

Applying intersectionality as a method

A critical analysis of how to apply feminist and intersectional methodologies in qualitative research

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Abstract

This thesis aims to answer the question of what it means to conduct feminist and intersectional qualitative research and how to do so. My experiences during my internship at FNV Vrouw and the difficulties I encountered there provided me with the opportunity to point out the challenges that this type of research poses. In this thesis, I argue that the blockages I experienced are all linked to what I describe as the *friction of feminist objectivity*. How can one do justice to the voices of a group without speaking for them? And how can one generalise the claims emerging from the group while also doing justice to the particular? These questions are linked to a core question for feminist researchers: How do I account for my role as a researcher? In this thesis I address these questions and I argue that conducting feminist and intersectional qualitative research is a challenge that can be undertaken if the researcher pays enough attention to ensuring to be accountable for their research and the knowledge that is produced, through extensive reflections on all parts of the research process.

Key words: Feminist epistemologies, intersectionality, qualitative research methods

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INTRODUCTION

The position of women on the Dutch labour market received much attention in 2017. The ‘Global Gender Gap Report 2017’ showed that the position of the Netherlands regarding gender equality has gone down 16 places, reaching place 32 (World Economic Forum, 2017). The news was all over the Dutch newspapers. How was this possible? The decrease in gender equality is astonishing because when it comes to education, the Netherlands appears to be the most equal country in the world (Bruinsma & van Dongen, 2017; Atria, 2017). Men and women perform equally well on the educational front. Yet they do not get paid the same on the labour market, as men earn an average of 16 per cent more wage than women do for the same work. Another example of gender inequality on the labour market is the fact that the number of women in positions of power in the economy and politics has gone down (Bruinsma & van Dongen, 2017; Atria, 2017).

I further investigated gender inequality on the Dutch labour market during my internship at FNV Vrouw. FNV is the largest trade union in the Netherlands. One of its departments is FNV Vrouw (‘Woman’), which was founded in 1948. This is an independent union (‘zelfstandige bond’) within the FNV Federation by and for women, which aims to create a society with absolute gender equality and equal gender treatment in practice (FNV Vrouw, n.d.). During the internship, I conducted dialogue tables with different groups of women throughout the Netherlands to find out what they think needs to change in order for the labour market to become ‘woman proof’. For FNV Vrouw, the term ‘woman proof’ indicates a labour market in which women are not discriminated against based on their gender.

I approached the answers the women gave through an intersectional lens. This term has its origins in Black Feminism (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1982; Lorde, 2007). While the field of intersectional feminist scholarship has grown exponentially during the past thirty years and has produced a variety of positions and arguments, two central claims lie at its core from the very beginning. First, there are specific forms of oppression experienced by Black women and women of colour. Second, it is impossible to see this specificity because of the single-axis frameworks that are used by courts in legal contexts, as single-axis frameworks treat gender and race as mutually exclusive (Crenshaw, 1989). I realise that there are more forms of intersectionality than only the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity, but this is the

intersection I focus on. The term intersectionality pays attention to these layered forms of oppression.

Including intersectionality in this research has both a theoretical and political purpose, mainly for feminist and anti-racist scholars. Most importantly, it underlines the necessity for theorising (labour) discrimination in a more complex way than in binaries of gender, race, ethnicity, and other key axes of identity (Nash, 2008). Approaching my work at FNV Vrouw through an intersectional lens was not easy because the project was already set up. On the one hand, in terms of content, the project risked reproducing precisely the single-axis framework that intersectionality questions. On this front, I managed to include an intersectional component. On the other hand, the method chosen by FNV Vrouw to collect the data was already decided. I chose to devote this thesis to the challenges I encountered on this methodological front.

At FNV Vrouw, I discovered the methodological difficulty of turning feminist and intersectional theory into qualitative research methodologies, thus putting the theory into practice. During the internship, I did not have the full freedom to conduct the research in the feminist and intersectional way I wanted. I worked with the research plan that FNV Vrouw had already created, and adapted it where I thought this was necessary and possible. It was predetermined that the collection of rich qualitative data was to be done through dialogue tables and the analysis of the transcripts using content analysis. Measuring intersectionality turned out not to be a simple task. I also discovered difficulties with conducting qualitative feminist research, such as accounting for my role as a researcher. I wish to further explore the methodological issues I encountered during my internship research in this thesis. My goal is to develop a better understanding of what it means to conduct feminist and intersectional research. Many of the papers I have read during the master Gender Studies have been of philosophical nature, and have left me wondering how to put these theories into practice. These reflections on the methodological problems I encountered function as a guide for other academics struggling with similar issues.

So my main question is: How to turn feminist and intersectional theory into a methodology applicable to qualitative data? Is this even possible, or how can one come closest to this goal? How best to tackle the methodological problems I encountered during my internship? In this thesis, I approach these questions by conducting literature research and by analysing the research process I went through

during my internship in collaboration with FNV Vrouw. The goal is to explore possible solutions to the problems I encountered, and at the same time make an intervention in broader debates on feminist and intersectional research practices.

This thesis is mostly a theoretical thesis focussed on methodologies and methods.¹ Chapter one deals with questions that concern how to conduct feminist research. The main concern here is: What is my role as a researcher within a research process? I discuss feminist epistemologies to explore what it means to conduct feminist research. I show the importance of reflecting on your role as a researcher within the research, and on the way you represent your findings. Chapter two deals with the following question: What is intersectional theory and how can it be used as a tool or a research approach for qualitative research? By conducting a literary review of the existing scholarship on intersectionality and its relation to methodologies, I start approaching the main problem that emerged from the internship at FNV Vrouw. This is then more concretely approached in the third chapter. There, I reflect on the research process itself in order to foreground questions of methodology. My experiences, logs, and notes during the research process of my internship guide me to the main issues. I evaluate this process to find possible solutions to the blockages in conducting feminist and intersectional research. In the conclusion, I provide suggestions on how to conduct intersectional feminist qualitative research.

Taken together, this thesis tries to answer the question of what it means to conduct feminist and intersectional qualitative research and how to do so. My experiences during my internship and the difficulties I encountered have provided me with the opportunity to point out the challenges that this type of research poses. My literature research, combined with critical reflections on my own research process, lead to possible solutions to these challenges. I will not offer final answers; rather, I aim to add to on-going debates about feminism, intersectionality, and research methodologies.

¹ A methodology is the study of how research is conducted. A method is a specific tool used to conduct research. Methodology is thus the theory behind a method.

CHAPTER ONE. FEMINIST RESEARCH

During the master Gender Studies, I have been introduced to a feminist way of thinking and conducting research. But what exactly does this mean? Of course there are many different strands within feminism, so there is not one right answer. In this first chapter, I discuss the history and general characteristics of feminist research.

Although there is much debate on the exact history of feminism, a commonly used division suggests that feminism went through three waves.² The first wave of feminism took place between the 1850s and 1920s, and was strongest in the United States and the United Kingdom. This wave mainly consisted of suffrage movements and thus focussed on political rights. Once women gained voting rights, they expanded their demands to sexual, reproductive, and economic matters. The second wave took place between the 1960s and the 1980s. During this wave, feminists extended their fight and focussed on legal and social rights concerning workplace, family, and again sexuality and reproductive rights. The field of Gender Studies has its origins in this wave because women started to criticise the way knowledge was produced in academia, which often made women invisible (Simić, 2011). The third feminist wave started in the 1990s and follows up to the present. This wave continues the work that previous feminists have started, while remaining critical of feminist work done so far.

Even though there are different feminist waves, and even though there is not one epistemology or methodology that is always used in feminist research but rather a range of possibilities (Hesse-Bieber, 2011; Narayan, 2003; Smiet, 2017), there are certain characteristics that are applicable to all feminist research. As Hesse-Bieber (2011) puts it, “all [feminist research] recognize[s] the importance of women’s lived experiences to the goal of unearthing subjugated knowledge” (p. 3). Subjugated knowledge is knowledge that has been left out of dominant discourse. Whose voice is not heard or not represented? This is the kind of knowledge that feminist research is most concerned with (Hesse-Bieber, 2011; Narayan, 2003). Feminist knowledge aims to challenge knowledge that excludes. It is conscious of power structures and hierarchies within these power structures. Feminism aims to alter existing structures of oppression.

² I base my summary of the feminist waves on the research and comparison of different sources (Pinterics, 2001; Van der Tuin, 2010; De Vries, 2006).

