Using ‘Foucault’s toolbox’: the challenge with feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis

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Abstract
This paper discusses the challenges that the author faced when using post-structuralist feminist interpretations of Foucauldian discourse analysis as a research methodology, which emphasised the enmeshment of the researcher’s subjective self in the research. Analysis of the ‘self’ involved the author being stripped of her ‘creative role and analysed as a complex variable function of discourse’ (Foucault 1977, p. 138). In a struggle to deconstruct personal ‘truths’, the author repeatedly questioned and checked her multiple subjective positions and life narratives against feminist concepts within literature, with colleagues and research participants. Sensitivity towards the author’s power over the interpretation of the data became an object of discourse analysis in its own right. This paper argues that reflexive engagement strengthened the analysis through broadening the author’s own discursively defined views and by exposing how subjective experiences interacted with research.
Introduction

My PhD research utilised feminist interpretations of Foucauldian discourse as a methodology, which emphasised the enmeshment of the researcher’s subjective self and texts within the research. This paper discusses the theoretical challenges that I faced in conceptualising my own ‘truths’ and power when using a feminist post-structuralist philosophy. Sensitivity towards my constructions of ‘truth’, and my power over the research process when interpreting data, became an object of discourse analysis in its own right. This approach required me to engage in self-reflexivity and to heighten my awareness of the ‘outer’ social, cultural and discursive contexts of the research. Engaging in self-reflexivity and analysing the ‘self’ strengthened the discourse analysis through broadening my own discursively formed views and by exposing how my constructions and subjective experiences interacted with my research. In using ‘Foucault’s toolbox’, his earlier works prior to his change of mind on structuralism and the state were ‘borrowed’.

Foucault and discourse analysis

There is a fundamental methodological premise in Foucault’s work that discourses, as knowledge and truth claims, play a significant role in constructing what is ‘real’ for each of us. Yet, despite Foucault highlighting the connection between discourse, power and knowledge, he never articulated methods for the sociological analysis of discourses within empirical data. The closest he came to articulating a framework for identifying discourses was via his rules for locating ‘discursive formation’ (Foucault 1972): ideological regularities, located in language use amongst people, that produce discourses.

What is known is that the variable ways to conduct discourse analysis are informed by methods that seek to identify and describe the plurality of reality and the precarious nature of knowledge claims. Yet it becomes problematic to construct an analytical framework that rests upon the works of Foucault alone due to his lack of clear precepts for conducting discourse analysis. The best we can do, as researchers, is to draw on his theories and to use them however it best suits our own thematic research schema, or our own theoretical perspectives, for he himself said:

All my books ... are little tool boxes ... if people want to open them, to use this sentence or that idea as a screwdriver or spanner to short-circuit, discredit or smash systems of
power, including eventually those from which my books have emerged ... so much better! (Foucault 1975, 'Interview with Roger Pol Droit', cited in Paton 1979, p. 115)

Searching for ‘truths’

Whether we are the researchers or the researched, meanings that the world has for each of us are created and mediated by variable matrices of cultural and social life. Questions arise as to how we can research ‘truths’ when there are no essential characteristics and no shared human experiences from which thematic schema or interpretive labels can be naturally conceived. Butler (1990) argued that terminological categories to describe people, such as race, class, age, religion, ethnicity, sexuality and so forth, exist within a matrix of differences. It would be wrong to assume that filling people with these various components could allow researchers to come up with an assumption of what the ‘truth’ should be. This is because research categories for people and their experiences would take as many forms as there are people (Moi 1987).

In this sense, there is no one truth about the subjective experiences of the people we research that is waiting to be unearthed. There is no one truth about the way we, as researchers or analysts, should make sense about the lives and experiences of others. In presenting theories of people and their life experiences, which are unstable concepts, all we as researchers can speak about is our personal observation of the discourses, the ‘assumptions, values, and worldview as they are embodied in communal practice’ (Dunlap 1997, p. 48) that people use to talk about the self. If our observation is all there is, then the histories and experiences from where our interpretations are formed must form part of our analysis.

We are all subsumed by the ‘truth claims’ embedded within discourse; we participate in them, we perpetuate them and sometimes we resist and/or rebel against certain discourses. When considering that both subjugated and dominant knowledges are constituted by discourses in language use, which are subtle and often out of the realm of consciousness (Dunlap 1997), it becomes a worthwhile objective for researchers to develop better understandings about their own discursive formations and power in order to minimise their power over the research participants and the research process.
Therefore, I engaged in an analysis of the ‘self’, which involved me being stripped of my ‘creative role and analysed as a complex variable function of discourse’ (Foucault 1977, p. 138). I analysed and brought to light the discourses that were unconsciously embodied in my everyday social interactions, which were in plain view but which I had previously failed to see.

**Changing my perspective**

Wittgenstein wrote:

> How could human behavior be described? Surely only by sketching the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. What determines our judgment, our concepts and reactions, is not what one man is doing now, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action. (1981, no. 567)

Wittgenstein (1953, no. 144) suggested we change our ‘ways of looking at things’ and see things through new ways. He was not concerned with hunting out new facts. Rather, he said, ‘the essence of our investigation’ is ‘to understand something that is already in plain view’ (Wittgenstein 1953, no. 89). He suggested that the ‘whole hurly-burley of human actions’ (Wittgenstein 1981, no. 567) consists of unnoticed background activities that we react to and respond to without intellectual deliberation in our everyday lives that we live. These background activities are depicted in language, they are used to describe our histories, our wants and desires and they are shaped as much by social contexts that we attempt to fit ourselves into as our socially constructed inner self from which we also act out (Shotter 1994). In response to each other, our histories and our background activities construct what we think about ourselves and how we understand our research participants in socially ‘fitting’ ways.

