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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7zz8s1m7>

ISBN

978-1-4798-1337-7

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Publication Date

2023

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Living Theory: *Gender Play* and Learning to Live a Life Less Ordinary

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It is October 16, 2011 and I am standing in Washington Square Park in New York City with a small group of friends. We have gathered to join a march that has been called in support of the Occupy Wall Street protest movement. Activists first established an encampment in Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan about a month ago, and the movement has been gaining steam in recent weeks despite much of the media having initially ignored or mocked the protesters. Today's march has been planned in coordination with activists from around the world who, among other things, are marking the five-month anniversary of the 15M demonstrations in Spain. It feels like the wind is now at the back of an increasingly global protest movement, and I am beginning to feel hopeful that the political-economic regime that has reigned for my entire lifetime might be losing its grip.

But I am also at the protest because it is the weekend and I need a break from the academic work routines that have commandeered much of my life since I entered graduate school in 2005. Six years later, I am a PhD candidate who is living in New York to conduct ethnographic field work for my dissertation, which is centered on an experimental new public school that opened with much fanfare several years earlier. The school had, in my view, turned out to be a disappointment, and at this point I am grappling with how to square the good intentions of the school's sponsors, designers, and supporters with the troubling ways in which race, class, and gender hierarchies were being remade inside the school. I plan to graduate the following spring,

so I am spending most of my days trying to figure out how to transform a messy mass of ethnographic documentation into something resembling of a passable thesis. I am also applying to a handful of tenure-track jobs with the anticipation of being rejected. In other words, I am spending much of my life like most other doctoral students: immersed in the often uncertain and unsettling work of trying to learn how to become an academic.

So, it feels especially good to be outside on this day, to be doing something to try to change some of those “structures” that keep showing up as mere words on my laptop screen, to share some collective effervescence with friends and strangers – most of them young adults like me and none of them seeming to care if I have sufficient command of “the literature” – to be, in short, away from academia and work, if only for a moment. I am in this state of joyful reprieve when I see Barrie Thorne approach me and my friends, and, upon seeing her, I feel both surprise and trepidation. I should not be surprised to see Barrie since I had invited her to join us the night before while we were having dinner together. Still, somehow I did not expect Barrie to join, but now she is here, and I do not know quite how to act. Part of my disorientation has to do with the social production of age divisions and hierarchies, something that Barrie had first turned me onto several years prior. I am with a group of friends who are in their 20s and early 30s, and Barrie is about the age of my parents. Will Barrie fit in with my younger friends, and can I be at ease if Barrie is with us? This latter question gets at the trepidation I am feeling. It’s not that I do not like Barrie – quite the opposite – or because I am afraid of her – okay, maybe a little – but because at this time I still primarily associate Barrie with that other world – academia, work – from which I am trying to get a bit of a break.

Barrie is in New York for a meeting of an academic advisory board for the philanthropic initiative that is sponsoring the school I am studying, and I had made a short presentation on my research to the advisory board the day before. Barrie is also a member of my dissertation committee, a role she generously agreed to take on after my initial doctoral advisor, Barrie's spouse Peter Lyman, tragically died of brain cancer in 2007. I had first met Barrie several years prior to Peter's death when she visited Peter's research group, of which I was a member. I was barely in graduate school at the time, and my primary memory of first meeting Barrie is one of intimidation. Barrie had visited Peter's research group to help the grad students learn how to study young people's digital media practices ethnographically, and I felt overwhelmed by how much she knew and how little I did.

In subsequent years, those feelings of intimidation lessened but never vanished. They lessened in part because I had managed to learn something about the craft of doing ethnographic research, and because I had learned a lot from Barrie about the history and sociology of childhood, all of which was informing my current work. But they mostly lessened because Barrie and Peter had opened their home in Oakland to me and other grad students on numerous occasions, because I had met their children, eaten their food, and enjoyed jokes and banter with them. But, still, all of this had been in the context of work, which wasn't the same as what I was planning to do on this day with my friends. Or so I thought.

* * *

Gender Play is a remarkable work for the richness of its ethnographic descriptions and for the generativity of its analysis. The book's continued use and relevance testifies to those contributions. But *Gender Play* is also remarkable for the courage it models, a courage that is simultaneously ethical, intellectual, and political, a courage, I want to propose, that productively troubles boundaries between "a work" and "a life." Part of that courage stems from the book's treatment of the social production of gender as a legitimate and worthy subject of sociological inquiry, a stance that appears less risky today, but which was quite heterodox at the time when Barrie conducted the fieldwork and wrote the manuscript for *Gender Play*. The same can be said about the ways *Gender Play* treats young people as full and worthy social actors who deserve the attention, respect, and resources of serious social inquiry. We now have subfields dedicated to the sociology of childhood, and there is even an interdisciplinary field focused on childhood studies, but those did not yet exist, at least not in an institutionalized form, when Barrie was crafting *Gender Play*. The book, a work, helped make those scholarly worlds possible, and in doing so the book helped create a slipstream for those of us who followed in its trails to craft our own professional lives.

