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(Re)Searching Queer Subjects: Approaching a Queer Methodology

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The catalog copy for my Masters in Education program contends that “the program focuses on the theoretical, historical, and political perspectives of race, class, gender, language, and sexual orientation as they apply to the theory and practice of education.” In fact, queer subjects and queer voices rarely come up in the coursework, and when they do they are cordoned off into the “queer” section of the course. Only once did I ever see a queer student question these exclusions-- the teacher listened respectfully but made no changes to the syllabus or the readings. As a gay/queer identified man, I take these exclusions personally. I have also observed that queer invisibility is omnipresent in educational research. This paper explores the possibility of creating a queer methodology by first exploring the questions of ethics, positionality, validity, and topics of inquiry. It then attempts to fashion some queer theoretical tools that researchers can use.

Like me, Mary Bryson and Suzanne de Castell (1998) are “troubled” by the fact that participants in educational research studies are almost always marked heterosexual by the absence of any disclosure or acknowledgement of their sexuality (p.245). It is now eleven years later, and gradually researchers are starting to publish studies about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and/or Queer subjects. Yet the vast majority of studies fail to acknowledge or address the issue of sexuality.

Audre Lorde once wrote that “the master’s tools will not dismantle the master’s house” (1984, p. 110-114). According to Kenn Honeychurch (1996), theories and methods of research embed within them heterosexist values (p.339-340). Education

researchers need to develop queer methodologies that challenge these hegemonic values and epistemologies. A methodology, Robert Bogdan and Sari Biklen (1998) wrote, differs from methods in that methods are “specific techniques you use” while a methodology is “the general logic and theoretical perspectives for a research project” (p. 31).

Three studies in particular illustrate various points throughout this paper; Pascoe study (2007) of masculinity and sexuality at an urban high school in California and Saltmarsh’s study (2007) of sexual violence at a boys’ school in Australia. Pascoe described in *Dude You’re a Fag* how she spent a year and a half at “River High School” studying how sexuality helps to delimit and construct masculinity among boys (p. 3). She found that the notion of a “faggot” was more often deployed by boys to enforce compulsory gender roles and behaviors rather than simply being about an individual boy’s sexual orientation. Saltmarsh engaged in a three year study of violent incidents at a boys’ school in Sydney, Australia, using interviews and analysis of media representations (p. 336). She investigated how “discourses of elitism, heteronormativity, and violence” permeated the private school (p. 336). The final study that this paper will address is my unpublished Masters’ thesis research in which I explored the California Teachers Association (CTA) Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender (GLBT) Caucus by reflecting on my own personal experiences, interviewing members of the caucus, and observing caucus meetings.

Scott Long (1993) suggested that readers imagine his paper being presented “by a small, mustachioed man wearing a gold lame cocktail dress, black pumps with three inch stiletto heels, a raven wig, and a beaded cloche with peacock feathers” (p. 79, cited in Honeychurch, p. 348). Imagine this man as an educational researcher doing work in a classroom. Imagine this man approaching the principal of an urban high school asking to do fieldwork in a classroom. Bryson and De Castelle observed that “only heterosexual or faux-heterosexual people are usually welcome to do school-based educational research” (p. 247).

Colleen Capper (1999) discussed how one often must often claim to be researching a broader topic than sexuality in order to gain access to a site (p. 6). Pascoe claimed that she was “writing a book about teenaged guys” rather than a book about the connections between heterosexism and masculinity (p. 183). She carefully controlled her gender presentation to be more masculine than the girls at the school, while being careful not to disclose her lesbian identity until the conclusion of her research. This became challenging, as one of the “Basketball Girls” sensed she was a lesbian and the “Gay-Straight Alliance girls” were much more certain about her lesbian identity and teased her about her “roommate” on a regular basis (p. 191). She wanted to be able to be out as a lesbian in order to provide a role-model to these girls since there were no other out gay or lesbian adults in the school. Feeling that it would interfere with her research, however, she chose not to do so until the conclusion of her study (p. 191).

James Sears (1996) offers a similar notion of “covert queer research” where queer researchers gain access to a site and use their invisibility to explore dynamics of heterosexism and homophobia (Capper, p. 6). Queer theorists are skeptical about the nature of the closet; for example, Judith Butler (1991) contends: “Being ‘out’ always depends to some extend on being ‘in’; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being “out” must produce this closet again and again in order to maintain itself as ‘out’” (p. 16). If one cannot come out without reinforcing the whole notion of the closet, is it such a bad thing to creatively use strategies of concealment and revelation, as Diana Fisher (2003) observes gay and lesbian Russian immigrants do, in order to gain agency over one's lives? Fisher suggests that “when members of The Russian Gay and Lesbian Group tactically operate according to the ‘chance offerings’ of daily circumstances, they use the closet as a space to potentially escape the surveillance of the proprietary powers” (p. 182).

