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## Gender and Social Justice: A Conversation with Dr. CJ Pascoe

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### Abstract

The following is an interview with C.J. Pascoe.

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## **Gender and Social Justice: A Conversation with Dr. CJ Pascoe**

Interview Conducted by Andres Lazaro Lopez

**JCTP: Can you think of the salient experience that guided you to social justice work?**

**Pascoe:** I'm probably going to have an answer that's not your usual academic answer - I was raised as an evangelical Christian. As a child, I got steeped in the teachings of Jesus, which I think I might have had a slightly different understanding of than a lot of people in that particular faith tradition. What I took from them was a social justice message that we should act like Jesus and make the world a better place. I was this odd little child who was embracing what I now know was liberation theology without knowing it, and I really felt different than a lot of the kids at my church because I was picking up on these messages. I remember even as a young child being really invested in social causes.

We had to do a report in 5th grade on somebody from history, and I did a report on Elizabeth Cady Stanton. I chose an early feminist and was just totally on fire for that. Then they were going to build a prison in my town, and I went to some protest about not building prisons at all because they're bad for people. Even as this little kid I was like this nutty little activist, although some of my activism was around conservative causes.

When I went to college and started taking political philosophy classes, I started to get a language around social justice and a social scientific, social justice lens replaced a more religious one and that made more sense to me. That's when I learned about liberation theology. I was like, "Oh, that's what I was thinking about that whole time."

When I took my first sociology class, "Women and Intellectual Work" this light shone down from the heavens like "Ta-da! Right, here, here is where you want to be." This is how you can combine some sort of rigorous social-scientific analysis with a passion for social justice and analyze it in a particular way such that you can know things about inequality and, by knowing those things you can perhaps make a difference in people's lives. I had a very strange path; I don't think it's traditional.

**JCTP: How would you describe the current state of gender studies?**

**Pascoe:** Well, I think it's an exciting time. I think that at least within sociology, we're being taken seriously, which is nice. If you're doing an analysis on gender inequality you can get published, so that's good. We (sociology) are starting to incorporate the insights of queer theory, which is to my mind even more exciting – looking at the ways that gender and sexuality are mutuality constitutive and looking to see how we can have this dialogue between primarily humanities-based queer-theoretical traditions and category based social-scientific traditions, which don't always speak well to each other. But I think that bringing queer theory to bear on social scientific evidence leads us in exciting directions.

I think Jane Ward is doing that; Tey Meadow is doing that. I've tried to do a little bit of it, I wouldn't say as successfully as those two have. I think that very specific interdisciplinary work, where we can recognize that there are these disciplinary traditions and where these disciplinary traditions get us stuck, and then reach beyond them. That's a really exciting place to be because I often think the most exciting work is done on the margins. I think right now the challenge is for those of us who are doing that kind of work to figure out a way to make queer theory traditions legible to the more traditional sociologist. Why is it important to reach into this other intellectual tradition to shed light on social scientific evidence? How do we flesh out that language in a way that make sense to sociologists? And that's not always an easy thing to do, but I think it's happening, and it's exciting.

I remember when I was doing my dissertation and this amazing new scholar came to Berkley, her name was Dawne Moon, and she had just graduated with a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. It's always that exciting moment when this cool new young scholar, who wears Doc Martens and swears, comes to your department. I went in to meet her, and I was so excited and I was telling her all about my dissertation. She looked at me and she said, "So have you heard of queer theory?" I said, "No." Then she told me all these things to read, which I did, and then I went back to my advisor who is one of my most favorite people in the whole world and she looked at me and said, "Okay." She gave me the permission to run with it even though it wasn't hers, and it was a cool moment to have my advisor, who is a symbolic interactionist<sup>1</sup>, say, "All right. Let's see what you can do with this. It's not mine, but you can do this."

