Chapter 3

Positionalities

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Introduction

In this chapter we will explore the importance of positionality – from feminist and critical disability studies orientations – to qualitative research. Burns and Walker (2005: 67) consider positionality in terms of the ‘implication of the researcher in the production of knowledge and a breaking down of the “masculinist” separation of the private [world of the researcher] through the public [activity of research]’. Positionality is located within this discussion as an ongoing informing of a contextual framework from which we (the writers and researchers) come and its influence on the choices and approaches we make when embarking on research. In other words, we are interested in rendering visible the subjective and critically reflective frameworks to the how we research, what we research and why we research. At a very fundamental level – we believe that no research is value free – and it is these values with which we are particular concerned. The chapter explores a number of key themes in relation to methodological, epistemological and ontological undergirdings of qualitative research using feminisms and critical disability studies as our points of location and reflection. We have chosen to write this as two parallel and interconnected accounts of our approaches and positions within this exploration as ‘the differences in our experiences precisely underline the need to pay reflexive attention to the complex processes of doing research’ (Jowett and O’Toole 2006: 456).

Viewpoint/sitpoint

We start by reflexively considering some of the origins of our research interests and why qualitative research is important to us not only as more than an idiographic approach but also as a space to understand the structural, cultural and political foundations of what is often known as the psychological.

A feminist viewpoint: Sophie Smailes

As a woman, academic, psychotherapist, feminist, white, able bodied, middle class, etc. etc. my 'fluid and constantly in flux identities' (Bordo 1990; Moulding 2006) have informed and been informed by how these positions reflect dominant discourses and positions. In qualitative research, the need to be open and aware of our position and impact on how we engage in the research process is a vital reflective action throughout all stages of the research. Both Willig (1999, 2008) and Lafrance and Stoppard (2006) write about the process of how we locate ourselves being drawn from particular prevailing discourses which 'contain a range of subject positions which in turn facilitate and/or constrain certain experiences and practices' (Willig 1999: 43). The structure of qualitative research, and in particular feminist research methodologies, is informed by this constant reflexivity and adds to the richness and transparency of the whole 'enterprise'.

With this in mind my reflections on my positioning and journey are a way of providing an insight into the how and why I engage with feminist qualitative research and its representational implications. My location is informed by a number of influences not least that I am female. I came to higher education with a background in British history where much of the material we covered was the preserve of men, power and patriarchy. So, the focus was on the kings (and the odd queen), the battles/crusades, the church versus state, the laws and legislature, urbanisation and industrialisation. The way in which this was taught, what we read and indeed the very essays we wrote were concerned with particular instrumental and power issues, which were the sphere of men. It was not just that these were considered the most relevant and important aspects to 'know' but also that these were universalised to all; and women, the poor and disenfranchised, disabled and homosexual, etc. were either invisible, periphery or problematised.

What counts as legitimate knowledge, our ways of knowing and how we come to know what we know (Burns and Walker 2005), can reflect very rarefied perspectives. Notions of reality, knowledge and what was considered relevant, pertinent, worth knowing, and who recorded the knowledge, meant that the picture I had of British social history was partial at best. Stanley and Wise (1993) and Westmarland (2001) write about 'malestream methods' as being hierarchically located, legitimising only certain 'kinds' of data, information and sources. Willig (2008), O'Leary (2004) and Westmarland (2001) emphasise how what is presented/sourced as universal and worthy of note resides within patriarchal values and scholarship – hence the partiality.

My choice of degree was informed partly by my frustrations with this partiality and I endeavoured to choose one that would give voice to a far wider range of people/realities. I learnt that sources of data, what was considered as legitimate data, whose voices were heard and acknowledged was far more diverse than initially taught; and subject to the choices, interests and perspectives of the people who taught and wrote them (Jarviluoma *et al.* 2003). Feminist qualitative research is also concerned with opening up the arena of 'legitimate data and voices' and encourages the access of a wide variety of data sources/methodologies which allow for diverse voices, representations and constructions to be heard and acknowledged (Oakley 1981; Neilson 1990; Ramazanoglu with Holland 2003).

A further influential bed of knowledge/experience informing my approach to qualitative feminist research was my training in humanistic counselling/psychotherapy. This emphasises the relationship between the therapist and the client, centralising the voice, story and words of the client. Karniel-Miller *et al.* (2009) write about the importance, in qualitative feminist research, of the respondent's ownership of their story. The role of the researcher is to reflect/represent as closely as possible this story. Oakley (1981) writes about the need within qualitative feminist interviews to acknowledge and work with the power implicit within the relationship, and indeed engage with an active sense of reciprocity. In humanistic counselling reciprocity takes the form of being fully present, congruent and actively engaged in the client's process and its meanings (Geldard and Geldard 2003; Tolan 2003; Joseph 2010); explicitly valuing the person and giving space to their own realities.

Within such a person-centred reflexive training, little acknowledgement was given to social and political contexts except in the form of special 'add-on' sessions for gender, sexuality, disability and race. Lafrance and Stoppard (2006) and Kitzinger (2004) challenge this 'adding on' process within generalised normative discourses as implicitly positioning men as 'the norm' (Willig 2008). As with history, this approach rendered women (and indeed ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality, disability, etc.) as invisible and/or a problem (O'Leary 2004; Burns and Walker 2005; Watts 2006). Indeed, the intersectionalities between and within these various 'identities' were missed and often responses of tutors/students came from inadvertent pathologisation or elision.

