SAGE researchmethods cases

# Feminist Approaches to Using Other People's Words: Two Examples

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**Abstract**

This research methods case discusses how we use other people's words—often collected through interviews—when informed by feminist methodology and theory. It presents different approaches to interview material (narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and conversation analysis) and considers how these epistemological approaches create "facts" (often called ontology) from "data." We end by discussing how our use of interview material created different knowledge through the concept of onto-epistemology. We hope students will be left with an understanding of how one's own positionality always affects what one sees in material. Using feminist methods and theories (and hoping students see the difficulties in drawing a strong distinction between methods and theories), we problematize a positivist understanding of qualitative research.

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**Learning Outcomes**

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Remember that there is a problematic distinction between method and theory
- Understand that they need to reflect on the epistemological and ontological claims their method decisions make for them
- Analyze what their theoretical framework and their own subject position do to their methodological toolbox
- Evaluate the assertion that a transcribed interview is usable raw data
- Imagine an onto-epistemological analysis

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**Project Overview and Context**

In this case, we describe two different projects to demonstrate the way in which a reflexive stance toward the relationship between theory and method permeates feminist analytic approaches. With this in focus, we address the ways in which sources of inspiration (which might be theoretical and/or personal) shape what we identify as interesting in our data. The two projects we engage with in the following, on the one hand

- Dealt with bodies, materialities, medicine, and normativities;
- Used semi-structured interviews as data;
- Were conducted in interdisciplinary settings which fostered flexible approaches to empirical analysis.

On the other hand, they differed in terms of

- Their theoretical tool boxes;
- The aims and research questions of the projects—what we were focused on getting from the material;
- The relative social positionality and subjectivity of our informants to our own professional roles;
- The type of experience the interviews are asking about—lived experiences and knowledge-making practices.

The research projects described here are as follows:

1. A study of how young women with conditions labeled “variations of sex development” (aka disorders of sex development [DSD] or intersex) enacted, reinforced, resisted, and challenged normativities surrounding female embodiment. In this project, Lisa wanted to explore how norms that govern sex, sexuality, and genitals physically shape bodies through medicine and in relationships and how such norms could be reinforced and challenged. Therefore, she conducted a qualitative analysis of interviews with 23 women who in their teens had found out that they did not have uterus, were missing or had a “small” vagina, did not have two X chromosomes, and had no or non-functioning ovaries. She specifically wanted to figure out how one makes sense of one’s sexed embodiment and situation, and of medical interventions, when faced with a condition that may overturn assumptions about one’s body and expectations about one’s future. We will refer to this project as the “Female Embodiment Project.”
2. A study of the use of medical simulators as teaching tools, in a project that looked at the introduction of a gynecological simulator to Sweden. The gynecologists in charge of teaching the bimanual examination to medical students at our university had purchased an American simulator and were frustrated that it was not performing as well as they had imagined it would. They asked, among other things, why this simulator did not work in their Swedish classes but did work in the United States. Ericka was asked to figure this out, employing a combination of theoretical frameworks from human–computer interaction, feminist science studies, and gender scholarship on medicine and the female body. Ericka planned to attack this through interviews, employing discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and with video analysis of simulations. She hoped she could somehow find the answer to the conundrum if she collected the right material and successfully sifted it out of the data with appropriate analytical tools. In the following, we refer to this as the “Simulator Project.”

In each of the sections that follows, we will engage with these two projects to show how analysis of interview material can be (serendipitously and accidently, but unavoidably) enriched

by us maintaining a reflexive and iterative stance toward data and our interactions with data.

## Material Research Practicalities

The material conditions for both of our projects were ideal; in each project, we had several years to complete our work and research money to cover our salaries, travel costs, and incidentals. In addition, we both found ourselves situated in supportive research environments and felt at home and inspired by our academic colleagues. However, each project also involved particular challenges.

Although most of the time Lisa was genuinely excited about the topic of the "Female Embodiment Project," it did also prove to be a straining endeavor as it involved listening to and working with very emotional narratives. For example, the data detailed the pain involved in stretching a 2-cm vaginal dimple to a vagina of "normal" size, the tears shed when all of one's friends enter puberty years before you, and the fear of being rejected when one's body does not adhere to normative ideals. In this way, the materiality of the interviewees' conditions as expressed in the interviews was ever present in Lisa's mind. However, as often as the interview material was emotionally difficult, it was also rewarding as it involved listening to the support that the interviewees had encountered and their attempts at questioning norms that constrained them.

