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Thinking with Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research

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Thinking with Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research

Abstract

Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research is a direct challenge to long held traditional forms of qualitative data analysis. Defining analysis methods like coding and thematic analysis to be reductive and simplistic, Jackson and Mazzei offer an alternative account of data analysis by “plugging-in” six poststructural theorists to data. Through interviews of two first generation academic women, Jackson and Mazzei demonstrate how researchers can employ complex theories to analyze data without relying upon traditional methods. The insightful, clear, and, at times, profound, findings of Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research demonstrates the need for researchers to reexamine the continued reign of traditional forms of data analysis in the contexts of modern social life.

Keywords

Poststructuralism, Data Analysis, Diffraction, Interview Data

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Thinking with *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research*

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Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research is a direct challenge to long held traditional forms of qualitative data analysis. Defining analysis methods like coding and thematic analysis to be reductive and simplistic, Jackson and Mazzei offer an alternative account of data analysis by “plugging-in” six poststructural theorists to data. Through interviews of two first generation academic women, Jackson and Mazzei demonstrate how researchers can employ complex theories to analyze data without relying upon traditional methods. The insightful, clear, and, at times, profound, findings of Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research demonstrates the need for researchers to reexamine the continued reign of traditional forms of data analysis in the contexts of modern social life. Keywords: Poststructuralism, Data Analysis, Diffraction, Interview Data

Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) begins by positing that researchers find themselves “in spaces which we no longer know how to describe” (Deleuze, 1998, p. xi). That is, traditional forms of qualitative data analysis (e.g., coding, thematic analysis) may no longer be, and perhaps never were, able to adequately assess modern social life. To help find a new way through these unfamiliar spaces, Jackson and Mazzei set out to describe a “language and way of thinking methodologically and philosophically together” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. vii) that directly address the limitations the authors see in familiar data analyses methods (e.g., coding). This language and way of thinking is termed by the authors to be *thinking with theory*, directly “plugging-in” theory with data. The goal of this work is to push back against what the authors see as traditional forms of data analyses that attempt to reduce what is complex and multilayered to what is simple and transparent.

To meet these objectives, the authors interviewed two first generation academic women (i.e., Cassandra and Sera) and used the resulting transcripts as the data for all of the theories and theorists (i.e., Derrida, Spivak, Foucault, Butler, Deleuze, & Barad) employed. This work is divided into 8 chapters with 6 smaller chapters termed “interludes” that serve to introduce the theories and theorist that will be *plugged-in* to the data collected. An introductory chapter provides the rationale, foundation, and overview for the idea of thinking with theory as a method of data analyses. Following this introduction, the authors demonstrated the thinking with theory method by analyzing the interview transcripts using six poststructural theorists. Table 1 summarizes the theories, concepts, and research questions examined by the authors.

The *interludes* that preceded the main discussion of each of the theorists were a welcome review of those to whom I had been acquainted with and a much needed introduction to those with whom I was unfamiliar. These introductions were clear, comprehensive, and accessible to both researchers and students. Important terms and concepts (e.g., discourse/discursive fields, knowledge, power: structural and relational) for each theorist were directly defined and explicated by the authors, which created a clear framework and a strong foundation for the subsequent analyses. Following the interludes, each theorist was *plugged-in* to the narrative transcripts to address a clearly stated research question.

I was familiar with most of the theories and concepts employed, but I was mostly unacquainted with Derrida and entirely unaware of Spivak. As a result, I was able to read the main chapters as both a knowledgeable reader and as a reader new to a theorist’s work. Through both of these lenses, I believe the authors succeeded at describing the nature of their

premise and demonstrating the necessity of the data analysis method advocated by the authors. In each of the main chapters, the authors took the terms and concepts defined in the interlude and directly intertwined them with the data without relying on codes, themes, or other common forms of analysis. Each chapter acted as an independent examination of the data, and produced an insightful analysis of the experiences of first generation academic women.

Table 1. Summary of Applied Theorists, Concepts, and Research Questions Examined

| Theorist | Theoretical Concept | Research Question |
|-------------|--------------------------|---|
| 1. Derrida | deconstruction | <i>How does the presence of Sera and Cassandra in the academy make visible the excess of race, class, and gender in the event that is deconstruction?</i> |
| 2. Spivak | postcolonial marginality | <i>How is Cassandra outside in the teaching machine?</i> |
| 3. Foucault | power/knowledge | <i>How do power/knowledge relations and practices produce Cassandra's and Sera's multiple subjectivities as they venture into the academy as first-generation professors?</i> |
| 4. Butler | performativity | <i>What are the performative acts that (re)produce Cassandra's and Sera's subjectivities as academic women?</i> |
| 5. Deleuze | desire | <i>How does a desiring silence function to keep/maintain/produce smooth social, familial, and professional relations?</i> |
| 6. Barad | material intra-activity | <i>How do Cassandra and Sera intra-act with the materiality of their world in ways that produce different becomings?</i> |

Poststructuralism, even in its most clear state, is highly complex and frequently counterintuitive. Many of the concepts used by the authors were still steeped in the language and discourses surrounding this larger framework. I would not expect novice readers to fully grasp the intricacies and nuances of the poststructural theorists through this work. As this book was focused on the method of thinking with theory and not necessarily the theories themselves, I do not believe this is a significant issue. Having background knowledge in poststructuralism would be ideal when approaching this work, but this book retains accessibility to any scholar through its clear objectives and fully explicated applications of theorists and theories. Researchers and graduate students alike can benefit from considering the ideas presented by Jackson and Mazzei.

Poststructuralism has a reputation for being as difficult to understand as it is notable for insights into academic research. This polarization is especially salient for doctoral students, all of whom search for a way through the mire of multiple philosophical and theoretical frameworks. The complexity and allure of poststructuralism seems to attract some, repel others, and baffle all. As one of those graduate students inclined towards qualitative research and consternated by the seeming elusiveness of poststructuralism, I was eager to read the work by Jackson and Mazzei to gain clarity into the direct application of these theories to interview data. After having finished this work, I have found difficulty in returning to more traditional forms of data analysis and implicitly agreeing to the assumptions those methods require. More

than just another form of data analysis, *thinking with theory* may be a possible future for the field of qualitative inquiry. Perhaps there is no way back once a researcher begins to *think with theory*.

References

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Author Note

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