Finally, as an academic I reside largely within the social sciences, qualitative research, feminist and critical theory and humanism. All of these strands, as well as my own lived experiences, feed into how I understand and engage with qualitative feminist research. Feminist qualitative research is transformative and ongoing; it situates 'knowledge' in ongoing debates and processes requiring 'awareness of the social context in which such accounts are expressed and of the social and cultural locations from which they are drawn' (Kerr *et al.* 1998: 114, cited in Jowett and O'Toole 2006: 453). As I continue to engage with these privileged and marginalised subjectivities, 'uncomfortable' and taken for granted areas become more visible. Critical research theory and feminism asks us to give voice to the experiences of ourselves and marginalised groups (Stephenson 2006; Salmon 2007) when engaging in qualitative research. More recently, feminist theorists like Watts (2006) emphasise the contested nature of our identities and the need to work with intersectionalities and diversities within; a commitment which can make the choices of methodologies and approaches in research even more challenging.

Critical research, including feminist methodologies, is not a static uncritical concept which is used to design qualitative research. These methodologies are various, ongoing, in a constant flux and always developing and responding to the contexts and constructions in/with which we reside. 'Feminism and feminist methodology are not monolithic but numerous, a contested terrain and source of continual debate among feminist scholars' (Burns and Walker 2005: 69). The second area of positionality we explore in this chapter resides in critical disability studies.

A critical disability studies sitpoint

When completing my undergraduate degree in psychology in 1993, I (Dan) felt let down by much of what I had been taught. Yes, there were highlights: the lectures on Marxism and psychoanalysis; sessions exploring feminism on the psychology of women course; some seminar discussions of discourse analysis and the opportunity to implement a qualitative dissertation project had given me access to some of the insights from critical and qualitative research. However, much of the psychology that I had come into contact with was positivistic, quantitative, individualistic and, frankly, dull. Moreover, my own personal commitments to what I came to know as the politics of disability seemed far, far away from the mainstream realities of much of what was considered to be good psychology. When disabled people were addressed in psychology, this tended to be in terms of abnormality, as objects of cognitive and biopsychological research and intervention. Perhaps inevitably, this led me to leave psychology, to complete a PhD in a sociology department, to then work in departments of sociology and education. Throughout these times I became more and more immersed in critical disability studies and qualitative research. And then, in 2007, I returned to psychology and the department from which I had graduated. Two questions now occupy me: how can critical disability studies colonise psychology? To what extent can qualitative (psychological) research further the development of critical disability studies?

The notion of sitpoint (alluding to the disabled researcher and user of a wheelchair) is borrowed from the feminist disability studies scholar Garland Thomson (2005) who revises the feminist concept of standpoint in order to foreground disability. Recognising one's personal and political commitments – and reflexively accounting for their impact on the implementation of research – is an important element of qualitative research. While positivist researchers may identify such disclosure as evidence of the blatantly biased nature of qualitative research, we may turn the tables here back at positivists and remind ourselves, as Walker (1981: 153) did, that 'to choose to take on an objective, scientific or dispassionate stance is just as much a value position as to choose one's own subjectivity'. Foregrounding one's commitments to qualitative research – and the qualitative research of specific issues of social justice – reminds us that research is often very much more than simply a data gathering exercise: it reflects assumptions, philosophical beliefs and ideological commitments (Rist 1977). Indeed, for Wright Mills (1970), the dominance of positivistic, quantitative research within social science disciplines such as psychology and sociology rendered a condition known as abstracted empiricism: a pronounced tendency to confuse what was being studied with the set of methods that suggested for the study (Wright Mills 1970: 61). The dominance of science meant that social phenomena were only ever studied 'within the curiously self-imposed limitations of an arbitrary epistemology' (p. 65): namely positivism. For Jung (2002: 182) disability and feminist studies agree that objectivist and scientific approaches to knowledge production suppress and silence those who are marginalised or excluded. These silences in the academy are integral to the reproduction of unequal relations of power in the social world.

Inequality as a starting point for qualitative research

In this section we explore a shared assumption: that the social world is in conflict, that there are inequities and that qualitative research provides possibilities of tracing, mapping and challenging moments of discrimination, oppression and inequality.

Feminism and inequality

Inequalities in psychological research (Qin 2004; Lafrance and Stoppard 2006; Moulding 2006; Willig 2008) and indeed by association in our social world are deeply embedded in how knowledge and how men and women are constructed. McAlister and Neill (2007: 169) in their research with young Irish women's perceptions of self found that 'dominant patriarchal ideologies persist, but are more concealed'. These messages, or dominant discourses, impact on women's experience of self in increasingly complex ways. Feminist qualitative research's commitment to explore and recognise these inequalities allows the research to move from rather naive, unexplored, taken for granted discourses to more rigorous socially inclusive research. Inequalities (a contested term in and of itself and one which can depend on what/who is 'defining/experiencing it') and the access to material/political/social opportunities and the power and 'freedom' they afford in terms of education, suffrage, employment, money, sexual 'freedom', etc. were at the heart of initial feminist movements. While some of these areas have opened up for some women, particularly in western contexts, notions of patriarchal privilege (and in this I take wider meanings in terms of white, middle class, able bodied, heterosexual, western, highly educated) still reside and serve dominant social and political structures (Westmarland 2001; Burns and Walker 2005; Watts 2006).

An area in which these 'structures' are particularly highlighted is psychological research on (and meanings of) women's depression. Lafrance and Stoppard (2006) and Ussher (1991, 2010) challenge the medicalisation of women's depression as first accounting for women's higher rates of diagnosed depression than men, as well as the discounting of women's lived experiences. They highlight the social and political context of women's lives, where women experience higher rates of poverty, continued unequal division of household labour and care in the home, higher levels of sexual assault and other abuse as compared to men as being implicit in women's mental health and well-being. By locating women's experience of depression, where single mothers and young 'married' women with children are disproportionately represented (Lafrance and Stoppard 2006; Ussher 2010), within this context they dispute mainstream psychological research's claims that biological, psychological and behavioural differences between men and women account for this discrepancy (Lafrance and Stoppard 2006).

