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Manières de faire: Research, everyday life and young people's sexual health

Abstract:

Social science research rarely considers itself as creative practice, but sometimes considers the practices of its researched populations in this way. Yet this focus is predominantly on subjectivity as social practice rather than creative practice. Through my research into discourses of young people's sexual health, I wish to illuminate various subjective practices of both researched *and* researchers, serving to unsettle distinctions between these, and emphasising shared spaces of creative practice. Distinctions between researcher and researched can be used to colonise knowledge, whereby the researcher has knowledge of the researched, whose own knowledge practices may be disregarded or simplified for the purposes of a research agenda. A social science strategy built upon objective and routine analysis can encourage the researcher to enter 'the field' as though she is external, impartial and unhindered by her everyday practices.

Within my studies, I seek a self-reflexive research practice in which it can be understood that the researcher, like the researched, is engaged in *ascesis* (self creation through ongoing practice). Employing Certeau's theory of the everyday allows a more nuanced engagement with the binary of researcher/researched, in particular the contemplation of *strategies and tactics* that both researchers and researched engage with. From this theoretical standpoint, *strategies* of the field – the spaces in which we all operate – can be challenged or circumvented through various *tactics* – our creative ways of doing (*manières de faire*). In relation to this, Certeau's metaphor of 'the renter' is considered as a tactic that is potentially useful in complicating research spaces. Operating as renters, researchers can extend the possibilities of a less hierarchical, less colonising, and more creative research practice.

Keywords:

Certeau; everyday practice; strategies; tactics; health research; subjectivity; sexual health; young people; *manière de faire*.

This paper reflects upon the ongoing development of a PhD thesis focused on the discourses of young people's sexual health. This research considers subjectivity as a site of practice and becoming, particularly drawing from Julia Kristeva's (1982) *sujet en procès* (subject in process), Michel Foucault's (1988, 1986, 1997) *technologies of the self*, and Mary Douglas's (1966) anthropology. These theories (to be discussed throughout) privilege the study of practices over identities, referring to subjectivity as a site of doing rather than a state of being. Subjectivity here is performed through practice and does not exist as though a stable and internal ontology. From this perspective, my paper will use Michel de Certeau's (1988) theory of everyday practice to consider the potential of research that is creative, situated and everyday.

The consideration of difference is key to the works of each of these theorists who illustrate how differences produce knowledges, fears, politics, and understandings of self. Certeau reminds us that all knowledge claims, and therefore all research, are a reflection of difference:

In any event, from where we are speaking, we are unable to overcome the difference that separates us from the experience of most people around us. We take the necessary risk of addressing the issue, but from the particular place that we inhabit and that determines our place in society. (Certeau 1997, 128)

This paper seeks to recognise the interplay of difference within research, using my current research perspective to illustrate my place of speaking. A further aim of this paper is to contribute to an expanding field of research that considers itself creative, partial, and situated (Haraway 1988; Law 2004). Such research can problematise truth claims, which can limit not only the breadth of human experience but research itself. It also challenges the notion that research is unbiased, and seeks to depart from research paradigms strengthened by various hierarchies, distinctions, universalisms

and silences. I wish to acknowledge my position throughout my research, to remind readers, participants and myself of its partiality. Like Haraway,

I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. (Haraway 1988, 589)

So it is from my place/s that I consider the subjective practices involved in young people's sexual health. From here I also consider differences, such as those between and among the discursive fields of my three data: interviews with young people, website content, and published research papers. Difference connects my experiences to those of my research participants in relation to age, education and life experiences, but difference is also both generated and complicated via our shared spaces of everyday practice; our various and overlapping *manières de faire* (ways of doing) (Certeau 1988). Certeau's concept of *manières de faire* situates practices (be they research or sexual health practices) in the realm of the everyday, not easily extracted and isolated from their diverse functioning. Considering *manières de faire*, and not just 'the doing', broadens the scope of an inquiry into social practices such as these, and complicates knowledge generated through difference.

Both the researcher and the researched are subjects in process, where subjectivity is always unresolved, continual, becoming (Kristeva 1982). Kristeva believes that subjectivity cannot be mastered by a self, but is a variant state that is always 'subject to' the influence of culture, history, and language, despite our ongoing attempts to achieve stable subjectivities (McAfee 2004). She examines this via the concept of 'the abject', represented by bodily waste – that which is neither subject nor object and therefore renders the subject's borders difficult to define and maintain (Kristeva 1982). Abjection is not caused by such 'dirt' (Douglas 1966), but by that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982, 4).

