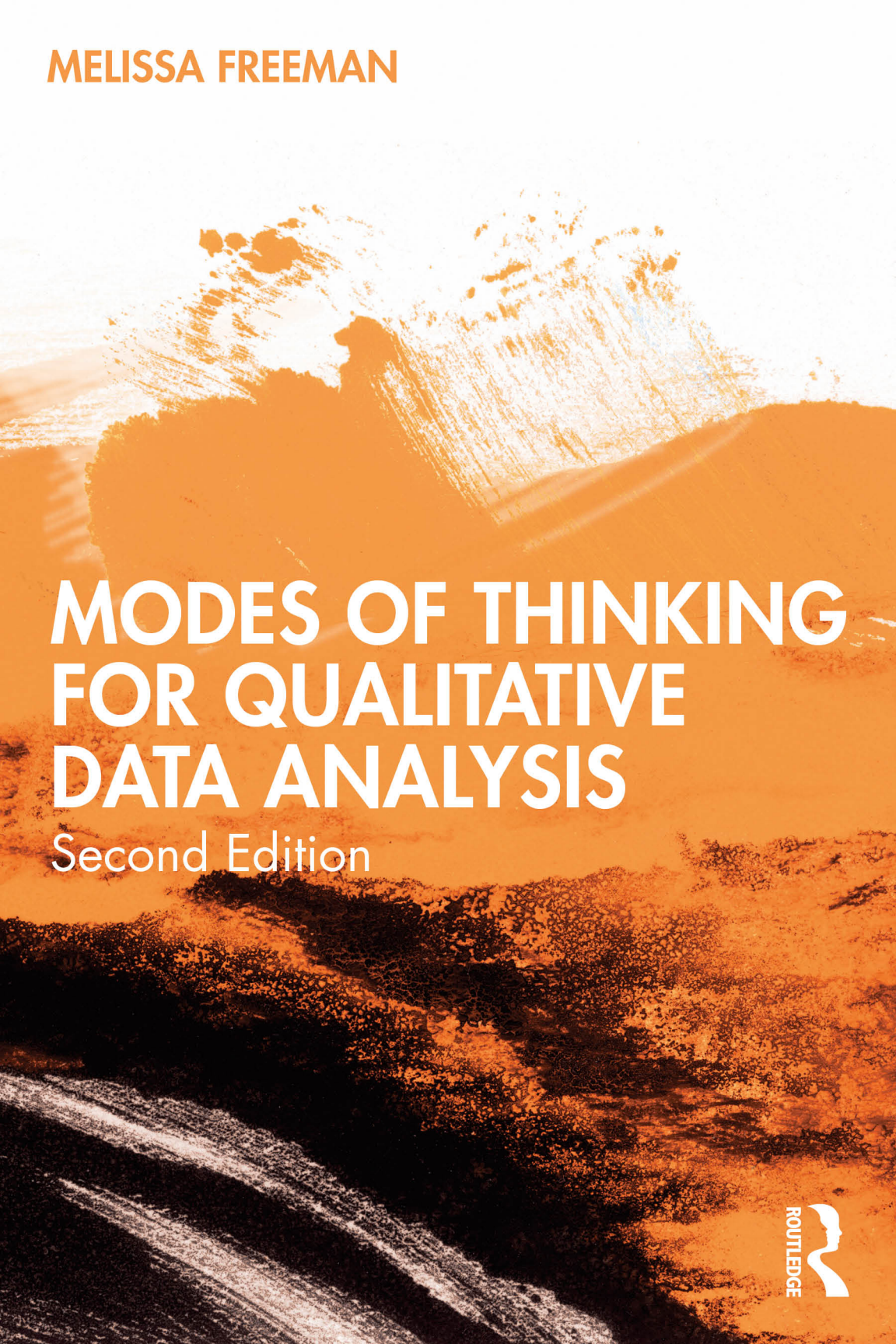
MELISSA FREEMAN



MODES OF THINKING FOR QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Second Edition

ROUTLEDGE

Modes of Thinking for Qualitative Data Analysis

Modes of Thinking for Qualitative Data Analysis offers a creative and comparative account of the conceptual and philosophical underpinnings of six prominent analytical movements used by interdisciplinary qualitative researchers: Categorical thinking, narrative thinking, dialectical thinking, poetic thinking, diffractive thinking, and decolonial thinking.

Each "mode of thinking" engages in a particular process for analytical sense-making. Every chapter describes core characteristics of the focal analytical movement along with examples to illustrate what that approach might look like in practice. By presenting these analytical movements in the space of a single text, the author not only highlights their unique contributions to qualitative analysis but also creates a structure from which to understand their strengths and challenges, as well as the kind of outcomes and realities each participates in shaping.

This book is a thought-provoking resource for experienced and novice interdisciplinary qualitative researchers seeking to deepen their understanding of the variety of ways qualitative analysis is, and could be, theorized and practiced.

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Second Edition

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For Tom

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Acknowledgments

Books are never written by a solo author. They are always the product of conversations (real and imaginary) with people, texts, the music one listens to, the art that surrounds us, the political and environmental climate one inhabits. Three missed deadlines later, I am generally satisfied with where the text landed and even though more could be done, I am ready to leave the more to the readers. I want to thank my colleagues in the Qualitative Research Program at the University of Georgia, Kathy Roulston, Maureen Flint, Giovanni Dazzo, and Morgan Tate. Their feedback, friendship, and encouragement kept me going when I doubted myself. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers for guidance about where to put my energies and to the many students who read, used, and commented on the first edition of the book. Finally, thank you Tom, Genevieve, Ava, Wilson, and Frances for allowing me to talk nonstop about "the book." And to my parents Susan and Socrates Litsios and my brother Ken, I truly miss our talks.

Preface

What is the movement of analysis? How do we move from a question, an interest, a hunch about something into a presentation or account of what we learned about that something through inquiry? Feminist theatre scholar Elaine Aston (2007) suggests that we suspend intellectual reflection and allow "the experiential, physical, material, embodied practice, one which brings mind and body together in the moment of 'making something'" (p. 14), to guide the creative process. Imagining thinking as a multimodal phenomenon allows me to jump right in to what I see as a core challenge facing those of us teaching and learning qualitative research. How do we make sense of the numerous analytical approaches used by qualitative researchers in ways that support our own unique research agendas, while also encouraging us to stretch our thinking and to imagine research designs that go beyond the confines of the limits of our experience and disciplinary training? This requires, I believe, the need to think differently about the theory–practice relationship; replacing the idea of there being a right way to carry out a research study—which assumes that once the right way has been identified all one has to do is follow it—with a conceptualization of research as design-in-the-making; an approach that embraces re-vision and rethinking, and necessitates an introduction to the many ways theory and practice intersect in design, and in analysis specifically.

What prompted the development of the first edition of this book (*Modes of Thinking for Qualitative Data Analysis*, 2017) was dissatisfaction with the resources available for teaching a general interdisciplinary course on qualitative analysis. While there were numerous and rich sources for common types of analysis, for example, thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis, narrative analysis, there were none that conceptualized the field of analysis from the analytical thinking strategies themselves; strategies whose distinct movements are embedded within these varied approaches but whose similarities and differences often become overshadowed by the methodological orientations shaping them. In addition, qualitative data analysis books taking a general rather than a specific approach to qualitative research design

presented, for the most part, a limited view of qualitative analysis as a procedural process involving coding, categorizing, and the creation of themes. I noted my indebtness to Joseph Maxwell and Barbara Miller's (2008) article on categorizing and connecting strategies for qualitative analysis, as well as Donald Polkinghorne's (1995) article on narrative configuration, as being good introductions to categorizing and connecting approaches to analysis, while also helping me recognize the need for a book that expanded students' analytical imaginations (Lather, 2006) beyond these two approaches. As such, I added three modes of thinking to categorical and narrative thinking, namely, dialectical thinking, poetical thinking, and diagrammatical thinking. Since the publication of the first edition, I have not only used the book in my own teaching of analysis but attended closely to how others have taken it up in their scholarship, and to the feedback received from students, colleagues, and reviewers about what they perceived as the strengths and limitations of the book. This second revised edition grows directly from the encouragement and constructive criticisms received. In this edition, I attempt to make more clear what I mean by "mode," "thinking," "data," and "analysis," among other value-laden concepts, as well as to establish my teaching philosophy in the introductory chapter, rather than as part of the conclusion. In addition, I have added decolonial thinking as another mode of thinking distinct from the others, and notably absent in the first edition. Decolonial thinking is a necessary addition, as it provides ways of thinking that are grounded in non-Western epistemologies. I have also revised the term poetical to the more grammatically correct poetic and renamed diagrammatical to the more graspable diffractive. As such, the six modes included in this edition are (1) categorical thinking; (2) narrative thinking; (3) dialectical thinking; (4) poetic thinking; (5) diffractive thinking; and (6) decolonial thinking.

Modes of Thinking for Qualitative Data Analysis are movements for thought. Each mode enacts a way of "thinking" or a process for sense-making. In my own grounding in the practical and dialogical approach to interpretation known as philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1981), the word *thinking* has a pluralistic connotation, distinguishing it from its usual association with rational or logical thought. In the context of the modes portrayed in this book, thinking unfolds in the shape of a particular analytic movement along with its related ontological assumptions and methodological aims, and cannot therefore be reduced to a formalized rationalistic understanding of thought (Williams, 2016). In a philosophical sense, then, *modes* are not styles, as the word might suggest, but possible configurations for thought and thinking. Additionally, *analysis* does not require processes of "segmenting and reassembling" (Boeije, 2010, p. 75) to be identified as analysis. Rather, analysis simply denotes the detailed examination of whatever information, or lack of information, might be

considered evidence for the claims made as a result of the analytic exploration. As Marcus Weaver-Hightower (2019) aptly notes, "Just distinguishing an event *as data* represents analysis" (p. 4). In this second edition, my aim is to try to make more visible the distinct movement embodied within each mode of thinking. Also new to this edition is the inclusion of more recent examples, more emphasis on the contributions made to each mode by underrepresented scholars, as well as the inclusion of analytic activities I have found relevant to teaching a particular mode. Repeating what I wrote in the first edition, it is impossible to account for all the rich movements for thought occurring within analysis; nevertheless, I believe these six ways of thinking present distinct movements for analysis that, while coexisting, are also critiques of one another.

Modes of Thinking for Qualitative Data Analysis, therefore, departs from the structure employed by other texts on qualitative research as it is neither a book on conducting qualitative research from beginning to end, nor does it provide procedures related to any one analytic approach, such as constant comparative analysis, or descriptions of the variety of methods linked to a specific methodology, such as narrative inquiry. Rather, the book seeks to describe the actions and aims engendered by each mode of thinking in order to deepen researchers' understanding of these actions and aims. It is a conceptual analysis of the movement enacted through analysis and affirms the belief that imagination is essential to the analytical task. I agree with Maxine Greene (2001) that it is "imagination that enables us to challenge the fixed and the taken-for-granted, that allows us to open windows in the actual and disclose visions of what might be" (p. 110). Imagination is fueled when we consume the ever-expanding design configurations dreamed up by researchers near and far, and it is nourished by our own attempts to think differently about this practice called research. It is only in conversations with evidentiary material, with others, in person or virtually, and through exposure to how others think about research across the diversity of disciplinary conventions, that we can begin to break away from the narrowness of our own experiences and disciplinary roots.

Importantly, this book provides a conceptual ground from which to understand a variety of analytic options, as well as identify the contributions different modes of thinking have made to the field of qualitative research. Furthermore, most studies use more than one analytical approach, which makes the presentation of these movements in one text fertile ground for qualitative design construction. In other words, understanding the actions inherent to thinking categorically or diffractively should enable researchers to consider how categorizing, for example, might contribute to other modes of thinking like dialectics. Putting these modes of thinking into dialogue with one another does not mean that their action or aim in each case will be the same. Quite the contrary, categorizing is going to serve a very

different function in content analysis than it would when determining the parts of a plot for narrative thinking or when being deconstructed or entangled in dialectical or diffractive analytic movements. In addition, placing these modes of thinking side by side furthers conversations about incommensurablity, and the issues that may arise when seeking to mix modes of thinking that support different paradigmatic worldviews. Overall, understanding different modes of thinking for qualitative analysis is intended to support a deeper attention to analytic decision-making. I hope this book provides students and instructors of qualitative research with a variety of approaches that support well-established analytical options as well as open up spaces to advance what Keisha Green (2020) calls "an 'otherwise' epistemology and ontology in educational research" (p. 116).

As an instructor, I do not believe we learn by being given answers to problems. We learn when we are given opportunities to dwell in complexities. I also believe that we learn about our own theoretical stance when we are pushed to consider a variety of, often contradictory, positions. My approach to teaching and learning honors all of the modes of thinking presented in this book. Although I have my preferences, my intention is to help the reader see and value this range and not to make "categorizing look bad," as one of my students requested I mention in the Preface to this book. Her comment is helpful to consider because each mode of thinking is, in many ways, a critique of, and response to, the others, and so it would have been easy to tell a story of progress as I moved from categorizing to narrative and on to decolonial thinking. Instead, these are offered as equally important approaches to analysis with the hope that a deeper understanding of the kinds of knowledge they produce will prompt researchers to think more critically about the limitations and potentials, and very different effects, each mode of thinking puts into motion.

Finally, I hope this book will demonstrate that attention to different analytic movements is a valuable approach to learning qualitative analysis. I purposefully do not tie the modes of thinking to any one theoretical perspective or methodology since theoretical perspectives and methodologies foster different designs depending on the specific problems they are meant to address. In other words, theories play a role in producing different strategies, but each strategy does not necessarily reflect back on, or represent the work of, any one theory. Rather than start from a paradigm, the modes of thinking were derived by examining the diversity of strategies carried out by researchers, who, by virtue of their unique relationship to the world, are always engaging with, modifying, and creating their own particular paradigmatic stances. As Shawn Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree) (2001) notes, research paradigms not only reveal what we accept to be true about the world but how we think knowledge about that world is obtained. Paradigms are shaped by what we have been taught and by the theories we read

while also being responsive to individual experience and one's dynamic location in a pluralistic world. A research paradigm, then, Cynthia Dillard (2006) explains, "becomes the way in which scholars, teachers and thinkers articulate their sense of life around them, make sense of and order the universe" (p. 61). Each mode of thinking put forward in this book provides a space for engagement—for moments of recognition and refusal—on the journey into articulating one's own paradigmatic mode of being, knowing, and becoming.

In addition, since the analytic movements described in this book are derived from close examination of approaches employing similar movements for analysis, rather than an introduction to a theorist's version of an approach, each chapter is an abstraction of these movements. In other words, none of the chapters are intended to stand in for the scholarly work of seeking out and reading primary sources from those individuals who participated in the shaping of these approaches as well as those who have criticized them. Furthermore, they are not the only analytic movements available to scholars. In other words, another scholar undertaking the task I set out to accomplish could have just as likely organized the field differently.

Modes of Thinking for Qualitative Data Analysis begins with an introductory chapter that situates the movement of thought at the center of qualitative analysis, and analysis at the center of research design. Chapter 2 then introduces the six modes and how they might be understood as distinct activities with particular aims. Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 each present a particular mode of thinking. These chapters begin with a general introduction to the mode of thinking followed by the characteristics that distinguish it as a unique analytic approach. Several research examples are then presented to illustrate how each mode of thinking *might* look in practice. They are not intended to be models, or even exemplars, for how that mode of thinking *should* be carried out. The intent is for readers to use examples to think critically about the possibility, as well as limitations, of different design decisions. Examples, whenever possible, are selected from high-quality, peer-reviewed journals and represent studies carried out in a variety of disciplines and on a variety of topics. Each chapter concludes with a general commentary about the perceived benefits and drawbacks of the mode of thinking in question.

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1 Introduction

Research intervenes in the way things are. As Harry Wolcott (1994) notes, "Everything has the potential to be data, but nothing *becomes* data without the intervention of a researcher who takes note—and often makes note—of some things to the exclusion of others" (pp. 3–4). Research, then, must be designed (Maxwell, 2013). Its design can be fluid, flexible and innovative, rigid, constrained and procedural, or, as in many cases, a combination of qualities. In all cases, however, it puts into motion a process that begins with the identification of a topic of interest and ends with an account of what was learned from inquiring into that topic. What makes analysis challenging to novice researchers is that what is often presented in introductory textbooks as a predetermined procedure is fraught with conflicting interests. These conflicts have multiple sources. Some of them are internal to the researcher, such as prioritizing certain voices or themes over others, having a preference for certain modes of representation, and bringing preconceived ideas about how the world works and the role research plays in its working. Some are external, such as needing to communicate in a predefined way to a committee or to other researchers in a field, or having to reexamine one's assumptions when faced with new insights gained from research participants or from reading material that directly confronts a taken-for-granted belief. And these negotiations do not end there. As Joseph Maxwell explains,

> You will need to continually assess how your design is actually working during the research and how it influences and is influenced by the context in which you're operating, and to make adjustments and changes so that your study can accomplish what you want.
>
> (Maxwell, 2013, p. 3)

So, from the start, it should be said that this is not a book about data analysis procedures. Although examples are used to illustrate the different analytical modes of thinking listed in the Preface, they should not be understood as

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the way to carry out any of these modes of thinking. They are not *models* of modes of thinking, but conceptualizations of the distinct analytic movements enacted when used by qualitative researchers (see Chapter 2 for an overview of these movements). Furthermore, analysis is an interactive process. Analytic strategies are not just applied *to* data; data prompt us, make us wonder, caution us, and coerce us even into thinking certain ways. Amanda Coffey and Paul Atkinson (1996) explain, "There is no single right way to analyze qualitative data; equally, it is essential to find ways of using the data to think with" (p. 2). Additionally, I agree with Margot Ely et al. (1997), who write, "We think it is more important for researchers to understand certain principles underlying qualitative analysis and to adapt approaches as the needs of their own data suggest rather than to attempt to follow any one approach too rigorously" (p. 163). The descriptions offered of each mode of thinking, and the examples used to illustrate that mode in practice, are intended to assist in those negotiations and adaptations, and to help researchers better assess and understand what they are doing when they engage in certain analytic strategies over others.

New and innovative approaches to qualitative research continue to grow and enrich the design possibilities for qualitative researchers. No longer do popular definitions, based on a naturalistic perspective of qualitative research as an interpretive framework that prioritizes the meanings and perspectives of participants, prove sufficient. In fact, in the third edition of *The Sage dictionary of qualitative inquiry*, Thomas Schwandt (2007) argues that the term *qualitative* "does not clearly signal a particular meaning or denote a specific set of characteristics for qualitative research" (p. 248), which suggests that introducing the field with a definition might mislead rather than clarify. I like Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln's (2011) statement that, even though it means "different things" in relation to different historical moments, "qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" (p. 3), because it leaves the aims, concerns, strategies, values, and identification of what counts as data wide open, and supports the aim of this book, which is to consider what each analytic approach might contribute to our understanding of the world. This is how I hope readers will approach the contents of this book, with a sense of wide-openness and curiosity. Furthermore, I assume that readers have an introductory understanding of qualitative research design and have been exposed to some of its theoretical variety. However, it is likely that even with an introductory understanding of qualitative research, readers will not be familiar with some of the approaches discussed in this book. That is fine. Just as Wolcott (1992) suggested, one should approach the collection of viewpoints offered in the first edition of the *Handbook on qualitative research in education* (LeCompte, Millroy, Preissle, Eds.) from the perspective of "a shopper" to see "what is available that may prove *useful*

to you" (p. 5); this book encourages readers to do the same: To think with these descriptions and use them as points of departure for further perusing, reading, and reflecting. However, while the book encourages adaptation, it is important to understand that as *modes of thinking* these configurations are not interchangeable, and cannot be switched like a pair of shoes. Nor can some of them be mixed without critically assessing the paradigmatic landscape embodied in each. Rather, each puts into action particular ways of seeing and organizing the world, and, as such, alters what is taken to be the world itself.

Why Focus on Analysis?

All social scientific research involves a taking stock of what is being worked with and a process for making a statement about the topic of inquiry. In other words, all research involves some sort of data identification, organization, selection, creation, recognition, and some sort of transformation of what is identified, organized, selected, created, recognized into an account about the topic of inquiry or "findings." The interaction between taking stock and writing an account can take many shapes, but it is always a "doing" since one is acting on what one defines as data in some way. When teaching analysis, I encourage students to think critically about whether or not they are working with the kind of data, or the analytic approach, that will get them where they want to be. As Wolcott (1992) states, "To conduct any inquiry, one must have both an idea of what one is attempting to accomplish and an idea of how to proceed" (p. 41). However, there are several challenges facing novice researchers that make assessing that task difficult. Briefly, these are:

1 Needing to do analysis to understand analysis
2 Understanding the relationship between analysis and interpretation
3 Understanding that writing is inseparable from analysis and
4 Gaining enough exposure to diverse conceptualizations of analysis to imagine new possible configurations for research

I address each of these in turn.

1. The Need to Do Analysis to Understand Analysis

One of the challenges of learning and teaching qualitative analysis is convincing novice researchers of the need to jump into the analytic work in order to determine what that work is going to involve. This seems counterintuitive, but we gain competence in most practices (e.g., riding a bike, teaching a class, or learning a language) through practice, and practice

involves trial and error, joy and frustration, and sometimes the need to go back to the drawing board and start again. An issue for novice researchers is how time-consuming this is, and they become concerned about wasting valuable time if what they are doing results in dead ends. In the context of higher education, where it seems more needs to be accomplished in less time, this is a real concern. Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts to analysis and, more often than not, when these are attempted the result suffers. For this reason, I encourage students to spend time with their data, and ask that they read whatever data they are working with line by line. I encourage them to engage in this close reading, and annotate, label, "code," question, and dialogue with what is there, without yet worrying what it might mean. I do this because the tendency for many is to leap into interpretation, to wonder why a statement was made, or an action was carried out, without really considering the range of statements and actions presented in the data and, conversely, those that are absent. In other words, the desire to interpret, to make sense of what something means, overshadows analysis or the careful study, the "loosening up" (Harper, n.d.), of its complex components.

This tendency is one I actively try to interrupt and I explain to students, even those who do not believe in coding (see St. Pierre and Jackson (2014) for a compelling argument against coding), that the thinking enabled by coding as a process of taking stock of what is there, does not bind them to carry out their analysis in any predetermined way. Here I am simply talking about the process of annotating one's data based on its content and not the development of categories that coding is believed to assume (Boeije, 2010). Maggie MacLure (2013), while rejecting coding as a predefined process, argues that this dwelling is important, that a certain giving over of oneself to the process may open up unforeseen connections and potentials. As a result of taking this stance, students have acknowledged that the process not only allowed them to see things in the data not previously noted as significant, but also realize that, until pressed to do so, they were not actually reading or attending to the data, but glossing over it.

I also have students try out narrative mapping, critical discourse analysis, diffractive analysis, among other options. Again, this is not about engaging in one of these approaches in depth, but getting a feel for what a different approach might help reveal. Doing analysis is challenging because it pushes students to closely interact with the materials from which they are expected to contribute new understandings on a topic of interest. Engaging analytically also reveals the "hermeneutic" nature of the process. That is, there is no predetermined method for interpretation; rather, interpretations are formed within the dialogic movement of analysis itself. This open-ended interpretive movement can be unsettling for students who often wonder whether they are going about it in the "right" way. To me, this question indicates that they are thinking about what they are doing as they are doing

it, and I remind them to take note of their decisions because these provide the foundation for principle number two.

2. The Importance of Understanding the Relationship Between Analysis and Interpretation

However frequently stated in introductory texts on qualitative research, the mantra "show, don't tell" or, as Adrian Holliday (2007) calls it "showing the workings," is not easily adopted by novice researchers. Novice researchers have difficulty understanding that their analytical work creates the justification, provides the evidence for the interpretations that result from that work, and sets the stage for the organization and style of presentation for those interpretations. Furthermore, even when they do understand this relationship, they have trouble knowing how to show their procedures and decisions in a way that supports the presentation of the results—in whatever form they take or however understood. Complicating matters are concerns for what counts as "meaningful coherence" and "significant contribution" (Tracy, 2010) in relation to qualitative research design (Denzin, 2011). The lack of agreement for what constitutes quality research (Denzin, 2011; Freeman et al., 2007) generates much angst among novice scholars who, more often than not, are navigating and seeking to synthesize multiple, often competing discourses (e.g., disciplinary, personal, theoretical, methodological, institutional, programmatic, and so on).

As mentioned in the Preface, I come to teaching from a philosophical hermeneutic stance (Gadamer, 1976; Grondin, 1994). What that means is that when we "read" data, theory, the world, our own embodied responses, and so forth, we are always engaging in a practical interpretive process; that is, what we understand from these engagements takes shape in relation to a practical issue or to something that matters within the horizons of its past, present, and future. To understand this position, just consider the various perspectives on the interpretation of texts. Is the "truth" of a text what the author intended within the historical context of its authoring, what the reader subjectively imposes on the text, or the outcome of reading the text at a particular place and time (Smith, 1993)? From a philosophical hermeneutic perspective, I do not believe we can ever know the intention of an author, or to that extent, the intentions of an interviewee behind the words spoken. Nor do I believe I am simply imposing my subjective view on the text since that would assume the text is having no effect on me, when in fact the words used, the structure of each sentence, my reasons for having selected this text, and so forth, already carry their influential matter within them. Reading is just the beginning of the path we create in our inquiry into complex matters (Freeman, 2024). What analysis helps to accomplish is a revitalization of *praxis* as a creative activity that is always theoretically imbued and necessitates some form of critical

examination toward the meanings produced in the process (Lather, 1991). In other words, I am always reading or analyzing from within the dynamic discourse of a "'matter' under consideration" (Gadamer, 1976, p. 71) and from within a particular time and location. Rather than doing a methodology called "phenomenology," for example, I believe it is more analytically fruitful to continuously question how the theoretical assumptions of phenomenology are being carried out within the activities of a particular study. Simply naming a study phenomenological and listing its core tenets is not sufficient. Working from a particular set of phenomenological assumptions within the practical activities of a research study develops the understanding that no two qualitative studies will be the same because each puts into play a unique relationship between theoretical assumptions and practical applications. Furthermore, the diversity inherent to qualitative analysis inspires adaptation in practice (Jarzabkowski, 2004), suggesting that a better grasp of the differences between modes of thinking should help provide support for the arguments justifying the design decisions being made. In other words, when theories and methodologies are mixed, they may emphasize some guiding assumptions over others or necessitate the creation of new rationales altogether. In addition, the process of adapting any approach means that concerns over correct procedures or over validity cannot be resolved prior to analysis; the argument must be developed in the midst of the work itself.

3. The Essential Role of Writing

Writing, like analysis, is made up of false starts, careful thinking, narrow and broad wanderings, and untraceable leaps of imagination. There is no right way to go about doing it and no guides for when to end. There are plenty of examples to ponder and draw from, but in the end each study takes on its own direction and shape. A challenge for researchers is taking seriously the role writing plays for thinking analytically. Max van Manen explains:

> It is in the act of reading and writing that insights emerge. . . . It is precisely in the process of writing that the data of the research are gained as well as interpreted and that the fundamental nature of the research questions is perceived.
>
> (van Manen, 2006, p. 715)

Writing is itself a skill that is learned best when practiced, but, unfortunately, many of the conventions learned in educational contexts work against the kind of writing qualitative analysis encourages (Ely et al., 1997). Fortunately, most introductory texts on qualitative research emphasize the importance of writing (e.g., Holliday, 2007; Maxwell, 2013), and many texts provide an

orientation toward writing that disrupts the artificial separation of literary and scientific writing (e.g., Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Richardson, 2000); a separation that has long been repudiated in the field of qualitative research. Holliday (2007) suggests that qualitative researchers think of themselves as writers, since "the very act of interpretation within qualitative research is itself integrated with the act of writing" (p. 15).

Writing serves analysis in multiple ways. It is "thinking on paper" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 20). For example, writing "memos" is a crucial part of analysis since it pushes us to articulate insights we are having in the moment; insights that may otherwise get lost. Memoing is "a practice of logging thoughts regularly so that the researcher documents his or her [or their] impressions, reflections, questions, and ideas as they evolve throughout the study" (Boyle & Butler-Kisber, 2019, p. 396). And annotating texts in different ways can open creative pathways for analysis (Shelton & Coogler, 2025). In addition, exposure to a variety of ways research is written about, and written up, helps students understand that "by writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it" (Richardson, 2000, p. 923). Finally, arguing against writing as a writing of something else (i.e., data or a representation of findings), St. Pierre (1997) views writing as thinking, noting, "As I write, I think, I learn, and I change my mind about what I think" (p. 408). In other words, writing produces knowledge, meanings, provocations, rather than representing these things.

Regardless of the perspective taken on writing or of being encouraged to start writing early, even "before actually engaging in fieldwork" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 405), novice researchers have a difficult time embracing this practice. Writing continuously throughout the process of analysis, and writing in a *variety of ways* is one way students become more comfortable with the uncertainties of the research process. These variety of ways can include *visual journaling* (Scott Shields, 2016), *conceptual collaging* (Marshall, 2008), or creating other kinds of *visual artifacts* (Langley & Ravasi, 2019) meant to support the deepening of understanding involved in analysis.

In addition, writing is an important part of reflexivity and helps develop awareness of the role scholarly writing plays in the production of discourses about people (Smith, 2021). Just as there is no neutral analytical approach, there is no neutral writing style, and writing, like analysis, puts into practice ways of thinking about the world and its people. Furthermore, Holliday argues, all writing "is a product of a discourse community which cannot avoid ideology" (p. 15), so research writing needs to be as transparent as possible within the ideological commitments made by the researcher. A better understanding of this interaction supports researchers' journeys into theory and theorizing in ways that resonate with their multiple identities (Sánchez & Hernández, 2022).

4. Gaining Enough Exposure to Diverse Conceptualizations of Analysis to Imagine New Possible Configurations for Research

In order to embrace, and make use of, the theoretical range available, researchers need exposure to the diversity of approaches being put to use by interdisciplinary qualitative researchers, as well as a sense of the history of the field and its ongoing fight for legitimacy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In other words, qualitative researchers should understand that research is "a technology of justification, meaning a way of defending what we assert we know and the process by which we know it" (Kincheloe et al., 2011, p. 169). Different forms of analysis make different claims to knowledge and result in different "truths." Without exposure to diverse conceptions of knowledge and truth, researchers run the risk of becoming deluded by their own worldview; believing it to be the one, and only, way to truth. To deepen our understanding of our own beliefs requires an awareness of those of others. To think with, and through exposure to, difference, however, means approaching different ideas, styles of writing and theorizing, not as deviations from some (falsely) presumed center, but as something unique and worthy of consideration within its own epistemological articulation. Awareness of theoretical heterogeneity encourages thinking, a point Emmanuel Eze (2008) made in a philosophical study on reason and the conditions that bring about acts of thought, stating, "Diversity constitutes a necessary condition of thinking in general. Without diversity there is no thought" (p. 3). That is, philosophical reasoning takes shape within complex and often contradictory experiences with diversity. A curriculum, then, that hopes to foster thinking must be inclusive of a wide range of qualitative research traditions, interdisciplinary topics, and cultural voices (Preissle & deMarrais, 2011).

Providing a diversity of perspectives accomplishes at least two things. First, it disrupts what Audre Lorde (1984) calls a "mythical norm," and helps us develop our own critical reflexivity for how we inadvertently, or intentionally, participate in the construction of difference. A mythical norm is a norm against which we construct our identities, such as in the United States, being white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and so on. Lorde cautions, however, that

> those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practising.
>
> (p. 116)

Using a wide range of research examples that demonstrate competing theories in practice promotes awareness of the strengths and limitations

of different design decisions and the complex ethical issues embedded in them. Second, and related, an inclusive curriculum contributes to the development of diversity by providing models for students who may not have been aware that their way of thinking and viewing the world was either valid or practiced and taught by others. Providing a range of "whos" and "hows" from which to develop one's own thinking supports the idea that one needs exposure to diversity to imagine analysis differently.

Qualitative research is inherently pluralistic; as researchers change, it changes. Since interpretation opens up the multiplicity of meaning, the hermeneutic task is not the outcome of the interpretive act, but to develop a better understanding of the act of interpretation itself. This is not a straightforward process and "involves the ability to *listen* for the subject matters that speak through the other's voice" (Davey, 2006, p. 69). In other words, to change, we need to be willing to have our own understanding transformed in the process. Critical and *reflexive* engagement with diverse perspectives on meaning can help us attend to perspectives we might ordinarily dismiss, listen for what they reveal about their—and our—perspectives, and develop a better understanding of how each participates in the constitution of the world. Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1996) explains, "to be reflective does not demand an 'other,' while to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny" (p. 130, as quoted in Pillow, 2003, p. 177).

Ultimately, what I hope to achieve in my teaching is fostering awareness and understanding of the nature of learning itself, which I see as occurring when we engage openly and critically with the way our received disciplinary and methodological practices exert their influence on the work researchers do. As participants in the meaning-making discourses of society, research is a hermeneutic act, and gives shape to the very worlds it reflects upon. Although all modes of thinking have strengths and limitations resulting from their core characteristics, in many cases it is their uncritical use by uninformed or careless researchers that has resulted in some form of injustice to participants either in the study or through dissemination of the results. This suggests that an awareness of the core issues associated with particular uses of common strategies is a necessary part of reflexive research. Wanda Pillow (2003) argues that reflexivity "not only contributes to producing knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of our social world . . . [it] also provides insight on how this knowledge is produced" (p. 178). By demonstrating how the strategies we employ as researchers participate in the structures that give some knowledge legitimacy over other forms of knowledge, researchers are better prepared to work with this complexity in ways that (hopefully) support the acknowledgment and legitimation of diverse ways of thinking and reasoning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Eze, 2008).

Inherent then to my teaching, and one of the pedagogical principles of the Qualitative Research Program at the University of Georgia (UGA), is a belief in the value and power of interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity best represents the multifaceted field of qualitative research which "cross-cuts disciplines, fields, and subject matter" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Programs such as the one at the UGA support cross-disciplinary conversations by serving an interdisciplinary body of students, and drawing on a cross-disciplinary range of theoretical and empirical literature. However, this does not mean that the methodological choices taught, and made in practice, are equally valid. So, while I stated in the Preface that I do not want to make any of the modes of thinking look bad, neither do I endorse a relativistic position. Instead, I believe that relativism obscures the very real effects that particular research approaches have had on what individuals and groups believe to be true, meaningful, valued, and valid. Research, like teaching, is a political act, in that, as researchers or instructors, we make conscious decisions about what to include, exclude, emphasize, and strive for. The six modes of thinking described in this book not only advance a critical awareness of the conceptual diversity inherent to the field of qualitative research, they also intentionally serve to disrupt the "qualitative positivism" (Prasad & Prasad, 2002, p. 6) narrowly endorsed by mainstream funding sources (St. Pierre, 2006). A focus on the movement of analysis engendered in each mode of thinking makes visible the epistemological orientation and ontological assumptions they put into practice, and the ways in which they each shape the world in distinct, and often incompatible, ways.

None of the assumptions described here are novel, but they do require a belief that time spent thinking, reflecting, processing, discussing, and engaging with one's data is worthwhile. Like most instructors who incorporate hands-on activities in teaching, using class time productively is a source of worry, especially if students feel uncertain about the process, stare blankly into space, or panic about wasting time and needing to start all over. However, I believe the resulting discomfort is worthwhile and, in many ways, part of the process for fostering an environment for reflexive dialogical practice since it pushes all of us, myself included, to better articulate our stances on different aspects of the research process. Furthermore, I believe this kind of environment is especially important to instill in introductory research courses because, as Zygmunt Bauman explains, the task of the researcher in postmodern times—characterized by pluralism, uncertainty, and the rejection of shared norms—is undergoing dramatic change:

> To be effectively and consequentially present in a postmodern habitat sociology must conceive of itself as a participant . . . of this never ending, self-reflexive process of reinterpretation and devise its strategy accordingly. In practice, this will mean in all probability, replacing the

> ambitions of a judge of 'common beliefs', healer of prejudices and umpire of truth with those of a clarifier of interpretative rules and facilitator of communication; this will amount to the replacement of the dream of the legislator with the practice of the interpreter.
>
> (Bauman, 1992, p. 204)

Therefore, it seems more important than ever to gain a better understanding of how these multiple strategies are being taken up, interpreted, reorganized, merged, transformed, or disguised in everyday practice, including the institutional and disciplinary practices of inquiry. Teaching for diversity through reflexive dialogue and practice provides a space for qualitative researchers to try out, understand, interrogate, disrupt, rethink, and re-entangle the paradigmatic diversity while simultaneously recreating what is understood as individuals, society, language, concepts, and the world.

Thinking, Not Thought

A focus on thinking is not new. Philosophers, ancient and contemporary, have considered thinking to be a fundamental way of being in the world (Dahlin, 2009). Thinking is an intrinsic part of who we are, how we approach the world, and how the world itself gets produced. Focusing on thinking, therefore, is meant to bring to awareness the way different thinking modes enable different orientations; modes we inhabit and take on for a variety of reasons in our encounters as beings in the world. We cannot do this critical work outside of thinking, since, Eduardo Duarte (2009) states, thinking is itself "the activity that counters the legitimation of existing forms of knowledge. . . . Thinking differently produces a difference *in* the world because thinking is itself an encounter *with* difference" (p. 250). In qualitative research, thinking orients us to the task of being researchers, which is always at risk of being reduced to some sort of method, a process that can be followed. This book argues that this kind of reduction hurts our understanding of what it is that researchers do. So even while describing the modes of thinking as distinct, it is not for the purpose of fixing them as methods, but to enable their circulation, adaptation, and even, their transformation.

While I acknowledge that it is difficult, and often impossible or unnecessary, to make thinking visible, I believe awareness of its configurations is an important part of thinking analytically. And although thinking cannot be taught, as it is itself "an activity expressing itself in many forms" (Dahlin, 2009, p. 548), it can be encouraged. I agree with Bo Dahlin (2009), who writes: "Contemplative practice is a way to learn to think, that is, to learn *to live consciously* in the *activity* of thinking" (p. 551). This conscious engagement requires a stance toward learning

that simultaneously embraces reflective rumination and an active, critical engagement with different presentations of meaning. Providing an introduction to this selection of modes of thinking, however partial, is one way to encourage that engagement. The next chapter describes the six modes of thinking in relation to each other before these are each presented in the chapters that follow.

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2 Modes of Thinking

The next six chapters describe key features of six modes of thinking for qualitative data analysis. These are (1) categorical thinking; (2) narrative thinking; (3) dialectical thinking; (4) poetic thinking; (5) diffractive thinking; and (6) decolonial thinking. In this section, the modes of thinking and the kinds of questions each mode of thinking might encourage are briefly introduced using a data excerpt from my dissertation. As mentioned earlier, modes of thinking are movements given to thought that create distinct entry points and paths for analysis. A point to make clear is that while there is not one definition of qualitative research, I am working from the assumption that its aim is not to emulate methods of the natural sciences. Therefore, the modes of thinking presented here are best described as post-positivistic. As Pushkala Prasad (2005) states, post-positivist researchers "tend to approach questions of social reality and knowledge production from a more problematized vantage point, emphasizing the constructed nature of social reality, the constitutive role of language, and the value of research as critique" (p. 9). Another point already stated in the Preface is that these modes of thinking are abstractions. That is, they describe analytical movements rather than theoretical perspectives. In other words, I would expect researchers drawn to narrative thinking, for example, to seek out and study the contributions made by narrative scholars to provide support and direction for their design and analysis. The term "narrative thinking" simply points to an analytical movement I have identified as being commonly used by qualitative researchers whether they call their research "narrative" or not.

