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Social Justice, Research, and Adolescence

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Abstract

In what ways might research on adolescence contribute to social justice? My 2014 Presidential Address identified strategies for social justice in our field. First, we need research that is conscious of biases, power, and privilege in science, as well as in our roles as scholars. Second, we need research that attends to inequities in lives of adolescents, and as scholars we need to question the ways that our research may unwittingly reinforce those inequalities. Third, we need research that attends to urgencies, that is, issues or conditions that influence adolescents' well-being which demand attention and action. I draw from a range of concepts and theoretical perspectives to make the case for a framework of social justice in research on adolescence.

Keywords

social justice; privilege; inequality; urgency

Can we imagine our research and our field as being in the service of realizing the potential of young people?

In recent years I have been trying to ground myself in perspectives from multiple disciplines and vantage points, trying to get my hands around ways of doing, thinking about, and using research in ways that are authentic to two joint goals: doing good research, and making a contribution to social justice for and with young people. In this essay I outline some of this thinking. I present three broad arguments that I believe will promote research on adolescence characterized by social justice. First, we need research that is conscious of biases, power, and privilege in science, as well as in our roles as scholars. Second, we need research that attends to inequities in lives of its subjects (adolescents), and as scholars we need to question the ways that our research may (at times unwittingly) reinforce those inequalities. Third, we need research that attends to urgencies, which I define as issues or conditions that influence adolescents' lives and well-being which demand attention and action. I argue that we need to begin to incorporate urgency as a criterion for what counts as "good" research. These three themes are responsive to a key element of the mission of the Society for Research on Adolescence: "We value research as a foundation for raising children and for informing educational and community programs, practices and policies that shape the lives of youth." That is, as a scholarly society we believe research can do something in the world – that it can play a positive role in shaping the lives of young people.

The essay begins with a brief narrative introduction in order to situate the key themes related to social justice within the context of my personal life and scholarship. With that backdrop, I provide an analysis and critique of our research, or “science”. I then draw from borderlands theories to frame a discussion of privilege in our role as scholars, and queer theory to frame a discussion of the role of science in producing normativities. Finally, I consider the possibility that our field might value (and even prioritize) urgency among criteria for research. I close with suggestions for future directions that might lead to progress toward these strategies for social justice in research on adolescence.

On Boxes and Borders

First I offer a narrative introduction to help contextualize these ideas. I received a PhD in sociology in the mid-1990s at Duke University. I saw myself as a sociologist of the family, with concentration areas in studies of the life course and demography. The field at that time, and much of the emphasis of the training at Duke, was mainstream quantitative empirical macro-level sociology. The training was unquestioningly positivist: The epistemology was indistinguishable from the methods of positivism.¹ I understand positivism as the commitment to the idea that knowledge is derived from objective observation and measurement (science). Through the pursuit of science we can identify truth; theoretical questions can only be answered in relation to empirical observation (for discussion and critique see Alexander, 1982). Locating my training in this way, and offering a critique of it, is relevant for several reasons. First, that tradition of positivist scientific training, in which knowledge is defined (and thus limited to) induction derived through “objectivity”, continues in many fields related to the study of adolescence and adolescents today. Second, scientific and field leadership to broaden the epistemological possibilities for the study of adolescence still remains the exception, or at least notably in contrast to the dominance of positivism in science. And third, I make the critique because my scientific path has felt “boxed in” by this history and perspective. As a graduate student I sensed but could not name the epistemological silences – the omissions of alternate philosophical vantage points for seeing knowledge and the world – that characterized the field into which I was being trained and for which I was ostensibly being prepared.

Much has happened in my personal experience since the mid-1990s, the details of which do not matter specifically, except that I had a number of opportunities and collaborations that led me to broaden my understandings of not only what science is, but also broaden my thinking about the motives and methods that could characterize my perspective, work, and contributions.

