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# To Think or Not to Think with Theory in Qualitative Research

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## To Think or Not to Think with Theory in Qualitative Research

### Abstract

Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing Data across Multiple Perspectives is a book that challenges the traditional way of analyzing qualitative data. The book invites researchers who use qualitative methods to think with theory when it comes to analyzing their data since analyzing the data with no theory in mind can make injustice to the data. Thinking with theory, however, can enrich one's study and direct the process of the data analysis. The authors offer us six theories, as examples, to think with when analyzing qualitative data. These theories are: Derrida's Deconstruction, Spivak's Marginality, Foucault's Power/Knowledge, Butler's Performativity, Deleuze's Desire, and Barad's Intra-action. To clarify their approach, the authors interviewed two first-generation-scholar participants: Cassandra and Sera and analyzed their data in the chapters of the book; each chapter analyzes the data from the perspective of one of the six aforementioned theories, and each chapter is preceded by an interlude in which the authors explicate why they have chosen this particular theory.

### Keywords

Qualitative, Theory, Transcript, Analysis, Coding, Themes, Interviewing

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## To Think or Not to Think with Theory in Qualitative Research

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*Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing Data across Multiple Perspectives* is a book that challenges the traditional way of analyzing qualitative data. The book invites researchers who use qualitative methods to think with theory when it comes to analyzing their data since analyzing the data with no theory in mind can make injustice to the data. Thinking with theory, however, can enrich one's study and direct the process of the data analysis. The authors offer us six theories, as examples, to think with when analyzing qualitative data. These theories are: Derrida's Deconstruction, Spivak's Marginality, Foucault's Power/Knowledge, Butler's Performativity, Deleuze's Desire, and Barad's Intra-action. To clarify their approach, the authors interviewed two first-generation-scholar participants: Cassandra and Sera and analyzed their data in the chapters of the book; each chapter analyzes the data from the perspective of one of the six aforementioned theories, and each chapter is preceded by an interlude in which the authors explicate why they have chosen this particular theory. Keywords: Qualitative, Theory, Transcript, Analysis, Coding, Themes, Interviewing

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*Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing Data Across Multiple Perspectives* is a felicitous attempt that aims at challenging the qualitative methods of research and calls for changing the way we code and thematize qualitative data (such as interview transcripts) into thinking and analyzing this data with theory. Thinking with theory when dealing with qualitative data is critical since many graduate students and junior researchers may take for granted that the qualitative data should undergo a process of analyzing the data for the sake of finding emerging themes. This is good but may not do justice to the rich data researchers get from the interviews. In this sense, Jackson and Mazzei argue that interpretation and analysis of qualitative data "does not happen via mechanistic coding, reducing data to themes, and writing up transparent narratives that do little to critique the complexities of social life;" such method the authors continue "reduces complicated and conflicting voices and data to thematic "chunks" that can be interpreted free of context and circumstance" (pp. vii-viii).

In an attempt to sophisticate this simplistic approach, the authors offer us six theories to think with when dealing with qualitative data that, the authors claim, are important for researchers to get acquainted with when approaching such data. To put theory into practice, the authors collected qualitative data to be analyzed through the lens of the six theories. The authors interviewed two first-generation-scholar participants: Cassandra and Sera. Cassandra, born in the 1940s, is the first in her African-American family to go to college. Cassandra was raised on a three-acre family-owned farm. Her father left school when he was a fifth grader and her mother continued school till grade eight. Her family used to also work for other people to gain some more money to help raise children and make ends meet. Against all odds, Cassandra managed to attend college, graduate, and be a university professor. Sera on the other had was the only child in her family; her parents were white middle-class alcohol-addicted. Sera grew up in poverty and struggle. She did not plan to attend college; it was a series of incidents that drove her there. These incidents include having financial aid, scoring high in high school, and gaining saved money from her grandmother. Sera is now a professor, too. The authors analyzed this data through the six theories: Derrida's *Deconstruction*, Spivak's *Marginality*, Foucault's

*Power/Knowledge*, Butler's *Performativity*, Deleuze's *Desire*, and Barad's *Intra-action*. Depending on the theory that a researcher chooses to think with, different questions get generated; these questions drive the process of analyzing the data.

Derrida's *deconstruction* is not about deconstructing and reconstructing the text but rather about looking for tensions, inconsistencies, omissions, and odds that happen in the text/speech and that the researcher should be attentive to. The authors were attentive to this and looked in the data to places where the signifier (word) does not necessarily match the signified (meaning), and looked within texts for other contextualized elements that can bring coherence into the texts and stories told. For Derrida, texts are never complete and there is always something missing that the researcher has to fill in order to have better understanding and comprehension of the interviewee's narrative. Driven from this, the authors framed the research question as: *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?* The authors analyzed the interview transcript looking for places that can denote or connote such dilemmas (race, class, etc.) that the participants shed no light on. An example of this would be when Cassandra mentioned that her father was so proud of her going to college because this is something that not too many Blacks can do. The authors trouble this sentence mentioning that this denotes the persistence of racism against and isolation of African American from achieving scholar-status at that time.

