RESILIENCE YOUTH AS FUGITIVE LIFELONG LEARNERS:
ENGAGING IN A STRATEGIC, ASSET-CREATING, COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING PROCESS TO COUNTER EXCLUSION AND TRAUMA IN FORMAL SCHOOLING

André P. Grace, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

Sexual minorities include those individuals whose sexual orientations and gender identities fall outside heteronormative categorizations of sex, sexuality, and gender as well as outside the dichotomies of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual binaries (Grace 2007, 2008). They comprise such positionalities as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, intersexual, two-spirited (Aboriginals who display both male and female characteristics), and queer. As a key focus in my research on lifelong learning, I explore how sexual minorities as a spectrum of disenfranchised groups mediate the complexities of change, institutional and community cultures, and civil society in order to learn and live in contemporary times. In this research to counter heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia as destructive cultural forces, I have also focused on developing and implementing queer critical educational and cultural practices that respect and accommodate individuals across the diverse sex, sexual, and gender locations they can occupy. In this work, I locate education as a sociopolitical and cultural project that is caught up in the larger contexts that bind society in particular ways. From this perspective, I proceed aware of two realities: heteronormativity is culturally engrained (Grace and Wells 2005, 2009), and education legitimates particular ways of being and acting in the world (Freire 1998, 2004). Despite these systemic facts, I still believe that education, if it is driven by a politics of hope and possibility, has the potential to play a key role in political and cultural work for social transformation (Allman 1999). For me, both queer and critical analyses are informative here. Thus I have worked to develop what is emerging as a queer critical theoretical framework to guide ethical, political, sociocultural, and strategic aspects of sexual-minority research and educational and cultural practices. As I develop a multiperspective queer critical theory, I know that I work in the problematic intersection of two seemingly disparate theories. Still, both queer theory and critical theory seek to fight oppression. Thus they share some common ground to support the possibility of building a queer critical theory that is mutually informative with inclusive, ethical, transgressive, and transformative politics and praxis. Queer theory engages how the realities of ignorance, fear, hate, and oppression permeating the dominant culture-knowledge-language-power nexus impact the positionalities of sex, sexuality and gender identities fall outside heterosexual/homosexual binary (Aboriginals who display both male and female characteristics). Queer theory seeks to disrupt norms and binaries. Critical theory and transformative politics and praxis engage the possibility of change. The two are caught up in the larger contexts that bind society in particular ways. From this perspective, I proceed aware of two realities: heteronormativity is culturally engrained (Grace and Wells 2005, 2009), and education legitimates particular ways of being and acting in the world (Freire 1998, 2004). Despite these systemic facts, I still believe that education, if it is driven by a politics of hope and possibility, has the potential to play a key role in political and cultural work for social transformation (Allman 1999). For me, both queer and critical analyses are informative here. Thus I have worked to develop what is emerging as a queer critical theoretical framework to guide ethical, political, sociocultural, and strategic aspects of sexual-minority research and educational and cultural practices. As I develop a multiperspective queer critical theory, I know that I work in the problematic intersection of two seemingly disparate theories. Still, both queer theory and critical theory seek to fight oppression. Thus they share some common ground to support the possibility of building a queer critical theory that is mutually informative with inclusive, ethical, transgressive, and transformative politics and praxis. Queer theory engages how the realities of ignorance, fear, hate, and oppression permeating the dominant culture-knowledge-language-power nexus impact the positionalities of sexual minorities in contextual, relational, and dispositional terms (Grace 2005a; Grace, Hill, Johnson, and Lewis 2004). Critical theory focuses on domination and oppression, and on political resistance and transformation in the face of power. Critical ideas like cultural democracy, ethical public practice (embedded, for example, in the ideal of lifelong learning for all), and disenfranchised queer citizens as change agents can be explored in framing a queer project that advances access, accommodation, and full human and civil rights for sexual-minority persons (Grace 2005b, 2006). Within a mutuality of queer critical theory and practice, this cultural work for social transformation of the life-and-work conditions of sexual minorities is a difficult, but incremental, local, and relational possibility (Freire 1998, 2004; Grace and Wells 2007a, 2007b). Here both critical pedagogy and queer pedagogy can be helpful. Both have focused on transgressing and transforming mainstream education as a sociopolitical and cultural site where discourses and institutional arrangements have traditionally aided and abetted an exclusionary status quo. In this regard, both pedagogies can help us integrate what Hill (1996) calls fugitive knowledge into everyday educational practice where every student can learn about the histories of sexual minorities and their struggles to be, become, and belong as persons and citizens in a heteronormative world. Building fugitive knowledge is about giving presence and place to the fringe social and cultural learning formations and projects of sexual minorities; it is teaching to transgress and transform social and cultural constructs historically limited to heteronormative contexts (Grace and Hill 2004).