My early research focused on teenage pregnancy and parenting, beginning with largely demographic approaches to identifying precursors (or “risk factors”; see Russell, 1994). Over time, and as I began to stretch the bounds of that box of my training, my emphasis shifted from a desire to understand correlates or consequences to an interest in the ways that we understand and approach teenage pregnancy through efforts to prevent it, or the ways that

¹To be fair, there was a range of perspectives represented among the faculty, including post-positivist, and an emphasis area in “comparative/historical sociology”; my point is that the dominant culture of the program (and field) was rooted in positivism.

we understand it as a social problem from different social locations (Russell, Lee, & Latino Teen Pregnancy Prevention Workgroup, 2004; Wilkinson-Lee, Russell, Lee, & Latina/o Teen Pregnancy Prevention Workgroup, 2006; Schalet et al., 2014). Following my postdoctoral training, Lisa Crockett and I began a collaboration to study cultural meanings or differences in parent-adolescent relationships, both in themselves (e.g., Crockett, Brown, Russell, & Shen, 2007) and in relation to adolescent adjustment (e.g., Russell, Crockett, & Chao, 2010). Then in the late 1990s I began research on the health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth (begun during my postdoctoral training; Russell & Joyner, 2001), work that initially bridged the “adolescent sexuality” studies represented by teenage pregnancy research with my interests in cultural or family variability in parent-child relationships.²

These areas of my research each focused on inequalities in the lives of families and adolescents: In the cases of teenage pregnancy and LGBT youth, my program of research brought me into conversation with practitioners, advocates, and activists working for social change to improve the lives of young people (Russell, 2005); those influences confirmed for me that the box of my training, and its assertion of objectivity, was limiting if my work was to contribute to social change. Over the course of time, and as I began to push the boundaries of and reconfigure that box, I began to redefine myself first as an applied researcher, and then as an advocate and sometimes an activist scholar.³

With that background I moved to the University of Arizona and Tucson in 2004. I was coming into mid-career as well as an awareness of the limitations of my academic training for helping me navigate the tensions between my “official” research contributions (those suitable for university promotion) and my growing desire to be in collaboration with and accountable to advocate and activist colleagues working in programs and policies to promote youth sexual health and well-being.⁴

For the last decade I have lived approximately sixty miles from the United States-Mexico border. In 2009, the 49th Arizona legislature passed Senate Bill 1070 (Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act, 2010), the now infamous (anti-) immigration law. It was also the time that my partner and I became parents of a teenage son. Enrique was 13, and every morning I would drive him 20 miles to school on the south side of Tucson (about one-third of the distance from our home to the U.S.-Mexico border). Listening to National Public Radio each morning driving to school, we would hear updates on the

²I want to acknowledge that only twenty years ago I was warned not to be out as a gay man in job interviews or among colleagues, and the study of “gay and lesbian youth” was believed by several of my advisors to be professionally compromising. I am indebted to the William T. Grant Foundation Faculty Scholars Award (and especially grateful for the encouragement of Karen Hein and Lonnie Sherrod at the foundation) which made legitimate an area of study that I was explicitly told would thwart my career.

³I acknowledge the tensions within our field and cultures of science regarding the role of science in the public (Guerra, Graham, & Tolan, 2011). A complete discussion of the role of the scholar in education, advocacy, and activism is beyond the scope of what is possible here (see, for example, Du Bois, 1996; Gedicks, 1996).

⁴My navigation of these tensions is a complex story. I made commitments to social justice-grounded scholarship in ways that were, I believe, risky. I did that in the context of privileges of social class and life partnership – as well as race and gender – that permitted me to take risks with respect to academic and thus financial security. As I became more engaged in advocacy-informed research I was aware that it required far more time and energy than my formal “academic” work (unless I sacrificed one or the other), and I made intentional commitment to that time in the context of my career and with my family. I acknowledge that such commitments are not possible or desirable for many. Describing the personal dimensions of the ways I navigated those tensions are beyond my goals for this article, but as we say in academic articles: further information available from author on request.

legislative session. One provision of SB1070 linked transportation of undocumented immigrants to smuggling, thereby making it a felony in Arizona to drive a car with an undocumented passenger. At that time my son was undocumented: Each morning driving him to school we would pass day border patrol agents (Tucson is a center for border patrol for the region). Later that summer the legislature passed a measure designed to strip healthcare benefits from same-sex domestic partners of state employees (which included my partner, at that time of 16 years). The following year, the state legislature passed the “Parents’ Bill of Rights” (SB 1309, 2010) particularly relevant for Society for Research on Adolescence (SRA): The law has the effect of limiting rights for self-determination for a person who is not 18 years old or older (i.e.: to give parents full rights to make health care decisions, review medical records, opt out of public instruction that the parent finds harmful, and opt in to sexuality education in schools). I had already been thinking and writing about civic engagement and rights for adolescents (Russell, 2002), and these experiences led me to writers who are theorizing about youth, sexuality, and rights in the context of the border (Gutiérrez, Hanhardt, Joseph, Licona, & Soto, 2010);⁵ these ideas inform the framework for imagining social justice in research on adolescence.

