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Privilege, power, and politics in research: a response to “Crossing sexual orientations”

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My questions in this essay are about privilege, power, and politics in research on oppressed groups: Who speaks and why? Who speaks for whom? To whom is one speaking?

The political and ethical questions around such research are sometimes difficult enough to make one yearn for the days of a vulgar positivism, when researchers floated above social problems and didn't have to worry about how their race, gender, sexual orientation, or class status might affect their work. I have days when I feel like praying to the Research God (presumptively male, of course): Strip me of my attributes and let me be one of the Objective Ones at the top of the Knowledge Mountain.

But even that yearning is socially situated. Only a privileged white boy is likely to yearn for a time in which almost all research was done by privileged white boys and was declared to be The Whole Story. I cannot even take refuge in flights of fantasy without being complicit in perpetuating untenable theoretical assumptions and regressive politics.

However difficult, this is the place we find ourselves as scholars, and there is nothing to do except engage the questions and be glad that we finally recognize their importance, even as we struggle with the answers. One of those questions is, what is the appropriate role of researchers from a dominant group in conducting research about a subordinated group? Robert Rhoads's article does a good job of engaging some of those questions, though not necessarily answering them adequately. My purpose is not so much to declare his approach wrong, especially since I agree with much of what he argues, but to be part of the conversation by describing some lessons I have learned from my work as a man in feminism. I doubt there are definitive answers to these questions, but there is a need for more and better conversation. To do that, I am going to talk not about Rhoads's work, but about my own.

Who speaks and why? The need for honest self-reflection

When I returned to graduate school in 1988, I became interested in the debate over pornography and the radical feminist antipornography critique. Seminar papers on the subject led to a dissertation, which led to journal articles, ongoing research, and a collaborative book that is under construction. At the time I began doing that work, I was a (A) white (B) man (C) with a professional background living comfortably in the middle class as a (D) married (E) heterosexual. A, B, and C haven't changed, but D and E have; more on that later.

During my entire academic career I have had to face questions about why I was doing feminist work and how I was going to do it responsibly. What was my role as a

man within feminist theory and feminist political action? As I worked my way through that question, it became clear to me that men could work within feminism with integrity, but that it takes self-reflection and a commitment to accountability (Jensen, 1995a).

A crucial step in that process was for me to be honest about who was speaking, about who I was. The longer I worked on the issue of pornography, the more I felt compelled to be honest about why I had chosen that line of research. I began writing and speaking more explicitly about my motivation, a subject unfortunately often avoided in scholarly writing. Research questions don't just drop out of the sky onto our desks. We choose things for reasons, and exploring those reasons improves one's research by making it more clear just what we are doing.

In focusing on pornography, I not only wanted to contribute to public understanding about the relevant legal and public policy issues. I wanted to understand myself. My research was motivated in part by my desire to understand the way in which my sexuality had been affected by the pornography I had used as a child and young adult. I wanted to know why pornography produced both intense sexual excitement in me as well as a sense of sadness and disconnection from myself and others. I wanted to understand why I could watch a rape scene and feel sexually excited. I wanted to know how I had come to be the sexual being I was.

Those motivations didn't mean my work had to slide into self-indulgent solipsism. But like feminist philosopher Joyce Trebilcock (1994), I found that:

I like working best... when I am making sense of my secrets. When I write out of memory and emotion, and make new connections among them, and connect them with concepts and values – then the work is most like what I have always wanted to do, and doing it feels good. (p. 66)

By being honest about those motivations, I stumbled onto new ways of knowing about pornography through my own body and emotions. Part of what I know about pornography is embodied; it comes to me through physical and emotional responses as well as intellectual ones. As I wrote in my dissertation: I get erections from pornography, which I take to be an epistemologically significant fact.

The process of coming to terms with my motivations was a long one. Central to it was not only my ongoing process of self-reflection, but my engagement with women (and a small number of men) in the feminist antipornography movement. Those people held me accountable in a way that fellow academics could not. This did not mean I turned over control of my project to anyone else. But I took seriously the feedback from these colleagues and often made substantive changes based on conversations with them.