One of the main structures of power that feminism is aware of is patriarchy. Patriarchy leads to androcentric bias and sexism in knowledge production. Androcentrism assumes that the man is at the centre of all knowledge, and excludes all other perspectives (Hesse-Bieber, 2011). Feminism embarks on projects to correct this bias by including all genders in knowledge, while making sure not to generalise the situation of a group. Other factors such as race, class, sexual orientation, and cultural context also play a role. It is a task for feminists to try to be as inclusive as possible.

In the next chapter, I discuss the theory of intersectionality, which foregrounds the relations between these different factors and aims to make feminism a more inclusive theory and practice. In this chapter, instead, I address epistemological and methodological questions: What kind of knowledge does feminism produce in order to combat androcentric biases and sexism? Who can produce such knowledge?

Feminist epistemologies

Positivism is the most common epistemological paradigm in the social sciences. This paradigm is founded on the belief that the truth is out there and it can be derived objectively via scientific methods (Aliyu, Bello, Kasim & Martin, 2014; Hesse-Bieber, 2011). This is what I have been taught during my two bachelors in Sociology and Economics at Utrecht University. Only now, during my master Gender Studies, have I become very aware that this is not the only possible way to conduct research and to produce knowledge. Since the beginning of the existence of feminist epistemologies, feminist scholars have responded to positivism by noting that no knowledge production can be fully objective (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). Scientific knowledge is not observed or found, but it is made (Harding, 1988; Smiet, 2017; Sprague & Kobryniewicz, 1999). This means that no claim can be made to a universal truth. Positivism is criticised for not acknowledging this. Two feminists that have offered key contributions to this debate are Haraway (1988) and Harding (1993). Their literature explains the notion of ‘feminist objectivity’. This is a different form of objectivity than the one described in positivism. They recognise that knowledge is a product of a certain context, and yet it is not only applicable within this specific context (Narayan, 2003; Smiet, 2017).

Before turning to the contributions of each of these researchers, I discuss how one – possibly unconsciously – influences their research to show the importance of the matter. England (1994) names two main ways. The first is that personal characteristics of the researcher allow for certain insights. For example, I am a white bisexual woman living in Utrecht. I have grown up in a white environment and this has as a consequence that I am most familiar with my own western and white culture, and have not been very aware in my youth of the problems non-western people experience. This might influence my attitude towards new theories unconsciously, even though consciously I would try to prevent this. Every choice made during the research process is a personal choice and reflects social positionality. The second way is that the experiences and everyday life of the researched is influenced by the presence of the researcher and by their response to the presence of the researcher. For example, does my presence cause the researched to act differently compared to when he or she is around people she knows better? Such subtle dynamics can take place unconsciously, and are reasons why it is important to reflect on your position as a researcher.

Rich (1984) gave the lecture “Notes toward a Politics of Location” to pay attention to the importance of positioning herself within her research. Her speech is a reaction to the exclusion of certain groups of women from the women’s movement in the 1970s and 1980s (Smiet, 2017). She takes herself as an example to illustrate her point. She discusses the importance of recognising the fact that everyone has multiple locations. By locations, she does not only refer to the literal sense of the word, i.e. the geographical location, but also the historical location and other markers of your identity. She talks about her locations such as her gender, her race, her religion, the political situation the USA is in, and the place where she lives (Rich, 1984). Rich stressed that every woman has a different location. In saying this she emphasises that woman is not one homogeneous group, and that oppression takes place even within the women’s movement. White and women have talked about ‘we women’ while excluding non-white and non-western women. Rich (1984) calls for the recognition of and accountability for one’s location and the knowledge one produces. She says these identities are never fixed and they are always changing. As a feminist scholar, it is necessary to carefully reflect upon your own location and not assume that you can speak for (all) others.

Harding worked on creating a feminist objective epistemology. Harding (1993) coined the notion of ‘strong objectivity’ and standpoint theory. Her theory is based on three main claims. The first is that knowledge is socially situated. This means that knowledge stems from a social position. As people have different social positions, they produce different knowledge (Sprague & Kobryniewicz, 1999). This shows a clear overlap with the locations Rich (1984) refers to.³ The second claim is that marginalised groups are socially situated in a way that it is possible for them to be aware of more compared to non-marginalised groups. The third and final claim is that knowledge production must thus begin with the view of the marginalised. This does not mean that only the marginalised can create knowledge. Rather, it means that anyone can create knowledge, but is it important to take the view of the marginalised into account. Standpoint theory thus places a large emphasis on power relations in knowledge production.

One influential feminist researcher who applies standpoint theory in her work is Collins (2000), as explained in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. She argues that African American women experience an intersection of different oppressions based on race, gender, and class. According to her, the African American women themselves have the most suitable view to understand their marginalised status. Her work thus agrees with feminist objectivity as conceptualised by Harding. She uses her own experience as an African American woman to point to the fact that she is made to be an outsider in the academic world, where the norm is a white man.

In response to the standpoint theory developed by Harding, Haraway (1988) coined the term ‘situated knowledges’, adding to the debate of finding an alternative to positivism and scientific objectivity. She questions what we actually know about objectivity. Situated knowledges are a specific form of objectivity that takes into account both the agency of the knowledge producer and that of the object of study. Haraway (1988) states the following: “Many currents in feminism attempt to theorize grounds for trusting especially the vantage points of the subjugated; there is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful. Building on that suspicion, this essay is an argument for situated and embodied knowledges and an argument against various forms of unlocatable, and so

³ Here I must note that Rich (1984) did not address the problem of feminist objective epistemology, yet there is overlap between her work and Harding’s.

irresponsible, knowledge claims” (p. 583). She thus takes power structures into account and recommends listening to the view from below, as did Harding (1993). Yet it is important to note that she warns against romanticising the view from below. She states that the views of the subjugated are not innocent positions as these are also positions from somewhere (Haraway, 1988; Hinterberger, 2007; Rose, 1997). For Haraway, positioning yourself is the key practice in creating situated knowledge. There is no view from nowhere; every view has a story behind it that needs to be taken into account. This means that there is not one truth out there, but many variations of the truth depending on the social position of the knowledge producer. She summarises this in the following quote: “I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims” (Haraway, 1988, p. 589). Agreeing with Rich (1984), Haraway states identity is never something that is finished or final or perfect. It is always changing. This makes it important to take the social position of someone’s view into account when claiming rational knowledge, as this position may be ever changing.

Politics of location, situated knowledges, and standpoint theory agree on the fact that social location shapes and limits what a person knows and can know. What a person experiences, is aware of, and knows, is shaped by their personal location within hierarchal power structures. This personal location is determined by many factors. Examples are income, education, sex, age, class, profession, sexual orientation, race, (dis)ability, geopolitical location, social connections, and so on. A difference between Harding and Haraway is that Haraway believes the view from the marginalised should not be romanticised. Haraway asks whether any social situatedness, or location, or standpoint, should be privileged over another. Is one standpoint more objective than another? Would privileging the view of the marginalised in itself not be a power move? Who can speak, and who can speak for whom? This is the crisis of representation.

The crisis of representation

Who can speak for whom, and who should speak for whom? How does a researcher fairly represent the people about whom they are writing? These questions become even more important when the people to be represented are identity groups who have been misrepresented in dominant discourse or whose stories have been erased in the past. And these are exactly the people feminists (including myself) aim to give a voice to.

In 1991, Alcoff published her article “The Problem of Speaking for Others” as an intervention into the politics of who can speak for whom. She argues against the idea that a person can only speak for themselves and not for others. Her reasoning is similar to feminist objectivity. First of all, she acknowledges that social position is important because it determines what a person can say and how others receive what they say. She also acknowledges that speaking for others can be troublesome because it can lead to erasure of (part) of their original story. Yet she questions whether it is only possible to speak for oneself. She makes several points to support this doubt, among which two are particularly relevant for this discussion. First, the idea of only being able to speak for oneself reinforces the western idea according to which the individual is central and separate from others. Second, she finds it problematic to step aside from ethical responsibility. If no one can speak for another or for a group, how is it possible to take political action or to form public policies? I agree with this and thus want to use feminist objectivity to find a way to be able to fairly represent a(n) (oppressed) group.

