

# Soc-B Module 1 - Qualitative methods in biosocial research



# Goals

- Introduction to key concepts in science studies
- Critically reflect on language
- Dialogue

# Emily Martin – The Egg and the Sperm (1991)

- Initial thoughts:
  1. Have you thought about language this way before?
  2. Did you find it useful, challenging, utter rubbish, ...?
  3. Dated?

# Context

- Field of science studies
- “Scientific knowledges are ‘views from somewhere’, the result of particular studies conducted at particular times and in particular places, and as a result are socially constructed.”

# Donna Haraway – God's trick

- God: neutral, omniscient observers (removal of the first person)
  - Trick: partial perspective, socio-cultural background
- Mask! Advantageous

# Donna Haraway – God’s trick

- “Why should we be cowed by scientists' descriptions of their activity and accomplishments; **they and their patrons have stakes in throwing sand in our eyes.** They tell parables about objectivity and scientific method to students in the first years of their initiation, but no practitioner of the high scientific arts would be caught dead acting on the textbook versions. **Social constructionists make clear that official ideologies about objectivity and scientific method are particularly bad guides to how scientific knowledge is actually made.** Just as for the rest of us, what scientists believe or say they do and what they really do have a very loose fit. The only people who end up actually believing and, goddess forbid, acting on the ideological doctrines of disembodied scientific objectivity-enshrined in elementary textbooks and technoscience booster literature-are nonscientists, including a few very trusting philosophers.”

# Donna Haraway – Situated Knowledges

- Scientific knowledge is always multiple, particular, and defined by the researcher's self-interest and cultural background.
- Heterogenous matrix of culture
- *“Rather than being produced in an isolated privileged realm and trickling out to inform the rest of us about what is “true”, science is made throughout – bubbles up from many places within – historically constituted human culture.” – Martin*

# Donna Haraway – Situated Knowledges

- Complex network of relationships and knowledge networks, coincidences, wider historical shifts, ...
- Not unaware
- Example: the funding of “fashionable” research topics



# The production of objective knowledge

- How does knowledge acquire the status of *the* truth?
- Foucault: the regime of truth
  - set of mechanisms, techniques and individuals are capable of producing “true” knowledge varies from society to society
- Western, contemporary society: “impartial” observation, scientific institutions (UCL), ...
- God’s trick turns situated knowledges into absolute truth

# Discussion

- How has your socio-cultural background (broadly defined) influenced your choice of research topic?
- Do you feel you perform the god's trick in your work?
- Do you think there is an alternative way of reporting your findings?
  
- Discuss in pairs for 10 mins

# Discussion

“We need to learn how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order **to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name.** The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision.

Positioning is, therefore, the key practice in grounding knowledge organized around the imagery of vision, and much Western scientific and philosophic discourse is organized in this way.

**Positioning implies responsibility for our enabling practices”**

– Haraway

# Sleeping metaphors

- Language reveals stake in knowledge production and socio-cultural influence
  - (Sleeping) metaphors useful tool
  - Lakoff metaphor theory
  - Abstract/unfamiliar → tangible/familiar
  - Examples:
    1. Love → butterflies
    2. Embryo → humanized description
- Downplay one aspect, foreground another

# Sleeping metaphors

- Metaphors hidden in scientific content (<-> poem)
- Naturalised! Presented as objective knowledge
- Interconnected web, feeds back into each other
- Cements oppressive status quo (i.e. changing gender ideals)
- Cannot necessarily stop, but "wake" them up

# Egg and the Sperm

“Sperm are small, streamlined, and invariably **active**. They **deliver** their genes to the egg and **activate** the developmental program of the egg.”

“(…) The cervical mucus **protects** and **feeds** the sperm and **directs** them up into the pockets of the cervix.”

# Contemporary examples: intra-oocyte donation

- New procedure
- Heteronormative bias in naming conventions
- Reception of Oocytes from Partner: medical (receives <-> gives)
- Shared motherhood IVF: monogamous partnership (stresses genetic ties, mirroring heterosexual family ideal)
  
- "Mother" (heterosexual, social + biological)
- Gestational/genetic mother= just a gestational/genetic mother
- Lesbian mother
- Vs. Moms/other naming conventions like dadgal

# Conclusion

- An alternative perspective out of many
- Be mindful of your positionality and its impact
- A way to bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative research, humanities and sciences