Science: Inside the Box

I begin by defining key concepts. First, I understand social justice as the ability to realize potential in society (Russell, 2015); for SRA, this is about ability of adolescents to realize their potential. Others have described social justice frameworks for human sciences as moving from a focus on the characteristics of young people to a focus on the systems and settings which guide their lives (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997). Such an approach helps shift our thinking from a focus on “risk” as the property of an adolescent, to oppression as a character of systems in which adolescents live. From such a perspective we are able to reframe the challenges and vulnerabilities that much of our research identifies for youth. For example, understandings of poverty shift from conceptualizing a young person as “being poor” or “having limited resources,” ideas which locate poverty in or with the young person, to a focus on the impact of social and cultural systems that produce social exclusion or barriers to opportunity and which result in limited resources and opportunities for some young people (Yoshikawa, 2014). A social justice approach implies some commitment to using research to promote the realization of human potential, including to effect change in the systems and settings that structure adolescents’ lives (Russell, 2015). Indeed, most of us who study adolescence do so because we believe that our research can have some effect on improving the lives of adolescents.

Second, I understand science as a system that organizes knowledge in forms of testable predictions about the world (in its dominant, positivist form), or more broadly as a systematic approach to exploration and investigation about things in the world. Science is also a way of pursuing knowledge based on that idea: It is a culture of pursuing knowledge that is based on the idea that things can be organizable and predictable. It is obvious that

⁵I am aware that this talk is fundamentally “American” in many ways. I acknowledge the arrogance of the use of “American” that erases the majority of peoples who live in the Americas when people in the United States call ourselves American. I use the language intentionally to acknowledge then ways that I have been working in and thinking about this place and my space in it.

science could be conducted with the goal of helping young people reach their full potential, and equally obvious that social justice is not a necessary goal of science. The point is that we can think more carefully about how social justice and science might be more aligned (Russell, 2015); the absence of alignment leaves out important areas of scientific inquiry and thus areas of knowledge that could contribute to social justice goals.

By way of illustration, I think of this as a disconnect between what we know, what we are able to know (that is, what we are permitted to know based on conventions and cultures of science), and what we need to know to advance the wellbeing of young people. Figure 1 presents a graphical representation of this idea. What we know is represented by a box: Even though much of what we know is exciting and transformative, it becomes part of the existing body of knowledge because it is knowable (and thus “inside the box”). There is a broader scope of what we are able to know (that to which we have access), represented by a circle which encompasses everything we know (because we had access to it) but also includes areas of knowledge that remain yet unknown. Within the unknown are areas of knowledge that remain unknown because we do not ask, we do not know how to ask, or in our asking we are in conflict with the established and dominant methods or knowledge inside the box (Alexander, 1982; Way, 1998). Consider, for example, research on children in immigrant families, the legal and ethical complexities of which have limited scholarship in this area and thus our knowledge of their experiences (Hernández, Nguyen, Casanova, Suárez-Orozco, & Saetermoe, 2013); about the historic absence of knowledge regarding LGBT health disparities because until recently most U.S. states would not include relevant questions about LGBT status on health surveys (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011); or about the skepticism regarding findings on boys’ friendship intimacy because it conflicts with prevailing notions of boyhood (Way, 2013).

Finally, there is a universe of what we need to know which lies beyond what we know, or even what we are able to know with existing methods and theories. The second circle in the figure illustrates that not everything we know is needed; that is, not everything we know will necessarily contribute to the realization of the potential of young people. There is no specific value judgement intended by pointing this out: Sometimes we conduct science for the sake of knowledge in itself. But more important in this space of what we need to know are the everyday needs of adolescents as understood from their perspective (Way, 1998; 2013), or the real-life practice and policy questions that research could address, but that remain unexplored. By way of examples, I have been asked by practitioners and policy-makers:

- What is the best approach to sexuality education that we could teach in seven hours?
- What is the one best thing we could do to improve LGBT student safety in schools?
- What is the best strategy to reduce discipline disparities in schools?

These practical questions are the things about which our research does not currently, precisely provide answers. Of course, much of our research is relevant and can be used to provide guidance. Many researchers are or would be motivated to find those answers, and our fields provide the ability to design approaches to seek answers to those specific

questions. The point is that there often is a disconnect between what we need to know to advance goals of social justice and what we have to offer as scientists.

