WORKING PAPER ON ETHNOGRAPHIC & INTERVIEW METHODS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The key questions and challenges confronting those who conduct qualitative research on sexuality involve issues of mentorship, institutional review boards, the positionality of the researcher and the integration of mediated communication and cultures. To address these challenges we suggest that this subfield is in need of a queer research method that speaks specifically to issues of qualitative social science research.

II. MENTORSHIP

The key theme that this work group repeatedly returned was the issue of mentorship. In our discussions it became increasingly clear that many of us who do this sort of research suffer from a lack of mentorship. This sense was shared by those of us in graduate school as well as those who are working in tenure track positions. Our discussions revealed that many of us who research sexuality are mentored by those whose primary focus is gender. Additionally, because sexuality (especially when it is researched using qualitative methods) is a marginal topic, it may be that those who research this topic end up not at research universities mentoring graduate students, but at liberal arts colleges. Interestingly, one of the members of our group did not even research sexuality, but came to the conference to develop tools such that she could better mentor her students who did focus on sexuality. This lack of mentorship is especially noticeable in terms of qualitative research on sexuality, because, while a faculty member who has not been
well versed in the topic can read texts related to the topic, actually having done the research and experienced the pitfalls that are a part of it is essential to effective mentoring relationships.

We anticipate that this will be a theme that may cross workgroups. As such we propose that some sort of institutional mentoring system be set up. Whether it be lunches that pair junior and senior scholars at yearly meetings or facilitating an online space like a discussion board or email list, such a system is necessary because of the institutional and professional barriers that stand in the way of connecting senior scholars and junior scholars who research sexuality.

III. THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

Some of the issues raised in qualitative inquiries into the subject of sexuality are not so different that the questions raised by qualitative research into other topics – the role of the research as a fraught one for instance. Sexuality researchers investigate intimate and often private, practices and identities. Thus they are in a particularly interesting place in which their own sexual identities, practices and performances are read by those they are researching in a variety of ways. These components of sexuality are often read through gendered performances that may effect the research in ways that are not always predictable.

It seems that some aspects of the researcher’s own identity may be salient in this type of research in a way it is not in other projects. Issues of touch and physical and emotional boundaries may, for instance, be especially fraught when research sexuality. That is, we may be researching incredibly intimate portions of our subjects’ lives, but, at the same time, researchers draw particular boundaries between themselves and their subjects. The question becomes, when, how, and why do researchers draw particular boundaries when researching these types of intimate topics. Similarly, to what extent is the researcher a resource for populations with limited access to other information and expertise? That is, at the same time that sexuality researchers are gathering information, their subjects often look to them as experts, looking for resources about particular identities, orientations, practices and beliefs.

IV. NAVIGATING INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS

Related to the issue of mentorship is the more specific issue of how one navigates institutional review boards when researching a “suspect” area such as sexuality that may involve observing or asking questions about areas that such boards may consider “off limits.” This challenge is
compounded when, as is often the case, there are no qualitative researchers on a given school’s institutional review board. In those cases it seems that certain words or phrases (sexuality, observation etc.) can act as triggers for institutional review boards to deny a project approve. This challenge again speaks to the need for a more formal mentorship mechanism by which sexualities scholars can share “tricks of the trade,” a la Becker, about how to explain their efforts at qualitative inquiry in ways that institutional review boards can understand.

V. MEDIATED CULTURES

With the rise of mediated communication and culture comes a reconfiguring of public and private spaces that historically may have characterized specific information preserves. This has particular implications for researching something typically considered to belong to the realm of the private, like sexuality. Thus, we ask, how does the rise of mediated cultures require a rethinking of qualitative methods in terms of privacy, confidentiality, the use of image, replicability, the ability to reach marginalized populations and range of information that counts as “data?” Institutional review boards are woefully unprepared to deal with mediated environments, information and communities. Given these challenges, those who research sexuality and those who research new media may have something to say to one another. To that end, we include here the address for the site for best research practices from the Association of Internet Researchers. As of right now the list of best practices is still being developed by AoIR members, but we anticipate that it will serve as a useful resource for sexuality researchers in the future.

VI. A QUEER RESEARCH ETHIC

Given these methodological challenges, we suggest that it might be time to think about developing a queer research ethics. Much like feminist methods has critiqued positivist and seemingly objective research methods, to what extent might a queer research method be a useful concept? What might it include? How might it critique, build upon, draw from or contradict feminist methods? Given our discussions, the development of such a method seems to be the next necessary development in this subfield.