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Positionality and pornography

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As pornography continues to open up as a valued field of academic inquiry, consideration should be given to the researchers' position, both within the field and within the academy, and how these two positions influence knowledge production. The study of pornography, as a stigmatized subject, has an impact on who can write about it, what they can write, and where that writing is published. How this impacts what we know about pornography, how we can overcome these barriers, and larger questions about positionality in the academy and the field are discussed.

Keywords: pornography; fieldwork; positionality; ethnography; knowledge production

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This paper draws on my experiences of studying pornography as an ethnographer and as a junior scholar, and addresses the methodological and epistemological considerations that are unique to this field of study. Positionality in the study of pornography is worth considering, not as a 'gratuitous gesture' (Robertson 2002, 788) toward insider status or intellectual infallibility, but as significant to the development of future scholarship. Although my position as a multiracial, queer, middle-class, educated male cannot be separated from my position as an academic, in this discussion I focus on academic positionality and its relation to research subjects rather than on issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, and citizenship.

My academic training comes from a sociology department with strengths in ethnographic methods. On the day that I was given access to observe an adult film studio's sets and offices, I was asked by my department to meet our undergraduate honors students. I introduced myself: 'I'm Nathaniel and I study the adult film industry.' The undergraduates gasped in unison and a collective buzz conveyed tones varying from excitement and interest to clear disapproval. This reaction toward my work is not uncommon and I open with this story to emphasize that pornography is a charged topic, even and perhaps especially so for those in the academy, and to highlight that these reactions create several barriers to the breadth and depth of knowledge produced, the types and quality of work produced, the avenues available for dissemination, and the audience of the scholarship. Through a discussion of positionality, I will speak to these barriers that must be addressed in order for pornography to be more widely accepted as a worthwhile field of study in the academy.

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I have been told 'You don't want to be "the porn guy"' and 'you will have to deal with the content issue of your work.' These are comments I take to be supportive and made with the intention of positioning my academic career for success on the job market and as productive of work that will garner respect in the academy and in my discipline. While these comments came from scholars who appreciate and see the value in my work and wish for me to succeed, their caution has two clear implications. The first implication concerns who gets to write about pornography and the second is about appropriate disciplinary lenses. Graduate students may become vulnerable because of the subjects they choose to study. Research on stigmatized topics such as pornography is more easily done as a tenured faculty member. What this may mean for the future of the academy, the development of research, and for individuals as they select their topics is worth consideration. There are potentially fewer scholars studying stigmatized subjects who can address the breadth of topics in pornography and plumb their depths, and possibly less diversity demographically, a factor that may reduce the potential for challenging and developing existing frameworks and methods.

Interrelated with the first barrier is the second: the types and quality of work produced. My work, as is true for many scholars who study pornography, addresses issues of gender, race, class, the body, sexuality, citizenship, and power. Yet in sociology there are lenses through which it is more and less acceptable to study the social world. This academic morality implies that there are some vectors of social life that have more worth than others and are therefore more deserving of study. In pornography, people perform sex acts that involve, perpetuate, or may challenge inequalities. Justifications for studying it, such as the size of the industry or the number of people it employs, should not be necessary – it is a lens into the social world deserving of inquiry that can help answer questions about workplace practices, power relations, workers' rights and health, and the reproduction of inequality.

Sociology's aversion to pornography as a site to study society occurs for three broad reasons. First, the study of sexualities is marginalized within sociology. Second, pornography is seen by some as a site of violence and its study may be perceived as legitimating violence. Finally, those rooted in positivist traditions may fear that the study of adult film is 'unscientific' depending upon the selected methodology. As Patricia Hill Collins (2013) notes, it is precisely the flexibility of sociology that makes it resilient, creative, and exciting – the 'ebbs and flows' of content areas such as pornography are what keep the discipline alive. Yet the stigmatization of studying pornography impacts not only how it is studied and which scholars are able to undertake its study, but also the avenues available for the dissemination of scholarship and the kinds of audiences who receive it. Where work on pornography appears is important for its adoption into core theories of the discipline and for whether it becomes part of a broader public knowledge about pornography.