Might this strategic disclosure give researchers a new sense of agency in an otherwise oppressive locale in which they are doing fieldwork? Bryson and De Castell disagreed; they were aghast at the idea of covert research; their queer researchers Manifesto included “**I will not** try to pass as straight in my research work” as one of its primary tenets (1998, p. 249). They attempted, rather, to open up spaces for out queer researchers to be doing research with queer subjects, to allow Long’s “man in the gold lame cocktail dress” to do educational research. Contrary to orthodox positivist ideology, it matters who is doing the research.

Researcher subjectivity

Who is doing the research? In a traditional positivist framework, it does not matter, or at least matters only as you work towards being the perfect, unbiased (read white heterosexual male) observer. Joshua Gamson (2000) observed that (positivist) science has traditionally been used against those that do not fit the norm (p. 347). Honeychurch (1996) suggested that in order to have a queer perspective, researchers must reject paradigms in which the neutral observer comes to know an objective truth. Instead, to research from a queer perspective means to “embrace... a dynamic discursive position from which subjects of homosexualities can both name themselves and impact the conditions under which queer identities are constituted” (p. 342-343). This means putting oneself into one’s work.

Researchers ought to maintain a continual skepticism about the notion of positionality. Rasmussen (2006) observed that researchers need to deconstruct even their own identities: positionality is in some sense just a “chimera” despite having real impacts on our research (p. 38). For example, in research with the CTA GLBT Caucus, I could say that I’m a “white, gay male leatherman, living in the Castro, who is studying to be an education researcher and works as a paraprofessional and substitute teacher.” It's necessary, however, to unpack these identities. To merely state one's identity without analyzing it is to fail to consider the social construction of these identities and their complex, interwoven histories. For example, stating that I am a “white man” glosses over the fact that the privilege of that identity has been reinforced through hundreds of years of forced labor, racist violence, colonization, and denial of resources. To be a “white, gay male” living in the Castro means to be a participant in a community that has long been defined by sexist, racist, and classist exclusions. To be a

"leatherman" brings up stereotypes of gay men as perverts who are attempting to "recruit" youth to immoral lifestyles. (Although, on the subject of "recruitment," S. Anthony Thompson, in discussing support services for gay and bisexual students with intellectual disabilities, wonders if "perhaps reluctance to recruit is simply internalized homophobia" (2007, p. 49) and if we failing to offer the necessary support to disabled people who wish to fashion queer identities because of our own fears). Calling myself a "paraprofessional" obscures the fact that paraprofessionals for a long time were denied the ability to join CTA despite being members of the national affiliate, NEA. Calling myself a substitute teacher is to take on a marginalized identity-- substitute teachers statewide and nationally are virtually silenced when it comes to educational policy. To call myself an "education researcher" in a CTA context brings up a legacy of researchers mischaracterizing and misinterpreting teachers' everyday work. Claiming an identity without a critical analysis "slide[s] into claims of essential difference, neglecting to critically examine the social context in which they are formed," warns Mayo (p. 84)

Queer researchers might look beyond simply self-indulgently exploring their own positionality and address how it impacts their work. Esther Newton (1993) told a joke of a postmodern anthropologist who is talking with an informant. Finally, the informant says, "Okay, enough about you, now let's talk about me" (p.3) Researchers do not automatically have an emic perspective when working with queer subjects; the relationship between researcher and researched is more complicated than any one identity category. Mary Lou Rasmussen cited Kennedy and Davis (1996)'s observation about how both their and their subjects being lesbians "did not make positioning [themselves] in relation to the complex and powerful forces of class, race, and gender

oppression—not to mention homophobia—easy” (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 47). This is more than just a brief note in “about the author” and is more than just writing about your personal experiences in a situation; it is a constant process of analysis of these relations.

To research from a queer perspective is more than an abstract analysis of oppression. It is about the integration of the sexual and erotic components of one’s interactions with one’s subjects—about material bodies, not just intellectual ideas. Newton (1993) asked, “What else is going on between fieldworker and informant?” in her seminal work “My Best Informant’s Dress.” She observed that desire is quite probably “satisfied away from the glare of the published account, cordoned off from legitimate ethnography” (p. 4). Historically, most anthropologists were straight men. These men tended to use mostly male informants in order to avoid the veneer of eroticism (p.5) while clandestinely sleeping with the exotic women that they encountered during their fieldwork . Newton found that most of the times the erotic, rather than being real, is used as a metaphor in ethnographies. She, by contrast, reviewed the few ethnographies in which fieldworkers take account of their own desire and then offers an example of her own; she described a lesbian relationship which formed the center of her fieldwork in Cherry Grove as involving flirting, eroticism, and a deep form of love. This relationship failed to culminate in the sex act not due to ethical considerations but rather due to some practical aspects of a relationship with a much older woman.

