Feminist and queer perspectives on qualitative methods

Vanessa R. Panfil and Jody Miller

Though not strictly or prohibitively the case, the shared sensibilities that feminist and queer perspectives have in common with qualitative epistemologies often mean that they go hand in hand in criminology. In this chapter, we explore the relations among feminist and queer criminologies and qualitative methodologies. We begin with an overview of what we mean by feminist and queer perspectives, tracing the evolution, overlaps, and contests between these overarching frameworks. In doing so, we briefly highlight the role these perspectives have played in criminological research. Next, we consider the nexus of feminist, queer, and qualitative epistemologies and methodologies. We describe more specifically why and how so many feminist and queer criminologists find, in qualitative research, “a place for alternative values within the academy” (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006, p. 38). Finally, we illustrate how qualitative methods are put to use in practice by feminist and queer scholars. We draw from our own and from several prominent works to illuminate how qualitative data analysis furthers feminist and queer intellectual projects in criminology.

What are feminist and queer perspectives?

Although feminist and queer perspectives share emancipatory agendas, they come in many forms, in both dialogue and divergence with one another (Jagose, 2009; Showden, 2012; Stein, 2008; Valocchi, 2005). Sociologist Christine Williams (2000, p. 9) describes academic feminism as “a general approach to understanding the status of women in society.” Notwithstanding the range of theoretical and methodological approaches brought to bear on the question, she observes that, “all feminist social scientists share the goals of understanding the sources of inequality and advocating changes to empower women” (Williams, 2000, p. 9). This is certainly true in feminist criminology. Especially in the American context, feminist criminology typically treats the category “woman” as an “anchor point” (McCall, 2005, p. 1785), with research oriented toward understanding and ameliorating the gender inequalities and other social disparities that shape crime, victimization, and justice practices (see Miller & Mullins, 2006).

On the other hand, the emerging field of queer criminology thus far demonstrates deeper intellectual roots in the poststructuralist turn than are found in social science–based feminism generally (O’Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012), and feminist criminology specifically. This
includes poststructuralism’s “anticategorical critiques of categorization” (McCall, 2005, p. 1779), with some queer theorists’ insistence that the reliance on categories—such as male/female and straight/gay—“reinforce[s] the notion of minority as ‘other’ and create[s] binary oppositions which leave the ‘center’ intact” (Stein & Plummer, 1994, p. 182).

Feminist perspectives in criminology can trace their roots to at least three primary sources, each with implications for how the qualitative study of crime and justice is approached, and with insights for feminism’s relations with queer perspectives in and beyond criminology. First are the radical feminist efforts of second-wave feminism in the mid-twentieth century. Emerging simultaneously with early gay rights activism and often forged by lesbian feminist thinkers, radical feminist theory was grounded in a critique of compulsory heterosexuality, including its harmful impact on women’s experiences of marriage and intimate relationships, child rearing and domestic responsibilities, and exposure to sexual and other gender-based violence (Brownmiller, 1975; Firestone, 1970; Rich, 1980). Of her famed 1980 essay, “Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence,” Adrienne Rich (2003, p. 11) later explained that one of her goals was, “to encourage heterosexual feminists to examine heterosexuality as a political institution which disempowers women.”

This is a challenge feminist criminologists have taken seriously. Such concerns are infused in feminist perspectives on women’s pathways into and participation in crime, experiences of incarceration, desistance processes, and explanations for violence against women, among others, and are especially prominent in qualitative research. Yet Rich also notes that she wrote the essay to “challenge the erasure of lesbian existence” in feminist scholarship (2003, p. 11). Indeed, contemporary queer theorists, despite their epistemological and ontological distances from radical feminism, continue to interrogate the ways in which feminist attention to gender is—some claim inherently—“indentured to heteronormative conceptual models” (Jagose, 2009, p. 165). By and large, this remains the case in feminist criminology, a point of departure that queer criminology intervenes upon, as we discuss further below (see Peterson & Panfil, 2014).

Despite its significant insights, radical feminism faced fundamental critiques of its essentialist treatment of the category “woman,” most notably by three bodies of scholarly thought: poststructuralism (which, as noted, has heretofore had relatively minimal impact in American feminist criminology); feminist social constructionism and other sociologically based theories of gender and gender inequality (Connell, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987; see also O’Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012); and critical race feminism, which interrogates radical and other feminisms’ erasure of differences and calls, instead, for intersectional approaches that recognize the interdependence of hierarchies of gender, race, class, age, and sexuality, among others, in systems of oppression (Collins, 1990; Davis, 1983; Lorde, 1984/2007; Spelman, 1988).