For my dissertation, I conducted multiple interviews with 11 white parents from different social class backgrounds in order to examine the discourse of parental involvement through a close analysis of the narrative accounts of parents engaged in that practice. I was particularly interested in the way social class mediated parents' understandings, values, and actions regarding their involvement. So as to avoid conflating the mediating effects of social class with those of race, the parents I recruited all had children attending a public elementary school in the Northeast United States, which,

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at the time of the study, served a population described on its website as 100% white. The story selected here to introduce the modes of thinking is from Ellen's[1] second interview with me. Ellen was a married working-class mother, who graduated from high school and had taken some college-level classes. At the time of the study, her three sons were in grades one, four, and six. During the interview, I asked her about her activities and experiences with her children's school. When asked what she least appreciated about the school, she told a story in which she felt communication between her family and the teacher was lacking. Without prompting, she explained that what she valued most was open communication with school personnel, and she told this story to illustrate what she meant:

> My youngest son really acted kooky one day when there was a substitute and Mr. LeBlank (assistant principal) called me in. . . . This was the situation that happened. Anytime my son was told he couldn't do something he expects that the entire class can't do it; that what was good for one is good for the other, cause it goes the same way in our house. If they're all fooling around and they're not supposed to be then they're all in trouble. . . . Well there was this toy that my son had brought to school and he was asked to put it away, and he put it away. And then there were two other boys playing with toys, and so when the substitute asked my son to put it away, my son said, "well when you're asking me to put it away, what about them two over there, they're not allowed to have them out either." "You're being disrespectful," the substitute said. My son said, "you're being disrespectful to me because you told me to put it away and those two kids are over there playing with it and you're not telling them to put it away." He said, "you go back to your desk and put your head down." When my son went back to his desk to put his head down there was a book, the teacher's book, so he went to put it back on the teacher's desk, and he was sent to the principal's office because he was out of his chair. And you know the substitute teacher is a man who wears his pants hiked up a little high, well my son was imitating him down the hall on his way to the principal's office, so when he got to the principal's office, [Mr. LeBlank said] "I need to call your mom," and he didn't really know the whole story. . . . So I went down. I said, "yup, I'll be right there." So I said "I'm going to take my lunch break early. I just need to go over to Riverbed school." And when I got there, we sat down, and I said to my son, "you need to tell me exactly what happened, and don't lie to me. Just tell me the truth, I'm not going to be angry, we'll just talk." Well he went on word for word everything that happened, and Mr. LeBlank called the substitute teacher down, and my son retold the story, and he said, "well yes that is what happened." So Mr. LeBlank was great. He said "well you need to make sure that if one child is playing with

> a toy and is asked to put it back then the other ones need to put theirs away too because (son) does have a point." So the whole situation was resolved. But you know I listened to what my son had to say and I feel yes he was disrespectful in the sense of making fun of that teacher, and I said "we do teach you that you need to respect people and you should ask for respect from other people, but the way that you said it wasn't so cool with the substitute teacher." So we talked about this thing, and it was a done deal.
>
> (Freeman, 2001a, pp. 142–143)

What can one story tell us about parental involvement? While I believe it can tell us a great deal, the answer to this question is also determined by how our analytic questions and strategies give shape and direction to our findings. Since each mode of thinking prioritizes certain questions over others what counts as findings in each case will be articulated differently.

Categorical thinking serves a classificatory function for analysis. Its movement is one akin to sorting playing cards by suits, number, or color. This is the kind of thinking that seeks to determine what something is, or is about, and to organize the identified entities into categories. However, categories do not create themselves, and are often made up of other identifiable categories, so boundaries need to be established. Reading Ellen's story, I might ask: What is this an instance of? What other stories from Ellen, or other parents, does it belong with? For example, Ellen's story could be labeled "open communication" to align with how Ellen introduced it, or it could be labeled "school discipline practices" or "parental intervention" if I was grouping school disciplinary practices together or times when parents intervened somehow. Categories sort units of data into groups, so depending on what the other units of data suggest, I might be interested in the parts of the story that show family values, parents' ability to leave work at short notice, parents' accounts of their relationship with the school's administration, parents' interaction with their children, rule enforcement at home and at school, and so on. Categorizing helps to separate out units of data that can stand alone often as a way to contrast or relate them to other units of data. These labels can be fairly stable, or they can be fluid and temporary, depending on the overall design and purpose of the research.

Narrative thinking focuses on the identification or construction of theories of action or plots. Its analytic movement is to emplot, that is, to connect points, events, actions to other points, events, actions. Narratives connect and provide coherence to seemingly disparate events. This need not be a linear movement since the emplotment of narrative action can take many forms, from analyzing the structure of narratives, such as the

way Ellen tells this particular story, to analyzing her stories in search of "threads"; particular plotlines that are woven through a person's various accounts (Clandinin, 2013, p. 132). I might ask: What elements and actions are being brought together to form this story? Or, what kind of plotlines appear over and over in Ellen's stories, and what do they tell us about the kind of person she is presenting herself to be? In this way, we might look more closely at the way she constructs her actions, those of her son, the teacher, and the assistant principal, and consider what is being accomplished in this telling, what kind of action moves the plot forward, what is its effect or meaning. Since narrative thinking helps researchers understand the actions and meaning-making processes of individuals, I might look across all the parents' stories in search of a better understanding of what matters to parents overall, what they believe about education and their roles as parents, or what they consider important to tell me, the researcher, about involvement.

Dialectical thinking seeks to uncover inherent tensions or contradictions that are believed to exist in humans as well as in societies, and put these in dialogue with each other for transformational purposes. Its analytic movement is to enact transformative processes without negating the contributions or identities of those involved, whether these contributions are imparted dialogically or through examination of discourse. While Ellen's story seems at first to be one of cooperation rather than conflict, another way of looking at this story is to wonder what kind of continuous effort on the part of Ellen, or the assistant principal, was needed to develop this type of collaboration or relationship. Furthermore, Ellen's presentation and her emphasis on family values and listening to her child suggest that she believes these actions and beliefs may not necessarily be usual in other families or in how discipline is generally practiced in school. I might, therefore, focus on visible and hidden conflicting beliefs, and ask: What diverse values and beliefs are being negotiated in this account? What role does dialogue play in moving what was a punishable event into one with a solution or a desirable outcome for those involved? Dialectical thinking emphasizes transformation through a continuous process of negotiation, so I might look at how Ellen positions herself in relation to others in the story, and how this position might be the result of negotiating less-than-desirable conditions for herself or her sons, and the belief that if these actions were not taken, things would return to a less-than-desirable state. Looking beyond Ellen, a dialectical researcher might wonder what these efforts look like for all the parent participants, and how parental intervention, in whatever form this takes, puts into motion different relationships for different people. Overall, a dialectical researcher would be interested in how practices such as parental involvement benefit and oppress those involved.

Poetic thinking focuses on those hard-to-reach felt experiences that transcend specific contexts and create forms of expression that expand and challenge the imagination. Its analytic movement is one of transfiguration. When we read a story like this one told by Ellen, we enter the flow of human understandings, experiences, and feelings; an aesthetic space that is our own, while also revealing threads and fragments of human meaning that transcend time and place. Researchers using poetic thinking strategies do not ask what this story means; rather, they ask, how does this story participate in the unfolding flow of meaning? What aspects of its telling contribute to a deepening of understanding of what it means to exist and perform as humans, and which aspects endure beyond this telling, to be told elsewhere, and in other forms? Poetic thinking asks us to blur the boundaries between art and research, to reject predetermined conceptions of what it means to "know," and to create research performances that expand and challenge the imagination. It asks us to allow for dramatic performances, for example, how this episode reveals "a path to consider what it is we humans are up to" (Richardson, 1998, p. 461), or creates a way to work metaphorically with the content of the story. For example, from Ellen's story, I could expand analytically the idea of a "done deal" as being both the manifestation of the outcome of a business negotiation, and the distribution of a good like truth or justice. Or I could consider the way the story forms around a concept like the sharing of responsibility as a larger human theme. Poetic thinking works with excesses of meaning that are only limited by the imagination and artistry of the researcher.

Diffractive thinking seeks to disrupt conventional ways of thinking about human and nonhuman interactive spaces or networks. It asks that we look beyond the familiar narrative construction of a story and fold aspects of its telling into less considered entities—affects, the atmosphere, material objects, and so forth—in ways that create novel assemblages of moving and rigid formations, junctures, and concepts. Diffractive thinking involves looking at change through intra-acting materializing bodies (Barad, 2007), rather than through preconceived concepts or forms of classification. Concepts such as "affect," which "refers to changes in bodily capacity" (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 80), or "desire," which is understood "as a coming together of forces/drives/intensities that produce something" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 92), give some idea of the direction these analytic questions might take. I might ask: What are Ellen, her story, my research desires, the discourse of parenting, involvement, educational achievement, social class, the notions of sharing responsibility, and so on, bringing into existence, becoming together? What is being produced at these agentic junctures when considered as a collective, and how does this production help me rethink the landscape of

involvement? What makes diffractive thinking hard to describe is that it rejects familiar systems of meaning, disrupts hierarchies between human and nonhuman agencies, and rethinks language and concepts as agential forces.

Decolonial thinking forwards an Indigenous paradigm (Wilson, 2001) for analysis. Its movement is to (re)map (Goeman, 2013) Indigenous cosmologies of place and time to further Indigenous decolonizing efforts. As a non-Indigenous scholar, it would be unethical of me to appropriate Indigenous theories or concepts without consultation with Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, decolonial thinking activates its own metaphysical and epistemological space of meaning so it is incommensurable with the Western epistemologies that have given shape to the other modes of thinking I have described so far and those I drew on to support my dissertation design. An awareness of Indigenous and decolonial approaches, however, would prompt me to be more attentive to the identities of the participants in my study, the place where this study is being carried out, and the impact of the study on Indigenous peoples whether they are participants in the study or not. Since I did not ask Ellen, I do not know her unique history, where her family is from, or where they call home, whether her family lineage is Native to the area or part of settler colonial history. Nor did these topics come up in her stories. Although I did not seek out Indigenous protocols or guidance (Battiste, 2008) when conducting my dissertation, having a better understanding of its roots and histories would have encouraged me to consider more critically the aims and scope of my study and who ultimately benefits from its findings. Centering decolonial thinking orients researchers to reflect on the impact of their research beyond the narrow theoretical and methodological boundaries typically endorsed in Western-derived articulations of research design.

The Modes of Thinking in Dynamic Relation

History has shown that humans do not just live out their lives as passive recipients of some sort of fatal existence. From the beginning, being human has involved wondering about what this being is about. Our participation in the world has not only been an active one but played a large role in shaping, for good or ill, the very existence and world we wonder about. As a result, there are many ways to research the world, each putting into practice different beliefs about the aims of research, beliefs about reality, and the strategies meant to connect the two. Analysis allows us to enter history, that is, to enter the changing flow of meaning, and participate in its construction. Separating this flow into six modes of thinking that have distinguished themselves from each other through a variety of strategic moves is one way of making

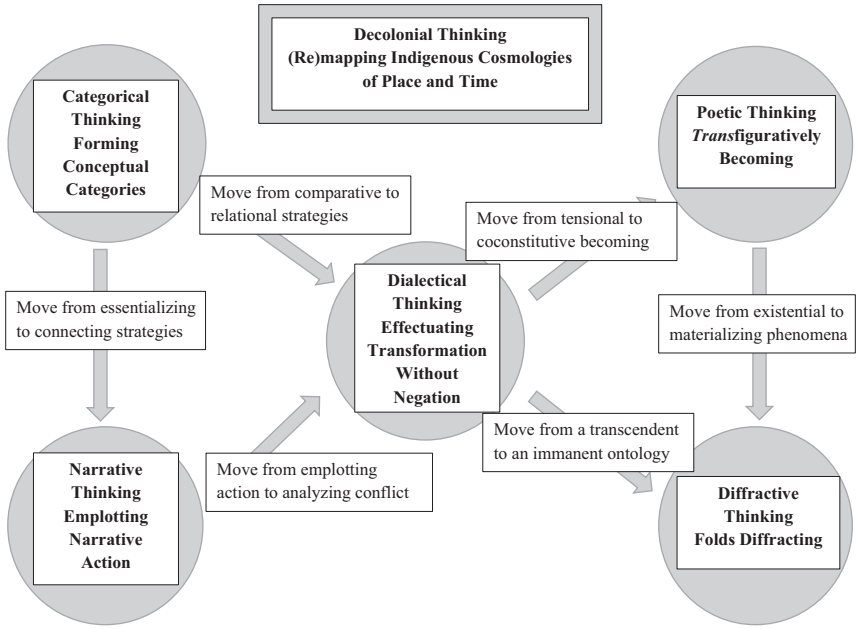

Figure 2.1 The Modes of Thinking in Dynamic Relation.

sense of this participation. The six modes of thinking, then, offer six distinct movements for qualitative data analysis. Table 2.1 outlines their purpose and focal actions. However, their development is the result of coexistence and conversation, and is, therefore, best understood in dynamic relation, as they gain their identities from their critique of each other, as much as from what they each emphasize. Figure 2.1 depicts the modes of thinking in relation.

In dynamic relation, one can begin to see the kinds of issues that have haunted social science researchers. What is the world made up of, and how should one inquire into it? Is data something to name and compare, emplot or experience, transform or create? How should researchers engage in the activity of research? To what extent should these activities seek ways to minimize the effects of research itself? Or, on the contrary, since research produces effects, what effects are most, or least, desired? How should researchers intervene in history's shaping? Schwandt (1993) states, "What sets contemporary debates in social science apart are not methods debates but debates about the very substance of social science—large-scale disagreements about the nature, meaning, and purpose of human activity, including the activity of human inquiry" (pp. 10–11).

As Table 2.1 and Figure 2.1 demonstrate, there are varied perspectives on this issue. My exploration of the ways research has been carried out

Table 2.1 Modes of Thinking for Qualitative Data Analysis

	Categorical Thinking	*Narrative Thinking*	*Dialectical Thinking*
Overall Purpose	To organize data units based on definitional or identifiable criteria.	To understand human meaning-making as unique theories of action.	To activate theories of change that rectify oppressive structures and relations.
Analytic Movement	Forming conceptual categories.	Emplotting narrative action.	Effectuating transformation without negation.
Focus of Analysis	To determine what something is in relation to the conceptual scheme that gives it meaning.	To examine the way disparate events get connected in a particular context from one or more points of view for one or more audiences.	To uncover inherent tensions that exist in individuals and societies and put these in dialogue with one another for transformational purposes.
	Poetic Thinking	*Diffractive Thinking*	*Decolonial Thinking*
Overall Purpose	To express hard-to-articulate aesthetic meanings.	To diffract human and nonhuman encounters within the transversal folds of pure immanence.	To further Indigenous self-determination and futurity through intergenerational stories and storying.
Analytic Movement	*Trans*figuratively becoming.	Folds diffracting.	(Re)mapping Indigenous cosmologies of place and time.
Focus of Analysis	To reanimate the sensual, embodied, immersive modes of experiencing and knowing that reach beyond situated meanings and keep understandings in flow.	To reactivate the revolutionary potential of not-yet thought entanglements of tangible and intangible, rigid and fluid, human and nonhuman entities.	To champion Indigenous resurgence, sovereignty, and ways of being, living, and knowing.

revealed that this conceptualization has undergone many moves—more than can be addressed in any one book. It also made apparent the pivotal role dialectical thinking played in these theoretical conversations. As a theory of change, dialectics helped transform the aim of research from a focus on what is, or has been, to one where research is assumed to be an intervention; a focus on what could be. But, more importantly perhaps, dialectics revealed the potential of the generative space opened up by dialectical friction itself, a generative space that has spawned a wide variety of dialectical approaches, and provided the ground for theorists seeking to transcend the perceived limitations of dialectics itself. As I illustrate in the chapters on poetic and diffractive thinking, these less familiar conceptualizations for research are dissolving familiar concepts, such as science and art, qualitative and quantitative, actual and virtual, and rewriting the field in creative ways. In addition, decolonial thinking refuses integration into modes of thinking that have contributed to colonial domination and exploitation, and forwards an agenda of "radical resurgence" for and by Indigenous scholars and peoples (Simpson, 2017). Ultimately, therefore, I hope a deeper understanding of the diversity that already exists in the field of qualitative research will not only support and inspire new forms of thinking for social science research, but further an appreciation for, and willingness to learn from, diversity itself.

Before turning to the modes of thinking in the following chapters, let me make a few final points:

1 All modes of thinking described in this book already exist in the world and are used, to a greater or lesser extent, in everyday living and interacting. These modes are useful to us and serve us in many ways (e.g., when we try to identify what something is: Is it a dog or a bear, an insult or a joke? When we are moved by a story of survival. When a complex work of art takes us beyond our own situated experience, and so on).
2 Different cultures, disciplines, and groups of scholars have valued some modes over others. Some of these groups exist in comfortable dialogue with one another, while others strive to overcome rigid hierarchies of acceptance.
3 The presentation of these modes in this way is the result of my engagement with the theoretical landscape. These could have been organized differently, and there are likely other modes and analytical approaches that do not fall into any of the ones I have identified in this book.
4 In practice, the modes of thinking are sometimes combined. My decision to describe them separately is to illustrate their unique analytic movement and demonstrate the way certain ontological and epistemological assumptions have given them shape. When used in combination or to do

the work of a particular theoretical perspective, these assumptions often shift and change. My hope is that the descriptions provided in this book will encourage readers to recognize when, and how, these modes of thinking are being used, how they might be combined if commensurate, and how to identify when they are incommensurable.

5 Finally, the terminology I use to name the modes of thinking do not necessarily match the definitions assumed by other scholars. Although the descriptions I provide of the modes of thinking are drawn from the methodological and theoretical literature, they purposefully reorganize that literature in ways that can be challenging to recognize. For example, narrative inquiry can be approached categorically, dialectically, poetically, and so forth, but in each case a different movement for analysis is forefronted. Similarly, poetic inquiry can be approached dialectically, narratively, and so forth, highlighting different strengths which do not necessarily match my conceptualization of poetic thinking. One limitation of this book, then, is that it does not easily align with prevalent ways of organizing qualitative research. This is also one of its strengths since it offers a different way of understanding qualitative research theorizing and can reveal the benefits and drawbacks of conventional ways of organizing the field of qualitative research.

Note

1 All names of the parents used throughout the examples in this book are pseudonyms, as are the names of school personnel and the school itself.

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3 Categorical Thinking

Introduction to Categorical Thinking

Categorizing is something we do every day when we identify or classify something as belonging to a particular group. It is an essential way of making sense of the world and an important part of social living. Any kind of language acquisition from birth onward immerses us in learning categorical as well as variable linguistic forms (Nardy et al., 2013). As children learn to speak, they simultaneously learn the names of things around them, and during this process take note of the characteristics inherent to the thing named. This ability is astonishing, and very young children are able to transfer the mental image of a dog seen on a walk to one seen within the pages of a book. They also quickly understand that everything has a word attached to it, and they will ask for this if they cannot recall it or do not yet know it. Furthermore, children, just like adults, are capable of using language in abstract and nonliteral ways (Gardner, 1974). Just consider everyday occurrences such as when my 32-month-old grandson called himself a "pillow" when his 10-month-old sister laid her head on his chest. It is clear that the word "pillow" was not understood literally as being simply the soft squishy thing for one's head but also as part of an action that defined it as a pillow. When thinking categorically, a pillow can belong to the category of "bedding" and to the category of "supports for one's head" and to other categories such as a "tightly stuffed material object." To name something, then, simultaneously frames it conceptually. This dynamic relationship between things, language, preexisting categories, and our ability to come up with new ways of conceptualizing and organizing the world, is at the core of categorical thinking. Concepts and categories are inherently linked.

In their study of thinking, psychologists Jerome Bruner et al. (1956) conclude that a concept could be defined as "the network of inferences that are or may be set into play by an act of categorization" (p. 244). More recently, psychologists Sarah Solomon and Anna Schapiro (2024) use "the term *concept* to reflect the internal representation of a *category*, which is

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a set of ideas or items in the external world" (p. 458). In other words, a concept "refers to a mentally possessed idea or notion, whereas a category refers to a set of entities that are grouped together" (Goldstone & Kersten, 2003, p. 600). Expanding upon the example of the pillow, when I glance around my living room, I see a table covered with books and a couch. However, I could conceptualize these objects as a brown wooden surface, multiple colorful laminated surfaces, and a woven cotton, beige surface. Alternatively, they might be conceptualized as the thing I put my feet on, the things I read, and the thing I sit on. Each of these designations provides an account of these objects but draws on or constructs different systems of classification. Each focus on different properties of the objects results in different organizational arrangements. A notable feature of categorical thinking, then, is that there is no predetermined system of classification for establishing a relationship between categories and concepts. Once formed, however, they play a crucial role in predefining what we see, how we think, and how we organize the world (Allport, 1954). Categories impose "coherence on the social world by partitioning items into groups" (Vergne & Wry, 2014, p. 58), creating a familiar structure we come to believe is representative of our being (Blanchette, 2003).

The fact that there is no standard way in which people make use of the multiple, mostly unconscious, and often competing, perceptual, cognitive, linguistic, and cultural factors available, makes categorization seem like "an act of invention" (Bruner et al., 1956, p. 2). The ordering and referential powers of categorical thinking continue to fuel research in areas such as philosophy, linguistics, and psychology, forming cross-disciplinary fields such as cognitive science, which studies questions of perception and the workings of the mind (Frankish & Ramsey, 2012). For example, why is it that although humans can perceive the detailed hues and textures of a summer garden or the fine wrinkles of skin on a laughing face, they are content to register "garden" and "joy" to define them? Bruner et al. explain:

> The resolution of this seeming paradox—the existence of discrimination capacities which, if fully used, would make us slaves to the particular—is achieved by [hu]man's capacity to categorize. To categorize is to render discriminably different things equivalent, to group the objects and events and people around us into classes, and to respond to them in terms of their class membership rather than their uniqueness.
>
> (Bruner et al., 1956, p. 1)

For cognitive scientists, categorizing is the human capacity for quickly discriminating from the available information the required level of detail for the task at hand. Bruner et al. (1956) observe that "in the case of most categorizing, we attempt to find those defining signs that are as *sure* as possible

as *early* as possible to give identity to an event" (p. 13). Categorizing, then, is considered an adaptive mechanism that involves both an anticipation of the consequences of making an error and an assessment about whether more information is needed. As Shari Tishman (2017) notes, "Categories vary widely across contexts, but their basic purpose is the same: they function as a lens to selectively focus the flow of perception on certain features" (p. 10). Going back to the example of the laughing face, a quick scan of the situation was probably all that was needed for the face to be interpreted as joyful rather than one which appeared threatening; however, in another context, that interpretation might need revising. Building on the interrelationship between language and culture and the categories used by a society, cognitive scientists have examined topics, such as learning, cognitive and linguistic development, stereotyping, and communication, all of which have had a direct or indirect influence upon the theories and categories used by social science researchers.

In addition, the prevalent use of classification systems and strategies across disciplines has engendered another significant area of study, namely, research on categorizing: Its developments, uses, possibilities, and consequences (e.g., Clair et al., 2019; Hannan et al., 2019; Risberg & Pilhofer, 2018; Vergne & Wry, 2014). This research not only discloses the widespread use of procedures for categorizing, classifying, cataloguing, and archiving, but brings into visibility their normative effects (Clair et al., 2019; de Langhe & Fernbach, 2019; Risberg & Pilhofer, 2018). Since categories are used to describe, interpret, and represent the world, and, therefore, play a key role in the way all aspects of that world are named and organized, categorizing is not a neutral activity. What these studies show is that categorizing can have harmful and beneficial effects, sometimes simultaneously, pointing to the complexities involved with decisions involving categorization (Risberg & Pilhofer, 2018). What is also revealed is the tendency for systems of categorization to reinforce existing hierarchies and divisions rather than confront them. As such, the study of categories scrutinizes the interrelationship between categories and the social formations dividing and defining those who inhabit them (Goldstone & Kersten, 2003; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). In their overview of symbolic and social boundaries, for example, sociologists Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár (2002) describe "social boundaries" as the enactment of "symbolic boundaries," and symbolic boundaries as the "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality" (p. 168). Categorical thinking, then, is a process that involves identifying conceptual categories for analysis. This makes categorical thinking a core strategy in qualitative research even when it is not being used as a primary analytical strategy.

Characteristics of Categorical Thinking

Categorical thinking serves a classificatory function for analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995). It involves, first of all, viewing something *as* an identifiable something (Bruner et al., 1956; Goldstone & Kersten, 2003) and then sorting those somethings into categories. That is, when we identify something as a "pillow," "garden," or "joy," we are also simultaneously considering "the category of which an item is a member" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 10). Categorical thinking attends to the criteria and processes through which items are grouped into categories. The most common procedure for developing categories is to compare items and note their similarities. "Similarity-based relationships involve resemblances or common features . . . which can be independent of time and place" (Maxwell & Miller, 2008, p. 462). This process, which Polkinghorne (1995) calls seeking a category's "specific difference" (p. 10), orients researchers to those features of the item that define it as an instance of, or allow for the creation of, a particular category. Depending on the aims of a study, the discipline or context, and the proclivity of the researcher, the features considered worthy of note, will vary widely.

Thinking categorically, therefore, includes consideration for the particular type of equivalency used to group entities and their level of detail. For example, in a study of teachers' attitudes toward standardized testing, further differentiation based on age, gender, ethnicity, years of experience, teaching philosophy, geographical location, and so on, may or may not be relevant. Rationales for, or against, consideration of demographic or other units of identification, while considered an expected part of any good study, are extensions of categorical thinking. Choices about what to include often depends on what each might contribute analytically to a study's findings. For example, since my dissertation focused on how the discourse on parental involvement showed up in the accounts of parents from different social classes, I had to come up with the criteria by which I would determine how to sort the parents I interviewed into social class categories (Freeman, 2001a). Wanting to contribute to an existing literature on parental involvement, I did what many researchers do and used criteria that other researchers had used, in this case drawing on Annette Lareau's (1996) determinations of social class categories. To explain my choice and its limitations, I added a note about how this classification strategy could not account for the diversity within categories that the parents in my study embodied and experienced. Therefore, part of the decision-making process involved in categorical thinking is to explain one's choice of categories, the boundaries or criteria of inclusion for said categories, the limitations of these choices, and how these categories will be used in the overall study design.

A second characteristic of categorical thinking is that most categories, by virtue of being, or made into, instances *of* something, are therefore at the same time *not* instances of something else. "Categories are at work in the expectations, purposes, and assumptions we bring to any experience, allowing us to "see" certain things rather than others" (Tishman, 2017, p. 10). This characteristic of categorizing may seem self-evident but it is by determining its relationship to other items or units of meaning that the overall conceptual structure underlying the categories is made visible. For example, philosopher Rom Harré (1966) notes that Aristotle derived his system of categories "from the kind of questions that he thought it was possible to ask about anything" (p. 15). These questions included questions about substance, quality and quantity, relations and networks, among others (Moravcsik, 1967). Harré argues that a key quality of categorization is that it is "flexible, since it seems evident that we might find ourselves asking a new and different sort of question about any subject matter, and this would provide us immediately with a new taxon of concepts" (p. 15). In other words, categorizing is a dynamic process dependent on the questions directing the classificatory movement.

In qualitative research textbooks, the creation of categories is often achieved through an analytic process called *coding*, which involves tagging or naming a unit of data with a *code* which allows us to compare it to other units of data similarly or differently coded (Charmaz, 2014). This classificatory movement can be approached inductively. That is, by closely examining the data itself, relevant labels and categories are discerned and brought forward as potentially significant (Bendassolli, 2013). Coding data can also be approached deductively, which involves the creation of predetermined categories usually derived from theory that are then used as codes and applied to the data (Bendassolli, 2013). In an inductive approach, meaning is generated from close analysis of data, whereas in a deductive approach the data act to confirm or refute the assumed theory. While neither of these analytical approaches can ever be applied in a pure manner (since inductive codes are also guided by the context and aims of a study and the application of deductive codes relies on distinctions made by the researcher and the level of certainty offered by the data), qualitative researchers can benefit from understanding their analytical strengths and limitations (Bendassolli, 2013). An analytical exercise that can prompt an understanding of the value and/or hindrance of coding for analysis is offered by Sally Galman (2013) through two homework assignments: Deductive buckets (p. 30) and inductive buckets (pp. 44–45). I have found that when students are asked to carry these assignments out, it not only helps them understand these distinct forms of reasoning (commonly understood as theory-driven and data-driven) but has them engage immediately with the impossibility of approaching data from only one of these stances. Rather, what is revealed

is the messiness of the analytic process, the power theory has in shaping what we look for and see (even when theory is not believed to guide the process), the ambiguity of language, and the codependence between theory–researcher–data regardless of which form of reasoning is prioritized. What these activities generally disclose is the active role played by the researcher and the way their decisions shape the coding process as well as its outcomes. Kathy Charmaz explains:

> We *construct* our codes because we are actively naming data—even when we believe our codes form a perfect fit with actions and events in the studied world. We may think our codes capture the empirical reality. Yet it is *our* view: we choose the words that constitute our codes. Thus we define what we see as significant in the data and describe what we think is happening.
>
> (Charmaz, 2014, p. 115)

This co-construction is informed by the researcher's disciplinary training, personal experience, worldview, commitments, and so forth, what qualitative researchers often call a researcher's subjectivity or positionality (Berger, 2015; Peshkin, 1988; Sybing, 2022). That is, the process through which researchers sort and label their data is embedded in a network of intersecting beliefs, experiences, theories and concepts, all of which play a role in the analytical decisions made.

This points to a third characteristic of categorical thinking—which is to connect the particular to the general, conceptual, or formal (Polkinghorne, 1995). Bruner (1985) describes this as a paradigmatic way of thinking. Paradigmatic thought fulfills the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation. It is based upon the operations by which categories are established, instantiated, idealized, and related one to the other in order to form a system (p. 98). That is, when researchers sort items or instances based on their similarities and differences, they are drawing from a range of embodied or assumed understandings about the world. Howard Becker's (2007) description of making sense of a series of photographs illustrates the analytical process involved in categorical thinking. He states that when we compare something to another we form tentative hypotheses about what the image or thing is about. We do this not only based on similarities and differences between one image, or thing, and the next, but also with a particular purpose and audience in mind. By carrying out what Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) call the *constant comparative method,* categories are slowly delineated and organized into an abstract representation of the studied phenomenon or topic. Through this comparative process, categorizing sorts data units into groups, gives these groups a conceptual identity as being a "this-kind-of-thing" rather than a

"that-kind-of-thing," and determines the relationship each group will have to the others. As Charmaz (2014) advises, analytical categories should be "as conceptual as possible—with abstract power, general reach, analytic direction, and precise wording" (p. 189). The aim of this process is "to generate general knowledge from a set of particular instances" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 14). Categories thus formed become the basis for a study's findings, which are then disseminated through formal and informal means. In this way, categories, whether reproduced or created, enter the flow of symbolic boundary making (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), shaping the discourses and practices that structure the social world. Figure 3.1 depicts this relationship.

Categorizing supports theories of knowledge that assume that conceptual ordering of the world is not only attainable but useful for descriptive, explanatory, and, in some cases, predictive purposes. Identifying some things as fruit, others as disciplines, landscapes, affects, languages, and so on, allows humans to manage and navigate the world's never-ending flow of features, imagined or real. By producing "cognitive networks of concepts" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 10), humans make sense of the diversity and similarity of human responses, recognizing instances as examples of broader human phenomena. This is an interdependent relationship: Conceptual categories are used by researchers to explain certain behaviors, perceptions, and events and, in turn, these behaviors and events can serve to alter the parameters and meaning of a particular category. This last point is one of

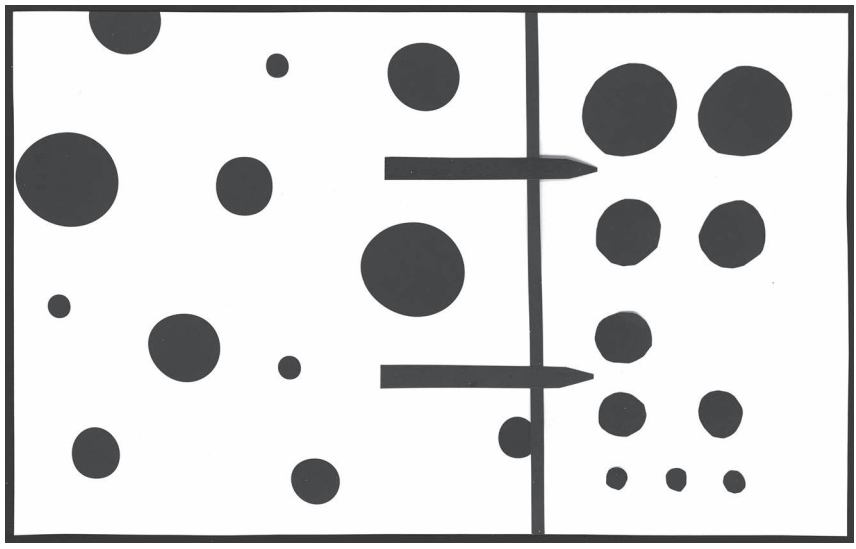

Figure 3.1 Forming Conceptual Categories.

the primary strengths of categorical thinking as well as one of its issues. While categories are not stable units (just look up the many changes the US Census Bureau has made to the categories used to classify the federal data on race and ethnicity), they are often treated as such. Since a category is a decontextualized and simplified representation of a complex phenomenon, it is not always clear what other factors may have played an important role, making their use across contexts and cultures challenging and often problematic, a point expanded upon in the last section of this chapter.

Categorical Thinking in Practice

Categorizing is a useful strategy for qualitative analysis and is applied in numerous ways. In general, the focus on categorization for analysis is to highlight salient features of the studied phenomenon, organize these into categories or themes, and describe or interpret their meanings as these relate to the aims of a study. Researchers working categorically decide what to compare but also how and what to label the units of data being compared. Labeling choices vary depending on whether the researcher is primarily approaching the analysis inductively or deductively. Negotiating the relationship between preestablished concepts and dimensions, and a new set of data, therefore, is part of categorical thinking. I am purposefully not including abduction in this section because in general researchers claiming an abductive approach draw inferences that go beyond the evidentiary content of identified categories or are putting into action analytical approaches I would not classify as primarily categorical (Brinkmann, 2014; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). For example, the reason I consider grounded theory illustrative of a narrative thinking strategy (next chapter) is that the end goal of the analytic process is the construction of an emergent theory that accounts for surprises and novel connections generated through analysis of the data (Charmaz, 2008). The categories, if they are accounted for, are used to support interpretive relations or the pursuit of inferences that then become central to how the findings are presented. Charmaz (2008) explains, "Abductive reasoning aims to account for surprises, anomalies, or puzzles in the collected data. This type of reasoning invokes imaginative interpretations because the researcher imagines all possible theoretical accounts for the observed data" (p. 157) while also assessing the nature and strength of the evidence provided to support these accounts. The separation I am making here is more heuristic than how categorizing occurs in practice since theorizing as a result of categorization straddles both categorical and narrative thinking strategies (see Grodal et al., 2021, for an overview of active categorization strategies for theory building). For the purposes of this chapter, and to illustrate categorical thinking in practice, I sought examples of studies where categorical thinking took precedence over other analytic strategies covered in this book.

As part of her interest in labor market stratification processes, Lauren Rivera (2012) conducted a case study on the hiring decisions of elite banks, management firms, and law firms. Her data collection strategies consisted of interviews with 120 individuals involved in the hiring process from three different firms as well as conducting 9 months of field work in one firm. During that field work, she was able to observe all recruitment events except for the job interviews themselves. Rivera provided a brief subjectivity statement to address how who she was might have affected the interviewees' responses: "I am an Ivy League educated female from a mixed ethno-religious background, which may have primed respondents to emphasize high-status cultural practices (which they did) and favor diversity (which they did not)" (p. 1005). Using an open, inductive analytic approach, she coded for all instances where evaluative mention was made about a candidate. It was during this process that the concept of "cultural fit" began to take shape. She explained that originally she had intended to focus her study on gender in hiring but, after noticing the relevance of fit in the hiring practices that she was observing, she began to also attend to this trend in her analysis. Having determined that employers based their assessment of applicants upon some sense of likeness or compatibility, she had then to understand what kinds of similarities were most important. By comparing data units describing types of similarities with units describing their meaning and use, she was able to identify three categories of evaluative processes used to determine similarity: (1) "organizational processes" based on "cultural fit"; (2) "cognitive processes" based on the "valuation of candidates' qualifications"; and (3) "affective processes," which provoked interest and excitement in the interviewer (p. 1006).

Categorical thinking supported Rivera's aims of understanding the criteria used in the hiring practices of these elite firms by helping to sort through the evidence and organize it to support the findings. Constructing categories allowed Rivera, first, to identify cultural fit as a significant concept, second, to organize the data units into representative categories, and third, to rank these categories based upon their frequency of use. It was in this way that she was able to conclude that cultural matching was a significant factor in the decision-making process. In the presentation of the findings, she provided an account of all three processes as well as considered alternative explanations for the findings.

Another example of categorical thinking is provided by Susan Cadell et al.'s (2022) exploration of the reasons bereaved persons gave for obtaining a tattoo to memorialize a deceased person. Because the authors were interested in the meanings memorial tattoos have for those who seek them out, the authors' theoretical framework was grounded in Herbert Blumer's (1969) theory of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory premised on the assumption that humans make meaning

by interpreting their social actions and interactions within specific contexts, thus requiring methods that are oriented to the meanings social actors make themselves (Blumer, 1969). Designing the study within this theoretical framework meant that the authors approached the participants' decisions surrounding memorial tattoos as a socially meaningful act when coping with the grief of losing someone. A flyer describing the study was circulated on social media by a bereavement network and included a phone number for potential participants to initiate contact. Interviews were conducted with 41 participants. Most participants were between the ages of 40 and 60. Relationships with those who had died varied and included close family members as well as friends. "The causes of death of the people memorialized included suicide, stillbirth, accidents, overdoses, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), complications from illnesses (e.g., stroke, adult, and pediatric cancer). In five of the interviews, the cause of death was not specified" (Cadell et al., 2022, p. 133).

Interview questions were piloted prior to developing the semi-structured interview guide used in the study and focused on asking for a description of the tattoo and its location on their body, as well as questions about its meaning and connection to grief. Photographs were also taken of the tattoo if participants allowed. The analysis of the data was conducted using a constant comparative approach, which meant comparing data incidents with other incidents seeking commonalities and differences across participant accounts. In this way, similar accounts were grouped conceptually "into preliminary categories" (p. 134). The authors also mentioned using memos and diagrams to document their process as a way to map out tentative relations between categories and subcategories, deepening their understandings of core categories. Categorical thinking guided the inductive process of combining categories until two themes for presenting the findings were established: "inking the bond and challenging stigma" (p. 134). These themes were then presented in detail including photographs of various tattoos.

Categorical thinking allowed the authors to sort through the variety of information and attend to analytical units that connected the data to the research purpose. The authors noted that the presence of the tattoo as the focus of the interview altered the discourse around bereavement. Rather than center their accounts around the death of the loved one, the tattoo forwarded a more celebratory account of the relationship each participant had with the person who died, thus keeping the presence of that connection alive. Using an inductive approach to coding allowed the authors to keep their interpretations adjustable as they identified something as being a member of a category, described variations within categories, and then organized the categories under two overarching themes to convey the findings. By presenting these themes in detail, the authors stated being able to

contribute significantly to grief studies by demonstrating the importance of memorial tattoos for bereavement.

Although interviewing is a common method for eliciting participant accounts, documents and observations can also be analyzed categorically. Content analysis is another analytic strategy that makes use of categorical thinking. Qualitative content analysis was used in Nahia Idoiaga Mondragon et al.'s (2024) study of drawings created by children in Northern Spain. Children, aged 6–12, attending summer camp during COVID-19's post-lockdown period were asked "to draw whatever they wanted relating to the health epidemic they were experiencing" (p. 382). The aim of the study was to use a child-sensitive approach to collect data on how children understood and chose to represent the COVID-19 health crisis. Visual research provided an alternative way to access how children incorporated the information they were exposed to. The theoretical assumption guiding this study was that drawings function as a discursive means to express and communicate thoughts and interpretations. A total of 345 children participated in the study, with slightly more girls participating than boys and with an average age of 8.65. In total, 345 drawings were uploaded into a popular computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program and analyzed for their visual content. The researchers focused solely on the elements and patterns depicted in the drawings, which helped them create a category system to discuss salient features. Frequency counts helped the researchers organize the 949 identified elements into several broad categories. For example, "COVID-19 pandemic symbols" was reported to be the most frequently depicted category, followed by "emotions experienced during the pandemic." These categories were followed by "actions carried out by children during the pandemic" and the impact the pandemic had on "social relations" (p. 383). The authors concluded that children were well-informed and visibly influenced by the media and other discourses surrounding them, and suggested that educators might want to provide play spaces or art activities for children to process this information.

By sorting data units into categories and identifying the salient feature of each category, each one of these studies advanced understanding of a significant topic in their relevant fields. In the next section, I address some of the strengths and limitations of using categorical thinking as the primary mode of analysis.

