

Outline

“If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence...Orientations towards sexual objects affect the things that we do, such that different orientations, different ways of directing one’s desires, means inhabiting different worlds.” (Ahmed, 2006, p.1 & p. 68)

“Education, like all human enterprises, is a function of identity and desire...The difficulty of education is due first and foremost to the fact that engaging and directing identities and desires is fraught with multiple obstacles...” (Bracher, 2002, p. 93)

Sexual desire is rarely less than potent, often subversive, and frequently messy. Differently ‘Othered’ sexual desire is considered thus even more so. These characteristics and, through physical expression, their association with sexual orientation and identity have been a central thread in queer theory. Learning at the doctoral level, too, is potent, subversive and messy. Yet, until recently, queer theoretical approaches to understanding how learning works in higher education have failed to attract much scholarly attention (Renn, 2010). In respect to doctoral study, gender theorists are reincorporating the body into their discussions (Hopwood & Paulson, 2012; Carter, 2011), but there are still considerable absences around sexual desire and orientation (Gunn & McAllister, 2013).

Ironically, the sexual body (particularly the queer sexual body and the desires it materializes) has also been consigned to a more absent role in queer theory (See: Binnie, 2009; Freeman, 2011). Seduced by the disruptive potential of intellectual abstraction we have tended to cloak the nakedness of the sensual, erotic body underneath queer theory in phrases of the mind. This is not to disregard the call for education researchers to take queer concepts outside of the home turf of sexuality and gender made by Rasmussen and Allen (2014). Rather it is a *note-to-Self* that it is all too easy for desire’s material realities and corporeal experiences to be subsumed in debates about ‘performativity’ as an idea. It is after all lived, bodily encounters which have the practical power to destabilize all over-simplifying categories of human experience.

Theoretically this paper takes as its point of departure: Sara Ahmed’s work on how orientation in space is an aspect of sexuality and that this affects how we come to inhabit worlds and who we are [prepared] to inhabit them with. The central tenet of the argument presented here is: How, within the doctoral enterprise, intrinsically linked desires and bodies might inform or influence what we learn in terms of doctoral education’s fundamental aims and also what we are *prepared* to learn without compromising our Self. As such the notion of the leaning towards or away over time from discreet intellectual and material components of disciplinary studies is a useful heuristic tool for exploring how these processes operate.

With this in mind, queer theory clearly has something to teach us about the embodied experience of doctoral studies more broadly than just for the LGBTQ community. This is especially the case, if ‘queering’ is focused on destabilizing normativity in research methodologies in terms of:

- ◆ How their underlying metanarratives potentially disrupt interpersonal and inter-subjective aspects of learning;
- ◆ How these disruptions emanate from sexual orientation, and demonstrate the role the erotic body plays in broader academic and intellectual orientations.

To explore these points, I will interrogate the ways in which clashing metanarratives located behind and within our research methodologies can play out in the relationship between student, supervisor and discipline because of intersections of sexual orientation, desire and the body. In particular, this paper constructs a reflective case study based on the author's observations concerning the same-space residence of the two meta-narratives of biological determinism and social constructivism within the academy. It does so to illuminate the dissonances encountered because of this collocation and what this means for learning and lived experience. When these meta-narratives are enacted through research methodologies in disciplinary communities which students are assumed to accept, intersections with bodily experience can generate tensions within the interpersonal and inter-subjective realms. In such a situation leanings towards / away from supervisors, disciplinary norms, and learning occurs.

I will look specifically at the influence of the quasi-essential assumptions embedded in these meta-narratives, particularly in terms of:

- ◆ How they materialize in the disciplinary research environments of Education, orthodox Theology and some Biological Sciences
- ◆ How desire, orientation and identity play their part in cycles of response and reaction to them.

These reflections are based on my own experience as a researcher in an interdisciplinary arena and also as a supervisor. Currently in education research there is commonly an assumption that social constructivism explains not only how we learn but also how we come to understand ourselves as LGBTQ. Notions of 'being born that way' (sexuality emanating from within the individual from birth) are avoided, reframed around questions of identity development, and valued negatively as biological determinism. In biological sciences, however, the opposite might be true, with a laboratory based LGBTQ student being assailed with the possible scientific 'causes' of sexuality, whilst holding a belief that their own sexual orientation has nothing to do with their biology (The tensions for undergraduates in Life Sciences have been explored in: Toynton, 2007). In orthodox Christian Theology, the situation is almost more paradoxical as the two are operating in dialogue with each other. Within many mainstream statements relating to orthodox positions, the Creation story is assumed to presuppose heterosexuality as the divinely inspired norm (thus emanating from within). However, shifts in body theology to reframe personal sexuality from relating to specific actions to identity-based lifestyles, mean that non-normative sexuality is seen as a choice (not emanating from within) which individuals can overcome. The trouble is, a LGBTQ researcher undertaking LGBTQ focused doctoral studies may well believe, and so may his or her research subjects, that none of the meta-narratives explains their way of being as it manifests through their bodies. The orientations to the learning process, the supervisors, and disciplinary relationships that emerge from this dissonance has something important to tell us about how the doctoral process in general works.

Research methodologies underpinned by the meta-narratives profoundly interface with

personal beliefs and associated desires attached to *being*. Doctoral processes are thus potentially *embodied normativity*, with bodily incorporations, and related essentializing tendencies (Gunn, 2014). Such an insight transcends LGBTQ experience. It suggests that *desires which inspire* (and the understanding of diversity they demand) wind our performances, performativity, materiality and corporeality into a whole and this whole is where learning orientation is located.

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