These latter two bodies of work have been particularly influential in the evolution of qualitative research in feminist criminology, and often are integrated with the topical foci introduced by radical feminism without its essentialist assumptions (Jones, 2010; Maher, 1997; McCorkel, 2013; Miller, 2001, 2008; Potter, 2008; Richie, 1995, 2012). Sociological influences on feminist criminology are reflected in our understanding that the social world is systematically shaped by relations of sex and gender, with these operating at all levels of society, including individual, interactional, organizational, and structural (see Connell, 2009; Risman, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987). As Daly and Chesney-Lind (1988, p. 504) sum up, “gender and gender relations order social life and social institutions in fundamental ways.” Thus, feminist assessments of criminological research include critiques of its focus on males to the exclusion of females, its lack of attention to the ways that crime commission is both gendered and is a performance of gender, and, occasionally, its assumption of heterosexuality among offenders (Collier, 1998; Messerschmidt, 1993; Miller & Mullins, 2006), with feminist research an attempt to intervene upon these limitations.
Where poststructuralism has had an impact is in feminist criminologists’ recognition that gender also operates within “the discursive fields by which women [and men] are constructed or construct themselves” (Daly & Maher, 1998, p. 4). Consequently, feminist perspectives examine how taken-for-granted ideologies about gender are profoundly embedded in social life and often include common-sense notions of fundamental difference between women and men, coupled with the perception of maleness as the normative standard. These deeply engrained assumptions are regularly found in criminological research and theory; in the policies, practices, and operation of organizations and institutions; and in the interpretive frameworks women and men bring to their daily lives, all of which are consequential for understanding crime and justice. Some feminist scholars insist that it is through the enactment of these gendered meanings that the most persistent, yet often invisible, facets of gender inequality are reproduced, making these important areas for qualitative inquiry (see Miller, 2014a; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

Intersectional frameworks, which consider the interlocking nature of race, class, and gender oppression and recognize that women’s experiences of gender vary according to their position in racial and class hierarchies, have also become increasingly influential in feminist criminology (see Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Potter, 2006). The growing number of qualitative studies addressing the intersections of gender with other axes of inequality, and their consequences for crime and justice, highlight that feminist scholarship must fully engage with the constraints and privileges that emerge as a result of such intersections (see Jones, 2010; Maher, 1997; Miller, 2008; Miller & Carbone-Lopez, 2014; Richie, 2012). As Jones (2009, p. 90) notes, “on its own, [the analysis of gender] is not likely to reveal how the social contexts in which . . . interactions take place are shaped by the ‘messy’ intersection of various systems of oppression.” Here as well, though, heteronormative assumptions tend to dominate (see Miller, 2014b).

How, then, are queer perspectives related to feminist perspectives? Jagose (2009, p. 160) notes that, “before there was queer theory—that is, before queer theory became the most recognizable name for anti-identitarian antinormative critique—feminist scholarship had already initiated a radically antifoundationalist interrogation of the category of women.” Traces of this can be seen in feminist criminologists’ adoption of social constructionist perspectives, and in the influence of intersectionality in feminist criminological research. Yet, to a greater extent than in queer criminology, social categories of people—women and men, and even raced women and men—remain as central to research within feminist criminology as the study of gender “as a fundamental category of historical analysis and understanding” (Abelove, Barale, & Halperin, 1993, p. xv).

In addition to providing a critique of the heteronormativity that pervades criminological thinking, queer perspectives push for the destabilization of categories in ways that feminist criminology has thus far been unwilling to go. Queer has gone through several iterations in its lifetime, beginning first with meanings such as counterfeit, odd, or eccentric. By the early twentieth century, it had shifted to a derogatory term for gay and lesbian people, sometimes coupled with violence and rejection; it was then reclaimed by some segments of LGBTQ populations for its self-identification possibilities (Brontsema, 2004), and has now become an intellectual term to reference deconstruction. Although queer need not refer to sexual orientation, but rather to anything outside normative categories, much colloquial usage and queer theorizing is indeed about those who do not fit into society’s restrictive gender and sexuality binaries. Some definitions of queer simultaneously acknowledge its role as a signifier of nonnormative gender or sexuality and its refusal to be limited. Sedgwick (1993, p. 8; emphases in original) notes that queer symbolizes, “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.” Other scholars
are more willing to place queer along any axis that does not intersect with normativity. As Halperin (1995, p. 62; emphases in original) so famously asserted, “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.” Butler (1993, p. 19) offers, “If the term ‘queer’ is to be a site of collective contestation . . . it will have to remain that which is . . . never fully owned.”

In other words, “queers” (LGBTQ or nonnormative people) may exist and identify themselves as such; someone or something unconventional may be “queer” (though not necessary LGBTQ); and paradigms, such as criminology and/or qualitative methodology, can be “queered.” Queer can, therefore, exist as a noun, an adjective, and a verb. Queer theory is perhaps best conceived of as a sensibility, an orientation, or a disposition, with its goal of destabilizing normative categories. Plummer (2011, p. 203) remarks:

What seems to be at stake, then, in any queering of qualitative research is not so much a methodological style as a political and substantive concern with gender, heteronormativity, and sexualities. Its challenge is to bring stabilized gender and sexuality to the forefront of analyses in ways they are not usually advanced and that put under threat any ordered world of gender and sexuality. This is just what is, indeed, often missing from much ethnographic or life story research.

