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# Seeking a Research Method to Study Women Who Have Recovered from Trauma and Addiction that Combines Feminist Theory, Somatic Theory, Alternative Forms of Representation, and Social Justice

Sharon N. Stopforth  
*University of Calgary*

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## Seeking a Research Method to Study Women Who Have Recovered from Trauma and Addiction that Combines Feminist Theory, Somatic Theory, Alternative Forms of Representation, and Social Justice

### **Abstract**

The following paper attempts to find an approach to research that will best suit women who have recovered from addictions and trauma and consider themselves resilient. This approach will need to combine contemporary feminist theory, somatic theory, and alternative forms of representation/interpretation. The paper will begin by exploring the connection between postmodern feminist theory and somatic theory and what they both have to say about how we embody social conditions of gender through non-verbal interactions. Research will then be examined that captures the non-verbal aspects of being in the world and how this intersects with the postmodern turn. Finally, in combining postmodernism, embodiment, and alternative forms of representation, cutting edge research will be explored that takes embodiment to the next level: social action.

### **Keywords**

Postmodern Feminism, Somatic Theory, Body Psychotherapy, Non-Verbal Data, Women, Social Action

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## **Seeking a Research Method to Study Women Who Have Recovered from Trauma and Addiction that Combines Feminist Theory, Somatic Theory, Alternative Forms of Representation, and Social Justice**

Sharon N. Stopforth  
University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

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*The following paper attempts to find an approach to research that will best suit women who have recovered from addictions and trauma and consider themselves resilient. This approach will need to combine contemporary feminist theory, somatic theory, and alternative forms of representation/interpretation. The paper will begin by exploring the connection between postmodern feminist theory and somatic theory and what they both have to say about how we embody social conditions of gender through non-verbal interactions. Research will then be examined that captures the non-verbal aspects of being in the world and how this intersects with the postmodern turn. Finally, in combining postmodernism, embodiment, and alternative forms of representation, cutting edge research will be explored that takes embodiment to the next level: social action. Keywords: Postmodern Feminism, Somatic Theory, Body Psychotherapy, Non-Verbal Data, Women, Social Action*

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With my background as a social worker and as a body psychotherapy practitioner, it is important to find a methodology that allows the expression of the body in combination with a social justice imperative. For my Ph.D. research, I will be looking at the significance of embodiment in the healing and resilience of women who have recovered from addictions and trauma. Those who would be interested in reading this paper would include: researchers and scholars interested in women's issues and oppression; somatic theorists and practitioners seeking a research method that allows for capturing non-verbal data; and social justice activists seeking a method that incites people to take action which gets at the root of their oppression. In writing this paper, I hope to demonstrate the connection of women's oppression to the body and the need to conduct research with women that allows for the combination of embodiment and social justice.

In the following paper, I will explore the intersection of postmodern feminist theory and somatic theory and what they both have to say about how we embody social conditions of gender through non-verbal interactions. Next, I will look at how research is being done to capture the non-verbal aspects of being in the world and how this intersects with the postmodern turn. Finally, combining postmodernism, embodiment, and alternative forms of representation, I will look to cutting edge research that takes embodiment to the next level: social action.

### **Post-Modern Feminist Theory and the Body**

The status of the body in Western intellectual tradition has mostly been one of absence or dismissal (Price & Shildrick, 1999). Theory has gone forward as though the body does not matter and that the thinking subject is disembodied. At the end of the twentieth century, feminism has seen its own project as connected to the body and has produced theory that attempts to take the body into account. How did the body become omitted in Western theory?

The body has been regarded with suspicion as the place of uncontrollable passions that might disrupt the search of truth and knowledge (Grosz, 1994). Plato imagined the body as the deceiver, its unreliable senses and wild passions continually tricking us into mistaking the temporary and imagined for the permanent and real (Spelman, 1999). The Enlightenment saw the splitting of the mind and body with Descartes' famous expression "I think therefore I am." The body was seen as a barrier to pure rational thought. Therefore, the body resides in a place of the excluded other, and can be set aside altogether.