Addressing these barriers through one's position requires a great deal of work; the call for reflexivity and careful attention to positionality present unique challenges to the study of pornography. Scholars who wish to shed light on the silence in the study of pornography must be careful not to understand themselves as giving voice to those unable to speak (see Alcoff 1991). Academics are not the only ones having intelligent, informed, and productive discussions about the industry.

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As researchers we are held to high expectations in our relationships with research subjects; editors call for scholars to address what kind of work one may have done in a fieldsite, which for scholars of pornography means potentially exposing histories of sex work and production. For example, I have set up and taken down sets, fetched drinks, food, condoms and lubricant for actors, observed and participated in casting discussions, taken behind-the-scenes photographs, and served as a back-up cameraman. I did this work with great consideration of the impact it may have had toward my data; my labour was a form of remuneration for allowing me to spend time in their space. Calls for reflexivity can be a challenge for researchers of pornography: readers wish to know how you participated in your research, related to research subjects, and how subjects understood your role in the fieldsite. This information may be incompletely or incorrectly interpreted as participating in the production of adult film, which may cause some to dismiss the legitimacy of the work as complicity in its production, as opposed to critical engagement with the processes of labour.

The stance an ethnographer selects relative to research subjects can address some of these challenges. My experience has been that acting as 'complete observer' or 'complete participant' (Gold 1958) is not successful, although for different reasons. Being a complete observer disrupted a shoot, as performers wanted to know about my study, while to be a complete participant would depend on being already involved in the industry in some way; an involvement that may further stigmatize the researcher within the academic community. For these reasons it is easier to limit our role to an observer-as-participant who has the privilege to selectively engage in industry activities while foregrounding their role as researcher.

Inevitably, the position one takes in research design and data collection has a bearing on the final written product. I have found that the relationship between my writing and the people I study places me in a complicated position. I consider myself a feminist as my research interests orient me toward addressing gender and sexual inequality. When I entered my current fieldsite, I was interested in how these inequalities are constituted in the production of gay adult film through hiring and directing processes. My goal was to produce professional/political sociology (see Burawoy 2005) that highlights the potential problems and strategies of subordinated groups, such as men of subordinated masculinities and men of colour (see Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Connell 2005), in a field of labour. By doing so, my hope is that others can mobilize to reduce these inequalities. This standpoint, however, problematizes the work that porn workers are doing as it positions them as potentially constitutive or complicit in the production of inequality. Because of this, engaging research subjects in the writing process or sharing results is a delicate issue. It is difficult to articulate to performers and producers that my role as a researcher is not to make moral judgments of pornography, and that I respect their labour, while also maintaining that I am engaged in an ongoing critique of the problematic conditions under which work can occur. A conscious presentation-of-self (Goffman 1959) must be carried out so as not to have critique misunderstood as disapproval.

In conclusion, scholarship on pornography within sociology faces several barriers, each of these impacted by one's position within the academy, the field, and the written work. As pornography continues to open up as a valued field of study in various disciplines, we should subject these barriers and the benefits of dismantling them to continuous consideration through the position we take as a scholar. What kinds of theoretical interventions, for example, may become available

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by opening up the opportunity for alternative ethnographic stances in the study of sex work? Would being more receptive to the voices of 'complete participants' challenge the stigmatization of sex workers and thereby address some of the concerns of 'false consciousness' levied against them?

Stacey and Thorne (1985) argue that the academy must be 'reconstructed' to address the demographic inequalities that have influenced the theoretical trajectories of disciplines. Part of this reconstruction, I contend, must be an acknowledgement of the hierarchical structure of the academy itself and how this shapes which topics are deemed valuable and appropriate for study. Those scholars who adopt a more complicated relationship with the study of sexual labour rightly point out that we have a great deal more to explore (see, for example, Bernstein 2007; Weitzer 2009). I argue that this exploration is incomplete until it is open to researchers at all levels, utilizing all methods, and from diverse theoretical perspectives. How can we address the intractability of the academy so that it is more readily open to the study of new topics in new ways? To answer this question requires that we consider how the topics we explore are structured by capitalism through the relationship between academic research and academic employment. How can we further the research of stigmatized topics – or better yet, destigmatize them – without separating intellectual exploration from employment viability?

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