Deciding on Categorical Thinking for Analysis

It is impossible to conduct any kind of research without using some form of categorizing. Just the act of selecting a topic, recruiting participants, and deciding on relevant concepts involves categorization. As already noted, the movement of categorical thinking is that of identifying conceptual

categories, which involves sorting individuals, features, objects, statements, and so forth, into categories based on some kind of likeness or resemblance (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). As such, categorical thinking is a useful strategy when identification of significant patterns, and comparisons between entities or groups are the aim of research, and has provided support for research seeking to deepen the understanding of concepts deemed significant to a particular field. In general, then, categorizing helps researchers:

1 Compare items to other items
2 Reduce the complexity of a data set
3 Identify something as a member of a group
4 Classify objects according to some defining attribute

When categorical thinking is employed as the primary analytic strategy, it is important to be aware of the strengths and limitations of categorizing in order to approach the research with a good understanding of its inherent dangers (de Langhe & Fernbach, 2019). What has not yet been discussed are some of the criticisms leveled at categorical thinking; criticisms that have resulted in the development and adoption of other modes of thinking, such as those described in the next few chapters. For example, while the examples described in this chapter may not appear controversial, many, if not most, categories employed by social scientists have a normative effect; that is, there is an assumed "normal" or "usual" from which to compare variations. George Herbert Mead (1934) observes that language itself "does not simply symbolize a situation or object which is already there in advance; it makes possible the existence or the appearance of that situation or object, for it is a part of the mechanism whereby that situation or object is created" (p. 78). This is an important point regardless of the mode of thinking adopted, but especially provocative when assessing the benefits and harms of an approach aimed at defining data units in particular ways. Three of the most cited concerns directed at categorical thinking strategies are: The inherent bias of language, the essentializing nature of categories, and the resulting decontextualization of the concepts created. These three issues are inherent to the process of categorizing, which means that while they cannot be eliminated, researchers will want to make careful decisions about the categories they use in relation to the claims they make. A lack of attention or awareness can result in researchers inadvertently developing, or keeping in circulation, concepts that are considered harmful, oppressive, or problematic in some way.

The Bias of Language

Since the categories and concepts we use as researchers make visible our beliefs and what matters to us, they also reflect deep-seated biases we have

about ourselves and others. Robert Rinehart (1998) remarks that the choices we make about how "to name other people and groups—how we categorize them—often tells us more about us, about our stance on how things are, than it does about any truth of who they are" (p. 201). For example, how social scientists use the concept of race, which is believed not to have any biological bearing (Graves, 2001), says much about a society's stance on racial diversity, an author's attitudes toward people who do not share the same racial makeup, and the way disciplines and discourses have been affected by these decisions. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2017) explain, "[R]ace and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient" (p. 9).

One challenge then facing researchers using categorical thinking is that commonsensical notions about the world, that is, our knowledge of it, constrain our abilities to change how we see, and think about, the object of our study (Becker, 1998). Questioning how certain categories came to be considered "normal" is considered a good point of departure (Becker, 1998) as is the hermeneutic practice of interrogating the commonsensical to "carefully dismantle the meanings of words and their etymological origins" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 134). Hermeneutic scholars believe that tracing the usage of a word can reveal the variety of meanings and historical connotations contained within a single word, supporting a critical and reflexive engagement with the language used by interdisciplinary scholars, and altering how we ourselves make use of it. Because categorizing is often believed to separate words from the contexts—situational, historical, cultural, interpersonal—that give them sense, categorical research is also criticized for believing that meaning resides in the words themselves (Packer, 2018). The belief that words can readily convey a speaker's meaning is based on what linguist Michael Reddy (1979) calls the conduit metaphor, the widespread assumption that words can carry the meaning of thought from one person to another without needing to consider the shaping effect of the context or the interaction within which the words were spoken (see also Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Packer, 2018). This suggests that, at the very least, researchers prioritizing categorical thinking account for the relevant contexts that may have played a role in the conventions, labels, and content of the categories used and produced through analysis.

The Essentialist Nature of Categories

Another criticism leveled at categorical thinking is that it is reductionist. Since part of its process is to construct identifiable and comparable categories out of complex events, the result is a reduced and simplified version

of their components. A primary concern here is that these essentialized descriptions become "a surrogate for being" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 355), resulting in the categories and concepts themselves standing in for complex events and interactions. When this occurs, concepts used in everyday practices become taken-for-granted as something "true" and "natural," far removed from the grounds and reasons for their conceptualization. This can lead to several undesirable outcomes:

> It can lead you to *compress* the members of a category, treating them as if they were more alike than they are; *amplify* differences between members of different categories; *discriminate*, favoring certain categories over others; and *fossilize*, treating the categorical structure you've imposed as if it were static.
>
> (de Langhe & Fernbach, 2019, p. 84)

All of these outcomes are especially problematic when it comes to human identity and the ubiquitous practice of sorting and classifying individuals based on preestablished social categories (Risberg & Pilhofer, 2018). As noted, racial categories can be especially problematic. Consider this example by Emmanuel Eze, who, as an Igbo Nigerian, describes his experience of coming to the United States as a graduate student and needing to fill out identification forms to receive a social security number.

> The forms I was required to complete asked me to indicate which race I belonged to. I searched for 'Igbo' but in vain. Instinctively, I turned over the form, looking for instructions as to a larger category under which the Nigerian Igbos might have been subsumed, but nothing prepared me for what I found: Nigerians are black all right, but not Algerians, who were categorized as white; the Sudanese are black, but not the Egyptians; and while the Zanzibarians of Tanzania are black, Libyans are white; and so forth.
>
> (Eze, 2001, p. 218)

Understanding the history of classification systems, such as this one, requires looking beyond assumptions about ourselves and others and into the political, social, economic, and cultural conditions that constructed such a system. Experiences such as Eze's point to the value for scholars across disciplines to critically question the way demographic surveys are used in research, especially since a common practice is to use such surveys in research requiring individuals to self-identify regarding their age, gender, race, ethnicity, marital status, sexual orientation, and the like. What is less considered is the *categorization threat* such practices produce, that is, "the negative experience that individuals undergo when categorized into an undesired or inappropriate group

against their will" (Clair et al., 2019, p. 593). These are not the only way such threats occur. Studies focused on discriminatory practices also point to interactional practices, where individuals are mistreated in response to a perceived category (such as gender or race) rather than recognized for their accomplishments within a desired category (such as one's profession or performance) (Clair et al., 2019). And yet, studies of discriminatory practices have also pointed to the way social-identity categories have been used to fight against inequality and discrimination (Risberg & Pilhofer, 2018). Categories, then, especially those pertaining to identity, should be considered critically. If demographic information is important, one strategy might be to consider alternative frameworks to gather identity information. For example, Judith Clair et al. (2019) offer researchers an unconventional framework from which to consider "non-normative demographic identities. . . . Specifically, we theorize about demographic identities characterized by (1) intracategorical multiplicity, (2) intracategorical mobility, and (3) intracategorical uncertainty, as well as demographic identities that are (4) acategorical in nature" (p. 593).

Another strategy that is also considered helpful is for researchers to reflect more closely on their own understanding of identity and culture. Kakali Bhattacharya (2017) provides several exercises that promote researcher self-reflexivity. For example, in an activity called, "What is Your Culture?" Bhattacharya offers this prompt, followed by a series of questions about values, group membership, cultural beliefs, and the processes by which individuals become members of a group, thus orienting researchers to the implications these questions may have on the design a study takes. The prompt:

> Select a box, paper bag, or any kind of container to hold things. Then walk around your home and pick up anything that resembles who you are, what is meaningful to you, rituals in which you participate, your style, groups in which you belong, etc. There is no right or wrong way to do this. Once you have gathered all your objects, pull them out. Look at them carefully. Think of what the objects signify, perhaps a value, a belief, a membership in a group, a weekly or monthly or yearly ritual.
>
> (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 8)

This suggests that a starting point for qualitative researchers is to consider how they understand themselves in relation to their participants and their research interests and then to continuously examine the potential benefits or harms on particular individuals, groups, norms, and disciplines that might result from the concepts or categories that are applied to or generated from their research.

Faulty Generalization

Third, but related to the previous two issues, is that the desire to create transferable categories or concepts means that often categories used to describe certain people or behaviors get transferred from context to context, resulting in the loss of the specific contextual features needed for making appropriate claims. Mariko Fujita (1991) explains that this can result in "the use of a single perspective in comparing different cultures" (p. 21). Concepts such as "the self" or other popular categories may not be relevant or conceptualized in the same way by different people or cultures which, Fujita says, "poses a vexing problem for those of us conducting cross-cultural research. Before we can compare two cultures, we need some kind of criterion for comparison; and yet the criterion is precisely what is called into question" (p. 20). A fundamental error occurs when categories or concepts are assumed to be inherently valid and considered applicable to any set of data without reflecting on their histories and the contexts in which they have been used.

Researchers who rely on categorical thinking and wish to minimize these issues make use of qualitative strategies that provide analysis and also critique or redefine taken-for-granted or well-established categories, offering new understandings and theories. They seek ways to effectively situate their research in particular contexts, address the limitations of their studies in a reflexive manner, or use categories as part of other strategies, such as those described in the chapters on narrative or dialectical thinking (see Chapters 4 and 5). An additional approach would be to work within modes of thinking that are "acategorical," liberating difference from categorical structures altogether (Foucault, 1977, p. 186), as, for example, through approaches considered diffractive (see Chapter 7).

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4 Narrative Thinking

Introduction to Narrative Thinking

Unlike categorical thinking, which separates data units into self-contained categories, the movement of narrative thinking involves "an active and temporal process of constructing a plot; storytellers depict how characters, events, interactions, and outcomes are related" (Lapum et al., 2010, p. 755). Narrative thinking then entails the weaving of plots, and is another strategy used by humans to make sense of, and organize, their worlds. Narrative theorists generally agree that without plot there would be no identifiable narrative. Consider, for example, the connection between this set of statements: "It was wrong," "you would think," "the teacher called me," "a picture of the states." Although we may easily imagine these statements as a narrative, they only become a narrative when we connect them as such. In addition, how we tie these fragments together reflects our beliefs about what characterizes a recognizable story and the context within which these decisions are made. Rebecca Luce-Kapler (1999) notes, "Narratives arrange events, summon characters, and create metaphors and other tropes, which weave a cultural fabric that not only brings meaning to our actions but also creates a milieu in which we can act" (p. 273). So while there may be different definitions of what is meant by *narrative* and *narrative inquiry* (see, e.g., Andrews et al., 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016), for the purposes of this chapter, I am conceptualizing narrative thinking as a movement of analysis centering acts of plotting in their diverse configurations.

Returning to the aforementioned loose statements, these were selected from a story told by Lisa, a mother of two, who began her response to my opening question about her own school experience by telling me she had dropped out of school in tenth grade and now regretted it. Over the next few questions, she built an explanation as to why she dropped out by tying together a need for more time to learn and negative experiences she had

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had with in-class participation. When I asked her if a particular event stood out, she told me this story:

> Um, well I can remember one time the teacher called me up (laughs) and she had a picture of like the States (Me—hmhm) but they didn't say the names of them, and she wanted me to find a certain one. And I'm up there going "yup ok I can't do this," so I just pointed one out, and (laughs), it was wrong and the whole class just laughed at me. And you would think that the teacher would have said something, you know like "that was rude," but no, just "go back to your seat and study," and that was all. It's like I just wanted to go curl up into a corner and just hide. You know, it's like, I mean at least the teacher could have said something to the kids like "well that's not right, you shouldn't laugh," you know, "we're all here to learn." That's what I'd say, you go to school to learn not to be laughed at, and if you're laughed at you're not going to learn anything.
>
> (Freeman, 2001a, p. 181)

Lisa told me many stories during three interviews on the topic of parental involvement. These stories went back and forth across time and context. She used stories like this one to explain her actions and decisions as a parent in relation to her children's schooling, to make sense of her own, as well as her children's experiences with schooling, and to convey the complex interconnectedness between all of these things. Narrative inquirers believe that we tell others about ourselves through stories and that the process of telling stories is how we make sense of our lived existence. Building on the etymology of the word *narrative*, Jeong-Hee Kim (2016) notes that narrative encapsulates "telling as well as knowing" (p. 6). This suggests that stories, whether informally shared among friends, articulated in response to an interview question, or crafted as formal research reports, are entangled in the politics of being and knowing in multiple ways (Hendry, 2010). Complicating this relationship, Hayden White (2001) explains, "We do not *live* stories . . . we give our lives meaning by retrospectively casting them in the form of stories" (p. 228). Stories, then, are plotted, where *plot* is understood to be "an emergent temporal configuring in which particular actions become meaningful as part of a larger, unfolding drama" (Mattingly, 2007, p. 409). Narrative thinking, then, as knowledge *and* as the engine for how knowledge gets emplotted, is central to human meaning-making. And in turn the ubiquity of storytelling in lived life has resulted in narrative thinking being compelling as an *object* of study and as a *form of analysis* for the social sciences. In fact, Petra Hendry (2010) rightfully points out that all research is essentially narrative since it organizes what is understood as data, procedures of analysis, and findings into some kind of meaningful plot. However, not all analytical movements prioritize narrative emplotment, which is why

I devote a chapter to it. Furthermore, despite its popularity, narrative thinking is still embroiled in the politics of what counts as legitimate research (Kim, 2016; Lyons, 2007), making understanding its emergence and characteristics a necessary part of its use.

Accepting narratives as a legitimate form of thinking has required a continuous and interdisciplinary effort on the part of scholars in the human and social sciences. Just consider the introduction to Dorothy Smith's (1999) collected essays on *Writing the social*. As a professor of sociology in the 1970s, she confronted head-on what she termed the "ruling relations" of her field. Rather than the theory-driven, detached, objective approach to inquiry advocated in mainstream textbooks, she writes,

> Inquiry starts with the knower who is actually located; she is active; she is at work; she is connected up with particular other people in various ways; she thinks, eats, sleeps, laughs, desires, sorrows, sings, curses, loves, just here; she reads here; she watches television. She sits at her computer playing solitaire, analysing data, sending e-mail messages to friends, writing a paper. Activities, feelings, and experiences hook her into extended social relations, linking her activities to others and in ways beyond her knowing.
>
> (Smith, 1999, pp. 4–5)

Although not arguing for narrative inquiry, Smith's recognition of inquirers as "situated knower[s]" who participate in the making of the social world (p. 6) is relevant to the perspective I am describing here. Situated knowers actively participate as interpretive beings in narrating and, therefore, emplotting particular accounts about the world. They do this because they have what Sarah Lucas (2018) terms "narrative agency," which is "the capacity to make meaningful one's situation within a web of other narratives,[1]" (p. 126) despite the limitations posed by power, or what Smith calls "ruling relations." It is how I am positioning narrative thinking, as an enactment of an interpretative way of being and knowing within the temporal, geographical, political, and relational contexts, that gives shape and direction to experience.

The belief that narratives play a significant role in the human world and constitute a valid means for making sense of human existence is, now, for the most part, well-established in the humanities and the social sciences (Kim, 2016; Riessman, 2007). What I focus on in this chapter, however, is not narrative inquiry per se, but emplotment: The interpretive processes from which narrative sense is made out of the flow and chaos of lived experience. That is, narrative thinking is a mode of thinking characterized by its attention to, and creation of, a "synthesis of the heterogeneous" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. ix) resulting from interpretation of complex actions and events. The analytical movement of narrative thinking then is to connect, to knit,

often temporally and geographically unconnected events, experiences, and actions into a meaningful account. "Plot . . . is the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning" (Brooks, 1984, p. xi). However, as Rita Felski (2008) notes, "plotting does not signal the sovereignty of a singular order of truth, but embraces contingencies, reversals, and variations of complex and often unexpected kinds" (p. 85). In other words, there are no rules to follow; as each connection is formed, new questions arise giving direction to the next connection, until a narrative account of the topic of interest is formed. Since there is no one way to go about creating a plot, a synthesis, or an intention, narrative theory is entangled in debates about legitimacy, truth, identity, voice, rationality, power, and privilege, just to name a few.

Narrative, then, as an "ordering of particularities" (Squire et al., 2008, p. 12), can take on different forms within multiple spheres of meaning—personal, social, cultural, institutional, and so forth. What each has in common is that by virtue of being emplotted, a narrative has effects; it participates in the production of sense-making circulating within and across these spheres of meaning. To understand a particular plot, then, one needs to attend to, and reflect on, the various ways *action* unfolds in a given account, and how various events and characters intersect with these actions, often across time and place and modes of expression. Another way to think about this is that plot is "the 'element' that imitates *praxis*" (Carli, 2015, p. 105), where *praxis* is understood in the Aristotelian way as being the practical domain of action. *Praxis*, defined as "action informed by theory, reflection, and social context" (Vaughan & Nuñez, 2023, p. 7), develops from the assumption that humans act as ethical-political beings who consider the appropriateness of their actions and interactions in relation to "*this* case, *this* person, at *this* time and place, in *this* set of circumstances" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 76). Furthermore, since stories are themselves shaped by cultural and political contexts as well as the nature of the relationship between storytellers and listeners, how plot gets theorized varies. Therefore, regardless of who tells the story, researcher or participant, it is important not to assume that there is one theoretical perspective guiding the interpretive process. There are, however, shared characteristics to the way I am portraying the analytical movement of narrative thinking. I turn to these next.

Characteristics of Narrative Thinking

(1) Narrative Thinking Is an Emplotted Theory of Action

We are surrounded by stories and construct stories as we make sense of the events we live and witness. Our stories are often embedded in other stories, which are themselves linked to other stories. This unending flow

of meaning-making affects, and is affected by, human existence, whether or not humans pay attention to it. Indeed, "the emplotment of events into narrative form is so much a part of our ordinary experience that we are usually not aware of its operation, but only of the experience of reality that it produces" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 160). In addition, an emplotted account is not necessarily the same thing as a story. As Ursula Le Guin (1998) writes, "plot is merely one way of telling a story. . . . But it's not superior to story, and not even necessary to it" (p. 94). Rather, Le Guin states, plot is "a form of story that uses action as its mode" (p. 122). This is a useful distinction since it aptly conveys the analytic mode of thinking I am calling narrative and helps distinguish it from stories whose expressions might be better conveyed as poetic or dialectical or decolonial (noting that these boundaries are more about analytical emphasis or ontological grounding since narratives have a way of working across many modes at once). What distinguishes narrative thinking then from other kinds of storytelling is that the kind of plot that is put forward embodies a pragmatic theory of action that places action, and the knowledge derived from action, in the midst of a dynamic world (Seigfried, 1991; Wills & Lake, 2020). In this way, plotting is believed to construct the reality it reports on; that is, the telling and the meaning derived are inseparable, as each event contributes actively to the construction, intent, and effect of the story (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1988). In other words, narrative action is performed through the plot itself. It is narrative plot that links actions, events, and understandings across time, place, and cultural context and puts into action a particular point of view about an event of significance. Brian Fay explains,

> The significance of each action is understood in terms of its role in an unfolding drama. In these and countless other cases, particular acts are related to other particular acts not as instances of a certain general law, but in their particularity as each pushes forward a continuing line of transformation.
>
> (Fay, 1996, p. 170)

When we read a novel or an historical account, it is easy for us to overlook the historical and cultural conditions that surrounded its creation. But another equally important context to consider is that our reading of the novel or historical account also plays a role in its shaping. In other words, plots are dynamic, in that "narrative texts themselves appear to represent and reflect on their plots" (Brooks, 1984, p. xii), and invite an audience (whether directly or indirectly) to participate in their unfolding. We do this actively, although often unconsciously, ascribing motives to actions, making connections between events, and continuously revising our understanding even while the narrator tells us otherwise. Furthermore, since stories are

themselves dynamic and are told differently depending on the reason for, or context of, the telling, they provide potential for an examination of overlapping plots and for the creation of alternative forms of emplotment and re-emplotment. In other words, narratives can help bring order out of chaos, provide explanations for unexpected events, and also spark reflection, critique, and reconfiguration of events in unconventional ways. In each case, the process involves navigating simultaneously particular narrative contexts with the contexts within which the narratives are shared. In addition, while there are recognizable narrative genres (e.g., comedy, tragedy, satire, and so on), a plot is not something predetermined and imposed upon disparate events; it is something performed in the narrative unfolding itself.

(2) Narrative Thinking Attends to the Relational Politics of Practical Life

When we construct a story, we gather together a variety of linguistic, physical, historical, geographical, sensual, physiological, cultural, and relational materials. Even when asked to "state the facts" about an event, the narrator's interest in conveying a "believable" or "truthful" account indicates that they not only add rhetorical elements to the telling but also convey the story from a particular point of view. Who we are and where we are located historically, culturally, and geographically shape the story that is being told as well as the way the story is read and interpreted. Context, then, in its many configurations, needs to somehow be accounted for when considering what sense can be made of a particular plot. For example, literary critic Barbara Smith (1980) criticizes the decontextualized approach taken by narratologists who focus solely on the structure of a text and argues instead that stories are "constructed, as *all* versions are, by someone in particular, on some occasion, for some purpose, and in accord with some relevant set of principles" (p. 218). For this reason, Smith prompts us to understand narratives "as part of a *social transaction*" (p. 232) so that we pay attention to the circumstances surrounding the telling of a story, and not just view it as an inert text. For example, in a narrative study of lifestyle migration, Anya Ahmed (2012) reminds the reader that the examined narrative plots are "being constructed by women through the narrative act, rather than being an inherent feature of their experience, and also subsequently, as imposed on the narratives by me as the researcher" (p. 234). In various ways, then, researchers forefronting narrative thinking must "generate relationships among the shared lived experiences of participants, themselves, and the context that surrounds them" (Blair, 2007, p. 3).

Narrative thinking involves a form of practical reason that is oriented to the relational politics of particular situations. The emphasis of practical reasoning is on "reflection (both deliberate and revealed through action) as a means to inform wise action, [and] to assist one to navigate the variable contexts of practice" (Kinsella, 2012, p. 35). It is "the general human capacity

for resolving, through reflection, the question of what one is to do" (Wallace, 2009, n.p.). Practical reasoning requires attention to the contingent and flexible relationships "between contexts and actions and interpretations" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 43). This is a situated, embodied form of reasoning grounded in experience that takes into account the consequential effects of action (Seigfried, 1991). Qualitative researchers who attend to how an event unfolds as narrated in the actions and reflections of narrative accounts are themselves enacting an interpretive approach that stays "open to the circumstances, situations, values, and interpretations of both the researcher and the researched" (Macklin & Whiteford, 2012, p. 87). In other words, they are attending to the politics of context and human relationality. Speaking of plots as "acted narratives," Cheryl Mattingly (2007) notes, "I am not referring to the habitual enactment of pregiven cultural scripts but rather to a more emergent, improvised, and socially orchestrated emplotment of action" (p. 408). And Stephanie Fox and Boris Brummans (2019) point out that it is through a process of "inclusion and exclusion [that] the act of emplotting delineates what matters . . . much like the frame of a camera lens focuses attention" (p. 264). One could say then that plotting enacts a theory of action (van Dijk, 1975) by accounting for the way a sequencing of events (action) unfolds in regard to particular or global issues (theme) in a particular time, place, location (context) from one or more point of views and for one or more audiences (point of view). Figure 4.1 depicts this movement.

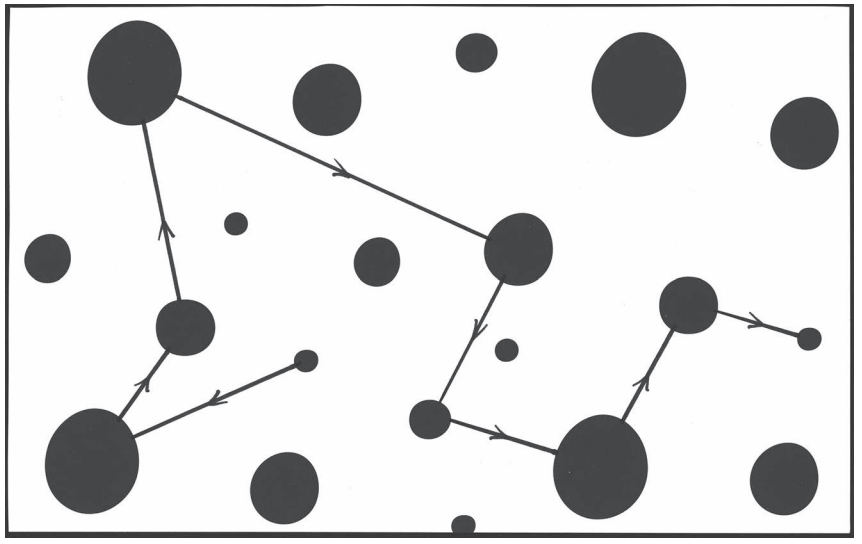

Figure 4.1 Emplotting Narrative Action.

(3) Narrative Thinking Furthers Narrated Agency

Scholars working in a variety of disciplines have conceptualized narrative emplotment in different ways. This is why a psychologist might be interested in what narrative plots convey about identity, a philosopher might worry about narrative and metaphysics, and a scholar of communication might wonder what a particular narrative is communicating, and how that "message" is being received. Overall, however, another reason narratives are considered significant to understanding human existence is that an understanding of narrative requires interpretation, and interpretation is believed to be how humans orient themselves to the world. In other words, whether talked about as "resonant threads" (Clandinin, 2013), "identity" (McAdams, 1988), "voice" (Gilligan, 2015), a narrative is always a *linked* account (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009); an outcome of "an active process of elaboration, not a regurgitation of local themes or received plotlines" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 70). Therefore, narrators make effective use of what Maxwell and Miller (2008) call contiguity-based analytical processes, which "involve juxtaposition in time and space, the influence of one thing on another, or relations among parts of a text; their identification involves seeing actual *connections* between things, rather than similarities and differences" (p. 462).

Narrative plots, then, can be said to form dynamic connections that say something about something that matters. In other words, "no item of experience is meaningful in its own right. It is made meaningful through the particular ways it is linked to other items" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 55). Moreover, narrative agency, as Lucas (2018) describes, can be understood "as an individual's most basic capacity for sense-making . . . [that is,] the *capacity* to say 'I' over time and with relation to others" (pp. 124–125). This capacity should not be confused with an author's intention or with the misguided belief that an individual acts alone or separately from the complex flow of lived life. Since "I" accounts are formed out of lived life, they are themselves entangled with the actions, interactions, and effects of varying sociopolitical contexts. As such, different narrated plotlines will make visible different webs of intersubjective meanings (Lucas, 2018) and effects, enabling a range of interpretations.

Something to consider, then, when engaging in narrative emplotment are the possibilities inherent to furthering specific plots or "voices" in the analytic process. An article that has helped me better understand this idea is Jennifer Lapum et al.'s (2010) study of the experiences of individuals undergoing cardiac surgery. Of relevance here is how the collected narratives were analyzed. Drawing from Lapum's dissertation, the authors employed "narrative mapping," which are "visual maps" that "highlight emplotment patterns" and document a particular sequence of events or plotline (Lapum

et al., 2010, p. 756). In Lapum et al.'s article, what is emplotted is the "authorial voice of technology" and the way the technological voice overshadowed the voice and agency of the participants. Recovery from surgery could be seen as linked to the patient's capacity to recenter the "I" in their accounts. As a result of this paper, I have students engage in narrative mappings of their own. Following Lapum's (2009) model, students are asked to identify the specific plotline(s) used to construct their maps, and try to limit their maps (a series of linked boxes) to one page. Figure 4.2 provides an example of what this might look like.

Through this assignment, students have mapped human-centered practices such as group-based decisions and how these transformed into collective action, as well as the effects of nonhuman agents such as the changing

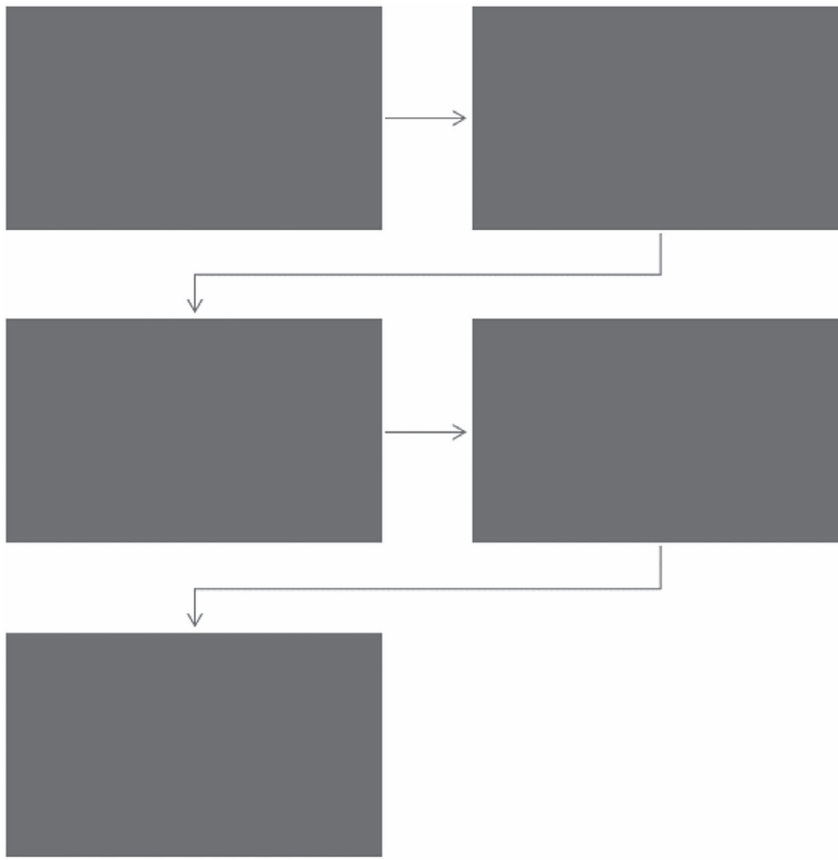

Figure 4.2 Narrative Map.

atmosphere of a setting on the unfolding events. I also introduce students to the Listening Guide (Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan & Eddy, 2021), which offers a guide to listening for "the interplay of inner and outer worlds" (Gilligan, 2015, p. 69), and is another example of an approach that attends to particular plotlines within complex narrated accounts.

Although the focus of narrative plotlines most often attends to spoken accounts, the analyzed experiences need not be written or spoken. For example, Deborah Blair (2007) compares musical mapping to narrative inquiry, effectively showing the way musical maps can provide ways for individuals to describe and share their listening experiences. And Sarah Turner et al. (2021) create multiple visual maps to better understand and convey the everyday experiences of street vendors in Vietnam. In other words, taking into consideration the multimodal intersections of narrative plots where the visual, gestural, aural, verbal, and so forth, are seen as integral to the plot's movement and intention (Dicks, 2019) creates numerous possibilities for analysis.

(4) Narrative Thinking Forefronts the Significance of the Particular

Narrative thinking focuses on particular events as these unfold in an account, event, or "case" (Flyvbjerg, 2001). By focusing on "context-dependent activities" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 39) within the particularities of interconnected actions, intentions, and events, narrative thinking helps bring into visibility human issues—ways of thinking, ways of acting—that speak to human concerns. This interaction between the particular and the general provides qualitative researchers with a strong argument for the social scientific value of studying a small number of cases in detail (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Thomas, 2010). The focus on the interconnectedness of detail provides researchers a unit of analysis that allows them to examine human meaning-making in context, while also providing the theoretical basis for considering that the narrative form taken encompasses, or puts into actions, values and meanings that are considered variations of a shared human existence. Whether the stories are one's own or those of others, they provide "a basis for understanding new action episodes by means of analogy" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 11) and are considered a dynamic resource for individual and social change.

Narrative thinking then is well-suited as an approach that prioritizes the "role of exemplars" (Mishler, 1990) for social research. In his critique of the use of standard, often deductively arrived coding schemas for analyzing narrative accounts, Elliot Mishler (1990) notes that even in those studies, researchers end up making pragmatic decisions and "adapt, convert, and translate 'standard' methods to solve their practical problems" (p. 426). Mishler then forwards a more inductive approach—in this case to the analysis of interviews of craftspeople—which he describes as focused on the "shared task and purpose"

(p. 427) of their particular craft. Narrative accounts, he observes, are an outcome of this shared task. He then provides other examples that show how each describes a process of analysis that works through the particulars of the presented information to make his key point: "learning from exemplars is a process of contextually grounded practice" (p. 437). What stands out in each example provided is that this "contextually grounded practice" was based on analytic strategies that took into account the particular narrative norms employed by the teller—their way of using language, their rhythms, their syntax—while also accounting for the particulars of the context within which the narrative unfolded and the context within which the narrative will be retold and interpreted. This back-and-forth process across contexts is often characterized as abductive since it employs a form of reasoning that makes use of "surprising observations . . . [to] develop plausible propositions from data" (Caiata-Zufferey, 2018, p. 9). James Liszka and Genie Babb (2020) explain that narrative thinking is abductive not only because it prioritizes contextually dependent thinking, but in the way in "which events, particularly surprising events are organized into this meaningful whole" (p. 224). This co-construction between the information presented to researchers, whether explicit or inferred, and a researcher's acts of attending, noticing, questioning means that "listeners, as much as tellers, are implicated in the narrative work of storytelling" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 94). The ability, then, to attend to a diversity of points of view and narrative forms requires a "heightened sensitivity to the diversity of perspectives . . . especially to those that are not our own and with which we might otherwise not be attuned" (Wills & Lake, 2020, p. 29).

(5) Narrative Thinking Enacts a Relational and Translational Ethics

A recurring question among narrative inquirers is how to ethically tell someone else's story? Even the telling of an autobiographical story involves references to others, whether explicitly or implicitly stated, which draws attention to questions of story ownership, and

> who is entitled to tell it or hear it. Claiming ownership of a story, or challenging someone else's right to tell it, points beyond the stories themselves to issues of status, dignity, power, and moral and ethical relations between tellers and listeners.
>
> (Shuman, 2015, p. 38)

Taking into consideration these kinds of situated issues is part of the ethical responsibility of all researchers. As Laurel Richardson (1990) points out, "Narrativizing, like all intentional behavior (including the writing of conventional social science) is a site of moral responsibility" (p. 131). However, the elicitation of personal narrative accounts from diverse individuals poses unique ethical dilemmas that are not easily resolved, if ever. Speaking of

the reflexivity required in undertaking autoethnographic research, Tony Adams (2008) observes, "Narrative ethics thus involves a simultaneous welcoming and valuing of endless questioning without ever knowing if our life writing and reading decisions are right or wrong" (p. 188). To work with, and account for, this uncertainty, Marilys Guillemin and Lynn Gillam (2004) suggest that qualitative researchers consider reflexivity as " 'ethics in practice'" that attend to "the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research" (p. 262). They point out that these situations are not the methodological issues that can be resolved by adapting one's research procedures, but those that arise in the relational ontology created in the space of being invited to share personal, often painful, stories. For these reasons, narrative researchers have written extensively about "relational ethics" (Clandinin et al., 2018), "reciprocity" (Blix et al., 2024), and "reflexivity" (Kim, 2016; Riessman, 2015) as ways for researchers to address ethical dilemmas as these arise in research relationships and to account for them in their reports.

Having a reciprocal relationship with participants, being a good listener, being reflexive throughout a study and beyond, while crucial to carrying out narrative research in practice, does not prevent the happening of "ethically important moments" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). For example, Francena Turner and ArCasia James-Gallaway (2022) find that the trust and relationship-building afforded by being Black women who share several cultural affinities with the Black elders they interviewed did not prevent the elders from limiting how they revisited and shared painful memories. Turner and James-Gallaway (2022) reflect on several possible reasons for the elders' refusals to discuss aspects of their personal experience as well as ways in which the generational gap resulted in different emphases placed on the importance of gender and race in the recollected events. Ethical issues can also occur in the process of turning narrative accounts into research reports. For example, Sara Acevedo (2022) observes how "grassroots knowledge is easily 'lost in translation' in academic contexts" (p. 598), even when enacting praxis-oriented and liberatory methodologies. And ethical issues can continue to trouble researchers or participants years after a study was completed. Rachel Heydon (2010) offers a knitted narrative to explore some of these moments from the perspective of someone who was written about in research reports. All of these critical reflexive accounts are important reminders that ethical reflection is crucial throughout the life of a study and beyond.

Narrative Thinking in Practice

Research prioritizing narrative thinking has contributed to the development of many interpretive theories of action for the social sciences. It has done this by arguing that humans have stories worth telling; that any story, no matter how similar to others, is unique in one way or another; that

regardless of how unique or different a story is from others, it provides an important perspective on human existence in general and, that plotting, by virtue of never being static, is both evidence of, and potential for, human change. In other words, whether a plot mediates across time and place, between events, between speakers within a text or in relation to the narrator, one of its unique contributions is how this mediation provides social science researchers with a way in which to theorize an interdependent relation between the particularities of human existence and the general conditions of being human. The possibilities inherent to narrative plotting are endless so, similarly to the section on categorical thinking, I selected studies for this section that demonstrate a variety of ways in which narrative thinking has been used in analysis, whether or not they draw explicitly on narrative theory as a framework.

Since narrative thinking is believed to provide coherence to the stories people tell about their lives or lived experiences, narratives are often elicited and analyzed as a way to understand a particular topic or phenomenon (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Lapum et al.'s (2010) narrative study of patients' experiences with technology during open-heart surgery and recovery is an example of this kind of study. The authors believed that the narrative accounts of patients who had undergone surgery could shine light on the boundaries between humans and the many medical devices used for their care. They argued that while illness is known to alter a person's sense of agency and identity, less understood is the role technology might play during recovery. To better understand the experience patients had with technology during and after surgery, the authors employed a narrative methodology with special focus on "narrative emplotment," which facilitated analysis for "how meaning is constructed in acts of storytelling" (p. 755).

Participants included 16 individuals between the ages of 59 and 85 who had undergone open-heart surgery at the same hospital. Each participant was interviewed twice: 2–4 days after surgery and 3–4 weeks following discharge from the hospital. Participants were also asked to keep a journal of their experiences. While questions were included to prompt them to recount their experience with surgery and with technology, participants were encouraged to use the journal in any way that made sense to them. Journal entries were used to elicit further stories during the second interview. Narrative emplotment guided the analytical process; specifically the use of narrative mapping as a way to "highlight emplotment patterns" (p. 756) in the patients' stories. These were "visual maps" that documented each patient's unique "narrative flow and sequence of events" (p. 756), especially regarding how technology showed up in their plotline. Of interest in their analysis was tracing the dominant discourse, or "authorial voice," structuring the narrative. "Authorial voice is the controlling influence of how a story unfolds" (p. 756). What Lapum et al. (2010) found was that during

and right after surgery, the voice of technology provided direction to the narrative plot rather than being led by the patients' agency who seemingly only regained control of the plot when enough evidence was provided to them that they had indeed survived surgery. The findings presented in the article focused on two notable shifts in the plotline related to who—the authorial voice of technology or patient agency—was leading the plot, and when. Although varying in timeframes, patients were able to regain a sense of agency as they reestablished daily routines and became more active.

In this study, narrative theory provided the epistemological basis for theorizing narrative emplotment as a way of understanding and knowing (Ricoeur, 1984). Narrative emplotment provided an analytical lens that not only honored the centrality of storytelling in sense-making but sought ways to make visible the dynamic qualities of overlapping plotlines. Researchers who focus on plot help convey the way varying and overlapping perspectives are entangled in story-telling events, suggesting various ways that attention to some plotlines over others can shape understanding.

Another analytical approach that focuses on narrative emplotment is the Listening Guide (Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan & Eddy, 2021). Seeking a way out of the binary logic of coding and categorizing, a working group met weekly in the 1980s and developed a voice-centered approach "for analyzing qualitative data—one that was sensitive to the relational parameters of psychological research and to the cultural factors affecting what could be said, what remained unspoken, what could be heard and/or listened to and taken seriously" (Gilligan, 2015, p. 70). The Listening Guide encompasses multiple ways of listening, "each guiding a different path through the narrative" (Gilligan & Eddy, 2021, p. 78) and has been used in multiple cultural contexts.

In seeking to better understand the multilayered and performative nature of selfhood of Palestinian youth, Sama Dawani and Gerrit Loots (2021) used arts-based research, participant observation, interviewing, as well as the Listening Guide. Students from grade 10 were first asked to create self-portraits, which they did using collage and paint, often while listening to music they chose themselves. Researcher–participant dialogues about the portraits produced the jointly produced narratives which served as the basis for the analysis. The study took place at the Friends School in Ramallah, Palestine, during 2012–2013. A case study of Lubna, a 15-year old Palestinian girl's performed self, is presented.