Queer research is not just about what researchers do when they publish their research; it is also about their practices in the field. Pascoe attempted to create a

“least-gendered identity” (lacking traditional feminine signifiers) in order to “gain access to boys’ worlds and conversations.” She found that despite her attempt she was being positioned as a sexual object, becoming a key element in the boys’ construction of their identities as masculine (p. 183). The boys often made lewd sexual advances, including reaching for her chest, propositioning her, and alluding to her as a sexual object (p. 184-185). She devotes an entire chapter, entitled “What If A Guy Hits on You,” to analyzing the conundrum.

In putting oneself into one’s research, a natural question to raise is: Can one study one’s own life using techniques such as personal narrative, classroom teaching, organizational involvement, or program implementation? Pascoe writes frequently of her own experiences, even as she strives to accurately report what happened in the school. Fisher (2003) wrote about a gay and lesbian Russian immigrants organization that she was personally involved with and suggested that writing about one’s own world involves more “personal vulnerability and accountability” than writing about someone else’s world (p. 175). Masequesmay (2003) writes about identity work among Vietnamese lesbians; she observes and writes about an organization which she herself facilitates. Schwarz (2009) used auto-ethnography to study his own life and reminded researchers that “with the acknowledgment that the researcher is subjective and human, comes the need for a possibility of heartfelt engagement – indeed, for heart itself.”

Reconceptualizing Validity

Putting oneself into the research naturally raises some questions of validity. To a positivist, validity is the “appropriateness, meaningfulness, correctness, and usefulness of the inferences a researcher makes” (Fraenkel and Wallen, p. 147). Lather (1986) attempted to find ways to re-imagine this positivist conception of validity in ways that researchers might use it in “openly ideological research.” Openly ideological researchers use value-based theoretical frameworks in order to conduct research that is “designed to criticize and change the status quo” (p.67). Lather tried to move beyond discussions of “threats” to unbiased, objective research and instead open up a dialogue about issues of interpretation.

Lather offered four criteria for validity in such research: triangulation, construct validity, face validity, and catalytic validity. Triangulation is traditionally thought of as the process of using multiple sources in order to cross-check one’s research. Lather added to this definition the concept that we should use multiple theoretical schemes (p. 67). For example, a queer researcher might also consider feminist perspectives, Marxist theory, and/or critical race theory in the process of their investigation. In traditional positivist social science, construct validity is about how well an instrument measures the concept that it is supposed to be measuring, as evidenced by other scores or the subject’s behavior in other situations (Fraenkel and Wallen, p. 153-154). Construct validity, in her definition, is about how theory is affected by the data; instead of sticking with a priori theories, theory must be dynamically shaped by “a ceaseless confrontation with the experiences of people in their daily lives” (p.67). Face validity involves sharing your preliminary conclusions and theories with the research participants in order to test them against their ideas and conceptions of the setting and situation (p. 67).

Perhaps Lather's most innovative idea is catalytic validity. Catalytic validity is the degree to which participants in research are transformed, gaining "self-understanding" and "self-determination" (p. 67). It is similar to Freire's "reading the word to read the world;" gaining the tools to collectively transform reality. This criterion blurs the lines between research and practice. Participants are transformed by their participation in research.

Catalytic validity is the missing piece in a discussion about research methods and methodology. As I sat in my graduate methods class, I wondered if all of this research was going to transform society. We discussed how deceiving participants as to the purpose of the research is a common practice in order to gain more "accurate" data. We discussed how often subjects receive no personal benefits from participation in research. All I could think is that this felt very exploitative—researchers, for example, study underprivileged students and leave the students and school the way they found them while building their careers around this research. In socially transformative research like queer research, researchers' goal should be for subjects to be transformed by their encounters with the researcher.

Lather does not quite consider it a question of validity, but having a value-based theoretical commitment is, in my conception, an important part of validity. Using theories that are based in a "white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy," to borrow a term from bell hooks, is to render one's research quite problematic. Saltmarsh has a strong value-based theoretical commitment and satisfies Lather's criterion of triangulation of theories well. Multiple theories are woven together in her analysis of texts and

interviews. Saltmarsh, under Lather's conception of validity has some shortcomings.