Research practices (like sexual health practices), seek and generate further opportunities for order. In sexual health research, boundaries between the researched and researcher (those inside or outside young people's sexual health) are necessarily

deployed. Without this, knowledge production on this matter would stall and little could be said of the surveyed other. To deny distinctions between the researcher/researcher (or self/other) would render any inquiry abject, contaminated, incomprehensible. My goal is not to transcend such borders, but to recognise them, and consider how they produce knowledge both through and beyond the everyday practices of the researched. As Certeau (1997, 128) states, knowledge (a process of ordering) can only be generated through difference.

Much sociological research is committed to a desire for system and order, though recent scholars such as John Law seek to illuminate the mess of social research and its methods (Law 2004; Law and Urry 2004). Law believes that social science should attempt “to make and know realities that are vague and indefinite *because much of the world is enacted in that way*” (Law 2004, 14 emphasis original). Building upon the work of Actor Network theorists Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, Law hopes for more creative social research in which science is no longer considered as exterior and independent of the people and things it investigates. He suggests that “if we want to think about the messes of reality at all then we’re going to have to teach ourselves to think, to practise, to relate, and to know in new ways” (Law 2004, 2).

According to Latour (2005), social science might benefit from returning to ‘old ways’ whereby the social is not a thing to be explained, but a site through which connections and relations are explored. Such research exists within the social, not beyond it, and like other phenomena (such as sexual health) it involves a mess of subjective practices. Arguably, social research cannot explain the sexual health practices of young people, but can explore its production, relations and discourses within a myriad of social (including research) practices. Social science is very much connected to the social world through discourse and practices that exceed it; therefore, sexual health research is never divorced from an expansive field of health policy, education, health services, and more.

A connecting line can be drawn between the mess of life and the mess of research by exploring everyday practice (including research) as creative. Certeau (1988) illustrates that within practice lies creativity, and through practices, multiple *manières de faire* produce multiple meanings, relations, ideas, and knowledges, none of which are

particularly stable or concurrent. In life, we employ a range of tactics to produce things, be they art works, questionnaires, or research statements. Creativity lies not in what is produced, but how (the *manières*) it is produced (via practice, process, consumption). This emphasis allows Certeau to explore *transverse* tactics which “do not obey the law of place” (Certeau 1988, 29). In other words, practitioners create meanings in navigating through sites that are not their own (be they sites of research, discourse, or foreign cultures). In doing so, the practitioner can produce alternative meanings and functions than those written into the strategies in place.

Within Foucault’s considerations of subjectivity, he suggests both a history and possibility of creative self practice. Distancing himself from (and critiquing the limitations of) identity politics, he focuses more intently on how humans engage in self-creation through practices:

But the relationships we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather, they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation. (Foucault 1997, 166)

Foucault’s self-creating self is useful for opening a space to consider research practice as part of the *ascesis* that he speaks of elsewhere, as “an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought” (1986, 9). This can extend to the researcher herself who is intrinsic (not external) to her knowledge pursuits. To consider research as creative not only challenges the ‘science’ of social science, but the limitations of systematic research models that seek objective distance. This disruption that unsettles as oppositional distinctions between researcher and researched can spread to other binaries such as the health expert and consumer, the educator and student, the adult and child. Within the function of these binaries is not only the useful practice of ordering, but also the marginalisation of particular subjects, like ‘the young person’, who as neither adult nor child (or sometimes both). This unstable location is not unlike that of the research student, who operates somewhat precariously – and without ‘proper’ place – in her roles of researcher, educator, or expert.

According to Mary Douglas (1966, 47), a subject that cannot be easily categorised is often approached as an anomaly, and “[w]hen something is firmly classed as

anomalous, the outline of the set in which it is not a member is clarified". It can be said that the anomalous category of *young person* serves to clarify the parameters of *adult* and *child* (as the research student clarifies parameters between researcher/expert/educator and student). At the same time the social category of young person (or research student) threatens this social ordering due to its difficult classification. This subject, who cannot be entirely classified as 'other', exists in a site of tension, as both threat to, and clarification of, distinguished categories. The young person and the research student might be considered abject, as per Kristeva's (1982) consideration of Douglas's (1966) 'matter out of place'.

Discourses of young people's sexual health often evoke a 'normal', adult sexual subject as a point of comparison to the young sexual person. This can be found in the following excerpt from a university produced website for young people (*Your Sex Health* n.d.):

Young people are more adventurous about the kinds of sex they're having, research suggests, but they don't always recognise that they're having sex. Perhaps it's because they don't want to think about what happens next, the 'what ifs'.

