
On Fitting in the Field: The Place of Social Science in Trans Studies

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Geoffrey H. Nicholson's personal essay in the recent pornography issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* has been a dark mark on what was an otherwise spectacular special issue on a subject of particular importance to the field of trans studies. A number of critiques could be levied against the piece—and many already have been. In addition to its stigmatizing language and offensive regard for the value of transgender people, the essay is, to be frank, poorly written and it fails to organize itself around any identifiable point or argument. But my critique of the situation at the heart of which we find this essay does not focus on the shortcomings of the essay's writing or its argument, or even the moral character of its pseudonymous author. My critique focuses on its purpose. Its sole purpose, to the extent I can identify one, is articulated at the end of the essay's introduction: "to bring the topic of transamorous men into discussions about trans issues" (Nicholson 2020: 269). Why was *this essay* the means by which transamory was brought into *TSQ* and, at a broader level, into discussions of trans porn? And was it really even the means by which this topic was brought into trans studies? The respective answers to these questions are "it shouldn't have been" and "if you take a more expansive view of trans studies than what's published in *TSQ*, it wasn't."

I write this response essay as one of the few academic researchers (if not the only one) to have conducted research on transamorous men in the context of pornography (see Billard 2019). My article, which was published in *Communication Research Reports*, presented the results of a survey of 236 cisgender men, 69% of whom identified as heterosexual and all of whom regularly viewed porn featuring transgender women performers. The point of the study was to assess what effect porn viewing had on respondents' attitudes toward transgender women and to determine how their experience of shame about their sexual desires (i.e., their transamory) influenced that effect. The study revealed that though porn viewing had a statistically significant effect on attitudes toward transgender women such that viewing more porn was associated with less transphobia, the size of the effect was substantively negligible. Moreover, viewing trans porn neither increased nor decreased the amount of shame people felt

about their transamory and that shame did not in any way mediate the relationship between porn viewing and transphobia. However, the amount of shame individuals felt about their transamory had a highly significant and substantively large *direct* effect on their transphobia such that experiencing more shame was associated with being more transphobic. It is on this point that Nicholson (2020: 270) provides his only meaningful insight: that transamorous men are secretive about their attractions to trans people and trans porn because they fear the stigma of transamory and the opinions of their community members. Indeed, as I found in my research, transamorous men's sexual shame was rooted in the fear of others' discovery and judgement.

Ultimately, my study offered evidence that, though trans porn may provide its transamorous viewers with positive sexual scripts in which trans people are legitimated as subjects (rather than objects) of sexual desire, that script does little to overcome the pervasive cultural script that tells them to be ashamed of their "wrong" desires. As such, the porn itself is a less important factor in transamorous men's attitudes and behaviors than is the sociocultural context in which they consume it. Their feelings about the porn they view matters much more than the porn itself, and that is where future research on transamory and pornography should focus. But would that research find its home in *TSQ*? I am doubtful.

I remember seeing the call for papers for the trans pornography special issue circulating around social media. I remember vividly my excitement it was happening because in doing my own research I had become painfully aware of the dearth of work both on trans porn specifically and on transamory more generally. I had only two previous works to reference in my writing, one of which was a Master's thesis on hegemonic masculinity in transamorous men's online dating profiles (Gericco 2015) and one of which was a journal article on trans women's experiences with transamorous men on Grindr (Lloyd and Finn 2017). This special issue would mean more work to cite in the future. But my excitement did not motivate me to submit my own work, which was not yet submitted anywhere. Instead I submitted to a journal in my "home" field of communication.

Why didn't I submit to the special issue? Because, like many others, I felt certain that my work would not have been welcome at *TSQ*, even when it so clearly fit the issue theme. *TSQ* had (and still has) an at best spotty history of publishing social scientific work. Outside of the special issue on "making transgender count" published in 2015 (e.g., Labuski and Keo-Meier 2015; Reisner et al. 2015; Schilt and Bratter 2015), the journal has published little research outside the humanities. I can count on one hand the number of *TSQ* articles I've read that employed inferential statistics. All of the current editors of the journal teach and publish in the humanities, as do the vast majority of editorial board members. In short, the journal has deliberately cultivated a reputation for itself as the premiere outlet for *humanistic* inquiry in transgender studies—but not for transgender studies as a whole. The consequence is that countless potential contributions to the field of transgender studies are never even submitted to the journal, depriving the field of key insights on topics that are not otherwise being addressed—on topics that have significant impacts on the material conditions of transgender people's daily lives.

Because of my (well-justified) presumptions about the journal's interest in my work, I consciously withheld my well-researched and highly relevant work on transamory and

pornography from *TSQ*. In doing so, I contributed to the creation of the topical vacuum Nicholson's essay was solicited to fill. The essay claimed, as I noted at the start of this response, to add something to this discussion. The editors of *TSQ* agreed, defending the essay's inclusion in the special issue on the grounds that it was "a meaningful contribution to the conversation on trans porn" (*TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2020). But, from my perspective at least, the essay was *not* a meaningful contribution. We learned nothing about transamorous men from Nicholson's essay that we did not already know from Reddit posts by also-anonymous "chasers," from journalistic exposés and interviews, from popular media portrayals of transamorous men such as on *Pose*, and, oftentimes, from our own personal experiences. I would argue it included less nuance and critical reflection than, say, Diana Tourjée's series of profiles of transamorous men published by *Vice* magazine, in which men frequently deconstructed the sources of their shame and how they've worked to overcome it. Social scientific works that *would* have made more substantive contributions to our collective knowledge and understanding, however, were withheld and likely will continue to be withheld unless there are changes to how the journal conceives of the field of which it claims to be the flagship journal and to what kind of work it regards as worth publishing.

So, what is the solution? The solution is to stop conceiving of transgender studies as a humanistic endeavor in field-building vis-à-vis queer theory and to instead conceive of transgender studies as an interdisciplinary endeavor to identify, analyze, and, ultimately, improve the material conditions transgender people face in daily life. The solution is for *TSQ* to actively solicit social scientific work and to create an intellectual community culture that welcomes social scientific contributions to the field alongside those from the humanities. The solution is to bring social science into the trans studies fold and, in doing so, to create a more robust academic dialogue on some of the most important issues facing trans people.

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