The background of both the researcher and researched is crucial in terms of working with inequalities and recourses to power and 'self definitions'. So feminist qualitative research challenges the notion that we can do research without taking into account the cultural scripts which are imbued with power differentiations and meanings. Karniel-Miller *et al.* (2009) consider the centrality of the research relationship as renegotiating ownership of the research, and endeavouring to end the oppression of particular populations by attempting to 'democratize the relationship' and give voice to people who are or may be already marginalised. Hence, transparency, reciprocity and responsiveness and being able to be open to the challenges and transformative nature of the research process are part of that commitment. Salmon's (2007: 983) research with Aborigine women also discusses the need to democratise research relationships, particularly given the tendency of 'colonial and imperial practices [being reproduced in research] . . . when White scholars develop and undertake research in which Indigenous peoples and their customs, practices, and lived experiences are the sole *objects* of study'.

McAlister and Neill's (2007) research indicates that popular notions of equality are constructed increasingly in discourses of individualisation, where young women are blamed for either not living up to 'idealised womanhood' or derided for being duped. Lafrance and Stoppard (2006) emphasise the power and influence of these dominant messages which locate women's experience of depression in their biology and psychological make-up, despite the lack of conclusive and consistent evidence. Moulding (2006), Watts (2006) and Stephenson (2006) also point out that women's experiences and understanding of self have largely been constructed in opposition/comparison to men's – employing value-laden dualistic reason to make sense of differences.

Thus, gendered (and colonial, able-bodied) constructions of the 'ideal' as autonomous, rational and active serve to problematise women's (and other marginalised groups) experiences as being 'other', or indeed individual pathologies and/or weaknesses (Lafrance and Stoppard 2006; Moulding 2006), rather than subjective agencies.

If equality is defined in terms of choices, then clearly those available to women are within 'the confines of a constructed ideal of "feminine perfection"' (McAlister and Neill 2007: 172). Health-care practice around mental health, depression and eating disorders (two areas in particular where women far outnumber men) is often interested in containing and managing women and their experiences; invalidating and problematising women's subjective agencies which fall outside the idealised normative constructs. Feminist psychological methodologies are, as a result, interested in exploring the shifting category of 'woman' (Watts 2006) by not fixing them into particular essentialised positions but working with the respondents themselves in enabling as full a picture as possible of their experiences to emerge.

Disability and inequality

Disability and inequality are inextricably linked. The word 'disability' hints at something missing. Following Goodley (2011: 1–2), to be disabled evokes a marginalised place in society, culture, economics and politics. It is concentrated in some parts of the globe more than others, caused by armed conflict and violence, malnutrition, rising populations, child labour and poverty. Paradoxically, it is increasingly found to be everywhere, due to the exponential rise in the number of psychiatric, administrative and educational labels over the last few decades. Disability affects us all, transcending class, nation and wealth.

The notion of the TAB – Temporarily Able Bodied – recognises that many people will at some point become disabled (Marks 1999: 18). Most impairments are acquired (97 per cent) rather than congenital (born with) and world estimates suggest a figure of around 500–650 million disabled people, or one in ten of the population, with this expected to rise to around 800 million by the year 2015 (Peters *et al*. 2008). Currently, 150 million of these are children (Grech 2008) and it is estimated that 386 million of the world's working-age population are disabled. Eighty eight per cent live in the world's poorest countries and 90 per cent of those in rural areas (Marks 1999). For example, India has a population of one billion and approximately 70 million are disabled (Ghai 2002). In the USA, 19.3 per cent or 49.7 million of the 'civilian non-institutionalised population of five years or older' are disabled (Quinlan *et al*. 2008). This makes disabled people the largest minority grouping in an already crowded theatre of multiculturalism (Davis 1995). Disabled people are more likely to be victims of rape and violence, less likely to receive legal protection, more likely to be excluded from mass education, under-represented in positions of power and more reliant on state benefits and/or charity (Meekosha 2008). As children they remain under-represented in mainstream schools, work, leisure and communities (McLaughlin *et al*. 2008). As adults, disabled people do not enjoy equitable access to human, economic and social capital resources. If we accept Marx's view that charity is the perfume of the sewers of capitalism, then disabled people are subjected to the bittersweet interventions of charity. Of the nigh on 200 countries in the world only a third have antidiscriminatory disability legislation, and many of these laws are questionable in terms of their legislative potency (UN Department of Public Information 2008).

Structurally, culturally and relationally disabled people continue to face oppression and marginalisation. Critical disability studies respond to the inequities faced by disabled people in contemporary society. Critical disability studies constitute a transdisciplinary space which breaks boundaries between disciplines and creates inroads into disciplines that have historically marginalised disabled people such as medical sociology (Thomas 2007), philosophy (Kristiansen *et al*. 2008) and psychology (Goodley and Lawthom 2005).

Sketching out feminisms and critical disability studies

In this section we introduce these two transdisciplinary spaces as reactions and resistances to dominant theories of gender and disability.

Gender politics

As an opening position, Ramazanoglu's (1992: 208) understanding of 'what one takes by feminist methodology depends in part on which authors one takes as examples' is a useful one. Qualitative research methodologies and critical approaches in particular are always concerned with locating the interpretations and reflexivity of the researcher as being implicated within the purpose, structure and design of research endeavours. Thus, the range and variety within feminist methodologies is reflective of shifting and multiple epistemologies (Stephenson 2006; Watts 2006). Banister *et al.* (1997) write that feminist methodologies are also identified by their purpose, how they engage with phenomenon and research itself, what the hoped for outcomes may be and how these outcomes might be used. Burns and Walker (2005: 66) also consider these commonalities in terms of 'a shared commitment to drawing attention to the deep and irreducible connections between knowledge and power (privilege), and to making problematic gender in society and social institutions in order to develop theories that advance practices of gender justice'.