Even so, strong headwinds remain. One of the things that apprenticing scholars come to learn as they transform into more experienced academics is that topics of social inquiry – and, thus, expertise – are subject to innumerable instances of comparative evaluation – some of which are institutionalized, but many of which are informal – that cumulatively articulate and sustain hierarchies of academic worth. Despite the intellectual clearings made by *Gender Play* and other trailblazing works, both gender and childhood remain low in these hierarchies in the eyes of many, and these assessments inevitably have a bearing on our work and careers. That is one of

the reasons why it still takes some courage to build one's work, and thus career, around the sorts of questions and topics that Barrie has long championed. Let me provide an example from my own fieldwork.

When I was crafting my dissertation prospectus, both Barrie and another courageous scholar of approximately the same generation, Jean Lave, encouraged me to center my inquiry on the lives of the students who would be attending the new school where I was planning to conduct fieldwork. I had read Barrie's and Jean's books and was impressed with them, so it did not seem particularly novel or courageous to pursue a similar approach. But it was quite another matter to actually do that work, which in my case meant spending countless hours hanging out with 11- and 12-year-olds as they went about their daily routines and then spending countless hours more writing up every detail that I could recall. Part of that challenge will be familiar to experienced ethnographers: a lot of what goes on in the field is mundane and (seemingly) kind of boring. But I also struggled with another, and more subtle, challenge, namely the habituated tendency to discount what young people say and do as not all that important, the feeling that the serious stuff lay elsewhere, the suspicion, in other words, that this form of knowledge making was not so worthy.

I knew about these biases before I went into the field, but I did not, and probably could not, anticipate how they would surface in practice. Time and again, especially in the early months of fieldwork, I would catch myself worrying about whether it was really worthwhile for me to be documenting in great detail how, say, middle schoolers were fervently exchanging Silly Bandz rubber bracelets with each other. The practice was clearly important to the young people I was hanging out with, but wasn't the phenomenon silly, as the bracelets' name itself suggested? An account of such practices might elicit smiles or even touches of nostalgia in my adult

interlocutors, but Silly Bandz did not seem to be the stuff of serious scholarship, or so I worried. This is just one example of how the cudgel of sedimented biases can insinuate itself into the practice of conducting ethnographic fieldwork – an example of how those hierarchies of worth can be self-imposed. It was during moments like this one that I would remember the advice of Barrie and Jean, and those remembrances helped give me confidence to keep documenting and thinking about the young people’s seemingly silly practices.¹

And it wasn’t just me who was making these sorts of tacit evaluations at my field site. One of the interesting things about the school where I conducted fieldwork is that it ended up attracting a lot of other observers in addition to me: other researchers, journalists, education reformers, government officials, and many more. Ostensibly, these people were there because they cared about children, and I suspect they were sincere in this regard. Yet nobody else appeared to be practicing the approach that Barrie had advocated to me, that is, to try to understand these young people’s practices and experiences on their own terms. Instead, the other observers were focused on what they and many others considered to be the serious matter at hand, something called education, the presumed beneficiaries of which were children, understood in a more abstract and general sense. Let me provide an example of this sort of tacit valuation.

At various occasions during fieldwork, I watched other qualitative researchers diligently documenting how students responded to a particular pedagogic intervention or technique by a teacher. This was understandable because the researchers were trying to figure out if and how the school’s pedagogic innovations were effective. Fair enough. But these were the serious concerns of the adults, not the silly concerns of the students, and privileging the former had the effect of rendering youth-driven practices like the exchange of Silly Bandz either invisible or unimportant. What is more, this devaluation of young people’s experiences and perspectives

ironically thwarted the adults from realizing their serious aims. In part because the young people's experiences and perspectives were largely overlooked, many adults who were involved with the new school had difficulty understanding why their intervention, which had been designed for the presumed interests of a "digital generation," did not enthrall many of the students who had enrolled at the school. Absent such an understanding, educators were eventually pressured into resorting to rather familiar and unsettling disciplinary techniques in order to compel students' participation in the supposedly fun activities that the adults had planned for them. What is more, most of the students who were targeted by these disciplinary techniques were students of color from lower-income households, many of whom subsequently left the school. As such, a school that had been imagined as egalitarian, playful, and student-centered ended up resorting to rather raw exercises of institutionally sanctioned adult power, a process that ended up mostly reinscribing entrenched hierarchies of not just age but also racialized social class and gender. Headwinds remain.