JCTP: **In the last 10 years, what changes, both good and bad have you witnessed in social justice work around gender issues?**

Pascoe: Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA)<sup>2</sup> are in every single state in the country. Ten years ago, I was finishing up the research for *Dude You're a Fag*, and GSAs were still a pretty new thing and a lot of schools didn't have them. I would give talks on the research and say, "This many states have protection for kids based on sexual identity. This many States have protection for kids based on gender expression and this many States have GSAs." I remember as I kept giving those talks every year, I'd have to change those numbers because the number of States that offered protection or kids from gender or sexuality-based bullying went up every year. I remember the time when I gave a talk, and I stated, "All 50 States have GSAs." That was an incredible moment, and I think it was incredible for a couple of reasons. It's not like everything is great, but the number of identities that are available to young people because of these social justice movements are incredible. That's a good sign, I would say.

What's been more disappointing has been the refusal of the mainstream Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement to be responsible in terms of gender issues, instead framing rights in this very individualistic way around issues of sexual identity and to be willing to throw their genderqueer and trans siblings under the bus. We

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about symbolic interaction, see here: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbolic\\_interactionism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbolic_interactionism)

<sup>2</sup> For more information about gay/straight alliances see here: <https://www.gsanetwork.org/>

can't get this piece of legislation passed, take the Trans protections out -- this tone-deafness as if this is all about marriage. I get this is how social movements often happen. But the rights that the mainstream gay and lesbian rights movements are fighting for are these upper middle class, very urban-centered, very family-centric set of rights that I find so deeply and profoundly disturbing that basically relies on them trading gender justice for sexual justice in a way that is not okay.

JCTP: **In the next 10 years, what do you consider to be of utmost importance in bridging gender research and social justice work?**

Pascoe: I think two things need to happen. I think gender researchers need to be able to code switch. We need to be able to talk to folks in the academy and say, "These views or complex theories need to be grounded. We need to take empirically based theoretically informed research and translate it into policy language. I don't know that we always know how to do that. We can learn from efforts like the Council on Contemporary Families<sup>3</sup> or True Child<sup>4</sup>, organizations that can take academic research and translate it into very clear actionable points. As individual academics, you need to cultivate relationships with a set of folks who are in the media or activists or policy makers who you can have ongoing contact with, who you can continually give your research or other people's research to, or point them in the right direction when they need work you don't do. When reporters come to me, I have a whole list of people that I'm like, "Oh, for that information you need to go to that person." They'll contact me asking, "You know about sexuality?" I'll be like, "Well, yes. But, I don't know about prison reforms and Trans rights. That's not my field, but, I know someone who does." Doing that as academics, being able to point people to other academics who can get that kind of information and being able to speak in that language to give information to those people who are doing the reforms in a way that makes sense to them.

Secondly, we need to get involved on advisory boards, boards of experts, and non-profit boards. Often these organizations are incredibly well-intentioned, but they don't know where the research is. We keep academic research behind these paywalls. They could be proposing some plan or reform idea, and you'll be able to say, "Oh, there are five studies on that that showed that this intervention works, this one doesn't, and here's the actual problem. Let me give those to you."

JCTP: **Most people know you from your award-winning book *Dude You're a Fag*. This research gave you quite a bit of national attention. Can you tell us a little bit about how this work allowed you to advance your social justice commitments and any challenges that you might have faced?**

Pascoe: I will say that all the attention came as a huge surprise. You know that *Dude* was my dissertation, and I got a book contract for it very fast, before I had graduated. The book came out two months after I graduated. Graduate school is really hard, even when you have a good experience it's really hard. You're a student, and you're 30 years old and that doesn't feel good. I was constantly trying to prove

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<sup>3</sup> <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.truechild.org/>

myself, and then within a two month period, I went from trying to prove myself, to please all of my academic advisors to, “Oh, you’ve written a book. You’re an expert. Talk to us about this.” It was almost like this whiplash where I wasn’t sure what to do. It was a steep learning curve. I was asked very quickly to start giving talks to people who actually do the work that I was talking about. Within the first year I was asked to speak with the psych team at San Quentin State Prison -- talk about people who are in the trenches with a lot of gender policing among men who have been policed in other ways. That was a really intense moment. Looking back on it, I’m very grateful for the opportunity, but I had no idea what I was doing. I didn’t understand because as academics we weren’t necessarily trained to give one set of talks to academics and another set of talks to people who are actually doing the work and or another set of talks for policy makers.