Who speaks for whom? Finding a place

Like many graduate students pondering dissertations, I surveyed the scholarly research on my subject and looked for places where I could make a contribution. In my case, I was aware not only of the need to find work that needed to be done, but I had to consider what kind of role I could and should play as a man working in feminist theory (for the reasons I say “a man working in feminist theory” and not “a feminist man,” see Jensen, 1995a).

The feminist antipornography critique grew out of the narratives of women as they began to tell their truths about how pornography had affected their lives. Those stories

slowly have found their way into print and into policy discussions, but there was room for more systematic work to give voice to women's experiences. I saw a need for that work, but would it have made sense for a man to undertake such a project? Should I have put myself in the role of interpreting women's experiences and reporting on them? I decided that I should not.

Instead, I asked myself how a man could contribute to the literature by taking advantage of being male. This led me to undertake a series of in-depth interviews with pornography users and sex offenders to explore the role pornography played in the construction of their sexuality (Jensen, 1995b). Once I finished that project, I realized that I would have to write my own story as well, reflecting on my use of pornography and the ways I had come to know through that reflection (Jensen, 1996a).

Curiously, articles based on those two dissertation chapters were the most difficult for me to get published later in scholarly journals. Each was rejected by six different journals in a variety of disciplines (communication, cultural studies, feminism) before being accepted by an interdisciplinary journal on violence against women. Yet, I have always felt those two chapters were the main contribution to the literature from my dissertation. Whatever the reasons for the rejections – some were clearly politically motivated, while others no doubt were based on reviewers' problems with my method or analysis, and in some cases the articles were simply a bad fit for the journal – it reminded me of the chances one takes when one steps outside the confines of traditional social science.

To whom are we speaking? Being clear about roles

If we choose to conduct research that involves subordinated groups of which we are not members, what is our obligation to their struggle for justice? Do we take the lead in forming policy and executing strategies? How do we present our work to the subordinated group?

I believe my primary role in feminism is to speak to men and support women in the political strategies they devise. In doing so, I purposely blur the boundary between research and political advocacy, a boundary that seemed illusory to me once I realized that there is a politics to all that we do, no matter how much we deny it. Contemporary feminist theory, for example, did not develop in a vacuum, with scholars doing "neutral" research. Sparked by their experiences with oppression, women developed a critique that was both scholarly and politicized. The politics didn't taint the work and make it suspect, but rather helped make the work possible and connected the work to the wider world.

Related to this is my resistance to the growing men's studies field. I do not do men's studies; I work within feminist theory to understand the construction of gender and the material effects of that construction on people's lives, especially women and children. The difference may seem merely semantic, but I think it signals how one views the politics, both of gender and of the academy. I do not object to the study of how masculinity is constructed, the focus of much of men's studies; indeed, my work focuses on that issue. But I do that work from a base in feminist theory, which provides the central insights that have allowed us to see masculinity and femininity as social constructs and critique their use to oppress women.

I consider the establishment of "men's studies" about as sensible as creating a field called "heterosexual studies." We need to study heterosexuality, but that is most

effectively done from the critical positions of feminism and gay/lesbian studies. The same goes for masculinity and men. Patriarchy does hurt men in many ways by imposing toxic conceptions of masculinity on us. Just as heterosexism limits the lives of straights in some ways. But the problems that patriarchy causes for men and that heterosexism causes for straights should not be confused with oppression (Frye, 1983). My fear is that if in research we lose track of these political realities, our scholarship will suffer for the confusion.

So, it has always been clear to me that in my work I am not telling women how they should think or feel about pornography. There is an ongoing debate within feminism about the issues, and many women do not share my opinions. My goal is not to convince women my position is superior, but to offer evidence and analysis that may be of use to them in their exploration of the issues, while I focus my energy on engaging men in conversation.

Here is where accountability is difficult. Some pro-pornography women have told me that I should not be writing what I write, that a man making assertions about the sexual subordination of women in pornography is implicitly authoritarian or condescending. But other women have encouraged me to do the work. Given the range of views on the issue within feminism and among women, I inevitably will reject the arguments of some feminists and accept the arguments of others in pursuing my research. I cannot be accountable in this sense to all feminists, but I can do work that acknowledges the differences respectfully and takes seriously critique from all directions.