In contrast, Ericka did not address patient narratives and experiences, but aimed to find out how the female body had been reified in the silicon and sensors of the gynecological simulator by analyzing interviews about this specific question posed to the inventor and designer. Her material gave, on the surface, simple answers. The challenge she had was to figure out why the technical and modeling approaches used—which were industry standard and widely assumed to be validated—did not seem to work when the simulator changed cultural contexts.

## Research Design

Lisa combined narrative and thematic analysis in the female embodiment project. Although the interdisciplinary context welcomed the use of various theoretical tools and entry points into data, it also required her to learn how to legitimize and "translate" her approach in encounters with disciplinary scholars, for example, at conferences and when submitting papers. At times, this was an overwhelming task, as was the task of sorting all the paragraphs, quotes, codes, and notes on aspects of her material that intrigued her that she had highlighted and scribbled down. In practice, she learnt how to deal with the first challenge by defending and explaining her approach over and over in different settings. The challenge of sorting and organizing her

material was dealt with in her office by creating “lists of contents” for her transcribed interviews (including codes and notes).

In the simulator project, Ericka combined discourse and conversation analysis to answer the question of why the simulator did not work. Like many researchers when their projects start, she did not really have much more of a research design than that at the outset. She planned to read up on the simulator (medical articles about it, press clippings, marketing materials, and the thick, detailed instructions and exercises manual that came with it) and then head out to interview the inventor, designer, or anyone else willing to talk to her about its genesis and commercialization. She planned to videotape people using the simulator in both the U.S. and Swedish contexts to see what they were doing “right” or “wrong.” Her identity in the project led by two medical doctors was as the qualitative social scientist, which meant she found herself defending the reliability and generalizability of her results, although deep down she was not sure they were actually particularly reliable or generalizable. Perhaps this is why the idea of interview data and video clips was so appealing to her. But like Lisa’s work, this method involved pages of transcribed conversation that she tried to find an answer (or answers) in and tried to mold into a narrative appropriate for journal articles.

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**Method in Action**

The concept of methodology implies a practice of *doing* research, and both of us used a plethora of verbs in this “doing.”

We *read*. Widely. Some of what we read was about the actual cases—the medical literature about DSD and the technical literature about the simulator. We used this material both as background literature and as raw data upon which to do discourse analysis. When we read this work, we also thought about what was missing and what we and our work could contribute to medical and simulator research.

Ericka *videotaped*. This involved recording teaching sessions with the simulator, watching the instructors and students approach the machine, touch it, talk to it, grapple (with) it, examine it. Then, she watched these videos, over and over, applying conversation analysis to the dialogue and looking for … well, she was never really that sure what she was looking for.

Ericka also *examined* the simulator as if it was a real body.

Ericka *compared*. One of her collaborators allowed her to watch students learning the examination with real, live bodies (on volunteers who agree to let students examine their bodies) and see how this was done compared with the simulator.

Lisa *searched*. Lisa spent lots of time looking for her research subjects and as the women were not easy to find, she used a variety of approaches:

- She *read* blogs.
- She *talked* with medical professionals.
- She *distributed* information letters about her project.

This search gave her more background information, but, in the end, she realized it had also colored her understanding of the condition, the people who associate with it, and also her analysis.

> Then, finally, we *interviewed*. For Ericka, this involved traveling to the countries where the inventor and the designer worked and asking them questions about the processes they went through in the development of the E-Pelvis. For Lisa, it meant traveling all over Sweden, and it often involved emotional conversations with people whose feelings were tangibly raw.
> Then, we *transcribed*. In both of these projects, the interviews were recorded, so the practice of "interviewing" included transcribing and listening, again and again. Both of us did this ourselves, and we both think that transcribing one's own material is extremely important. Listening over and over to the interviews which you conducted provides a more nuanced feeling for the material. And it gets you thinking about what you would want to do with it.
> And again, we *read*. This we did during the process of interviewing as well as after, both to make use of the dead time between interviews (one CANNOT overestimate the amount of bother and waiting that the arranging of interviews entails) and while trying to make sense of the "data" we had collected. But although we should have been reading about our empirical areas, much of the time Ericka was reading theoretical musings about relational agency, the human/non-human "divide," material-discursive cuts, and why/how they are made. And Lisa was reading about feminist phenomenology and different approaches to normativity and the normal. We suspect now, with the 20-20 vision of hindsight, that our sudden and passionate interest in complex and thickly worded feminist theoretical writings may have been an academic version of sticking our heads in the sand. We felt at the time that this reading was not doing "real research," which we thought was the more practical work like prepping interviews, analyzing videotape, and reading transcriptions. But we found ourselves buried in work by Lucy Suchman, Karen Barad, Judith Butler, and Sara Ahmed.

