

Beyond an Easy Sense: A Diffractive Analysis

Qualitative Inquiry
2014, Vol. 20(6) 742–746
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DOI: 10.1177/1077800414530257
qix.sagepub.com



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Abstract

In this article, I use Karen Barad's concept of diffraction as a methodological practice of reading "insights through one another" in response to the editors' call for examples of analysis after coding in qualitative inquiry. A diffractive reading of data through multiple theoretical insights moves qualitative analysis away from habitual normative readings toward a diffractive reading that spreads thought in unpredictable patterns producing different knowledge. In response to the editors' pedagogical approach for the issue, the article focuses on an example from previously collected interview data and how a diffractive analysis produces questions and knowledge that are only possible in analysis after coding in qualitative inquiry.

Keywords

diffraction, interview data, Barad, Deleuze and Guattari

In the editors' call for papers for this special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry*, they asked for examples that offered alternatives to qualitative analysis after coding. Like the editors, I share the concern that there is more to data analysis than a reduction of research narratives to a series of thematic groupings that do little to produce different thought. In a recently published book with Alecia Jackson (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), *Thinking With Theory in Qualitative Research*, we produced an alternative approach to analysis having become frustrated with the imperative to produce a coherent and familiar narrative and spurred by the ways in which each of us had been using theory in our previous and current work with qualitative data. Neither of us coded data anymore but we had not considered how to go about describing what happened when we "thought with theory." This "thinking with theory" is what I will further illustrate in what I, with Jackson and others (see Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Lenz Taguchi, 2010), have named a diffractive analysis.

In this article, I use Karen Barad's (2007) concept of diffraction as a methodological practice of "reading insights through one another" (p. 25). A diffractive reading of data through multiple theoretical insights moves qualitative analysis away from habitual normative readings (e.g., coding) toward a diffractive reading that spreads thought and meaning in unpredictable and productive emergences. In response to the editors' pedagogical approach for the issue, the article focuses on an example from previously collected interview data and how a diffractive analysis produces questions and knowledge that are only possible in analysis after coding in qualitative inquiry.

Diffraction as a Methodological Practice

Karen Barad (2007) wrote of what she named a "diffractive methodological approach" in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, one described as "reading insights through one another" (p. 25). In her project, she situated herself thus: "I draw on the insights of some of our best scientific and social theories including quantum physics, science studies, the philosophy of physics, feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, (post) Marxist theory, and post-structuralist theory" (p. 25). Such an approach provides Barad with important theoretical tools that acknowledge the roles of both the material and the discursive in knowledge production.

Barad makes a distinction between diffraction and reflection, a practice viewed as sound methodology for many qualitative researchers. She takes the metaphor from the notion of diffraction as a physical phenomenon, for instance, when ocean waves pass through an opening or obstruction and are spread differently than they would be otherwise. She stated that "whereas the metaphor of reflection reflects the themes of mirroring and sameness [e.g., coding], diffraction is marked by patterns of difference [e.g. analysis

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after coding]” (pp. 71-72). As a consequence of this, a diffractive strategy takes into account that knowing is never done in isolation but is always effected by different forces coming together, or in Barad’s words, “knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part of the world” (p. 185). This means that in a diffractive process of data analysis, a reading of data *with* theoretical concepts (and/or multiple theoretical concepts) produces an emergent and unpredictable series of readings as data and theory make themselves intelligible to one another.

My stance in support of data analysis after coding is that coding has become for many who engage in qualitative analysis where analysis begins and ends. Coding data from this stance concerns itself with the macro in a move described by St. Pierre (2011) that is “pedestrian and uninteresting” (p. 5). Coding as analysis requires that researchers pull back from the data in a move that concerns itself with the macro, produce broad categories and themes that are plucked from the data to disassemble and reassemble the narrative to adhere to these categories. In the interview study that I conducted with Alecia Jackson, we found that a focus on the macro was at some levels predictable and certainly did not produce different knowledge in our study with first-generation women academics. For instance, we could present major themes and patterns in a write-up of the findings: imposter syndrome, continuing male privilege, double standards, the importance of mentoring. However, they did not result in different knowledge as our formulation of the categories was driven by our experience and that of our participants.¹ We argued that

Coding takes us back to what is known, not only to the experience of our participants but also to our own experience as well; it also disallows a repetition that results in the production of the new, a production of different knowledge. A focus on the macro produced by the codes might cause us to miss the texture, the contradictions, the tensions, . . . A focus on the macro . . . locks us into more of a territorialized place of fixed, recognizable meaning. (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 12)

A recognition of the limits of our received practices did not mean that we rejected such practices; instead, we worked the limits (and limitations) of such practices.