Queer perspectives can also be transformative: “the possibility for alternative social worlds—their ethical constructions, politics and intimacies—materialise out of the destabilised and shifting fractures in dominant discourses” (Detamore, 2010, p. 172).

What could this possibly have to do with criminology? As criminological work with LGBTQ populations increases, and critical methodologies question taken-for-granted ways of doing, knowing, and being, queer criminology has become an identifiable subfield within the discipline. Most self-proclaimed queer criminological work includes some level of deconstructionist critique, not only of normative categories of sexuality and gender, but of traditional criminological theories, frameworks, and methods. Furthermore, much of this work has (and arguably should have) goals of reducing injustice, inequality, and invisibility, especially for LGBTQ populations (Ball, Buist, & Woods, 2014; Peterson & Panfil, 2014). Although a fairly recent development within criminology, pioneering queer criminological works (though their authors may not have used this term) were focused on lesbian and gay people’s experiences with victimization, including surviving heterosexist violence (e.g., Comstock, 1991; Herek & Berrill, 1992). Some of the earliest calls to queer criminology originated from cultural and/or feminist criminologists, who not only urged investigation into gay and lesbian people’s criminalization, social worlds, and meanings, but also urged criminology to face the ways its theories, conceptualizations of offenders, and justice system responses have been heterosexualized (Collier, 1998; Ferrell & Sanders, 1995; Messerschmidt, 1997). Just as feminist criminology now incorporates girls and women as victims, offenders, and criminal justice professionals, so develops queer criminology.

The nexus of feminist, queer, and qualitative epistemologies and methodologies

Both feminist and queer frameworks are systems for knowledge production, but also political orientations with a goal of social progress (Harding & Norberg, 2005; see also Browne & Nash, 2010), including the creation of knowledge that empowers marginalized people and groups (Sprague, 2005). Harding (1987, p. 1) was the first to ask explicitly, “Is there a feminist method?”
This led to articulations and considerable debates about what “counts” as feminist research (see DeVault, 1999; Fonow & Cook, 1991, 2005). Epistemologically, Harding identified three overarching perspectives: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint, and what she later referred to as postmodern epistemologies (Harding, 1991; see Doucet & Mauthner, 2006, for an overview). A feminist empiricist approach considers, “how feminist values can inform empirical inquiry, and how scientific methods can be improved in light of feminist demonstrations of sex bias in traditional positivistic practices of science” (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006, p. 37). Feminist empiricism emphasizes the role that value judgments play in research and positions researchers as specific “epistemological communities” of “knowers,” rather than individuals with unmediated access to truth (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006, p. 37). Standpoint epistemologies go a step further, challenging researchers’ positions as legitimate knowers, and arguing instead that marginalized groups have privileged access to knowledge as a result of their “particular socially situated perspective,” i.e., their standpoint (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006, p. 37; for examples, see Collins, 1990; Smith, 1987). Postmodern epistemologies, on the other hand, challenge the existence of stable, unified categories—calling into question the privileging of any particular standpoint.

Queer scholars grapple with similar questions. Just as queer is itself a fluid and contested term, there are many ways to produce queer knowledge. Similar to feminist empiricist approaches, many queer projects seek to remedy the lack of empirical research on LGBTQ populations, and are explicitly designed to generate insights for policy and practice that can improve the lives of queer people (see Dwyer, 2014; Messinger, 2014). Plummer (2011) even argues that queer theory could be seen as a form of standpoint theory. This is perhaps not surprising, as it has its roots in feminist theory, lesbian and gay studies, and identity politics (Jones & Adams, 2010). Yet differences of opinion exist as to whether recognizable identity categories should be retained, if in fact their normalization and reproduction are problematic and have historically perpetuated inequality. In the first anthology to explicitly examine whether there are queer methods and methodologies, Browne and Nash (2010, p. 1) ask:

If, as queer thinking argues, subjects and subjectivities are fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming, how can we gather “data” from those tenuous and fleeting subjects using the standard methods of data collection. . . . What meanings can we draw from, and what use can we make of, such data when it is only momentarily fixed and certain?

There is some doubt that the use of identity categories within existing scholarly fields—which have discounted queer lives—could ever produce positive results for queer populations (Ball, 2014). However, as with feminist scholars’ use of categories as “anchor points” (McCall, 2005, p. 1785), some queer scholars argue that identity categories such as sexuality and gender should be thought of as relational concepts that hold salience in individuals’ lives, just as other statuses such as race, class, and location do (see Panfil, 2014; Woods, 2014).