Spivak’s essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak (1988) uses the term subaltern,⁴ by which she means people who are unheard and unable to make themselves heard. This means that no one can know who the subaltern is. It also implies that no one can call themselves subaltern. All people who are subaltern are oppressed, but not all those who are oppressed are subaltern. The subaltern is a person who has no means to access a communication network and to make their voice heard. They do not have the means to form as a group and make themselves heard. Once they do, they are no longer subaltern. Spivak (1988) concludes that the subaltern cannot speak. Alcoff (1991) agrees with Spivak and prefers “speaking to” to speaking

⁴ The term subaltern was first introduced by Gramsci, and Spivak has re-conceptualised the term and used it in her own work (Louai, 2012).

for. She says: “We should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than for others. If the dangers of speaking for others result from the possibility of misrepresentation, expanding one’s own authority and privilege, and a generally imperialist speaking ritual, then speaking with and to can lessen these dangers” (p. 23). Alcoff concludes that it can be possible to speak for others if one is cautious. One of the main things Alcoff’s essay advocates is politics of responsibility and accountability (Alcoff, 1991). Both authors agree that intellectuals must keep engaging in the practice of representation, however imperfect this is.

Taking all of this together, feminist research rests on three main principles that have been named by Acker, Barry, and Esseveld (1983): “research should contribute to women’s liberation through producing knowledge that can be used by women themselves, should use methods of gaining knowledge that are not oppressive, should continually develop a feminist critical perspective that questions dominant intellectual traditions and can reflect upon its own development” (p. 423). But how does one do this? It is time to make it more concrete and turn to ways to achieve feminist objectivity.

Taking into account the role of the researcher

How can one take positionality into account when conducting research? How can one represent the voices of others, without colonising them in a way that in itself becomes a pattern of domination? Concrete solutions to these questions are now considered. This is important, because feminist research is always concerned with the process of speaking for and representing others, which is linked to the question of knowledge production where power structures are of importance (Hinterberger, 2007). The relationship between the researcher and the researched can be a complicated one and is also a power structure.⁵ It is important to know how to deal with this in order to conduct feminist research.

Feminist researchers often prefer seeking reciprocal relationships that are based on empathy and mutual respect, thus a rather symmetrical relationship (England, 1994). The role the feminist researcher takes is called the role of the

⁵ I chose to work with the terms researcher and researched. Another word for the researched may be informant, subject, participant or respondent.

supplicant (England, 1994). The researcher makes it known that his or her research depends on the information about everyday life that is given to her by the researched. The researcher thus makes known that the researched has greater knowledge on the research topic and their opinion is most important. The reason why this is an attractive method for feminist research is that it takes away some power from the researcher and gives this power to the researched (England, 1994; Christoffersen, 2017). This causes the power relations to become more equal and symmetrical.

Many researchers argue that the preference for qualitative research is a logic preference when the end goal is to understand the social life of the researched (Davis, 2014; England, 1994; Hunting, 2014; Shields, 2008; Smiet, 2017). A strategy to take within qualitative research is to try to understand the people studied in their own terms. Along with all feminists supporting feminist objectivity, England (1994) argues for the importance of reflexivity, which she describes as “self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher” (p. 82). This means the consequences of the interactions with the researched must be considered, and the researcher must be aware of his or her positionality. She argues that the first step is taking responsibility for your research. In her words, “We need to locate ourselves in our work and to reflect on how our location influences the questions we ask, how we conduct our research, and how we write our research” (p. 87). This is in line with politics of location, situated knowledges, and standpoint theory. The extent to which the researcher reports these reflections is a personal choice of the researcher and will always be debatable.

Alcoff (1991) also mentions concrete ways to achieve the politics of responsibility and accountability she advocates for. She distinguishes four interrogatory practices. The first is that the reason and motivation for speaking must be carefully analysed. The motivation of the researcher should be letting the other speak and fairly representing them, and not to always be the speaker, which she sees as “a desire for mastery and domination” (Alcoff, 1991, p. 24). The second is taking into account the effect of your own positionality – your location and context – on what you are saying. It is not enough to start off a research paper with autobiographical information, but a critical analysis on the bearing of that autobiographical information on the rest of the research needs to take place. This corresponds with reflexivity (England, 1994). The third is that a researcher should always be accountable and responsible for what they say or write, again in

correspondence with England's research. The fourth and final interrogatory practice mentioned by Alcoff (1991) is analysing where your words end up and what they do there. The effects of the claims need to be taken into account, next to the content, in order to have a comprehensive evaluation. For example, if I want to write about Black women in Uganda, I need to take into account how this target group receives my words. My intentions may be to decrease racism for example, but it may come across differently as I am a white woman living in the western world. The fact that I would speak for these women may reinforce the differences in hierarchies of power between the west and Uganda.

Returning to the issue of representation, England (1994) names solutions to deal with this problem. One is letting the researched read your analyses and respond to them. This is intended to avoid misrepresentation and misinterpretation on the part of the researcher. This method is called respondent validation (Mays & Pope, 2000). A second solution is including quotes of your researched, to make sure that their voice is (literally) heard and represented. Again, the goal is to avoid misrepresentation and misinterpretation. England (1994) sees problems with these solutions, namely that choosing to do so is already a power move. As a researcher, one would choose which text or words or quote would be included and which would not. Perhaps this could be solved by giving the researched much more influence. But then the goal might seem to minimise the influence of the researcher as much as possible. And this is not what feminist research and feminist objectivity stands for, as they are aware and acknowledge the influence of the researcher – without judging this.

I conclude from this that if the researcher takes steps to minimise their influence, they should elaborately reflect on this and all the steps taken during the research process. The end goal should not be to limit the influence of the researcher as much as possible, but rather to extend the influence of the researched. So limiting the researcher's influence is only appropriate if at the same time it helps to maximise the influence of the researched. This is a delicate balance. Decisions made concerning this "power-and-influence"-balance between the researcher and the researched should be reflected upon by the researcher.

Concluding words of chapter one

Feminist research is concerned with breaking hierarchies of power and acknowledging subjugated knowledge. This type of research focuses on answering the epistemological question of who can produce knowledge, which has led to the introduction of ‘feminist objectivity’. This describes the idea that there is no such thing as full objectivity and there is no possibility to produce universal knowledge. All knowledge is socially situated. Because all knowledge is situated, representing others may be problematic. There are several ways to acknowledge your own situatedness as a researcher and to take steps to be able to fairly represent others. I divide these ways to achieve feminist objectivity in two categories: situating yourself and accounting for the way you represent others.⁶

⁶ It is important to note that these are methods to conduct feminist research, and as the next chapter discusses intersectional research, and this is part of feminist research, several items may return in chapter two. If this is the case, they will be approached specifically from an intersectional perspective.

CHAPTER TWO. INTERSECTIONALITY

In the 1970s and 1980s, Black women experienced exclusion from the women's movement (Rich, 1984; Smiet, 2017). As hooks explains in her book *Ain't I a Woman*, the 19th century was the first time that Black women spoke up (hooks, 1992). At this time, Black women were part of two different movements. One was the women's rights movement, whose goal was to achieve gender equality, and the other was the Black abolitionist movement, whose goal was to achieve racial equality. Part of this last movement was successful, as Black men gained the right to vote in the year 1870. Black women did not. At this point, white women felt betrayed by Black men (as they were both fighting against the power of white men). White women then sided with white men, assuming this would improve their chances of gaining more rights. Black women were left out. In the 20th century, Black women stood before a choice: should they side with the women's movement that only represented white women, or should they side with the Black liberation movement that only represented Black men? Their choice was to join either Black male patriarchy or white feminism. This caused Black women to stand up for themselves, demanding recognition that they are oppressed not only because they are Black, but also because they are women. This is Black feminism. These two forms of oppression intersect in a way that makes it different from the sum of the two separate forms of oppression.

If feminist epistemology suggests that knowledge is situated, standpoint is key to knowledge production. Black feminism adds to this that a standpoint is not only gendered, but gender operates at the intersection with other factors. So there is not a feminist standpoint, but standpoint is necessarily internally differentiated, and some women's standpoints have been historically privileged over others. If feminism is about recovering subjugated knowledges, according to intersectionality we must also recover those knowledges or experiences that are subjugated by a monolithic version of feminism itself – a cause that Black feminists contribute to.

