

as an unfamiliar and problematic Global North practice that can be provocative in Global South contexts.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

In light of this research, an analysis of the professional experiences of queer educators needs to take into consideration transnational realities. This work could provide some direction for queer educators who wish to work elsewhere, as well as inform educational leaders and policy-makers who are concerned with finding balance between the social backgrounds of their staff members and respect for local laws, organizational behaviours, and cultural beliefs. Based on this research, there are a number of recommendations that may be useful to educational administrators. These recommendations are not easy work. They require openness, dialogue, and a constant “re-vision” in order to address difficult encounters or “blowback” (Hill, 2009) that will surface as a result of diversity initiatives.

Given the transnational nature of this research project, there is added value to employing border-crossing educators as an opportunity to enhance pedagogy for learners and staff members. First, it is important to keep in mind that sexual orientation is about the gifts, talents, skills, knowledges, and joys that everyone brings to the table. It is not a catchall phrase for simply a “heterogenous group” of queer workers, but perhaps a starting point to more fully actualizing and maximizing the development potential of staff and students. Second, sexual orientation must be addressed at the organizational level, which includes entry level, middle-management, top management, and so forth. Third, sexual orientation is expressed in time and space (circumstance and regional diversity), which may surface tensions around sexuality. Negotiating these tensions may mean constant awareness-raising and action-planning to prepare

for tensions as they arise. Central to this recommendation is the fact that there are different understandings of sexuality everywhere and these varied understandings need to be respected. Finding this balance in light of a transnational work situation will be tricky work, and will require a great deal of time and communication. Fourth, since this study originated with the voices of educators describing their experiences, it is important for administrators to realize that change begins from the bottom up—so organizing and mobilizing at the “lowest” level is fundamental. Fifth, recruiting leaders, educators, and other staff who represent diversity helps strengthen inclusion based on sexual and gender difference. Along this vein, after staff members are hired, mentoring schemes where the “minority” mentors the dominant group is helpful towards building social integration and networks. Finally, drawing from the literature on gay–straight alliances (Niblett & Ora, 2014), the establishment of a queer-positive space in the educational workplace can provide advocacy, support, coalition-building, information, and fellowship. I also envision in this space a discussion on values and knowledges toward sexual and gender diversity (including same-sex and cross-sex sexualities) from various cultural perspectives, and practical strategies that welcome difference and respect local traditions. Setting aside a queer space develops the possibility for an intermediary body to communicate emerging needs with educational administration and re-conceptualizes sexual orientation as a concept that requires elaboration and expansion in all workplace systems. Overall, educational administrators can be supportive by becoming sensitive to and aware of the issues facing queer transnational educators and disrupting heteronormativity in their educational institutions. Through this effort it is envisioned that the entire workplace will become a queer-positive space.

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