As already noted, feminist methodologies are informed by a desire to challenge and render visible deeply embedded, taken for granted discourses of inequality, hegemonic 'knowledges' and power. Positivism's assumed position of reason, universality and objective 'truth' is one that feminist methodologies challenge (Stephenson 2006; Watts 2006; Willig 2008), particularly as this knowledge has been constructed on the (white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, western) male as being what Willig (2008) calls the 'protypical human subject'. As Oakley (1974), Stanley and Wise (1993), Ramazanoglu (1992) and Westmarland (2001) all point out, this positioning of knowledge impacts on the how and what research has been done and is being done in ways which negate the need to consider the social/political/economic contexts in which research takes place.

Wilkinson (1998) and Jowett and O'Toole (2006) both write about feminisms in terms of 'disrupting' the power imbalances, challenging them and then seeing where the research goes and what emerges. Salmon (2007: 983) emphasises that 'feminist, antiracist, and anti-colonial [this could equally apply to critical disability, queer theory, etc.] have underscored the need to transform the oppressive relations inherent in standard [psychological] research methods' by disturbing this limited normative approach to research and recognising the relationship between the researcher and researched. Fay (1987: 23, 27) emphasises how feminist methodology 'explains social order or explains social reality, criticises it and empowers people to overthrow it, or in milder forms, helps to understand social reality'. In terms of designing and engaging with qualitative research then, it is not just about what emerges and how realities are constructed between and within the research relationships, but how the process and findings are put into active use (Watts 2006). Thus, a core element to feminist methodologies is validating the knowledge marginalised groups with the view to challenging the status quo and existent power structures.

Burns and Walker (2005) emphasise the challenge of feminist methodologies to what is seen as the silencing/sidelining of women's voices, assigning women passive roles (no agency), with little 'reasoning'. The research with women of McAlister and Neill (2007), Moulding (2006) and Lafrance and Stoppard (2006) highlights how existent patriarchal underpinnings of mental health, idealised womanhood and depression act in ways which serve to limit women's choices within the 'confines of a constructed feminine perfection' (McAlister and Neill 2007: 172). Jowett and O'Toole (2006), McAlister and Neill (2007) and Lafrance and Stoppard's (2006) research is all concerned, in various ways, in engaging with women's voices; while the work of Moulding (2006) filters women's experiences through the lens of practitioners who work 'on' anorexic young women. The research of Lafrance and Stoppard (2006) and McAlister and Neill (2007) worked with their respondents in ways which allowed emergent realities and contradictions to be highlighted and acknowledged. Thus, their work 'revealed' that dominant messages about social, relational and maternal identification and 'the good woman' 'are concealed in visions, messages and text concerning the empowerment of women, the celebration of womanhood, choice, individuality, freedom and a breaking from age-old gender inequalities and assumptions' (McAlister and Neill 2007: 169). Methodologically feminist research can enable this unveiling process, where the contradiction and double binds of increasingly dominant messages of individualisation are seen to work alongside existing structures of inequality in complex ways – ways which reflect some of the wider 'cultural contradictions' around femininity, class, race, sexuality and disability (Moulding 2006; Salmon 2007).

The politics of disability

Critical disability studies emerged as a response to the growing politicisation of disabled people across the globe. With politicisation came conscientisation: a realisation that societies tended to view disability – and treat disabled people – in terms of an individual pathology, a tragedy, a problem of a deficient body or mind. This approach is heavily reliant upon medicalised views of the disabled-person-as-broken. Linton (1998) and Sherry (2006) suggest that this individual discourse creates a number of 'fault lines': disability is cast as an essentialist condition (with organic aetiologies); disabled people are treated as objects rather than authors of their own lives; 'person fixing' rather than 'context changing' interventions are preferred; the power of health and social care professionals becomes ever increasing as they seek to rehabilitate, educate or normalise disabled people. Disabled people are infantilised, constructed as helpless and viewed as asexual and incompetent. Out of this growing awareness that dominant ideas have individualised the problems of disability emerged alternative views of disability that were more social, cultural and structural in orientation (Goodley 2011).

From the 1970s onwards, critical disability studies emerged as a transdisciplinary space for the development of theory, research and practice that responded to the perspectives and ambitions of disabled and cast disability not as a problem intrinsic to individuals with sensory, physical or cognitive impairments, but as a sociocultural and political problem through and through. These ideas did not remain in academia but fed into and were informed by the politicisation of disabled people. This new discourse of critical disability studies gave rise to alternative definitions which recognised the cultural and social responses to people with impairments:

> **IMPAIRMENT**: is the functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment.
> **DISABILITY**: is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers.
>
> (Disabled Peoples' International 1982)

These definitions acknowledge impairment but politicise disability. For Sherry (2007: 10), impairment can be understood as a form of biological, cognitive, sensory or psychological difference that is defined often within a medical context. Disability, however, is the negative social reaction to those differences associated with impairment. Thomas (2007: 73) extends this analysis further in her definition of *disablism* as 'a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well being'. Disablism therefore sits alongside other forms of oppression including hetero/sexism and racism. Critical disability studies theory and research aim to expose the conditions of disablism as they work at the level of psyche, culture and society (Goodley 2011: xii–xiii).

A key question for qualitative research is focus: does disability studies research focus on understanding disabling society or the meaning of impairment (Goodley and Lawthom 2005)? While both are important questions to ask, critical disability studies is mindful of the fact that much disability-related research has tended to be impairment obsessed: individualising the problems of disability in terms of pathological, individualised and deficient understandings of the disabled body and mind. Indeed, qualitative research in the field of medical sociology and health psychology, for example, has been criticised for attending too often to the embodied experience of living with particular impairments rather than casting the net wider to qualitatively analyse the conditions of disablism (see, for example, Thomas 2007). That said, critical disability studies encompass a multitude of research questions and qualitative studies that, in their broadest sense, aim to understand the meaning of impairment and disablism.