Boxed in

Science has the potential to improve the human condition, but also the power and authority to pathologize and stigmatize young people. A social justice perspective insists that we acknowledge our part in perpetuating pathologized understandings of youth, and in creating a status quo not only in research on adolescence, but on societal understandings of the very notions of adolescence, adolescents, and teenagers. Consider that our field traces its history to Stanley Hall (1904), whose legacy of “storm and stress” influenced lasting public and scientific understandings of adolescence. Sixty five years later these ideas were ingrained in psychological understandings of adolescence:

The upheavals in character and personality are often so sweeping that the picture of the former child becomes wholly submerged in the newly emerging image of the adolescent, who... becomes as a first step, hungrier, greedier, more cruel, more dirty, more inquisitive, more boastful, more egocentric, more inconsiderate than he has been before (Freud, 1969, p. 7).

My point is not that developmental challenges during adolescence are not real or legitimate (see Arnett, 1999), but that those ideas have contributed to a pathologized societal understanding of adolescents and adolescence (Lesko, 2001) which are further complicated or magnified across race and ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, and other categories of inequality.

For a contemporary example of the ways that research may be used in ways that contribute to a pathologizing view of adolescence, I point to studies of the adolescent brain. In the last decade there have been dramatic advances in our understanding of neurological and cognitive changes that have implications for social, behavioral, and interpersonal development during adolescence (e.g., Casey, Jones & Somerville, 2001). Yet this research has been misused and misinterpreted. Individual scientists or fields cannot control the way our research gets taken up and framed by others, but sometimes we contribute to pathologizing adolescence. For example, the idea of “starting an engine without yet having a skilled driver behind the wheel” (Payne, 2012, p. 5) has gotten wildly misused: I have heard adult professionals and volunteers that work with young people refer to “the new brain research”, saying that youth “can’t make decisions,” or that they “don’t have self-control.”⁶ My point is not to ignore the developmental distinctiveness of adolescent brain development and implications for decision-making and self-regulation. Yet our responsibility should be to promote an understanding of adolescent brain development that does not contribute to pathologized views of adolescence. (This example is further complicated because it is a good example of the translation of complex research results in ways that resonate with the general public. However, the very reason it resonates is because it stabilizes deeply held

⁶A specific compelling personal example comes from my experience as an expert witness for a legal case in which a school district had prohibited the formation of a Gay-Straight Alliance club in a high school. An “expert” witness for the school district opined that “The adolescent brain is physiologically geared for impulsiveness and risk-taking and... to put teens in a ‘support club’ atmosphere... is the worst case scenario of the blind leading the blind.” (Gonzalez v. School Board of Okeechobee County, 2008)

beliefs about the unruly, out-of-control teen.) If we follow the principal described above – asking not only about the characteristics of individual adolescents but also about the systems and setting that shape opportunities in adolescence – we could come to a different way to express these ideas about the adolescent brain. When we say “Starting an engine without yet having a skilled driver behind the wheel...” we would follow up by asking: “...but are there street signs, visible pavement markings, guardrails, and public drivers’ education? And do you have to prove citizenship to get a driver’s license?” Each of these represents real-life characteristics of the settings in which youth grow up – their access to economic and resource infrastructure (Mohn, 2012; White, 2015) as well as the sociopolitical context (National Immigration Law Center, 2008) that create vulnerabilities for any adolescent who might wish to drive an automobile.

Boxed Out

In addition to the potential to pathologize and stigmatize young people, cultures of power within science create systems of dominance and believed differential rigor and value across fields of research. The standard methods (“gold standards”) often invisibilize and marginalize both young people as well as some fields or areas of study. First, some young people remain invisible, or are made invisible by our scientific questions and methods. There are several obvious and known examples: Studies based on school samples, for example, leave out young people that are absent from the school setting, many of whom have been “pushed out” (Tuck, 2012) or have compelling family or economic reasons to work rather than attend schools (Rumberger, 2013).

For multiple reasons, some adolescents are missing from our base of knowledge. Yet the problem is further complicated because there are many young people whose identities and experiences are invisible because we simply never ask or acknowledge them. An example in the United States is the federal approach to questions about race and ethnicity (which specify categories for ethnicity and race; National Institutes of Health, 2001). In a recent study we discovered that many youth were leaving the questions blank because, understanding themselves to be “Mexican” or “Mexican American”, they did not see themselves reflected in the ethnicity (“Hispanic or Latino/not”) or race (“American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or White”) categories. This is an example of what Barbara Rogoff (2003) calls the “box problem” (p. 77): Scientific standards and practices make some youth invisible. But in other cases, we simply never ask: For decades we have had no health disparities for LGB young people because we have not had the will (until recently) to include them in our surveys (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).

