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18 What to Do with Actual People?

THINKING THROUGH A QUEER SOCIAL SCIENCE METHOD

C.J. Pascoe

About a decade ago, as a newly minted PhD, I attended a public discussion between psychoanalyst Ken Corbett and queer theorist Judith Butler. I forget the actual topic of the discussion, these years later. But I remember vividly Dr. Corbett sharing a vignette about the complicated emotional terrain of masculinity that would later appear in his book *Boyhoods*.

"It is summer, and I am driving to the beach. The top is down. My seven-year-old nephew Alex is in the back seat, his blond hair wild and in the wind. Eminem raps from the stereo speakers. . . . I turn around and Alex is standing on the seat, raising one fist in the air, grabbing his crotch with his other hand, and doing his best Eminem. He shouts, 'This is the life!'" (Corbett 2009: 208). Corbett proceeded to unpack this tender and complicated moment in terms of masculine play, pleasure, and performance. Professor Butler responded with an equally compelling analysis about the nature of gender, sexuality, inequality, and power. I, who only moments before was imagining myself in the car rapping along with Alex and Eminem about not missing our one shot, was seduced, totally thrilled by her heady deconstructive discourse about performativity and abject identities. With a soft smile Corbett slowly shook his head and said, "Well, of course *you* can say that, Jude, *because you don't have to deal with actual people.*"[1]

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"You don't have to deal with actual people." Indeed, like many social science graduate students who were introduced to and enthralled by queer theory in the late 1990s,[2] I wanted to use all queer theory All The Time to analyze All Things. However, as a social scientist in training, I found my concern summed up in Corbett's comment—What *do* you do with actual people? While I tend to the humanistic side of sociology as a discipline, I'm still, by comparison, an empiricist. I found myself knee-deep in writings by Sedgwick, Butler, Halberstam, and Bersani, among others, wondering how to take theory designed for literary criticism and close readings, theory focused on exploring heteronormative assumptions underpinning great literary works, art, and philosophic claims, and use it to deal with and understand *actual flesh-and-blood people in their everyday worlds,* not just literary, filmic, or artistic representations of them. When one has been trained as a sociologist, even a feminist sociologist, to look for patterns, develop categories out of those patterns, and provide a perhaps replicable analysis about those categories, according to the critical research stance that sociology entails, how does one invoke a theoretical sensibility designed to interrogate the very basis of those categories and is suspicious of the categories themselves as examples of the workings of power? As Steven Seidman (1994) and others point out, the sensibilities and many of the insights embraced by queer theory were originally given voice by radical social constructionist sociological theories as well as interdisciplinary feminist theories, neither of which are optimally acknowledged by queer theorists.

The question is, How does this translate methodologically—when one is dealing with actual people—from the very conception of a project to its execution, its analysis, its writing and publication? After all, I had been trained in a disciplinary tradition that, as Regina Kunzel (2008) points out, had been a central part of the normative project of constructing sexuality itself. As a graduate student stumbling through ethnographic research and analysis, somewhere along the way and in large part due to the feminist mentorship I received, I developed what I am calling a queer social science method. A queer social science method at its core is one that brings the patterned, lived experiences of actual people into conversation with queer theoretical insights. In this essay I suggest that scholars who want to further develop a queer social science method might start with the

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following propositions: embracing failure, deploying categorical ambivalence, and emphasizing a critical focus on the center, not the periphery.

EMBRACE OF FAILURE

"Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well," writes Jack Halberstam in the introduction to *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011: 3). For me, stumbling into a queer social science method was, indeed, a process of failure. Even writing this particular essay is an experience fraught with the pain, embarrassment, and stigma that characterized the dissertation research, analysis, writing, publishing, and job search process. Then, and to some extent now, a sense of failure characterized those endeavors. When I read Halberstam's book,[3] some of the shame, embarrassment, and stigma began to ebb as I realized that perhaps this wasn't my experience alone, but a shared one. A queer one. My dissertation, which was subsequently published as the book *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (2007), is the result of multiple failures, the sort of failures Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* recharacterizes as inherently queer. These are the sort of failures I am going to suggest might be central to a queer social science method.

