

Troubling descriptive research methods: A Black feminist interpretivist approach
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Abstract

A central aim of descriptive research is to systematically provide an account or portrayal of a particular area of interest in our social world. This may look like a rich description of an event(s), the organization of an institution, social conditions, or even a population. Irrespective of the site of interest, the methodological goal of the research is to provide an accurate account description and to expand the horizons of intellectual engagement of such sites and explore the politics related to their production. It is the issue of accuracy that I seek to trouble in this paper with particular attention given to the contributions of Black Feminist insights on the subject matter.

Good descriptive research is vital to understanding the social world. However, the research designs and the social scientific practices we employ to describe what we observe as social scientists in our field is not separate from the ontological and epistemological ways in which the social world is framed by hegemonic sites of power, and thus, our methodological enterprises are grounded in materialist orientation and historical contexts that give rise to them. It has been well documented that this often looks like the absence of the historical and social materiality of formerly enslaved and colonized peoples in methodological discourse. This underscores some of the divisiveness in academic debates about methodological politics, and how different social scientists think about knowledge production which ultimately reflects the methods they employ. Put simply, the design of research is influenced by the available knowledge and the specific ways the researcher understands the social ordering of the world that is grounded in a history of racial domination and coloniality.

This article considers how situating a Black feminist interpretivist approach at the forefront of methodological discourse offers a different set of insights into our social and political world than traditional political science methodologies. In doing so, I invite descriptive research scholars to consider processes of colonialism, enslavement, racialization, gendering, sexualization, and class in their research processes.

Introduction:

“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”

Audre Lorde (1979/1984a)

Conventional research paradigms are steeped in violence. What this means is that research methods are not neutral, but rather, are inherently infused with power. Therefore, they play a mutually enabling relationship with the hegemonic theories and material conditions that presuppose our respective disciplines. Knowledge production in the Western academy according to decolonial scholar Linda Smith (2012), for instance, are a means through which imperialism manifests and realizes itself in its co-constitution of the colonizing European self as a thinking and knowing subject, through the construction of the colonized Other as its preferred site of intellectual curiosity, academic vocation, and colonial discovery. Elsewhere, one of the central critiques of the academy, as a site of knowledge production, identified by post-colonial and decolonial scholars is how it continues the institutionalization of colonial discourses (Mohanty 1988; Crenshaw 1991; Agathangelou and Ling 2009; Mann 2013; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Collins 2015; Treva 2015). Scholars of this tradition are drawing attention to how the production of research in the academy remains instrumental in validating particular epistemological formations that authorize specific identities as agents of knowledge, promote a distinct form of ethnic and/or racial hierarchy, and reproduce racialized and gender forms of domination.

In response, post-colonial, decolonial and Black feminist scholars have denounced the dominance of white, Western, cisgender male, middle-class, and heterosexual ways of knowing as normative, and pointed out how it results in the evacuation of the voices of disenfranchised identities, primarily in the Global south and dispossessed communities in the Global north. Within the discipline of political science, for instance, some researchers engage with processes like colonization, enslavement, and race making as an abstract idea or a set of historical data points rather than a living legacy which continues to shape the social and material conditions of formerly colonized and enslaved peoples. The culminating effect for political science scholarship has been a reinforcement of an imperialist, white supremacist, patriarchal capitalist reading of politics (Mohanty 1988; Spivak 2010; hooks 1981, 1984).

My central thesis is this: Research methods are not detached from the ways in which scholars are trained to see, understand and make sense of the world. As scholars many of the ways in which we are conditioned to think about the social world valorize a Western Eurocentric ontological perspective that prioritizes individualism, rationality, and secularism; ignores the foundational roots of structural and interlocking inequalities; and, frames formerly enslaved and colonized people primarily through the lens of a pathological other. This ontological making, consequently, raises vitally important questions, that is how to enable epistemic ways of thinking that will create new anti-colonial possibilities for our research methods? How may we create research methods that do not exclude, pathologize or assimilate the imaginary Other, in political science scholarship?

As I have noted elsewhere, the research process is not race or gender neutral; who we are and the landscape of our subjectivities inform how and what we interpret as relevant to the social world (Thomas 2018; Thomas 2019). Our relationships (personal, interpersonal, and to our scholarship) are forged, shaped, and sustained by the lived experiences we encounter *vis-à-vis* the experiential embodiment produced through the processes of racialization, gendering, sexualization, and classification. As researchers, we are instruments in the research process (Pezalla, Pettigrew, and Miller-Day 2012) and our subjectivities thus influence the scholarship we explore as well as how we conduct research. As a result, the narratives we bring forth in our scholarship, those we omit, and the manner in which we present those narratives are not determined by happenstance.

What does a Black feminist interpretivist approach bring to the table?

The productive inclusion of a Black feminist interpretivist approach as a methodological tool allows for consideration of how our relationships (personal, interpersonal, and to our scholarship) are forged, shaped, and sustained by the lived experiences we encounter *vis-à-vis* the experiential embodiment produced through racialization, gendering, sexualization, and other forms of identity classification (Thomas 2021, forthcoming). A Black feminist interpretivist approach draws from the rich tradition of Black feminist epistemologies and methodologies that are based on the concrete understanding that the individual is embedded within a system of relations, and that social identities (and their adjacent processes) such as race, gender class,

sexuality and ability are interrelated at the individual level, interpersonal level, as well as the level of social structure (Davis 1981; Crenshaw 1991; Winker and Degele 2011; Nash 2019).

As an epistemic framework, a Black feminist interpretivist approach necessitates that all of our research projects be read through the lens of the historical legacies of coloniality and its socio-political renderings, which frames so much of the material element of social and political life. For instance it is coloniality that created the material conditions for us (as researchers) to study the Other. We can see this in a couple of ways: One, by constructing the intellectual via social and racial capital and thereby granting them the legitimacy to establish what constitutes the subject and object of empirical study. Two, the dominant epistemic frameworks that we have taken up (in conscious and unconscious ways), as we move through the social world, are deeply shaped by the material conditions produced through coloniality.

What I seek to contribute, as a methodological practice, is a Black feminist interpretivist approach that allows for a ‘talking back’ (hooks 1989), a response, to these dominant epistemic frameworks which insinuate themselves into all of our disciplinary traditions by encouraging the researcher to recognize and understand how the researcher’s own self— cognitive, emotional, bodily, and spiritual positioning— influences their perspectives in the development and implementation of their research. As well as situates the social phenomena we seek to describe in our research agendas within the historical, social, cultural, and material context of coloniality, racial and ethnic hierarchies, racial capitalism, and so forth. At its epistemic core, a Black feminist interpretivist approach sees processes of racialization, gendering, sexuality, class, and other classifications as technologies that are central in shaping all aspects of our political and social public/private life, from the experiential level of the individual to our interactions with social structures (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 1990; James 1996; Brand 2002; Hartman 2008).

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