To stop at coding, in other words, to produce an “easy sense” (Mazzei, 2007), would have allowed us to affirm our own experiences as women in the academy and to fall short in our attempts to work the limitations of such practices. Not working the limits would have resulted in a failure to produce previously unthought questions and knowledge. Our response to working the limits and limitations of coding and interpretive work was to use a concept that we picked up from Deleuze and Guattari, “plugging in.” We first encountered “plugging in” while reading Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980/1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*: “When one

writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, *must* be plugged into in order to work” (p. 4). In a move away from coding toward our thinking with theory, we were confronted with multiple texts—or literary machines: interview data, tomes of theory, conventional qualitative research methods books that we were working against, texts we had previously written, traces of data, reviewer comments, and so on *ad infinitum*. That is, we had a sense of the ceaseless variations possible in having co-authored texts that relied on a plugging in of ideas, fragments, theory, selves, sensations, and so on. And so we moved to engage “plugging in” as a *process* rather than as a *concept*, something we could put to work, *the assemblage in formation*.

To illustrate and extend this example of plugging in, I go to diffraction as a practice of analysis. Just as Barad described diffraction as a dispersal of waves, a diffractive analysis functions to move me away from habitual normative readings that zero in on sameness toward the production of readings that disperse and disrupt thought as I plug multiple theories into data and read them through one another. A diffractive analysis is not a reduction of data using a series of concepts, much like coding would require. Rather, it takes a rhizomatic (rather than hierarchical and linear shape) form that leads in different directions and keeps analysis and knowledge production on the move.

What Does a Diffractive Analysis Produce?

As discussed in the previous section, a focus on coding, or at least an analysis that relies only on coding, results in a reporting that focuses on “sameness” within categories as researchers adhere to the coding imperative to reach “data saturation.” A diffractive analysis, however, emphasizes difference by breaking open the data (and the categories inherent in coding) by decentering and destabilizing the tropes of liberal humanist identity work necessary in conventional qualitative research: the subject, interpretation, categorical similarity, and so on. To engage in a diffractive analysis is not to layer a set of codes onto the data, or even “a” theoretical concept for that matter, but is to thread through or “plug in” *data into theory into data* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) resulting in multiplicity, ambiguity, and incoherent subjectivity. It is not a matter of coding or thematizing according to a theorist or concept. It is instead a moment of plugging in, of reading-the-data-while-thinking-the-theory, of entering the assemblage, of making new connectives. In my development of this process in the midst of my project with Alecia Jackson, we began to realize how plugging in creates a different relationship among texts: They *constitute* one another and, in doing so, create something new.

In the data excerpt that follows, I read and plug into multiple texts: feminist poststructuralist theory, the transcript of my interview with Brenda, Barad's concept of intra-action, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of desire, the editors call to produce a pedagogical example of data analysis after coding, my ongoing work with Alecia Jackson, and so on. Reading these texts diffractively means that I have tried to read these texts *through*, *with*, and *in relation to* each other to construct a process of thinking with the data and with the theory. Rather than a "zeroing" in, a diffractive reading presents a spreading of thoughts and knowledge—of multiple readings that are much richer than an easy sense

produced by the reductive process of starting with coding and returning to experience.

While I illustrate with one data excerpt from one participant in this article, a similar process could be used if I worked with multiple transcripts at the same time. The excerpt that follows is from a qualitative study conducted with Alecia Jackson in which we interviewed 10 women professors and administrators in the academy who are first-generation college graduates. In response to an earlier question that the interviewer asked Brenda about what relationships in her life had changed as a result of becoming an academic, she provided the following response.

Brenda: I did end up divorced because he [my husband] wanted me to quit school. He was fine with me moving around the country when he needed to go to school, but he had a very hard time doing that when I wanted to go to school. I mean in theory, it's the old thing about it's easier believing in feminism than it is living with someone who's a feminist. Right?

Like most people intellectually understand that women are human beings too, but it's hard to live with it sometimes, and so I—looking back on it, it was like I was having an affair because I got to school, and I got so much positive feedback from people, and I absolutely loved everything I was doing. And of course, I spent a lot of time studying and writing and all of that stuff, and he just simply got jealous and would say things like, "I don't think you're smart enough to do this. You have to choose between school and me." And that kept up for a while, and I finally said, "I choose school because I'm a lot happier there."

Now I have a [new] partner, and while I was finishing the dissertation, it was like, oh, my God. He was like jealous too because I had to spend so much time in the final editing. . . . But he finally has kinda come around.

If I were to take a conventional approach to data analysis of Brenda's response, I could present a discussion supported with data excerpts from all the women who participated in our study of how relationships had changed after they became academics. However, reading through multiple theoretical insights, I posit a series of questions, or rather, the questions are produced through my thinking with various theoretical concepts that I then use to open up different questions and knowledge from my reading of Brenda's account and that of the other women from our study. Instead of focusing on the obvious nature of gender relations and sexist practices evident in the excerpt above, I go to the following theorists to pose a set of diffractive questions that sprout from the process of reading the theory and data through one another. Although there are many theorists and/or concepts that could be mobilized, I will focus on two for purposes of illustration, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *desire* and Karen Barad's concept of *intra-action*.