Many Black feminists have written about the fact that they are oppressed by an interaction between sexism and racism. Sojourner Truth, who was born into slavery but managed to escape, gave her famous speech "Ain't I a Woman?" in 1851, where she plead for the rights of women and of Blacks. She considered these two oppressions to be interconnected (Smiet, 2017). More recently, in the 1970s, the Combahee River Collective expressed that Black women felt left out of the women's

movement (Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995). They wrote a manifesto in which they stated that they experienced oppression based on race, class, and sex simultaneously. In the 1980s, Lorde wrote about the oppression she has experienced as a Black lesbian feminist (Lorde, 2007). She makes it clear that there is no solidarity between feminists in the USA across different ethnicities, classes, and sexual preferences. This solidarity could be achieved by the recognition of different forms of oppression that Black (lesbian) women experience. Also in the 1980s, hooks formulated a summary of their collective message: “When Black people are talked about the focus tends to be on Black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women” (1982, p.7). Black women are not recognised as an oppressed group. Agreeing with Lorde, hooks (1982) argues that all women need to recognise racism and its history if the women’s movement is to work together as a whole. The first person to give a name to the oppression experienced by Black women was Crenshaw (1989), by naming it intersectionality. For her, intersectionality was about recognising “how multiple dimensions of inequality do not exist separately from one another but rather are constructed in relation to one another” (Smiet, 2017, p. 59).

Intersectionality is regarded by many as one of the most important contributions to feminist theory (Davis, 2014; McGall, 2005; Shields, 2008). There are many different definitions to be found. For example, Davis (2008) uses the following definition: “the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination” (p. 67). Lugones (2008) interprets the term as follows: “Intersectionality reveals what is not seen when categories such as gender and race are conceptualised as separate from each other” (p. 4). McCall (2005) describes intersectionality in the following way: “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (p. 1771). And Smiet (2017) explains intersectionality in this way: “An intersectional feminist perspective insists that gender cannot and should not be studied in isolation from race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion or other structures of power because they do not exist in isolation from one another, but instead always intersect” (p. 19). These scholars agree that there is confusion when it comes to how the term should be used as an approach. The discussion remains about how to conceptualise it or put it into practice (Davis, 2008; Smiet, 2017). Is intersectionality a concept? Is it a heuristic device? Or is it a reading strategy for doing feminist analysis?

How can a theory that apparently remains vague have such large consequences? In this chapter, I elaborate on the meaning of the term intersectionality by going back to its origins in Crenshaw's work (1989), and discuss possible ways to apply intersectionality as a critical methodology. In this way, I attempt to contribute to a clarification of the term and its possible applications.

Intersectionality as a theory

Literary research I conducted for my internship showed that gender inequalities on the labour market are often explained by intersections of different forms of discrimination (Becker, 1994; Brouns, 1993; De Jong-van der Poel, Schoenmaker & Hommes, 1978). This brought me to intervene using the notion of intersectionality. The oppression that Black women experience is formed by the intersection of two forms of discrimination, namely sexist and racist discrimination. This intersection is not the sum of sexism and racism, but rather the interconnected way in which different forms of power together cause discrimination against someone. The term may be used to explain the intersection of oppressions of different characteristics that lead to discrimination, for example, being woman and being disabled, or being woman and having children. Yet it has its origins in the intersection between being woman and being Black and this is the way I use it in this research.

To further understand what exactly is meant by intersectionality, I turn to the article by Crenshaw (1989) where she originally coined the term. Crenshaw is a Law scholar and she starts off her article by saying that in dominant antidiscrimination laws, single-axis frameworks are used. This means that discrimination is explained due to either race or gender, always only one of the two. Crenshaw shows that these two axes can intersect, and that this is reflected in the experiences of Black women. Because this intersection is not recognised by law, the experiences specific to Black women are not recognised by law. Very important is that the experience of the intersection of race and gender is different from the sum of racism and sexism.

To illustrate this, Crenshaw (1989) mentions several examples of court cases where Black women were discriminated against in the labour market. In each case, she shows that Black women do not get recognition of the oppression they experience. The court will recognise either race or sex discrimination, but not the intersection of the two. This leaves Black women left out. In the first case analysed by

Crenshaw, five Black women sued their employer for discriminating against Black women. The court rejected this attempt because the women did not sue on behalf of all Blacks or all women. The specific oppression of Black women was not acknowledged. The second case shows a different way in which the court does not acknowledge the experiences of Black women. The plaintiff claimed the employer was guilty of race and sex discrimination in promotions. The court rejected this claim because the Black woman could not represent all women. In the third case, the court rejects the claim of race discrimination brought by two Black women on behalf of all Blacks, because Black women cannot represent all Blacks due to a class difference between Black men and Black women.

So Black women could never win; they were almost never recognised as being discriminated against specifically as a Black woman when this was their claim. And if they claimed discrimination against all Blacks or all women, they were told they could not represent Black men or white women. As Crenshaw (1989) argues: “It seems that I have to say that Black women are the same and harmed by being treated differently, or that they are different and harmed by being treated the same. But I cannot say both” (p. 149). This apparent contradiction shows exactly the roots of the single-axis discrimination laws, where race and gender are seen as mutually exclusive categories. As Crenshaw (1989) puts it: “The point is that Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways and that the contradiction arises from our assumptions that their claim of exclusion must be unidirectional” (p. 149). What makes the situation complex is the fact that a Black woman may be discriminated because she is a woman, because she is Black, or because of an intersection between the two. Crenshaw concludes that as Black women can experience intersectional discrimination, their experiences are not acknowledged in the categories mentioned in discrimination laws.

Taken together, Crenshaw (1991) argues that an intersectional analysis consists of three main pillars. Firstly, that racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing rather than distinct systems of oppression. This means that racial subordination reinforces sexual subordination, and vice versa. Race and gender cannot be seen as mutually exclusive categories. Secondly, that Black women are most often marginalised by a politics of either gender or race alone. Thirdly, that a response to each form of subordination must be at the same time a response to both

forms of subordinations (Crenshaw, 1991). This is because race and sex are entangled and cannot be disentangled.

There are several reasons why academics struggle to fully understand the term intersectionality. There is debate about how to conceptualise intersectionality, and also about how it should be used (Davis, 2008). Davis (2008) comes to the conclusion that it is exactly this vagueness and open-endedness of the term that make it such a success. According to her, these characteristics of the term stimulate creativity, critical thinking, and the use of situated knowledges. Yet it is also this complexity and open-endedness that makes the term difficult to translate into a concrete method.

Intersectionality as a method

One of the critiques on intersectional theory is that it does not say how exactly to study it, how to use it as a method, or how to apply the theory to research. McCall (2005) argues that this is partly because of the complexity of the term. Including multiple dimensions of social life and categories, which is the case with an intersectional approach, complexifies the analysis. Not all methodologies allow for such complex analysis, leaving a limited choice in methodologies. For example: it may be particularly difficult to accommodate an intersectional approach within quantitative research that uses linear regressions, as this is a statistical approach that only allows for single-axis framework to be tested. As each methodology contributes to create a different kind of knowledge, using an intersectional approach may limit the scope of knowledge that can be produced (McCall, 2005). Another reason why there are different approaches to intersectionality is because it has become important in a very broad range of fields, mostly in the humanities and social sciences (Simić, 2011; Smiet, 2017). As every discipline has its own preference for methodologies, each discipline has different ways to apply intersectionality. This disciplining of intersectionality is something Nash (2009) warns against. She argues that bringing together different approaches from different fields would work better. I agree and argue that this is more in line with the open-endedness of intersectionality.

An important debate is whether intersectionality is better suited for qualitative or quantitative research. In general, qualitative research is preferred to apply intersectionality – this is because qualitative analysis allows for a more complex analysis of social reality (Davis, 2014; Hunting, 2014; Shields, 2008; Smiet, 2017).

Yet, before turning to the most popular view of using qualitative methods, I discuss an influential article by McCall (2005), who was the first to argue that “the quantitative social sciences are also a valid and important field to practice and apply intersectionality” (p. 68).

McCall (2005) names three possible approaches, which all have a different view on categorisation and its use. The approach she prefers is most suitable for quantitative approaches. The first approach is called *anticategorical complexity*. This approach rejects categories, for it does not allow social life to be reduced to such categories. It could be said that reality does not form categories, but that humans themselves think of categories to divide up reality. Categories are then socially constructed. This means these categories might not reflect reality. An example McCall (2005) mentions is the division of sexuality groups. Whereas there was once a divide between gay and straight, there have now been more categories added such as bisexual, transgendered, and queer. Another example is questioning a category such as ‘women’. Can this category ever be defined? This links back to the crisis of representation: How can anything be said for all women? This questioning of categories occurs in poststructuralist feminism (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005; Smiet, 2017). This approach assumes that each separate category of an intersection has no autonomous effect (Dubrow, 2008). Thus this approach is most suitable for qualitative research, as categories are needed for statistical methods in quantitative research.