In this paper I situate my research to study how Canadian sexual-minority youth grow into resilience. I problematize the notion of resilience as I locate it as a process and an outcome of an individual
youth’s prowess at cultivating the attributes and capabilities that enable mediation of adverse heterosexist, sexist, homophobic, and/or transphobic ecologies. I consider elements of risk and protection as I consider how sexual-minority youth grow into resilience by engaging in lifelong learning as a developmental asset-creating process that enables the individual to transgress the adversity induced by heterosexism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia; deal with consequential mental and emotional trauma; grow into self-respect and self-confidence; set realistic goals and engage in problem solving as part of surviving, thriving, and acting in the world; and build supportive, collaborative relationships (Goldstein and Brooks 2005a, 2005b; Grace and Wells 2007b). I conclude with a focus on linking lifelong learning to possibilities for more encompassing studies of resilience.

RESEARCHING THE RESILIENCE OF CANADIAN SEXUAL-MINORITY YOUTH

Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects sexual-minority Canadians against discrimination. Even so, changes in law and legislation respecting the individual and citizenship rights of Canadian sexual minorities have been slow and incremental, and they have not resulted in adequate respect and accommodation in Canadian education, culture, and society (Grace 2007). In the case of sexual-minority youth and formal schooling, stories of incessant symbolic and physical violence are well documented in narratives about confusion, depression, aggression, substance abuse, impulsivity, alienation, truancy, quitting school, being gay bashed, hurting others, running away, and suicide (Public Health Agency of Canada 2006; Quinlivan and Town 1999; Ryan and Futterman 1998; Tonkin, Murphy, Lees, Saewyc, and the McCreary Centre Society 2005). Increasingly though, stories of at-risk sexual-minority youth are being transgressed by stories of resilient sexual-minority youth who survive and thrive amid the risks and barriers they face daily (Grace and Wells 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2009). In a real sense, these youth are like Hill’s (1996) fugitive learners who, over time, grow into resilience via strategic informal and nonformal learning in diverse community contexts outside formal education.

This has become evident in my ongoing queer critical ethnographic research on sexual-minority youth and resilience building, which is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The youth involved in this research have attended Camp FYrefly one or more times since its inception in 2004. Kristopher Wells and I co-founded this annual four-day leadership camp, which has attracted youth from across Canada (www.fyrefly.ualberta.ca). In 2009 there will be camps in four Canadian cities: Edmonton, Vancouver, Saskatoon, and St. John’s. The FYrefly acronym stands for fostering, Youth, resilience, energy, fun, leadership, yeah! Through our efforts to obtain private, corporate, university, and community funding and in-kind support, Camp FYrefly is able to accommodate up to sixty youth per site. Each youth (14 to 24 years old) pays only a $25.00 or in-kind (through volunteer work at camp) commitment fee. At the camp, we use by-youth-for-youth educational strategizing and programming, adult and peer-to-peer mentoring, and a mobilized community support system. During the Camp, lifelong learning for youth participants emphasizes growing into resilience through individual development, socialization, intergenerational learning, community building, health education, learning about safety and the law, and building leadership potential (Grace and Wells 2007b). In conducting research on resilience as a process and an outcome, I use multiple methods to explore how Canadian sexual-minority youth build knowledge and understanding of self, others, and their surroundings as an ethical and political co-construction that helps them become resilient lifelong learners. These methods include a dialogic style of interviewing in both open-ended individual and focus group contexts. My research is indicating that sexual-minority youth engage in community-based lifelong learning through Camp FYrefly as a strategic process that enables them to grow into resilience supported by a range of protective factors.

RESILIENCE: A CONSTRUCT UNDER CONSTRUCTION

As a construct, resilience is multidimensional and still indeterminate in nature. It is riddled with ‘(1) ambiguities in definitions and terminology, (2) variations in interdomain functioning and risk experiences among ostensibly resilient children, (3) instability in the phenomenon of resilience, and (4) theoretical concerns, including questions about the utility of resilience as a scientific construct’ (Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker 2000: 543). Regarding its multiple definitions, ‘theoretical and research literature on resilience reflects little consensus about definitions, with substantial variations in operationalization and measurement of key constructs’ (Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker 2000: 544). Still, it is generally understood that the concept refers to managing or surmounting great risk in the face of major stressors, difficulties, and threats to individual development (Doll and Lyon 1998; Masten, Hubbard, Gest, Tellegen, Garmezy, and Ramirez 1999). Furthermore, in contemporary research, resilience is not reduced to a personal characteristic of a person; instead it is considered to
be a sustainable recovery process and a capacity and outcome of effectively adapting in the face of
tremendous adversity or trauma and significant threats to personal welfare, health, safety, and
security (Clauss-Ehlers 2008; Johnson 2008; Luthar and Cicchetti 2000; Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker
2000; Masten 2001).