The Listening Guide is an approach to analysis that listens for the multiplicity of voices within a narrative text. Although each listening is undertaken separately, they are co-performing in the sense that their interrelations are present in each listening, even while a particular voice is given focus. In the case of Lubna, the first listening, "listening for the plot" (p. 186) provided an account of the co-creation of Lubna's self-portrait. In Lubna's case,

the co-creation of the narrative occurred through writing due to not finding a time to meet in person. Dawani, who collected the data, explained that the written dialogue was created, "with Lubna writing an initial narrative, and later answering my questions, clarifying meanings, and providing more details" (p. 188). After presenting an overview of this narrative, Dawani provided a detailed account of her relationship to the school, to education, and to her beliefs about the self. The analysis is then presented through further listenings, this time by first listening for "the 'I,' the self-voice" (p. 186), and then by listening for "contrapuntal voices. . . . Here we do not look for themes, rather we listen to the different strands, melody lines, or voices in the text, especially those that speak to our research questions" (p. 186). These overlapping listenings allowed the researchers to listen for "the relationship, the interplay between the different voices" (p. 186). In Lubna's case, the findings were presented through four contrapuntal voices:

> The first voice presented is the voice of "I am a brick," which was almost always followed by the voice of "I am nothing like another brick." The voice of "knowing" is then presented, which Lubna responded to by the voice of "wanting to be a human."
>
> (Dawani & Loots, 2021, p. 189)

Narrative thinking was used throughout this study first in approaching the construction of narratives as a situated, relational, and co-constructed endeavor, and then by focusing the analysis on the way various voices were performed in response to each other, to the sociocultural context, and within the relationship formed between Lubna and Dawani. It also demonstrated the agentic performance of an individual's negotiation of self and context.

Another approach to research that often incorporates narrative emplotment involves case studies of lived experience where the themes derived are organized using narrative strategies, thus accounting narratively for a process, an experience, or a journey. An example of this approach can be found in Marjoris Regus et al.'s (2024) study of the experiences of Black women music educators. Using a collective case study approach, Regus et al. were interested in understanding how Black music educators navigated their childhoods and college years as Black music students in a predominantly white field. In addition, they wished to "understand the experiences of Black women music educators who have taught in communities of color, especially as viewed through asset-based approaches" (n.p.). Three music teachers from different places in the United States responded to the invitation to participate in the study. Each educator was interviewed three times following Irving Seidman's (2006) phenomenological approach to interviewing. Tara J. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth provided the

theoretical lens from which Regus et al. examined the participants' experiences. Analysis of the interviews then followed Sharan Merriam's (2009) procedures for the analysis of case study material, which included "an initial within-case analysis of each teacher's interview data followed by an inductive cross-case analysis of common themes found across the three cases" (n.p.). These were then presented as three broad themes, "path to teaching," "navigating the academy," and "pedagogical approach" (n.p.) with numerous subthemes.

Narrative emplotment guided the presentation of the findings which read like a collective story of shared and divergent experiences navigated by the three women. Although themes are a common form of presentation in categorical and other forms of thinking, the themes in this study moved back and forth across time, place, and experience to create a coherent narrative account drawing together points in the plot that stood out as relevant to the questions guiding the study. In this way, none of the themes stood alone as categories, but were instead necessary dimensions of the whole story. By constructing a shared narrative, Regus et al. (2024) retained salient aspects of each individual's path to teaching while weaving together those components that seemed crucial not only to the Black women music educators' experiences, but also in what their analysis contributed to understanding the value of a community cultural wealth lenses in highlighting the rich cultural knowledge and the unique skills these educators offered their students, colleagues, and communities.

In general, then, constructing plots provides a way to retain the unique circumstances of a person's experience, an organization's journey of change, or the historical conditions surrounding an event and can be used with a variety of design options. So whether the researcher traces the unique plot of a speaker or constructs a plot out of disparate data sources, value is placed on the particularities of each situation and what can be learned about human nature from an analysis of these uniquely situated conditions.

Deciding on Narrative Thinking for Analysis

Narrative emplotment for data generation and analysis forwards a relational ethics that prioritizes subjective ways of knowing to explore and examine experiences and topics of importance to the human and social sciences. Like other modes of thinking, it has its strengths and limitations. One of its primary strengths is the familiarity of its form; the way narrative emplotment figures centrally in everyday human talk and activities, and develops from well-known narrative conventions. Bud Goodall describes,

> The story's narrative and rhetorical supporting structure (for example, its form or genre, episodes, passages, conflicts, turning points, poetic

> moments, themes, and motifs) are constructed out of ordinary and extraordinary everyday life materials that, from a reader's perspective, allow meaningful patterns to emerge and from which a relationship develops.
>
> (Goodall, 2000, p. 83)

With its focus on human action, narrative thinking allows researchers to:

1 Connect disparate events into coherent accounts
2 Witness the unique variations of human experience-making by attending to the way individuals put into action their own interpretive "principles of interconnectedness"
3 Highlight human practical domains of action or *praxis*
4 Connect individual experiences to universal human themes

Although narrative thinking has gained popularity and legitimacy across disciplines, it is not without its issues. And, for the most part, these revolve around its subjective and interpretative nature, whether the narrative accounts are provided by research participants or constructed by researchers themselves. In general, researchers working with narrative strategies will want to consider the issues of correspondence, coherence, and culture.

Correspondence

Mark Freeman (2010) explains that drawing on narratives in social science research has always raised questions about the "relationship between life as lived, moment to moment, and life as told, in retrospect, from the vantage point of the present" (p. 3). And White (1992) notes that "conflict between 'competing narratives' has less to do with the facts of the matter in question than with the different story-meanings with which the facts can be endowed by emplotment" (p. 38). In other words, the resulting conflicting accounts of supposedly factual affairs continue to pose interpretive challenges to historians and social scientists, prompting some to criticize narratives for their unreliability, while others argue that narrative thinking provides crucial insights into human interpretation (see Munslow, 2007, for one account of this debate). In general, there is agreement among narrative researchers that all narratives are "an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 162). However, researchers disagree with how much each is needed for narrative research to be considered valid. For example, narrative theorists disagree about how (or whether) to address issues of memory, intended or unintended distortions on the part of participants, or how to account for multiple versions of the same story if some form of correspondence to the actual experience is required for their study (Freeman,

2010). For some researchers, such as historians, these issues are of critical importance. When researchers are interested in individuals' perspectives on their own lives it might not matter whether the accounts happened in the way described, but when those accounts clash with versions told by others, then whose truth should take precedence? Whose account should be considered more valid, reliable, worth telling? And what criteria should be used to determine which history to tell ourselves and our children? Since our understanding of the past depends on what we have lived or what we have been told of it, the past and its telling can become entangled in the politics of representation in complex ways (see Friedländer, 1992, for example, for a collection of essays on the complicated issue of representing the Holocaust). Therefore, the narrative decisions researchers make have ethical consequences that reach beyond the confines of the study. This is one reason narrative theorists call for reflexivity in regard to research relationships and the interpretive decisions made in the process of constructing a research report (Etherington, 2004; Riessman, 2015). Furthermore, many theorists believe that ignoring the interpretive and literary procedures used in the research process weakens the abilities of researchers and historians to engage with issues of representation collectively (White, 2001).

Interestingly, even when correspondence is dismissed as irrelevant and narratives are not believed to mirror reality, there is still widespread reluctance toward the writing of fiction as research (Watson, 2011). Watson states that "[t]his reluctance is no doubt the result of a deeply felt need for research to be grounded in an empirical reality of something that *really happened*" (p. 396), even if that happening is understood as one person's version of the truth. Nevertheless, in practice there are researchers who have turned to fiction as a viable means of representing social science research findings (Clough, 2002; Toliver, 2022; Watson, 2011; Whitebrook, 2001). While much of this work employs narrative thinking, the move for others from action and intention to felt experience or to the construction of counternarratives positions their work as primarily driven by poetic or dialectical thinking.

Coherence and Culture

Coherence, and what counts as coherence, is another issue facing narrative researchers. In general, "narrative is capable of representing fragmentation, disunity, uncertainty and of offering solutions to what would otherwise be disabling disjunctions" (Whitebrook, 2001, p. 87). However, coherence is always "an interpretation of some aspect of the world that is historically and culturally grounded and shaped by human personality" (Fisher, 1987, p. 49). So while a story can draw on a wide variety of rhetorical strategies, what counts as a story is rooted in tradition, and these traditions do not

necessarily align with one another. This means that what counts as a coherent account is always tangled up with the politics of culture (Benhabib, 2002). For example, Corinne Squire (2008) examines such tangled issues as these relate to experience-centered narrative assumptions drawing from several studies, including one of individuals with HIV living in South Africa. In this account, Squire, who does not share the cultural background of the participants, discusses issues of coherence, overinterpretation, representation, the desire of participants to have their stories shared widely with others, and the complications of seeking to integrate more culturally congruent practices in narrative research.

Narrative scholars should, therefore, attend to issues of coherence as well as the politics of culture, both in their decisions about what narratives to report and how to craft these, but also in the way in which they articulate a rationale for narrative research. The reason for this is that there are crucial distinctions, and disagreements, among narrative researchers regarding the role and agency of the narrator, the role and position of the researcher, and whether narratives can analytically stand alone or must be positioned within broader discursive, cultural, or political frameworks. In other words, while narrative researchers tend to agree that narratives are legitimate forms of experiential knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Collins, 2009), they differ regarding the role and emphasis of each in the narrated plot. And although a description of the varieties of narrative theories is beyond the scope of this chapter, like categorical thinking, some of the possibilities and constraints offered by narrative thinking are inherent to the mode of thinking itself. For example, a fundamental part of the process of emplotment is to transform complex events into coherent, organized accounts. Since what counts as coherence is not only determined by linguistic conventions, but also shaped by cultural, social, and disciplinary norms, the stories that get circulated and accepted are more often those that reinforce, rather than resist, the status quo. This issue makes narrative research vulnerable to the same criticisms leveled at categorical thinking. Nevertheless, the emphasis of narrative thinking on the principles of interconnectedness and its grounding in everyday practice provide a strong argument for the validity of first-person accounts as a reliable source of knowledge about an event lived and witnessed by the narrator (Collins, 2009).

The strength of narrative thinking is in its ability to make visible the interpretive capacities of human agents in relation to their actions, interactions, beliefs, and practices. As such, narrative thinking not only is considered an important way to understand human action and experience but has become a core component for critical, emancipatory research, a form of research most often guided by dialectical thinking, the topic of the next chapter. This is because, as some have argued, it is not narrative's connection to culture per se that is the issue, it is when researchers seek to classify and represent

these in ways that silence culture's inherent multiplicity (Benhabib, 2002). Benhabib explains: "The lived universe of cultures always appears in the plural. We need to be attentive to the positioning and repositioning of the other and the self, of 'us' and 'them,' in this complex dialogue" (p. 41). A challenge, then, for researchers making use of narrative thinking is how to contextualize situated or cultural stories in ways that maintain the inherent complexity of an individual's or a group's understandings. Taking a dialectical or decolonial approach has been one way to address this issue.

Note

1 The importance and influence of these webs of meaning continue in dialectical, poetic, diffractive, and decolonial thinking but are understood and accounted for differently in each of these approaches. Whereas in dialectical and decolonial approaches the interaction between structures and histories of meaning and the material productions of lived life become the focus of analysis, in poetic and diffractive thinking meaningful effects do not preexist their manifestation within the analytic movements that produce them.

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5 Dialectical Thinking

Introduction to Dialectical Thinking

Dialectical thinking is a form of deliberative thinking oriented toward change. It departs from categorical and narrative thinking to prioritize inquiry as a form of transformative action. Dialectical thinking challenges the objectification and essentialism associated with categorical thinking as well as the focus on the agency of the actor often portrayed in narrative thinking. Researchers using dialectical approaches believe that there are problems in the way things are, which need to be surmounted, and that focusing on understanding these problems is insufficient. What is needed is a way to change the problematic social arrangement. A core assumption guiding approaches considered "dialectical" is that human consciousness, personal identity, cultural norms, beliefs, and practices, and societal and institutional discourses cannot be separated from the historical, structural, and material conditions of which they are an integral part. Another assumption guiding dialectical theories is that there are oppositional forces *within* entities and structures that not only result in societal inequities and discriminatory practices but also create the illusion that these divisive forces are coming from *outside* the affected entity or structure. Paulo Freire (1993), for example, argues that marginalized people are falsely assumed to reside outside the exclusionary structures. Rather, Freire notes, oppressed people "have always been 'inside'—inside the structure which made them 'beings for others.' The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves'" (p. 55). Furthermore, Wayne Au (2007) explains, "at the heart of dialectics is the idea that all 'things' are actually processes, that these processes are in constant motion, or development, and that this development is driven by the tension created by two interrelated opposites acting in contradiction with each other" (p. 177). Dialectical researchers, then, must consider how to attend to the transformative potential of engaging with conflict, opposition, and difference within contexts and relationships that are themselves always undergoing change.

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In addition, there are many "dialectics," which results in different ways the movement of dialectics is embraced by researchers. This chapter focuses on two of the more common approaches to dialectics in the social sciences. The first, which Seyla Benhabib (1986) calls "the politics of fulfillment," wholeheartedly embraces dialectical thinking and works from within conflicting entities to effect desired change. The second, which Benhabib calls "the politics of transfiguration," acknowledges the powerful effects of dialectics but works against it, seeking instead to break it apart, disrupting its constitutive power and internal movement. The first approach is well-illustrated in Freire's earlier quote on the internal process of addressing the structures creating marginalization. The second aligns more with historical methods such as Michel Foucault's (1977) genealogical approach, which focuses on the conditions for "emergence," emergences that allow some things to be thinkable that were not thinkable before. Discursive concepts thus materialize out of particular displays of force. Foucault (1977) notes that the analysis of emergence, then, "must delineate this interaction, the struggle these forces wage against each other or against adverse circumstances, and the attempt to avoid degeneration and regain strength by dividing these forces against themselves" (pp. 148–149). As will be evident from the characteristics of dialectical thinking listed later, research drawing on dialectical thinking puts into practice a wide variety of approaches, using one or both of these orientations in distinctive ways. Benhabib sums these up:

> The politics of fulfillment envisages that the society of the future attains more adequately what present society has left unaccomplished. It is the culmination of the implicit logic of the present. The politics of transfiguration emphasizes the emergence of qualitatively new needs, social relations, and modes of association, which burst open the utopian potential within the old.
>
> (Benhabib, 1986, p. 13)

Benhabib believes that any research seeking to benefit from what has been opened by dialectics must take into account both orientations; a challenge that continues to inspire qualitative researchers seeking to put into action subversive aims for the social sciences.

What connects these two orientations is a move away from a social science focused on understanding what is going on in society, to one that views society, its norms, discourses, and practices, as problems needing reform. Research is now conceived of as an intervention, a political and transformative act that works with, and for, *praxis*, now defined as "the self-creative activity through which we make the world" (Lather, 1991, p. 11). A problem for researchers seeking to effect change is that dialectical strategies have been conceptualized as both the necessary part of all transformative action

as articulated by Freire, and, as Foucault suggests, a powerful movement that must itself be broken open if transformation is to occur. Part of the reason that both perspectives need to be presented together is that their different orientations and aims "are often conflated and confused" (Levinson, 1995, p. 113). Most often, it seems, the conflation occurs when theories of transfiguration get taken up to provide support for theories of fulfillment, even though the two orientations are conceptually quite distinct. For example, in Chapter 4 on narrative thinking, I introduced Lisa through one of her stories. In actuality, the primary mode of thinking employed in my dissertation study on parental involvement was dialectical. Although I collected narratives from parents, this was not primarily to understand their individual experiences of involvement. Rather, I assumed that how parents talked about involvement would provide a window into the broad discourse of involvement that I believed circulated through a complex network of systems of meaning, whether or not these represented parents' actual experiences. I believed that dialectical thinking provided a way for me to theorize the movement of a discourse like parental involvement, or a grouping like social class, "independently of the intentions of their individual members, who nonetheless benefitted from (or suffered) the consequences" (Teira, 2011, p. 83). In the analysis of Lisa's and other parents' accounts, I was interested, and provided evidence for, the way in which one's class location intersected with the parental involvement discourse, ultimately participating in the maintenance of an unequal system for parents and their children. After analyzing the parent narratives in order to help me understand the parents' experiences and the way their social class positions seemed to shape those experiences, I considered "the central role discourse itself plays in the creation and maintenance of social positions and relations" (Freeman, 2001a, p. 205). Drawing upon Foucault's (1980) analysis of the intersection of power and knowledge, I concluded that the parental involvement discourse maintained inequalities in education and society in at least two interconnected ways. The first was that it had never functioned as a partnership with parents but, instead, reinforced a narrow view of the "good" parent from which all parents' actions were measured. Second, parental involvement practices gave the false impression that power was being shared with parents, but this was an illusion that not only served institutions by maintaining the status quo but transferred the responsibility for success or failure onto the individual. I drew support for this finding from Foucault (1980), who wrote, "The individual . . . is not the *vis-à-vis* of power, it is . . . one of its prime effects" (p. 98). Foucault's philosophy of power provided support for my critique of parental involvement policies and practices, as well as a way to imagine their rearticulation. This is because, in a dialectical view of the world, humans and structures are believed to be in a constituting-constitutive relationship, so change can only occur by reconceptualizing that relationship.

What I had failed to understand at the time was that I was reading Foucault through Freire's radical democratic humanism (Aronowitz, 1993) rather than fully grasping Foucault's departure from a subject-centered position (Foucault, 1977). I did not recognize that the individuals Foucault wrote about do not exist in the way I was conceptualizing them. Although I understood that the individuals in my study were constructed within systems of oppression, I believed that their collective action was necessary to confront and reconstruct these systems from within. In contrast, the individual that Foucault is referring to is a concept formed at the intersection of multiple overlapping relations of power, a way of perceiving power as an emergent force that has influenced the development of diffractive modes of thinking (Deleuze, 1988), which are described in Chapter 7. Post-structural theorists such as Foucault have contributed enormously to the conversation about the potentials and limits of dialectical thinking, and their work supports a large body of research working both within, and against, dialectics. The reason for this is that dialectics itself provides the ground for this move. It does this by embodying a "logic of freedom" (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 374). As Roy Bhaskar explains, "The dialectic is a flexible instrument. . . . [It is] neither good nor bad in itself, except insofar as it empowers us in our understanding and transformation of reality" (p. 374).

Freedom, from a dialectical perspective, is *praxis*, in that it lies in the transformational possibilities opened by the dialectical movement itself, possibilities that always exceed the constitutive material present in any historical moment (Hoffmeyer, 1994). For fulfillment-oriented dialectical researchers freedom is not a given but must be pursued: "Freedom is not an ideal located outside of [the hu]man. . . . It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion" (Freire, 1993, p. 29). From this perspective, humans and the world are always "beings in the process of *becoming*" (Freire, 1993, p. 65), but this becoming needs to be nurtured if humans are to co-construct a world in which they can be more fully themselves. However, "the possibility of constant change" (Rajchman, 1985, p. 123) opened up by dialectics also provides the ground for non-dialectical freedom. Such a freedom "is found in dissolving or changing the politics that embody our nature, and as such it is asocial or anarchical" (Rajchman, 1985, p. 123). Emancipation from a transfigurative perspective "signifies a radical and qualitative break with some aspects of the present" (Benhabib, 1986, pp. 41–42) and requires "reeducation and transformation, the objects of needs and pleasures would be redefined" (Benhabib, 1986, p. 113). As I illustrate in the section on dialectical thinking in practice, one of the ways this reeducation has been conceptualized is by rewriting history and making visible an alternative history, one that has been hidden or distorted by the workings of power (Foucault, 1972). Another way is to seek strategies that eschew dialectical thinking as, for example, poetic or diffractive

thinking approaches as described in Chapters 6 and 7. Understanding the characteristics of dialectical thinking, therefore, is crucial to understanding theories and methodologies seeking ways to work with and/or against dialectics to effect change.

Characteristics of Dialectical Thinking

Dialectical thinking is so ingrained in our societal structures and modes of being that, like categorical and narrative thinking, its presentation usually brings forth recognition, rather than surprise. As Maxine Greene (1988) explains, "There is . . . a dialectical relation marking every human situation: the relation between subject and object, individual and environment, self and society, outsider and community, living consciousness and phenomenal world" (p. 8). As a theory of change, dialectical thinking has played a dominant role in explaining historical and social changes, as well as the continuous changes occurring in the natural world (Engels, 1940; Gould, 2002). So even though there are many "dialectics" (see Bhaskar, 1993; Rescher, 2007), as theories of change, they exhibit certain shared characteristics.

1. Everything Is Interconnected and Made Up of Dynamic Intersecting Parts

Dialectical theorists view the world as a network of colliding and competing forces that cannot avoid coming into contact with one another. As Friedrich Engels posits,

> The whole of nature accessible to us forms a system, an interconnected totality of bodies, and by bodies we understand here all material existence extending from stars to atoms, indeed right to ether particles, in so far as one grants the existence of the last named.
>
> (Engels, 1940, p. 36)

A key concern, therefore, for dialectical researchers is how to understand what is meant by "system" and the role each part plays in creating and maintaining such a system, including the role and effects of the research situation itself. How natural scientists have dealt with this issue is beyond the scope of this book; for social scientists, however, working with this issue is one of the determining factors of dialectical research.

One way theorists have addressed this is by speculating that all systems "gain their identity through their parts, and that parts come into being through wholes" (Roberts, 2014, p. 20). Social scientists working with dialectical strategies must therefore not only identify the system(s) of influence

they feel matter to their study and who should be included in their target population, they must also determine how they will theorize the relationship between the two. For example, in the late 1970s, feminist researcher Bonnie Dill (1979) proposed "a dialectical framework to analyze the condition of black women in the family . . . [based on] a conviction that the relationship of blacks to white society is dialectical in nature" (p. 546). She theorized that the relationship Black women have with white society is multidimensional and complex, and not likely to be the same for all Black women, or for any woman participating in a variety of situations. Because all "wholes" gain their identity from their parts, the whole in question in dialectical research is a whole constructed at the intersection of parts identified for the purpose of the study. In Dill's study, these parts—race relations in general, women's roles in the family, women's work, and so on—make up the social context within which the experiences of the Black women can be understood. The complexity of these intersecting systems, including the individual nature of each woman, accounts for the variety that Dill seeks to uncover and understand. In another study, different parts to wholes might be prioritized, resulting in a very different understanding of, and impact on, society. Dialectical researchers, therefore, do not believe organisms act alone, or that the capacity for change resides solely in the organism itself, but is the result of complex intersecting forces.

2. *Change Is Inevitable and Is the Result of Friction Between, and Within, Living and Nonliving Organisms, Especially Those Considered Oppositional*

"The root idea of dialectic lies in the Heraclitean conception of an oscillation between opposing forces in a productive tension where each turning makes a constructive contribution to the effective functioning of the overall process" (Rescher, 2007, p. 120). Although there are various interpretations of what Heraclitus may have meant about flux and the role played by opposing forces[1] (Graham, 2015), a key concept for dialectical thinking is that of friction, which results when oppositional forces come into contact with one another. The importance of friction for dialectical thinking is more than simple "awareness of contradictions . . . [Rather, it] encourages the unearthing of hidden or tacit contradictions. It does not "accept" or "tolerate" contradictions; rather, it seeks to resolve contradictions, leading to higher levels of understanding" (Ho, 2000, p. 1065). Another assumption guiding dialectics then is that transformative movements are propelled by conflict emanating from *within* the system or organism. Nicholas Rescher (2007) explains, "The driving mechanism of dialectic is instability—be it the instability of thought (most drastically exemplified by self-contradiction) or the instability of condition typified by the vagaries of nature or the fickleness of

[hu]man[s]" (p. 5). Change is believed to be a movement toward stability, in whatever form it may take.

For example, Michael Basseches (2005) examines Karl Marx's history of production and Thomas Kuhn's history of science to better understand their dialectical movements. He explains how both describe the interdependency of the disciplinary field (history and science) with those involved in its practice. Although disciplines shape practice, practitioners also shape the theories and methodologies of their disciplines. Paradigm shifts occur, Basseches notes, when enough tensions or anomalies are produced in ways that the presiding formulation of a discipline cannot resolve. Since tensions are believed to be inherent within individuals and systems as well as between them, a dominant social practice is always at risk of being overthrown from within. This is a major reason why much of the research considered dialectical is emancipatory. By purposefully seeking and including voices that have been excluded, dialectical researchers have sought ways to bring into visibility the oppressive, harmful, and exclusionary effects of supposedly neutral or "scientific" disciplinary practices. For example, biologist Ruth Hubbard (2009) discusses her growing awareness of the role science has played in the structuring of society and her feminist turn toward questioning who benefits, who is harmed, who and what is included and excluded in the male-dominated fields of biology and genetics. "When women started looking at this situation more critically," she observes,

> they began to point out that there were certain questions that hadn't been asked, or if they were being asked, they were being asked in strange ways so as to give strange answers that really didn't correspond to the experiences of women.
>
> (Hubbard, 2009, p. 301)

Similarly, Eurydice Bauer and Lenny Sánchez (2022) intentionally sought out the lived experiences of a Latina immigrant mother and daughter living and working in the United States as a counter-story (Delgado, 1989) to strong anti-immigrant discourses that were fueling widespread disinformation and xenophobia. Counter-stories and counternarratives (Delgado, 1989; Milner & Howard, 2013) humanize discourse in ways that are believed to alter perceptions, which can lead members of the dominant ideology to question the status quo and revise their understandings. In other words, while change may be inevitable, there is nothing inherently "natural," "logical," or "just," about its movement. By intervening in change's constitutive movement, dialectical scholars seek ways to create similar revolutionary paradigm shifts to occur within particular fields or structures. What they often discover, however, is that when change efforts disrupt "harmony," results in loss of "authority," or produce confusion and chaos,

people resist, retreat, and restrain from participating (hooks, 1994), suggesting that the pull of stability and the dialectical work of engaging with contradiction creates another challenge for dialectical researchers. Since discord is "the driving force of a dialectical process" (Rescher, 2007, p. 5), surfacing conflict, disagreement, contradiction, difference, inequality, all become starting points for research seeking to engage in its transformative movement in productive and emancipatory ways. How to create the necessary discordant and tensional space to begin the transformative process that includes, and retains, participation of those in positions of power as well as those oppressed by power continues to be at the core of emancipatory work (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1993).

3. The Dialectical Movement of Emancipatory Change Is Cyclical and Purposeful

Rescher (2007, p. 1) depicts the phases believed to occur in a dialectical process as a continual movement involving,

1 *Initiation* (positing, declaration, inauguration)
2 *Response* (counterreaction, reply, opposition, destabilization)
3 *Revision and readjustment* (operational modification, sophistication, complexification)

As such, the social world is believed to be always *in* formation as structures and relations emerge from "a temporal flow of determining and determined contradictory phenomena continuously emerging from a potential state to become realised and going back to a potential state" (Carchedi, 2009, p. 147). Dialectical researchers disagree, however, in how to theorize the transformative process occurring between the "potential state" of entities across time and place and what those changes might consist of.

It is impossible to consider this issue without mentioning the influence of the nineteenth-century philosopher Georg Hegel. Although scholars disagree about how to interpret Hegel's dialectical method, these disagreements point to a core issue when considering dialectical thinking as an analytic strategy. As illustrated through Dill's (1979) analysis of the experiences of Black women in a white society, dialectical thinkers need to understand the system, structure, or whole within which the "other" is acting as the destabilizing, discordant, or opposing agent. Trying to overcome Cartesian dualism which theorized the mind and body as two separate substances, Hegel believed that separate entities (mind/body, theory/practice, abstract/concrete, knowledge/experience) not only were of the same substance but existed as *necessary* contradictory forces *within* each facet of each pair (Beiser, 1993; Gallagher, 1997). That is, an organism like the mind would not grow and

develop as "mind" without the experiences encountered through the body and vice versa. In addition, the unity formed from the interdependence of mind and body requires that each retain their unique difference even while being inherently a constitutive part of both. An issue for many emancipatory researchers is that the change-inducing friction issuing from Hegel's pairs is not one between equals but places one facet as subordinate to the other (e.g., dominant/subordinate, active/passive, masculine/feminine, community/family) with the half associated with masculinity believed to embody the characteristics connected to the side assumed as dominant and expected to benefit from the dialectical friction caused by these inequities (Braidotti, 1991). "A dialectic of one/other is thus established, which organizes the sexes in a power relation" (Braidotti, 1991, p. 213). Rosi Braidotti (1991) notes that a simple reversal of power would not eliminate the power differential existing at the core of this dialectical schema and calls "for a different reading of women's otherness, a radical redefinition of difference away from domination and subordination" (p. 214), which has furthered analytical approaches such as diffraction, discussed in Chapter 7. Entering any dialectical relationship to incite change, then, requires a deep understanding of the forces at play and consideration for how to intervene both in defining the dualities involved *and* in determining their anticipated roles in the ensuing transformation.

For example, in *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (2009) underscores the rich legacy of Black women activism in furthering strategies that account for these power inequities. Collins writes, "This dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the suppression of African-American women's ideas and our intellectual activism in the face of that suppression, constitutes the politics of U. S. Black feminist thought" (p. 6). Collins notes that response and resistance to oppression is ongoing, and there is much activists can learn from the many practices of resistance undertaken by Black women at different times and places. Attending to the unique position, knowledge, and plight of oppressed groups in repressive systems, then, is an important part of uncovering strategies that forward emancipatory change versus those that fail to do so.

Researchers seeking to enact change through dialectical analysis consider questions such as: How is the whole in question—whether a structure like neoliberalism or an aspect of identity like race or gender—conceptualized in relation to the creation, maintenance, or transformation of inequality? How is the oppressed group defined and accounted for? Is the oppressed group allowed *equal* participation and the development of its own self-identity in the creation of this new whole? For example, reflecting on the lack of attention to US Black women intellectuals, Collins (2009) observes that the suppression of "the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming

absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization" (p. 5). In addition, a long-standing critique raised by critical race scholars in the United States is that for the most part when whites enact changes that are seemingly to benefit Blacks in society, their motivation "originates from a place of self-interest" (Muhammad, 2024, p. 38, see also Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), which directly speaks to the challenges of creating spaces for change that will actually benefit oppressed peoples. As these theorists aptly note, inquiry approaches seeking transformative action have to overcome the disparaging perspectives that suppress particular voices while simultaneously bringing them into the conversation. A lack of inclusion is believed to result in the "whole" being created as not only limited and distorted (as Hubbard showed in the field of biology) but potentially just as oppressive (as critical race theorists like Muhammad, Delgado, and Stefancic demonstrate).

4. Dialectical Thinking Works With, and Against, the Dialectical Movement of Change

Dialectics is believed to be inherently critical because it must bring together differing or opposing perspectives or forces—the "negative" of a "positive"—in order to construct something new. However, the pull toward harmony, or what is often considered the *synthesis* achieved when a *thesis* and *antithesis* resolve a conflict, threatens the identity of the negative from that of difference—the "other"—into becoming *one and the same* as the positive it opposes. In addition, the conventions of identifying something in relation to what it is not can result in a kind of dependency where the growth of the "not-A" is limited by the ability of "A" to change (Grant, 2010). A challenge then for dialectical researchers is how to initiate a transformative movement toward *revision and readjustment* without erasing the unique identity or essential difference of its constitutive and interdependent parts and without trapping or binding "not-A's" destiny to that of "A." Attempts to overcome this issue have provoked various theoretical formulations, such as the one offered by Theodor Adorno's (1973) "negative" dialectics.

Adorno's negative dialectics works with the movement of dialectics against itself by continuously dispersing any emerging constructions. "Negative dialectics is the unending transformation of concepts into their opposites, of what is into what could be but is not" (Benhabib, 1986, p. 173). In this way, negative dialectics works *with* the dialectical movement by actively engaging with the friction generated when a thesis is brought into relation with a counter-thesis, and *against* dialectics, by finding ways to continuously defer or suspend closure, or a final synthesis. John Grant (2010) notes that in addition to deferral, Adorno conceptualizes a "nonidentity," which is no longer defined in opposition to identity, but "is the

undoing of this type of relational consistency" (p. 225). There is a need, Grant argues, to attend more closely to the material conditions that enrich the development and understanding of the discursive.

Dialectical, feminist, and other critical researchers have sought ways to account for how power and oppression spread through and structure social relations, and attend closely to the way language and representation are entangled in the material consequences of the dialectics of power and resistance (Braidotti, 1991; Grant, 2010). "What negative dialectics makes us aware of is something our use of language as a tool for communication, or a medium for transferring contents, makes us forget. It is the potential of language to disclose experience through its expressive moment" (Foster, 2007, p. 199). As the examples in the next section illustrate, dialectical researchers work with the transformative potential of language, turning this potential back on itself in the form of critical and generative dialogic encounters (Freire, 1993), and/or discursively by tracing the evidence and effect of the co-construction between historical conditions, knowledge and power, and the meaning-making systems shaping human understanding (Foucault, 1972). Language, then, becomes central to the processes through which dialectical researchers seek to retain the integrity of difference, while also serving to alter the systems of oppression that place certain groups, individuals, ways of being, or ideas in subjugated positions. In other words, the paradoxical nature of language, as being both the means of oppression and offering the possibility of liberation, positions dialogue and discourse as central to dialectical inquiry. bell hooks (1994), reflecting on the relationship between enslaved Africans and English, observes, "Needing the oppressor's language to speak with one another they nevertheless also reinvented, remade that language so that it would speak beyond the boundaries of conquest and domination" (p. 170). The point is, oppressed peoples have always found means to work within-against systems of oppression (Lather, 1991), sometimes dialectically, sometimes eschewing dialectics for dialogue, as Collins (2009) explains:

> In contrast to the dialectical relationship linking oppression and activism, a *dialogical* relationship characterizes Black women's collective experiences and group knowledge. On both the individual and the group level, a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness.
>
> (Collins, 2009, p. 34)

A feature of dialectical research, then, is that the risk of annihilation of language, cultures, norms, and so forth is very real, and new threats are manufactured everyday by those in power, so dialectical researchers seek

ways to enact transformational engagements without negating the identities or unique contributions of those involved. It is in this way that the analytic movement of dialectical thinking can be characterized as a movement that seeks to effectuate transformation without negation. Figure 5.1 depicts this dialectical movement.

Since the outcome of the dialectical movement is the creation of a system of relations that replaces the oppressing system, dialectical thinking forwards an emergentist theory (Wan, 2012). Recall Foucault's quote on emergence. A final note, then, in this section is that as an emergentist theory dialectical thinking has played a central role in conversations about the nature of time and change, order and disorder, reversibility and irreversibility, and so on (Burger et al., 1980), which have, in turn, influenced how social scientists have made use of the generative process offered by dialectics. In general, dialectical researchers have theorized ways to work *with/in* (Lather, 1991) the dialectical movement believed to be created through friction, and *with* some process for making visible the entities believed to be in friction in efforts to work *against* them. As illustrated in the next section, this work builds on the idea that a better understanding of the interdependence between constitutive structures, practices, discourses, and so on, and their impact on beliefs, understandings, social arrangements, and the like, will provide the necessary ground for reconstructing constitutive relationships

Figure 5.1 Effectuating Transformation Without Negation.

or reconfiguring problematic arrangements. However, as I point out in the final section of this chapter, the idea of emergence has been taken beyond dialectics and influenced the development of poetic and diffractive thinking approaches, the topics of Chapters 6 and 7.

Dialectical Thinking in Practice

The relationship between individuals and society encompasses many levels of dialectical tension, making the inclusion of some form of dialectical thinking probable in all inquiry. Simply recognizing that analysis involves working across diverse perspectives or that language itself is dialogic (Bakhtin, 1986) opens a dialectical space for inquiry. Furthermore, since competing forces can be internal or external to the organism or entity being inquired about or, most likely, involve both, the magnitude of research designs employing dialectical strategies is endless. As Poe Yu-ze Wan (2012) explains, dialectical thinking can serve many "heuristic purposes by highlighting, for example, emergence, complexity, historicity, dynamic change, contingency, the interweaving of continuity and discontinuity, the interpenetration of seemingly mutually exclusive categories, the relative autonomy of different levels of matter in motion, and so on" (p. 438).

As noted throughout this chapter, social science researchers working in the dialectical mode pay attention to competing demands. They seek ways to account for difference in their research designs while also wanting the inquiry process to play a transformative role in society and an emancipatory role for individuals oppressed by current and/or past social arrangements. Since difference is perceived to be a fundamental part of life, and the various forms it takes produce a multiplicity of effects, social scientists interested in change have wondered how to best work with difference to effect change in desirable ways. In keeping with the distinctions I made between fulfillment- and transfiguration-oriented inquiry, I have divided the practice section into two general orientations to research: One dialogue-centered, the other discourse-centered. Although both approaches can be, and have been, used together, separating them helps to describe how each might enact dialectical thinking in practice.

In general, both the dialogue- and discourse-oriented approaches work on the assumption that there is a co-constitutive relationship between the social or natural world and human consciousness or understanding (Au, 2007), and that research must somehow account for that constitutive relationship. They differ, however, in their point of entry. The first approach is human-centered, participatory, "action-oriented [and] . . . forward-looking rather than simply reporting on the status quo" (Mitchell et al., 2005, p. 268). It aims to disrupt the objectification of the human, and works with subjective meaning-making to reconstruct more humane relationships. Although

Table 5.1 Two Approaches to Dialectical Thinking in Practice

	Dialogue-Centered Approach	*Discourse-Centered Approach*
Dialectical Action	Dialogue with Difference	Tracing Competing Concept Formations
Point of Entry into Dialectical Relationship	Human Disenfranchisement and Experience	Language, Concepts, Material Practices
Nature of Analysis	Future- and Action-Oriented	Historical and Reconstructive-Oriented

it is understood that humans enter a world that has already been named and constructed in particular ways, the focus is on how humans make sense of that world and their efforts to change it. The second is discourse-centered and conceptual, and is built on the assumption that all discourses and practices have material effects and shape how humans understand themselves and others. It is often historical and seeks transformation by revealing the way taken-for-granted conceptualizations of reality (the categories, narratives, and social arrangements that shape the world) are illusions constructed at the intersection of multiple, competing discourses. Rather than prioritize dialogue, researchers enter the flow of competing discourses and focus on the ways these discourses have shaped the world. Table 5.1 outlines these two approaches.

Although there is no "road map to follow" (Jorgensen, 2005, p. 30), the examples in this section provide a brief overview of what these two approaches might look like in practice.

Dialogue-Centered Dialectical Research

Dialogue, for theorists like Freire, provides a way for human agents to enter into the dialectical process of naming and renaming the world. Freire explains,

> To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.
>
> (Freire, 1993, p. 69)

Dialogue fosters a "consciousness *of* consciousness" (Freire, 1993, p. 60), which helps humans step outside their situation and begin the process of

reconceptualizing a situation from one of limit to one of possibility. Since human cognitive shifts are believed to happen in situations where an opposite force produces tension, dialectical approaches seek to create the conditions to enact a dialogue with difference, and achieve a critical "co-understanding" (Cohen-Cruz, 2006, p. 433)—a necessary precursor to transformative action. It is through dialoguing with others who have different experiences with current social arrangements and relationships, and different conceptions of how things could be, that humans can begin to transform these relationships and construct more socially just arrangements. In this approach, different perspectives are sought out, especially those of people believed to have been marginalized, oppressed, or silenced by dominant social norms and practices (Collins, 2009). Caroline New (1998) explains: "Subjugated knowledges can be key to social change, not because they are the whole truth, but because they include information and ways of thinking which dominant groups have a vested interest in suppressing" (p. 360). Furthermore, since subjugated knowledges often overlap, they provide a source of experiential evidence for building solidarity and engaging in collective action (New, 1998). Dialogue provides the dialectically induced generative space to unpack, reflect upon, criticize, and reconsider the variety of opinions offered on an issue. The learning and understanding produced through dialogue is believed to be as important as the solutions generated (hooks, 1994).