Here is an incomplete and brief list of the failures behind *Dude:*

- *Failure* to find a research site. I contacted school after school after school after school, more than fifty, if I recall correctly. No public school wanted to admit a graduate student researcher to study adolescent masculinity, it seemed to me. One school even went so far as to say it had someone conducting the exact project I described at the school already. I haven't seen the results of that study.
- *Failure* to move the project through the institutional review board. Multiple iterations of my human subjects proposals were rejected. I tried to ask for help, in person and by phone. Repeatedly I was told by the IRB representative in charge of my proposal some version of, "Tell us what you want to do, and we'll tell you whether or not you can do it." Without their guidance I changed the wording of my proposal over and over again, guessing as to what phrasing might please them until finally they passed it through, even though the proposed research itself remained relatively unchanged.

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- *Failure* to get a job. Perhaps like many of us, my first year on the job market was an abysmal one. Was this due to my research topic? It turns out, sociology departments weren't exactly outdoing each other to recruit sexuality scholars. Was it due to my recommendations? Rumors emerged about a less-than-optimal letter of recommendation in my file suggesting that *Dude* lacked an argument. Still other rumors suggested less-than-optimal relations between that letter writer and graduate students. I still wonder to this day what was in that letter and if it or my research was the problem.
- *Failure* to be a sociologist. I have often described myself as a very bad sociologist. In fact I published an article in a *sociology* journal for the first time in 2015. Until then, I had published in interdisciplinary journals. When I was invited for talks, it was rarely to sociology departments.[4] I instead spoke to sexuality programs, psychology programs, gender and women's studies programs, and gave university keynote lectures, often never hearing from any representative in a sociology department during my visit.

To be honest, it never occurred to me that these experiences, among myriad others, were anything more than my own. Certainly, we all have our job, research, and publishing struggles. Graduate student life is emotionally, financially, and intellectually challenging for many of us. However, my understanding of these struggles began to shift when I found myself sitting in the audience of the ASA Sexuality pre-conference in 2012.[5] I listened as Janice Irvine documented unique struggles of sexuality researchers by sharing the initial results of her study of sociologists of sexuality. Her study indicated that as sexuality scholars, we are faced with unique challenges throughout our professional lives—harassment in the field site, harassment and intellectual dismissal by our colleagues, difficulty getting published in journals, to name a few (Irvine 2014). I wasn't alone as tears streamed down my face listening to Irvine tell our stories in our words. I remember hearing her quote other scholars, and thinking, "Wait, did I write that?" Our stories were shared stories. The stories of sexuality research were ones of failure in so many ways: failure to avoid sexual harassment, failure to be gendered correctly, failure to be understood as legitimate sociologists, failure to reproduce normative messages about sexuality, failure to publish in the right venues for tenure, failure to get jobs, failure to hold on to those jobs—stories of violent tenure denials

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some of us witnessed firsthand. We were, collectively in that room, the queer art of failure.

It turns out I was not alone in my failures. Rather as I detail below, my inability to do a more traditional sociological analysis of sexuality was a failure to be part of the normative project of social science. As Halberstam writes, “Disciplines qualify and disqualify, legitimate and delegitimate, reward and punish: most important, they statically reproduce themselves and inhibit dissent” (2011: 10). The discipline of sociology itself, into which so many of us entered, perhaps because of fantasies about how research and knowledge production can inform social action and social change, was the same discipline that, because of its epistemological engagement with the production of “the norm,” relegated us and our research to the sidelines at best, and to failure at worst.

QUEER POSITIONALITY

Queer positionality itself might be part of that failure. Feminist methodologies tell us that the researcher herself is a central part of the research process (see, for instance, England 1994). A queer social science method builds on this insight, suggesting that the researcher’s sexuality is also a central part of the research process. In fact, the failure to inhabit a binary social organization of researcher-researched, adult-child (1988), boy-girl (Pascoe 2007) may be an important part of the findings. In researching *Dude,* I found that my particular queer positionality as a twenty-something researcher embodied a wide variety of failures to conform to binaries like these, failures that were central to the research process: failure to be a role model for sexual-minority students (as recommended by liberal out-and-proud narratives; Connell 2014); failure to be a normatively gendered woman; failure to be readable as an adult; failure to be readable as a student; failure to maintain expected age, geographic, temporal, and social boundaries; and, finally, failure to leave the field.