The second approach is called *intracategorical complexity*. This approach is in the middle of the other two approaches. It uses categories and does not reject them, yet the formation of categorisation is looked at critically. So questions of making and defining boundaries are considered, but are not at the centre of the approach. This approach focuses on single groups or categories that are placed at the intersection of multiple categories. An example is a case study because this is an in-depth study of a single group or category. The approach is most suitable for qualitative research.

The third and last approach is called *(inter)categorical complexity*. This approach does not reject categories; it actually depends on the systematic use of categories. It deals with complex and ever-changing relationships among social groups, and uses provisional categories as a means of explicating those relationships. The focus lies more on the changing relationships than on the categories used to describe social groups. In order to investigate these relationships, quantitative analysis

is used. It is assumed that intersectionality can be measured by the interaction of certain categories, and this approach thus allows for the use of different statistical procedures (Dubrow, 2008). The difference between this approach and the *intracategorical* approach is that the *(inter)categorical* approach is concerned with complex relationships among social categories, rather than with single categories. So the *(inter)categorical* approach engages with comparatives between categories whereas the *intracategorical* approach is rather an in-depth study of one category.

Which approach would Crenshaw, whose definition of intersectionality I follow, approve of? Crenshaw (1991) mentions the idea that categories are not naturally given, but rather are socially constructed. But even if a category is socially constructed, this does not mean that it has no meaning or significance. She does not reject categories. Categories are reflections of power, as even naming categories is a power move. But according to Crenshaw, the process of categorisation is more complex than this. The process of categorisation does not happen though one party only. Who has the right and the power to name a category and who does not? Several parties are involved. If one party names a category, it is up to other parties to interpret and use this category, and perhaps give it a different connotation than intended by the original creator. This does not mean there is no unequal power, but “there is nonetheless some degree of agency that people can and do exert in the politics of naming” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1297). So there are two powers at work here. The first is the power of categorisation, and the second is the power to create certain social and material consequences to this categorisation. Crenshaw (1991) thus problematizes the process of categorisation because the information on which the descriptions of these categories are based, show clear power structures that cause certain experiences to be heard and others not to be heard. When the category woman is formed, the narratives on which this category is based are most often based on the experiences of white women. And when the category Black is formed, the narratives on which this category is based are most often based on the experiences of Black men. This once again shows the exclusion of the intersectional experiences of Black women, also when categorisation is concerned. So Crenshaw looks very critically at categorisation and does not take categories as naturally given. It matters who forms the categories and whose narratives are taken into account.

Crenshaw does not reject categories all together, as she herself, for example, talks about the category of Black women. Because Crenshaw herself uses categories,

but looks at them critically, her theory may inform the *intracategorical* approach as conceptualised by McCall. I argue that Crenshaw's approach is best understood as *intracategorical* as she investigates intersectionality within a social group. The aim of *intracategorical complexity* is to explore crossing categories in order to understand the positions of disadvantaged social groups that are placed at such an intersection (Angelucci, 2017). McCall's research has made clear that when it comes to applying the term intersectionality during a research process, it is important to carefully choose your approach concerning categorisation. As your positionality needs to be reflected on, so does the categorisation approach you choose (Hunting, 2014).

Davis (2014) names McCall's favoured *(inter)categorical* approach as a possible option in intersectional research, yet also sees problems here. First of all, it uses social science theories, and leaves out many works from literary criticism or cultural studies. Another criticism mentioned by Davis (2014) is that the *(inter)categorical* approach favours quantitative over qualitative methodologies. Instead, for many authors qualitative methodologies are ideal for looking for new and out-of-the-box ways of doing feminist research (Davis, 2014; Shields, 2008). As stated earlier, there is a larger preference to apply intersectionality in qualitative research (Smiet, 2017). Since Crenshaw, on whose description of intersectionality I base my research, prefers qualitative research to investigate intersectionality, it is now time to elaborate on this more extensively.

Examples of methods that are compatible with intersectionality are participatory action research and ethnographic methods, such as interviews and case studies (Hunting, 2014). Yet there is no standard way to implement intersectionality in qualitative studies such as these. One way mentioned by several authors to apply intersectionality is to use the approach of "asking the other question" (Davis, 2014; Lutz, 2015; Matsuda, 1991). This is an approach that Matsuda (1991), who coined the idea, summarises as follows: "When I see something that looks racist, I ask, 'Where is the patriarchy in this?' When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, 'Where is the heterosexism in this?' When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, 'Where are the class interest in this?'" (p. 1189). Asking the other question forms the basis of intersectional research. This can be used as the starting point, i.e. a way to apply an intersectional lens.

However, as Davis (2014) notes, many feminist scholars wonder what to do after this. It seems that the list of questions to ask is endless, and it is difficult to see

or think of all possible powers that are at play and to determine when to stop asking questions. Both she and Lutz (2015) mention different ways to go forward after asking the other question. Lutz (2015) says it “functions as a directive to focus on various levels of the analysis” during the analysis of qualitative data (p. 40). Based on my literary research, below I divide the possible steps forward into three categories. First, strategies that can be used in the planning phase of the research; second, strategies that can be used throughout the research; and third, strategies that can be applied specifically to the analysis and interpretation part of the research.

I. From the outset of the research

While planning the research, several steps can already be taken to ensure research is intersectional (Christoffersen, 2017; Hunting, 2014). First, the way the questions are formulated is important. The questions must allow for intersectional processes to be investigated, thus leading to richer data accounting for how social issues are experienced across intersecting social categories (Hunting, 2014). For example, the question ‘Do you experience discrimination on the labour market?’ is less suitable to allow for intersectional processes to be analysed, compared to the question ‘What are some of the challenges you experience as a non-western woman on the Dutch labour market?’ The latter question asks the experiences at the intersection of being a woman and being non-western. Second, the use of particular words shapes the way they are received by respondents (Bowleg, 2008). Finally, in the planning stages of the research, while recruiting the participants, it is important to ensure that the diversity among the research participants is as large as possible (Christoffersen, 2017). This is an obvious precondition to measuring intersectionality.

II. Throughout the research

The concrete steps to be taken during the whole research process can be divided into two categories: situating or positioning oneself, and reflecting upon the categorisation that is used.

A first important strategy that can be applied during the whole research process is *situating oneself*. Reflexivity must be central in intersectional research (Christoffersen, 2017; Davis, 2008; Hunting, 2014; Lutz, 2015). This means to carefully consider one’s position as a researcher within the research and acknowledge the position one produces knowledge from (Davis, 2014; Haraway, 1988; Harding,

1993; Hunting, 2014; Rich, 1984). What are your gender, class, ethnicity, religion, (dis)abilities, sexuality, education, geographical location, and other characteristics that might influence the way you see and interpret the world? By discussing this, the researcher positions themselves within the topic and methodology of their research. The question is how to merge together your position and your writing. This is a difficult challenge. Davis (2014) names different ways of positioning oneself within one's research. One way may be to simply list the identities of the researcher. Yet a list may not be enough. A strategy that suits intersectionality better is elaborating on the way in which your identities and characteristics influence you throughout the research. Positioning oneself helps to achieve feminist objectivity. As chapter one has shown, this is an important step that should be taken in feminist research.

What is important concerning positionality in intersectional research, is to take the positionality of everyone involved in the research into account, not only of the researcher. Positionality in intersectional research is about positioning all situated knowledges within the research. So not only should the positionality of the researcher be explored, but also the differences in positionalities between the people in, for example, the interview (Lutz, 2015). There may be differences in gender, ethnicity, level of education, age, religion, or other characteristics. This should not merely be noted, but the effects of these differences on both the researcher and researched should be explored. Davis and Lutz together have shown that, in Lutz's words, "it is very likely that the interviewee her/himself uses intersectionality in the construction of her/his life-story as much as the interviewer does in her/his analysis" (Lutz, 2015, p. 41).⁷

As part of the reflection, a strategy is to be aware of one's blind-spots (Davis, 2014). This may be difficult as we are often unaware of our own blind spots, and thus it might be necessary to ask questions about differences that fall outside of the main analysis. This is a combination of "asking the other question", positioning oneself, and considering the categories used. It is about forcing oneself to recognise the thinking patterns one has, and then actively thinking differently.

As Hunting (2014) points out, it is important to reconceptualise the meaning and the consequence of the categories that are used during the research. This should be done at every stage of the research process and this is the second way to go

⁷ This discussion is about interviews specifically, but can be applied more generally to all qualitative methods.

forward after asking the other question: *reflecting critically upon categories*. Reflecting on the categories used and reconceptualising them along the way helps the researcher to “create space for the complexities of identity and experience” (Hunting, 2014, p. 8).