However, since one of the core assumptions guiding dialectical work is that no one can speak for another, and that change must occur from within each of us in the process of coming to an understanding, the challenge for dialectical researchers has been how to engage with diverse participants in ways that support everyone's critical transformative capacities without imposing a particular transformative process or outcome. This is one impetus for critical research approaches considered "participatory" (see Call-Cummings et al., 2024, for a comprehensive overview of theories and methodologies of critical participatory inquiry). Although the aim is to open up a "space for groups to take action themselves . . . and come up with their own creative solutions" (Mitchell et al., 2005, p. 268), there are disagreements about who should be involved in those groups. Most groups, whether considered homogeneous or heterogeneous, will bring a range of differences, and so a common belief for participatory researchers is that participatory approaches cannot avoid issues of power and so must seek to address these head-on. Revolutionary themes of "justice, equality, civil rights, [and] democracy" (Benhabib, 1986, p. 13) often guide the process.

Dialogue-centered approaches seeking collective action can take many forms. One common approach is to seek out the perspectives of groups of people typically excluded from decision-making processes as important voices and contributors for reparative action. For example, for a study

on the relationship between a historically white institution (HWI) and the Black community displaced by the university's development, Roshaunda Breeden sought out the cultural expertise of two Black undergraduate students who were both residents of the community and also students at the university. It is in this way that Roshaunda Breeden, Tavaria Smith, and Aniya Willis (2023) became a research team. Wanting to better understand how the Black community surrounding the University of Georgia (UGA) made sense of their relationship to the university, the team of researchers worked together to create a research plan, identify key members of the community to interview, and carry out the research project from beginning to end. Breeden et al. noted that like many other institutions built during the antebellum period, UGA made use of enslaved Black laborers to build and service campus buildings and has its own history of mistreatment, exploitation, and discrimination of Black individuals and communities. In addition, continued projects of university expansion and modernization meant that many local residents had lived through the seizure of property, removal of citizens, and destruction of one of these Black neighborhoods, Linnentown. Within this context, then, the study sought to answer this question: "How do Black communities surrounding UGA make meaning of their local HWI?" (Breeden et al., 2023, p. 4).

The study was guided by "endarkened feminist epistemology" (Dillard, 2012) and "critical race theory" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013). An endarkened feminist stance encouraged the research team to center the responsibility they had to the Black community and to attend to issues of trust, power dynamics, and the needs and desires of the community. Critical race theory (CRT) guided the analysis on the relationship between the university and the community, keeping the tenets of "systemic racism" and "white supremacy" in focus. In addition to participatory action research in the development of a research team and in how decisions about the research design were enacted, the team also conducted interviews and focus groups with Athens, Georgia, residents ranging in ages from 8 to 80.

Data were analyzed reflexively in an ongoing way during data collection activities. Then the team of researchers "created life notes for each participant, related to the research topic and tenets of CRT (e.g., permanence of racism, interest convergence, counternarratives, revisionist history, and whiteness as property)" (p. 5). The team approached the data holistically, going back and forth across transcripts, observations, and individual participant life notes until they had reorganized the material into three broad themes. Wanting to present the themes in ways that resonated with their theoretical framework and seeking a way to preserve the voices of community members while also protecting their confidentiality, the team created five composite characters who would tell a collective story. However, the team felt that more was needed, not only to honor the lived reality

conveyed by the themes but also to give back to the larger local community. Drawing on the long history of Black West African storytelling, the research team turned three dialogical vignettes into a two-hour performative counter-story open to the public which included opportunities for the audience to be able to respond to the performance, and "talk back" between scenes (Town & Gown Players, 2021). The three vignettes are as follows (Breeden et al., 2023, p. 6):

1 "Strained Relationships": Attempting to Erase Our Presence and Significance
2 "They Just Disregard Our People": Intentional and Internalized Messages of White Supremacy
3 "All These Things Are Truly by Design": A Legacy of Institutional Racism

In this article, only the first vignette is shared due to lack of space. The whole performance can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtTTp6r95Fo.

Dialectical thinking processes shaped this study from beginning to end. It did so by centering the analysis on the point of contact between the community and the university. Second, the dialogical and purposeful nature of the study was fostered in choosing a participatory action research design supported by endarkened feminist epistemology and critical race theory; in creating composite characters and counter-stories; and in producing a theatrical performance that included opportunities for the community to respond. And finally, the researchers reconnected the findings to the tenets of critical race theory and shared three recommendations the local community had for how the university could move toward reconciliation: "(a) naming and embracing racial histories, (b) moving toward action, and (c) reconciling what was lost" (Breeden et al., 2023, p. 12).

Discourse-Centered Dialectical Research

Discourse-centered researchers believe that language itself is a meaning-making agent. Language conceived discursively "builds objects, worlds, minds and social relations. It doesn't just reflect them" (Wetherell, 2001, p. 16). Therefore, discourse analysts focus on the co-constitutive "relationship between discourse and other elements of social practices" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 207), and the historical conditions that account for the processes in which systems of knowledge have penetrated and shaped everyday knowledge, beliefs, actions, and interactions. The aim of discourse analysis is to identify the "procedures" that construct discourse and obscure its distributive effects, and to articulate new relationships between discourses and practices in order to produce different effects. Understanding the products of discourse analysis "as a kind of fiction . . . means that we come to

see 'truth' as something less final; as something we can (re)make" (Graham, 2011, p. 666).

Although discourses are human products, discourse theorists believe that spoken, written, or visual statements cannot be connected to human intentions or actions in any consistent way. As such, a focus on discourse dissolves the distinction between structure and agent, viewing both as implicated in discourse formations. Therefore, the task of analysis is not to understand what something means, but to examine "possible enunciations that could be made on a particular subject, why it is that certain statements emerged to the exclusion of all others and what function they serve" (Graham, 2011, p. 667). When taken up dialectically, the analysis works with the tensions and contradictions embedded in competing discourses—linguistic, disciplinary, conceptual, and so on—in ways that reveal their workings, that is, how they produce certain meaning structures, while stifling others.

Sue Saltmarsh and I-Fang Lee's (2021) examination of the way happiness and play are co-implicated in images of childhood is a good example of this approach. Saltmarsh and Lee noted the way the discourse surrounding childhood play was typically associated with happiness which in turn infiltrated the associated images circulating about children and childhood. By examining images of children in educational and curricular reports and documents, Saltmarsh and Lee sought to show the "visual rhetorics through which happiness and play function in the discursive construction of storylines whose credibility is maintained by normative assumptions that are acceptable to romanticising adult sentiments" (p. 301). Their aim was to examine the way discourse produced an idealized and seemingly universal understanding of the role of childhood play. The documents analyzed in Saltmarsh and Lee's (2021) study included early childhood and educational curricular materials from Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, and the United States, differing in scope and focus. In each document, images, along with any corresponding text, provided the source for the analysis.

In the discourse analysis of these documents, Saltmarsh and Lee drew on a variety of theories, notably Foucault's (2008) notion of "biopolitical power," Michel De Certeau's (1984) concept of "everyday practices," and Sara Ahmed's (2005) accounts of the "cultural politics of emotion." The authors paid particular attention to how these concepts organized the discursive presentation of children at play. After providing an overview of the discourse surrounding concepts of play and happiness and orienting the reader to the "biopolitics of play" and their role in "governing happy childhoods" (p. 299), the authors used Theo van Leeuwen's (2008) guidelines for discourse analysis in the analysis of the selected materials. The intent of the analysis was to consider how the written and visual elements of a text did not just represent the curricular or pedagogical practices of the organization depicted, but were also "*doing* something in discursive terms—as

constructing, explaining, and legitimating and reiterating discursive and social ideals about both play and happiness" (p. 301).

The authors demonstrated how these images produce discursive connections that reinforce and impose a particular ideological perspective on childhood and on educational and parenting practices. They argued that discourses of play, regardless of cultural contexts, were aligned and shaped by Western constructions of childhood. In addition, the authors illustrated how particular images of play and happiness reinforced governing power structures by positioning the governing of individual bodies at the center of discursive systems constructing social beliefs and expectations regarding norms of conduct. They concluded that more attention is needed to reveal the way images are used to construct specific ideological connections, especially in how children's embodied emotions are implicated in these connections. Dialectical thinking worked the discursive intersections of play and happiness to show how their co-implicated discursive productions are taken up to support and/or critique dominant views of "good" or "bad" behaviors and practices in education, parenting, and childhood studies, among others. In this way, analysis of a seemingly benign relationship between two concepts opened up less benign governing discourses circulating through societies and institutions.

Deciding on Dialectical Thinking for Analysis

Dialectical thinking has had a huge impact on the natural and human sciences, so I can confidently state that no discipline remains untouched by it. Furthermore, it is clear that some form of dialectics is present in all research. Less widespread is its adoption as the primary research strategy employed. This is due largely to dialectical researchers being unapologetic about their ideological and political leanings and their desire to openly challenge the dominant view of scientific research as objective and neutral. Since it is possible to conduct critical research—that is, research that provides a critique of taken-for-granted norms, beliefs, or practices—from either a categorical or narrative approach or both, why choose dialectical thinking as the analytic movement to guide research?

As described in this chapter, the primary reason researchers choose a dialectical approach is to overcome the limitations believed to be inherent in approaches that assume it can produce social change by providing an account of an event, group, or phenomenon from a space of supposed objectivity or neutrality. In addition, approaches, like narrative, that embrace subjective perspectives and intersubjective understandings do not always prioritize societal change. There are overlaps, however, between narrative and dialectical thinking in the form of counternarratives seeking to offer counter-experiences and strategies to enact change, and also between dialectical and poetic thinking since artful approaches to inquiry often serve

emancipatory aims. These combinations point to spaces where different modes of thinking have been effectively used together, in these cases, to support dialectical aims. In general, dialectical thinking has provided the theoretical foundation for researchers to:

1 Expose the co-constitutive relationship between systems and structures and their impact on individual identity and societal arrangements
2 Put into action a theory of change that works with the generative space of dialectical friction
3 Construct counter-stories and discursive accounts that critique oppressive practices and relations and reenvision more socially just arrangements

Inherent to dialectical thinking, then, is a radical disruption of the established order, and this includes beliefs about the aims of research itself. Dialectical researchers believe that a critical social science must always refashion itself in response to "changing historical conditions" (Lather, 1991, p. 3). They also assume that change cannot be brought about without considerable struggle and risk. Greg Dimitriadis explains,

> Acknowledging culture as dialogic, as emergent, makes us responsible for the ways we as unique individuals inhabit one another's worlds, as well as how we write up our empirical material (or "data"), opening a space to see ethnography, writ large, as a political praxis . . . with real effects.
>
> (Dimitriadis, 2001, p. 579)

This requires that researchers open themselves up to being transformed, to making themselves vulnerable and believing in the transformative value of learning from others (hooks, 1989, 1994). Dwight Conquergood (1985) explains, "When we have true respect for the Difference of other cultures, then we grant them the potential for challenging our own culture" (p. 9). As such, dialectical approaches call on researchers to engage a heightened sense of reflexivity and to acknowledge the ideological values they put into practice. "Dialectical practices," Lather (1986) explains, "require an interactive approach to research that invites reciprocal reflexivity and critique, both of which guard against the central dangers to praxis-oriented empirical work: imposition and reification on the part of the researcher" (p. 265). Researchers are thus encouraged to engage in multiple layers of "critical reflexivity" that account for the way their positionality shapes the design and outcome of the study (Madison, 2012). Bryant Alexander explains,

> Critical reflexivity as a method is both a demonstration and a call for a greater sense of implicating and complicating how we are always and already complicit in the scholarly productions of our labor, and the

> effects of our positions and positionalities with the diverse communities in which we circulate.
>
> (Alexander, 2006, pp. xviii–xix, as quoted in Madison, 2012, p. 198)

Dialectical researchers believe that all research, whether intended or not, participates in the construction of the reality it seeks to describe, explain, or overthrow (see Hacking, 1983). Since effects can be both positive or negative, or more often than not, both, critical researchers worry about research effects. However, since change is believed to be inevitable—that is, change will result from no action just as well as from action—researchers believe they must do the best they can to intervene in ways that direct change in beneficial ways. Lather (1986) explains that this latter point poses difficulties for dialectical researchers—how to intervene in ways that cause the most benefit and the least harm to social groups oppressed and marginalized by current social arrangements without creating new forms of oppression for these groups or others. In general, then, dialectical researchers need to determine (1) how they plan to intervene in the flow of a changing world and (2) how they conceptualize dialectical change.

Intervening in the Flow of Change

Dialectical researchers, regardless of whether they are conducting a dialogue-centered or discourse-centered study, need to consider how they will demonstrate "how large-scale social discourses are systematically (or, for that matter, unsystematically) manifest in everyday talk and writing in local sites" (Luke, 1995/1996, p. 11). Since the dialectical tensions involved are not only complex but continuously changing as they interact with one another, identification of core issues can be a challenging task. What to prioritize and what direction to take becomes an ongoing concern for researchers who are being asked to simultaneously facilitate an open process and somehow direct its course. A tension exists then between identification of competing and conflicting forces and the desire to let the dialectical or dialogical process lead the way.

In addition, the need to name the powers of oppression as they are being unpacked has led to dialectical approaches being criticized for potentially contributing to the very issues they are trying to overcome (Benhabib, 1986). By seeking to disrupt the constitutive relationships between discourses, social arrangements, and peoples' perceptions of themselves and others, dialectical researchers have generally drawn on the resources available to them. That is, they have looked to history or current arrangements, working from within these conceptualizations in search of points of transformation. To counter the potential limitations of these understandings, dialectical researchers have sought ways to keep the topics of conversation in motion,

whether it is within the movement of a generative dialogue (Freire, 1993), or in the oscillation between a specific text and the "order of discourse" that provides its structuring network (Fairclough, 2003, p. 3). They have also sought ways to revisit, reclaim, and reinterpret the words and work of oppressed and marginalized people (Collins, 2009). For example, Collins notes that rekindling new insights for Black feminist thought "also involves searching for its expression in alternative locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals" (p. 17). In other words, researchers seek ways to approach the project dialectically, both trusting that the process itself will provide the needed insight about how to proceed and finding ways to bring in diverse materials to provoke new insights.

The question of how to intervene, in turn, creates procedural, political, and representational issues. As noted earlier, societal divisions between groups of people, practices, knowledges, and so forth, do not simply point to different viewpoints or experiences, but are enactments of power (Martínez Guillem, 2013). This means that even when given the chance for deliberative discourse on matters of concern (Benhabib, 1986), inequity precedes discussion and participation. Prejudice is carried into the discussion in language, concepts, settings, and the racialized and gendered bodies of those present. Along with practices of critical reflexivity, it is important also for those in power—typically white, able-bodied, cisgendered citizens—to acknowledge their complicity with maintaining oppressive institutional structures. hooks (1989) explains,

> When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white-supremacist values and beliefs even though they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination . . ., they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they profess to wish to see eradicated.
>
> (hooks, 1989, p. 113)

As hooks (1989) notes, researchers need to be able to account for their own positionalities and the way these are enacted in the research process, acknowledging how research practices are themselves systems that produce both desirable and undesirable effects. Michelle Fine calls this stance "working the hyphens," stating

> When we opt . . . simply to write *about* those who have been Othered, we deny the hyphen. . . . When we opt, instead, to engage in social struggles *with* those who have been exploited and subjugated, we work the hyphen, revealing far more about ourselves, and far more about the structures of Othering.
>
> (Fine, 1994, p. 72)

Dialectical practices, then, are believed to open a performative space where difference is articulated in ways that do not seek fusion but a redrawing of the hyphen. Conquergood (1985) describes this performative stance as a space where diverse perspectives are brought into conversation in order to learn from, and challenge, one another. The aim is to engage *in* an open conversation that "resists conclusions . . . [and works] the space *between* competing ideologies. It brings self and other together even while it holds them apart. It is more like a hyphen than a period" (p. 9). In other words, dialectical researchers seek to effect change by disrupting the arrangements categorical thinking might have established to produce counternarratives (Milner & Howard, 2013) that problematize taken-for-granted beliefs about human action. Focusing on the tensions that result at the intersections of societal arrangements and individuals is meant to go beyond simple empathy for others and incite collective action (Collins, 2009; Conquergood, 1985; Freire, 1993; Madison, 2012).

Like other qualitative approaches, the design and analytical procedures of dialectical research are iterative and flexible. Specific to dialectical thinking is the analytical focus on the tensions that arise when oppressive practices or power structures are brought out into the open to be picked apart and expose their problematic and harmful effects. Svend Brinkmann (2018) calls this process "*making the hidden obvious*" (p. 17), stating that to conduct inquiry from a critical stance is "to uncover the hidden power structures that regulate human behaviors and influence the politics of human experience" (p. 17). Others suggest more is needed. For example, E. Anthony Muhammad (2024) writes, "decoding isn't sufficient. Merely making something visible and intelligible does not transform that reality, nor does it necessarily lead to resistance" (p. 43). Since, people, researchers included, are multifaceted and participate in oppressing practices as well as having experienced oppression (Freire, 1993), dialectically informed analytical approaches are self-critical as well as critically reflexive (Hong et al., 2017), and often draw on theories that assist researchers' endeavors to direct their analytic gaze in ways that affirm efforts to resist oppressive forces and imagine life differently (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1989; Muhammad, 2024).

Conceptualizing Change

Going back to the idea of freedom, Bhaskar (1993) suggests that freedom does not mean the elimination of conflicting forces but is about engaging "the capacity for self-development" (p. 385). And since humans and world exist in a co-constitutive relationship, ultimately dialectical research is about self- *and* world-development. So another issue for dialectical researchers is how to conceptualize self-development, change, critique, or

what is meant by "dialogue across difference." These issues have generated a range of scholarly materials that provide good resources for researchers interested in dialectical approaches. The point here is to not take for granted what dialectics means, but to consider how to use dialectical theories to conceptualize *a* perspective on difference, *a* conceptualization of the movement of change the study is expected to enact, and *an* analytical approach that reveals the working of oppression while also offering *a* transformative vision for the future. As such, theorists working with and against dialectics have sought ways to describe transformation and the conditions that enable a transformative process that does not negate the identities, histories, and contributions of those involved. Researchers have also sought ways to work outside dialectics by working with the idea of movement without identifying the poles of an issue, a sort of transformation without formation. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the insights that have germinated from conversations about dialectical theories and practices have provided support for two different approaches: The poetic (described in Chapter 6) and the diffractive (described in Chapter 7). Poetic thinking departs from, and extends, dialogue-centered approaches by moving from a dialectical view of the human–world relation to one where bodies/world exist through lived and felt entanglements. Diffractive thinking departs from, and extends, discourse-centered approaches by moving from a dialectical view of the subject–discourse relation to one where the focus of analysis is on the agential intensities of entangled entities—the stage of forces mentioned by Foucault—which suggests new ways to conceptualize their articulation and entanglement. One is deeply human and embodied, the other posthuman and materialist.

Note

1 Graham's (2015) encyclopedia entry on Heraclitus suggests that one possible reading about Heraclitus's notion of change is "not that all things are changing so that we cannot encounter them twice, but something much more subtle and profound. It is that some things stay the same only by changing. One kind of long-lasting material reality exists by virtue of constant turnover in its constituent matter" (n.p.).

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6 Poetic Thinking

Introduction to Poetic Thinking

Imagine a thinking that can penetrate the deepest regions of our embodied sense (Grünbein, 2010). Poetic thinking is not about art per se, but about unleashing our perceptual, aesthetic capacities for sensuous knowing. It is *felt* experience; the experience of *being in* the whirlpool of affect that we *are* as experiencing beings. This is a move away from attention to epistemological and representational forms of knowing to an ontological mode of participating in the living expressions of existence. The poetic, the expressive arts, then, are not solely transmitters of thought; they are themselves "a kind of thinking" (Homan, 2020, p. 3). Ivan Brady (2009) observes that regardless of the form it takes, "poetics is every bit a sensuous-intellectual activity—centering, decoding, reframing, discovering, and discoursing ourselves in ways that show us something of what we are, literally, as embodied participants and observers" (p. xiv). Derived from the Greek concept of *poiēsis*, poetic thinking is a way of knowing that is simultaneously a making, a bringing something "into being as what it is" (George, 2012, p. 25). As such, poetic thinking is revelatory, intuitive, nonrepresentational thinking. It does not concern itself with portraying *an* experience, understanding, or event as evidence of something else; it is *itself* an experience, an understanding, an event. Susanne Langer explains,

> The appearances of events in our actual lives are fragmentary, transient and often indefinite, like most of our experiences—like the space we move in, the time we feel passing, the human and inhuman forces that challenge us. The poet's business is to create the appearance of "experiences," the semblance of events lived and felt, and to organize them so they constitute a purely and completely experienced reality, a piece of *virtual life*.
>
> (Langer, 1953, p. 212)

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Rooted in phenomenological conceptions of experience, perception, and language, poetic thinking attends to the phenomena of lived life as these are experienced. Within a poetic and phenomenological stance, phenomena are things, impressions, feelings that manifest through, or appear to, our embodied senses (Freeman, 2021; Galvin & Todres, 2009). Rather than abstract meaning from the manifold felt and sensed responses and reducing these to concepts such as in categorical thinking, poetic thinking restores, "aesthetics to its original task: investigating the nature of experiences gained through sensory perception and sensibility" (Saito, 2017, p. 1). Prioritizing aesthetic experience reunites the unique significance of lived bodily response with the whole of existence (Gadamer, 1989; Merleau-Ponty, 2012). The world beckons us and we respond (Gadamer, 1989), not by taking it over or shaping it to our image, but by participating in its unfolding; a participation that puts us in the midst of a world overflowing with meaningful matter. "The phenomenologist's call 'to the things themselves' . . . is an appeal not to literalism but to the generative power that is freed when the human mind listens to what things have to say" (Simms, 2008, p. 1). Perception denotes our connectivity with the world and is as much a being, as it is a taking in, of this world. James Hillman observes,

> In the ancient world the organ of perception was the heart. The heart was immediately connected to things via the senses. The word for perception or sensation in Greek was *aisthesis*, which means at root a breathing in or taking in of the world, the gasp, "aha," the "uh" of the breath in wonder, shock, amazement, an aesthetic response to the image (*eidelon*) presented. (Hillman, 2006, p. 36)

Perception, then, is reception; as perceiver-receivers we are, each in our unique ways, able to activate our embodied senses. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012) explains, "To understand is to experience . . . the accord between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the realization—and the body is our anchorage in a world" (p. 146). It is in this way that I conceptualize poetic thinking. It is a way "to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" (Shklovsky, 1965, p. 12).

Unlike the modes of analysis covered so far, what differentiates poetic thinking is its reach beyond a search for abstract theory into the sensual, efferent and afferent, difficult-to-grasp, or to put into words, experiential world. It brings into being the complexities of sensed experience. Like the wind, it cannot be seen, but its effects are powerful and real. For example, when we experience a winter wind blowing against our faces or the rush of fright from an encounter with a barking dog, we experience simultaneously the cold rise of the epidermis, the flow of blood in our ears, the rustling of every other moving object out of sight's reach, and whether I am actually

talking about fear or the wind does not matter, the desire in the poetic is to bring forward the knotty and embodied knowledge of the senses, and recirculate these into the world for others to experience.

Poetry and art are believed to get us closest to this embodied, immersive state of being. This is where the overlap with narrative is most evident. However, distinct from narrative thinking, the aim of poetic thinking is not to share the experience in its contextualized and temporal form, but to transcend time, space, action, and personal identity, and give oneself over to "the aesthetic state" itself: "a pure instance of suspension, a moment when form is experienced for itself" (Rancière, 2004, p. 44). This does not mean, however, that poetic thinking is a decontextualized endeavor. On the contrary, in their responses to the world and its objects, perceiver-receivers take into consideration the way all places, things, and beings are impregnated with histories—cultural, personal, sensual, aesthetic (Saito, 2017). In addition, art-making cannot be separated from the art-maker, nor is art-making always a choice or something controlled by the art-maker. Qiana Cutts (2020) points to the "critical necessity" of poetry, especially for members of marginalized communities, noting that when poetic inquiry is understood only from artistic or research viewpoints, it fails to "underscore the influence of poetic necessity, (re)membering, and spirituality in crafting research poetry" (p. 911).

Poetry as a human necessity requires artist-researchers to blur, and reject, many socially constructed boundaries between science and art and open their senses to all that the world offers. This includes blurring disciplinary boundaries (Brady, 2004), recognition of the entanglement of "the verbal and the visual" (Richardson, 1994, p. 78), the spiritual and embodied (Cutts, 2020), and a shift from "speaking about things . . . [to] language itself as matter, or as that which matters" (Gurevitch, 1999, p. 526). For example, Peter Clough (2002) explains how, in crafting narrative fictions, he strives

> to blur distinctions not only between form and content, but also between researcher and researched, between data and imagination; to insist, that is, *that language itself, by itself, does the work of inquiry*, without recourse to the meta-languages of methodology.
>
> (pp. 2–3, my emphasis)

When language is brought into presence through poetic means, and is given space to speak, it is words asserting themselves as their own being. bell hooks (1989) explains,

> Poetry was the place for the secret voice, for all that could not be directly stated or named, for all that would not be denied expression. . . . The magic of poetry was transformation; it was words changing shape, meaning, and form.
>
> (p. 11)

Researchers turning to artful, poetic, and narrative forms of inquiry reject the unnatural separation imposed by dominant conceptions of research that require scientific method (Eisner, 1981). And whether they perceive themselves to be poets or artist-researchers, or like me do not, the turbulence of life and the complexities of research have propelled many into poetic thinking. For example, while the design for my dissertation was simple—interviewing research participants on their experiences with parental involvement—making sense of the complex intersection between theory (what I thought I was doing by drawing on a critical hermeneutic framework) and practice (being there, listening, and seeking understanding) was not. Poetry just happened to be a space where I gave myself over to understanding, not as something outside myself or achievable, but something I was already in the midst of. In poetry, I was able to move from a position as a prepared knower:

> I try to walk you down the corridor
> I had prepared
> And you try to follow me there too
> Freeman (2001b, p. 646)

to one of recognizing that *understanding* is something lived, experienced, and undefined:

> I laugh when I think
> That I feared
> They'd get lost
> When I have never known
> Where I was going
> Freeman (2001b, p. 657)

Like many researchers, I did not explicitly use poetic strategies in my study of parental involvement, yet neither did I dismiss the aesthetics of the research experience as nonessential components of the meaning-making process. Attuning to the felt as it is experienced and seeking poetic expression is not a process or procedure for extracting data bits and rearranging them poetically. It is a mode of being and becoming; a way of tuning into the embodied knowing already pulsing through our veins. As a gathering of being, poetic thinking bridges boundaries between human and nonhuman worlds, the spiritual and the physical, the felt and the conceptual. Sarah MacKenzie-Dawson (2019) observes, "Poetic inquiry embraces uncertainty, allowing multiple meanings and understandings to exist within a word (i.e. imperfect becoming (im)perfect), a poem, or the research itself" (p. 74). And Zali Gurevitch (2002) points to the way poetry has the ability to integrate disparate fields like art and science or supposedly oppositional qualities like abstract and concrete entities while also opening us to the

new and the possible. The movement, then, of poetic thinking is one of *transfiguration* (Gurevitch, 2002). Gurevitch explains, poetry

> wavers between closure and opening, figuration and trans. Closure is the outcome of figuration, the completion of figure, the finality of form, which allows a performance to take place. Trans, however, is the opening aspect of poetry; it is that which shifts between forms, toward form, away from form.
>
> (Gurevitch, 2002, p. 410)

As has been the case for all the modes of thinking, poetic thinking is a more varied approach than can be presented here. Furthermore, art and poetry also play a significant role in research where narrative or dialectical modes of thinking prevail. Often the presence of an expressive, evocative, and imaginative artistic approach work hand in hand with the narrative presentation of a lived history or the dialectical analysis of an historical event. In many ways, the familiarity of the dialectical encounter, and of the lived experience of the narrative, both contributed to the development and legitimation of poetic thinking as a form of inquiry. Maxine Greene (1986) observes, "Poems address our freedom; they call on us to move beyond where we are, to break with submergence, to transform" (p. 429). Furthermore, poetic thinking is a deeply personal act. Since poets act as perceiver-receivers, the worlds they create are "full of touch, smell, taste, hearing, and vision, open to the buzz and the joy and the sweat and the tears—the erotics—of daily life" (Brady, 2004, p. 628). In a poem called *Verbal exchange*, Aisha Durham reveals this sense of nakedness:

> I want to be
> A poet, but I am
> Afraid—I can't—stomach putting
> Me out there
> On paper
> For strangers to rummage through my privates
> Like bargain hunters at a Saturday morning yard sale
>
> Durham (2004, p. 493)

It is this dwelling in experience for its immanent rewards that makes poetic thinking so antithetical to modern-day thinking. So accustomed are we to picturing ourselves as separate beings who act on the world, and whose actions are meant to produce a measurable effect, that the idea that we might be most ourselves in a participatory state of being, where "the invisible shapes of smells, rhythms of cricketsong, and the movement of shadows all, in a sense, provide the subtle body of our thoughts" (Abram, 1996,

p. 262), requires a radical reconceptualization of humans in the world. So how should we understand this space of heightened felt sense, this blurring between subject and world that transcends taken-for-granted notions of our centrality and purpose in the world?

Characteristics of Poetic Thinking

Poetic thinking is another form of thinking that is not alien to us. We are not only surrounded by human forms of aesthetic expression (e.g., music, dance, poetry, art), we often find ourselves taken aback by the sheer beauty of a landscape or the felt depth of an emotion. As artist-researchers, the desire is to keep the aesthetic aspects of inquiry alive. Dean Young (2010) asserts, that rather than intending, "the poet ATTENDS! Attends to the conspiracy of words as it reveals itself as a poem, to its murmurs of radiant content that may be encouraged to shout, to its muffled musics there to be discovered and conducted" (p. 4). Artist-researchers, then, like all humans, are caught up in the flow of experienced existence. Their task as poets is to capture, even partially, the manifold phenomena and felt sensations circulating wildly about, and to send these back into the world for others to experience and to complete (Leggo, 2009). The engagement between poet and existence, and poet and audience, then, is an important part of keeping this experiential flow alive. The minute we (audience or poet/researcher) step out of the experience into an explanatory or reflective discourse *on* the experience, we have stepped away from that which is gained from poetic thinking. Forrest Hamer observes,

> One of the primary values of poetry is the opportunity it provides for a conversation, not only among poets but also between a poet and a reader or listener. . . . Poetry relies so much on language, on voice, and the music within voice that it literally holds the voices of many others who have in turn contributed to a single poem.
>
> (As quoted in Rowell, 2004, p. 1049)

Although we may not all have the creative ability to write a poem, imagine a sculpture, or perform a play, we can heighten our awareness and tune our senses to the complex richness of the phenomenal world. As participants in a shared world, poetic thinking is indebted to, while also transcending, linguistic and cultural forms of seeing, saying, and knowing. In this sense, poetic thinking calls on researchers to embrace "art as a form of *world-making*" (de la Fuente, 2013, p. 169). Laurel Richardson (1993) notes, "By settling words together in new configurations, the relations created through echo, repetition, rhythm, rhyme let us hear and see the world in a new dimension. Poetry is thus a *practical* and *powerful* means for reconstitution of

worlds" (p. 705). Poetic thinking, then, requires a reconsideration of one's place in the world, a turning over of oneself to the sensuous; an entangling of subject and object, so that it is not clear whether the artist or the material is leading the creative process (de la Fuente, 2013). As with the other modes portrayed, poetic thinking exhibits certain characteristics.

1. Poetic Thinking Privileges the Figurative and Performative Dimensions of Languages, Images, and Gestures Over Their Literal or Representational Ones

Poetic thinking requires that we let languages, bodies, movements, and images lead the way (Barthes, 1982). As linguistic and symbolic beings, we all have the capacity to participate in the becoming of language, that is, to imagine, to be, to feel, and to mean something different through these imaginings. In this way of thinking, art practices are a form of human participation in meaning-making that gives "form to thought" (Sullivan, 2006, p. 29). Elliot Eisner (1981) explains the potential of this form of thinking for social science research. Rather than discovering laws, "art seeks . . . the creation of images that people will find meaningful and from which their fallible and tentative views of the world can be altered, rejected, or made more secure" (p. 9). As such, poetic thinking shifts the aims of research from one that examines and represents people's meanings in the form of categories or stories, to one that works with the evocativeness and power of figurative language. Mary Oliver (1994) remarks, "Imagery, more than anything else, can take us out of our own existence and let us stand in the condition of another existence, or another life. . . . Use it responsibly" (p. 108).

Since, the aim of poetic forms of inquiry is not *an* interpretation of the perceptual encounter but an invitation for others to enter the phenomenal world of human experience, Oliver's heedfulness is understandable. Rebecca Luce-Kapler (2009) writes, "Poetry has a way of drawing us toward a phenomenon so that we feel the emotional reverberations of a shared moment" (p. 75). Attending poetically to the words of participants spoken in an interview or to the complexities of a setting or event pushes researchers to consider how each word and each specific detail has the power to bring recognition, provoke discomfort, or cause pain in an audience. Gurevitch (2002) describes how poetry works through language, often reworking seemingly disparate entities, into a new whole. Poetic thinking has the capacity to create "a form, without formulae: a landscape, disengaged from all horizons" (Glissant, 2010, p. 213). By juxtaposing and transposing forms of saying and perceiving in ways that move beyond the constraints of any one language, "The poem itself testifies to the existence of alternative ways of saying something and implies that there could still be others" (Tedlock, 1999, p. 157). It is in these ways that poetic thinking brings into

existence the manifold and the possible of lived life. The care researchers take in "re/turning the world into poetry" (Schoone, 2021, p. 228) accentuates the ambiguity of meaning of lived life itself. When an artist-researcher crafts poetry from encounters with data, the poem becomes its own entity and is itself open to interpretation, pointing to the second characteristic of poetic thinking.

2. Poetic Thinking Mediates Between Real and Possible Felt Worlds in Ways That Open Up Rather Than Close the Potential for Multiple Interpretations

A poem, or other kind of poetic performance, creates a virtual world *of* meaning, embodied sense, felt phenomena, or event that is thought to be more real than if it was depicting an actual world. Langer (1953) talks about this as "the world of the poem" (p. 228). The poem or "work of art can gather the unruly materials of everyday life into a shapely whole without losing anything of their vitality" (Eagleton, 2005, p. 57). Poetic thinking merges world and experience in pursuit of aesthetic ways to recirculate worldly meanings onto themselves. Artist-researchers enter a world already in motion and seek ways to move with it. Richard Kearney (1998) explains that the "origin of poetic imagining is neither a transcendental ego nor a negating *pour soi*—it is a becoming of language which demands perpetual rebirth" (p. 111). Together, with every word and every image, poetic thinkers open the world to what James Risser (2002) calls an "infinite dialogue." Although, as discussed in Chapter 5, dialogue can be dialectical, the dialogical movement of poetic thinking makes full use of the ontological, transfigurative, generative space of becoming (Gadamer, 1989).

This generative space of becoming is, however, paradoxical, since poetry "is never as unified as when it diversifies" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 25). This is because art and poetry maximize the expressive quality of the work of art by keeping the possibilities of its "meaning" in flux, and, yet, each work of art is uniquely itself (Davey, 2013). Gadamer (2007) explains, "Becoming is no longer simply some kind of nonbeing, that is, something seen as the becoming of something different; now it signifies coming into being. . . . Being emerges from becoming!" (p. 209). What makes a work of art or poem worth seeing or reading again is that its meaning is never definite, and each new reading, each viewing, will provoke a new aesthetic response, and provide us with new possible dimensions for understanding. And while the work forms a unity, it is not self-enclosed; its meaning exceeds itself in ways that even the artist could not imagine. It is, Gurevitch (2002) notes, "a vehicle for passage, like building a raft in language" (p. 403). And the language of poetry, James Longenbach (2004) observes, "revels in duplicity and disjunction, making it difficult for us to assume that any particular

poetic gesture is inevitably responsible or irresponsible to the culture that gives the language meaning" (p. 1).

Although poetic thinking blurs and crosses boundaries, this does not mean that any one thing gets subsumed into another. On the contrary, the work of poetics brings into closer scrutiny the manifold dimensions, the uniqueness of each word, sound, texture, gesture, and what they bring to understanding (Gadamer, 1989), aesthetic experience (Rancière, 2004), or some other effect resulting from turning attentiveness to details into poetic expression. Poetic thinking, therefore, mediates the "polyphony of the senses" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 6) and puts into motion complex, difficult-to-articulate, human felt experiences. There is no original experience represented. Rather, the "original" experience is kept alive, enhanced, becoming more than originally imagined or intended. This idea of a repetition that is always itself a difference takes a posthumanist sense in diffractive thinking in Chapter 7, but here it is deeply human; its aim is to engage, bring out that which is shared in humanity, or the potential of humanity in humans. It helps recreate experiences that may otherwise be lost or create those that have not yet been thought. Shelley Tracey (2021) explains, "Poetry drops a plumbline into meaning" (p. 254), playing with the liminal spaces between creativity and knowing. After all, "the poet *is* a human scientist" (Leggo, 2008, p. 165), attending to, interpreting, and retheorizing the world in transformative ways. Figure 6.1 illustrates the movement of poetic thinking.

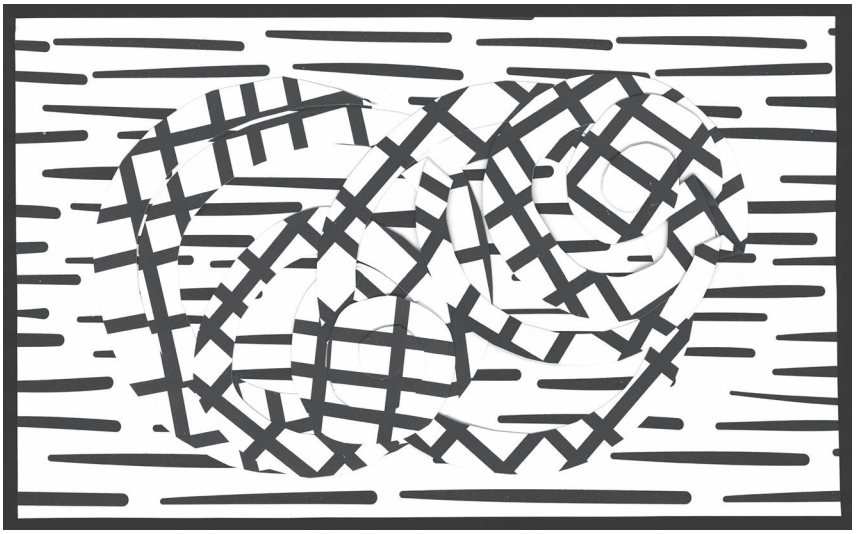

*Figure 6.1 Trans*figuratively Becoming.

3. Poetic Thinking Invites, Even Requires, Participation, Dwelling, a Desire to Be Transformed, an Activist Engagement With "The Polyphony of the Senses."

Poetic thinking is participation; a sharing of experience that makes a difference in the world. Understanding, perceiving, and feeling take shape within active involvement and "a long lingering with the senses" (Wiebe & Snowber, 2011, p. 106). And since this dwelling entails a deep listening to the "other," it is not a neutral event. Poetic thinking is inherently political, although perhaps not in the usual practice of the word as taking sides on an issue. Rather, it intervenes "in the general distribution of ways of doing and making" (Rancière, 2004, p. 13). Furthermore, poetic thinking is a practical activity (Gadamer, 2007). The world, in all of its concreteness, whether directly experienced, or experienced through language, images, and gestures, is a dialogical partner in meaning-making (Davey, 2013; Gadamer, 1989; Schwandt, 2004). The poet's task is to reframe "that which already exists. To slow, to disrupt, to interrupt the flows" (Metres, 2018, p. 11). The longer we linger, the stronger our commitment to listening to the polyphonic rustlings of a pluralistic world, the more we work to express the depth of its hopes and horrors, the more humanity gains. The work of art or poem asserts itself and "bears witness to our own being" (Gadamer, 1986, p. 115). This relationship is kinetic, as Julian Henriques (2010) argues, "We not only feel moved *by* something, but are also moved to *do* something—to take action and move others" (p. 73).