Gay chic?

In preparing this essay, I asked several gay and lesbian friends and colleagues about their gut reaction to the idea of heterosexuals conducting research on lesbians, gay men, or bisexuals. One friend said she had no problem with it, so long as the researchers are honest about what they are doing and why. Another said he didn't discount the possibility of such work having value, but that it annoyed him that straight people sometimes simply claim the right to do such work. Everyone agreed that intellectual fadism can lead people to jump on the bandwagon of the hip topic of the week. If it is chic to do work on lesbians, gay men, or bisexuals, perhaps it is inevitable that some work in the field will be done that is motivated by careerism, not commitment.

So, the crucial question might be not whether heterosexuals can research and write about homosexuality, but why one is doing it, and who has the burden of proof. That is, should the straight researcher have the burden to prove that he or she is committed to social justice and willing to be accountable? Or, should a researcher expect to claim the right to do such research without accountability to the community in question? I believe that the former approach is required, not only for ethical and political reasons, but because it is bound to improve the research. When we engage each other on all levels and open ourselves up, the quality of our interaction – and hence, the quality of the knowledge we produce – improves.

Who is gay?

In addition to my feminist work, I have done research on Native Americans and the issue of sports teams using derogatory nicknames, such as Redskins. I took much the same tack on this project as the pornography work: I acknowledged my location in the

debate, made explicit my political commitments, and focused not on telling Native Americans how to feel about the issue but on the practices and ethical failures of the predominantly white world of mainstream journalism (Jensen, 1994).

I adopted a similar position for a study of newspaper policies concerning “wedding” announcements by lesbians and gay men (Jensen, 1996b). At the time I conducted the research for that article, I was married and living a heterosexual life. I presented the paper at a conference, casting myself as a gay-friendly straight person. By the time the article was published in a journal, I had left my marriage and come out as a gay man.

That research also focused on how mainstream journalists should approach the issue of commitment-ceremony announcements. The only change I made from the “straight Bob” version to the “gay Bob” version was to be more direct about my feelings about the overall issue of same-sex marriage (I’m skeptical about its value in the long-term work of resisting heterosexist patriarchy) because I thought I had a more tenable position from which to speak. But I felt no need to change anything else.

Would I have been able to produce better research on that subject as a gay man? Was I a gay man when I did the original work? Did living as a heterosexual make me heterosexual? If I still sometimes feel sexually attracted to women, should I call myself bisexual? What is a gay man?

The issue of sexual orientation has much in common with other oppressions that are built on the naturalizing of a domination/subordination dynamic. But there are differences as well, one of which is the fuzzy boundaries between gay, straight, and bisexual. The boundaries between “races” are, of course, also fuzzy, and the notion that there are two – and only two – distinct genders is also up for grabs. However, in a society that so severely punishes same-sex affection, “knowing” one’s own sexual orientation is particularly tricky business. Perhaps the only thing a heterosexual person in the contemporary United States can say is, “Given the intense social, cultural, religious, and legal pressure on people to be heterosexual, I think I am straight.” Certainly there are people who live as heterosexuals for large portions of their lives before acknowledging gay or lesbian identities. For some, that acknowledgment does not come until very late in life. It seems reasonable to assume, then, that some people who are in some sense gay go to their graves without ever connecting to their gayness. So, who is gay? Maybe we all are, and it just takes some of us longer than others to figure it out. As Marilyn Frye (1982), has suggested, because lesbianism endures despite strenuous attempts to erase it, perhaps we should assume lesbianism is “natural” for most women:

The suppression of lesbian feeling, sensibility, and response has been so thorough and so brutal for such a long time, that if there were not a strong and widespread inclination to lesbianism, it would have been erased from human life. There is so much pressure on women to be heterosexual, and this pressure is both so pervasive and so completely denied, that I think heterosexuality cannot come naturally to many women; I think that widespread heterosexuality among women is a highly artificial product of the patriarchy. (p. 196)

If a heterosexual person were to acknowledge that reality before engaging in research on lesbians, gay men, or bisexuals, maybe the conversations that take place during, and as a result of, the research would be far more productive.

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