It should be clear, then, that queer and feminist methodologies share a number of similarities. Qualitative methods, such as ethnography, in-depth interviews, and focus groups, are typical and logical for queer projects, just as they are utilized for feminist, LGBTQ, antiracist, and postcolonial projects (Browne & Nash, 2010; Plummer, 2011). As feminist theory critically interrogates the gendered subject, queer theory seeks to disrupt stable understandings of sexual and gendered subjects. Furthermore, attributes such as an ethic of care, a politics of recognition and respect, and a commitment to democratizing values that aim to reduce human suffering, in light of individuals’ inherent worth and right to equality, could very well describe queer, feminist, and qualitative approaches (Plummer, 2011, p. 198).
Similar practical and ethical concerns are pertinent to both feminist and queer qualitative methodologies. For example, early treatises on feminist methodology, particularly the use of in-depth interview techniques, were situated in women’s standpoint theory (Oakley, 1981). These were grounded in feminist goals of “giving voice” to women and their experiences, which had historically been silenced (see DeVault, 1999; Smith, 1987). Initially, feminist scholars held relatively uncritical assumptions that, when women interviewed women, their shared experiences as women would result in identification, rapport, and, consequently, authentic revelation of “women’s experiences.” These rather romanticized assumptions have since been problematized by both feminist and queer scholars, with careful attention given to the need for reflexivity, including consideration of power differentials between researchers and those researched, including the power of representation (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Presser, 2005). Giving voice to marginalized groups remains an important goal of feminist and queer criminologists (see Panfil, forthcoming; Sprague, 2005; Whitely, 2014), though with critical understandings of its challenges.

Now, when the questions are asked—must feminist research be conducted by women, and must queer research be conducted by nonheterosexually identified people?—the answer to both questions is, of course, a resounding no. Shared social statuses may allow for easier formation of rapport and a certain amount of shared knowledge that can make interviews more productive (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Sprague, 2005; Zinn, 1979), but can also stifle researchers’ quests for participants’ own meanings, if they assume they know how their participants think, feel, and act (Gorman-Murray, Johnston, & Waitt, 2010; Panfil, forthcoming). Indeed, because a number of social statuses intersect in individuals’ lives—including gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, nation, and age, as well as individual life trajectories and experiences (Grenz, 2005; Presser, 2005; Song & Parker, 1995; Veroff & DiStefano, 2002)—there is no universal “women’s experience,” just as there is no universal “gay experience” (and there is certainly no universal “queer experience”). There is, thus, no shared standpoint between researchers and research participants.

Furthermore, not even qualitative methods allow unmediated access to pure and objective “truth” (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Miller & Glassner, 2011; Silverman, 2006); narratives are constituted in situ, and are necessarily products of relational processes occurring in circuits of social power between researchers and participants (Gorman-Murray, Johnston, & Waitt, 2010; Presser, 2005). Smith (1990) claims that an insistence on objectivity can both obscure and reproduce dominant groups’ power. Echoing these concerns, but extending them to researchers’ accountability, Harding and Norberg (2005) suggest that so-called “value-free” research is an ideal that is both unachievable and undesirable, for it cannot hold itself accountable for any social consequences resulting from the research. Even the passive voice found in so many research products hides the researcher’s agency and social power; by contrast, active voice and “I” statements can be held accountable and make the researcher visible (Sprague, 2005). Feminist and queer qualitative methodologists thus argue that the reflexivity of the work is one of its strengths.

What, then, can feminist and queer scholars accomplish with qualitative research for criminological knowledge building? More specifically, what do qualitative methods offer for our attempts to attend to the complexities and challenges we have described? In general, qualitative research is oriented toward the creation of contextual understandings of social worlds, emphasizing complexities in the meanings and social processes that operate within them. Because qualitative interview-based research still predominates, in feminist scholarship (O’Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012) as in qualitative criminology (Copes, Brown, & Tewksbury, 2011), we direct our comments primarily to this methodological approach. From our point of
view, the strength of qualitative interviews lies in what they are: reflective accounts of social life offered from the points of view of research participants. These accounts not only provide information about the “who, what, when, where, and how” of social phenomena, they are also valuative statements (Scott & Lyman, 1968) that provide insight into the “ways in which people organize views of themselves, of others, and of their social worlds” (Orbuch, 1997, p. 455). As such, narrative accounts provide two intertwined kinds of data: descriptive evidence of the nature of the phenomenon under investigation—including the contexts and situations in which it emerges—as well as insights into the cultural frames that people use to make sense of their experiences (Miller & Glassner, 2011). Both are especially useful for feminist and queer theorizing in criminology.