Engaging poetically asks perceiver-receivers to listen intently to sounds and utterances that may not at first be intelligible. For example, bell hooks (1994) shares that when diverse forms of speech or other languages are allowed to be spoken in classrooms, students often complain, particularly white students upon hearing Black vernacular. hooks writes how bringing Black speech into the classroom is a pedagogical move that creates a space of recognition of what it means to experience *not* understanding what someone is saying. hooks (1994) notes, "Such a space provides not only the opportunity to listen without 'mastery,' without owning or possessing speech through interpretation, but also the experience of hearing non-English words" (p. 172). And Andrea Dancer (2009) observes, "It takes work to stay open and porous, vulnerable and excessive" (p. 39). As we tune ourselves to the ambiguous, the unfamiliar, the unbelievable, we become aware of the varied possibilities for *being* itself and gain new recognition of the horizons "that give rise to and also surpass our selves" (Homan, 2020, p. 130). In other words, poetic thinking engages while also shocking us out of our complacency, while keeping images and words from stabilizing into an absolute truth. Because inquiry presumes the presence of an other, whether the other is a work of art, another person, or the world itself, to be disturbed into new forms of thinking demands a suspension

(Rancière, 2004) of preconceived attitudes or judgment about the "other." The "other" is a cocreator of meaning, a meaning that does not belong to either. It is this way that poetic thinking breaks away from the dichotomous thinking of dialectics.

Poetic thinking can also guide pedagogical activities. For example, an activity I often use to generate conversation in class about assigned readings is to select a quote from the readings, then create prompts that task students to carry out some kind of reading—deconstructive, narrative, poetic, and so forth. I divide students into small groups, assign each group a quote, and then have them randomly pick a reading task (typed in advance and cut into paper strips, like selecting a playing card from someone's hand). In this way, I give up control over matching a task with a particular quote, leaving that association up to chance. What has been effective with this activity is that students seem to suspend worries about correct analytical procedure and embrace the task given to them as a different kind of challenge often producing evocative, thought-provoking, and creative responses. Box 6.1 provides an example of a quote from an assigned reading, the task the students were prompted to do, and the group's response.

Box 6.1 Poetic Response Crafted by Corey Ingram, LMSW, Asiimwe Ismail, Dan Jin, and Aviann Morris

Required Reading: MacLure, Maggie (2013). Classification or wonder? Coding as an analytic practice in qualitative research. In R. Coleman & J. Ringrose (Eds.), *Deleuze and research methodologies* (pp. 164–183). Edinburgh University Press.

Quote: "Perhaps we could think of coding, then, as just such an experiment with order and disorder, in which provisional and partial taxonomies are formed, but are always subject to change and metamorphosis, as new connections spark among words, bodies, objects and ideas. Such a conceptualisation would recognise coding, not as a static representation or translation of a world laid out before us on the operating table of analysis, but as an open-ended and ongoing practice of *making* sense. It would also recognise that the gaps and intervals that we make as we cut and code the flow of difference are possible openings for wonder. We need therefore to learn not to look away or to fear that which we can scarcely comprehend, or bear to comprehend, when 'subjects' refuse to submit to the discipline of coding, since those occasions might be the ones that open onto wonder" (MacLure, 2013, p. 181).

Task Directions: Rewrite this paragraph as a poem or in poetic form to convey its core sense. Think aesthetically, attending to affect, form, voice, sound, pulling together key words, phrases or images, and crossing out others. Feel free to reorganize the text in whatever way makes sense. Write the poem up. Be prepared to share.

The Group's Response

To code or not to code
A journey that blends order and chaos,
Where ideas and thoughts constantly shift,
Shaping and reshaping like a chameleon,
A dance between the known and the unknown.
Provisional patterns form and dissolve,
As we explore connections, gaps, and sparks,
Crafting sense from the swirling river of minds,
Yet sometimes, like a truck in muddy terrain, we get stuck.
Coding is the leap into wonderland,
An iterative process—daunting, yet captivating,
A courageous plunge into the forest of ideas,
Seeking clarity amidst confusion,
To make sense of it all, or perhaps to embrace the mystery.
For in the spaces where order slips,
And in the words left unsaid,
Lies the opening to the vast unknown,
A glimpse of something more, uncharted and wondrous.
To code or not to code—
The question that leads us forward,
Forever open to new connections,
To the metamorphosis of understanding.

The relationship between the world and our rendering of that world is complex. Opening artistic productions to multiple reverberations does not mean that ethical issues of representation are resolved or lessened. Rather, ethical questions are revealed as these are woven into the interpretations that inspire the poetic performance. The performative aspect of poetic thinking can help reveal the role that language and other symbolic systems have played in shaping how it is that we see and think of the world to begin with. Nicholas Davey explains this relationship:

> The world is not art and yet the world requires art in order for us to discern what worldly action is possible. . . . It is not a question of translating

> the image into actuality but of allowing that image to transform one's understanding of what is plausible or possible within actuality.
>
> (Davey, 2013, p. 134)

This awareness also reveals the way language has been complicit in shaping a world that excludes, oppresses, and marginalizes, prompting artists and scholars to seek ways to honor traditional lineages that have, for the most part, gone unrecognized, erased, or considered only in contrast to an established norm. For example, while Toni Morrison's work is revolutionary in its ability to focus on and create complex and meaningful accounts of Black people's lives and experiences on their own terms (Greenfield-Sanders, 2019), Morrison underscores the discrimination experienced by Black writers and uses a parable in her 1993 Nobel Prize acceptance speech to explain this oppressive movement. Morrison narrates that the woman in the story is "a practiced writer. She is worried about how the language she dreams in, given to her at birth, is handled, put into service, even withheld from her for certain nefarious purposes" (Morrison, 1993, n.p.).

Morrison's point reveals a tension that is embedded in any typology or history of the social sciences and requires careful thought on the part of the researcher as to how a story, an issue, a life will be presented and the kinds of theories and contexts most suited for conveying that life in research accounts, poetically expressed or not. It requires recognition of the theoretical and personal commitments researchers bring to their craft. Not all artist-researchers will approach artful practice or research in the same way. So although I conceive of poetic thinking phenomenologically, others may reject the phenomenological lineage that shapes my stance, while still embracing a poetics for inquiry. For example, Britton Williams (2023) argues for "Black aesthetics" for inquiry that leans "into Black feminist praxis" (p. 59) and centers Black ways of knowing. Sandra Faulkner (2018) calls for a feminist epistemology, and MacKenzie-Dawson (2019) draws on poetic inquiry and *currere*, an autobiographical exploration of life's practices as curriculum, to deepen understanding of addiction and recovery. These examples suggest that there is ample room to create artful approaches for inquiry that resonate with diverse perceiver-receivers and that do not draw on phenomenological philosophy.

4. When Successful, Poetic Thinking Transcends the Limits of Human Situatedness, Becoming More "World" Than "Human," More Felt Collectivity Than Individuality

As artist-researchers give themselves over to the creative act of art-making, "meaning is made" (Brady, 2004, p. 624), but meaning made in this way is always a transaction, a passage through one embodied interpretation into the next (Galvin & Todres, 2009; Gurevitch, 2002). Once released, the work of art becomes its own thing. So while deeply personal, poetic thinking transcends

authorship. The speaking "I," Miles Richardson (1994) explains, is no longer relevant as a singular or authorial "I," but sparks an opening between word and "luminous instance" (p. 84). This opening can be understood as a kind of "surrender." Esther Fitzpatrick and Katie Fitzpatrick (2021) describe bringing coffee beans to a poetry and writing workshop and asking participants to "'surrender' to the sensuous embodied provocation . . . to pay attention to the smell, the feel, the taste, and the sounds to evoke memories and engage with its 'itself-ness'" (pp. 1–2). Their intention was to revitalize the connection between embodied senses and creative writing. Activities such as this can rekindle the way our senses open to memory and daydreaming (Bachelard, 1964) and encourage an "embodied reflexivity . . . [that] allows us to uncover the lived experiences of our body in a direct and an unapologetic way from the inside out" (Mahani, 2024, p. 184).

Poetic thinking puts humans into the midst of living; a living that precedes and extends beyond any mortal existence. Because language and meaning belong to the world (Gadamer, 1989), and not to any one being, poetry and art serve as a medium with which to enter this flow. It is "trans" (Gurevitch, 2002, p. 405)—transfigurative, transformative, transgressive; poets are instigators of "passage-work" (Gurevitch, 2002, p. 410), becoming both the passage and the passenger that transports. As such, poetic thinking puts us in the midst of movement. It does not claim to understand, to complete a thought, or to still the movement of becoming. As participants in the world, humans have the potential to contribute in meaningful ways to the unfolding of meaning and understanding. Meaning and understanding, by their very nature, however, are movements that will always exceed any possibility of totality, so there are no guarantees that one's engagement will be beneficial or harmful, only that there is the potential to effect the flow of what is thinkable within humanity (Gadamer, 1989; Rancière, 2004). It is this potentiality—this infinite excess—that serves as an invitation, rather than deterrent. Being alive in the midst of meaning keeps felt experience alive and moving through generations of perceiver-receivers, each encounter putting into motion multiple and enduring effects and new articulations of meaning (Leggo, 2009). Artist-researchers engage in this movement, not because they believe that there is an essential or original meaning to be found, but because they understand that all meaning is dynamic and has the potential to be enhanced, redirected, thwarted, changed, or even obliterated. Poets participate in this flow because it is only by participating that growth for all occurs (Lorde, 2009).

Poetic Thinking in Practice

Researchers using poetic thinking strategies create expressive provocations, facilitating collaborative, performative encounters where receiver-perceivers and their audiences enter the complex stream of lived-life. Any sense or sensations elicited through these experiences cannot be predetermined

and are not meant to be the same for everyone. Some may receive therapeutic benefits from their encounter, while others may be moved to social action. Others may find that dwelling in the complex layers of felt existence unleashes new understandings, new visions, hopes, and possibilities. Sean Wiebe and Celeste Snowber (2011) explain, "The stew of our lives is the ability to live, breathe, and listen to the sensuous world. . . . [T]o honor how we were created as humans is to find a myriad of ways to bring the senses to learning" (p. 108).

Atsushi Iida (2021) drew on poetic representation to better understand the lived experiences of survivors of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Iida began the research report with a short poem written by a first-year college student in an English class in Japan about the death of classmates during the earthquake, which occurred when the student was in the ninth-grade. Iida stated being so moved by the student's poem that he began to wonder "how cultural trauma is experienced and constructed by an individual" (p. 45). He noted that while the statistics circulating about the event showed the magnitude of the destruction caused by the earthquake and tsunami, they could not convey the subjective experience and the effects this event had on young people's lives. Iida interviewed the student who wrote the poem, Shinji, in February 2015, almost four years after the event. Iida used poetic representation and the first-person voice to stay as close as possible to the narrative sequence, wording, and emotional emphasis of the account as narrated by Shinji. The first poem opened the moment the earthquake hit,

On March 11, 2011,
At 2:46,
In Hamadori-district, Fukushima

Iida (2021, p. 47)

And ended 16 poems later,

How many times did I think, "I have to survive"?

This tragedy changed me.
This traumatic life event has made me grow up.
This heart-breaking experience has made me who I am today.

I would like to live for
all the people who supported me

I must live for
all my friends who passed because of this disaster

Iida (2021, p. 56)

Through repetition and emphasis, line and typographic variation, Iida stayed close to the sound and pattern of Shinji's spoken words even though these had been translated from the Japanese into English for publication. Shinji's alternating feelings of confusion, uncertainty, urgency, fear, and hope were aesthetically expressed providing the reader empathetic access to the experience Shinji went through. For this study, poetic representation helped the author convey the emotional register and roller-coaster experienced by the young survivor.

In another example, Kuo Zhang (2020) used poetic inquiry to focus on the lived experiences of international graduate students who became first-time mothers while pursuing graduate degrees in universities in the United States. Zhang argued that pregnancy, birth, and motherhood are not only corporeal experiences, they put into motion an embodied learning process that alters an individual's sense of self and identity. The aim of Zhang's study was to "capture the dramatic moments of corporeality, language, identity, gender issues, and therefore contribute to the understanding of IGSMs' [international graduate student mothers] experiences as a social, cultural, and educational phenomenon" (p. 312). In this poetic ethnographic study, Zhang recruited international students first through the university's Office of International Education and then through snowball sampling, where participants suggest other individuals to the researcher. Eleven participants enrolled in five universities in four states participated in the study, ten were from Mainland China and one from Taiwan. Participants were interviewed in Mandarin. In addition, information was gathered in a chatgroup for Mandarin-speaking mothers initiated by the author.

Once the interviews were transcribed, Zhang described the analytic approach as "searching for poetic ideas . . . those evocative, critical, and dramatic moments, which Cahnmann-Taylor and Hwang (2020) have referred to as 'Kapow!' moments" (as cited in Zhang, 2020, p. 318). In addition, Zhang approached the poetic inquiry not to produce a poetic representation as Iida (2021) did, but to respond poetically to the data. This approach, which is often called "generated poetry" (Butler-Kisber, 2005, as cited in Zhang, 2020, p. 316), allows researchers to respond poetically to the data using their own words (Zhang, 2020). By responding interpretively and evocatively to the data, seemingly ordinary experiences come alive as surprising and compelling.

Zhang described three rounds to the process of creating poems. First, she copied verbatim the events or statements that stood out in the transcripts. Then, for the second round of engagement, she "investigated the heterogeneous voices, connected to relevant literature and broader sociocultural issues, and transformed the first draft/prompt into a poem" (p. 319). In the third round, the poems were assessed for their aesthetic merit, shared with others, and revised. The poems were then presented as findings without explanation or interpretation as Zhang believed the poems are able to

show meaning in their own way. Headers were used to organize the poems topically, such as "Sociocultural and Sociopolitical Contexts for IGSMs," "IGSMs' Pregnancy Stories," and "IGSMs' Birth & Motherhood Stories." Through poetic inquiry, Zhang felt she was able to honor the marginalized voices of her participants and share their experiences with a wider audience. Poetic inquiry provided a way to gather together the various threads of these mothers' lived experiences and make the ups and downs of their journeys tangible.

Sometimes words are insufficient in portraying a felt experience. During the COVID-19 lockdown, Nicole Porter (2022) used observational sketching and journal writing to engage in "a disciplined process of prolonged empathetic observation" (p. 60) to better understand the impact of the pandemic. Moved to simply observe the view from the same window, a shared garden space provided to tenants, Porter produced a visual journal that included over 200 sketches documenting "the individual and collective experience of lockdown and revealing place-specific impacts and responses to the pandemic" (p. 60). In this article, 16 of the drawings were presented along with commentary that wove together personal experience, notes on the drawing, and quotes from other scholars and artists "who have practised drawing as a way of knowing" (p. 61). Poetic thinking was evidenced throughout the visual essay, as drawings and commentary allowed the reader to experience the perspective Porter offered of the natural and social rhythms of this particular space. Porter observed how drawing can provide a way of making visible the "extraordinariness in the ordinary, and celebrating the poetic potential of landscapes, both existing and yet to come" (p. 75).

The final example in this chapter is a "critical phenomenology *of* walking" (Zurn, 2021, p. 1). It is critical because walking is not assumed to be an embodied, practical activity that is the same for everyone. An examination of walking allowed Perry Zurn (2021) to bring into visibility the multifaceted structures that reveal walking to be a complex phenomenon that not only manifests differently in different bodies but also elicits a wide range of responses from those who witness the walking, some of which become life-erasing. Zurn drew on other critical phenomenologists such as Judith Butler, who discussed "the story of Charlie Howard, a white gay man of 23 who was killed in Bangor, Maine, in 1984" (p. 6). Butler had pointedly asked, "why would someone be killed for the way they walk? Why would that walk be so upsetting to those other boys that they would feel that they must negate this person, they must expunge the trace of this person" (Butler, 2006, n.p., as quoted in Zurn, p. 6). Building from accounts such as these while also embracing the liberatory aims of critical phenomenology, Zurn questioned,

> what is it to walk? What does it look like, feel like, sound like? For whom, in what time and place, is it so? . . . What are the social values and

> structures that inform and give form to who walks, where and how they walk? How is it that our walk differs depending on the "we" who walks? But also, how is walking itself a worlding? Why and how does walking have the power to change the social values and structures that impinge upon it, shaping pathways and lifeways as it goes?
>
> (Zurn, 2021, pp. 1–2)

The paper is structured into four sections. Section 1, *The Path of Critical Phenomenology*, provided a rationale for bringing phenomenology and critical theory together. Zurn showed how critical theory attended to the reality of social forces that make walking a high-risk activity for certain members of society. Section II, *The How of Walking*, analyzed the circumstances around the deaths of Charlie Howard in 1984 and Latisha King in 2008, who were both victims of homo- and transphobic hate crimes. Zurn questioned the way sexism, racism, homophobia, and ableism intervene where gait is met with a reaction, phenomenologically unpeeling the way walking performs not only the walker's way of being or becoming, but embodies structural norms and values. By attuning to the way walking mediates societal norms, Zurn effectively provided a deeper understanding of the structures of oppression that "constrain walking chances" (p. 2). Section III, *The When and Where of Walking*, deepened the analysis, demonstrating how a style of walking shaped by intersecting and oppressing relations can also become sites of "resistance and re-formation" (p. 12). Zurn commented,

> It is not just that Latisha King experiences her walk, or that her walk is experienced by others awash in homophobic and transphobic, racist and ableist frameworks, but that her walk does something in the world, realigning embodiments and rearranging horizons. It does something and it says something. It is a saying, a responding that examines as it listens. And this is how walking comes to matter.
>
> (Zurn, 2021, p. 13)

From this multilayered phenomenological analysis of walking as a phenomenon, Zurn showed how "walkers from marginalized groups are not simply victims of oppression . . . [but] are also revolutionaries, rewriters of history in the very pitch of their gait" (p. 12). In this piece, poetic thinking kept theory and the embodied practice of walking entangled to produce a provocation to phenomenological accounts that fail to consider the structures of power and discrimination that shape the way phenomena are formed while also moving the reader to reflect on their own understanding of these intersecting forces.

Embedded in poetic thinking, then, is a deeply aesthetic way of knowing that enables artist-researchers to confront the limitations of traditional

research standards and seek new ways of engaging with life and living. In this process, the artful account itself, whether words, images, or movements, gains its own agency and invites repeated engagements into its being and becoming.

Deciding on Poetic Thinking for Analysis

There are many ways that artistic practices have been used in research design. However, not all arts-based research prioritizes or makes use of poetic thinking in the way described here. For example, the analytical practice of creating poetic transcriptions, poems constructed from and grounded in the data often "move in the direction of poetry but [are] not necessarily poetry" (Glesne, 1997, p. 213). Similarly, an artistic approach might be taken up in unique and compelling ways but, in many cases, the principles guiding the work are aligned with a narrative or dialectical standpoint. This does not make the work less significant, only that it is important to recognize their distinctions if gaining a deeper understanding of poetic thinking is desired. What clearly differentiates poetic thinking from the others is that the aesthetic experience that is opened up in the encounter between an artist and the world, or an audience and a work of art (such as the poetry, installation, performance of an artist-researcher), puts into motion possible and varied "moment[s] of transcendence" (Davey, 2013, p. 133) that give us a glimpse of humanity's truth without corresponding to any actual truth. It is this unrealized (and never-ending) potential that artist-researchers build on and develop further in their work. Therefore, using poetic thinking strategies in research requires entering into an aesthetic, experiential relationship with the research topic rather than one guided by the conventions of social science research (Schwandt, 2004). In general, poetic thinking allows researchers to:

1 Penetrate the felt and difficult-to-grasp regions of experiential life
2 Reach beyond meaning and keep understanding in flow
3 Create expressions of encounters that expand and challenge the imagination
4 Critique what is, by putting into circulation undervalued forms of expression, or creating them anew

Like the other modes of thinking presented in this text, poetic thinking is shaped by its inherent movement, and is not without its challenges or criticisms. In regard to decision-making, the primary ones addressed here are *art as research* and *negotiating standards of quality*.

Art as Research

Research shaped by the arts is usually well-received and appreciated for its ability to provoke an aesthetic response and resist the dominant scientific

paradigm. Less certain, however, is how to assess its status as research, and whether such a status is even necessary. Artist-researchers disagree on this issue. Some believe that, although an arts-based researcher might have a different criterion for the quality and aim of a study, seeking legitimacy within the larger research community is an important goal, and that one way of doing this is "by explicating the logic-of-justification that underpins . . . [the] work" (Piantanida et al., 2003, p. 185). Others feel that attaining legitimacy as research undermines the important transgressive role played by the arts and that "arts-based researchers must undergo a radical break from science as a standpoint for understanding" (Finley, 2003, p. 289). For some, reconciling the expectations of artistic and academic writing is impossible. Dancer (2009), for example, feels that academic writing is not always the best platform for "the complexities, interrelatedness, and incomprehensibility of embodied language" (p. 39). And Clough (2002) explains that the problem with research validity is that it depends "on things being already what/as they are" (p. 93). What Clough means is that scientific notions of validity set up a solipsistic situation where to know requires an already defined conception of what can be known and what knowledge looks like. Art, however, disrupts this assumption, revealing that meaning is accomplished in every encounter, encounters that do not need to "make sense" (Furman, 2007; Clough, 2002) in any traditional sense of the word.

Others believe that the false separation between art and science is part of the reason this question arises to begin with. Art, research, and science are all in the business of creating meaning and knowledge about the world. By aligning itself with a narrow view of science, research has disregarded the essential aesthetic qualities of science (Eisner, 1981) and created its own problematic dichotomy. In other words, the proliferation of various forms of arts-based research is evidence, Eisner notes, that science needs art, not that art needs science. In a scholarly exchange concerning the question of the specialness of the "arts" in the curriculum, however, Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) suggests that the tension surrounding classification of the arts is productive, even if there is no clear resolution. Alternatively, Jorge Lucero (2018) argues that art-making "is predominately a thinking process and needn't require a practitioner to make conventional art in order to claim the identity and license of an artist" (p. 201). Lucero goes on to suggest that prioritizing the conceptual impetus of art-making supports the belief that art provokes thought.

Standards of Quality

Another challenge to conducting research guided by poetic thinking strategies is that it will be assessed for its artistic qualities as well as for its contribution to what advances it makes about the topic of inquiry. This means that artist-researchers must be able to work across competing standards

of quality, which involves understanding their unique conventions, even while seeking to transcend these, in order to navigate across what are often considered disparate forms of thinking and expression (Bresler, 2006). Understanding the debate around this issue, then, is an important part of assessing one's work. Although there are disagreements about which standards of quality are most relevant, many artist-researchers hold clear expectations for identifying quality art-based research. For example, Liora Bresler (2006) argues, "Good qualitative research, like art, presents us with complex reality. Bad research and art, I suggest, distort in the process of oversimplification, creating stereotypes and distancing us from the world" (p. 65). Tom Barone (2002) adds that the elements supporting the design of arts-based research, as would be the case for any quality research, are not "chosen at random. Their selection is evidence of recognition that in successful research endeavors form and function are mutually supportive" (p. 258). In addition, most people would likely agree with Eisner's (2002) statement that, "Artistry requires sensibility, imagination, technique, and the ability to make judgments about the feel and significance of the particular" (p. 382).

And yet, Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor and Richard Siegesmund (2018) remind us that what is considered good or great art "is not a culturally neutral value" (p. 9). They write, "when issues of quality are raised, it is important to recognize the cultural forces that preserve power by serving as self-appointed arbiters of excellence" (p. 9). How one situates oneself in these debates, then, becomes an important part of one's scholarly footprint. This is true regardless of the approach taken but one aspect of poetic thinking worth noting, is how it often elicits a deep sense of recognition among artist-researchers. For example, when first encountering poetic inquiry as a graduate student, Camea Davis (2021) writes, "Long before I was an 'official academic,' I was a poet; a student of word, voice, and sound. I used poetry as a sense making tool" (p. 116). This deep sense of recognition is accentuated by the impossibility of separating out the multiple identities that shape an individual's work. Many artist-researchers introduce themselves through their intersecting identities. For example, Gloria Wilson and Pamela Lawton (2019) write about how their identities as Black/women/artists/educators/researchers infiltrate the work that they do. And Cutts adds, "Black women's poetry—whether personal or research-based—is born of the spirit. *Ars spirituality* is presented as an important reflexive practice in poetic inquiry. It is the overarching impetus under which craft, aesthetics, and evaluation are situated" (p. 917). These multiple identities are not only crucial to the individual but also necessary for diverse voices and languages to gain recognition and spread throughout institutions that have a long history of denying them access, notice, or regard.

In this sense, arts-based research is often called upon for its transgressive qualities. As noted earlier, part of the power of poetic thinking is its ability to effect transformation, often simultaneously, on multiple levels—individual, communal, embodied, conceptual, social, institutional, historical. In other words, poetic thinking has "transgressive validity" (Richardson, 1993); validity is reached when the encounter achieves a "living presence," (Bresler, 2006, p. 61), and pushes the audience "to think in ways that may be revolutionary" (Dillard, 2014, p. 255). This reception need not be the same for everyone, and in fact, should not be. The variety of ways that poetry, or other forms of artistic performance, have been received in the social sciences are also an indication of its ability to recreate itself in new ways (Richardson, 1993). The point here is that the diversity of effects, even conflicting ones, is considered positive for poetic thinkers who see validity as emanating from having a continued effect on the world. The decision to approach research from this perspective would support research projects that seek to provoke an aesthetic response in others or, as mentioned earlier, to disturb others (and self) into new forms of thinking (Metres, 2018).

Poetic thinking transcends borders, connecting as well as dissolving, revealing as well as creating a dynamic world of felt experiences. It takes the experiential movement of living to heart, keeping that movement alive while also participating in its recreation and dispersion. Poetic thinking has contributed to the ontological turn in the social sciences (Gadamer, 1989). It has done so from a deep-seated belief in the centrality of humans as cocreators of the world's meaning structures. So although poetic thinkers believe the world—in the sense that things, whether natural or humanly-made—have equal "voice" in the co-creation of meaning, the ontological space is one filled with the angst of human existence in all its variations. As will be clear in Chapter 7, a general critique of the phenomenologists' emphasis on human meaning has been one of the catalysts for the development of diffractive strategies in the social sciences. By moving from human–world co-creations as forms of aesthetic relationships to assemblages of things as manifestations of movement itself, meaning is displaced. In this displacement of the human, things—humans or otherwise—gain power and presence by virtue of the intensity emanating from assemblages. This move takes us beyond "the mode of the thing itself" and into a radical rethinking of human–world entanglements.

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7 Diffractive Thinking

Introduction to Diffractive Thinking

Imagine waves forming and colliding in the center of the ocean. Imagine how undulation meets undulation, creating an unpredictable and ceaseless movement; folding, splitting, combining, changing directions, dispersing. "Each wave," Bronwyn Davies observes,

> is more than itself, intra-acting with forces larger than itself, the moon, the sun, the body of the ocean, the seasons, the surface of the ocean floor, and a multitude of smaller forces inside-outside itself such that there can be no clear demarcation between wave and not-wave.
>
> (Davies, 2021, pp. 63–64)

This is diffractive thinking; a movement for thought bubbling forth from "intra-acting" (Barad, 2007) tangible and intangible forces. Diffractive thinking engages the dynamism of life, (per)forming conjugations at the interstices of solid and fluid heterogeneous elements within a "plane of immanence. . . . A plane of consistency peopled by anonymous matter, by infinite bits of impalpable matter entering into varying connections" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 255). In this mode, thought cannot be confined to a human body, but is the affirmation of life itself (Braidotti, 1991). Gilles Deleuze (2004), for example, observes that there are no differentiating essences in nature, only "spatio-temporal dynamisms: that is to say, agitations of space, holes of time, pure syntheses of space, direction, and rhythms. . . . And simultaneously, beneath the partitioning phenomena of cellular division, we again find instances of dynamism: cellular migrations, foldings, invaginations, stretchings" (p. 96). In these ways, diffractive thinking dissolves established structures and understandings produced within conventional thought to (re)activate the revolutionary potential of "not yet[1]" thought relations and intensities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

As the activation of "pure immanence" (Deleuze, 2001), diffractive thinking accommodates a range of techniques for reconfiguring the interplay of a

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heterogeneous world of human and nonhuman entities without relying on predefined categories for organizing the world or predetermined relations or hierarchies between entities. This is a way of inventively reading an already entangled world in its becoming-otherwise (Davies, 2021) while folding the effects of that reading into the very creations it produces. Techniques for reading considered "transversal" (Guattari, 1995), "diffractive" (Haraway, 1992), "schizoanalytic" (Guattari, 2013), "cartographic" (Braidotti, 2011; Latour, 2005), "nomadic" (Braidotti, 2014; Deleuze, 2004); "rhizomatic" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Masny, 2013, 2016), "intensive" (MacLure, 2024); "diagrammatical" (Freeman, 2017, 2025), and the like, do not seek to decipher or interpret what is, but strive to enact analytic practices that temporarily assemble disparate entities in ways that perform thinking's liveliness, refusing and resisting compartmentalization and stabilization. The focus of these ways of reading, then, is not on what an assemblage of parts *means* but interrogates *articulation* itself. That is, different assemblages enact different modes of articulation, producing different lively effects.

Diffractive forms of reading can be understood to perform assemblages or diagrams that write, carve, and cut through moving matter in ways that reveal, disrupt, create, reconfigure the human, nonhuman, more-than-human entanglements that we are and could become (Davies, 2021). As such, diffractive thinking works *within* the space of the *not yet,* or from the middle of, real, potential, and imagined assemblages of disparate entities. Unlike categorical or dialectical thinking, it does not seek identification of assembled parts or a synthesis of these parts into another. What is at stake is how this middle, the between of things, is itself something else, a state of difference, unnamed and unnameable, yet leaving powerful traces as it moves in and out of relationships, changing configurations along the way. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explain,

> *Between* things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle.
>
> (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25)

In addition, an often overlooked aspect of diffractive thinking is that humans, and the entities that humans believe make up the world, are already produced within the continuous dynamism of entangled "social, material and semiotic flows and forces" (Davies, 2021, p. 108) of a universe in motion. Differences between entities considered social, material, or semiotic are themselves effects of reading the world in particular ways (Law, 2004). Diffraction does not (cannot) ignore or eliminate

the conventional, but shows the inseparability of the predictable *and* the surprising, the reductive *and* the boundless, the rigid *and* the fluid (Davies, 2021). Here, the analysis of tensions dialectical approaches depend on is reconceptualized as an integral part of the becoming of the world's entangled entities. "Realities are made," John Law (2004) writes, "They are *effects of the apparatuses of inscription*. At the same time, since there are such apparatuses already in place, we also live in and experience a real world filled with real and more or less stable objects" (p. 32).

What social scientists working in diffractive modes of thinking seek is a way to work with this *middle*, this "something whose mode of individuation is not that of a thing, but a hurricane or a battle—a becoming" (Bogue, 2004, pp. 77–78). The paradoxical nature of "becoming"—as something that is neither one nor the other or a combination of both—is believed to provide researchers with a way to talk about difference, and conceptualize its world-changing potential, without resorting to the limitations produced by the other modes of thinking described. *Becoming* involves a change of state effectuated through contact with spaces opened by cracks and fissures of the in-between always happening within a plane of immanence. It is an activation of a kind of passage, or affect which alters "becomings, risings and fallings of . . . power, which pass from one state to another and are in constant variation" (Smith, 2012, p. 154). This is a "vitalist reading" of the forces of life as they fold and unfold, enact boundaries, open cracks, confront chaos (Stivale, 2008, p. 116).

To think thought as an event, as becoming, Deleuze and Guattari build on Baruch Spinoza's concept of *common notion* to conceptualize the resulting composition when two or more things are brought into a relationship (Phillips, 2006). According to Beth Lord (2010), Spinoza developed the idea of *common notions* as "building blocks for rational knowledge"—a potential that is enhanced when bodies interact with bodies "of a similar nature" (p. 114). Of interest to diffractive thinkers is that for Spinoza what all things had in common was the capacity for infinite dynamism (Lord, 2010). Rather than look outside the entities brought into contact and construct a category they both can share, the common attributes that matter in diffractive thinking is that all things exhibit states of "extended being . . . [which] contains within it all possible dynamic relations" (Lord, 2010, p. 42). The immanent potential for " 'infinite motion and rest' is the infinite set of variations of motion, which expresses all possible ways that physical beings can exist" (Lord, 2010, p. 42). That is, "relations between forces" (Deleuze, 1988, p. 36) create dynamic flows, interferences, and interactions, which are generally ignored or overlooked by social scientists.

John Phillips (2006) provides an example to illustrate how attending diffractively to contact points between disparate entities can produce a unity, or *state of becoming*, that does not rely on external categories to explain the connection.

> The unity, for instance, of a poison and the body poisoned can be regarded as a state of becoming and an event which is reducible to neither the body nor the poison. The body and the poison, rather, participate in the event (which is what they have in common).
>
> (Phillips, 2006, p. 109)

In this example, the poisoned body is not some other manifestation of "poison" or "body," but enacts a becoming-state, an emerging material presence that creates the event referred to here as becoming-poisoned. That is, the body in one event where its health is the taken-for-granted condition of a state of becoming in the daily assemblage of "becoming-worker" is not the same body as the one participating in an event of "becoming-depression" or "becoming-poison." Each mode of becoming not only assembles diverse entities but produces different agentic "events" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994), "assemblages" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), "phenomena" (Barad, 2007), "actor-networks" (Latour, 2005), "diagrams" (Freeman, 2025; Zdebik, 2012), just to name a few. An assemblage, then, is "an arrangement that creates agency" (Müller, 2015, p. 28), in that it "produces and creates, bringing new entities into existence and thereby serving an ontological function" (Watson, 2009, p. 11).

The idea that an assemblage assembles "heterogeneous entities so that they work together for a certain time" (Müller, 2015, p. 28), and that they have real and often enduring effects is just one of the paradoxical qualities of diffractive thinking. Without the familiarity of the rhythmic back and forth of dialectical thinking or the comfort of emplotment or the ease we have of sorting data units into categories, diffractive thinking often seems too abstract and arbitrary to feel like a worthwhile endeavor. Furthermore, the visual connotations associated with words like assemblage, diagram, and network often obscure what is being carried out analytically through these collective agentic events. Rather than think of an intersecting web, the analytic movement for diffractive thinking might be best conceptualized as a folding or *fold* (Deleuze, 1993). Charles Stivale explains that the *fold* for Deleuze does not mean any one thing,

> It can mean *pli selon pli*, the fold after fold that implicates the movement of life from fold to fold, within, into, and through the envelopment of unfolding and onto the next fold. It can mean the *entr'expression*, the between expression, that this undulating, creative, and vital movement manifests, the ongoing and constant expression of the actual from the

> virtual, as much as the virtual's nascent state toward the actual.
>
> (Stivale, 2008, p. 15)

The fold moves within the plane of immanence to account for the multiplicity of singularities actualizing within and through *becoming*. For example, while we have no problem stating that the thought of something is not the same as the something which is thought (a dualist and transcendental way of understanding thought), it is more difficult to understand that the thing thought is a modulation of contracting thought–matter dividing, folding, gestating in simultaneous and continuous motion (Zdebik, 2012). "Multiplicities coexist," Davies (2021, p. 33) asserts. And as multiplicities ourselves, we are enfolded in the materiality of thinking itself (Braidotti, 2014; Davies, 2021). By breaking preestablished boundaries about what to think, how to think, what to bring into thinking, studying, reading, writing, the *fold* opens *living*'s creative, pluralistic becomings.

What is being articulated, then, in approaches considered diffractive is a (re)configuration of all that has been previously assumed to reside in predetermined and separate domains (e.g., psychologists study the human mind, geologists the earth, biologists living organisms, and each one is a disciplinary body of work distinct and separate from the other) to one of envisioning the disparate entities of each domain in relation to "co-constitutive emergence" (Taylor, 2016, p. 208). It is a mode of analysis that cuts into the flow of heterogeneous moving entities and attends to the ripple effects created as each fold articulates, assembles, becomes its own singularity, its own becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). What a focus on folds and foldings affords is a (re)enactment of a changing world that traverses commonplace systems of meaning in ways that dissolve their usual connotations, and generate new thought–diagrams, or concepts (Colebrook, 2010). For example, Karen Barad (2007) creates the concept of "spacetimemattering" (p. 179) to argue that time, space, and matter cannot be usefully considered as separate, identifiable entities. Rather,

> space, time, and matter are intra-actively produced in the ongoing differential articulation of the world. . . . The existence of the quantum discontinuity means that the past is never left behind, never finished once and for all, and the future is not what will come to be in an unfolding of the present moment; rather the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming. Becoming is not an unfolding in time, but the inexhaustible dynamism of the enfolding of mattering.
>
> (Barad, 2007, p. 234)

Looking back at my study on parental involvement (Freeman, 2001a), how might diffractive thinking shift the study focus and design? What analytical questions would I have asked the data? What would the "data" consist

of? As described in Chapter 5, dialectical thinking was the primary mode of thinking used for that study. Therefore, in my analysis, I emphasized the tensions between my data set and the discursive systems giving it shape. Since diffractive thinking rejects the dualism inherent to dialectics, I would have to rethink the entire ontological premise upon which the study was designed. This is what Malou Juelskjær (2013) did when revisiting interview data collected as part of a longitudinal "study of 13-year-old students who changed schools to experience 'new beginnings'" (p. 754). Drawing on Barad's agential concept "intra-action," Juelskjær reconsiders how an intra-active perspective alters the reading of one student's performed subjectivities. Juelskjær explains that what is "produced through iterative intra-actions . . . [are materializations of] specific phenomena, where phenomena are not 'things' but relations" (p. 755). To demonstrate this, Juelskjær first tells the story of Mary's enacted subjectivities from a post-structural perspective of multiple discursive positions, and then adds an intra-active performative perspective. In the first, the interview is understood to produce a "specific 'present' in which Mary is positioned and positions herself within available discursive practices" (p. 760). Through the diffractive reading, Mary is revealed as a multiplicity, intra-actively produced in the spacetimemattering of overlapping "geo-political topologies" (p. 762). In other words, how her body performs "Mary" shifts continuously, a performed "dis/continuity" (p. 758), disrupting common notions of the self as an identifiable entity.

How might Ellen or Lisa's stories or the concept of involvement be reread diffractively? What apparatuses would help reveal how their accounts participate in the making of "differences that matter" (Barad, 2007, p. 146)? Barad (2007) explains that apparatuses "are not merely assemblages that include nonhumans as well as humans. . . . [But] are boundary-making practices that are formative of matter and meaning, productive of, and part of, the phenomena produced" (pp. 142, 146). What boundary-making practices create the parent involvement entanglements that produce Ellen, Lisa, and the affect of involvement? Diffractive thinking pushes us to think of these accounts as folds within overlapping, but potentially different, topologies, as differentiating manifestations of performed "parentinvolvement" intersecting with other potentially modifying forces (e.g., social class, knowledge, experience, affect, ecology, economy, personality). Parentinvolvement is not just some way to connect or combine parenting, schooling, and involvement but becomes something else altogether, something uniquely itself at these sites of diffraction. Thinking diffractively pushes us to map the effects of interferences (Haraway, 1992) on everyday life. It helps us dissolve the taken-for-granted understandings of what is, and reveals a "vitalist materialism" (Braidotti, 2014), an "elastic" ontology (Zdebik, 2012) previously hidden from view or not yet imagined.

Characteristics of Diffractive Thinking

Seeking a way out of the impasse dialectical thinking is believed to create, diffractive thinkers propose a different way of thinking, one that suggests that reading moving and folding states of becoming might allow humans to create themselves and their worlds differently. As noted in the introductory section, diffractive thinking interrogates the effects of flows, forces, and folds. Research that is diffractive does not seek closure, does not strive to read the world in a way that pulls together commonalities or make visible its dialectical tensions, as these too are part of the "entangled becomings *of* the world" (Davies, 2021, p. 89). This way of approaching inquiry requires that we question the smallest aberration as well as the most taken-for-granted assumption. It involves understanding that our enactments, small and large, co-constitute the world as we know it, as we imagine it to be, and as we hope it might become. It is an act of invention and intervention that creates as it cuts and folds, stretches and connects. Nothing preexists its becoming-form, becoming-intensity, becoming-state.

Because diffractive thinking requires a radical shift in thinking, I share an illustrative example provided by Manuel DeLanda that I found helpful. DeLanda (2012) explains that conventional scientific thinking was based on a system of classification created by Aristotle who saw the world as

> populated by three categories of entities: *genus, species*, and *individual*. Entities belonging to the first two categories subsisted essentially, those belonging to the third one subsisted only accidentally. The genus could be, for example, Animal, the species Human, and the individual this or that particular person characterized by contingent properties: being white, being musical, being just. A genus was linked to its various species (Horse, Human) by a series of logically necessary subdivisions.
>
> (DeLanda, 2012, p. 220)

For example, DeLanda explains that humans and horses are both animals because they share characteristics that unite them as belonging to that *genus* or category, but they also have distinct characteristics which separate them into particular species or subcategories. There is an undetermined range of individual variation within species, and, in turn, each species can be thought of as a variation of its overarching *genus*. Typically, when a new entity is discovered, the question is often what is this an instance of? To which existing category can this be added? As mentioned in Chapter 3 on categorical thinking, this process allows for categories themselves to be changed if the new entity makes visible previously unforeseen characteristics of a category. The issue for diffractive thinkers is that categorical thinking often reproduces preexisting categories and structures, making it

difficult, if not impossible, to rethink the world's configuration (Deleuze, 1995). Thinking differently requires rethinking the nature of things and the relation between things.

