

## Book-review

ALECIA JACKSON & LISA MAZZEI (2012) *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: viewing data among multiple perspectives*. London: Routledge. 150 pages, paperback: ISBN 978 0 415 78100 8.

### Introduction

Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei, authors of *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: viewing data among multiple perspectives*, introduce the aim of their book as an invitation to create a language and a way of thinking that can make it possible methodologically to grasp qualitative analytical movements in new ways. The target audience for the book is researchers (both experienced and novice) as well as students who may be new to theoretical analysis and qualitative methods. The book circles around theorists and concepts that can be characterized as belonging to a post-structuralistic framework, and the authors' main purpose is to create a process-oriented book and invite the reader into various philosophical concepts. In this spirit, the authors attempt to illustrate how it is possible to open up data analysis in qualitative research. Through a common data set Jackson and Mazzei encourage the reader to "plug" theory and data into each other and use theory to think *with* data by dissociating oneself from mechanistic coding; to avoid merely reducing data to a set of themes.

### A description of the book

The book is divided into eight chapters, beginning with a general introduction then moving on to offer an overview on how the authors approach 'analytical manoeuvres'. The six central chapters each present one of six theorists and theoretical concepts most readily associated with them. The theorists and concepts include: Derrida and deconstruction; Spivak and postcolonial marginality; Foucault and power/knowledge; Butler and performativity; Deleuze and desire; and finally Barad and material intra-activity. The ways Jackson and Mazzei move from one theorist to another is deliberate; the chapters follow each other in a genealogical order and connect one to another by 'forwardly stretching, expanding or distorting each other', as the authors explain it.

Each chapter uses the same data chunks derived from interviews with two first-generation academic professors, gendered as women, and given the pseudonyms Cassandra and Sera. Through the chapters Jackson and Mazzei in their analysis show how each theorist and associated concept opens up for certain research questions and scrutinizations. Through their analysis Jackson and Mazzei give examples of what questions might be asked, and how the concepts are generative in investigating these questions further.

The central tenant of the book is to remind researchers to keep in mind that theory and data are mutually constitutive. They constitute each other in certain ways and these ways have important implications for what can be said and done and how. After reading chapter one the reader is invited to choose the order in which to read the rest of the book. Each central chapter is constructed in a similar way. First, the authors start with an interlude that places the theorist in a theoretical landscape, what they seem to arise from and they also indicate how the theorist presented helps Jackson and Mazzei think in a particular way and therefore what kind of questions they make possible to ask and investigate. Yet every concept used is clarified in small, clear and delicate paragraphs, and each theoretical chapter is closed by giving ideas and suggestions for further readings on the theorist and their concepts.

In the last chapter the authors close the book by summing up and this is done with help from Karen Barad and her concept of diffraction.

### Does it work?

The authors intend to offer a challenge to qualitative researchers; I took up this challenge in my own doctoral research to see what happens if I try to work with the data in the ways Jackson and Mazzei invite me to. I was encouraged to ask myself: What will happen to my project if I follow the ideas and suggestions presented in the book? Does it provide me with any tools I didn't have before? Is it useful to my research since I am working with completely different research questions and informants?

In the following I will try to pursue these questions through three main attention points. My Ph.D is a qualitative study concerning how bullying is being constituted in kindergarten. My empirical data consist of observations among kindergarten children, interviews with a number of 4-to-6-year-olds, curricular, diagnosis criteria and legislation. Through my empirical data I try to scrutinize which social dynamics, intra-active processes and discursive, material and subjective forces that seem to constitute and characterise bullying practices in kindergarten. More theoretically, I draw on concepts from new materialism, post-structuralism and cultural psychology, therefore many of the theorists and concepts presented in the book are not new to me.