The 'ologies': epistemology, ontology and methodology

We now consider the ways in which these key concepts of qualitative research can be understood from our two positions. In particular we will consider the ways in which feminisms and critical disability studies offer new epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies to dominant ones associated with essentialism, medicalisation, individualism, psychologisation and functionalism.

Feminist theories

Reflexivity, situational knowledge and an ongoing dynamic critique of how knowledge is constructed, and who does the 'constructing', weaves throughout much of what is positioned as feminist epistemologies. May (2003) explores critical research theory's interest as to how our common-sense meanings have been constructed, what process takes place and how these meanings are operated upon by political, social and economic powers within society. 'All knowledge is produced in someone's interest so all knowledge is generated from positions of power/powerlessness' (Skeggs 1997: 50). Thus, it challenges positivism's position that 'facts' exist separate from the ideologies, beliefs and invested self-interests of dominant groups (Gray 2004).

O'Leary (2004) also emphasises this critical epistemological position, noting that we are all part of this socialisation, that we are all products of this process and these discourses influence and inform how we position ourselves within research, how we position our respondents and what we consider 'relevant and meaningful'. 'All knowledge, including women's knowledge, is . . . partial and situated' (Burns and Walker 2005: 68). According to Travers (2001) and Ramazanoglu with Holland (2003) the role of the feminist researcher is to engage with these contested issues, recognising their own part within this. Jowett and O'Toole's (2006) research explores this when they acknowledge, in the process of their own research, how their [privileged] assumptions materialised in ways which were implicated within their choices of methodology as well as how they engaged. The flexibility and responsiveness of their designs not only allowed this to emerge, but meant that these new insights could then be responded to by working in ways which recognised the subjective agencies of their respondents in ways they had not anticipated.

Qualitative feminist research requires a rigorous critical positioning of self 'within' the research rather than 'with out' it. So the place of the researcher is central to how the research proceeds on all levels. Travers (2001: 138) goes on to say that it is not just about producing 'emancipatory knowledge' for others but also 'to demonstrate that [she] has come to view [her] own life differently through conducting empirical research'. Thus for feminist methodologies we are co-creators, co-'responders', co-meaning makers with the people with whom we research. Epistemologically it also works with some of the contested notions that the individual is a 'relatively autonomous, self-contained and distinctive entity, who is affected by external variables like "socialisation" and "social context" but is in some sense separate from these "influences"' (Kitzinger 1992: 229). The challenge for feminist and indeed all critical researchers working within postmodernist discourses is to find ways of working with 'difference and complexity while not losing sight of the bigger issues around women's (and some men's) oppression' (Burns and Walker 2005: 68). McAlister and Neill's (2007) research with young women is particularly revealing of this ongoing epistemological challenge to both individualisation and essentialism. By highlighting women's accounting of their relationships to and with their bodies, they draw attention to how the young women pathologise and 'other' experiences of body dissatisfaction and objectification. The larger contradictory cultural and structural processes and messages are thereby lost in discourses of individual responsibility and choice.

Watts (2006) and Stephenson (2006) also consider how feminist methodologies provide opportunities for exposing particular subtle dominant messages which are still informed by phallocentric ideals of autonomy and responsibility – situating the individual in charge of their lives and eliding processes of individualisation and 'the personal' into depoliticised concepts of 'freedom'.

Theories of disability

One way of pitching an analysis of theory – or the epistemological, ontological and methodological approaches of theory – is to drawn on the work of Burrell and Morgan (1979). Clough and Nutbrown (2002: 30) provide a helpful definition of these terms: an *ontology* is a theory of what exists and how it exists; an *epistemology* is a related theory of how we can come to know these things; *methodology* is the approach to how we investigates these things. Burrell and Morgan (1979) consider these components of theory through the mapping out of distinct theoretical positions across two overlapping axes (Figure 3.1).

The horizontal axis of subjectivity and objectivity is underpinned by distinct assumptions. Epistemologically, an objectivist approach would be closely related to a positivist approach (an objective deductive engagement with observable real things), while a subjectivist approach is associated with an anti-positivist perspective (a subjective inductive engagement with the processes of meaning making). In terms of ontology, subjectivists would be characterised as nominalists; focused on the often elusive properties of individuals. Objectivists, in contrast, are realists; focused on the real things that exist independently of the observer in the world. Methodologically, then, it would follow that an objectivist position would be aligned with nomothetic approaches to research (including scientific, quantitative, experimental approaches to research that measure variables), while subjectivists would adopt idiographic methodologies (such as non-scientific, qualitative research that engages with meaning making). In addition, following Burrell and Morgan (1979), each position would view human nature in contrary ways. Objectivists would tend to understand human nature in terms of determinism (human nature is the product of biological or social structures), while subjectivists would be sympathetic to the stance of voluntarism (human nature is the product of individual and relational agency).

The vertical axis of radical change and regulation reflects what Burrell and Morgan (1979) define as the concerns of theory. Regulation theorists adopt a consensual view of the social world and are interested in notions of status quo, social order, consensus, social integration, solidarity and need satisfaction. Conflict theorists adopt a different view of society and culture and are interested in notions of radical change, structural conflict, modes of domination, contradiction and deprivation.