DeLanda's (2012) example provides an entry point into rethinking thinking itself. He shows that while it is rather easy to conceptualize that horses and humans belong to the same *genus* because of shared traits (i.e., the categorical approach), it is much harder to conceptualize these on some sort of plane where foldings and their manifold movements open diverse possibilities—a topological approach. DeLanda explains,

> What we need here is a means to conceptualize a "topological animal," an abstract animal that can become a human or a horse through a series of embryological operations: foldings, stretchings, invaginations, cellular migrations. . . . [I]f species must be conceived as *individual singularities*, genera must be replaced by a topological diagram structured by *universal singularities*.
>
> (DeLanda, 2012, p. 221)

Here the "abstract animal" should not be thought of as an archetype containing preset variations of "animal," but as an assemblage, a diagram that diffractively operates through "the forms and substances, expressions and contents it will distribute" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 141; see also Alliez, 2013). DeLanda explains that conceiving how something like a diagram can animate transformation without being defined by what it animates requires an understanding of the concept of "degrees of freedom." Degrees of freedom are

> the relevant ways in which a system is free to change. . . . Because as the degrees of freedom of a system change its overall state changes, a model of the system must capture the different possible states in which it can exist. . . . [T]his set of states may be represented as a *space of possibilities* with as many dimensions as the system has degrees of freedom.
>
> (DeLanda, 2012, pp. 221–222)

Although DeLanda explains that Deleuze and Guattari do not necessarily use these terms, and goes into more detail about their use of mathematical concepts than is relevant to my purpose, what is being conceptualized here is a way to consider an assemblage as an articulation of matter and function (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), an articulation that performs rather than explains. In other words, if we think of change on a moving continuum such as between a horse and human in an essentialist or categorical way, each splice in the continuum would be considered comparatively to some ideal feature (e.g., is it more foot or hoof?), and in relation to some predetermined

definition of "footness" or "hoofness." Thinking about this diffractively removes essentialist categories from the picture altogether, as well as the idea that there is an actual continuous movement between foot and hoof. Instead, each topological diagram—or slice in the movement of living matter, or what Barad (2007) calls "agential cuts," is composed of states of possibility, being neither foot nor hoof, but having the potential to become either, or branch out into another "not yet" entity emerging from the topological space; which, as noted earlier, is an assemblage open to interferences. This requires that researchers step away from part–whole conceptualizations of structure, or inductively or deductively derived logical conclusions, where language or other systems account for their conclusions, and turn to the analysis of assemblages in motion, which, in the movement of becoming, can hypothetically be assemblages of an infinite number of possible arrangements.

Thinking diffractively allows researchers to speculate about the way assemblages of entities change when put into motion (Otte, 2011). For example, in motion, some of the lines and edges of different surfaces will disintegrate, while new ones become not only possible but also likely. DeLanda's example should not cause us to think, however, that moving assemblages have identifiable contours, beginnings or ends, or points in between. Even if one conceptualizes the movement from horse to human as a series of overlapping metamorphoses, such as the hoof to foot, hoof to hand, mane to hair, eye to eye, and so on, the variety of horse and human possibilities, as well as the potential for not-yet considered interferences, prevent any standardization. Every slice across continuums, therefore, cannot be considered to be in between one particular slice and the next, but has to be understood as its own state, a state *between* (Barad, 2010) non-definable, determined, or possible points. Each slice is an enactment of a between-state, a state of becoming, a specific articulation of matter and function (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) that (per)forms something uniquely itself, neither the slice occurring before this one, nor the one occurring next. In this way, an assemblage, or state-space, is both an enactment of an individual singular *and* its topological structure (Deleuze, 2001). Each assembled entity, each event, actualizes its multiplicity within "the plane that gives it its particular reality" (Deleuze, 2001, p. 31). So although the degrees of freedom of the becoming-hoof, or some other state, might vary, they bring with them particular processes of actualization that, together, function as "new co-ordinates for reading" (Guattari, 2013, p. 17) enacting particular effects. Different entanglements, such as adding poison or heat, would produce different states of becoming.

Researchers working with diffractive modes of thinking are interested in how assemblages "emerge in particular ways, how they hold together, somewhat precariously, how they reach across or mould space and how they fall apart" (Müller, 2015, p. 27). Conceptualizing this process as a

state-space, or "constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together" (Livesey, 2010, p. 18), and mapping overlapping operations and effects, allow researchers to focus on the way human and nonhuman material entities evince a "self-organizing materiality . . . [generated through] the immanence of relations" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 82). In other words, the focus is on the "dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations" (Barad, 2007, p. 141) of the materializing assemblages forming among human, nonhuman, physical, or immaterial entities. The point here is to develop analytic approaches that do not focus on how things work or what things mean from the outside, but seek to demonstrate their materializing formations from inside materialization itself; a materialization that never ceases to change. By and large, diffractive thinking exhibits several shared characteristics.

1. Diffractive Thinking Consists of Working With Temporary Assemblages as Open Systems

Assemblages are diagrams, topological compositions that are nonetheless vulnerable to interferences, resulting in unpredictable, but effect-producing folds, links, knots, and ruptures. An assemblage can be understood "as a relay concept, linking the problematic of structure with that of change and far-from-equilibrium systems. . . . It recognizes both structuring and indeterminate effects: that is, both flow and turbulence, produced in the interaction of open systems" (Venn, 2006, p. 107).

Maggie MacLure (2024) explains: "Assemblages flout the conventional "tripartite division" between reality, representation and subjectivity, making unlikely connections across these orders" (p. 1647). In addition, the entities assembled exhibit their own form of vitality (de Freitas, 2012). This means assemblages are not stable structures, but a way of conceptualizing moving matter as it collides, breaks apart, births new offshoots, connects with old conduits, or folds in new matter; their movement has often been compared to that of a rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Since it is always "becoming-other" (Bogue, 2010), a focus on assemblage is a focus on ontology (St. Pierre, 2019) and existence (Stengers, 2011). In other words, diffractive thinking seeks to enter the fold (think of DeLanda's topological-animal) to articulate movements of change without the usual dualities of inside/outside, below/above, ahead/behind. For example, Silvia Grinberg explains how this kind of research requires

> interrogating processes of subjectification, the dominant as well as the little cracks, the imperceptable ruptures, the emerging forms of knowledge, the rationalities that manage to take hold as well as the struggles

> and resistances experienced on a daily basis, with their complexities and multiple contradictions.
>
> (Grinberg, 2013, pp. 203–204)

In another example, Elizabeth de Freitas and Nathalie Sinclair (2014) show how actions or embodied gestures within the fluidity of differential relations can be understood as folds in the space–time continuum of moving matter. For example, they point out how an "arm" can be revealed as an apparatus for grabbing a pencil and moving rhythmically over paper in one assemblage, whereas in another the borders are less visible as the waving motion of a handheld fan disperses air and dust that stick to or flow around human and nonhuman bodies in nondifferentiated ways. Each, however, affect the folding and unfolding of moving matter. Since the focus of inquiry is on the folds of articulation, or transversal lines of becoming, an assemblage, or event, can be a manifestation or materialization of any kind of agentic material and does not require a physical presence (Henriques, 2010). Researchers working diffractively are immersed in force-fields (Bogue, 2004) that crisscross and fold into each other, out of which they must map, fabricate, or emphasize points of articulation, disclosing a lively and permutable "field of possibilities" (Barad, 2003, p. 819) from which to theorize becoming and difference. Figure 7.1 provides an illustration of the movement of folds diffracting.

2. Diffractive Thinking Focuses on the Performative Event or Agential Operations of Assembling Entities

Assemblages or diagrams enact "*relations of force*" (Alliez, 2013, p. 221). From a diffractive thinking perspective, "matter is not a formless blob that is given shape by our imaginings of it. It is not inert substance waiting to be discovered and described. It acts; matter pushes back. . . . Forces are produced. Momentum. Counterforces" (McCoy, 2012, p. 764). The "sense"[2] of motion, therefore, however conceptualized—whether as "affect" (Deleuze, 1995; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), "agency" (Latour, 2005; Barad, 2007), or some other concept—arises out of what Jane Bennett (2010) calls "*Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (p. 6). By overlooking or ignoring the forces and folds already at work in the world, researchers are believed to be missing "the most direct and intimate connections and relations of dependence within the material world as a whole as well as between matter and life" (Grosz, 2007, p. 291). Matter is not something molded from the outside, but is itself "the condition that allows change, or life, as a constant movement of differentiation" (Borradori, 2001, p. 7). The ways in which matter flows, folds, is given direction, shape, and function create spaces of becoming

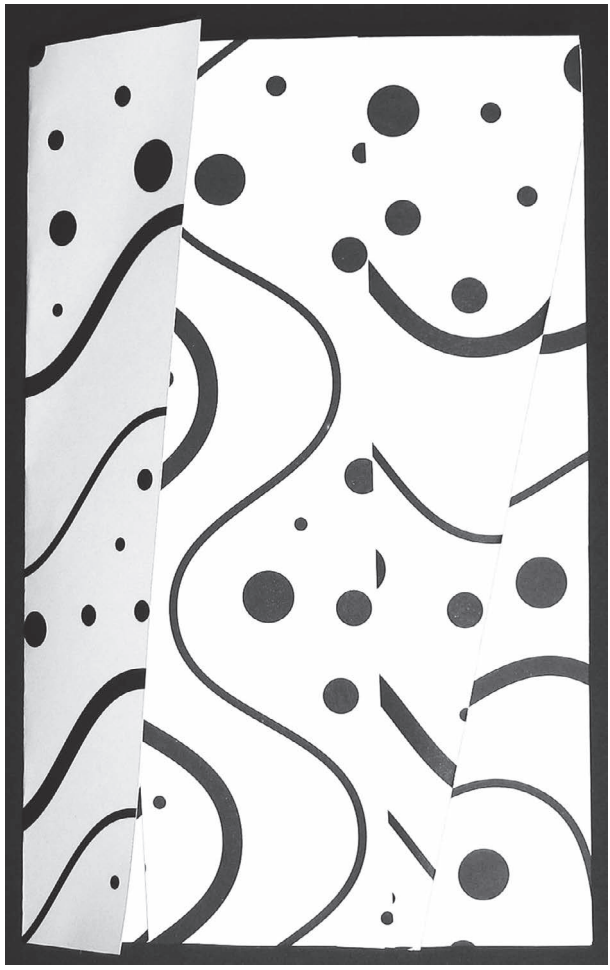

Figure 7.1 Folds Diffracting.

that carry forward the capacity to act, while also being an enactment of that capacity. That is, becoming is a tendency inherent to matter itself (Borradori, 2001), a potential intensity, or intense potential, becoming differently within shifting conditions. If matter is itself vibrant, Bennett (2010) argues, it recasts the world as "a dense network of relations" in "which all bodies are kin" (p. 13). It would be in our best interest then, Bennett suggests, to consider our engagements with matter as a shared responsibility, for "in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself" (Bennett, 2010, p. 13).

In an assemblage, power is distributed. But it is "not distributed evenly across the surface of an assemblage, since there are joints or nodes where there is more traffic and affect than at others" (de Freitas, 2012, p. 562). And as Frank Macke (2018) notes, "It is at the edges of the fold that we encounter a vigilance regarding who belongs, who deserves entry, who should be expelled" (p. 58). In other words, as sites of potential, assemblages can open up possibilities for "new means of expression, a new territorial/spatial organisation, a new institution, a new behaviour, or a new realisation" (Livesey, 2010, p. 19), or contribute to their erasure, distortion, and exclusion. Since not-yet-thought articulations of relationships seek ways to unhinge sedimented connections and trigger less-attended-to material–discursive performances of matter and meaning (Barad, 2007), these assembled articulations carry affective and agentic qualities that are believed to reconfigure the world. That is, diffractive assemblages carry ethical and political ramifications, which call on us "to take responsibility for the role that we play in the world's differential becoming" (Barad, 2007, p. 396).

3. Diffractive Thinking is Creative, Interventionist, and Experimental

Theorists who think diffractively view research as an intervention and the world as a vast arena of, and for, ongoing experimentation. However, what this means conceptually or practically is difficult to pin down. Philosopher Ian Hacking (1982) explains that we cannot "know" reality or "see" what it is made up of, but we can manipulate reality in ways that make visible effects of its interconnecting parts. Using the example of electrons, Hacking states, "The 'direct' proof of electrons and the like is our ability to manipulate them using well understood low-level causal properties. . . . Hence, *engineering*, not theorizing, is the proof of scientific realism about entities" (p. 86, my emphasis). Experimentation is "a way to intervene, not a theory of what to think" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 1) and, through intervention, researchers, along with other materializing agents, bring phenomena into existence (Hacking, 1982).

As a way to help students in my qualitative analysis class experience the way diffractive reading can elicit new insights, I bring several pages of the assigned readings copied onto different colored paper (one color for each reading). I then give each group of students the same excerpts, and ask each student to randomly pick one excerpt, in this case, one of four selections. The students are then told to read their selection without discussing it with the others, and select five quotes that stand out to them. These they are to cut out and then, again without sharing the quotes with the others in the group, take turns taping their quotes onto a large sheet of paper in no particular order. Once taped to the page, the students are directed to read through the produced text and come up with a title for their collaged

production. I have found that each group of students approaches this task differently. For example, I have had groups come up with multiple titles rather than agree on one, create rigid linear structures of quotes or more fluid interconnected concept maps. One group carefully analyzed each quote as they searched for a title they could agree on: *Beyond Boundaries: Exploring Creativity, Challenging Dualism, and Unleashing the Abstract Machine of Imagination*. Figure 7.2 is an image of this group's diffracted text. Although the text is unreadable, the takeaway here is not the text itself, or even which readings were chosen, but what is learned from engaging in diffractive reading.

Each group expressed appreciation for how the activity helped them better understand diffractive reading and what Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei (2013) might mean by "plugging one text into another" (p. 261). I created this activity by adapting Pablo Helguera's *Combinatory Play*[3] (Green, 2020, p. 84). Sarah Green writes that the new piece created through combinatory play,

> fused dissimilar narratives and placed well-known lines in an unfamiliar order and context. It was nonsensical at times, and very funny, creating an entirely new reality out of four discrete plays that had been created many decades earlier. The process was a theatrical version of collage, taking existing entities, each interesting on its own, and placing them into unlikely juxtaposition.
>
> (Green, 2020, p. 85)

Elaborating on nonrepresentational practices such as diffractive analysis, Barad (2007) argues that "theorizing and experimenting are not about *intervening* (from outside) but about *intra-acting* from within . . . the phenomena produced" (p. 56). One way of understanding this is that as researchers participate in the flow of matter, and produce what matters, they are already engaging in experimentation and creating turbulences that intervene and alter the flow of the thing inquired about. As already mentioned, sometimes this is done by creating concepts that help reconfigure specific connections. For example, in a study on "Asian migrant women's desires for educational success," EunKyoung Chung (2020) creates the concept of "*affective* reflexivity" as a way to account for the intra-active nature of the study. Chung observes, "The affects I encountered in the research field incited me to negate the distinction between *knowing* and *being* by illuminating the relationship between the researcher (as being) and data (for knowing), not as interaction but as intra-action (Barad, 2007)" (p. 386).

Thinking about the world "intra-actively" (Barad, 2007), as "lively matter" (Bennett, 2010), as "entanglements in the world's becoming" (Davies, 2021), or using Spinoza's notion of infinite dynamism, requires entering a

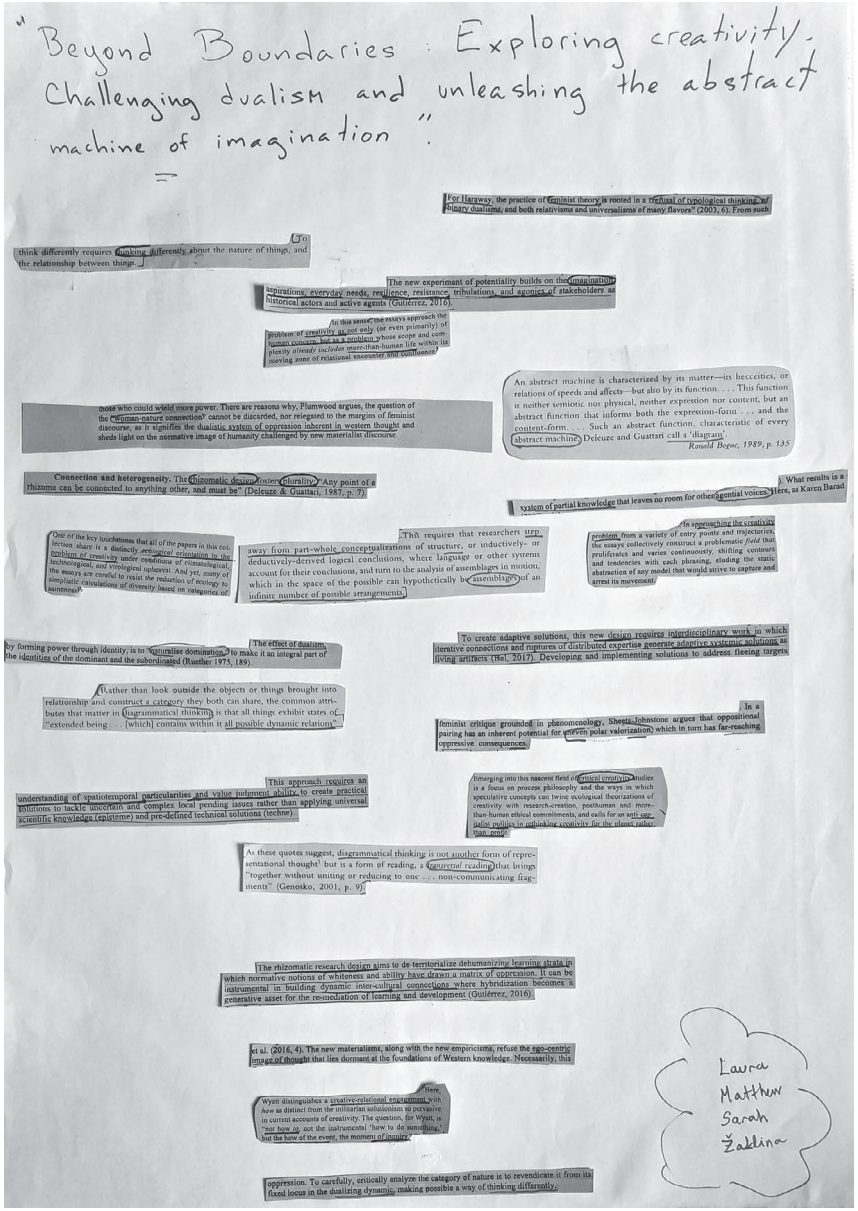

Figure 7.2 Diffracted text created by Žaklina Grgić, Laura Montes, Matthew Nyaaba, & Sarah H. Park.

world made up of a wide variety of states of rest and motion, ranging from moments of calm to chaotic turbulences. While these are not always visible, a researcher's engagement with states of rest and motion participates in the unfolding of the world and puts into motion particular states of becoming, whether they are able to describe these well or not.

4. Diffractive Thinking Queers Dualist Ontologies

By working within a plane of immanence, diffractive thinkers seek a way out of a dualist or reductionist vision of, and for, the world. As mentioned earlier, a moving assemblage frozen at any point in time is always a unique "agential cut" (Barad, 2007), embodying an enactment of a unique singularity *and* the structuring plane or system of operation giving shape to its operational capacity. It is, therefore, always an enactment of difference, of multiplicity. What is being conceptualized is "difference-in-itself" (Cole, 2012, p. 5). Here the concept of difference is no longer the dialectical "other," the assumed *anti*-thesis. Whereas dialectics conceptualizes difference by negation (i.e., something is an "a" only because it is not a "non-a") (Borradori, 2001, p. 3), difference-in-itself is internal to itself and "implies something like a shade, a nuance" (Borradori, 2001, p. 3). The recognition of difference's inherent multiplicity has a long and complex history among feminist, queer, and Indigenous scholars (Barad, 2018). Donna Haraway (1992), for example, notes how Trinh Minh-ha's notion of "inappropriate/d others" forwards an understanding of difference as a "critical difference within" (Minh-ha, 1986/87, as quoted in Haraway, 1992, p. 299). Arguing for attending to this critical difference within, Minh-ha (1986/1987) notes that "Differences that cause separation and suspicion . . . do not threaten, for they can always be dealt with as fragments" (p. 26). And Barad adds that queering is "the un/doing of identity" (2010, p. 247), since "the quantum (dis)continuity queers the very notion of differentiating" (2011, p. 149). Identity, however, is never eradicated. Its doing/undoing sets in motion an alternative relation between oppositions. By seeking a transversal movement, it sets up a path that is constantly hiccupping and repairing itself. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) note, "correctives are necessary to undo the dualisms we had no wish to construct but through which we pass" (p. 20). This approach queers philosophy and "leads to escape routes, out-pourings, lateral shifts to elsewhere, into unknown futures" (O'Rourke, 2013, p. 127) and reconceptualizes thought and thinking altogether.

Diffractive Thinking in Practice

Diffractive thinking radically alters the focus and nature of social science research. Working from the assumption that reality is already performing

assemblages, materializing relationships, and staging a kind of order out of chaos (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), it brings to the analytic task a way of reading, or intervening, into this moving matter. Like researchers drawing on poetic thinking strategies, researchers working in diffractive modes are deeply "entangled within the assemblages they seek to study" (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013, p. 6). However, unlike poetic thinking, which performs an aesthetic reciprocity humans have with the world's entities, diffractive entanglements work with heterogeneous matter as it folds into materializing assemblages and create interferences and flows that are often too subtle or easily overlooked as insignificant to be noticeable. Researchers working with diffractive thinking strategies, therefore, seek ways to articulate these subtle nuances and through cuts, folds, and rhizomatic entanglements study their moving effects. They do this by focusing on events, "agential intra-actions" (Barad, 2007), "lines of flight and intensities" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 4), "ordinary affects" (Stewart, 2007), and other spaces of intensive potentialities where "thinking might happen" (Colebrook, 2010, p. 2).

Julian Henriques' (2010) study of affect offers such a way of reading the propagation of affect and is a good example of diffractive thinking. As anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2007) notes, "Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences. They're things that happen" (pp. 1–2). As a result, Stewart explains, their analysis is not straightforward; "they have to be mapped through different, coexisting forms of composition, habituation, and event" (2007, p. 4). This is what Henriques (2010) set out to do. By analyzing how "affect is expressed rhythmically—through relationships, reciprocations, resonances, syncopations and harmonies . . . [Henriques sought to enact] a vibrant cultural studies, working and thinking through vibrations themselves, rather than a cultural studies of vibration" (p. 58).

Henriques argued that affect does not preexist the situation, but arises out of the event, while also being a crucial component of its propagation. This is not, therefore, a study of a dancehall, or of musicians' or dancers' perceptions of affect. Rather, it is a study of the concept of affect itself. And it is in the "propagation of vibrations" (Henriques, 2010, p. 58) or, in this case, sound waves, that the intensity and texture of this concept is revealed. To do this, Henriques used three procedures—counting, measuring, and listening—to discuss sociocultural, corporeal, and material sound waves as affect in a dancehall scene. Briefly, counting focused on rhythm, pitch, interactions, and so on; measuring focused on a consideration of the value and amplitude of the sonic experience; and listening sought out the tone or "timbre" of the event—"its distinctive quality, the details that make one night different from another" (p. 60). Inquiry, such as this, is inventive in that it participates in the movement of becoming, dislodging the hold that language and reason

has had on science, showing the way concepts such as affect might produce a choreographed effect by "riding these sound waves" (Henriques, 2010, p. 66). Henriques concluded: "Breaking the boundaries of text, image and the surfaces of objects, vibrations offer an opportunity to conceptualize the permeability of individuals in their environment as they selectively transduce and amplify its energetic patterns—that is, propagate affect" (p. 84).

In another example, Sue Ruddick et al. (2021) used Deleuzian-inspired diagramming to better understand the navigational challenges of "three middle school children with limited mobility" (p. 15) arising from the intersections of their social, technological, and embodied experiences. Seeking a more affirmative approach to issues of accessibility and inclusivity that move beyond individual blame or simple design solutions, Ruddick et al. (2021) were interested not only in how the young people navigated various day-to-day environments but also "in how children 'become' with these challenges" (p. 27). Diagramming provided them with an approach "to *diagram* these insights . . . in a way that might immediately and affectively illustrate the limits and possibilities of the challenges these young people face in their day-to-day environments—that is, the assemblages that they navigate" (p. 17).

The study itself was a three-year qualitative ethnography involving 13 young people who moved about with wheelchairs, canes, or walkers, and who lived in different neighborhoods in North America. First, the research team conducted three site visits to the homes of each participant in order to get actual tours of the homes and "virtual tours of neighborhoods and schools using photos, drawings and questions about their experience" (p. 26). In addition, interviews were conducted not only to elicit accounts of these experiences but also to discuss the young people's day-to-day movements, which had been tracked using GPS with the participants' consent. The authors then had to consider how to create diagrams that would provide schemas of these navigational assemblages and came up with graphic matrices for three of the youths that included "places of least, average and greatest difficulty to navigate" (p. 26), their levels of importance, with an overlay expressing "the extent of mobility and constraint" (p. 28). Ruddick et al. (2021) noted that a contribution the diagram makes, "is to expose overcodings and blockages, to reveal creative or liberating variations, to think productively about the social ecology in our assemblages" (p. 37). They also pointed out that one of the design's limitations is that because each interview focused on one specific space—home, school, community—this affected their ability to create further linkages across these domains.

Research in diffractive modes is often conducted within a plane of consistency that holds together "heterogeneous disparate elements" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 507), within which events, intensities, affects, or becomings coalesce, dissipate, split, mushroom into productive multiple singularities. A question orienting such studies is how to study movements of becoming

that bring awareness to the politics of difference without falling prey to dualistic thinking that situates one against a predefined other. This is what Spirit D. Brooks et al. (2020) set out to do in their collective biography of becoming-academics. As "queer and straight; white, Black, South Asian, and Indigenous; first-generation college students and first-generation hyphenated Americans; mothers, daughters, sisters, and partners" (p. 281), they sought ways to both "refuse the restrictive hierarchical systems of the neoliberal academy. . . . [while finding] new ways to survive the seemingly impossible task of becoming scholars" (p. 283).

Collective biography was chosen for this group project because, as Brooks et al. explained, it matched their commitment to engage with experience while also critically examining that experience. To support this process, the data generated for this project was ongoing and centered around conversation and collaborative writing. They set up an online blog space that allowed flexibility for balancing life and work commitments. In this collaborative space, they shared posts about readings, asked questions, inserted personal experience, and responded to each other's questions.

Through what they called "entangled data-stories" (p. 284), Brooks et al. used collaging techniques and the performative refrain of multiple versions of their embodied story to imagine life in "the academic assemblage without becoming the academy" (p. 291). Furthermore, these assemblaged enactments drew on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notions of smooth and striated space as well as Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity. A striated space denoted the rigid structures of academia intent on producing an academic subject that aligned with the institutional neoliberal image. A smooth space, then, was like a diffractive wave, unpredictable and multiple, where Brooks et al. embraced practices of "becoming-nomad" (p. 294). Smooth spaces do not erase striated spaces. The smooth space, Brooks et al. noted, was there all along, in moments of escape, and of experiencing academic competence within difference.

What these examples demonstrate is that researchers moving away from dialectical, categorical, or narrative thinking seek ways to work the generative potential of distinct events formed at the junctures of moving assemblages. As in other modes of thinking, possibilities for diffractive research are vast. However, what seems clear from the examples provided is that researchers interested in putting it to work are considering innovative ways of assembling the available and not-yet-imagined heterogeneous entities to (re)create the world anew.

Deciding on Diffractive Thinking for Analysis

In the book, *After method: Mess in social science research*, sociologist John Law writes:

> What does this mean in practice? The answer is that I do not know. But one thing is indeed clear. In the longer run it is no longer obvious that the disciplines and the research fields of science and social science are

> appropriate in their present form. . . . [W]e need quite other metaphors for imagining our worlds and our responsibilities to those worlds. Localities. Specificities. Enactments. Multiplicities. Fractionalities. Goods. Resonances. Gatherings. Forms of craftings. Processes of weaving. Spirals. Vortices. Indefiniteness. Condensates. Dances. Imaginaries. Passions. Interferences. . . . Metaphors for the stutter and the stop. Metaphors for quiet and more generous versions of method.
>
> (Law, 2004, p. 156)

Given the level of uncertainties and complexities involved in rethinking social science method, why choose a diffractive lens for research? As already noted, the primary reason is to conceptualize difference differently. A focus on difference as becoming, as a multiplicity, provides a way to step out of dominant forms of thinking, such as dialectics (Deleuze, 1995). To do so requires a reconceptualization of the very concepts that make up philosophy. As such, diffractive approaches give researchers a way to work with "the agency of assemblages: the distinctive efficacy of a working whole made up, variously, of somatic, technological, cultural, and atmospheric elements" (Bennett, 2005, p. 447). Agency, then, is no longer conceived as located in an individual, but is instead distributed, emanating through the intensities produced by (re)forming assemblages (de Freitas, 2012). As Ezekiel Dixon-Román (2016) observes, "data are assemblages that are more-than-human ontologies that consist of the forces of sociopolitical relations" (p. 483).

Understanding difference to be an agentic enactment of moving assemblages (or as "dispersions of the subject"; Foucault, 1972, p. 55) helps to rearticulate an understanding of change as discordant, discontinuous, and random, rather than ordered, continuous, and purposeful (Barad, 2010). Within this mode of thinking, human bodies and objects are made up of particles that exist in the world and perform their existence in a variety of ways. The analytic work is not to look for commonalities, or plot the points into representations of an existing or perceived reality, or synthesize contradictory viewpoints into new understandings. Choosing diffractive thinking, therefore, requires a commitment to dig into a complex and interdisciplinary body of literature and a willingness to become "better equipped to deal with mess, confusion and relative disorder" (Law, 2004, p. 2). In general, then, diffractive thinking helps researchers:

1. Reconceptualize interacting heterogeneous entities as assemblages or transversal forces without foundations or predefined aims
2. Dissolve preassumed distinctions endorsed in dualist and representational modes of thinking
3. Engineer articulations and entanglements between diverse human and nonhuman entities to produce world-becoming relations, insights, (re)configurations

4 Reconstrue agency as a collectivity that entangles responsibility for its effects within the folds of its produced possibilities

As mentioned in the Preface and Introduction, my presentation of each mode of thinking reduces a large number of complex theorizing into a simplified version of a movement for thinking that cannot be said to align significantly with any of the sources drawn upon. In addition, the issues I include in this section may not be equally relevant across these diverse theoretical sources. They are, however, important to consider when approaching analysis diffractively. These are (1) the claim of a "new" paradigmatic turn for thought; (2) the use of adversarial language to argue against dualisms; (3) the "identity" of the human; and (4) prioritizing concept-creation over seeking methodologies that aim to redress an unjust world. Here I briefly account for these by addressing (1) and (2) together and (3) and (4) together.

The Claim of the New and Dualistic Language

Scholars taking up diffractive strategies have been criticized for needing to justify their work through rejections and refusals in order "to authorize new terrain" (Ahmed, 2008, p. 33), and then creating concepts that keep old binaries alive, such as those connecting "nature/materiality/biology and culture" in their justifications for a proposed "new" paradigm (Ahmed, 2008, p. 34). Although talking about the anti-biology movement in feminist poststructuralist writing, Sara Ahmed forwards an important critique. That is, in order to claim the "new" arising from diffractive thinking, many scholars end up making broad statements about rejecting the "old," whether oriented to the inherent dualism of conventional Western philosophy or toward methods and practices considered "incommensurable" (St. Pierre, 2016) in ways that create predefined divisions that seem to contradict the assumption that the world of diffractive analysis is a world in flux in which non-formed entities are always in states of becoming. This suggests that researchers pay attention to language and the way in which the concepts they are using or creating might be reproducing a dualist landscape similar to the one they are criticizing (Serra Undurraga & Wyatt, 2024; Sundberg, 2014).

In addition, the gesture of naming theories that provide support for diffractive thinking strategies as "new" dismisses the critical work of scholars who were already doing the diffractive deconstructive critique within their fields and traditions (Ahmed, 2008). For example, Virginie Magnat (2022) points out that the theorizing of Indigenous scholars has not only been centered in a reciprocal ontology binding humans with "other/more-than-human life" (p. 27) long before Western researchers began making these claims, but that Western researchers have much to learn from Indigenous scholars. This raises the additional concern of how to navigate the (im)possibility of such

a collaborative exchange (Tuck, 2010). In addition to making a false claim of "discovery," which reproduces the colonialist urge to find and take what is not theirs to take, any claim that must reject another to exist is likely reproducing the very binary thinking it seeks to reject (Sundberg, 2014). Diffractive thinkers, therefore, would benefit not only from studying the diverse ways similar ideas and concepts are taken up across a diversity of communities of thinkers, but from being mindful of the colonialist urge to "discover" and "appropriate" Indigenous concepts without responsible and citational care (Magnat, 2022; Sundberg, 2014). As Alison Ravenscroft (2018) writes, "A refusal to acknowledge the prior presence of and the debt to Indigenous materialisms reiterates the fabricated grounds of colonization: *terra nullius*—a land on which there are no others with prior claim" (pp. 354–355).

Human Emancipation and the Acceptance or Rejection of Methodology

Working within diffractive modes of thinking does not eliminate concerns regarding meaning, representation, purpose, and impact. In addition, there are many ways concepts such as "human," "subject," "human embodiment," "human emancipation" are conceptualized. Oftentimes, a posthumanist ontology is embraced to account for the effect of the "human" within an assemblage, including the researcher. Rosi Braidotti (2013), for example, writes, "Posthumanism is the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework, looking more affirmatively towards new alternatives" (p. 37), and provides an alternative way of accounting for the human in research designs. However, some researchers are criticized for dismissing the human altogether, rather than accounting for their effects (physical and spiritual) as a material entity (Anderson & Perrin, 2015). Jacqueline Serra Undurraga (2022) asks, "How do 'human intentions,' 'agency,' let alone 'humans' get to be produced?" (p. 838) and provides an overview and a critique of the way some scholars using posthuman theories end up essentializing an understanding of "human" in their search for ways to decenter all of its associated baggage. As Braidotti's quote suggests, the intent of posthumanism is not to eliminate the human subject but to reconceptualize the idea of the subject. Scholars who critically reflect on the posthumanist turn in inquiry underscore its ethical and political ramifications. Serra Undurraga (2022) observes, "I think that the movements towards embracing new concepts and practices through rejecting and discarding others echo a, too common, human omnipotence that believes that we can step outside constraints and be who we want to be" (p. 833). Serra Undurraga suggests that there is a missed opportunity among researchers to better employ diffractive thinking in ways that embrace the inherent dualities within subjectivities,

such as considering reflection and diffraction together rather than pitting one against the other, as often portrayed in the literature.

In addition, in its efforts to reject the representationalist impasse that is believed to exist in the history of thought and then reproduced in the methodologies adopted by qualitative researchers, methodology itself is being rejected by many diffractive-oriented thinkers (see St. Pierre, 2021; Springgay & Truman, 2018, for an example of arguments for and against this stance). In brief, the argument against methodology would point out that the simple act of being able to think "methodology" reproduces the epistemological assumptions that have created it. This is why, for example, Elizabeth St. Pierre (2021) writes that the "onto-epistemological arrangement of poststructuralism . . . [does] not allow one to think methodology" (p. 5). In St. Pierre's view, approaches I am calling diffractive are doing something else. Others have argued that the rejection of methodology creates a dichotomy between theory and methods, which reinforces a solipsistic "*theory-centrism*" (Aagaard, 2022, p. 316) that limits creativity. In addition, the lack of guidelines for what this "something else" looks like has participated in the spread of a generalized stance on "methods" as something requiring rejection, rather than a concerted effort to consider the risks, benefits, possibilities, and impossibilities of these supposedly incommensurable practices (see Tobin, 2024, for an argument against incommensurability).

Finally, the outright rejection of methods posited by some researchers engaging in diffractive approaches has prompted post-critical scholars to raise questions of how to engage critically with a world that continues to disregard "the histories of Black, Brown, [and] colonized people," whose lives continue to be "dehumanized, their bodies weaponized, and their lives brutally erased for simply existing in the same space as those who are white/passing" (Bhattacharya, 2021, p. 181). Does it not make more sense, Kakali Bhattacharya argues, to seek out whatever methodological tools we have at our disposal—including the experiences of oppressed peoples—to combat injustice? This suggestion is echoed by other diffractive-oriented researchers who call for

> a more ethically informed post-qualitative inquiry, . . . [noting that] [q]ualitative inquirers can and should balance desire for theory with the responsibility for praxis, action, and decision-making. Otherwise, in insisting only on theory, qualitative research risks being superfluous to the needs of others outside the academy.
>
> (Wolgemuth et al., 2022, p. 588)

The issues I have only briefly touched upon in this section have prompted some post-critical scholars to either reject paradigmatic labels altogether,

including those considered post-qualitative (see Bhattacharya, 2021), or to break from particular theorists and theories that continue to oppress, despite their best intentions (Serra Undurraga, 2022), in search of more just grounds (Tuck, 2010; see also King, 2017). These concerns point to the critical necessity for all researchers to become better acquainted with decolonial approaches whether they aim to conduct positivist, interpretivist, critical, diffractive, or post-qualitative research. I turn to these approaches in the next chapter.

Notes

1 The "not yet" evokes a state of becoming where the source of any organism cannot be found within the organism since its becoming relies on energies and conditions surrounding it; energies and conditions that are themselves open to interferences, creating a ripple effect of chance encounters that could potentially benefit or harm the organism in question. What the "not yet" means for inquiry is that it allows researchers to work with nonconventional intersections occurring within and around a particular topic as a way of creating an alternative—not yet thought—state of becoming for that particular topic (see Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).
2 In French, sense or *sens* refers to meaning as well as direction (Phillips, 2006).
3 The idea for this activity came from Sarah Green's (2020) book, *You Are an Artist: Assignments to Spark Creation*, which I highly recommend.

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8 Decolonial Thinking

Introduction to Decolonial Thinking

When I first embarked on making the revisions for the second edition of this book, my aim was to include a more diverse range of voices who contributed to the shaping of each mode of thinking, including Indigenous[1] scholars. And while I believe that continues to be an important and necessary aim, I am now convinced that when it comes to Indigenous epistemologies, inclusion is not only insufficient but mistaken. I believe that despite the best intentions of non-Indigenous scholars, whether or not they collaborate respectfully with Indigenous peoples, the permanent harm done by colonizers demands more than inclusion, collaboration, and care. Despite our best intentions—and as a white scholar of European descent (from Kozani, Greece & Whitby, England, I've been told) and now settler to the United States, I include myself—Eurocentric ways of speaking and doing, intentionally or unintentionally, dominate or take control of knowledge-producing processes. I am reminded of a study Julie Kaomea (Kānaka Maoli) (2009) conducted "in a Hawaiian-language-immersion, parent-participation preschool" (p. 81) and the overbearingness of non-Hawaiians "with their dominant styles of interaction and participation" (p. 81). The more I read about the way non-Indigenous family members loudly took over this cultural space, and other incidents where the incommensurability of cultural norms surfaced, the more I too wondered whether opening such programs to non-Native settlers provides any benefit to Hawaiian people. Kaomea concluded by calling on non-Hawaiians to question their place, and to potentially decide that the right action might be to "step out" (p. 95) altogether. Similarly to the parents in Kaomea's study, non-Indigenous scholars too often get "too loud," "betraying our best intentions" (Serra Undurraga, 2024), in settings and relations where the more appropriate behavior would be to step aside or wait to be invited (or not) into the unfolding event.