Growing into resilience ‘involves the interplay between strengths of the individual and external
supporting factors in the individual’s social environment,’ which some researchers now relate to
students’ lived everyday experiences (Johnson 2008: 386). Some researchers have also explored the
dynamic interplay between resilience and risk. Pianta and Walsh (1998: 411) explain, ‘Risk and
resilience are not a characteristic of a child or a family or a school but are characteristics of a process
involving the interactions of systems. More specifically, resilience is produced by the interactions
among a child, family, peers, school, and community.’ As they see it, a successful process of
resilience building must be sustained, and it may involve multiple and interactive factors and actions
from the point of initiation through to other stages in the process. Emerging research has shown that
the process is a dynamic one in which ‘positive adaptation … involves a developmental progression,
such that new vulnerabilities and/or strengths often emerge with changing life circumstances’ (Luthar,
Cicchetti, and Becker 2000: 544). Rutter (2006: 8) discusses this progression:

Protection may derive from what people do to deal with stress or adversity. That is, the notion of
resilience focuses attention on coping mechanisms, mental sets, and the operation of
personal agency. In other words, it requires a move from a focus on external risks to a focus on
how these external risks are dealt with by the individual. More generally, this means that
resilience, unlike risk and protective factor approaches, forces attention on dynamic
processes, rather than static factors that act in summative fashion. … Protection may derive from
circumstances that come about long after the risk experience. In other words, resilience
may sometimes reflect later recovery, rather than an initial failure to succumb.

Resilience and risks must be considered concurrently. For youth, risk factors include poverty, physical
and emotional abuse, family dysfunction, and poor parenting or other deficient relationships with
adults; these factors disable the process of growing into resilience and tend to be interconnected,
multiplicative in negative developmental and social consequences, and cumulative in impact over time
(Doll and Lyon 1998; Rutter 1999). For the sexual-minority youth participating in my research, those
who felt at risk or threatened stayed ‘in the closet’; that is, they remained silent about their sexual-
minority positionailties. They provided such reasons as ‘feeling vulnerable to attacks, ignorance, and
rejection;’ and ‘being out is scary’. Still one respondent stated, ‘Hiding is harder than dealing with
homophobia’. When respondents were asked how having to hide or be silent affected them, their
responses included: ‘It makes me even more angry, and since I can’t express that anger, it turns
inward;’ ‘It requires energy that should be available for other things;’ ‘I am unable to be myself and
support my own values;’ ‘It can crush people on the inside;’ ‘It affected me greatly. It’s harder to trust
people and when I was younger I cut and wanted to die;’ ‘You eventually fade as a person;’ ‘It
changes you, rots you;’ ‘I think it absolutely kills my self-esteem and confidence;’ ‘I have this secret
that I want to tell, but I don’t know what people will say. I don’t want to be shunned or disowned. It’s hard.
It’s like a prison;’ ‘It’s emotionally draining to always pretend that I am someone I’m not’. Overall,
youth used an array of descriptors to depict how they felt: sad, alone, depressed, isolated, ashamed,
disappointed, unhealthy, stressed, tense, self-hating, bitter, frustrated, stupid, excluded, and
incomplete. One ‘out’ youth was bothered by those who were not: ‘I am a very pro-active person, and
I honestly cannot stand queer people who just sit on their balls whining, unwilling to help change the
world in the least bit. It saddens me and makes me lose hope on achieving absolute equality’. It
appears that as this youth became more resilient, he grew frustrated waiting for others to catch up.

Youth who grow into sustainable resilience value self-knowledge and have self-understanding that
enables them to be reflexive as they make causal connections between their experiences and their
resulting emotional impact (Beardslee 1989). For sexual-minority youth participating in my research,
building resilience involved the important step of ‘coming out’, which is being visible and vocal to
others about one’s sexual-minority positionailty. When asked what it means to be out, youth provided
such answers as ‘It is being confident in letting people know you are gay;’ ‘It gives me power;’ ‘For
me, being out is really freeing … because you’re true to yourself;’ ‘It’s being comfortable and honest
with others about my identity;’ ‘It means you advocate;’ ‘It also inspires others to come out;’ ‘It is being
visible and proud;’ ‘It is accepting yourself and being willing and trusting enough to show the real
you to others;’ ‘It is validation of my identity;’ ‘It means that the close people in my life/friends know my
sexual or gender identity; ‘It means I am not afraid of what other people think and I will openly tell anyone who asks;’ ‘It's one of the most important things you can do’.

