



8-1-2016

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Austin G. Oswald
University of Georgia, ago22809@uga.edu

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Recommended APA Citation

Oswald, A. G. (2016). New and Innovative Ways of Engaging Data: A Review of Davies' Listening to Children: Being and Becoming. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(8), 1394-1397. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2016.2705>

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Abstract

The growing use of diverse qualitative approaches in the social sciences has lead qualitative researchers to seek new and innovative ways of engaging their data. Davies' book Listening to Children: Being and Becoming is just that. Listening to Children is a scholarly text intended for an academic audience. Davies applies guiding principles of new materialism in her research and demonstrates how this approach is rich with potential when researching with children. Akin to a how-to-book for new materialism and childhood research, Davies walks her audience through the diverse analytic possibilities of new materialism within the setting of child studies. In this review, I share my thoughts and interpretations of Davies' book and address principal concepts discussed in the text.

Keywords

Review, New Materialism, Qualitative Research, Childhood

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New and Innovative Ways of Engaging Data: A Review of Davies' *Listening to Children: Being and Becoming*

Austin G. Oswald
University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, USA

*The growing use of diverse qualitative approaches in the social sciences has lead qualitative researchers to seek new and innovative ways of engaging their data. Davies' book *Listening to Children: Being and Becoming* is just that. *Listening to Children* is a scholarly text intended for an academic audience. Davies applies guiding principles of new materialism in her research and demonstrates how this approach is rich with potential when researching with children. Akin to a how-to-book for new materialism and childhood research, Davies walks her audience through the diverse analytic possibilities of new materialism within the setting of child studies. In this review, I share my thoughts and interpretations of Davies' book and address principal concepts discussed in the text. Keywords: Review, New Materialism, Qualitative Research, Childhood*

Davies (2014) situates her book *Listening to Children: Being and Becoming* in a number of interwoven narratives that describe her encounters with children in Swedish Reggio-Emilia-inspired preschools and in her community of Sydney, Australia. By using a series of vignettes, Davies captures the dynamic and emergent nature of her encounters with children and the research process. Her stories take us to places like the playground of a Swedish preschool; music class where children, adults, and instruments interact; her apartment creating art with her young friend, Clementine; and memories from her own childhood experiences.

Listening to Children is a scholarly text intended for an academic audience. The book is dense with theoretical and philosophical concepts and is an excellent resource for anyone interested in exploring new materialist approaches to research. The data for this book were gleaned from Davies' encounters with children and used methods of informal interviewing, participant observations, and field notes. In her writing, Davies makes sense of abstract concepts by situating them in practical lived experiences. She embeds her stories into a larger theoretical framework and skillfully oscillates from theory to personal experience. This is one of the most valuable aspects of this book. By sharing her years of experience as a child researcher, Davies demonstrates a new way of engaging children and the research process.

The book begins by orienting the readers to the guiding theoretical and methodological framework. Located within the new materialist tradition, Davies used principles of Barad's (2007) approach to new materialism. Applying concepts of quantum physics, Barad captures the unique onto-epistemological considerations of new materialism where matters and meaning are fused together. Barad points out,

Matter and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder. [...] Perhaps this is why contemporary physics makes the inescapable entanglement of matters of being, knowing, and doing, of ontology, epistemology, and ethics, of fact and value, or tangible, so poignant. (p. 3)

Barad's approach to new materialism underscores the implicit role of matter in our everyday sense making. She describes a type of knowing and understanding that cannot be deduced from utterance and enunciation; rather, one that emerges from a dynamic entanglement of the matters affecting our thoughts and actions. Davies explains, "the ways in which we affect each other, and are affected, cannot be separated from thought any more than it can be separated from bodies. Thought and action are mutually entangled, just as individual beings, who know and who act, are mutually entangled" (p. 11). Through the use of Barad's work, Davies captures how the research process shapes and is shaped by contextual factors surrounding the research encounter.