Reflecting critically upon categories can be done by exploring answers to several questions (Hunting, 2014). Who is included and excluded in the categories should be evaluated, the role of inequality and power in creating these categories, and the similarities between the categories, are such questions (Cole, 2009). Another example can be questioning and complicating the category of gender (Davis, 2014). This is an exercise in which you investigate the way in which you as a researcher see gender. According to feminist theory, gender is not a binary. Gender is always related to other factors and is thus a complicated concept. The exercise asks you to think of an example that for you is clearly ‘about gender’. Then you ask the other questions to complicate your thinking. Afterwards you reflect on the different ways of thinking about gender. This exercise gives you insight and recognition of aspects that might have been missing in your original chains of thought. This method is linked to McCall’s (2005) emphasis on categorisation. In intersectional qualitative research, *intracategorical complexity* is appropriate, where categories are reflected upon critically and change throughout the research.

III. Strategies for analysis and interpretation

I now turn to strategies that can be applied starting from the analysis and interpretation of research, so after the first data have been collected. A strategy that asking the other question leads to during the analysis, is identifying at which specific moments the interviewee mentions a characteristic (such as gender, ethnicity, level of education, etc.) in connection with specific experiences (Lutz, 2015). When a certain characteristic or term is mentioned frequently, this does not necessarily make it more important. It is important to take context into account. While this would lead to an interpretation on the side of the researcher, a way to make it less dependent on the interpretation of the researcher is to contact the interviewee after the interview to check the researcher’s interpretations.

A second strategy while analysing and interpreting the data is to approach the data from different perspectives (Christoffersen, 2017). For example, you could read the data several times, each time with a different main question in mind. This way you

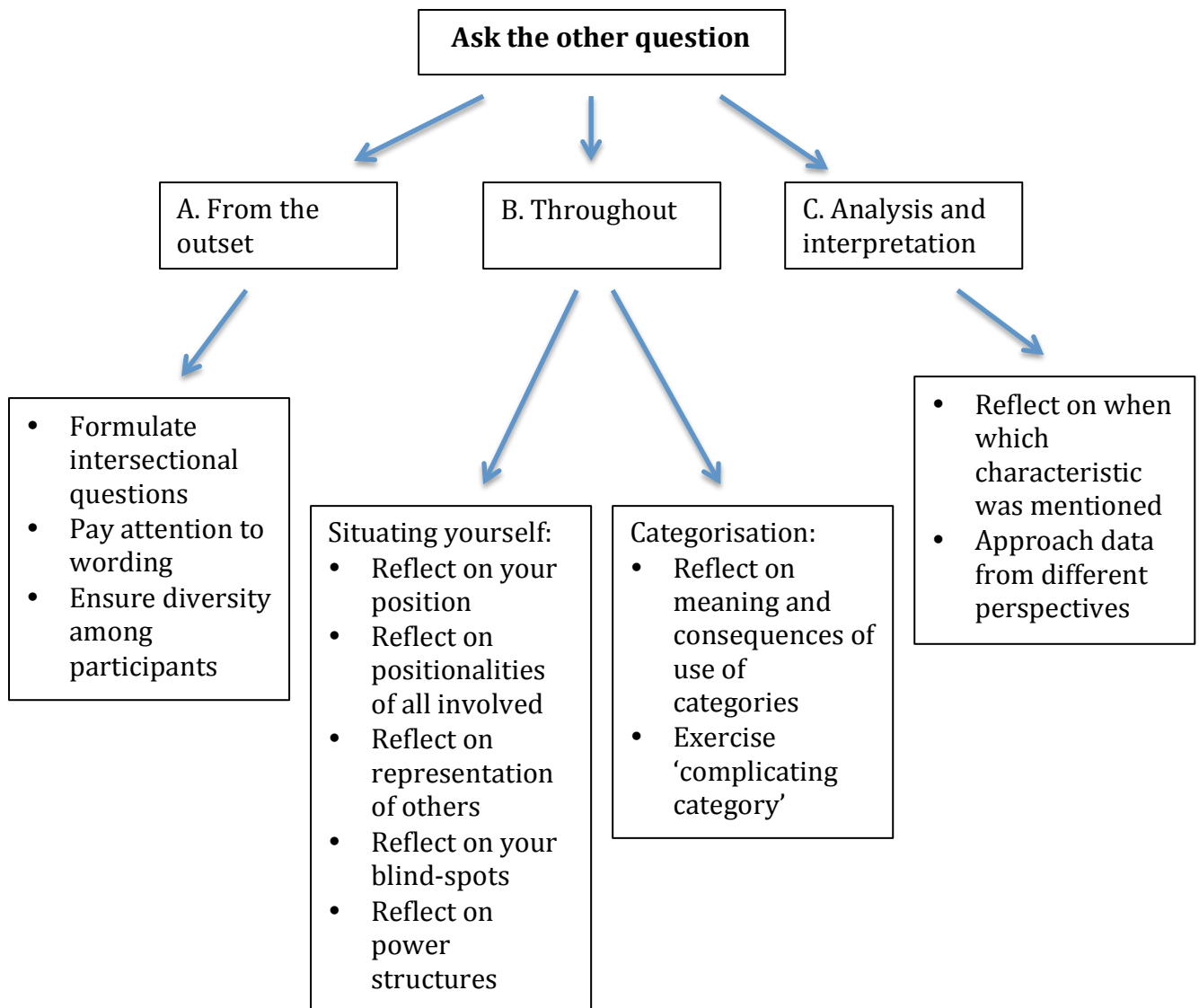
are less likely to miss out on different perspectives that are of importance when researching intersectionally.

Concluding words of chapter two

Intersectionality is regarded as one of the most important contributions of feminism. The original theory about intersectionality entails the following: not only can Black women experience discrimination based on their race, but also based on their gender. They can experience an intersection between the two that is different from simply the sum of the two forms of discrimination. Intersectionality commits to the situatedness of all knowledge, which corresponds to feminist objectivity.

There are several ways to turn intersectional theory into intersectional methodologies. As discussed in this chapter, there is not one correct methodology or method. But in accordance with Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality, qualitative methods are best suited to measure intersectionality. There are several steps to take to ensure that one's chosen qualitative method is feminist and intersectional. To create a clear overview, they are shown in the scheme below (figure 1). Following different feminist scholars, I argue that one starts with asking the other question. In each part of the research process, this leads to different types of strategies and analyses. Figure 1 shows a summary of the answers that existing feminist scholarship offers to the main question of this thesis: How to take a feminist and intersectional approach to qualitative data analysis?

Figure 1. Steps to take when conducting qualitative feminist intersectional research.



CHAPTER THREE. RESEARCH AT FNV VROUW

FNV Vrouw, a feminist union based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, celebrated their 70th anniversary in 2018. For this occasion, the organisation decided to set up a research project to find out what their constituency needed for the labour market to become ‘woman proof’, that is, free of any gender-based discrimination. They planned to organise dialogue tables throughout the Netherlands, in order to talk to women and to hear their opinion on the matter. FNV Vrouw wanted to know the measures an employer can take to help make the labour market ‘woman proof’. Each dialogue table had a different theme. My research task as an intern was to co-organise and conduct the dialogue tables, and to analyse the data to create a thematic list of what makes a labour market ‘woman proof’. While FNV Vrouw had formulated the key question of the research project – What makes a labour market ‘woman proof’? – I added a second question: To what extent does intersectionality play a role in this? I approached my research process with these two questions in mind. I realise that there are more forms of intersectionality than only the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity, but this was the intersection I focussed on.

Participants were recruited via the network of FNV Vrouw and the networks of the chairpersons. Participation was voluntary. If a person felt they belonged or had something to say about the chosen theme, they could apply. In return for their participation, FNV Vrouw offered a free meal and compensation for travel expenses. We aimed at a diverse as possible group of women, although we obviously lacked full control over this.

The method that had been determined beforehand by FNV Vrouw was of qualitative nature. The project consisted of ten dialogue tables to be held throughout the Netherlands. Each dialogue table was led by a (voluntary) chairperson, and this chairperson chose the theme. The themes were woman starters on the labour market, pregnancy discrimination, highly intelligent (gifted) women, working mothers, LGBTI women, women in education, older women, women in politics, and woman entrepreneurship. I added the theme women from different cultural backgrounds to make it more intersectional. Even though I encouraged a theme focussing on ethnicity, the chairperson chose the wording of the theme. This way, the themes were not imposed by FNV Vrouw or me – the researchers – but by the target group themselves. The reasoning behind this was to give the women a voice, to let them

speak for themselves and not speak for them. The goal was to speak to them rather than to speak for them, in order to be able to fairly represent them (Alcoff, 1991; Spivak, 1988).