Upon first arriving at the field site for *Dude,* “River High,” I pulled the rainbow sticker off my car in violation of that “out-and-proud” expectation. But lack of a rainbow symbol did not stop the LGBTQ young people at the school from recognizing me as one of their own. As I tried to conform to

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social science research methods about the divide between researcher and researched, I attempted to evade answers about my sexual life. Shawna, a tangential member of one of the groups I studied, the Basketball Girls, once followed me out of the school cafeteria, saying, “I have to ask you my question but I’m not sure how.” I joked with her, hoping to skirt questions about my sexuality by asking, “Do you want to know how much I weigh?” Shawna responded, “No,” and the other Basketball Girls laughed. I threw out a few more joking questions: “How old I am? What my favorite color is? How many kids I have?” As Shawna and I continued to walk, the other girls fell away, and she asked me, “So are you into girls?” I replied, “What makes you ask that?” She murmured, “I dunno,” as she shuffled uncomfortably. “’Cause you wear that big jacket and ’cause the way you like move and talk and stuff, and ’cause you used to have your hair all short.” I nodded to indicate that I understood why she was asking that question and responded by saying that I could answer her when I was done with my research in December. I found myself wanting to be out to these girls as a role model because there were no other out gay adults at River High. Even years later I get asked by audiences why I didn’t stand up for Ricky to the administration or why I wasn’t out to the sexual-minority students at River. A sense that I somehow failed these young people in need of an adult role model still haunts me these years later.

Similarly, I struggled and perhaps failed, to encourage the boys I was studying to maintain socially sanctioned, age-based sexual boundaries. In part, perhaps, to render my queer positionality as legible in their world, some boys I studied did their best to frame me as a potential (hetero)sexual conquest. For instance, one day as I was sitting around with some of the boys in the weight room, one of them, J.W., was looking pensive, sheepish, or mopey, I couldn’t tell which. He finally sidled up to me and asked, in a saccharine bashful voice, “Can I ask you a personal question?” This question always gave me pause. I had been asking these young people all sorts of personal questions for over a year. I felt that I should reciprocate, as per the guidelines of feminist research methodology, to a certain extent, with information about myself. I answered “Sure,” thinking I could talk myself out of inappropriate questions about whether or not I was married, gay, or straight, usually the vein of these personal questions. Instead, J.W. surprised me with a question I didn’t fully understand but inferred the meaning of quite

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quickly: "Have you ever had your walls ripped?" Given the context of the boys' previous discussions about making girlfriends bleed by "ripping their walls," I assumed this particular sexual experience had something to do with their penises being so large that they produced bloody tears in their girlfriends' vaginal walls. Responding neutrally and hoping to see if my interpretation was correct, I asked, "What do you mean, 'walls ripped'?" J.W. stammered trying to answer the question. After an awkward moment and feeling uncomfortable myself, I said, "I know what it means. Why do you want to know?" He responded, "Cuz, I like to know if girls are freaky or not. I like freaky girls." That is, he wanted to know if I was a "girl" he could like because of my unconventional sexual practices.

Both Shawna and J.W. were trying to render my sexuality legible and, in doing so, produce meanings about sexuality in general. Shawna wanted to know if she was reading my sexual "sign equipment" (Goffman 1978 [1956]) of black shirts, cargo pants, and bodily comportment correctly. J.W. was trying to make those signs legible as well—through discursive sexual violence. J.W. wasn't alone. In the course of my research boys grabbed me, physically confined me, and joked about "banging" me. The way in which the young people I was researching dealt with my queer positionality—looking to me as a role model or as an object of sexual harassment—became an important part of the research process and indeed a finding itself.

In a way I never anticipated, this queer positionality also blurred the lines around the boundary site itself in terms of leaving the field. Years after *Dude* was published, I found myself a devoted member of an online community of queer parents. Over the years, we shared our challenges and successes with fertility struggles, parenting adventures, and partnership formations and dissolutions. The group's members still remain in almost daily contact with one another. A year or so into my participation in this group, a member private-messaged me to ask if I was C. J. Pascoe, the one who interviewed her at River High in the early 2000s? In that instant, I discovered that I had been sharing some of my most intimate struggles around queer family making with a member of this group who had indeed been a student at River High. Years after I had left the field, this member of one of the student groups I had studied, the GSA Girls, and I found ourselves bonding over being queer parents.

