

Joanie: A Reflective Elegy

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Abstract: This work examines how a personal relationship influenced my professional positionality as a researcher interested in social connections, discussing how experience influences positionality of the researcher. An examination of positionality informs equitable and person-centered practice and research. My experiences with my chosen family—and a particular friendship—informs the way I approach my practice, my research, and my life.

Keywords: deadnaming, kithship, person-centered research, positionality, transgender

Traditionally, family has been defined through bonds of blood, creating an intrinsic and often intractable sharing of a “mutuality of being” (Carsten, 2013, p. 245). As a researcher, I use narrative to capture perceptions of “family,” which is an evolving and fluid concept. Traditionally, family was defined as “kin”—persons, related by blood or marriage—or “fictive kin”—supplemental, non-biological kin who are provided through relationships with kin (Ibsen & Klobus, 1972; Spruill et al., 2014). Kin is one’s family of chance.

Family is more, though. I believe that “family” is individually defined and dependent upon the purposeful curation of social bonds that extend throughout the life course and beyond. These non-familial social bonds—what I call “kith”—is one’s family of choice. Kithships are curated through time and ties and move beyond the kin and fictive kin that are provided by others. Kith relationships are one’s own unique creations (English, 2016).

Positionality is a fundamental driver of my research. Positionality is framed by the social context of one’s experiences, one’s interpersonal relationships, and one’s social environment. One’s positionality is a product of life experiences that influence attitudes, perceptions, and expectations regarding the self and others. The examination of one’s positionality is fundamental for equitable and person-centered work, whether as researcher or practitioner. It challenges epistemological assumptions, increases awareness of bias, promotes culturally humble practice, and honors the lived experience of ourselves and others (Glesne, 2016; Holmes, 2020; Secules et al., 2021). My positionality directly affects my decisions of practice and research. It is ever-evolving and unique to the individual, creating a distinct and dynamic vantage point to the broader social world (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016; Dovidio & Fiske, 2012; English & Flaherty, 2019).

I have never experienced mutuality through the bonds of direct kin. As a child, I was repeatedly abused and abandoned, losing connection to my parents and my sister. I have never felt the ties of blood and have, instead, spent time and energy creating connections with other persons who lacked traditional familial relationships, finding a mutuality often based on the common experiences of loss and grief. The non-traditional bonds I have forged with my “kith” extend space and place and I have been made more whole by this family of choice—despite the family of chance to which I was born. Over time, my circle of “kith” expanded, including persons who were often considered “other” by their own families of chance because of sexual expression or identification as a gender minority. As I became an adult, my awareness of this became much

keener, and I deeply wanted to understand more about how families of choice can offset the pain often experienced by family estrangement. This extends to my research, which often focuses on the importance of non-traditional social ties for marginalized persons throughout the lifespan, including after death.

If the personal becomes political, then my friendship with Joanie is the reason I gravitated toward advocating for the rights of persons who are marginalized by the social attitudes, perceptions, and expectations of others. The active process of building one's family of choice agentially promotes resilience, and I work to learn more about the experience of aging among LGBTQ+ persons who are disconnected from families of chance—the families to which persons were born. My positionality has evolved, and my viewpoint includes my experiences with both kin and kith. I believe that non-familial relationships have the capacity to protect and repair. This viewpoint drives my work... because Joanie is dead, and life is... less.

I first met Joanie when my mother reappeared and moved me to a dusty and desolate town on the edge of the desert in the southwestern corner of the United States. We were in high school where Joanie, who was then called John, was the captain of the football team and the class president. They were also part of the Drama Club and brought a level of acceptance to the geeky theatre kids simply by hanging out and occasionally stepping on stage. I spent a lot of time building sets and stringing lights with them. In between performances of one-act plays and passé high school musicals, John taught me how to ride a motorcycle and how to make an entrance, how to hold both my liquor and my ground. One day, shortly after graduation, John hopped on a motorcycle, pointed west, and didn't stop until they made it to the coast of California.