The knowledge produced by the research is based on the experiences and opinions of the marginalised group: women on the Dutch labour market. The research design was thus based, if implicitly, on feminist objectivity and standpoint theory (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993). The questions asked during each dialogue table were predetermined by FNV Vrouw and were used in order to make comparison possible. I adapted the questions slightly to allow for intersectionality, by including questions about the influence of gender in combination with ethnicity, and gender in combination with the specific theme of the dialogue table. The questions were guidelines for the chairpersons; they were meant to get a dialogue going on the relevant topics (figure 2).

Figure 2. Questions asked during dialogue tables.

- How do you define woman proof? Can you give an example of a place where you worked that you consider woman proof? And an example of a place that wasn't woman proof? Can others identify with this?
 - When do you consider a labour market to be woman proof? Why is or is not the current labour market woman proof?
- Break*
- Question concerning specific target audience:
To what extent does the fact that *[theme dialogue table]*, next to being woman, play a role with the experiences you have had?
 - Question about the role of ethnicity:
To what extent does your background, next to being woman, play a role with the experiences you have had? Do you think the needs for woman proofness differ for women from different backgrounds?
 - What needs to happen to realise a woman proof labour market? What is needed for this? Where do you see possibilities and barriers?

A researcher at the University Medical Centre Amsterdam (VUmc), who was working as a voluntary academic advisor for the research, advised me to use content analysis as a method for the analysis of the dialogue tables. Content analysis codes the data – the transcript of the recordings of the dialogue – and interprets the counts of the codes (Gavora, 2015; Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). The codes correspond to themes that return throughout the conversations. I thus divided the words used by

the participants into themes. The coded categories were derived from the data, and not necessarily based on previous theories and explanations of gender inequality on the labour market, making the method inductive (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Gavora, 2015; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). As argued in the previous chapter, qualitative approaches are preferred when the end goal is to understand the social life of the participants, so this was a good choice (Davis, 2014; England, 1994; Hunting, 2014; Shields, 2008; Smiet, 2017). The strategy to understand people in their own terms is also in line with feminist objectivity.

However, this does not mean that the research process did not pose any challenges. In this chapter, I reflect on the research process. Building on the previous two chapters, I discuss blockages I encountered in two main areas: on the one hand, how to negotiate my role as a researcher; and on the other hand, how to turn intersectionality into a methodology for feminist qualitative research.

My role as a researcher

I. Blockages

The first blockage I encountered during the research process was how to define my role as a researcher and how to account for my influences on the data collection and analysis. On the one hand, I tried to be as objective as possible; on the other hand, I knew it was not possible to rule out my influence (Harding, 1988; Smiet, 2017; Sprague & Kobryniewicz, 1999; Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). I wanted to carefully consider the influence of my personal experiences, knowledge, and opinions on the research and its results.

This was most difficult during the content analysis of the dialogue tables. The first step I took was to transcribe the dialogues using the recordings. I realised that even in writing the transcription, my influence was visible, as I did not transcribe word for word literally. Choosing what to transcribe and what not to transcribe is a clear power move by the researcher (England, 1994). Moreover, once the coding process started, which was the second step, it was my role to determine which code to assign to which words in the transcripts. This is when I realised that if someone else were to take over the job, they would most likely end up with different codes. So it is never possible to achieve full objectivity. Yet this acknowledgement does not imply that one renounces to make any truth claim and, furthermore, that the knowledge one

produces remains strictly bound to the specific context and circumstances of its production without possibility of generalisation (Narayan, 2003; Smiet, 2017). This is because feminist objectivity is strong objectivity (Harding, 1988). Strong objectivity takes into account the researcher's bias, which is something that can never fully be removed. All knowledge is valuable and can be generalised if the steps taken are documented, and by including the reasoning behind those steps in a 'strong reflection', as Harding (1988) calls it.

Yet I could not shake the idea that limiting my personal influence would increase the objectivity, because invoking standpoint theory should not be an excuse to stop being careful about one's influence on the research process. This is exactly the contradiction I struggled with: To what extent should one limit personal influences when advocating feminist objectivity? In other words, I struggled with the relationship between objectivity and truth. This friction, which I propose to call the *friction of feminist objectivity*, is the difficulty I encountered as someone previously trained in positivist sociology trying to understand and apply feminist objectivity. Acker et al. (1983) have discussed this problem that one can encounter when doing feminist research. They describe the problem as follows: "a critique of objectivity which asserts that there can be no neutral observer who stands outside the social relations she observes can easily become a relativism in which all the explanations are subjectively grounded and therefore have equal weight. When all accounts are equally valid, the search for 'how it actually works' becomes meaningless" (Acker et al., 1983, p. 429). Acker et al. explain that they tried to avoid this problem by claiming validity for their analysis, which they did by explaining the steps they took, applying standpoint theory, and questioning categories. This is very similar to reflexivity (Christoffersen, 2017; Davis, 2008; England, 1994; Hunting, 2014; Lutz, 2015).

A second struggle I experienced, closely connected to the former, was how to end up with data that represent the participants' stories. It was my job to turn the dialogues into a list of aspects that make a labour market 'woman proof' in such a way that all participating women could recognise themselves in this list. I thus had to represent the voices of different women. The difficulty that I experienced here is that I could recognise reoccurring themes and sub-themes, but I knew that every woman had an individual story that would not fully fit the list. The challenge I experienced was moving toward generalisations while doing justice to the particular. How to do justice to the voices of the women, so how could I fairly represent them? How can I

represent them without speaking for them? This is also a part of the *friction of feminist objectivity* that I experienced.

II. Possible solutions

As mentioned above, the first blockage I experienced was how to understand, in practice, the relationship between objectivity and truth, and how to be accountable for my influence on the research. I dealt with the problem by being accountable for my research. I made a report of all the research steps I took per dialogue table and why I took them. This functioned as a guide for anyone later on wanting to know how I came to the results, or anyone wanting to repeat the research. In this document, I elaborated on each methodological step that I took and reflected on my choices by discussing what I would do differently next time and why. This way, I held myself accountable for the steps I took and the results I found. I also wrote comments in the analysing (coding) documents explaining my choices. For example, if a person mentioned how the upbringing of children can influence how these children perceive the role of women in society, I would explain that this was not relevant to code for FNV Vrouw because it is not a measure an employer can take to make the labour market 'woman proof'.

Another main aspect to take into account when considering the role of the researcher is reflexivity, i.e. positioning oneself (Alcoff, 1991; Christoffersen, 2017; Davis, 2008; England, 1994; Hunting, 2014; Lutz, 2015). This is in line with politics of location, situated knowledges, and standpoint theory, which are important examples of feminist objectivity (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993; Rich, 1984). After each dialogue table, I took the time to reflect upon the event using a fixed set of questions. These questions focussed on my personal influence both on how the dialogue table went and on the results, and also considered what other (group) dynamics were at play that might have influenced the data. In these reflections, I answered questions such as: Which questions were asked and which were not, and why? Which perspective was missing? Were there any external factors that may have influenced the dialogue table?

As Alcoff (1991) argues, it is possible to reflect upon one's positionality more elaborately by taking the following steps. First, considering one's motivation for conducting this research. Second, reflecting on one's location and the context in

which one conducts the research. Third, analysing how others receive one's work and words. These are questions I kept in mind while analysing the research process.

As mentioned above, the second blockage I experienced was how to fairly represent the other. Feminist objectivity and fairly representing others can be achieved by situating yourself as a researcher and by accounting for the way you represent others (Acker et al., 1983; Alcoff, 1991). During the research process, I implemented several steps to better enable me to represent the voices of the women. The most important step I took was writing a summary of the outcomes of each dialogue table and sending this to all women who participated in the concerning dialogue table to ask for their comments. This ensured that I did not misinterpret the women, and that I did not miss any important point that had been mentioned (England, 1994; Mays & Pope, 2000). Unfortunately, so far, I have not received any feedback or adaptations to these summaries. I do not know whether this is because the women feel the summaries represent what was said during the dialogue tables, or whether they simply did not (want to) reply.