The area of greatest use of postmodern study of the body is in the work of feminists stimulated by Michel Foucault (1980). Feminists have added to Foucault's task as one to *expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body* (p. 148) to one that includes patriarchy (Bartky, 2003). Foucault looks at discursive operations that create a body that can be manipulated, in what he calls the *docile body*. This has given feminists ideas that link the everyday body as it is lived and the system of corrective and rigid practices that shape and form its behaviour. Theorists such as Bordo (1993) and Bartky (2003) have analysed how the process of *surveillance* is involved in creating a set of *normativities* for the female body. According to Butler (1993), femininity is a creation, a way of performing gender standards. Bartky (2003) looks at those corrective practices that produce a body, which in gesture and appearance is seen as *feminine*. Such practices, she suggests, look to create a body of a certain size and general shape, a specific set of gestures, postures, and movements.

There are big differences in gesture, posture, movement and bodily styles: women are far more limited than men in the way they move and in how much space they take up. Young (1980) sees that women are cautious to move beyond a certain space which shows up as a hesitance to reach, stretch, and extend the body and is typically limited in posture and general style of movement. Women's space is not a field in which her body can be free but an area in which she feels she is enclosed (Wex, 1979). Women's body language of tension and tightness, is agreed to be a language of subordination (Bartky, 2003).

In modern societies, effects of power "circulate through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions" (Foucault, 1980, p. 151). Power now looks to change the minds of those individuals who might fight it, not only to punish or jail their bodies. This involves two things: a better control of the body's time and of its movements, a control that cannot be done without constant watch. Behaviour is then concerned with the making of isolated and self-controlling subjects (Dews, 1984). The techniques through which the *docile bodies* of women are created look at a control that is lasting and complete—a control of the body's size and shapes, its appetite, posture, gestures and general conduct in space, and the look of each of its noticeable parts. In this way, gender does not just stay on the surface of the body, in acting and doing, but becomes embodied. It becomes deeply part of who women are physically and psychologically (Connell, 1987).

Feminist theorists have made ties between disembodiment and gender oppression and how embodiment has usually been described by binary norms. Butler's (1993) idea of *performativity*, identity created through a process of repeated acts and gestures, suggests how our experienced and experiencing body is us. One of the important effects of performativity is that it gives a conceptual basis for how somatic interventions might change the somatic impact of oppression by giving other ways of performing embodied experience.

### Somatic Theory

Somatic theory puts forward that promoting embodied consciousness produces an altered state of consciousness (Johnson, 1983), which in turn can serve as resistance against oppression (Hanna, 1970). Some somatic practitioners argue that being comfortably connected

in a solid felt experience of the body in connection to other bodies is so different from the experience of *othering* or being *othered* that it gives a powerful change to hierarchical models of social power. Somatic theory as well as feminist theory would understand this process as having deep effects on social structures, based in the idea that social structures are created and copied through a web of social relations. When relationships change, body by body, so do the structures. By adding these ideas to the concept of performativity it is possible to suggest further effects for practice that speak to the question of how critically informed somatic theory might address the embodied parts of oppression. If the unequal categories upon which oppression rests are culturally constructed through regulative discourses (including nonverbal communication as discourse) (Manusov & Patterson, 2006), it is the repetition of acts shaped by these discourses that keeps the appearance of a whole identity. If oppression depends upon social categories of unequal power and status, the idea that identity is performative (that is, it depends not on natural but on repetitive acts) then changing those acts upsets the categories upon which social inequity rests on.

This is where feminist theory, somatic theory and social justice meet. To create a new identity, requires changing the repetitive acts, which then requires learning a new way to perform in the world. This is where socio-cultural research and alternative forms of representation/interpretation come into the picture: one in which the research process changes the consciousness of all those involved in an embodied way that leads to social action and social change.

### **Alternative Representations**

There is an increase of information in our current times with technology and communication systems. Research interest and the way we do research have also changed as a result of innovations such as multi-media, virtual reality, digital cameras, and video conferencing. Television, video, computers, and film are everywhere and there is great potential of using these media to present visual data in social science research. According to Rose (2007), the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western society. All the different sorts of technology and images offer views of the world; they render the world in visual terms. According to Fyfe and Law (1988), they claim that “depiction, picturing and seeing are ubiquitous features of the process by which most human beings come to know the world as it really is for them” (p. 2). Berger (1972) suggests that this is because “seeing comes before words” (p. 7). Stafford (1991) states that beginning in the eighteenth century, the construction of the world has become more and more based on images than written text. Jenks (1995) posits that “the modern world is very much a “seen” phenomenon” (p. 2).