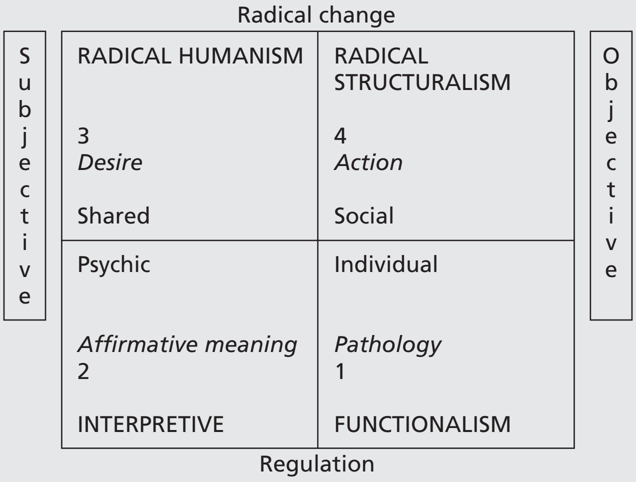

Figure 3.1 Burrell and Morgan's (1979) mapping theory

Placed against one another, these two axes allow us to locate particular approaches to the study of social and psychological factors. Critical disability studies has undergone some major theoretical shifts from a view of disability as the product of an individual's mental functioning and behaviour (functionalism) to an engagement with the structures and institutions of society that disable (radical structuralism). Along the way, researchers have illuminated the primacy of experiences of disabled people to an understanding of the social world (interpretivism), while others have contested ideologies of disablism (radical humanism). To exemplify this further, following Goodley (2011: 51–2), a *functionalist* view of the world sees society as regulated and ordered, promotes objective measures of (dys)functional mental states and behaviours and, inevitably, views disabled people as adherents of a 'sick role' (Barnes 1998). From this worldview, disabled people have inherited pathological conditions that can be objectively diagnosed, treated and in some cases ameliorated. A functionalist position assumes that disability has a biological, social and experiential component (Wendell 1996: 23).

An *interpretivist* stance understands the social world as an emergent social process, created by individuals and their shared subjective understandings (Goodley 2011: 52). Disabling or enabling identities and attitudes are made by and between voluntaristic individuals in a coherent and regulated world. An interpretivist position is adopted by Ferguson *et al.* (1992) who draw on qualitative research with disabled and non-disabled people to explicate the ways in which, for example, the attitudes of non-disabled people threaten to stifle the participation of disabled children in school settings.

Radical humanism situates knowledge production in the elusive shared subjective creation of dominant disability discourses, hegemonies and social meaning-making processes of wider society (Goodley 2011: 52). Langness and Levine (1986) demonstrate that the entire concept of mental retardation is bound up with capitalist and modern ideologies that mark some people as productive, contributory citizens and others as passive dependents.

Radical structuralism sees the social world as constantly in conflict, where economic and political structures can be objectively observed and in which certain social groupings are always at risk of alienation, oppression and false consciousness (Goodley 2011: 52). For example, Finkelstein (1981) argues that while early capitalism (phase 1) offered some inclusion in the community through disabled people's involvement in small-scale cottage industries, the rapid growth of manufacturing and machinery supplanted their contribution to a growing labour force. Phase 2 saw manufacturing industries such as coal and steel expanding. Mass migration from rural to urban areas increased exponentially. Industrialisation deskilled and impoverished disabled people who had previously worked in agrarian communities. Many disabled people, deemed incapable of offering labour quickly joined the unemployed in the cities. Industrialisation demanded fit workers. Factories exposed uncompetitive workers. Institutionalisation provided a means of controlling non-viable workers and, in contrast, developed new forms of labour for those working in them. Phase 3, late capitalism, offers more opportunities for consumer groups and disabled people's organisations to challenge their exclusion from mainstream life.

Politics of embattlement

The peripheral location of feminisms and critical disability studies in relation to more mainstream (psychological) uses of qualitative research situates them as, potentially, transformative spaces. We will consider this peripheral location as a limitation (exclusion) and as a place of possibility (offering deconstruction).

Feminist encounters

'Psychology does politics when it tests the current normative constraints of the personal realm' (Stephenson 2006: 82). Qualitative research facilitates the exploration and emergence of these normative processes, not just giving space to the voices of marginalised groups but noting the impact of these processes on our understandings and experiences. The researcher's role within these approaches is to explore and investigate, to extend the reaches of knowledge construction, to be able to challenge and work with their own perspectives and impacts, the choices they make and the language they chose. Jarviluoma *et al.* (2003) question the limitations of mainstream research in terms of its non-acknowledgement of differential power and cultural constructions, while McAlister and Neill (2007) and Lafrance and Stoppard (2006) highlight how constructions of femininity and masculinity are contained within particular discourses which serve to constrain women [and men] in particular ways.

O'Leary (2004: 45) considers that the engagement with these ongoing structures enables far more rigorous research as 'being aware of your own social status and the social status of the researched puts you in a position to manage any potential power related issue that might influence your research'. This ethical commitment to non-exploitative research (Neilson 1990; Travers 2001; Letherby 2003; Salmon 2007) is about not simply *using* our respondents as a resource for our knowledge construction, *using* their experiences and perspectives as a way of, to put it bluntly, increasing our *own* academic portfolios, developing our *own* theories, improving our *own* status and so on – it goes to the fundamental ethical principles of shared emancipatory knowledge and action. De Laine (2000: 110) explains it well when she claims that for qualitative feminist researchers 'a key to ethically and morally responsible fieldwork resides with participating more fully in social relations' and endeavouring not to replicate the unequal power relations existing in social and political structures. Thus critical qualitative research can be designed to open up and disrupt these implicit, and explicit, power relations (Jowett and O'Toole 2006; Lafrance and Stoppard 2006). Respondents are located as the 'experts' (Oakley 1981; Stanley and Wise 1993) of their own lives and 'allowed' to name their priorities and represent their subjective agencies, a process which can help redress some of the power imbalances. Perhaps at the core of qualitative critical researchers practice is this working with subjective agencies. The 'freedom' of individual voices and groups to experience, practise and engage with power is informed by 'the freedom to position oneself in discourse [being] contingent upon access to power' (Parker 1992: 795).