So, we were reading "theory" in between the real verbs of real research. And here's the thing: Although we were executing the methods we had learned in qualitative methods courses at various departments as PhD students and despairing over the fact that we did not know what we were supposed to be doing with all these data (because we had a lot of data—but what were we supposed to see in it? How was this supposed to answer the questions which we weren't even sure were real scientific research questions in the first place? How did we know what was science and publishable and interesting and what was just … a question looking for

an answer?), we were escaping into micro-vacations from a steady state of self-doubting angst into the theoretical discussions that *real* academics with *real* research agendas had written in *real* books, trying to engage in the discussions they were holding with each other.

And as we did, these excursions into the theoretical literature shaped the questions we were asking of our data. As Ericka was watching the simulations on video, she was thinking about the relational agency of the simulator—she saw it because she had the theoretical terms for it on her brain. As she was transcribing the interviews with the inventor, she heard the inventor talk about knowledge-making phenomena, intra-action, and materiality (even though the inventor did not use those words) because that is what she was reading about at the time (Barad, 2007). And as she was interviewing the anatomist designing the simulator's organs, she asked the anatomist about the apparatuses of knowledge construction because she had been reading about agential realism and relational agency (Suchman, 2007) for the same reason.

Lisa, in turn, grappled with how to make sense of the numerous accounts of normality that she found in her data. It was everywhere—in accounts dealing with specific body parts, in accounts of relationships, in accounts of medical treatments, in accounts of fertility, in accounts dealing with puberty, and in accounts that envisaged the future. To disentangle and understand the interviewees' efforts to embody, understand, and articulate normality, Lisa found that she had to go in somewhat different theoretical directions. It led her to feminist conceptualizations of normative heterosexuality (e.g., Jackson, 2008) as she wanted to understand how her interviewees made sense of how to physically shape and make the body more "normal" (Guntram, 2013a). It led her to engage with feminist scholars' conceptualizations of sexed female embodiment (e.g., Martin, 2001) as she was interested in how the interviewees discursively constructed and positioned their body in relation to others and to ideas about the "normal" female body (Guntram, 2013b). It led her to feminist work on emotions and affect (e.g., Hemmings, 2012) as she wanted to examine how her interviewees relationally dealt with normality when disclosing their condition to others (Guntram & Zeiler, 2016). Although tension was an inevitable dimension of combining these theoretical vantage points, their engagement with problematizing normality resonated with Lisa's aims, and eventually three different publications (all dealing with normality, but in different ways engaging with the patterns identified) began to take shape.

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**Practical Lessons Learned**

In Swedish, we have a phrase, *som man frågar får man svar*, which is roughly translated as "You get what you ask for." The shape of a question determines the contours of the answer.

And the theoretical framework that shaped our questions—both to our research subjects and to our data—was directly influenced by the theoretical nesting ground we had come to roost in. Yet roosting is a misleading metaphor because during the doing of research, we were in constant motion, almost oscillating, moving back and forth between theory and empirics, between data collection and analysis, between different parts of data, between joy and despair. Our questions and analysis were shaped by theory and by our experiences, but this was not a one-off that occurred before we set off to do our work. It was a process that continued all through the research, and which continues, even now, after the projects are complete.

This reflects a few methodological assumptions common in feminist studies:

- Interview data are co-constructed; they are produced in a specific context and to a specific audience.
- Analysis is not conducted in a vacuum but is infused with context and is done in dialogue with the imagined audience of the article, chapter, or dissertation one is trying to write.
- Analysis is also a dialogue infused with the academic context one is situated in, the theories where one feels “at home,” and inspiration from one’s personal experiences and history.
- If approaching research methods (and interview data in particular) in this manner, analytic entities—such as themes, codes, and categories—cannot be seen to “emerge” from or “found” in the data, but are created and shaped by the researcher. They result from the researcher’s focal points, interests, and concerns, from her histories and contexts.