Second, we marginalize some forms of knowledge and/or some fields of study (see an example of broad discussion of these issues in a special issue of the *Educational Researcher*, Southerland, Gadsden, & Herrington, 2014). By this I mean that some types of research are regarded as more valid than others, with the result that key areas of knowledge are made marginal. A current example is the teenage pregnancy prevention program funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which identifies “evidence-based” programs eligible for federal funding. Programs are defined as meeting the criteria for being

evidence-based if evaluations have documented pregnancy prevention, reduction in sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or rates of sexual risk behaviors (i.e., sexual activity, contraceptive use, or number of partners). Such notions of evidence are constrained by a narrow understanding of scientific perspectives, epistemologies, and values – specifically, values that elevate treatment-control design as the “gold standard” (see Schalet, et al., 2014, for an in-depth discussion). Yet statistical difference in behavior change in a treatment group is only one form of knowledge. Decades of research that documents the ways that race, class, gender, and sexuality stereotypes undermine youth well-being take different approaches to arriving at evidence (Schalet et al., 2014). Should we be surprised that young people in a treatment group are less sexually active six months later if the program emphasizes wishfully outdated gender stereotypes, classism or blatant heteronormativity (Schroeder, Hauser, & Rodriguez, 2012)? This example shows that attention to one version of evidence or one form of science leaves us vulnerable to the potential to pathologize or stigmatize some young people. It is important to underscore that although this has not been the intent of our science – or of our policies – it is a consequence of the culture of science that we have created.

Using Science for Social Justice

Thus, science has the potential to challenge or to reinforce social norms and cultural frameworks for understanding adolescence. This is a complex dilemma because everything in our field may be contested: It would be difficult to identify something in the field of research on adolescence that is NOT a topic about which we have deep social anxieties (education, health, sexuality, achievement, opportunity...). How can we use science and its cultural power in a way that could be transformative? Could we take the box (in Figure 1) – the box of what we know – and invert it, spin it, turn it, change its shape or break it apart or have it change colors? The point is to challenge our own scientific constraints in order to use science for stewardship, rather than presuming the expertise that “science” represents, and at the same time protecting against the potential that it might be used to stabilize comfortable tropes of the adolescent, which often pathologize adolescence. In everything we do can we embed responsibility for constantly questioning the ways that science operates as a form of cultural dominance? And how may we reconcile our scholarly culture and engage in this kind of questioning?

To provide a framework for thinking in these ways I draw from a number of theories and concepts. SRA is an interdisciplinary society, yet the scope of SRA typically remains within boundaries of social-behavioral health epistemologies with less representation of cultural, historical, critical or humanistic inquiries in the lives of young people. Even the language of adolescence is a marker for a specific epistemological understanding the 2nd decade of life (see Lesko, 2001 for a critique of the notion of “adolescence”). Regarding “theory”, in our field we often modify theory with “scientific” (that is, we presume we are talking about “scientific theory” when we use the word “theory”), which implies verification and falsification of empirical evidence. Yet in its broadest definition a theory is a system of ideas to use to explain something in the world. In fact, in many fields the idea of theory is to describe that which is immeasurable. Theory also articulates epistemological method and positioning. The discussion below is based in this broader understanding of theory.

I draw from three key theoretical concepts to frame three arguments about the potential for social justice in research on adolescence. First, borderlands is a theoretical space of contestation and relation of rejecting binaries and of accepting “both-and” thinking (Anzaldúa, 1999). Thinking in terms of borderlands helps us critically examine our position as experts. Second, theories of queer are based in contested notions of gender and sexuality and the ways that gender, sexual or other identities are defined or regulated in terms of normativities, that is, what is “deviant” or what is “normal” (Sedgwick, 1990). A queer perspective helps us analyze the normalizing potential of our work, or the ways that our work may stabilize norms and meanings that leave some young people at the margins. Third, I describe urgency as a way to think about a force or impulse that compels or constrains us and the quality or condition of requiring action (Scanlon, 1975). Thinking in terms of urgency helps us analyze and value a balance of dimensions of scientific rigor.