Time passed as time does... and I didn't see them for a couple of decades, during which John had carved out a life, created a family of choice, embraced the pronouns of *them* and *they*, and become known as Joanie... who, twenty years on, I recognized immediately. When Joanie walked into our high school class reunion, I instantly knew them... the laugh, the smile, the verbal marksmanship. I spent the night watching them hold court among the astounded former high schoolers, many of whom asked questions about the physical "change" in Joanie while they huddled in corners, grasping their morals and cash-bar drinks. The collection of reunited high school acquaintances voted Joanie "most changed." As for me, I was folded into Joanie's California family, the one they had chosen and curated over time. Our bonds, once forged in the darkened theatre wings of the Fine Arts building, continued.

I learned that Joanie's road was bumpy and they had spent a lot of time hating the body to which they had been born. They covered their body with the heaviness of flesh and fabric. It weakened Joanie's soul and heart, but, over time and bit by bit, Joanie shed that heaviness and one day, stood before us all, resplendently decked out in leather and lace. We smiled and sang and celebrated our friendship and the fruition of the family we began to create a few decades earlier. Like me, Joanie experienced a disconnection with kin—the family of chance, to which one is born. Like me, Joanie experienced frail, fractured, and fragmented relationships with those who had neglected and rejected the person they were. Both of us created circles of "kithships," built upon accepting and relationships that offset the absence of kin and provided opportunities to not only survive, but to thrive. I loved Joanie's kith, and I was happy to be included among them.

For a while, all seemed well with the ground we held, but then, too soon, Joanie died, their heart too weak to carry any more of the weight of the world.

Someone... I don't know who... sent Joanie back to that dusty town, away from Joanie's kith and back to kin, who made arrangements, wrote obituaries, and had a deadname carved into stone, trying to force us all to remember Joanie as John. The weight of the world became heavy, again.

Perhaps, long-standing bias influenced Joanie's kin. Non-affirming behaviors by kin towards transgender persons are associated with a desire to shame and punish. Sometimes, this active denial of affirmation extends across one's lifetime and, often, beyond (Fae, 2018; Orel, 2017). Regardless, this post-mortem deadnaming was a result of what Dovidio and Fiske (2012) described as an extension of stigmatization. Misgendering and deadnaming transgender persons is a form of disrespect and control. Wood et al. (2019) reported the prevalence of this practice, which dehumanizes and "others" transgender persons, in life and after death. This active negation of the self intentionally perpetuates the structural barriers faced by persons who live sexual lives outside of a binary, delegitimizing and marginalizing persons across the lifespan and beyond (Rodríguez-Madera et al., 2017; Vance, 2018; Wood et al., 2019). As VanderSchans (2016) noted: "The notion of finding oneself and representing one's true identity through a name is a very large part of transitioning one's gender identity, but not any name will do, rather each individual is searching for a 'true' name" (para. 1). Honoring one's identity, one's self, one's name honors the narrative of a life, which is fundamental for persons who are members of gender minorities, especially those who experience multiple intersectionalities (de Vries & Sojka, 2020).

VanderSchans (2016) explained that the name chosen by a transgender person represents a confident and true reflection of the self. The transgender community is often misgendered, misidentified, misrepresented, and misinterpreted (Orel, 2017). While "John" is carved in the cold stone, "Joanie" is written again and again in the warm sand of the beaches. Joanie's family of choice remains in Cali, celebrating their life with champagne and sunsets, far from the dust of the desert southwest.

It's hard becoming oneself. Hard when people force others into spaces where persons cannot thrive. It's hard when people force us back, especially after death. Joanie was, of course, more than a name, but one's name is a fundamental part of one's identity, one's self, and how one relates to others.

Carsten (2013) proposed that kin can either *thicken* or *thin* relatedness with others. One's viewpoint depends on where one's position lies. My work has revealed the relationship between agency and resilience. "Kithship" provides a way to actively build trusting relationships in supportive spaces. I propose that the creation of one's kith is an ongoing process of thickening, the intentional creation of ties to persons who love, respect, and desire to know us as we are (English, 2016). I know this because we are a chosen family familiar with a chosen name—and we, Joanie's kith—continue to look westward, tracing their name in the sand, and remembering that Joanie is dead, but because of them, life is... more.

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