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Embodied knowledge

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Embodied Knowledge

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Embodied knowledge situates intellectual and theoretical insights within the realm of the material world. Embodied knowledge is sensory; it highlights smell, touch, and taste as well as more commonly noted sights and sounds. Knowledge grounded in bodily experience encompasses uncertainty, ambiguity, and messiness in everyday life, eschewing sanitized detached measurement of discrete variables. Such an epistemology, or way of knowing, resists the Cartesian mind–body split that underlies Enlightenment philosophy and its persistent remnants, including the scientific method and the glorification of objectivity. Embodied knowledge is inherently and unapologetically subjective, celebrating—rather than glossing over—the complexities of knowledge production. Fieldwork, interviewing, writing, and other qualitative methods involve embodied practices performed by actors occupying specific standpoints or positions within cultures. The researcher's body—where it is positioned, what it looks like, what social groups or classifications it is perceived as belonging to—matters deeply in knowledge formation.

The normative erasure of researchers' and participants' bodies from conventional disembodied accounts of qualitative research yields deceptively tidy accounts of data gathering and analysis. Research reports typically follow strictly scientific conventions that obscure the author's agency via passive voice (e.g., “data were collected ...”) or represent a sanitized “I” that reports completed actions without any thick description of the bodies involved. The resulting invisibility of bodies in accounts of qualitative research shapes our understanding of interaction and meaning-making in real-world contexts. Feminist researchers contend that such writing conventions reaffirm the mind–body split and the association of males and masculinity with mind and the association of females and femininity with body. Western cultures deeply privilege the mind over the body, positing a sharp distinction between mind, equated with self, and body, the (potentially unruly) property of the (higher) mind. An alternative perspective blurs the boundary between the mind and body. For Trinh Min-ha, the body is not a possession of higher mind to be manipulated and controlled; rather, the body and self are one, and that one generates inherently embodied knowledge. With the “narrative turn” in social sciences, health, and education, positivist assumptions about objectivity have been decentered in favor of realistic positioning of scholars as imperfect, embodied social actors. Edited collections and journals that focus on interpretive methodology, such as *Qualitative Inquiry* and *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, publish embodied knowledge in narrative and interpretive research, reflecting what sociologist Laurel Richardson called “creative analytic practices.” Rather than apologizing for subjectivity or simply stating one's “biases,” qualitative researchers can generate rich accounts of embodied knowledge both through using creative forms of representation, such as narratives, poetry, and autoethnography, and by including thick

description of bodily experience in mainstream research reports.

Laura L. Ellingson

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See also

- [Autoethnography](#)
- [Feminist Research](#)

Further Readings

Coffey, A. (1999). *The ethnographic self: Fieldwork and the representation of identity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ellingson, L. L. *Embodied knowledge: Writing researchers' bodies into qualitative health research*. (2006)., 16. 298–310.