Here, there is no indication of whom the young people are being compared to. Also implied is the existence of normal sex practices that young people exceed. In both cases 'the adult' is the point of comparison. This observation of young people comes from a site of difference, yet one that need not be announced by the adult voice of research statements, which familiarly consider young people as transitional beings, moving from child to adult (Erikson 1968). This movement – the path from childhood to adulthood – indicates a lack of place. Yet according to Certeau (1988, 100), within such movement is a manipulation of space.

Furthermore, what is meant by the above use of "adventurous"? And how is it that young people are known as such? The phrase "research suggests" (used here and throughout this site without reference to particular research) indicates a distinction between the knowledges of young people and researchers. In *their* knowledge, young people "don't always recognise that they're having sex." Yet, clearly the researcher

does. The following is an excerpt from a government website (Australia. Department of Health and Ageing n.d.):

Young people are usually less experienced in or confident about sexual relationships and sometimes unknowingly put themselves at risk.

Again, a comparison is made to an unspecified subjective norm, separating the 'young' person from the (adult) person. Such statements insinuate that health researchers and promoters have knowledge above and beyond that of the young person who is 'unknowingly at risk.' Conversely, the speaking expert has a sense of the field she operates in. Through education (gaining knowledge) and practice (gaining experience), the professional is subjectified, situated in the knowledge and fluent in the language of their disciplines. Through practice, "the Expert pronounces on the basis of the *place* that his specialty has won for him" (Certeau 1988, 8 original emphasis), and is the proprietor of expert knowledge. What can be seen here is a strategy of location in which "every strategic rationalization seeks first of all to distinguish its 'own' place" (Certeau 1988, 36).

This cannot be said of the young person in her knowledge of sexual health. Yet, while she is not proprietor of official discourses and strategies of sexual health, the young person does not fall outside these. Drawing from Certeau's understanding of *tactics and strategies*, it can be said that without the need to be bound to place, system, or strategic field, the young person employs a range of tactics to engage with, resist, or circumvent this discourse, and more broadly, the strategies that she did not generate and could not generate on the basis of being 'out of place' (Certeau 1988). Although "[t]he tactician has no resources of his own" (Sheringham 2000, 192), tactics can infiltrate systems "in which they sketch out the guileful ruses of different interests and desires. They circulate, come and go, overflow and drift over an imposed terrain" (Certeau 1988, 34). It can be said that strategies of expert knowledge do not constrain the young person, but such terrain and its openings can produce other *manières de faire*. This can be said of the young practitioner's use of sexual health discourses produced through educational websites, which will not always correlate to their current sex practices, but might prove useful in other ways.

In a non-government sexual health website for young people (*Like it is* n.d.), discourses of young people's experience and knowledge (or lack thereof) further illustrate a transitional youth subjectivity. Examples can be found in the following excerpts advising young readers on sex practice.

With any foreplay you'll experience what's known as arousal.

(*Like it is* n.d.)

This statement tells young people what they *will* experience in foreplay, as though they have not yet experienced this. These young people are inexperienced and arousal is not yet theirs. Elsewhere it is said that

like anything, learning to be good at sex takes time and practice.

(*Like it is* n.d.))

This suggests that sexual competence can only be achieved after a certain level of experience (constituted through time and practice). Through sex *practice* one can hone one's sexual skills or techniques. This also implies that early sexual encounters cannot be 'good'. Furthermore,

[I]ike most things, sex gets better with practice.

(*Like it is* n.d.))

While the previous statement focuses upon the skill of practitioners – being “good at sex” – this statement looks at sex itself as pleasure generating. Like competence, pleasure is also said to improve with practice. By this account, experience not only enhances sexual skills, but sexual pleasure as well. These examples subjectify young people as having little sexual experience, reflecting a differentiation of young people (from a site of expertise) on the basis of their transitioning to sexual competency and pleasure. Suggested here is a threshold that the young person must cross in order to become experienced and pleased by sex. But surely sexual pleasure can be part of the *practice* of sex, rather than something later arrived at.

Foucault (1997) illuminates skills and pleasures within sex practices that are more entwined, and in referring to strategic relations found in S&M practice, he situates pleasure *as* practice. Positing the difference between S&M and standard heterosexual practices, he notes heterosexual courting practices in the Saturday night dancing of ‘boys and girls’:

They [the boy and girl] are acting out strategic relations. What is interesting is that, in this heterosexual life, those strategic relations come before sex. It’s a strategic relation in order to obtain sex. And in S&M those strategic relations are inside sex, as a convention of pleasure within a particular situation. (Foucault 1997, 170)

How might this relate to the research process undertaken by the postgraduate student? Is the research we do simply a strategy in order to achieve the pleasure of a professional qualification? Or is it more than that? Is the dance of the postgraduate student like the dancing of the boy and girl? What if the pleasure exists in the practice itself, as with S&M, and not simply in the achievement of published research? For some of us, the strategy and the pleasure are entwined, and the latter does not just arrive in the event of (thesis) submission. Foucault argues that S&M is founded in its practice, so cannot be extracted from sex practices. A research strategy that wishes to experiment with its form and shape itself through its practice might also be considered queer and marginal, as might research that does not delineate professional from everyday practice.