Interview data, in which people describe and explain their behaviors and experiences, help us identify and understand social processes and patterns at the interactional and situational levels, as well as the meanings people attribute to their experiences and behaviors (see Charmaz, 2006; Spradley, 1979; but see Silverman, 2006). In criminology, this includes, for example, examining in situ motivations for behaviors such as offending or desistance (Maruna, 2001), situational analyses of crime events (Miller, 1998; Mullins & Wright, 2003), social processes associated with crime, criminally involved groups, or the streets (Maher, 1997), as well as life-history analyses that examine pathways into and out of offending (Giordano, 2010). As such, qualitative research can provide us with ground-level understandings of crime and justice, with specific attention to how gender and sexuality, along with other social positions, shape crime-related processes and outcomes. In-depth interviews are even suited to exploring how meanings are constructed together, including in the interview itself (see Miller, 2010; Presser, 2005).

Given feminist scholars’ concerns with how language and discourse “reflect and help constitute” gendered meaning systems (Cameron, 1998, p. 946), the analysis of in-depth interviews thus offers an especially useful tool for feminist scholars in simultaneously examining both social patterns and social meanings associated with gender, inequality, and crime. Recognizing interview accounts as evidence of both the nature of the phenomenon under investigation and the cultural frameworks that individuals use to interpret their experiences means that, in one’s analysis, juxtaposing these facets of accounts—even, or especially, when they appear incongruous—can be useful for developing theoretical insight. Moreover, examining the cultural frames that individuals use to make sense of their social worlds makes interview accounts particularly useful for deconstructing the intertwined ideologies about gender and sexuality that guide social practices, including the strong tendency to view both through individualistic and binary lenses. Qualitative interview data are thus particularly well suited for addressing the goals of feminist and queer criminologists for understanding how gender, sexuality, and attendant inequalities shape the experiences of those involved in crime.

Likewise, because queer(ed) research is concerned with identities, performativity, processes, and meanings, qualitative approaches are especially fruitful, but not the only option. Browne and Nash (2010, p. 4) note, “‘Queer research’ can be any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations.” However, the sheer process of “queer(y)ing” quantitative research or attempting a deconstructive project through quantitative research is problematic owing to queer projects’ intrinsic foci on destabilizing categories. After surveying more than 7,000 LGBTQ adults, Browne (2008) lamented the fact that, for statistical purposes, all of the sexual identity variation outside recognizable categories of “gay/lesbian” and “heterosexual” had to be collapsed into a “bisexual/other” category. Because this process did not challenge or subvert taken-for-granted identity categories, but instead reinforced and normalized them, Browne describes that she essentially “sold her queer soul.” We had a similar experience in our recent data collection.
with several hundred urban LGBTQ youth and allies with regard to creating an “other” category of sexual identity (that subsumed identities such as queer, pansexual, and bisexual), but also saw other unexpected patterns emerge. For example, several of our respondents reported their gender identities as transgender and male, but reported their sexual identities as lesbian, with females as their primary sexual partners. Perhaps these young people embody being transgender as crossing gender boundaries (as the word *trans*gender itself would suggest) and not totally negating their experience as female or as lesbian; alternatively, the words “straight/heterosexual” may have no salience for their identity, even if that is how society might define male–female romantic pairings. With follow-up in-depth interviews, we will be able to explore these meanings in participants’ lives in ways that our pen-and-paper survey could not.

**Feminist and queer approaches to qualitative data analysis**

As we note above, feminist and queer perspectives now routinely adopt intersectional frameworks, which require understanding of individuals’ experiences and social life at the nexus of multiple identities and social positions. McCall (2005) suggests there are three major methodological approaches to studying intersectionality, each of which is defined by how analytical categories are used to explore the complexity of intersectionality. Each also entails its own strategies to manage complexity, to render analyses intelligible. *Anticategorical complexity* deconstructs analytical categories, not only to interrogate the process of boundary making, but also to avoid reproducing the inequalities that are inherent in the categorization process, which focuses on difference. The *intercategorical approach*, although perhaps most vulnerable to this pitfall because it relies on categorization, uses categories strategically by comparatively exploring relationships of inequality across social groups and “focus[ing] on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories” (McCall, 2005, p. 1786). Finally, the *intracategorical complexity* approach focuses on “particular social groups at neglected points of intersection . . . in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups” (p. 1774), while maintaining a critical stance toward social categories. McCall’s typology is a useful lens through which to view feminist and queer qualitative research.