* * *

One of the things Barrie told me over dinner the night before the protest was that I should not let people involved in the philanthropic initiative censor my work. When Barrie made this comment, I did not know what she had in mind, and I did not anticipate any such efforts, but the comment was foreboding, so it stayed with me. I thought about Barrie's comment many times as I was writing my dissertation and then turning my dissertation into a book. Over time I started to realize that I was indeed self-censoring my account. In particular, I was omitting the role that the philanthropic initiative had played in bringing the school into being as well as my involvement in

that initiative. Why? Mostly because I was afraid of aggravating influential members of the philanthropic initiative, people who had helped fund my academic career thus far and who still held considerable sway over my future. Eventually, I began to stop censoring myself, and, as it turned out, Barrie's warning proved prescient. When the book finally came out, a couple of people who held considerable power in the philanthropic initiative tried to get my press to stop promoting and distributing the book. They also backchanneled with other senior scholars in an attempt to besmirch my credibility, and they privately shamed and threatened me, including by threatening to file formal charges against me with my employer unless I agreed to accede to their demands and pressure my press to do the same.

This period was one of the most difficult ones of not just my career but also my life. I was an assistant professor at the time, and I worried about my tenure prospects and nascent professional reputation if these senior scholars continued with their discreditation campaign or followed through with their threats. I also experienced severe self-doubt, became disillusioned with academia, and considered leaving it. But throughout those travails, I managed to find some solace and confidence in learning that many of the "old-timers" who I respected the most in academia had been through similar challenges. During this difficult period, I often wondered how Barrie knew to warn me of possible backlashes to my work by those who held power over me. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that her foresight was not only prescient but also a learned quality of her feminist praxis.

As the introductory chapter of this volume describes, Barrie's political and intellectual work has always been informed by her life and vice versa. Among other things, Barrie's journey as a

scholar has been shaped by the complex challenges of growing up in conservative Utah and eventually disentangling herself from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. It is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on what that sort of disentanglement entails. Leaving a home and a church is not as simple as making a proclamation about what you do and do not believe. It involves a willingness to learn firsthand how power operates in the most intimate and personal of ways, and it involves the necessity of nurturing new intimacies and of fostering new communities.

Much of the feminist intellectual and political work that Barrie has done throughout her career has been in this vein: making new worlds possible by working against the grain with others, often off the page and behind the scenes. She has repeatedly fought to make space in academic institutions for gender studies, for childhood studies, and for other lines of scholarship that challenge entrenched orthodoxies and hierarchies. She has spent countless hours mentoring and caring for students who did not feel they had a legitimate and valued place in the academy. And she has championed and defended junior colleagues whose work was deemed threatening or illegitimate by senior faculty and administrators. I was a beneficiary of this feminist praxis of Barrie's, and many others were too, more than readers of Barrie's works or even this volume are likely to know.

An example. Not long after I began work as an assistant professor, I met an accomplished full professor at my new university who shared with me a story about Barrie. The professor had learned that I had worked with Barrie when I was a graduate student, and she wanted me to know how impactful Barrie had been on her own career. She recalled how she had reached a point

during graduate school during the 1980s when she had decided to quit academia. She had been an unorthodox graduate student for her time, she recounted, and she had struggled to find a path through academia that would allow her to do the sort of feminist political and intellectual work that mattered to her. Barrie wasn't at her university or on her committee, but Barrie knew the graduate student, and when Barrie learned of the student's plans to leave academia, Barrie intervened to help the disillusioned young scholar get through the difficult period. Barrie saved the younger scholar's academic career, this now accomplished faculty member recounted. I am confident she is not the only one.

Yet this essential care work – this labor that sustains academic careers and institutions alike – remains largely overlooked and undervalued in the academy. It does not typically show up on the pages of our finished monographs except in the acknowledgements section, a place spatially and symbolically cordoned off from the manuscript's "serious" intellectual contributions. Much of it is not legible in tenure and promotion cases, and when it is accounted for its value is discounted. It does not really help scholars gain citations or win a higher standing in their fields. It does not really help with job offers. It often does not put those who practice it in good favor with institutional gatekeepers. It does not, in short, really help the careers of those who perform it, and, if anything, it often hinders career success, as conventionally defined and celebrated in the academy.