Within these responses are constitutive factors associated with youth growing into resilience. As my research progresses, I hope to learn more about the individual and environmental factors that the research literature associates with resilient, self-confident, self-directed, interactive, and focused youth who adapt/continue to adapt in the face of serious adversity. These factors include having (1) a positive temperament, a calm attitude, personal agency, and an urge to persist and succeed; (2) a sense of self-control and self-worth; (3) the ability to think critically and reflexively about the ecology of self, others, relationships, and surroundings before responding and acting in situations; (4) a close, accepting, communicative, cohesive, and supportive relationship with a peer, sibling, parent, or another supportive adult; (5) a sense of belongingness, a commitment to community, and the ability to make connections to prosocial groups and structures including effective schools; and (6) awareness and pride in the strengths of one’s cultural legacy as positive impacts on individual identity development and community building (Beardslee 1989; Carbonell, Reinnerz, and Giaconia 1998; Clauss-Ehlers 2008; Doll and Lyon 1998; Hauser 1999; Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker 2000; Masten 2001; Neighbors, Forehand, and McVicar 1993; Rutter 2006). Masten (2001: 230) relates that such asset-building interventions are premised on the ‘the idea that enough [of these] positive assets could offset the burden in a child’s life from one or many risk influences.’

LIFELONG LEARNING AND POSSIBILITIES FOR RESILIENCE RESEARCH

Lifelong learning as learning about individual development and social, historical, political, and cultural contexts is challenged to deal with the failure of institutions like heteronormative families, schools, and churches that have historically and largely failed to recognize, respect, and accommodate sexual-minority children and youth. When lifelong learning as it occurs in places like Camp fyrefly helps youth grow into resilience, it is better when it is preventative rather than rehabilitative since the latter kind of learning only happens after at-risk youth have endured the trauma of exposure to heterosexism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia that often intersect with other debilitating forces like racism, ethnocentrism, and classism. In their onslaught on disenfranchised youth, these destructive, life-eroding forces perpetuate nihilism expressed in such negative outcomes as depression, alienation, and suicide ideation (Public Health Agency of Canada 2006; Tonkin, Murphy, Lees, Saewyc, and the McCreary Centre Society 2005). While Camp fyrefly and other informal, asset-creating, community-based learning sites fill a void as they help youth to overcome nihilism and build resilience, they should not let schools and formal education off the hook. Indeed formal education ought to be an integral part of lifelong learning for sexual-minority children and youth. A transformation of heterosexualizing schools that have traditionally maintained the heteronormative status quo is necessary if there is to be systemic change to make learning and life better for sexual minorities. As Doll and Lyon (1998: 359) argue:

Schools and communities need to increase greatly the commitment of their resources to [sexual-minority and other disenfranchised] students existing within hazardous niches of multiple, chronic risk conditions. In doing so, the focus needs to be on eliminating sources of risk and enhancing sources of support. In those cases in which causal risk factors are known, it makes good sense to attempt to remove or ameliorate them, if possible.

To expand possibilities for research, as noted earlier resilience ought to be studied as a lifelong process involving developmental progression that shifting life circumstances impact. Luther, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000: 555-556) stress the value of conducting research on the concept across the lifespan, asserting, ‘Resilience can be achieved at any point in the lifecycle’ so ‘there is a need for additional work on at-risk individuals’ achievement of positive outcomes in later life.’ Rutter (2006: 10) concurs, stating, ‘[In studying resilience,] it is necessary to adopt a life-span trajectory approach that can investigate later turning point effects’. Connecting experiences of risks in childhood to potentially negative conduct in the mediation of everyday later life, Rutter (1999: 130) adds, ‘The carry-forward of ill-effects into adult life is much influenced by … negative chain reactions by which people’s behaviour increases the likelihood that they will have further adverse experiences.’ He goes further, stating ‘it is also clear that our attitudes to[ward] ourselves and our confidence in our ability to deal effectively with life challenges is likely to be influenced by how we have coped with stress and challenge in the past’ (125). From this perspective, studying resilience in the context of lifelong learning can help to promote research into how ways of dealing or not dealing with adversity impact a person’s resilience and ability to resist difficulties in adulthood. As well, linking the study of resilience to lifelong learning can
be a way to emphasize the importance of longitudinal studies that examine ‘how the assets, risks, and protective factors in … resilience models may influence each other over time’ (Masten 2001: 230). Thus a huge resilience research frontier awaits us.

REFERENCES