Within this more recent debate is the acknowledgement of the complexities and intersectionalities of particular positions, which requires feminist researchers to work across and within these multiple constructions without losing sight of the political and power dimensions of oppressive structures (Westmarland 2001; Watts 2006). 'The contested and shifting identity of this category (i.e. women as a category, being highly fragmented and amidst the cultural, racial, social and political plurality) gives insight into the tensions inherent in the choice of 'appropriate methodology' (Watts 2006: 386). Personal is indeed political, and as Stephenson (2006) and Watts (2006) discuss, the danger with deconstruction is that feminist researchers become complicit in the 'depoliticisation of the personal . . . feminist attempts to realize the political dimensions of the personal realm can produce unwanted effects – subjective experiences being continuously retied to neoliberal individualization' (Stephenson 2006: 79). The balance between deconstruction and contextualisation is a challenging one, and one which McAlister and Neill's (2007: 175) research rendered very clear when they found that the messages which young women were receiving and engaging with were ones of 'freedom, choice, power and individualism – yet within clear constraints – and the dominance of these messages means that larger structures of inequality and reproduction of gender messages are less obvious'.

The deconstruction of disability

While critical disability studies has developed theoretical weight to the growing politicisation of disabled people, the peripheral place of disabled people in mainstream life ensures that when they do enter the research context and academy then this can be met with resistance. As Shildrick and Price (1999) suggest, the disabled or devalued body is capable of generating deep ontological anxieties on the part of the non-disabled majority. Coming out as a disabled researcher presents possible dilemmas: 'to identify as blind is to invite and perhaps amplify the objectifying look of sighted researchers' (Mintz 2002: 163). Qualitative research is not immune to disabling discourses that circulate in wider society. This is particularly the case in psychology – which has contributed to dominant functionalist understandings of disability and impairment. As Henriques *et al.* (1984: 1) contend, psychology does not simply describe individuals, it regulates, classifies, administers and constitutes the subjectivities as well as the objects of psychological science. The objects of disability, then, are often understood in terms of pathology, deficit and lack. The associated subjectivities – what it must mean to be disabled – are understood in similarly deficient ways. Critical disability studies therefore intervenes at a point of conflict: challenging dominant epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies typically associated with the psychopathology of disability.

A classic example of such an intervention is provided by Bogdan and Taylor (1976, 1982). Their earlier paper, published in the *American Psychologist*, and the book written thereafter, reveal the embattled nature of two debates; the conceptualisation of disability and the merits of qualitative research. In their work they present the story of a man named Ed Murphy who has been given the label of mental retardation. Drawing on a number of in-depth interviews with Ed, the story, which is told in the first person, retraces his experiences of diagnosis and institutionalisation and its impact on his sense of self and the perspectives of family members. This powerful narrative served to demonstrate the subjective richness of a qualitative methodology and a very different view of disability afforded through an interpretivist epistemology to a psychological community that was still very much preoccupied with the arbitrary epistemology of positivism, the methodology of experimentation and quantitative analysis and a stance of functionalism in relation to disability. Retrospectively, we can read Ed's story as enacting a form of what Henriques *et al.* (1984: 2) describe as deconstruction: challenging and teasing apart 'taken-for-granted, common-sense' understandings of, specifically, mental retardation:

> The word 'retarded' is a word. What it does is put people into a class. I like mental handicap better than mental retarded. The other word sounds nicer . . . my day's gonna come through . . . I'm gonna tell them the truth. They know the truth. All this petty nonsense.
>
> (Ed Murphy, Bogdan and Taylor 1982: 77)

Following Henriques *et al.* (1982: 2), Bogdan and Taylor intervene in a process of prising apart the meanings and assumptions that are fused together in the ways that people use to understand themselves, to reveal these meanings and assumptions not as timeless and inconvertible facts but historically specific products.

Subjectivities

We now consider how subjectivity can be considered as the resource for qualitative research – with a specific focus on voice, ownership, participation and emancipation in research.

Doing feminist qualitative research

It is hopefully fairly clear by now that critical qualitative research works with and acknowledges the important role that positional subjectivities have in the 'doing' of research. The trans-disciplinariness of subjectivities, ours and our respondents, is seen as a great source of richness and rigour. Indeed Stanley and Wise (1993) see this as a crucial aspect to the research process, allowing the knowledge that is produced from the researcher's position to be less distorted, more transparent and more thorough than when diverse subjectivities are not acknowledged or worked with. It is important, however, not to fall into a practice of fixing these subjectivities and/or categories into essentialised constructs. Notions of subjectivity are, therefore in a constant flux, being both unstable and often opaque (Stephenson 2006) and can be paradoxical, conflicted and in constant disharmony. Burns and Walker (2005), Watts (2006) and O'Leary (2004) consider this ongoing process as being one of reconstructing/deconstructing dualism, essentialism and individualism. For O'Leary (2004) in particular, the role of subjectivity in feminist qualitative research is fragmentary, revealing and enlightening for both the researcher and researched, while Salmon (2007) highlights the importance of reciprocity and mutuality when engaging with multiple subjectivities in research.

A key to feminist research is this ongoing acknowledgement and openness to the impact and influence of our own value-laden subjectivites, challenging the notion that we are separate from what we produce, how we research, how we interact, how we interpret and understand our research field:

> We can speak ourselves into different ways of being, but only within the parameters of the discursive resources, or sets of meaning available within a cultural context. . . . Individuals draw on discourses to account for themselves and their experiences while, at the same time 'discourses contain a range of subject positions which in turn facilitate and/or constrain certain experiences and practices.
>
> (Lafrance and Stoppard 2006: 310)

Within this debate is the challenge to dualistic notions of subjectivity and objectivity and the values that are attached to each – so instead of deriding, disavowing, or denying subjectivities it would be far more 'logical' (Ramazanaglu with Holland 2003) to work with them, acknowledge them, be open to them and recognise their impacts in order to produce/engage with rigorous ongoing research. More specifically O'Leary (2004: 44) sees the richness of working with our own and our respondents' subjectivities:

> People will likely respond to you as a 'gendered' ['disabled', 'racial', 'heterosexual', etc.] individual and, without even realizing it, you will most likely respond as a 'gendered' self . . . the power of our sexuality is often underplayed and unseen. Yet, the rapport and trust you will build with respondents, the slant on stories you will hear, and the memories you will extract can be very dependent on gender.