Another step that I took was trying to use as much of the literal words used by the participants as possible. This way, the original voices of the women are represented, as their stories form the basis of standpoint knowledge (England, 1994; Harding, 1993). In the more elaborate report of the analyses, I wrote down quotes belonging to the themes. This way, I kept the original voices included in the elaborated results (England, 1994). Taken together, in order to solve the issues of the researcher's position within the research and of representing the participants, it is advised to invest in situating oneself and accounting for the way one represents the others.

Measuring intersectionality

I. Blockages

At the beginning of the research, I was familiar with the theory of intersectionality, but not with ways of turning it into a method. As the method of my internship research was predetermined, I worked on incorporating intersectionality in the dialogue tables. At the beginning of this chapter I have discussed ways I incorporated intersectionality at the level of content, but not yet at the level of methodologies. Regarding the latter, the difficulty lay in the complexity and open-endedness of the

term, which has been pointed out by earlier feminist scholarship to be the strength of intersectionality (Davis, 2008; McCall, 2005). There is not one logical way forward to measure intersectionality (McCall, 2005; Simić, 2011; Smiet, 2017). I thus used the methods predetermined by FNV Vrouw, and adapted them to make the overall methodology more intersectional.

I did not want to steer the participants towards intersectional answers. I wanted to hear what the women themselves had to say when it comes to making a labour market ‘woman proof’, and then see if these answers contained aspects of intersectionality. As each person has different experiences that may be intersectional, no intersectional experience is the same as another (Crenshaw, 1991). This again shows the problem of how to fairly represent the experiences of the participants. How do I measure intersectionality? How do I represent the intersectional experiences of the women? And how do I generalise while doing justice to the particular? Once again, this is a part of the *friction of feminist objectivity* that I experienced.

II. Possible solutions

The first step I took was thinking of common everyday language describing intersectionality without introducing the academic term, in order for everyone to understand what was meant. Words that I found most important were the combination between gender and (cultural) background. I thought of the consequences of these words and their implications for my research methods, as I had to ensure that I was able to measure intersectionality and that the participants felt comfortable with and understood the choice of wording (Bowleg, 2008; Christoffersen, 2017; Hunting, 2014). I also turned this simplified description of intersectionality into two questions that were added to the list of questions posed during the dialogue table (see figure 2). In order for my questions to be better understood by the participants, I could have spoken with people unfamiliar with the term intersectionality to see which words they would use to describe intersectional processes. I could then have used these words in my questions. This way, I would have paid more attention to the wording.

Second, the emphasis during the recruitment of women had to be on diversity. If the group of women were not diverse in ethnicity, intersectionality would be hard to measure (Christoffersen, 2017). This wish for a diverse group of women with different identities and from different backgrounds was mentioned in the recruitment

texts. The texts stated that it was important to hear the experiences of women of different backgrounds.

The third way I applied intersectionality to the qualitative research method was by reflecting on my position as a researcher and the positions of all participants in the research – because when it comes to reflexivity in intersectional research, not only should the positionality of the researcher be explored, but also the differences in positionality among all the people involved in the research. Reflexivity must be central in intersectional research (Christoffersen, 2017; Davis, 2008; Hunting, 2014; Lutz, 2015). This is in line with politics of location, situated knowledges, and standpoint theory, which are important examples of feminist objectivity (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993; Rich, 1984). As mentioned before, after each dialogue table, I took the time to reflect upon the event using a fixed set of questions. These questions focussed on my personal influence both on how the dialogue table went and on the results, considered what other (group) dynamics were at play that might have influenced the data, and also explored the positions of the participants within the research. At the beginning of each dialogue table, the participants filled in an anonymous questionnaire about their personal characteristics. The questionnaire asked where they lived, their age, their educational background, and how they first heard of the dialogue tables. I used these questionnaires, next the answers given during the dialogue tables and my observations, to get an idea of the positionality of the participants. When answering the reflecting question whether there were any external factors that may have influenced the dialogue table, I took the information I had gathered on the positionality of the participants into consideration.

The fourth aspect to focus on during the whole research process is the choice of categorisation. It is necessary to reflect upon the meaning and consequences of the categories that are used (Cole, 2009; Hunting, 2014; McCall, 2005). During the research at FNV Vrouw, each category used was not strictly defined in order to leave the interpretation up to the participants. For example, whoever considered themselves to be a ‘woman’ counted as a woman for the research analysis. It might have been interesting to talk to several women after the dialogue had taken place, to discuss how they felt about the categories that were used in the research and in the summaries. I believe this was not done because neither myself, nor my supervisor at FNV Vrouw, find using categories particularly problematic, as long as the categories are not fixed, but rather ‘open’ and free to personal interpretations. Here I see my mistake – as the

context in which I conduct research obviously steers what the priorities are during the research. This is thus my blind spot: not thinking from different (academic) perspectives to approach categories (Davis, 2014). To ensure the research I conducted during the analysis and interpretation was feminist and intersectional, it is important to not only approach the methodologies, but also the data from different perspectives (Christoffersen, 2017).

Concluding words of chapter three

The conclusion of this chapter is that knowing theory does not equal knowing how to put it into practice. There are many different ways to conduct feminist and intersectional research using qualitative data, and one is not necessarily better than the other. I applied intersectional methodologies to the dialogue tables and the analyses of the data. The blockages I experienced are all linked to what I have described as the *friction of feminist objectivity*. This is the difficulty I encountered as someone previously trained in positivist sociology trying to understand and apply feminist objectivity. How do I determine and account for my personal influence on the research process? More specifically, this leads to the problem of doing justice to the voices of the women and generalising their message, without speaking for them, and while also doing justice to the particular.

I argue that feminist objectivity and fairly representing others in intersectional qualitative research can be achieved by situating yourself as a researcher and by accounting for the way you represent others in intersectional research. It is important to critically reflect upon choices made in the research process, in order to be accountable for your own research. If you fairly represent the other in generalisations, you can do justice to individual stories. I would advise anyone who attempts a similar task to conduct literature research to come up with a checklist as I did in figure 1. This checklist will surely differ (if slightly) from mine, as the debate is on-going. What matters is the effort of being accountable, rather than the exact steps that are taken to achieve this.

CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to answer the question of what it means to conduct feminist and intersectional qualitative research and how to do so. My experiences during my internship at FNV Vrouw and the difficulties I encountered there provided me with the opportunity to point out the challenges that this type of research poses. My literature research led to possible solutions to these challenges. My aim was not to offer final answers, but rather adding to on-going debates about feminism, intersectionality, and research methodologies.

Chapter one dealt with questions that concern how to conduct feminist research. The main question here was: What is my role as a researcher within a research processes? Here I turned to questions such as what it means to conduct feminist research, and issues of positionality and representation. My literary research showed that feminist research is concerned with breaking hierarchies of power and acknowledging subjugated knowledge. The epistemological question of who can produce knowledge is at the centre of this. According to feminist objectivity, there is no universal truth and all knowledge is situated. This situatedness brings with it the issue of representing others. Feminist objectivity and fairly representing others can be achieved by situating oneself as a researcher and by accounting for the way you represent others.

Chapter two dealt with the following question: What is intersectional theory and how can it be used as a tool or a research approach for qualitative feminist research? For the meaning of intersectionality, I turned to the history of the term and in particular to the work of Crenshaw (1989), who originally coined the term. It describes the intersection of different oppressions, which is not the same as the sum of two oppressions. There is not one way to turn intersectionality into a method, though mostly qualitative methods are preferred. I have created an overview of aspects that are important to take into consideration when creating an intersectional method. This overview can be found in figure 1, in chapter two. It is important to think about the setup of the research beforehand in order to make it possible to measure intersectionality, to situate yourself and everyone involved in the research, to reflect on the categorisations used throughout the research, and to keep different perspectives in mind during the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Finally, chapter three has shown that turning intersectional theory into a research method for a pre-determined research plan is not easy. The blockages I experienced are all linked to what I have described as the *friction of feminist objectivity*. How can one do justice to the voices of a group without speaking for them? And how can one generalise the claims emerging from the group while also doing justice to the particular? These questions call back issues of conducting feminist research: How do I account for my role as a researcher? Conducting feminist and intersectional qualitative research is a challenge that can be undertaken if the researcher pays enough attention to ensuring to be accountable for their research and the knowledge that is produced, through extensive reflections on all parts of the research process. My research has shown that there is no specific method to use when conducting feminist and intersectional qualitative research, yet every chosen method can be given a feminist and intersectional approach by taking the steps summarised in figure 1. It is this flexible applicability of intersectionality to qualitative methods that creates endless possibilities for its use.

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