There were four different types of talks that I ended up developing: one for high school students, another for educators or mental health workers (people who are on the ground doing the work), another for policy people and then others for academics. Realizing that I needed to develop these different genres of talks was something that came through trial and error.

Because of *Dude* and then my involvement in the Digital Youth Project<sup>5</sup>, a research group that looked at kids’ use of the media, I’ve gotten to be involved in all sorts of fun things. The Gay Straight Alliance Network was building this anti-homophobia toolkit that they could provide to schools, and I got to be on their advisory board. Here was a thing that they were getting to schools that are going to help them combat homophobia, and I got to have input into it. To me, that’s the dream. I get to take all this research I did and to have input into this thing that educators could use to make their schools more equitable places.

There have also been those more formal opportunities such as working with the research advisory board for the Lady Gaga’s Born This Way Foundation, or the True Child board of experts which is an organization that works for gender justice among all genders of young people. Then there’s also blogging which has been interesting. Early on, when I put *Dude* out, blogging was still a newer thing. I didn’t have a blog, but I was asked to guest blog a couple of times; I had no idea what I was doing. More recently, between Social Inquiry<sup>6</sup>, a blog that Jane Ward and Tey Meadow and I set up, and then Manly Musings<sup>7</sup> over at Girl w/Pen! that I write with Tristan Bridges. I find it so fun to be able to look at academic research, bring it to bear on a contemporary issue of the day and then put that discussion out there. I think it’s actually a really important form of social activism because it’s a very low-stakes way of putting academic research out there in a way that people who are not necessarily engaged in the academy can hear and interact with it and work with it in their lives.

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<sup>5</sup> That research culminated in the co-authored book *Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*. The electronic version is free here: <http://mitpress.mit.edu/books/hanging-out-messing-around-and-geeking-out>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://socialinqueery.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://thesocietypages.org/girlwpen/category/manly-musings/>

JCTP: **What advice would you give to a new professional in the field who is passionate about doing gender, social justice research work?**

Pascoe: For those of us who are interested in social justice work, who are also working in the academy, one of the things that we get to do is to think analytically about whatever it is we're looking at and whatever our particular discipline thinks of as proof or as evidence. We get to engage with that in some systematic way. I say that because lots of times, outside of the academy, I just don't have the luxury to do that. If you're actually planning some sort of action on some sort of social issue, there are a lot of other things that come into play and sitting and looking at the research and the evidence on this particular topic is not necessarily what you get to do.

In terms of advice, I would tell people coming into or people who are starting off their careers to be aware of your two hats. Be aware of what it's like to think and write disciplinarily about your topic and know when it's time to switch that hat to thinking more in terms of activism about that topic. The two sometimes overlap and sometimes they don't. I think one of the ways you become successful is code-switching in a certain sense. Know which hat you're wearing and know when you can wear both. I think it goes back to what I was saying about using the wrong language to the wrong audience. Knowing when to wear which hat and knowing that each hat is equally valuable and that sometimes they overlap, that's a skill to develop.

JCTP: **How do you feel that you've grown and changed during your time as a professor?**

Pascoe: You know what's interesting is I've become a lot more restrained in my teaching. I think as a graduate student, I felt a lot more freedom in my teaching than I do as a faculty member. Freedom to try out radical things in the classroom whether it be pedagogy or readings. As a professor, I feel more constrained by the sort of thought that no, a proper professor would do this. It could be perhaps that when I started as a professor I looked really young, and that was not the most helpful thing in the world and so my pedagogy changed a little bit because of that.