What does it mean to *use* tools, be they theories, websites, condoms, or something else? Certeau’s considerations of *manières de faire* demonstrate that use of space, media and discourse is often overlooked by the researcher. Through an array of shifting metaphors he considers practices as sometimes incomprehensible to observers on the basis of unknown *manières de faire*. Using an example of TV viewing research, he states that

once the images broadcast by television and the time spent in front of the TV set have been analysed, it remains to be asked what the consumer makes of these images and during these hours. (Certeau 1988, 31)

In other words, the study of consumption is not enough, because it speaks little of how the media and its information are used. Likewise, we might know the frequency and duration of young people's visits to sexual health websites, but this tells us little about their use of this information. According to Certeau (1988), consumption is not oppositional to production, but is itself productive. The producers of TV media, or sexual health websites are not the only producers, and what takes place in consumption is co-production. For all the websites, posters, workshops, classes, programs and free condoms, little is known about how these are used, and further, how this use subjectifies:

The thousands of people who buy a health magazine, the customers in a supermarket, the practitioners of urban space, the consumers of newspaper stories and legends – what do they make of what they 'absorb', receive, and pay for? What do they do with it? (Certeau 1988, 31)

Such questions can be put to the products of sexual health, be they condoms or policy documents. Certeau's theorisation of strategies and tactics is at once a reflection and a demonstration of the tactical use of language, theory, metaphor and writing. He performs 'the ruse' of language as much as he hypothesises it, demonstrating a range of disruptions that can be made to strategies which might otherwise seem oppressive. But practice is tactical and evasive. It 'poaches' from the strategies that may seek order and system, producing alternative *manières de faire* (Certeau 1988; Sheringham 2006, 214). As Michael Sheringham states, "we [all of us] are users of institutions and discourses, and in our 'pratiques' and 'manière de faire' we do not passively follow out a predetermined script: we edit, amend and subvert" (Sheringham 2000, 191).

Throughout his work, Certeau uses (but complicates) binaries such as strategies and tactics, production and consumption, theory and practice. Strategies and tactics are different and their difference is articulated frequently (for example, strategies as spacial; tactics as temporal), but they are not considered oppositional. Rather, tactics are generated *within* strategies. A similar binary complication can be found in the production that occurs *within* consumption. The non-oppositional binary suggests a connection between the two concepts, an overlap which extends to distinctions

between theory and practice, as demonstrated by Certeau's theoretical practice. Within this practice, Certeau opens spaces for metaphors such as 'the renter' (Certeau 1988, 33). The subject who rents, borrows and uses, but does not own, presents a challenge to proprietary notions of knowledge and action. What might research look like if it did not rely so much on strategies but operated as something more like a rental agreement?

In relation to a 'proper' writing of history, Certeau states that

infinite lexicons and foreign vocabularies are silenced as soon as the museum or writing seizes these fragments in order to make them speak in our interests. At that point they cease to speak and to be spoken. (Certeau 1997, 139)

The researcher who must make something speak in her interests must extract that thing from the web of relations that give it life. To treat the researched young person as another culture to be mined, explored and turned over is to misrepresent her life practices. For Certeau, research or writing can be considered as the border between life and death, where "[n]othing from other cultures crosses this barrier without coming to us dead on arrival" (Certeau 1997, 139). This presents a challenge to my own research and my fears of colonising the spaces and practices of the researched.

With the help of Certeau's metaphors (the tools available to me), I approach my research as a renter. I live in this data for now, not forever, and its walls and furnishings give shape to my research practice. As renter, I move into this space temporarily, I make it comfortable, I move out when it is time. My rent is a loose promise to participants that I, like them, seek improvement. I hope to leave this place in a state no worse than when I found it.

For four years I rented an old flat in the centre of Newcastle: Thorn Street. Above a jeweller, a tattoo studio, and another flat was my home. From my rooftop I listened to the sounds of the city, watched boats move through the harbour, , and made research plans. This was until a construction company bought the property and evicted me and other tenants in order to re-develop that space. I then moved to Sydney where I write

this paper from a desk in the library postgraduate space at the University of New South Wales. While doing so, I and other students are advised that our desk sizes will shrink in order to make space for more students, for a more productive *use of space*. Following some complaints, the future of this space is undergoing a formal review. Yet it seems unlikely that I will continue to reside at this desk in its current location and size for the duration of my candidature.

