

Teaching Tool for Queering Kinship: Biopolitics, the Death Function, and Transcendent Capacity

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We've created this teaching tool to support educators in using [the article by Ari S. Gzesh](#) in their classes. The teaching tool includes questions for reflection and discussion, coupled with comments from the author, to encourage engagement with the theory. Educators can share the author's comments with students directly, or they can use the comments to inform their contributions to the discussion with students. The teaching tool is appropriate for a wide range of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, gender studies, political studies, and social work, among others.

Preparation

Have students read the article in advance, and encourage them to consider questions for reflection:

- How does the article align with or diverge from your understanding of family and kinship? What new insights about family and kinship are you considering after reading the article?
- The author uses the example of queer elders supporting youth in accessing gender-affirming care as a form of navigational capacity. What other examples of navigational capacity come to mind? Think about various stages of life and development (e.g., employment, parenthood, aging, etc.).
- Consider the significance of the theory of Transcendent Capacity for your discipline. How might this theory be applicable? What might this theory help to accomplish?

Author Comments: Consider the following example of navigational capacity. Dev relocates to a new city, and needs to find new medical providers. As a transman, he feels anxious about ensuring continued access to hormone assisted therapy, and about reproductive healthcare. Dev posts in a local trans-affirming Facebook page for suggestions, and finds a primary care provider who not only continues to prescribe his hormones, but also never misgenders him, which is especially important when he is getting gynecological check-ups.

Discussion

Create space for in-class discussion using these prompts as guidelines for small or large groups:

- What new insights about family or kinship are you pondering after reading this article?
- Why might it be important for research to seek out means of resistance and persistence by SGM, instead of just focusing on risk factors and behaviors?
- What are some current examples of how the death function puts SGM at risk? Think about recent legislative and policy initiatives, as well as common practices in health care, child welfare, and judicial systems.
- What examples of navigational capacity did you identify in your individual reflection? Consider how those might connect to the examples of the death function identified in your group discussion.
- What changes might reduce unjust gatekeeping by service providers and increase support for SGM?

Author Comments: In my role as a clinician, I provided crisis stabilization and community-based therapy to system-involved young people. I bore witness to many examples of the death function operating against SGM youth, which played out in adverse mental and physical health. SGM youth experience heightened levels of precarious housing and unemployment, sexual exploitation, STI/HIV diagnosis, arrest, overdose, assault, and suicidality.

Lack of cultural competence and gender-affirming care by service providers exacerbated these realities. For instance, many transitional housing programs operate on gender binaries, while trans youth are significantly more likely to experience homelessness than their cisheterosexual peers. If a young transwoman does not feel safe being housed in a shelter (because she would often be forced to be in a men's shelter, aligning with her sex assigned at birth instead of her gender identity), then she may need to resort to illicit economies to procure safety. Many transwomen turn to survival sex work – the transactional exchange of sex for food, shelter, hormones, or other basic needs – which may in turn increase vulnerability to STI/HIV, assault, or arrest.

Research, policy, and practice must better attend to recognizing not only the ways the death function exacerbates vulnerability of SGM youth, but also how Transcendent Capacity functions in terms of resistance and resilience. Queer communities support one another when systems fail to do so. Direct service providers are positioned to heal the harm enacted by unjust gatekeeping, and strengths-based theoretical frameworks are necessary in recognizing best practices already extant in communities. By bolstering informal efforts already in place, we can work to alleviate health disparities for SGM, in partnership with those who are most impacted by these interventions.

Debrief and Integration

As a follow-up to the in-class discussion, have students write a short post for a class forum. Encourage students to consider the following questions as optional prompts for their post:

- How did your perspective on family and kinship change as a result of the reading, reflection, and class discussion?
- What are the potential implications of the theoretical framework “Transcendent Capacity” for research, policy, and/or practice?
- How does this commentary build upon or connect to other readings we’ve done in the course or readings you’ve done in other courses?

Author Comments: Many have acknowledged that it is easier to build strong youth than to repair broken adults. Throughout a decade of direct service work, I’ve sought to leverage experiences of co-care and interdependence, an approach contrasting the conventional emphasis on independence as a measure of success; the latter obscures relational aspects of wellbeing, and misses opportunities for reparative influences through collective support systems. For marginalized youth, having a single caring adult is among the greatest protective factors to attenuate compounded traumatization. In the queer community, elders often occupy a parental role, particularly for youth who have experienced ruptures from family of origin. In so doing, queer elders can transmit Transcendent Capacity, thereby instilling hope for the future.

References

Gzesh, Sarah, E. 2022. “Queering Kinship: Biopolitics, the Death Function, and Transcendent Capacity.” *NEOS* 14 (2).

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To cite this article: Bozak, Chloe and Ari S. Gzesh. 2022. “Teaching Tool for Queering Kinship: Biopolitics, the Death Function, and Transcendent Capacity.” *NEOS* 14 (2).

To link this article: <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol14iss2fall22/bozak-gzesh>