After your Ph.D. and when you have your first faculty job you're like, "Wow, okay, who did I fool to get here? Like when am I going to be talking about a paper and get it wrong?" But then in time that goes away and you're like, "Oh no, I know a lot of things. Wait this is awesome." You start to feel more comfortable in your skin like, "All right, I got this. I know some things. I'm going to share some things."

My teaching philosophy has changed in a particular way where my goal is that students be able to leave my classes being able to analyze the world around them using particular tools that sociology offers. That wasn't always my goal, but it's become much clearer that's what I want to have happened in my classes. If they forget what Durkheim said, okay fine. If they remember that there's something more going on at a football game than just cheering for a team, but that there's actually something about a football game that reflects some fundamental truths about what happens when groups of people get together,

great. If they can look around and be like, “Wow, that thing is a totem. Wow, we’re all freaking out about this. That’s some collective effervescence. Wow, I’m doing things here that I wouldn’t usually do by myself.” If they can keep those analytic tools with them, I think that makes them better world citizens, and that’s my goal. I think refining and paying attention to this notion of what my goals are as a professor has become clearer as I’ve moved from graduate student to assistant professor to almost associate professor.

JCTP: **What has been the biggest challenge for you doing social justice work and how do you sustain yourself in this work?**

Pascoe: Doing it all. It is so hard to lead a balanced life, get my research done, be a good teacher, be a good parent, be a good partner, have some time for myself as well as do social justice work. The time is the worst. Let me give you a very specific example. I just got a call the other day asking if I would help read scholarship applications for GLBTQ youth for college scholarships. And I totally want to do that, but I had to sit and look at that email for a while and be like, “When would I do this? I don’t have the time.” That’s far and away the hardest part; I just don’t have time to do it all and I’m not totally sure how to make time.

I’ve been thinking about this a lot. How could I schedule my days such that the social justice work isn’t just squeezed in, but there’s actually a part of each day or a part of each week where I decide this is the time where I do whatever thing is going to be activist work? I haven’t figured that out yet. I get very jealous of my colleagues who can do this. I don’t know if they have more time, or they need less sleep, or perhaps they’re more efficient. I have no idea, but I don’t have the time.

JCTP: **How do you sustain yourself then with all those challenges?**

Pascoe: I have a regimented life where I prioritize self-care. I do a couple of things. I get 7 hours of sleep every night. I work out five days a week. I meditate ten minutes a day, and I know that professional meditation people say that’s nothing but I don’t care. I have my ten minutes; I need them. Those are just non-negotiable things that always happen unless I’m sick or something. If I do those things in the morning, then I feel like I have a clear mind, and I can take on the day better.

I also prioritize my writing and reading. It’s a joke that my office door doesn’t open until noon. I get to the office at 9:00am and I write or work on whatever publishing projects I’m working on until 11:00am. I also don’t work nights or weekends, and I never did all through graduate school. Having a well-patterned life in which my needs are met is just key.

I also try to make time to read for pleasure, to allow myself to luxuriate in a book, academic or fiction. To take in what other scholars have said feels rejuvenating to me in an important way. There’s something important for me about books, long-form analysis versus the sort of, “We have a hypothesis we tested it, and here are our findings.” It doesn’t feed my soul in the same way.

As a regular practice, I would encourage folks to figure out what their working style is. I do have friends who write best at 10:00pm. Fine go with that; that's not me. I'm asleep. For me to have work time and non-work time was important because otherwise I love what I do so much I would do it all the time and then I wouldn't love it. 99% of the time, I would set aside night and weekends for me and my family and that was key.

JCTP: **Who are some people who inspire you and what books and scholarship do you re-visit time and time again?**

Pascoe: My biggest inspiration is obviously my advisor Barrie Thorne. She wrote a book called *Gender Play*. You would be hard-pressed to look at *Dude* without reading it as an homage to *Gender Play*. Because that's the book I grew up with academically. There's even a girl in my book who's named after a girl in *Gender Play* and they're both similar girls who are kind of tomboy girls.