Thinking with Spivak's *marginality* would pose a different question: *How is Cassandra outside in the teaching machine?* This question does not include Sera because she does not belong to a minority group as Cassandra does. Spivak is critical of the notion postcolonialism because she argues that colonialism is never over. Spivak is worried about the "valorization of marginality in universities, such that there is an over-zealous drive to locate, represent, and inhabit the margins" (cited in Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, p. 38). According to Spivak, Cassandra is never in the margin nor is she ever in the center, despite her professorship. She is positioned in the center of marginality because she holds a PhD in a minority that was not considered educated, and she is positioned as the margin of the center when she is asked by many boards and committees in her institution to join them, not for the sake of herself as Cassandra but for the sake of having a representative of one of the minority. So, she is centered but not centered at the same time; she is in the margin of the centrality. Cassandra entered the teaching machine as a professor but she is out of it (a margin within the center) because, as she narrates, she is resisted by many of her students and colleagues who challenge her knowledge. That is how the researchers analyzed Cassandra's data through Spivak's *marginality*.

Foucault's *power/knowledge* relationship is not ontological in a way that investigates the source of power and the definition of it, but epistemological in a way that examines what effects power can have on people, what relation power can have with knowledge, and what subjectivities does this power/knowledge relation produce in different discourses. Foucault argues that subjectivities are not stable but changing according to the situation and the hierarchy that different situations demand. A professor is on the top of the hierarchy in classroom but the same professor changes her power hierarchy when meeting with the university president, when in family gatherings, when meeting with the governor, etc. The question that fits investigating the current data through a Foucauldian lens becomes: *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?* The authors traced the practices of power that the interviewees narrated and sought to know how the participants themselves were vehicles of power, what roles of power did they carry in different situations, and how they responded to those who questioned their power.

In thinking with Judith Butler's *performativity*, the author asked the question: *What are the performative acts that (re)produce Cassandra's and Sera's subjectivities as academic*

women? Butler's theory of performativity deals with the notion of repetition and reproduction. There are certain performances that we are required to gain, maintain, and repeat, in different situations in order to keep our subjectivities. We do not choose these performances, but we are doomed to just repeat them. A professor in a classroom, for instance, cannot be a professor until she repeats certain performances - giving instructions, helping students, giving assignments, etc. "People do not choose their gendered identities; gender gets produced as people repeat themselves... *people become subjects through repetition*" (p. 73). The two participants mentioned the strategies they maintained to keep their identities in school and at home. Cassandra, for example, mentioned that she kept using the slang at home to show that she is still Cassandra that they (her family and friends) know; they would think she has changed otherwise. At school, she has to publish a book in her field, as a performance to keep herself as a professor.

In thinking with Deleuze's *desire*, the question would be: *How does a desiring silence function to keep/maintain/produce smooth social, familial, and professional relations?* It is important to note here that for Deleuze and Guattari, desire does not mean the psychoanalytic desire, which is the need to possess. *Desire* for Deleuze means the need to produce- the power of production. Through the data that the researchers obtained, there exists silence. Participants reported incidents where they kept silent. This silence is a sort of productive force that is being produced by desire. Silence here is not a desire in itself; it is a production. Sera, for instance, does not feel comfortable talking about her experience with her alcohol-addict parents. Here she is producing silence through desiring to be independent and having enough power to be so. Discourses of silence here serve to maintain Sera's and Cassandra's status quo as having professor identities.

In thinking with Barad's *intra-action*, the authors framed the research question as: *How do Cassandra and Sera intra-act with the materiality of their world in ways that produce different becomings?* Barad is considered a post-critic feminist and materialist. For materialists, and post-humanists, humans are not the sole agential forces; materials such as machines, office rooms, bodies, and objects have agential existence, too. Cassandra cannot separate herself from the fact that she was raised on the southern farms. When her colleagues and students disagree with her, they do not necessarily disagree with her knowledge, but with her material life as well. Things get materialized to define who we are, and we cannot set ourselves apart from the materials around us.

This book does not come from vacuity; it comes from an observation that many qualitative studies are doomed to follow the traditional method of analyzing data without having a theory in mind to work with. This book offers an opportunity to practically introduce how theories can work when analyzing qualitative data. It gives six practical examples of how to analyze such data. This book is a step in the space of the qualitative methods and a must-read for all graduate students who choose to work with qualitative methods. After reading this book, one can start to think with theory, not only with the six aforementioned theories, but with any other. One can now think with Hegel's phenomenology, Althusser's interpellation, Spinoza's ethics, Nietzsche's morality, Vertovec's superdiversity, Kristeva's intertextuality, etc. This is one of the benefits this book offers. However, one should also know that this book is not a wholistic radical change in qualitative studies; you still need to collect data through interview or whatever qualitative method you choose, and you still need to code your transcripts; the difference comes at the analysis. Instead of analyzing the data through grouping themes, you look into the data from a theoretical lens, and this is what this book adds. To end, I recommend this book to researchers who employ qualitative methods in the field of education and applied linguistics.

### References

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### Author Note

Mohamed Yacoub is a PhD candidate in Composition and Applied Linguistics, Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Mohamed's publications appear in journals like *The Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, *Studii de gramatica contrastive*, *journal of creative writing studies*, and *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Mohamed Yacoub, 29 Regency Square. Indiana, PA. 15701; Cell: (724)762-0913; Email: [taha.mohamaad@gmail.com](mailto:taha.mohamaad@gmail.com) or [nbvv@iup.edu](mailto:nbvv@iup.edu).

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