Youth and Borderlands

I use borderlands to consider our relation to science in light of power, and the resulting implications for our motives, methods, measures and interpretations. Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) described borderlands theory as rooted in the dynamics of the United States-Mexico border, a contested place that is an instantiation of moments, spaces or opportunities for awareness and resistance to one’s oppression. Borderlands are places defined by relation. The U.S.—Mexico border is not a line in the ground: It is a space that demands understanding and is the instantiation of cultural tension. Thinking in this way, the border becomes a space defined by relationship, not by division: As multidimensional sites of negotiation, contestation and struggle (Brambilla, 2012).⁷

Be/tween—I introduce here the idea of be/tween as a strategy for rhetorical playfulness with a number of intersecting ideas relevant to my point about adolescence as a borderland. It resonates as a reference to youth for several reasons. First, it offers a play on “tween”, that hip (consumer-based) term that emerged in the early 1990s for the new youth cultural period (although I acknowledge discomfort with the gendered, consumer meaning that has become the meaning of tween; see Cook & Kaiser, 2004). It refers to “between”-ness – to change, development, or becoming. At the same time, the “be” represents “be”-ingness, the notion of already being and existing in the world. We hold these values in our study of adolescence: We believe both in the beingness (the here-and-now) of young people because we have a stake in their development⁸ and potential. Be/tween can also be a window on our positions of power as scholars: We may understand ourselves as positioned between our profession, careers and work, and the lives of young people. As such, be/tween helps us think about and question the ways that our work could reach out and make a material difference in the systems, programs, and policies that shape adolescents’ lives.

⁷I have never liked the SRA logo, yet upon reflection I find it interesting that logo represents and demands us to consider the relationship between the two halves. It implies adolescence as a border, a time of opposites, but in that opposition, presumably, potential.

⁸Like “adolescence” it is important to acknowledge that our use and meaning of “development” is contested in many fields of scholarship because of the ways that it presumes (and preserves) normative understandings of childhood that position children and youth as victims, or as not-yet-adults (Lesko, 2001).

Thus, the first strategy to realize the use of science for the potential of social justice is to be skeptical of our expertise – to imagine ourselves as on and navigating borders (see Licona, 2005).⁹ The challenge becomes how and where to begin, given that we are constrained by training and our methods. How can we question our own authority as scholars (particularly given how hard we work, for example, in graduate education to become competent and expert)?

A personal example may help illustrate this idea of questioning our expertise and authority. With my colleague Arnold Grossman I have been conducting a prospective study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) youth for several years (see Baams, Grossman, & Russell, 2015). Our recruitment criteria were that the young people be between the ages of 15 and 21, and that they be LGBTQ. After the first data collection we discovered more than five percent of the young people identified as heterosexual. My reaction was that they should not be in our study, thinking that they represented “error” (or youth whose participation was disingenuous and motivated by the participant payments), and that they should be excluded from follow-up. The (younger) community-based project leader who had gotten to know many of the youth in our study cautioned (educated) me, saying “Stephen, just wait, give it a little time.” Taking a deeper look (Russell, Fish, Ioverno, & Grossman, 2015), more than one-third of those young people that identify as heterosexual report sexual identity milestones (that is, they affirmed an age of first awareness of, first labeling of, or first disclosing their LGBTQ identities; see Drasin, et al., 2008), and one in five reported experiences of LGBTQ minority stress including concerns about coming out (Rosario, Rotheram-Borus, & Reid, 1996). I am guilty of not imagining the possibility of heteroqueer; of heterosexuality within and as part of LGBTQ; and of jumping to the conclusion that young people were participating in order to receive the participant incentive payment rather than considering the possibilities that they may be both “straight” and LGBTQ. It was a time when I, as an “expert,” needed to put my expertise on the backburner, listen, and learn.

What I take from borderlands theory is an epistemological method of positioning, of reflexivity, and of questioning my relation to the questions and youth that I study. In this way, the theory is the method. I do not argue that we abandon the potential of science (and the scientific method), or even its authority, which I believe that we should use. Rather I am making a call for introspection and caution in our position relative to our work as scientists.

Queering Research on Adolescence

Queer theory builds upon feminist challenges to the ideas of gender is a part of a central self (Barry, 2002), and on the close examination in gay and lesbian studies of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities (Sedgwick, 1990). In this history of a contested understanding of gender and sexuality, queer theory expands a focus on the ways that gender, sexuality and identities are defined or regulated in terms of normativity (Warner, 1999). Queer disrupts the neat categories, binaries and boundaries – or borders – of the normative. What I mean by normativity is the normative or shared values or institutions that constitute social structure or social cohesion: Normativity is the state of being that which is

⁹Consider our name, which presumes a hierarchy in which we as scholars are the experts on top: Society for Research “on” Adolescence.

normal, defined by social regulation and social norms. A challenge for any field of science is that we long for and even demand categories. In social, behavioral, and developmental research we are committed to the “box problem” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 77): We want adolescents to check those boxes on our surveys. Obviously those boxes have meaning and are important in the context of our scientific methods. But if we use queer as a verb, it can mean to deconstruct, analyze and critique an object, an event, or an idea as potentially contributing to or stabilizing normativity – that is, stabilizing the norms and social regulatory possibilities that, by definition, do not serve everyone equally well.