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Queer positionalities blur the boundaries of the field, the boundaries of age, and perhaps, with the help of the internet, the boundaries of space. Forging a friendship with my former respondent felt in some ways like violating expectations that had been premised on discrete communities, on ways of knowing that assumed a researcher who was not part of the community of the researched. This queer positionality itself, as negotiated by me and by my respondents, is a central component of a queer social science method.

CATEGORICAL AMBIVALENCE

A queer social science method embraces an ambivalent stance toward categories. This is no easy task given sociologists' love of categories. We are a social science after all, one that emerged from Auguste Comte's project to extend the method of scientific classification from the natural to the social. However, feminist sociologists, such as those who populated my PhD program and made up the internal members of my dissertation committee, had developed a robust critique of ways of knowing that constituted social scientific findings. That critique and the training I received from them in feminist methodologies laid the groundwork for uncovering findings that perhaps might not square with existing scholarship. Even so, as a nascent social scientist, I entered the field ready to fit my findings firmly into the literature about youth culture, literature that detailed the wide array of groups that defined adolescent life. I entered River High primed to look for the organization of students into the distinct categories I had read so much about in the literature on young people.

Armed with my notebook, I looked around, eager to record the River High versions of the Hallway Hangers, Brothers, Lads, Ear'ols, Rednecks, Rutters, Cool Kids, Jocks, Dropouts, Freaks. Soon I had my answer: students were talking about "fags." Whoever these guys were, they were referenced constantly. Male students used this phrase incessantly and seemingly apropos of nothing. Walking down a hallway, for instance, a boy would yell, "Fucking faggot!" at no one in particular. Curious, I began to ask students who the "fags" were. Where would I find them? Who was in this group? Student responses soon told me that that was the wrong set of

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questions to be asking. There was only one student who others held up as an example of a fag, not a group of them.

In other words, the social category or group to which students belonged was not the finding; the production of the very category itself was. I shifted my focus from a traditionally sociological approach emphasizing categories of young people, to a focus on the discursive production of masculinity. I came to call this process, by which boys disciplined one another into normatively masculine identities, enactments, and values through joking and serious forms of gendered homophobia, a "fag discourse." As such, instead of following classifications, I followed the discursive nature of the classification *process,* focusing on how gendered and sexualized meanings were mobilized and deployed across a range of students, contexts, and situations. In the failure to find groups, I found discourses. This failure, in this case, was the finding. Thanks to the feminist scholars on my dissertation committee, this failure was allowed to be the finding.

FOCUS ON THE CENTER

Perhaps because of the word *fag* in the title, after the publication of *Dude,* I came to be seen as an expert on LGBTQ youth. I was asked to serve on advisory boards for organizations working on behalf of LGBTQ youth, to comment on research on sexual-minority young people, to advise on LGBTQ issues in education, and frequently received press calls requesting comment and expertise on LGBTQ youth suicide or victimization. The problem was, I did not actually research queer youth. In fact, I found myself frequently reading up on all the research *others* had conducted on LGBTQ young people in order to answer these questions. Among the fifty young people I interviewed for *Dude,* one boy identified as gay and five girls identified as some variation of queer or lesbian. Whom did I know a lot about? Heterosexual teenage boys. *Dude,* at its core, is a book about heterosexual masculinity.

Why did people repeatedly fail to ask me about heterosexuality? It may indeed be because I use the word *fag* in the book's title. But I would suggest that this failure is due to a reaction to the book's request that readers turn their focus from the margin, the other, the victimized LGBTQ youth,

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to the center, to heterosexuality. To, perhaps, themselves. Repeatedly, academic and nonacademic audiences alike would, in a variety of ways, ask me to tell the story about how bad it was for gay kids in school. Repeatedly, I would answer by refocusing the conversation on institutional, discursive, and interactional productions of gender, especially heterosexual masculinity. Audience reactions to this refocus ranged from cool dismissal to downright anger. At one talk to a psychological staff at a large state prison, a listener stood up, interrupted me, and insisted that I used the phrase "homophobic discourse" rather than "fag discourse" as *fag* was offensive. When I unpacked for him the gendered nature of the use of this word and why the boys' practices did not, in fact, constitute the sort of homophobia he wanted me to talk about, he angrily walked out of the room. But not before first lecturing me about why I was wrong.