My homes, my desks, my ideas: they are never entirely mine, hence the need to develop tactics to deal with the precariousness of these spaces. The young subject of health promotion, as a precarious inhabitant of sexual health discourse, may also have to draw from a range of tactics in order to weave her way through those tenuous spaces. Highlighting tenuous spaces like these is not to suggest that my research is a passing phase, or an isolatable event in my life, any more than the sexual health practices of young people are. These things are at once transient and cumulative. Like the flat in Thorn Street, it will remain, resonate and filter through my ongoing experiences. I have not lived there since 2008, yet in some ways I still occupy that place, just as experiences of being young still linger in adults. Moving away from these spaces does not mean they are transcended, forgotten or discarded. To consider the young person *within* the adult, which is also the young person produced by the adult, conjures a more ‘Certeaudian’ view of difference, whereby such subjects are not oppositional (as they might be read in sexual health websites), but co-productive. While oppositional binaries might be useful to proprietary discourse or research, the tactics beyond those spaces (of young people, renters and metaphors) will always appropriate such things for other means, demonstrating that there are countless *manières de faire*.

History demonstrates that the colonised often use the tools of their colonisers for other means, as in Certeau’s example of Spanish colonisations where “the Indians often used the laws, practices, and representations that were imposed on them by force or by fascination to ends other than those of their conquerors” (1988, 32). Impositions are subverted through creative use, just as discourses of sexual health can be utilised, in multiple and diverse ways, within young people’s sex practices. Data collected from interviews with young people suggest multiple and malleable operations of sexual health, as can be seen in the definition offered by Jack (male; 24 years):

Paul: *So what does the term 'sexual health; mean to you?*

Jack: *Well ... it, for me I kind of flip it around a bit and it's 'healthy sex', you know, where there's, you know, lots of consent, appropriate levels of safety...*

By 'flipping in around', Jack conceptualises his own version of sexual health which does not limit or disturb his sexual practices. Throughout the interview he discusses the importance of sexual pleasure, his preference for frequent sex with various partners, and his fear of pregnancy. All of this constitutes his version of 'healthy sex' as abundant, variable, consensual and non-procreative. Jack's sexual health practices are not bound to a strategy, but are guided by a range of tactics and operations formulated through his ongoing consumption and use of sexual health knowledge.

The interview itself can be considered a site of young people's self practice, as reflected in their multiple motivations for (voluntarily) taking part. An example can be found in the rationale that Sam (male; 22 years) gave for participating:

Paul: *What made you take part in this particular research?*

Sam: *Oh this? Well I happened to see your, the document, I mean the poster on the wall. And actually I want to... review my, my sex experience by being asked questions. Yeah. And I want to talk about it with someone. Yeah, yeah, that's the main motivation.*

Prior to interview recruitment, I believed that few would contact a stranger to talk through their sex practices. I was wrong. It might be said that the interview is a tool for both researcher and researched, that participants, like myself, 'use the institution' in ways that are not determined or controlled by the institution. Here, the tools of the researchers (as colonisers) can be utilised by participants for alternative means. Likewise, the tools of a discipline (as coloniser) can be utilised by the researcher for alternative means. Considering the interview itself, Sam is not bound to that space, and is arguably less subjectified by the interview space than I am. As proprietor, as the voice from the poster that Sam responded to, I have more at stake in this. Sam can

tactically use this space, in this case finding an opportunity to discuss and review his sex experience.

Might research that considers the practices of both researchers and researched generate a space in which knowledge is borrowed, co-produced, but never entirely owned by the researcher? Or might this not matter, because proprietary knowledge is never much of a barrier for one's *manieres de faire* anyway. Yet seeking a research practice that loosens its grip on its disciplinary methods, principles and expertise – as that which produces knowledge beyond the everyday concerns of those researched – seems like a worthwhile pursuit. Such research might learn to lease space rather than own it, and take guidance from those outside the discipline, be they scholars, research participants or other practitioners of the everyday.

Can research projects seek to expand understanding without being co-opted by the history of a discipline, the need to promote that discipline, and the protection of its boundaries? Without occupying a permanent space, surely there would be no need for border protection. Perhaps the interdisciplinary who 'poaches' from various pools of knowledge and practice is less likely to own her research space, instead continually moving between homes, desks and participants. While precarious, inhabiting research as a renter could generate tactical resourcefulness on the researcher's part. And perhaps without heavy investment in one's history, identity, and expertise (like young sexual practitioners), one can produce research through a more everyday use of theory, language and metaphor.

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