*Anticategorical complexity* is the most successful of the three approaches in achieving complexity, but is the one utilized least often in qualitative criminological work, given the limited influence of poststructuralism within the field. Some queer criminologists have argued for its utility (see Ball, 2014), as it is the approach most consistent with a queer theoretical perspective, but it also constitutes a minority of queer criminological work. We focus the remainder of our discussion, then, on the two approaches that are best represented in qualitative criminology. The multigroup *intercategorical complexity* approach is systematically comparative and focuses on structural relationships. Although it is most typical of quantitative studies concerned with comparing experiences of crime and justice across social groups (see, for example, Heimer & De Coster, 1999; Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Kramer, 1998), it is also represented among qualitative criminological research (see, for example, Bottcher, 2001; Contreras, 2009; Harding, 2010; Maher, 1997; Maruna, 2001; Mullins & Wright, 2003), though it does not make up the majority of such work. That designation belongs to the *intracategorical complexity* approach, which is most popularly employed in qualitative criminology (see, for example, Bourgois, 1995; Collier, 1998; Carbone-Lopez & Miller, 2012; Copes & Hochstetler, 2003; Mullins, 2006). In this section, we present examples of both intercategorical and intracategorical approaches for studying complexity and illustrate how rigorous qualitative analytic techniques are utilized to explore inequality.

Some conventions of qualitative data analysis hold, regardless of how categories are utilized. Important to feminist and queer qualitative methodologies, as with all qualitative methodologies,
is the use of grounded theory techniques in data coding and analyses. These methods allow for theories to be constructed directly from the data themselves (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). During the process of coding, “we attach labels to segments of data that depict what each segment is about. Coding distills data, sorts them, and gives us a handle for making comparisons with other segments of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3). Especially in the early stages of a project, open coding helps themes emerge from the data, without the researcher imposing preconceived notions on the patterns within it. There is no substitute for reading the data carefully (and repeatedly) in order to identify important concepts and patterns.

A critical part of coding and analysis is paying close attention to research participants’ unique language and speech patterns (Spradley, 1979). Charmaz (2006, p. 55) refers to these as in vivo codes—words or phrases that condense and distill significant analytic concepts, to provide significant insights into social worlds or processes. Social worlds also encompass identity construction and group memberships; furthermore, certain populations or social networks may have their own lexicons. Take, for example, extensively studied gang and prison argots, or the vernacular of groups who developed an extensive set of verbal codes to avoid being detected and punished, including queer communities. The connection between identity and language may be especially salient for LGBTQ populations, who may spend a considerable period of their lives possessing no self-referential lexicon to describe their gender and sexual identities, simply because they lie outside society’s heteronormative expectations or gender binaries (see, for example, Miller & Nichols, 2012; Perry & Dyck, 2014). Gendered meanings, as well, are routinely conveyed through language usage (Cameron, 1998), making these facets of data analysis a critical component of feminist and queer qualitative research.

**Studying intercategorical complexities**

The second author’s book *Getting Played* (Miller, 2008) took an intercategorical approach by explicitly comparing urban African American young women and young men to understand their experiences and interpretations of, and participation in, gender-based violence. A closer look at my analysis of one in vivo code illustrates the utility of intercategorical analyses. The insider term “play” and its iterations became central to my comparative analysis, and was even the basis of the book’s title. While analyzing interviews with urban African American youth about interactions between young women and young men, and their relation to gendered violence, I was struck by the common, varied, and gendered ways in which the term “play” entered into youths’ accounts. I carefully examined its usage to identify the actions it represented and the implicit meanings “play” attached to them. This led me to an analysis of the variety of ways that “play” claims are used to minimize the significance of behavioral patterns that are harmful to girls. For example:

Young men often downplayed the seriousness of sexual harassment by couching it in terms of “play.” Antwoin said, “Yeah, I grabbed a girl bootie a couple of times . . . we was playing.” Such touching, he said, was best understood as, “like playing around. Sometimes the boys’ll be messing with the girls and they’ll just grab they bootie or something.” Similarly, asked why he and his friends touched on girls, Curtis said, “I don’t know, just to have fun. Just playing.”

“Just playing,” however, was a characterization young women roundly rejected. Instead, to quote Nicole, girls found boys’ sexually harassing behaviors to be “too much playing.” Katie complained:

Most of the time boys and girls get into it because boys, they play too much. . . . Like they try to touch you and stuff, or try to talk about you, or put you down in front of they
friends to make them feel better. . . . Just talk about you or something like in front of they friends so they can laugh.

Katie’s comments tapped into an important feature of boys’ play claims: The primary audience for this “play” was other young men. As Anishika argued, young men’s “humor” was for the benefit of their friends, and at the expense of the young woman:

They just tryin’ to be like this person and that person. They already know, they know what’s right. They know right from wrong. But when it’s a lot of ‘em, they think that stuff is cute, calling girls B’s [bitches] and rats and all that stuff. They think that stuff cute, and some of these girls think that stuff cute. But it’s not cute.

In fact, young men’s accounts are indicative of the role male peers played in facilitating young men’s behaviors. Thus, Frank explained, “some people, when they see [you touch on a girl], they’ll laugh or they give you some props. They give you like a little five or something like that. That’s what the dudes do.” Thus, a number of girls said boys simply used play claims as an excuse for their behavior, and described explicitly rejecting these claims. For example, angry after a young man made sexual comments about her, Destiny said he responded to her anger by saying, “you ain’t even gotta get that serious. I was just playin’ wit’ you.” She replied, “I don’t care. I don’t want you playin’ with me like that, stop playin’ with me like that.” And Nicole explained, “sometimes boys make it like, act like it’s funny. But it’s not. ‘Cause you touchin’ a girl and she don’t wanna be touched. So don’t touch me, period. Don’t even think about touchin’ me.”