There is not much triangulation of methods using primarily analysis of media texts and a few limited interviews. Saltmarsh does not appear to have done any significant fieldwork at the school in question. Saltmarsh also does not appear to recycle her preliminary ideas back to participants to gain their feedback and insight. And there is no discussion of catalytic validity.

My Masters thesis research was strong in terms of having a value based theoretical commitment but was lacking under the criterion of triangulation of theories- I used primarily queer theory although occasionally explored how queer theory intersected with other theoretical modalities. Triangulation of methods worked well in my project-- I used my own personal experiences, formal observations of meetings, and formal and informal interviews in order to cross-check my data. I found it difficult to recycle my preliminary ideas back to participants due to the complexities of queer theory and the limited amount of time that participants had to engage with my project. And I found it challenging to design a study that fully embodied the principle of catalytic validity.

Pascoe's study clearly used triangulation well; she did extensive observation and interviewed fifty students formally and countless more informally. She used a number of theoretical modalities including feminism, queer theory, and sociological study of masculinity—satisfying both triangulation of theories and also my criterion of a value-based theoretical commitment. Construct validity is present as well, with her theories being constantly reworked as she did her fieldwork. Face validity does not seem to be

as much of a concern of hers; her interpretations were concealed from participants in order to gain access to conversations and other data that she would not have had access to if the true purpose of her study was known. Catalytic validity is not one of the goals of her study although intense probing of notions of masculinity may have helped to shape the boys' conceptions and analysis of their own situations. However, no sustained attempts were made to enable them to question and change their own life situations. Perhaps the publication of her book will enable the development of new interventions into compulsory heterosexuality. But Pascoe watches as a neutral observer while guys brutally tease each other, objectify women, enact sexist skits. She, rather, works hard to maintain a sense of affinity with them—trying to one-up them in their bragging about mountain biking, teasing them about their form during weight training, and mimicking elements of their masculine style (p. 181, p.186). In essence, she is gaining a false sense of trust—in which the boys were encouraged to open up and reveal themselves so that she can write a book. She never reveals who she really was, why she was really there, or what she was really thinking. This is a problem with “covert queer research”—how can research have the kind of transformative effects a researcher might desire when they feel compelled to hide their own identities and purposes of their studies?

This problem that Pascoe faced raises an important question for researchers is whether they can collect the kind of data we want about the operations of heteronormativity while at the same time retaining catalytic validity. Might a study of an intervention, for example, be considered solid, quality research or would it be relegated to the realm of “action research?” What kind of informed consent might be needed in an

intervention? Pascoe seems to skirt the issue of parental consent in her study. Mayo (2007) considers parental consent to be a major problem when studying GLBT youth (p.83). Would you be able to gain parental, teacher, and administrative consent to carry out these interventions in the very schools that might be the most fruitful to study? To not intervene in many cases, though, seems unethical. If we see potentially harmful discourses being employed by boys (for example, calling each other fags), should we try to stop it? Bogdan and Biklen pointed out that “intervention may get you kicked out” and perhaps if you simply observe you could do more to “change the conditions [by publishing] than the single act of intervention.” (p. 46) But then they immediately wondered if this might be a “cop out, an excuse not to get involved” (p.46).

Topics of inquiry

Rubin (1998) wrote of the hierarchies of sexuality in our society, calling the privileged forms of sexuality the “charmed circle” (p. 109). She defined the charmed circle as “heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, no pornography, bodies only, vanilla” (p. 109). By contrast, she defined the outer limits, or denigrated forms of sexuality, as “homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, pornography, with manufactured objects, and sadomasochistic” (p. 109). Researchers are often too afraid to inquire into the outer limits. But this is in fact the most important place to explore--to think about the unthinkable, to speak the unspeakable. Researchers, however, must not forget about how power and discipline often involves a compulsion to speak, like the conservative Christian group who tried to

get an orgy cancelled the weekend before Obama's inauguration and spoke in graphic detail and great length about acts they claimed to be "unspeakable." And what are confession and psychoanalysis if not a Foucauldian "incitement to discourse?"