Indeed, even journal reviewers weren't keen on the story I was telling about heterosexual masculinity. As one reviewer wrote of the article "'Dude You're a Fag': Adolescent Masculinity and the Fag Discourse" (2005), which eventually appeared in the journal *Sexualities,* "At times, it almost seems as if he is taking revenge on male heterosexuality by both emptying 'it' (p. 10) and parodying 'it.'" Note that I am a "he" and that there are confusing scare quotes around "it." At that time and to this day I could not find evidence of this "revenge" and so changed nothing in the article. This comment, however, is instructive in that it encapsulates a larger discomfort with the way in which this research focuses on the center. To analyze heterosexual masculinity and its production is to take revenge on it. Analysis, in this line of thinking, is reserved for the *other,* the categories about which we can know, catalogue, and pathologize.

As queer theorists point out, turning an analytic lens on the center destabilizes the very category of the norm itself. That, apparently, is profoundly unsettling to reviewers, popular audiences, and other academics as they continually attempt to pull the discussion toward a narrative focusing on the suffering LGBTQ youth. This is indeed an important story, but it's not the story of *Dude.* The story of *Dude* is one of normative heterosexual masculinity and the institutional, interactional, and discursive violence that produces it. When I'm talking to audiences, I often remember how when one of my children was a toddler and wanted me to focus on something he didn't yet have words for, he would take my head,

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place a hand on either cheek, and gently turn it again and again toward the thing he wanted to talk about until I acknowledged The Thing. To maintain a useful analytic focus, a queer social science method might require acting like that toddler, continually reminding the audience of the center, no matter how many times they look away.

STUMBLING THROUGH A QUEER SOCIAL SCIENCE METHOD

As Halberstam reminds us, "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (Halberstam 2011: 2). This sort of failure, of not knowing, captures what it felt like to me to research *Dude,* a process that I now think of as stumbling into a queer social science method. The failures in this particular research project, as Halberstam might say, were deeply queer, and reflection on them helps to elaborate a queer social science method that embraces failure as a way of knowing, as a finding in itself. It is a method that suggests ways to bring the experiences of "actual people" into dialogue with queer theory through an embrace of queer positionality, expressions of categorical ambivalence, and a focus on the center.

All that said, even as I share some of these embarrassing and perhaps shameful moments in the research process, I'm not sure at this point that *Dude* can be read as a failure. After its publication the book sold exceedingly well. Chapters have been reprinted, some multiple times. It's been favorably cited frequently. To continue with the failure metaphor, did I fail to fail? What had felt like "outsider research" for so long has made its way, perhaps, to the "inside." But with that move comes a certain loss. That queerness—the repeated failures that informed who I was, how I worked, and what I did—was central to the research findings featured in *Dude.* I question what will be lost as I enter the ethnographic field once again in the next few months. As an insider with a job, a reputation, and an influential book, the stakes of failure are different. As such, the ways of knowing in this next project will be different. I do not enter into this particular ethnography accompanied by "ways of being and knowing that stand

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outside of conventional understandings of success" (Halberstam 2011: 2). This time I'm situated well within the bounds of the discipline. While this means that my graduate students' intellectual trajectory will not be shaped by watching mentors experience tenure denial based on their research topics, it also raises questions about what will be elided by insider ways of knowing. Can a queer social science method exist as an "insider method"?

A queer social science method is informed at once by queer theory and by sociology, a discipline whose claim to science and systematic data collection pushes back against the destabilizing impulse of queer theory. This method embraces the margins and boundary transgression. It casts a critical eye at the "normal." It interrogates the very categories upon which social scientists rely to make claims, while perhaps gathering information about the operation of those categories. It is a method in tension with itself. It is precisely by embracing this tension that a queer social science can deploy the best of both disciplines—the deconstructionist theoretical sensibilities of queer theory and attention to systemic research on the experiences of "actual people" embodied by sociology. This is the project of a queer social science.

NOTES

1. This may not be the direct quote, as I've been telling this story for years. But, I promise, he did say "Jude."
2. Thanks to the inspiration and forethought of my youngest and queerest, Doc Marten–wearing dissertation committee member, who after reading my research memos, quickly handed me work by Leo Bersani and Judith Butler.
3. Which indeed I *failed* to do for many years because I was too busy building a family and having babies . . .
4. Save for Brandeis University, my alma mater and a school still blessedly informed by the Frankfurt School—one of my earliest intellectual influences.
5. The first ASA Sexuality pre-conference. Ever. In 2012. Let that sink in.

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