Indeed, despite young men’s routine use of play claims, their own accounts belied the notion that their behaviors were simply intended as harmless fun. For example, several young men said part of the fun in taunting girls was getting an angry response. Moreover, several young men described treating girls in a derogatory way specifically to demarcate their (male) space and make it clear to the girl that she wasn’t welcome. One additional factor belies young men’s characterizations of their behavior as “just play.” Asked when harassing behaviors took place or whether they were directed at particular girls, a number of young men described targeting young women they deemed to be “stuck up,” unwilling to show sexual or romantic interest, or otherwise unimpressed with the boy. Curtis said:

We’ll see a girl in like a short skirt or short shorts, and we be kind of talking to her, and she don’t, she ain’t giving nobody no play. So we just get to playing with her, touching on her butt and all that.

(Miller, 2008, pp. 82–87)

This example illustrates how intercategorical qualitative research can be used to investigate “relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups, as imperfect and ever changing as they are . . . [by tak[ing] those relationships as the center of analysis” (McCall, 2005, pp. 1784–1785). Another example of an intercategorical approach to studying the complexity of intersectionality is Pascoe’s (2007) ethnography of River High. Although not an explicitly criminological study, it is a qualitative project with theoretical roots in gender and sexuality studies and shares important parallels with other urban ethnographies within criminology. Pascoe’s work focuses on adolescents’ constructions of masculinity by analyzing the talk and behavior of various groups of students. For example, she details the “fag talk” of (mostly white) heterosexual male students, in which anyone who transgresses gender norms or
is otherwise different is chastised for being a “fag,” which was also coupled with sexually explicit, misogynistic talk and unwanted touching of female peers, to construct masculine and heterosexual personas.

By contrast, males of color could engage in stereotypically effeminate activities, such as dancing and giving heightened attention to fashion and grooming, and instead could be read as “cool” within the context of urban hip-hop style, but were still viewed as a threat to the social order of the school. Pascoe also explores the experiences of the young women who, through activities such as sports and readiness to fight, embodied masculinity and were thus feared and respected. Throughout, she describes the strategies employed by the self-identified gay, lesbian, and bisexual students of River High, who navigated space in diverse ways, including fighting back, fitting in, dropping out, and making their own space by forming and participating in a Gay/Straight Alliance group on campus. Studying in a setting with some level of racial diversity and attending to sexual identities and groups beyond the heteronormative, Pascoe’s intercategorically complex approach allowed for a comparative, multigroup study across intersecting “categories” of race, sexuality, and gender.

**Studying intracategorical complexities**

Whereas studies that take an intercategorical approach explicitly compare across social groups, a strength of taking an approach based on intracategorical complexities lies in its ability to “uncover the differences and complexities of experiences embodied in that [group] location” (McCall, 2005, p. 1782). Consider, for example, Nikki Jones’s (2010) *Between Good and Ghetto*, an ethnographic study of African American girls’ negotiations with inner-city violence. As the title of her work suggests, Jones explores “the uniquely gendered challenge” (2010, p. 7) such young women face in balancing mainstream gender expectations with standards of gendered respectability unique to the African American community, and both simultaneous with the behavioral expectations of the “code of the street” (Anderson, 1999) in urban communities with high rates of violence. The young women she studied navigated daily life in economically distressed, racially segregated neighborhoods by learning to protect themselves, whether they identified as “good girls,” “fighters,” or were positioned somewhere in between.

The girls I met knew quite well the situations in which presenting oneself as “aggressive,” “good,” or “pretty” paid off. . . . They strategically choose from a variety of gender, race, and class displays depending on the situation, the public identity they are invested in crafting, and in service of a survival project that has historically defined the lives of poor, Black women and girls in the United States.

(2010, p. 92)

Jones is able to uncover “diversity, variation, and heterogeneity” (McCall, 2005, p. 1782) in the experiences of young women socially positioned at the “intersection of multiple categories” (McCall, 2005, p. 1781), highlighting the utility of intracategorical approaches.

In addition, qualitative criminological projects focusing on the complexities of the lived experience of certain social groups (consistent with the intracategorical approach) are still well positioned for exploring those groups’ diversity and relationships with other groups. The importance of in vivo codes in such analyses is worth reiterating. In the first author’s study of gay gang- and crime-involved men (see Panfil, 2013), it became apparent that *fag/faggot* referenced a series of context-specific meanings, each with vastly different intentions and consequences. Although I had suspected that these words would arise in a project focusing on
constructions and negotiations of masculine and gay identities, I could not have predicted the importance of these words in how participants made sense of social interactions. Consistent with the inductive process of qualitative methods, I became more attuned to instances when participants referenced or actively used these words, and I began to explore how participants made sense of the exact same word under very different contexts.