Specifically, Davies draws on principles of intra-action, entanglement, and the diffractive methodology. These concepts bring about unique ethical and methodological considerations. By using the diffractive methodology as a guiding framework Davies was able to illustrate how understanding is dynamic and emergent within the diffractive design. She notes,

The concept of diffraction replaces the more usual concept and practice in qualitative research of reflexivity. [...] Diffraction does not reflect an image of what is already there, but is actually involved in its ongoing production. [...] Whereas reflection and reflexivity might document *difference*, diffraction is itself the process where *difference is made*. (p. 2)

From a diffractive methodology, the research process is viewed as emergent and intra-active where we (researchers and participants) are "produced through intra-actions; we are multiplicities, always in the process of becoming other than what we were before" (p. 9). This approach acknowledges the dynamic nature of the research process and is open to new ontological and epistemological ways of viewing the world. Davies concludes, "a diffractive approach thus opens an onto-epistemological space of *encounter*" (p. 3), one that captures the interdependent relationship between knowing and being.

A driving force behind the diffractive methodology and Davies' encounters with children is the concept of emergent listening. Emergent listening is a process of interacting that is non-judgmental and open to new ways of knowing, experiencing, and being. Davies asserts,

Emergent listening is demanding. It means not conforming oneself to opinion, or to what one has always believed or wanted. It involves the suspension of judgment, letting go of the status quo and of the quotidian lives embedded in that status quo. It opens one up for new ways of knowing and being, actively resisting closure and being curious about the void of any situation. (p. 28)

Emergent listening, then, is a sort of waking up to the world; a conscious awareness of listening; and openness to new and unknown ways of thinking and being. Davies makes a case for the biased nature of listening and argues that a diffractive methodology provides a way of examining the multiple factors that influence thought and understanding. She points to two major forces, *lines of descent* and *lines of ascent*, which influence listening in a dynamic and interrelated way. She describes the lines of descent as the process of "listen[ing] in order to fit what we hear into what we already know" and the lines of ascent as "working, to some extent, against oneself, and against those habitual practices" (p. 21). The interdependent nature of these forces is brought to life in one of Davies' examples of painting with her friend, Clementine:

Some months later the idea of turning my kitchen into a place to paint seemed a natural extension of our story-making. To transform my kitchen into an art space meant giving up, to the extent that I could tell, the lines of descent of my quotidian kitchen-practices (a fastidious attention to cleanliness, order, and predictability), and opening myself up to the surprise of the new. (p. 62)

Davies argues that when we engage in emergent listening we open to new possibilities of thinking and being. With this in mind, she introduced the concept of *intra-active becoming* which is “an encounter where each participant affects, and is open to be affected by, the other” (Davies, p. 6). This philosophy calls into question the notion of self-as-a-fixed-identity and advocates for self that is multiple, in flux, and emergent through intra-action. Davies provides several excellent examples of intra-active becoming in her book. In one vignette, she describes how the process of creating art with her friend Clementine opened her up to new ways of being: “letting the brush flow and the colors mix in unexpected ways was a skill I began picking up from Clementine right there in that first encounter. Together we listened to each other, as we became emergent-artists-together, open to being affected by each other and to what we might create” (p. 63). This example helps to illustrate the intra-active potentialities of our encounters with people, material, and the world around us.

The book ends with Davies providing an alternative approach to new materialism by re-writing her favorite childhood fairytale. Davies walks the audience through her steps of rewriting text, using principles of new materialism to guide her ongoing analysis. The final chapter seemed somewhat disconnected from the first half of book as it moved away from direct encounters with children to textual representations of childhood in children’s literature. This shift seemed like an unnecessary and abrupt move beyond the scope of the book and felt a bit like an add-on. Despite this, the latter part of the book captured the diverse analytic possibilities of new materialism and Davies successfully demonstrated the versatility of new materialism and its potential as a viable analytic approach in various qualitative settings.

In sum, *Listening to Children* is an excellent book for anyone interested in new materialism and the diffractive methodology. Akin to a how-to-book for new materialist research, Davies offers clear explanations of new materialism and its application in child research. The book is rich with theory and is therefore ideal for those with a solid foundation in qualitative research, theory and methodology. However, Davies’ use of descriptive field notes helps the novice reader to understand difficult concepts by grounding abstract theory in concrete experience.

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Author Note

Austin G. Oswald is a graduate student at the University of Georgia in the Interdisciplinary Qualitative Studies Certificate program. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: ago22809@uga.edu.

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Article Citation

Oswald, A. G. (2016). New and innovative ways of engaging data: A review of Davies' Listening to Children: Being and Becoming. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(8), 1394-1397. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol21/iss8/3>