The longer I spend in academia, the more fortunate I feel to have found Barrie and a few other especially generous and caring mentors when I was in graduate school. My experience, I have come to learn, was not the norm. Too many of my friends and colleagues who pursued a PhD did

not feel supported by their advisors and committee members, or they felt supported in highly conditional ways, ways that often depended on their ability to help their mentors advance their own projects and careers. That such abuses exist in academia is hardly news. And I certainly do not want to suggest that variations in mentorship practices can be reduced to an individual's ethics. But the endurance of such patterns of neglect and abuse does point towards some of the problems that can arise when theory and practice are separated, when a work and a life are treated as distinct entities, when works are valorized and the care work that made those works possible is ignored or demeaned.

There is a nice moment in Sarah Ahmed's (2006) book *Queer Phenomenology* when Ahmed revisits Husserl's reflections on his writing table, a concrete place where Husserl's theories were seemingly made. Ahmed uses Husserl's reflections to queer the phenomenological notion of "the background" and to ask about all the concealed work, much of it domestic, that had to take place in order for Husserl's theories to arrive on the page. To quote Ahmed, "We can think... of the background not simply in terms of what is around what we face, as the 'dimly perceived,' but as produced by acts of relegation: some things are relegated to the background in order to sustain a certain direction" (Ahmed 2006, 31). Ahmed is drawing on a long history of feminist scholarship on the gendered politics of housework and of care labor more generally. But she is also drawing attention to how so many of our prized theorists tend to relegate to the background much of the work that made their work possible. Put differently, they relegate this necessary work to that vast remainder of activity that we often call life.

Nearly 40 years before Ahmed, the feminist artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles made a similar observation about the self-proclaimed revolutionary character of much avant-garde art. In a work titled, *MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART, 1969! Proposal for an exhibition: 'CARE'*, Ukeles wrote (as quoted in Lippard 1979:220-21):

Two basic systems: *Development and Maintenance*.

The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?

Development: pure individual creation; the new; change; progress; advance; excitement; flight or fleeing.

Maintenance: Keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight.

Development and maintenance, two systems repeatedly divided but integrally constituted, the former routinely valorized, the latter regularly denigrated. These feminist critiques have been with us for some time, and more recently they have even become fashionable in parts of the social sciences. Yet too often, it seems to me, the insight of the theory does not circle back to account for the care work that made the insight possible. What would it mean to not just make theoretical claims and to win acclaim for doing so but also to live by and for those claims? What

would it mean to produce and inhabit a living and livable theory? These are questions of a feminist praxis, questions with answers that predate care becoming an intellectual fashion, questions with answers that Barrie has long practiced and modeled in her work and in her life.

* * *

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Caption: Barrie and Christo at a march for Occupy Wall Street, October 2011, New York City.

My misgivings about having invited Barrie to join my friends and me at the Occupy Wall Street protest proved to be misplaced. My friends, it turned out, felt perfectly at ease around Barrie, Barrie seemed perfectly at ease around them, and soon I too began to relax. Those dogged divisions of age and role and of work and life did not seem to matter in this case. This was not an instance of “borderwork” (Thorne 1993, 64-88), in which the temporary crossing of divisions has the effect of firming up the boundaries. Rather, it was a moment of genuine conviviality. Yes, Barrie was still in a position of authority over me. Yes, Barrie would be one of four people who in a few months’ time would decide if I was fit to become a PhD. Yes, Barrie was in the process of writing me letters of recommendation for jobs. I would be lying if I were to say that those power relations did not weigh on me, did not make me worry a bit about doing something stupid or off putting in Barrie’s eyes. But I did not worry that much, as much as I could have, as much as I would have if most other senior colleagues had been the ones to join me and my friends on that day. I did not worry that much because I had come to trust that Barrie cared about me and my future, kindly and unselfishly, and without a tacit expectation of fealty or payback. I had

come to trust that she cared about me even though there was little I could do to help her advance her career, even though I was not in sociology or gender studies, and even though I was not in a position to become her intellectual acolyte or proselytizer. I trusted that she cared because that is what she had demonstrated in her interactions with me and in her writing, because that is how she had lived her theory and theorized lives.

Since becoming a professor, I have often thought about how I can repay the debts I owe to the advisors and mentors who helped me get through graduate school while also encouraging me to stay true to what I thought mattered. It is a debt that cannot be repaid, not even by volumes such as this one. And even if it were somehow possible to settle these accounts, I doubt that Barrie and the other mentors who cared for me in selfless ways would want a return on their investments. The only way I know to pay tribute to these generous and caring acts is by trying to bring a similar praxis to my own relations with graduate students and others over whom I hold some power. In that regard, perhaps I am an acolyte of Barrie's after all.

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Notes

¹ As it turns out, the practice of middle schoolers exchanging Silly Bandz is a serious matter, at least if you care about how gift exchange establishes and sustains social relations or how the wearing of such gifts displays social hierarchies, which is why the young people cared so much about the practice.