In interviews alone, *fag/faggot* appeared more than 400 times, providing many examples for a descriptive and nuanced analysis of its varied social meanings. When used by heterosexual males, *fag/faggot* was not always interpreted as inherently derogatory by the gay men in my study. Although it could be used dismissively to address a person who was ridiculous in some way (“Quit bein’ a fag”), participants more often focused on discussing their negative reactions to *fag* as an epithet that marks and insults atypical gender presentation, same-sex affection, or gay symbolism (“Shut the fuck up, you little faggot”). The former use was irritating, but the latter, more aggressive use could (and often did) spark an altercation. Similar, though not completely analogous, gradations were evident in the use of *fag/faggot* among gay and bisexual men. *Fag* could be used as a social greeting for a fellow gay or bisexual man (“Whatchu doin’, fag?”), but also as a way to other and shame flamboyant gay men who were acting loud, dramatic, feminine, or generally “too gay” (“Fags is not my type”). It could even be used to describe stereotypically effeminate activities or grooming habits (“I don’t do that faggot shit”). Finally, gay men used the term in other forms to describe reactive behavior, such as acting in aggressive and flamboyant ways simultaneously to deal with conflict (“fagging out”). Thus, as a signal of its dynamic uses (as with “queer”), *fag/faggot* was employed as a noun, an adjective, and even a verb.

Criminological literature on bias crime victimization would suggest that at least one of these uses of *fag/faggot* is familiar to criminologists: that of an anti-gay slur that is associated with heterosexist violence and marginalization. Other linguistic attributes, such as contradictions between in-group and out-group usages, are likely recognizable to many social scientists. However, an in-depth analysis of *fag/faggot* reveals insights far beyond its status as an epithet that has been occasionally and situationally reclaimed; it also indicates pervasive societal expectations that demand normative masculinity and discourage femininity among men, regardless of sexual orientation. That is, even among a group whose members have been called fags in an attempt to mandate their behavior, homophobic and misogynistic uses of *fag/faggot* persist. Set largely against a backdrop of negative perceptions of gay men, calling another gay man a fag was one way to create and enforce boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate behavior and thus construct a respectable gay identity.

**Conclusion**

As demonstrated in this chapter, feminist and queer perspectives have much to contribute to qualitative criminology, given the natural affinities of their epistemologies. Although feminist criminology has a lengthier history in the field, queer criminology has already begun to provide important new insights, a trend we foresee continuing. The ability of qualitative methods to support critical, reflexive, and even deconstructive projects means that scholars pursuing feminist and queer criminological work will continue to recognize their suitability, regardless of how researchers choose to conceptualize social categories or identities. Indeed, rigorous qualitative research of gendered and heteronormative phenomena, as well as the lived experience of diverse groups of people, already has import for a broader criminological audience: In illuminating gender- and sexuality-based inequality, this research provides insight into the meanings individuals ascribe to these phenomena and how offending, victimization, and criminal networks are structured by them.
Looking forward, our hope is that the wealth of insights queer perspectives have to offer will continue to infuse feminist criminology and the mainstream of the field, qualitative and otherwise, just as feminist and intersectional perspectives have before them. Although feminist and queer perspectives have much in common, we have also traced notable divergences between them. These should serve to highlight important limitations in feminist criminological thinking, including as reflected in qualitative research. Heteronormativity permeates criminology and criminal justice, including much feminist research. In nearly all of our theorizing, research, pedagogy, and practice, the field has been bound by assumptions about actors, acts, interactions, settings, and institutions that are normatively—and often invisibly—configured on the basis of a heterosexual social order. As such, the configurations and elisions on which our field is based distort how we think about crime and justice and what we know about crime and justice. As feminist research in criminology is coupled with the desire for our scholarship to contribute to social justice, queer perspectives are fundamental for the efficacy of these goals.

Moreover, the transformative potential of queer perspectives also comes from their deconstructionist foundations, though these have heretofore had limited impact in criminology, especially in the American context. Indeed, perhaps future feminist and queer criminologists will even pursue anticategorical projects. These will not only yield highly complex and nuanced analyses, but will undoubtedly challenge the standard practices and boundaries of our discipline. Combined with the inter- and intracategorical projects we have highlighted as most common among feminist and queer criminologists, such multifaceted strategies are poised to make the most of qualitative research in criminology, with the impact of a criminology that has been “queered” far reaching for understanding crime and justice and ameliorating their harms and inequities.

Note

1 In keeping with feminist and queer approaches, we use first-person pronouns here when describing our respective studies.

References