If decolonizing is believed to be the right way forward, then decolonial theories and Indigenous systems of knowing must become the paradigm

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that leads the way. Decolonial thinking means refusing assimilation into Western epistemologies and settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Whereas the aim of dialectical thinking is to resolve conflicts that arise due to difference and inequities by altering the structures that create them, and diffractive thinking focuses on the points of contact where difference can be created anew, decolonial approaches seek cultural sovereignty (Coffey & Tsosie, 2001) and resurgence (Simpson, 2016). By asserting "cultural sovereignty" (Coffey & Tsosie, 2001), Indigenous peoples are claiming their right to be and to become in their own way. Different from tribal sovereignty, which is determined by geographical borders and is equally important as it involves "the repatriation of Indigenous land" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 21), cultural sovereignty is "the effort of Indian nations and Indian people to exercise their own norms and values in structuring their collective futures" (Coffey & Tsosie, 2001, p. 196). Cultural sovereignty and resurgence go hand in hand. As Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee Nation) (2012) argues, "By focusing on "everyday" acts of resurgence, one disrupts the colonial physical, social and political boundaries designed to impede our actions to restore our nationhood" (p. 88). Indigenous resurgence, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) (2016) notes, "creates profoundly different ways of thinking, organizing, and being because the Indigenous processes that give birth to our collective resurgence are fundamentally nonhierarchical, nonexploitative, nonextractivist, and nonauthoritarian" (pp. 22–23). Simpson (2012) adds, "For me, living as a Nishnaabekwe is a deliberate act—a direct act of resurgence, a direct act of sovereignty" (n.p.). In other words, decolonial approaches that center Indigenous ways of knowing have always been part of Indigenous cultures and are embodied in Indigenous peoples' ongoing actions of survivance (Vizenor, 2008; Windchief et al., 2024).

The need for decolonial approaches persists. Indigenous peoples and scholars navigate living and working in a world where colonizers exploit, ravage, abuse, steal their lands, knowledges, and material goods, while continuously seeking to exterminate their very embodied presence. Explorers, naturalists, geographers, anthropologists, missionaries, and others, not only often leave a vast wake of destruction, but are often lauded for it. For example, Badtjala artist, Fiona Foley (1999) describes the way exploits such as those carried out by German naturalist Amalie Dietrich (1821–1891) are commemorated without acknowledging the violence perpetuated on Indigenous peoples of Queensland, Australia. Foley details how the bones of Aboriginal peoples were "collected" and used to advance scientific theories proclaiming Aboriginal racial inferiority, how a shipwrecked white British colonizer, Eliza Fraser,[2] became "a national and international heroine" (p. 49), erasing not only traces of the many Aboriginal heroes but continuing the exploitation and removal of Aboriginal peoples from their homelands. These stories are

unfortunately not unique to Australia, but are repeated, genocide after genocide throughout the globe, throughout time. When not conducted through force, other "shape-shifting colonial powers" are employed against Indigenous peoples, seeking ways to "eradicate their existence as *peoples* through the erasure of the histories and geographies that provide the foundation for Indigenous cultural identities and sense of self" (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005, p. 598). For example, Bonita Lawrence (Mi'kmaw) (2003) shows how colonial systems of classification "forcibly supplanted traditional Indigenous ways of identifying the self in relation to land and community, functioning discursively to naturalize colonial worldviews" (p. 3). And Foley (1999) remarks that the "nouveau colonialism," targets the Indigenous intellect in three ways:

> first, through the reconstruction of colonists' narratives nationally; second, through the use of language when using maligned buzz words such as *hybridization*, *reconciliation*, and *postcolonialism*; finally, through academia, where Aboriginal people are informants in the extensive research carried out by non-Aboriginal people.
>
> (Foley, 1999, p. 48)

While recognizing that every Indigenous culture, relationship with settler societies, and political-economic situation is different, Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawà:ke Mohawk) and Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee Nation) (2005) note that what is shared by all Indigenous peoples is the "struggle to survive as distinct peoples on foundations constituted in their unique heritages, attachments to their homelands, and natural ways of life" (p. 597). So although Indigenous communities differ fundamentally one from the other, what defines them is not just their status as "ethnic minorities; [but that] they remain in a colonial situation within or across the borders of nation-states that have not recognized their self-determination or sovereignty—which according to international law is an inherent right of all peoples" (Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 10). Decolonizing and Indigenous methodologies support Indigenous survivance by centering Indigenous ways of knowing and guarding Indigenous ideas, customs, and cultures from exploitation, appropriation, and distortion by non-Indigenous researchers (Smith, 2021; Tsinnajinnie et al., 2019). Furthermore, Indigenous and decolonial methodologies cannot be considered just another choice or add-on to other theories, modes of thinking or methodologies; if invoked, they must supersede all other ways of thinking (Smith, 2021).

This chapter thus puts Indigenous first (Tunstall, 2023). The absence or omission of Indigenous methodologies in research carried out with Indigenous peoples, Sweeney Windchief (Assiniboine) and Filipino-American scholar Timothy San Pedro (2019) observe,

> serves as a colonial tool of erasure that manifests in dehumanizing ways (Calderon, 2014). The result is a collective consciousness of superiority

> over Indigenous peoples in a way that allows generations to feel that Indigenous peoples, communities, and their resources, can be used to the benefit of non-Indigenous peoples.
>
> (Windchief & San Pedro, 2019, p. xviii)

Tahltan Nation artist Peter Morin explains that putting Indigenous first means that the process of decolonization involves "active interrogation" and the "dismantling of the privileges and powers" received "as a result of colonization." There are no blueprints to follow, Morin notes, stating that activating "a decolonizing methodology is something you have to determine for yourselves. But keep in mind: If it doesn't hurt, then you're not doing it right" (as quoted in Tunstall, 2023, p. 34).

In this chapter, I convey what I have learned about decolonial approaches knowing that I am only summarizing a portion of the scholarship that should be sought out for guidance when considering decolonial and Indigenous methodologies. In addition, there are many Indigenous traditions, which means that researchers working with Indigenous communities will need to seek out community members who can impart an understanding of its distinct "tribal knowledge systems and . . . Indigenous epistemology" (Kovach, 2018, p. 218, as quoted in Windchief et al., 2024, p. 241). These traditions also point to the incommensurability of Indigenous knowledge systems with Western philosophies (Tuck & Yang, 2012), suggesting that the generalized characteristics I am putting forward in this chapter would necessarily need to be examined and modified in consultation with Indigenous methodological texts and with the "explicit Indigenous values, theory, and ethics" (Windchief et al., 2024, p. 256) of the Indigenous community involved.

Characteristics of Decolonial Thinking

1. Decolonial Thinking Is Not Postcolonial Thinking

Argentinian scholar Walter Mignolo (2021) writes that the spread of postmodernism into movements such as post-structuralism and post-colonialism does not signal alignment with decolonial theories. Mignolo explains, "Whether 'post' is taken to mean 'after' or 'something different' is a question of interpretation. What matters is that the prefix 'post' signals a fracture of 'modernity' *within the same cosmology* of modernity" (p. 382, my emphasis added). Instead, the prefix "de-" of decoloniality points to rupture, disobedience, and delinking (Mignolo, 2021). It breaks up "Western universality and totality into multiple temporalities, knowledges, and praxes of living" (Mignolo, 2021, p. xi). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou, Tūhourangi) adds,

> New analyses and new language mark, and mask, the 'something' that is no longer called imperialism. For Indigenous peoples, one term that

> has signalled the striking shift in discourse is 'post-colonial.' Naming the world as 'post-colonial' is, from Indigenous perspectives, to name colonialism as finished business. . . . There is rather compelling evidence that in fact this has not occurred. . . . Decolonization, once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power.
>
> (Smith, 2021, p. 112)

Delinking from colonial knowledge systems involves analysis of the unique histories and colonizing processes relevant to particular groups of people, as well as attention to the politics of naming that work to clarify or obscure distinctions between groups. For example, in the Canadian context, Alfred (2023) is critical of the government's move to identify all Indigenous peoples as "Aboriginal," believing that this is a constructed identity meant to assimilate Indigenous ways of being into Canada's constitution. Alfred (2023) writes, "This Aboriginal is not who we are as Onkwehónweh, Dene, Saanich" (p. 78). In another example, Dolores Calderon (Pueblo/Mexican-American) (2014) differentiates between settler and colonial societies, and explains that, unlike colonial societies, settler societies "build new societies independent of their countries of origin and institute political institutions that maintain settler rule over the Indigenous peoples they displace" (p. 317). And Eve Tuck (Unangax̂) and Wayne Yang (2012) note, "settler nations are not immigrant nations" (p. 7), explaining the difference: "Settlers are not immigrants. Immigrants are beholden to the Indigenous laws and epistemologies of the lands they migrate to. Settlers become the law, supplanting Indigenous laws and epistemologies" (pp. 6–7). Going back to Smith's (2021) statement about knowing the colonizer and studying colonization, carrying out decolonial approaches, then, requires accounting for "how settler colonialism is maintained . . . [such as] through systems of schooling" (Calderon, 2014, p. 331) in particular contexts. These examples suggest that besides developing significant understanding of a particular community's culture, researchers should also attend to the relevant political landscape and the way language is shaping the local, social, and disciplinary discourses affecting the lives and traditions of its Indigenous peoples.

2. Decolonial Thinking Is Land-Derived, Relational, and Spatial

For Indigenous peoples, land is all-knowing (Armstrong, 1998; Styres, 2019; Kovach, 2021). Jeannette Armstrong (Okanagan/Syilx) explains,

> [I]t is land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. . . . It is constantly communicating. Not to learn its language is

> to die. We survived and thrived by listening intently to its teachings—to its language—and then inventing human words to retell its stories.
>
> (Armstrong, 1998, p. 176)

Centering land as all-knowing emphasizes the intimate and spiritual relationship Indigenous peoples have with place, being, and knowing (Styres, 2019). As Anishinaabe scholar Damien Lee (2012) notes, land "is the source of Indigenous knowledges, identities, languages, nationalisms, songs and laws" (para 4). Land, then, which Sandra Styres (Kanien'kehá:ka) (2019) capitalizes, transcends geography and "refers to the ways we honor and respect her as a sentient and conscious being" (p. 27). As a sentient being, land shapes the values embedded in Indigenous epistemologies and provides "an ethical and spiritual base associated with relationships between people, nature, and the cosmos" (Kovach, 2021, p. 67). Furthermore, Margaret Kovach (Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux) (2021) notes these relationships are not enactments of separate entities. Rather, they signify interdependence "between subject and object, tangible and intangible, self and others, self and the world" (p. 74), and express an Indigenous philosophy "that espouses a non-fragmented, non-human-centric, holism focusing on the metaphysical and pragmatic brought alive by an animate language structure and contextualized within place and land-based knowing and teachings" (Kovach, 2021, p. 67).

Land, then, is not an abstract symbol. It is a "placeholder" a "node" that stores and remembers Indigenous knowledges (Goeman, 2008). To be denied connection to the land, Deborah McGregor (Anishinaabe) (2004) notes, is to be denied connection to the Creator and to the many ways Indigenous knowledges are acquired and sustained in relation to place. In other words, the land orients those who inhabit it to the knowledges it holds. As McGregor (2004) explains, "Many stories and teachings are gained from animals, plants, the moon, the stars, water, wind, and the spirit world. Knowledge is also gained from vision, ceremony, prayer, intuitions, dreams, and personal experience" (p. 388). In addition, this knowledge crosses all disciplines. Speaking about ecological science, Gregory Cajete (Tewa) (2020) defines Indigenous science as "that body of traditional environmental and cultural knowledge unique to a group of people which has served to sustain that people through generations of living within a distinct bioregion" (p. 2). Embodied and spiritual experiences, then, do not only emerge from particular places, but become the basis for an interconnected understanding of science and spirituality (Pierotti & Wildcat, 2000, p. 1339).

This interdependent relationship with land is crucial to what it means to be Indigenous (Goeman, 2008; Smith, 2021). Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) (2008) writes, "Indigenous peoples make place by relating both personal and communal experiences and histories to certain

locations and landscapes—maintaining these spatial relationships is one of the most important components of identity" (p. 24). Colonizers not only stole the physical land from Indigenous peoples, but, in their procedures of renaming what they stole, sought to eradicate their spiritual and cultural identities as well. Smith (2021) explains,

> Renaming the land was probably as powerful ideologically as changing the land. Indigenous children in schools, for example, were taught the new names for places that they and their parents had lived in for generations. These were the names which appeared on maps and which were used in official communications. This newly named land became increasingly disconnected from the songs and chants used by Indigenous peoples to trace their histories, to bring forth spiritual elements or to carry out the simplest of ceremonies.
>
> (Smith, 2021, p. 59)

Reclaiming the right to name place in one's own language, then, plays a significant role in maintaining Indigenous knowledges and cultures, and validates and affirms the efforts of Indigenous peoples to safeguard their original languages in "their struggle for autonomy and sovereignty" (Hernández-Ávila, 2003, p. 46).

In contrast to Western understandings of place, which are codified in laws and maps and imposed on the entire world—a "geopolitics in which 'BORDERS' enforce state violence" (Goeman, 2013, p. 205)—Indigenous peoples understand land as "an articulation of ancient knowledges grounded in the experience of self-in-relationship to place" (Styres, 2019, p. 25). In other words, "the ontological basis of Indigenous sovereignties is being in and of the earth, which is antithetical to the ontological basis of state sovereignty" (Moreton-Robinson, 2020, p. 264). Because Indigenous knowledge exists and thrives in relationships, acknowledgment of tribal connections and the sharing of stories sustain and connect sentient beings "to multiple other spaces, histories, and people" (Goeman, 2013, p. 206). Furthermore, maintaining a relationship to land is a responsibility as it ensures that the Creator's knowledges are passed on to the next and to future generations (McGregor, 2004). Indigenous (re)mapping, Goeman (2013) argues, both acknowledges Indigenous epistemologies and also enacts an active form of "spatial decolonization, a specific form of spatial justice" (p. 4) that "produce places of their own making that are vital to Native communities" (p. 208). It does this by both sustaining tradition and recreating it anew to meet the conditions of each situation, or each present. Goeman's vision of this potential for (re)mapping suggests that the analytical movement of decolonial thinking could be understood as a way to (re)map Indigenous cosmologies of place and time. Figure 8.1 expresses this movement.

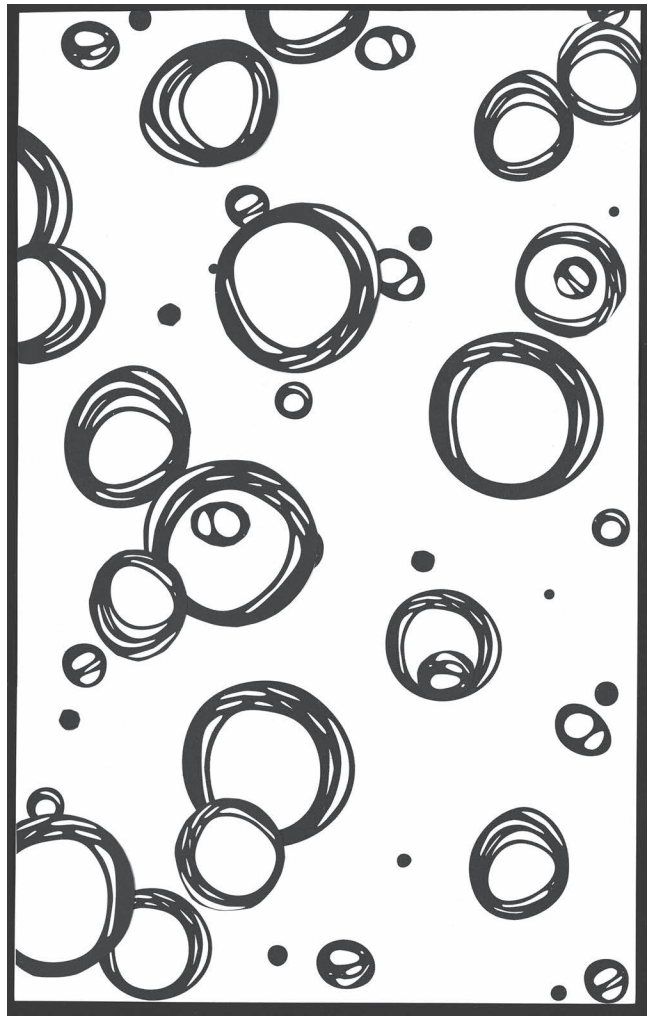

Figure 8.1 (Re)mapping Indigenous Cosmologies of Place and Time.

3. Decolonial Thinking (Re)maps Indigenous Cosmologies of Place and Time

Reclaiming and sustaining a connection with land is essential to Indigenous resistance and self-determination (Coffey & Tsosie, 2001; Corntassel, 2012). Since land is the Creator, Indigenous resurgence is entangled with the power and opportunity to (re)connect with the source of creation (Lee, 2012). This cosmology, however, is incommensurable with Western notions of place,

being, time, and knowledge, which continue to legitimize exploitative and colonizing practices. In other words, colonialism still seeks "to separate Indigenous peoples from knowledge about themselves" (Lee, 2012, para 5) through physical, social, cultural, geographical, legal, and political means. Corntassel (2012) adds, "If colonization is a disconnecting force, then resurgence is about reconnecting with homelands, cultures, and communities" (p. 97).

An example of how a lack of understanding of Indigenous spatial and relational cosmologies perpetuates disconnection is in the way Western scholars and institutions carry out the Indigenous protocol of Land Acknowledgments. Indigenous peoples are critical of the way land acknowledgment statements used by non-Indigenous individuals and settler institutions are often written in ways that suggest Indigenous people no longer reside in the referenced area, or have any claims to the land or a desire to restructure the institution (Ambo & Rocha Beardall, 2023). Theresa Ambo (Tongva/Luiseño) and Theresa Rocha Beardall (Mexican/Oneida/Sault Ste. Marie) call the practice of articulating land acknowledgments without associated institutional responsibilities to Indigenous communities "*rhetorical removal*—the use of language to selectively erase nonsettlers from the rights and benefits that settlers accrue on behalf of their assertions to place" (p. 105). Carried out in this way, land acknowledgment statements are seen to replace responsibility and action in the form of prescribed liturgies that serve to assuage settler guilt and seldom perform their relational, localized, historically specific intent (Robinson et al., 2019). In other words, rhetorical acknowledgments such as these are believed to not go far enough in providing support to Indigenous efforts to repatriate stolen lands.

Resurgence, repatriation, recognition, respect are all connected in Indigenous protocols (Robinson et al., 2019). This is one reason the practice of naming tribal connections in Indigenous greeting customs is considered important. In a plenary on land acknowledgement statements at the Canadian Association for Theatre research, Kanonhsyonne Janice Hill (Turtle Clan/Mohawk) explains that this Indigenous custom originates from a place of respect. That when addressing a group, Hill states,

> I place myself in relation to who I am within my family, clan, and Nation. It is important that I position myself so that you know where I am speaking from, what informs me, and where I am in relation to you and this land we stand on today.
>
> (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 23)

And Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō) describes the way land acknowledgments should connect to the specificity of the time and place of a gathering and the specific histories of the "Indigenous peoples upon whose lands we gather" (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 20). In these ways, relational commitments orient

Indigenous peoples to the uniqueness of each context while also forming bonds across cultures. That is, land acknowledgments reconnect Indigenous peoples to lands and histories colonialism severed *and* serve to strengthen relations and "(re)map" new possibilities for Indigenous peoples and communities (Goeman, 2013).

4. *Decolonial Thinking Is Incommensurable With Western, and Western-Dominant, Epistemologies*

There are many incommensurabilities that shape decolonial theories and approaches, but the one that stands out is the incommensurability between Western and Indigenous philosophies. As already noted, Indigenous and Western notions of land and place are not only radically different, they cannot coexist. In addition, these incommensurabilities are founded in different understandings of time and history. Western notions of history are linear and forefront a view of one's place in history as evolutionary and comparative-based, whereas for Indigenous communities, history is located in place itself (Wildcat, 2005; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Simpson, 2017). Simpson explains,

> Indigenous thought doesn't dissect time into past, present, and future. The future is here in the form of the practices of the present, in which the past is also here influencing. . . . [C]onstellations are place-based relationships, and land-based relationships are the foundation of Indigenous thought.
>
> (Simpson, 2017, p. 213)

Indigenous peoples locate their place in history in relation to the natural world (Wildcat, 2005). Experience with place, familiarity with its inhabitants, and knowing one's place—how to be, how to act, how to relate to self, to land, to history—is embodied in the land (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). As Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) (2003) observes, "The lands wait for those who can discern their rhythms" (p. 296).

As noted, maps and the process of mapping the world played an essential role in colonial and imperial expansion (Goeman, 2013). Time, as conceived by Western societies and then imposed on the world, plays a similar role. Daniel Wildcat (Yuchi member of the Muscogee Nation of Oklahoma) (2005) notes, "Once history-as-time is universalized and human beings are, so to speak, all put on the same clock, it is inevitable that in the big picture of human history some peoples will be viewed as 'on time,' 'ahead of time,' or 'running late'" (p. 433). For Indigenous cultures, whose conception of time is spatial, the Western view of time codified within "a single road called progress" (Wildcat, 2005, p. 433) creates numerous and potentially unresolvable tensions. This is not to say that Indigenous scholars are not able to advance their theories within settler institutions and spaces. On the contrary, there is

interdisciplinary evidence that Indigenous scholarship is effectively altering the disciplinary theoretical landscape. For example, in geography, the field of Indigenous geographies "theorize spatial thought and practice through ethical and accountable relationships with Indigenous peoples and intellectual traditions that span specific though interconnected Indigenous places" (Daigle, 2024, p. 2). And in other fields, such as social work and education, more attention to place-based epistemologies is altering practice in culturally sustaining ways (e.g., Bennett & Green, 2019; Smith et al., 2019; Kuokkanen, 2007).

Nor does it mean that there can be no dialogue between Indigenous and Western philosophical and epistemological traditions. Decolonial thinking, then, is not necessarily a complete rejection of what is or can be learned from Western traditions, but it is a rejection and a resistance against "the assumed dominance, supremacy, and legitimacy of western knowledge that works to oppress, suppress—and delegitimize—other ways of knowing, thinking, being, living, and imagining" (Dei & Jaimungal, 2018, p. 3). "Decolonization is essentially intelligent resistance" Tsinnajinnie et al., 2019, p. 46). It is a move that emanates directly from a lack of respect or attention toward Indigenous theorizing and practices in Western scholarship; the "systematic indifference . . . of the academy" (Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 5). This absence is part of the "colonial matrix of power" needing to be examined and dismantled (Mignolo, 2021, p. 9). So although not accepting Western knowledge structures, these still must be examined to uncover and trace their colonizing practices in ways that reveal spaces where delinking is possible, spaces that forward Indigenous forms of knowing and Indigenous claims to sovereignty and lands. In other words, the intent of resistance is not to restructure Western knowledge-institutions in ways that benefit a more just settler future, but to reclaim and (re)map the cultural and tribal sovereignties of Indigenous peoples around the globe (Tuck & Yang, 2012). In the introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies*, for example, Brendan Hokowhitu (Māori, Ngāti Pūkenga descent) (2021) writes that the creation of the handbook is a sovereign act, "a sovereign act that is part of a larger movement that supports the disengagement of Indigenous knowledges from the confines and violences associated with Western knowledge ordering" (p. 2). In short, Indigenous scholars are tired of the way Western scholars disassociate themselves from the actions and commitments required to redress violence toward Indigenous peoples and knowledges;

> what McIntyre (2000) calls "studied ignorance" and "privileged innocence" that uphold the status quo, assigning power, privilege, access to elite institutions, and hence the capacity to shape "realities" and "truths." Such privilege allows its holders not to know or think about systemic inequality or their own role in sustaining inequality.
>
> (Battiste et al., 2005, p. 9)

5. Decolonial Ways of Being and Knowing Further Indigenous Self-Determination and Futurity Through Intergenerational Stories and Storying

Indigenous storying connects past, present, and future in a web of lived and living relationalities (Maracle, 2015; Archibald et al., 2019). These are not chronological accounts, as history is often depicted by non-Indigenous people. Rather, stories enact memory, not as "a simple act of recall," but as an opening to time and spirit, much like the pathways of mind, its "dendrites—travelling to all parts of our memory" (Maracle, 2015, p. 15). Lee Maracle (Stó:lō Nation) explains how the past is woven into the future through remembering and storying,

> Remembering is a process of being fed by the past, not just my past but my ancestral past, the earth's past, and the past of other human beings. We are responsible for pulling the best threads from the past forward to re-weave our lives—together.
>
> (Maracle, 2015, p. 15)

Maracle writes that memory lives in the bodies of Indigenous peoples refusing to be ignored, calling out for a new direction when the need arises. This is not a movement of progress where a new direction replaces a past manifestation—a Western understanding of change—but an elaboration of existence or *being* within the conditions of the present and anticipating/creating the possibilities of the future. Through stories, Maracle (2015) explains, "We remember who we are and who we will always want to be" (p. 18). For example, speaking from the "banks of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo dividing Laredo, Texas from Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas" (Muñoz, 2019, p. 62), Marissa Muñoz (Xicana Tejana) (2019) writes, "Stories serve as decolonizing approaches that bear witness, revitalize, and remember the preborder relationships between the river, the land, and the people that have survived in the collective memory of the community" (p. 64).

In addition, these storied accounts are not about controlling the future (another Western assumption). Rather, the world, or the universe for that matter,—past, present, and future—does not revolve around human needs or desires (Wildcat, 2005). Within an Indigenous understanding of the world, the power of life exists in all beings, not just humans (Deloria, 2003). "Acknowledging nonhumans as teachers and elders requires that we pay careful attention to their lives, and recognize that these lives have meaning on their own terms" (Pierotti & Wildcat, 2000, p. 1337). In a relational understanding of memory, land, time, and spirit, Indigenous epistemologies forward a cosmic relationality that imbues humans—and other sentient beings—with responsibility for its upkeep, keeping past, present,

and future generations in dynamic relation. Stories, storying, and restorying serve this sacred responsibility (Moreton-Robinson, 2020; Archibald et al., 2019; Wilson, 2008; Goeman, 2013; Muñoz, 2019). For example, Māori scholars Joanna Kidman et al. (2021) describe how in Māori cosmology, Wā, or space–time, is a multidimensional temporal network within which kin relationships are located. "Wā is therefore the realm of connection between people (both living and dead), the land and the invisible and spiritual spheres that stretch across a vast, unbounded totality in which times past, present and future are coterminous" (p. 28). They explain that connections with Wā help new generations of Māori people navigate urban spaces, providing them with an ancestral intermediary "as they move around settler-colonial cities and towns on unceded tribal lands" (p. 28).

To decolonize then is not just a process of analysis to reveal and confront the many levels of enactments of colonial power (Mignolo, 2021; Smith, 2021; Styres, 2019); its intention is to further Indigenous self-determination (Smith, 2021) and, for many Indigenous scholars, it provides a way to theorize "Native futures without a settler state" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 13). Furthermore, Indigenous scholars note the continued omission of Indigenous knowledges and input in governmental decisions about the future of local and global societies (Battiste et al., 2005). Considering that the current state of the world is one of increased humanitarian and climate crises, Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) scholars believe that a change of leadership has the potential to put the world onto a more sustainable course of action. Deborah McGregor (Anishinaabe) (2020) observes that the way to a more environmentally responsible and sustainable future is embedded in Indigenous stories and understandings. From these, McGregor notes,

> a path to an Indigenous environmental justice and a sustainable future for all can be laid out. Every Indigenous Declaration since the first Earth Summit has provided guidance on how to create this path. Now all we have to do is pay attention, and act accordingly.
>
> (McGregor, 2020, p. 417)

Decolonial Thinking in Practice

As mentioned, Indigenous ways of knowing are incompatible with those of Western societies. One place where that incommensurability has been obvious is in the way research has been carried out. The term "research" brings up centuries of dehumanizing experiences, betrayals, and exploitation, as well as physical, psychological, and moral violence (Smith, 2021). It also points to the inherent violence settler philosophies—with their incompatible views of human being, gender, relationships, knowledge, space, time, and the like—have perpetuated on Indigenous peoples (Goeman, 2013).

In contrast to this history of destruction, research by and with Indigenous peoples become "spaces of resistance and hope" (Smith, 2021, p. 4).

For example, Indigenous scholars Madeline Wills (Warumungu), Jessica Rodaughan (Jardwadjali), Laura Jobson, Karen Adams (Wiradjuri), and Cammi Murrup-Stewart (Aboriginal woman with ties to Wurundjeri Country) (2024) carried out a study with First Nations Australian youth on their perspectives of e-mental health tools and on their general social and emotional well-being (SEWB). Although there has been increased attention to incorporating culturally relevant knowledge and language within digital resources intended to provide support to users' mental health, Wills et al. argued that little was known about the perspectives of First Nations youths, a dominant user group for these apps.

To better understand how First Nations youths in Victoria, Australia, made use of e-mental health tools, six First Nations youths (aged 18–25) were recruited by the research team as "knowledge-holders" capable of imparting unique perspectives grounded in their "own languages, cultural structures, and belief systems" (Wills et al., 2024, p. 226). Guided by Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies, "yarning" was used for data collection and analysis. Yarning is a set of Indigenous approaches aimed at forming "trusting, reciprocal relationships, [that] allows the researcher and participant to share knowledge through storytelling of memories, experiences, and perspectives" (p. 226). In addition, the research team drew on Indigenous values and sources to guide data collection and analysis procedures. Yarns were carried out via Zoom or in-person depending on participant preference. Knowledge-holders were compensated for their time with food and beverages and an "AUD$50 voucher" (p. 227).

"Connection" as an overarching theme tied the results together. The knowledge-holders first provided key understandings of SEWB from an Indigenous point of view emphasizing the importance of family, community, Mob, Country, and Spirit. When it came to perspectives on e-health, trust and familiarity with the app were essential. Knowledge-holders reported valuing representation of Indigenous peoples and were more likely to trust the app if someone they knew recommended it. On the other hand, centuries of trauma and government mistrust due to ongoing colonization resulted in knowledge-holders acknowledging being hesitant about sharing personal data for fear that it would result in the "data being used *against* them rather than *for* them" (p. 228). The authors concluded with recommendations to improve e-health in ways that not only are culturally informed but also strengthen users' "autonomy and sovereignty" (p. 230) in continued efforts to decolonize "the western deficit-based notions of health that dominate the existing Australian mental health landscape" (p. 230).

Another example of an Indigenous scholar's research is by Theresa Jean Ambo (Gabrielino-Tongva) (2023), who conducted a study to examine

how two universities of higher education in the United States carry out their missions as these relate to Indigenous students and communities. Ambo set the cultural stage by noting the changing discourse in higher educational institutions pertaining to diversity, inclusion, and anti-racist initiatives. However, Ambo noted, "settler colonial universities" (p. 1) have a particularly injurious relationship with Indigenous peoples, especially land-grant institutions that were subsidized by their state's ability to procure "public" lands for the establishment of public institutions of higher education. Ambo described how the Morrill Act of 1862 benefitted from the long history of efforts by colonizers to the United States to eradicate Indigenous peoples and steal their lands and resources. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, in California, where this study was conducted, Indigenous nations "ceded 7.488 million acres of land to the U.S. government" (Ambo, 2023, p. 5), lands which were then used to support the development of land-grant universities under the Morrill Act. Since part of the Morrill Act was the establishment of a mission to serve underserved and marginalized local communities, Ambo selected two land-grant universities to examine their actions and responsibilities toward local Indigenous communities. Both sites were chosen because they had programs that were specifically established to support Indigenous students and communities and were located in metropolitan areas conducive to that work.

Ambo (2023) employed Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies (CIRM) (Brayboy, Gough, Leonard, Roehl, & Solyom, 2012, as cited by Ambo, p. 4) supported by Tribal Critical Race Theory (Tribal Crit) (Brayboy, 2005, as cited by Ambo, p. 3) to examine how two universities located close to Ambo's homeland were carrying out their missions to support Indigenous peoples. CIRM furthered "principles of Indigenous relationality" and an interest in fortifying "tribal sovereignty" (Ambo, p. 4) by centering Indigenous values of respect, responsibility, and reciprocity, which affirmed Ambo's commitments, both within study procedures but also to the broader Indigenous community past, present, and future, whose interests were implicated in the design and outcomes of the study. The theoretical lens of Tribal Crit kept the study's focus on the examination of settler colonial structures and practices of higher education institutions through "nine tenets that address colonialism, White supremacy, liminality, sovereignty, power, assimilation, elimination, education, and Indigenous epistemologies and theorizing" (p. 3). In addition, besides publishing the research findings in academic journals, Ambo stated providing a separate report for community partners as a way to center and affirm Indigenous perspectives and not exacerbate erasure by commingling Indigenous voices with those of the institutions.

The two public universities were analyzed as "cases" to allow for a cross-case analysis of key findings. Data collection included interviews

with 21 individuals, analysis of over 100 years of relevant public documents, and 24 observations across both sites over a ten-month period. The focus of the 2023 article was based primarily on the interviews with ten individuals who oversaw the Indigenous academic and support programs provided at the two institutions. Several cycles of inductive and deductive coding were carried out prior to conducting a cross-case analysis to generate the final themes. Ambo then conducted member checking with participants to ensure the accuracy of quotes in relationship to the findings. Because the study was oriented toward examining how the two institutions carried out their responsibilities to Indigenous students and communities, and because participants' accounts drew on their institutions' expressed missions to support their answers, the study findings were organized in relation to three overarching missions expressed by public, land-grant institutions: Those focused on the "public," those focused on "their land-grant" missions, and those focused on their diversity and inclusion missions. In all three areas, Ambo found that Indigenous students and communities were grossly underserved, pointing to an institutionalized resistance to acknowledging and taking responsibility for their colonial histories. Ambo concluded by calling on institutions to address their complicity and carry out their responsibilities to serve Indigenous students and communities.

Deciding on Decolonial Thinking for Analysis

In the third edition of the book, *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes,

> [R]esearch exists within a system of power. What this means for Indigenous researchers as well as Indigenous activists and their communities is that Indigenous work has to "talk back to" or "talk up to" power. There are no neutral spaces for the kind of work required to ensure that traditional Indigenous knowledge flourishes; that it remains connected intimately to Indigenous people as a way of thinking, knowing and being; that it is sustained and actually grows over future generations.
>
> (Smith, 2021, p. 282)

As noted throughout this chapter, colonization has harmed generations of Indigenous peoples in numerous ways, including through research (Smith, 2021). Carrying out decolonizing research then should respond to the needs of particular Indigenous communities (Smith, 2021). This involves decolonizing approaches that both honor Indigenous communities and epistemologies (Tuck & Yang, 2019), and "provide a context for the particular colonial project(s) we are responding to" (Calderon, 2014, p. 314). For example, Kovach (2021) writes about how "Nêhiyaw

ways of knowing emphasize the importance of respect, reciprocity, relation, protocol, holistic knowing, relevancy, story, interpretative meaning, and the experiential nested in place, land, and kinship systems" (p. 81). Sakihitowin Awasis (Métis) (2023) articulates a decolonial methodology oriented to support Indigenous pipeline resistance movements. Specifically, by demonstrating the importance of multiversality, or "the existence of many spatiotemporally distinct yet interconnected worlds" (p. 154), Awasis (2023) demonstrates that "Indigenous self-determination lie in the capability to participate in decision-making processes that do not take the colonial temporality and state as the implicit context" (p. 155). This section, then, considers decolonial thinking as operationalized in Indigenous methodologies. Indigenous methodologies distinguish themselves from research about Indigenous issues or communities by enacting an Indigenous epistemology in collaboration with Indigenous communities (Windchief et al., 2018). Here, I outline a few recommended practices for researchers interested in decolonial thinking to consider.

First, Indigenous research methodologies "must come from an Indigenous paradigm rather than an Indigenous perspective" (Wilson, 2001, p. 176). Cornel Pewewardy (Comanche-Kiowa) (2019) explains that this means Indigenous scholars should concern themselves with both "the *practical* . . . and the *esoteric*" (p. 150). Orienting to practical matters continues the process of decolonization on all disciplinary, social, and political fronts. Attending to the esoteric means embracing the metaphysical, "the immaterial, non-tangible aspects of reality which come to life in such concepts as mind, spirit, consciousness, belief, conviction, mental representation, dream, image, intuition, imagination, myth, symbolism, and more" (p. 150). In other words, it is not necessarily the presence of specific methods that identify an approach as Indigenous, but the paradigmatic beliefs and theories guiding the methods (Tuck & Yang, 2019). Furthermore, an Indigenous paradigm is a paradigm "where relationships are more important than reality" (Wilson, 2001, p. 177). Marie Battiste (Mi'kmaw) (2008) concurs, "Indigenous knowledge is constantly shared, making all things interrelated and collectively developed and constituted. There is no singular author of Indigenous knowledge and no singular method for understanding its totality" (p. 500).

Second, then, decolonial approaches foreground relational validity (Tuck & Yang, 2019). As Wilson (2001) explains, "As a researcher you are answering to *all your relations* when you are doing research" (p. 177). This "relational accountability" (Wilson, 2008, p. 77) is enacted in how individuals embody their familial and locational lineage, and also through relations with friends, which shift depending on what or who a person is in relation with, sometimes belonging and being invited in, other times not (San Pedro, 2021). This relationality is also

expressed in Indigenous languages, where words for objects often literally point to the relation between human and nonhuman entities (Wilson, 2001). It is supported by commitments to respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). And it is carried out through the data collection and analysis processes, which Wilson—retelling an analogy told by Peter Hanohano—describes as analogical to a fishing net:

> You could try to examine each of the knots in the net to see what holds it together, but it's the strings between the knots that have to work in conjunction in order for the net to function. So any analysis must examine all of the relationships or strings between particular events or knots of data as a whole before it will make any sense.
>
> (Wilson, 2008, p. 120)

Third, developing trust, maintaining respectful and mutually beneficial relationships between researchers and Indigenous communities, and learning with and from Indigenous peoples (even when the researcher comes from the community) is at the core of decolonizing research (Tuck & Yang, 2019). Trust is necessary and purposeful and is guided by the specific protocol delineated by the community the researcher is collaborating with. "The trust is that we will listen, learn, and forward Indigenous sovereignty and relationality" (Tuck & Yang, 2019, p. xi). It also means that some information will not be shared outside the confines of the community. That is, embodying the values of Indigenous research means that all researchers,

> (Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike) must accept the knowledge keepers' resistance, reluctance, and refusal, to share knowledge, support the protective nature of community as it relates to people, and trust that time, space, and context are out of our hands. In short, some knowledge is not for the academy.
>
> (Windchief et al., 2018, p. 540)

As long as Indigenous peoples continue to be exploited, lied to, their claims to sovereignty refused, Indigenous peoples will have no reason to trust that researchers have good intention. Furthermore, deceit continues in other ways as well, for example, individuals faking to be Indigenous when they are not. This is not just a morally repugnant act; it continues the theft and violence against Indigenous peoples, with real consequences impacting the distribution of resources and material goods. In addition, accusations affect Indigenous individuals who don't "look Indigenous" and find themselves accused of "pretendianism" (Kolopenuk, 2023). Jessica Kolopenuk (Cree, Peguis First Nation) (2023) writes that if you are Indigenous and are falsely accused,

speak up, noting that speaking up will do more "to model the richness and diversity of what real Indigenous relationality looks like" (p. 472) than would staying silent, which likely adds fuel to colonial power and reach.

Despite the fact that Indigenous and decolonial thinking theories and practices preexisted the Western paradigm that spread through and reconfigured the universe in its image, there is a continued need to recognize and respect their aims and priorities without resorting to Western practices of assimilation, exploitation, and colonization. Whether Indigenous scholars work solely within an Indigenous paradigm, then, or include Western paradigms in their scholarly work, the essential aim of a decolonial approach "should be about healing and empowerment. It should involve the return of dignity and the restoration of sovereignty, and it should ultimately bring formerly colonized communities one step further along the path to self-determination" (Kaomea, 2001, p. 81).

Notes

1 Throughout this chapter, I capitalize Indigenous to indicate respect and recognition of "Indigenous Peoples as First Peoples" (Charnley, 2021) except in direct quotes where capitalization was not used by the quoted author(s). I also use terms such as Aboriginal, Indian, or Native when these were the terms used in the referenced source.
2 Fraser Island, named after Captain James Fraser, was renamed K'gari Island in 2023, a decade after the Indigenous Butchella People were given Native Title rights in 2014; www.resources.qld.gov.au/land-property/initiatives/kgari

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