Griffin (1996) argued that queer researchers need to define the agenda and focus on the uncomfortable. Similar to Rubin's definition of the outer limits, some uncomfortable topics include "cross dressing, transgender people, sex and sexuality in schools, pedophiles who are educators, and anti-gay sexual minority administrators" (Capper, p.6). This, however, raises a question of research methods; could a researcher come into a school and tell the principal that he's studying pedophiles within schools? (Bonus points if he's wearing the "gold lame cocktail dress.") Bogden and Biklen (1998) reminded researchers that "in the beginning [of research] you never know what you are going to find" (p. 53). A concern here, though, is that a researcher's preconceived notions are still an issue. What if one finds uncomfortable topics in their research? How can participants be transformed by their encounters with the researcher if the topics under investigation are too uncomfortable to even mention?

Developing new theoretical tools

Traditionally, gay men have had to use artifice and camp in order to signify homosexuality, and such styles can be utilized in doing queer research. Honeychurch (1996) is interested in textual eroticism and described how one might use the erotic not only in ones fieldwork but in one's writing. He suggested, inspired by Barthes, that "an idea, word, or phrase can simply be stimulating in its unfamiliarity, repetition, ambiguity,

location, alterations, flamboyance, or in its pairing with a seemingly incompatible other” (p.349).

There is more to queer research than just the conduct and presentation of the researcher’s work. Capper (1999) reminded researchers of some of the important principles of queer theory that apply to educational research. She worried that researchers reify sexual categories by attempting to identify LGBT administrators—they must either be or not be LGBT (p.7). Thinking in those terms, Leck (2000) warned, reduces one’s ability to see how “sexuality identity derives its complexities from within diverse social and cultural settings” (p. 324). This raises a number of questions for researchers, in that the process of sorting their data by categories they are in fact creating the very categories they think they have found! (And thus, Lather’s construct validity comes up again.) Pascoe applied these concepts well; she attempted to complicate identity by showing how the identity of the fag adhered to boys temporarily (p.60). In her analysis, she deconstructs the notions of heterosexuality even as the boys continually reified them.

According to Bogdan and Biklen, data analysis is “the process of systematically searching and arranging the... materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others” (p. 157). Standard techniques include identifying themes, coding, drawing diagrams, speculating, and summarizing. But this may not suffice... queer researchers, I contend, need queer methods.

Harwood and Rasmussen (2007) offered one such method; they expounded upon a Foucauldian approach to data analysis, involving four key areas: discontinuity, contingency, emergences, and subjugated knowledges (p. 34). In a Foucauldian genealogy, a researcher starts with a problem in the present and then explores the history of it. Traditional history starts with the present and then seeks to legitimate it, as De Certeau put it, “engender[ing] the future by reinscribing the present within the past” (Saltmarsh, p. 341). As I have contended in other papers, genealogy starts with the problem in the present and attempts to alter the problem through the reinterpretation of the past.

In the process of genealogy, the researcher looks for “ruptures in thought” and the “role of chance” (p.35). Rather than viewing history as a deterministic process, the researcher recognizes that there are many different ways things could have turned out. The colors pink and blue in the United States became girls’ and boys’ colors, respectively, by “after a media circus surrounding the acquisition of Thomas Gainsborough’s painting ‘Blue Boy’ and Sir Thomas Lawrence’s ‘Pinkie’ by wealthy art aficionado Henry Edwards Huntington.” (genderkid, 2009). Contingency is the notion that, rather than simple cause and effect, a “patchwork” of factors come together in order to create history (p. 35). The researcher uncovers the “emergences” or points of rupture in which truth was created (p. 36). And the researcher seeks to uncover “subjugated knowledges” which were hidden by systemizing theory (p. 36).

Saltmarsh uses the Foucauldian idea of starting in the present in order to explore the history of private schooling in Australia. She shows how the institutions’ histories

and the discourses of elite education are deployed in the media discourses surrounding the violent incidents, with the articles emphasizing not the incidents but the \$25,000 tuition, cultural capital such as their taste for upper class art, and the credentials of the (near godly) school leadership (p. 340). She links the operation of capital to heterosexism and shows how students get configured as subjects. In the discourses, “expert opinion functions in the discursive production of privileged knowledges through which... individual subjects are constituted” (p. 342).

Conclusion

Researchers and the broader queer community have had a lot of theoretical and practical successes and yet must continue to be skeptical of teleological narratives in our work. Questions of visibility continue to be questions of concern to GLBTQ communities, particularly as it is not surprising that an in(queer)y into queer research raises some similar questions, with questions of “covert queer research” being a major unresolved question. Researchers are no longer being silent about queer subjects, yet with speech comes new regimes of disciplinarity and power. This paper has sketched out some contours of the issues involved with queer research and hopefully will be of use to researchers as they struggle to contend with the contradictions that I have explored here. Imagine a future in which the “man in a gold lame cocktail dress” can do research in an educational setting. And what a future that would be!

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