I remember Barrie dealing with me when I felt so different than other sociologists. I was like, "I don't ask the same questions other people ask, I don't do the same literature that other people do. I'm like, what's wrong with me?" She would tell this story about how once she was told that she didn't do sociology. She said, "Fine, I'll do art." That was my mentorship. I was like, "Great, awesome, I'll do art then." There's a sense of freedom in that; that was a real gift. Arlie Hochschild's work was also very influential. She offers such a textured, very real presence of the ethnographer in a place that makes you feel as if you were in someone's home. That true evocative emotion was always so important to me.

Nancy Chodorow's book, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, was one of the first sociology books I ever read. I was deeply influenced by psychoanalytic theory, which I do not use now, but it grabbed me and brought me into the field in a particular way. In particular, it was the emotion and affect of the work that was incredibly important to me, and I think that is what drew me into Nancy's work.

There are some books and scholarship I re-visit on a regular basis. Obviously Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* is one. I always show my copy to my students because in the front, every time I re-read it, and I re-read it every time I teach it, I put down what I've learned. There's this whole list of terms and years in the front cover in different color pens that I show my students.

Gayle Rubin's work inspires me too. Gayle Rubin is such an amazing example of someone who has moved intellectually in this incredible way. Beginning with this structural psycho-analytic analysis of gender and equality and *The Traffic in Women* into things like, *Thinking Sex*, which is this profoundly queer theory, influenced way of thinking about sex and inequality and how we know what we know. This is so very different from what happened in *The Traffic in Women*. I think it's such a good model for all of us to reflect continually on our own theoretical practices and assumptions that guide our work and to refine those as we move through these different theoretical traditions. She so beautifully does it in such a reflective way. I think she's the greatest.



JCTP: **Is there anything else you want to add, perhaps another pearl of wisdom for young scholars or activists?**

Pascoe: I would say it's important knowing when to listen to folks who are giving good feedback and knowing when to say, "This thing I need to do. I know that you don't think I should do XY or Z, but I need to do XY and Z." Sometimes that's just an idiotic thing to do because you're getting great feedback from people, and you should listen to those people, but other times, when you need to do XYZ you're actually pushing a boundary that's important to push against. The struggle is when to know which is true. When to take the good feedback and when to stand your ground and say, "No, I need to do this thing."

I was lucky enough to have an advisor who let me do what I wanted to do and would help me pick up the pieces when I did something totally stupid. I felt a real freedom to stand my ground and learn through the years. It took me a while to figure out when I was getting good feedback and when to really listen to what I was being told. I think that's what being a young scholar is all about. If you are pushing the boundaries in your discipline, you're going to get pushback. The question is, when is that pushback great because you need to take that feedback and when is it time to break down some walls, and know that you're going to be the one to do that. To be reflective about those practices and to think about when to stand your ground and when to take the criticism is so important.

I would say the same of young activists. When I think back to when Riot Girls were doing what they were doing, it was such a precursor in so many ways of the slut walks of today, and the embracing of these labels that were thought of as negative, and embracing the sexuality of this awesome aggressive in-your-face sexuality and taking it back. The way in which that pushed back against second wave feminism so powerfully was profound. I am sure that was necessary for activists at that time. So at what point as a young activist do you say, "No, we're going to mobilize about this thing. We are going to walk through the streets as a group with 'Slut' written on our stomachs, and that's okay because it's going to work. This is going to bring attention to gender-based violence around the issues of sexuality." Versus when do you listen to more senior folks who have been doing activism for a long time who are like, "No, ten aligned reforms are the way to go. Marching the streets with 'Slut' written across you is not going to make any change. We need to do the legislative work." That's where it happens.

The question is, when do you stand your ground and do the radical act and when do you listen to people who have done something before that works? That continual reflection and checking in around your own path as an activist or a scholar is fundamental.