Doing disability research

Subjectivity is viewed as a resource in qualitative research (Banister *et al*. 1997). Researchers and participants bring to the research encounter their subjectivities: their preoccupations, ambitions, perspectives, stories, reflections and implicit as well as explicit theories. Researchers and participants are the key research tools of qualitative research (Taylor and Bogdan 1984: 77). Critical disability studies approaches to qualitative research have raised some interesting questions about the power of the researcher and participant and the modes of research productions that operate. From this we can ask: whose subjectivities shape qualitative research? In reviewing critical disability studies research papers Goodley and Lawthom (2005) identify a number of key questions:

- *Inclusion* – to what extent does research include disabled people?
- *Accountability* – who are disability studies researchers accountable to?
- *Praxis* – does disability research make a positive difference in the lives of disabled people?
- *Ontology* – whose knowledge and experiences count?
- *Partisanship* – whose side is the disability researcher on?
- *Analytical levels* – does research investigate politics, culture, society, relationships or the individual?

Appropriating and adapting Goodley (2011: 24), Figure 3.2 is presented to capture different approaches to research. The left-hand side of Figure 3.2 captures an approach to research which tends to dominate most approaches to qualitative research from undergraduate to funded research projects. Here the subjectivity of the researcher is central: she develops the research ideas, the research questions, makes decisions about the methodology, method and analysis and takes the lead in the writing up of the findings. Langness and Levine (1986) exemplify this approach: an edited collection of texts which draw on qualitative data (including ethnography, interviews, documentary analysis) to develop the argument that intellectual disabilities is a creation of social and cultural practices.

The middle approach, represented in Figure 3.2, places more onus on the subjectivities of researcher and participants. Here qualitative research involves researcher and participants working together in collaboration through the various stages of identifying research questions, carrying out the qualitative work and sharing the analyses. Doherty *et al.*'s (1995) research captures this mode of production well: where researchers with and without the label of intellectual disabilities explore the use of qualitative methodologies. They conclude that researchers must seriously reconsider how they approach research; to move away from a reliance on researcher-led research (which benefits the researcher only) to an inclusive approach to research (which also promotes the expertise of disabled researchers with intellectual disabilities).

Knowledge	**Shared knowledge**	**Action research**
e.g. An academic analyses the constitution of normalcy (Langness and Levine 1986)	e.g. Researchers work with a self-advocacy group to develop inclusive research practices (Docherty *et al*. 2005)	e.g. Disabled people's organisations work with researchers to measure and eradicate disablism (Arthur and Zarb 1995)
Non-participatory	**Participatory**	**Emancipatory**
Researcher-led	Researcher invites participants into research	Co-researchers

Figure 3.2 Research as participatory and emancipatory

Disability studies research can be conceived as a continuum

The third approach taken by Arthur and Zarb (1995) reflects on the 'Measuring Disablement in Society' project which set out to address this problem by providing a systematic empirical analysis of the barriers to disabled people's participation in mainstream community life in 1990s Britain. This research included interviews with key people in relevant local authority departments and local disability organisations (Barnes 1995). The work brought together disabled researchers and disabled people's political organisations to assess qualitatively (and quantitatively) the extent to which people with impairment are disabled by mainstream life and to identify policies, practices and interventions which would reduce this disablement. This is an example of emancipatory disability studies research: where research not only makes sense of the world but proposes changes that eradicate conditions of marginalisation. Clearly, such an approach has much in common with critical theory and Marxist orientations (Giroux 2009) and, indeed, many early examples of critical disability studies research shared this approach (see Barnes and Mercer 1997).

Chapter summary

In this last section we will reflect on each other's approach to consider possible tensions and commonalities between feminisms and critical disability studies.

Following Goodley (2011), disability studies might be seen as *paradigm busting*: subverting the normative tendencies of academic disciplines, testing respected research encounters and challenging theoretical formations. With these conceptions in mind, how would critical disability studies read the feminist orientations outlined in this chapter and vice versa?

First, it is important to recognise tensions. As Reeve (2008: 188) notes, when disabled women express their desire for activities such as motherhood, being a housewife, cleaning the house – which are often denied to them – then this might jar with some feminist work that has historically aimed to support women's exit from domestic feminised settings. Feminism and disability will, at times, disconnect.

Second, we acknowledge that the hugely different styles in writing, the language we use, the concepts we draw on to make sense of our approaches are reflective of our positionalities and the resources we have available to us:

> The researcher's personality, world view, ethnic and social background, perceptions derived from the researcher's professional discipline, the qualitative paradigm, the theoretical base of the research, the type of the research and its goals, the research methodology, and the researcher's own perception of the place and role of the subject/participant/collaborator/coresearcher.
>
> (Karniel-Miller *et al.* 2009: 280)

These are all interwoven within our engagements with this project, with one another and as part of an ongoing process of the writing up and exchange of ideas.

Third, these differences in our approaches provide a rich source for ongoing reflection and reflexivity. The transformative nature of engaging with feminist/critical disability qualitative research (Stephenson 2006) is indicative of the responsive and ongoing debates around critical theory and qualitative research. It is perhaps only through acknowledging diverse positions that we begin to fully recognise the wide reach of qualitative research in and outside of psychology.

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