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Sociological and queer perspectives on shame and intimacy

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Boundary works of Grindr research: Sociological and queer perspectives on shame and intimacy

As a newly minted PhD student I am eager to explain to my colleagues what hook-up apps are and why we should care to look at them. One day at the University campus talking to a colleague I find myself out of words that satisfactorily describes the feeling of navigating the grid of Grindr, the hook-up app that my sexual biography as a gay man is inseparable of. I decide to “show don’t tell”. In powering up the app on my iPad I get a sinking feeling. Perhaps this isn’t right? Who will pop up in the grid of pictures, maybe in “challenging” positions? Students, staff, colleagues? As these thoughts make their way through my head the app has loaded and I find myself anxiously explaining the basic affordances in a swift, matter of fact style, and soon closing down the app, doing my best to move on.

Introduction

The issues at play in the above vignette (Humphreys 2005) represent at least two familiar issues: The media scholar working ethnographically finding that there seems to be “two there’s there” (Schegloff 2002); and the queer, insider researcher coming into academia and moving back into the queer cultural spaces that they are emotionally invested in and have privileged access to. Ethnography has a long tradition for using and thinking about the slipping and sliding of identities into cultural spaces. Due to the mediatization (Lundby 2014, Hepp 2015) of intimate encounters (Linke 2011, Peil 2014) media ethnographers face both a quantitative increase and a qualitatively changed situation. In the vignette, the fact that the Grindr app, by way of its locative abilities, displays users nearby ties directly into the felt discomfort: The fact that the community that is “exposed” comprises of students and faculty members that might not have attuned their sexualised self-presentations to such a gaze. Here the public-private *expectations* come into play, tying into established Internet scholarly debates on the ethical issues regarding these distinctions (Markham 2012, Marwick 2014).

The paper argues that developments within queer, affective theory, as well as sociological and critical notions of intimacy, can shed new light on the challenges that media ethnographers encounter. It builds on the work done by queer ethnographic scholars, in that it interrogates not only the actions in fieldwork but also the distinctions and value hierarchies at play, and through that, the norms that put them in place. Further I take on the notion of intimacy to assess its analytical and critical potentials for unraveling the chronicled experience of shame.

Shameful transgression

The issues at play in the vignette attain to the feeling of shame in the face of what is perceived as a lacklustre negotiation of the classical ethnographical divide of insider and outsider knowledge, positioning, and identity. The vignette as well as the following general hesitancy to bring forward the field memo shows, that a researcher's affective investment in a given subject swiftly and determinately propels actions seeking to annul the experienced boundary transgression. Adding to the immediate implies for "damage control" shame both reveals taboos and seeks to erase actions that reveals the researcher as a transgressor. This is in line with queer and feminist works on affect (Ahmed 2004, Munt 2007, Bissenbakker 2013) that interrogates shame as moments that both reveal the investments that in turn produce and is produced by the affective response. These questions are critically discussed by way of the concept of 'safe space' and feminist ethics of care.

Intimate boundary works

There are psychological and sociological approaches that use it to describe types of interpersonal relationships (Giddens 1992, Baumeister 2007, Stempfhuber 2011, Nordqvist 2013). Related to this approach is the understanding that intimacy is something that is done, that is practiced. It can be understood as arising from boundary works (Jamieson 2005, [Auhor of this paper] forthcoming) and thus be ontologically entangled with the meeting of the prospect of boundary transgression that marks the end of intimacy. Lauren Berlant on the other hand sees intimacy as:

...the processes by which intimate lives absorb and repel the rhetorics, laws, ethics, and ideologies of the hegemonic public sphere, but also personalize the effects of the public sphere and reproduce a fantasy that private life is the real in contrast to

collective life: the surreal, the elsewhere, the fallen, the irrelevant.
(Berlant 1998)

The production of a public/private divide serves to orient subject attention towards interpersonal matters, making invisible the forces that define which exact distinctions to police.

This paper argues for an integrative approach, an amalgamation of sociological and critical intimacy theory. The paper argues that intimacy understood as boundary work between individuals is valuable in its bringing out the mechanics of being in public or private. It is also the level in which affective investments operate, which promotes critical methodological and ethical reflection. The critical perspective is also important in that it targets the very establishment of public and private realms, something that multilayered media practice complicates. It is argued that a critical approach to intimacy must take into account the ways that seemingly public, online visibilities and actions through discursive and affective work become intimate encounters.

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