I argue that we should queer (or challenge, disrupt) the neat categories that we think of as our science. We should challenge our methods, measures, and motives. Thus the second strategy to realize the use of science for social justice is to interrogate the ways our work may contribute to normativities, or the ways that our research may stabilize tropes of the G. Stanley Hall and Anna Freud “teen.” It is important to clarify that in drawing on queer theory I am not specifically referring to research on queer (or LGBTQ) youth.¹⁰ Rather my argument refers to challenging the ways our work might contribute to normativities, such as the way complex research on the adolescent brain might be taken up in ways that stabilize notions of reckless teens.

How do we do this? One obvious thing is to expose ourselves to different fields of knowledge – even the humanities and arts – which, frankly, we do too infrequently. We can work more closely with diverse groups of stakeholders for our research: parents, educators, clinicians, policy-makers, or youth themselves. Clearly a value for stakeholder engagement has emerged in multiple ways during the last decades in, for example, applied developmental sciences (e.g., Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000; Sherrod, 1999). I also want to suggest the method by critical race scholar Mari Matsuda who prompts us to “ask the other question” (1991): “When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’ When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where are the class interests in this?’” (Matsuda, 1991, p. 1189). When our research identifies inequalities in the lives of adolescents, we should interrogate the potential for intersecting forms of inequality (sex and gender, social class, sexuality, and other axes of difference) that may be operating to marginalize some youth, or limit their opportunities.

Returning to the example of the heterosexuals in the study of LGBTQ youth, it occurred to me to ask myself: How do race, class and gender shape the hetero-possibilities for young LGBT young people? It turns out that the heterosexuals in the study are more likely to be youth of color; they are less likely to be in college; they are more likely to be male (Russell, Fish, Ioverno, & Grossman, 2015). We can draw from other work to help us understand the ways that heteronormativity may be compelling, and LGBTQ identities may be much less

¹⁰Yet issues of social justice related to the study of LGBTQ and queer youth remain pressing. For example, on the same day that the governor of Arizona governor Brewer vetoed a bill that would have made it legal for restaurants to deny serving gay and lesbian people in the state of Arizona (SB-1062), a federal agency sent an email to a postdoctoral scholar instructing her to change the title of her funded grant to remove the language of “LGBTQ” in the title. The postdoctoral scholar changed the title of the grant to include “sexual minority” but was instructed again to change the title of the grant (then to “youth”). This is an obvious recent example of the ways that our research is regulated, and through such regulation some youth become truly invisible.

comfortable, accessible, or relevant for young people from each of these groups (a full discussion of the complex intersections of sexual identities with race, class, gender, and education is beyond the scope of this essay, but see Gates, 2010; Grov, Bimbi, Nanín, & Parsons, 2006; McCready, 2004). This example illustrates queer not only as a theory but a method or a strategy for social justice and research, leading not only to new insights, but to the potential for more full inclusion and representation of young people and their experiences through science.

Urgency

Finally I consider the notion of urgency. I define urgency as being compelled to give attention and action based on issues or conditions that influence individual well-being, in this case, of adolescents. If we can challenge our own position in relation to our science, and we can interrogate the normativities that our work might implicate, I believe we can better understand and value that which is urgent as legitimate for science. Put another way, attention to urgency is thwarted by our role as experts and by our tendency toward the normative. I argue that the third strategy to realize the use of science for social justice is to value (and even prioritize) urgency. In the special issue of *Educational Researcher*, Gutiérrez and Penuel (2014) speak of elevating relevance to practice as a dimension of rigor and educational research. I want to extend that thinking: It is not only relevance to practice that is important, but also what is urgent in the lives of young people.

Questions about the role of science in the world are always present. Too often our field gets caught up in our own self-perpetuating discussions of the uses of our work. A recent example comes from the *Child Development* special issue in “raising healthy children.” The issue represented some of the best recent scholarship, yet was frustrating to me because many of the questions raised in the issue were asked independent of a consideration of what is urgent for young people (Guerra, Graham, & Tolan, 2011; Shonkoff & Bales, 2011): How do we define the evidence base? What are the common standards for evidence? How do we validate proven strategies? What is “ready” to communicate given that science is ongoing? How do we maintain appropriate boundaries between scholarship and advocacy? I want to push these questions farther: What defines the “evidence base”, and who makes that determination? How are “proven strategies” determined, and by whom? Who decides which science is ready to communicate? Why do we think that a boundary between science and advocacy is realistic or desirable in the first place?