Jackson and Mazzei argue that instead of theoretical frameworks it can be useful to focus more specifically on theorists or even more concrete specific concepts. By drawing on different theorists and concepts the authors state that it can help challenge simplistic treatments of data and also challenge traps that make us sacrifice complexity in our analytical readings. Every concept opens up for certain ways of analysing and understanding the empirical data and keeping in mind that it may "*help us from being seduced by the desire to create a coherent and interesting narrative that is bound by themes and patterns*" (viii).

The authors provided me with a set of arguments about the importance of using several theories and concepts, which was exciting to me. In my Ph.D I attempt to be loyal to my empirical data, which for me means that I resist sacrificing interesting empirical emergences because they appear not to fit into a chosen theoretical framework. I want to do exactly what Jackson and Mazzei suggest.

However, in the book it is clear that the authors draw on their own backgrounds in poststructuralist theory. All the presented theorists are compatible with post-structuralism by neither contributing to the perspective nor drawing on it, but not all of the theoretical concepts I "plug in" together with my empirical data are easy to read together. This is a dilemma I think could be interesting for the authors to have discussed further: what to do when theorists and concepts don't fit together on an ontological and epistemological level. How can we read theorists and concepts diffractively? And how do we in that case, assuming it were at all possible, create another ontological and epistemological understanding?

Secondly, I noticed that Jackson and Mazzei outline that analysis is not done alone and that plugging in theory represents a human choice. Theory plugs itself into us as well, and makes us who we are in interaction with many other forces. As the authors describe, at some level it is possible to say that: "*Sera constituted Derrida, who constituted Cassandra, who constituted Foucault, who constituted Spivak, and so on*" (:4). Pursuing this further Jackson and Mazzei concretise the important consideration that data and theory is never finished once and for all, or presents a definite "truth" and "purity". When we plug data and theory together something else seems to emerge, and through the book it becomes clear that data and theory constitute one another in on-going practices.

When I plugged my own empirical data and theory into these ways of thinking I became a little confused by the authors' repeated claims that they want to push theory and data to their exhaustions or limits. This seemed to be in contradiction to one of their main points, namely that every time you read data and theories diffractively, and in different "machines" where the researcher is also a part, something new may emerge. The confusion strokes me when I plugged my own data into the same theoretical machine as Jackson and Mazzei. Doing that, it became clear to me that theories and data, through these ways of

thinking, can never reach any exhaustions or limits. Undertaking the approaches advocated by the authors will inevitably always offer open-ended practices, since theories and data always constitute one another in multiple ways no point of exhaustion can be reached. This is a point that the authors manage to illustrate all the way through the book, and which I find to be a vital contribution to the current debates about how to work with theory in empirical research.

Thirdly, I was thrilled when Jackson and Mazzei in the end of the book question contemporary ways in which qualitative research has to be presented. Many journals, as well as Ph.D committees expect a separation of theory and analysis. First, the theoretical framework must be unfolded and then a demonstration through analysis is offered to illustrate the ways theory helps to navigate a way through the data. This prevailing practice misses the important fact that empirical research and the articles and dissertations written are not a linear processes; conforming to presenting theory and research in this way complexities lose their sensitiveness in such a “clean-up”. Since I have been struggling with this exact dilemma in my own work, Jackson and Mazzei have provided me with new ways of presenting arguments and has given me ideas how to build up my dissertation in a way that is more sensitive so as to capture nuance and complexity.

More concretely, the book has given me suggestions about how to keep in mind *“that there is more in the idea of the possible than there is in the idea of the real”* (Deleuze, 1991:17) when doing qualitative research as well as helping me lift my theoretical arguments to a meta level. So thank you to Jackson and Mazzei for plugging in to my Ph.D project and opening my eyes to new perspectives, arguments and understandings. It is obvious that this book has provided me with new ways of thinking and doing research, and I will be delighted to recommend the book to both experienced researchers and students.

The book pushes understandings of doing qualitative research in new directions and will be helpful to create new ways of thinking and analysing. Further, the ideas offered provide the possibility for studies to be undertaken with greater methodological and analytical sensibility so that we take account of the ways research is done simultaneously and ultimately to allow us to resist linear models.

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