These methodological/analytical assumptions produce practical tips. To maintain a reflexive stance (asking yourself what you do and how you do it), you can

- Remember your original research questions and remember not to be too loyal to them;
- Identify theoretical interests and concepts that are at the core of your interests, which in turn can enrich your analysis of your data;
- Find a balance between letting theoretical concepts form categories in your data and, on the other extreme, letting your data speak as if your understanding of it was pure and uncontaminated by theory. We suggest trying to find an unstable, moving position between “data” and “theory,” oscillating back and forth between them. If we think about theoretical concepts as lenses through which we see our data, shifting between theoretical lenses for the same material can be a productive way of answering questions one did not originally have. This is why it is important to be continually reading other people’s work while still being consumed by your data. It is good to have the theoretical inspirations and be so familiar with your data that it takes space in your head, as well. How?
    - Transcribing your own interviews;

- Not coding for theoretical concepts but letting the material lead you to the theoretical concepts;
- Letting your informants tell their stories, but then reading their stories with various theoretical glasses on; listening carefully to what your data shows, what your interviewees say, and staying close to that.

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**Conclusion**

Theoretical frameworks have always shaped the results we see in our research. Feminist standpoint theory originally criticized science as being male and suggested that women scientists would have different perspectives that would lead to different hypothesis and results (Harding, 1986), which then influenced work that saw these perspectives in discourses of science and medicine (Martin, 1991). Feminist critiques of technological change and the labor market dwelt on the intersection of class and gender, heavily influenced by traditional Marxist labor studies (Cockburn, 1983) and which inspired later work on gender and technology in the information technology (IT) industry, carrying with it the categories of male/female, men/women (Faulkner, 2000). Postmodern feminists have critiqued the concepts of stable identities easily categorized by adjectives such as class, gender, and race and instead embraced fractured identities, intersectional subject positions and fluidity, and changeability (Butler, 2004; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Puar, 2007), influencing work on bodies, subjectivities, the sex/gender dichotomy, and binary sex (Guntram, 2013a, 2013b; Kraus, 2000).

With this, we would like to conclude with the assertion that we are inevitably involved in the creation of our material and our analysis, and “we” includes the theories we are inspired by, the environments we work in, and the personal backgrounds we bring to our work. We cannot escape this, as feminist studies of science make clear. Our theoretical inspirations are as much a part of the apparatus of investigation as our methodological tools, and together, they create the material-discursive practices of knowledge production that allow our verbs of research. This is the onto-epistemological lesson of Barad’s agential reality (Barad, 2007a), and to end this case, we would like to suggest that we as researchers be honest with the readers of our work—our results—about what we are doing and how we are creating the products of our studies through the words of others—both those we interview and those whose work we have read. And we can try to expect such honesty from other research fields, as well. To do this, we can name and discuss our theoretical inspirations and assumptions clearly and upfront—most of the academic genre we write in allow and even encourage this—and when working interdisciplinary one can try to express this conflation in an attempt to encourage others to reflect upon and make visible the theoretical paradigms for their thoughts.

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**Exercises and Discussion Questions**

1. When do you feel you are "doing real research" and what do you find yourself busy with between these bouts of efficiency? How does this affect your "research"?
2. If what we hear in our interview material is a direct result of what we are thinking about when asking the question and when transcribing and analyzing it, how can we claim to be finding "facts" about our research topic?
3. Again, if what we hear in our interview material is a direct result of what we are thinking about when asking the question and when transcribing and analyzing it, how can we claim to be ethically responsible to the voices of others who we have appropriated through an interview?
4. How can an onto-epistemological approach address the role of the interviewer and the materiality of the interview in creating data?

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**Further Reading**

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**Web Resources**

*Catalyst: Feminist, Theory, Technoscience*—an open access journal which deals with many related issues: http://catalystjournal.org/

*New Materialists Cartographies*: https://newmaterialistscartographies.wikispaces.com/

*Reading diffractive reading: where and when does diffraction happen?* by Iris van der Tuin: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSI6IRWvDoI

*The Quantitative/Qualitative Debate and Feminist Research: A Subjective View of Objectivity* by Nicole Westmarland: http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/974/2124

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