Although some authors (for example, Moores 1993; Probyn 1993) have expressed ambivalence towards researcher ‘self-talk’ and reflexivity, I argue herein that individual researchers must seek to understand the contexts that they attempt to fit their own ‘selves’ into, as well as their socially constructed inner self from which they also gaze out (Shotter 1994) before and during any attempts to understand the ‘realities’ of others. In support of my
chosen methodology, I drew on Valerie Walkerdine’s (1997) guidance to make sense of my place in the research:

> it is an impossible task to avoid something which cannot be avoided, instead of making futile attempts to avoid something which cannot be avoided, we should think more carefully about how to utilise our subjectivity as a feature of the research process. (Walkerdine 1997, p. 59)

The importance of exposing ‘me’ and my discursive constructions within my research becomes evident when considering Walkerdine’s (1997) view that it is impossible to avoid my researcher subjectivity. Because I cannot avoid it, I advocated for the wise and productive use of researcher subjectivity in order to show others the active formation of my research interpretations. Kincheloe and McLaren (1998, p. 273) stated that research is ‘conditioned by the way it is theoretically framed’ and is ‘dependent upon the researcher’s own ideological assumptions’. Hence, I examined the discursive construction of my inner thoughts, against which I perceive everything, I challenged it and checked it against what other feminist post-structuralist authors had written. As well, I brought myself into plain view for others to see – for I could only present my research findings to others by providing them with a description of my conceptual lenses constructed from my own subjective and discursively formed milieu.

**Researcher subjectivity**

The process of analysing my own discourses was essential in order to gain some understanding of embodied experiences of those whom I researched, which was framed by my interpretation of feminist and post-structuralist theory. In so doing, my feminist positioning consented to pathways in which to listen to the texts of others and to investigate, interpret and elucidate individual uniqueness within an inextricable mixture of historically contextualised social existences.

Harding, who had confronted the powerful foundations of scientific and social inquiry, argued that claims to objectivity, value-free research and separation of the knower from the known, are myths masked by masculine constructions ‘of what counts as a scientific problem and in the concepts, theories, methods, and interpretations of the research’, which are ‘not only sexist but also racist, classist, and culturally coercive’ (1986, p. 9). In a similar light, Haraway said that researchers cannot do a ‘god trick of seeing everything from nowhere …
And like the god-trick’ research is dominated by the masculinist-scientific ‘conquering gaze … this eye fucks the world’ (1991, p. 188).

The pragmatic solution is to avoid ‘futile debates about subjectivity versus objectivity’ because no ‘credible research strategy advocates biased distortion of data to serve the researcher’s vested interests and prejudices’ (Patton 2001, p. 51). Instead, my value-based inquiry uses a reflexive approach to interrogate, explore and realise the influence of my own power, discursive formation and subjective positions over my research endeavours so that my unintended distortions would be exposed (Lather 1991; Etherington 2004; Sunderland 2006). Researchers that acknowledge their subjectivity and who use value-based inquiry, with the ‘use of all of one’s capacities through personal experience and engagement … through ownership of voice and perspective’, suggested Patton (2001, p. 66), could more likely find results that have greater depth of meaning and authenticity.

When considering that power is embedded in discourse, historically through ‘an allegorical construction … not as raw, bleeding facts but in textual production, in narratives’ (Chambers 1997, p. 77), it could be considered that historical processes might deprive researchers and their subjects of creativity in understanding and making sense of experiences and existences in the world. Yet Foucault (1972, p. 185) suggested that his schema was ‘to free history from the grip of phenomenology’, not ‘free history of thought from all taint of subjectivity’ (p. 201). Therefore, exposing and analysing my own life scripts, my discursive formations and the taint of my subjectivity on my research is what makes my analysis honest.

Harding wrote: ‘our social activities both enable and limit what we can know. Distinctive kinds of thinking have distinctive material conditions’ (2003, p. xv). Therefore, research can only be conducted and results presented as the researcher’s version of a particular moment in history, filtered through their own constructions of the social milieu. Like other feminist post-structuralists, I advocate that researcher subjectivity, through a reflexive engagement, better enables a depth of understanding of other individuals in society through enabling researchers to work with and against their own discursively formed meanings.
Summary

The challenge with feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis, with the incorporation of researcher reflexivity, is that this methodology is subjugated by the academic discourses as to ‘what counts’ in research. However, self-exploration is argued herein to decrease researcher ambivalence towards his/her power over the research process. This methodology also serves feminist ends through exposing researcher influence in the interpretation of data as a means to preserve the voice of the ‘othered’. This is because the exposure of interpretive discrepancies and the permeation of researcher self-awareness, which acknowledges his/her lived experiences, constructions and ‘truths’, is more likely to expose and better control personal biases, as opposed to pathologising research subjects within a form of determinism. Researcher self-dialogue brings into ‘plain view’ the discursive formations that undeniably shape all facets of inquiry.

Finally, in recognising that it is not possible to represent all the variable views of the researched within their matrices of social and cultural life, feminist post-structuralist research favours the notion that social interactions are inconclusive because they are constituted differently in relation to time, space and varying discourse. My ambition, therefore, was to draw from Foucault’s toolbox, to mix it with a range of theoretical perspectives, and to expose my interpretive dialogues through my reflexive engagement with my research. I hoped that my modelling of reflexivity would encourage the readers of my research to reflect, to challenge their own discursively defined views, which may create pathways for societal change.

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References