I acknowledge that defining urgency is complicated, and definitions may depend on who defines it, and for whom.¹¹ The urgency of science depends on how useful the resulting knowledge is for young people, how well-off adolescents will be with or without it that knowledge, and what sacrifices are involved (Scanlon, 1975). I admit being conflicted about having grants for millions of dollars when there are many adolescents that simply need help with their material needs. Yet I believe in the potential, power, and significance of science to yield answers that will address urgent concerns for the future. I believe urgency should be

¹¹Although my focus is on researchers who do this as academic or professional work, I acknowledge that there is growing interest and attention to the ways that youth themselves may define what is urgent to them, and may be/come themselves researchers of those issues (see Noguera, 2009).

understood in terms of the range of possibilities for young people to achieve well-being and full potential. We think so rigorously with regard to theory and method, regarding the tradeoffs that determine the choices we make about the quality of our work, yet we do not think with that kind of care and determination and sophistication about social justice – about identifying dimensions of justice, including urgency in our work.

I have defined urgency as a condition that requires action, so by definition urgency might call not only for education of others, but also on advocacy or even activism. I want to close by directly affirming that. Even if our participation is only in public discourse, even if the science is not fully ready (Lafazani, 2012): Science is not ever fully ready. When I was conflicted about what to say when reporters called me about my early research on LGBTQ youth (which, at the time, was a very new area of study), Gilbert Herdt, one of my early mentors said to me: “Your educated opinion is better than somebody else’s wild guess.” Because our educated opinions could matter for improving the lives of adolescents: A lot of people need to hear our opinions.

Conclusion

I believe in the role of science for public good. I believe that our research has rhetorical, cultural, political value and power. And I believe that science matters. But the critical questions are how it matters, for whom, and why. Are we concerned with the minutia of things that interest us, or things that matter materially in the lives of young people? Carolyn Laub, the founder of Gay-Straight Alliance Network, an organization dedicated to “empowering youth activists to fight homophobia and transphobia in schools” (GSA Network, 2009), has been a friend and collaborator for more than a decade. Perhaps a decade ago in a meeting together, I was sharing some exciting new research on LGBTQ youth and schools, when Carolyn stopped me and said: “Stephen, that’s super interesting but it’s not what we need to know right now.” It was such an important lesson; such a polite yet direct way to redirect me to what was urgent.

We need social justice-motivated research that takes us to the borders, so that we can be conscious of our privilege, as science. We need social justice-motivated research to queer our scholarship so that we can be conscious of the ways that science may contribute to inequalities and normativities that constrain opportunities for adolescents to reach their full potential. And we need social justice-motivated research that incorporates urgency in criteria for good science. That will be my personal agenda for the next decade.

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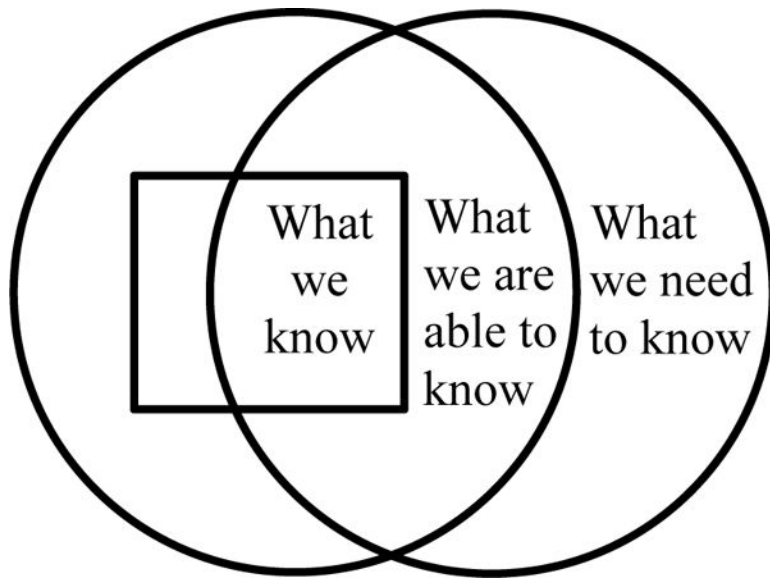


Figure 1.
Science Inside the Box

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