Deleuze and Guattari: *Desire*. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is about production. Desire's production is active, becoming, and transformative. It produces out of a multiplicity of forces. We desire, not because we lack something that we do not have, but we desire because of the productive force of intensities and connections of desires. Deleuze and Guattari prompt me to consider: *How does desire function to produce a "partner" for Brenda in the form of her intellectual peers or what does the presence of intellectual peers produce?* In other words, how does desire work, and who does it work for? What does desire produce and what are the intensities and connectives at work?

Barad: *Intra-activity*. It is the work of Karen Barad and others named "new materialists" or "material feminists" to ask how our intra-action with other bodies (both human and nonhuman) produces subjectivities and performative enactments not previously thought. Barad's work can be seen as an enactment of the ontological shift made by Deleuze in a

philosophy of immanence. Such a shift produces an onto-epistemological stance (Barad, 2007) in which practices of knowing *and* being cannot be isolated from one another but rather are mutually implicated and constitutive. To think of *knowing in being* that is neither merely a re-insertion of the material nor a privileging of the material is to “fashion an approach that brings the material back in without rejecting the legitimate insights of the linguistic turn” (Hekman, 2010, p. 7). Such fashioning prompts the following question: *How does Brenda intra-act with her world, both human and nonhuman, in ways that produce different becomings?*

To read the data diffractively through the insights of desire and intra-action is to engage questions about how Brenda is simultaneously producing material effects (leaving her husband for her intellectual lover as a production of desire) and how she is simultaneously materially and discursively produced (as becoming woman and as no longer wife). Susan Hekman (2010) wrote that “theories, discourses, have material consequences” (p. 90), and it is these intra-actions and transformative forces of desire that have much to say. A diffractive reading through the insights of desire and intra-action produces a consideration of how Brenda is both constituting and constitutive of the discourses perpetuated in a traditional patriarchal marriage:

He was fine with me moving around the country when he needed to go to school, but he had a very hard time doing that when I wanted to go to school. I mean in theory, it's the old thing about it's easier believing in feminism than it is living with someone who's a feminist. Right?

Such a diffractive reading also points to the material effects produced by her embrace of the intellectual life that is not just a life of the mind but, indeed, becomes a life of the body as well, for example, when Brenda recounted, “it was like I was having an affair because I got to school, and I got so much positive feedback from people.”

Brenda's description of the affair that she was having with her doctoral work evokes desire (in a sexual/sensual sense), pleasure (in an intellectual and sensual sense), and production (of satisfaction in the affirmation she receives at school and of change in her decision to leave her marriage). Deleuzian desire produces both an effect and affect—the action to forfeit the constrictions of her “material” relationship toward pursuit of the relationship produced in her intra-action with her intellectual lover. We can also go to Barad here to consider the materiality of texts. As Brenda encounters the thrill of the affair with her intellectual work, the “pages” and thoughts take on a material force. They are no longer merely words, and school is no longer merely a place of affirmation but a space in which affect and intensities are produced, both producing Brenda in a mutual becoming.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1972/1983) wrote, “There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together” (p. 2). Here they seem to be writing about the entangled nature of the material and discursive. To make this shift is to consider how the material is always already discursively produced and the discursive is always already materially produced. When Brenda talks during her interview recalling her former husband's indictment that she “isn't smart enough” or that she must choose between him and school, I read this not just as his speaking *against* Brenda but as an assault *on* Brenda. To make the shift from discursive to material↔discursive² is to read these words not merely as a construction based on gender stereotypes but as material, an assault not just on her intellect but a negation of her as a woman. This brings us to a place as researchers to consider how these constructions and interactions then are not just about bodies, nor just about words, but about the mutual production of both subjectivities and performative enactments.

Thinking Diffractively

Thinking with Barad's concept of intra-action and with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of desire helps us fashion an approach to data analysis that produces questions not possible otherwise. Reading diffractively in the above example prompts us to consider how discourses and texts materialize and, at the same time, produce subjectivities and performative enactments. Such a diffractive reading enables a thinking with the abstract concepts of Deleuze and Guattari to produce a different methodology in the form of a diffractive analysis. Such an analysis offers a way of considering the entanglement of bodies, texts, relationships, data, language, and theory that we are just beginning to understand and that presents the possibility of much productive potential for qualitative researchers after coding.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. One of us is a first-generation college graduate and the other the daughter of a first-generation college graduate (her father graduated from college on the G.I. Bill, but her mother did not attend college). The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill, was a law that provided a

range of benefits for returning World War II veterans, including payments of tuition and living expenses to attend college. By 1956, roughly 2.2 million veterans had used G.I. Bill benefits to attend college, many of whom would not have been able to do so otherwise.

2. I am using the double arrow to indicate the intra-action or that which is simultaneously materially and discursively produced, reflective of a key shift in material feminist thought. I do so as a gesture toward a removal of the hyphen or slash used to indicate the relationship between the material and the discursive without privileging one over the other. For a more lengthy discussion, see Jackson and Mazzei, 2012 Interlude VI.

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