Yet despite these changes, language, spoken and written, remains pre-eminent in research. According to Walker (1994), “we are at a disadvantage in qualitative studies in being constrained by language” (p. 72). Chaplin (1994) points out that social science has developed in such a way as to privilege verbal forms of communication. She states “our conventions about what counts as social science relate overwhelmingly to verbal discourse” (p. 207). Turner (1984) argues that a large reason for the marginalization of the visual in social science is as a result of the removal of the body as an analytic category from mainstream social theory. According to Fyfe and Law (1988), “when the body was deleted from social theory, so, too, was the eye” (p. 6). Also, according to Emmison and Smith (2000), “texts are associated with reason and higher mental faculties, images are seen as subversive, dangerous and visceral” (p. 14).

Anthropology and human geography have used visual images as research tools for as long as they have been established as academic disciplines. In anthropology, photographs,

diagrams, and film have been used and photos, maps, and diagrams have been used in the case of geography. The milestone study by Mead and Bateson (1942) led the way for visual anthropology; they used a process of photo-observation, combining images and text to share their insight into the cultural practices of the Balinese. From the 1960s to the early 1980s, debates focused on whether visual images and recordings could usefully support the observational project of social science (Collier & Collier, 1986). During this period many social scientists resisted the use of the visual in ethnography, claiming that as a data collection method, it was too subjective, unrepresentative, and unsystematic (Pink, 2007). Others responded that, under the right controls, the visual could contribute to a positivist social science as an objective recording method. The sub-discipline of visual sociology was correspondingly slow to engage with the visual beyond using it as a recording method and support for a word-based discipline. However, in the last ten years, an interest in the visual has resurfaced as a result of the post-modern turn that has led to demands for alternative representations of data (O'Neill, 2000).

Most recently, photovoice has been used where people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique (Wang & Buris, 1997). Wang, Cash, and Powers (2000) suggest it can be used for participatory action research, whereby people create and discuss photographs as a means of enabling personal and community change. Photovoice has three goals which are: to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through group discussion of photographs, and reach policy makers.

Elicited drawings are a useful adjunct to the traditional interview. In disability studies, Whiteford and Bennett (2009) urge greater attention to the embodiment of illness and disability, arguing that bodies present themselves with significant visual impact. An example of the use of visual methods in research is provided by Guillemin (2004). Guillemin used drawings to examine the ways in which mid-aged women understood and experienced heart disease and menopause. Guilleman is a vocal proponent of visual methods and believes the more traditional word-based social science tools such as field notes and transcripts "limit the extent to which, as researchers, we can explore the multiple ways in which illness is understood and enacted" (p. 273). She argues that drawings, when used properly, offer an effective method of gaining deeper insight into the multiple ways persons interpret their health conditions in particular places and times.

According to Banks (2001), the content of the image is the internal narrative and the external narrative is the social context that produced the image and the social relations within which the image is embedded at the time of viewing. The act of drawing was viewed as a dynamic process of interactive knowledge creation. Throop (2003) sees that drawing is a phenomenological experience and may be pre-contemplative in the sense that it captures the real-time reflective unfolding of social action. In a study done by Cross, Kabel, and Lysack (2006), they explored drawing as a visual method in disability research and saw drawings as a different sensory act distinct from speaking in order to access disability experience. Drawings offered insights into how people understand their disabilities and was seen as a process of knowledge production about disability itself. The process of drawing necessitates reflection and meaning-making on the part of the participant, the outcome of which is an image that depicts the way that the disability is understood at that point in time. This image is neither fixed nor stable but is a product of the set of social relations within that particular place and time.

A research method being used, rather than photography, to capture the elusive body making it visibly, audibly, and viscerally present, is the use of video diaries. This method resonates with living bodies and using video, helps develop a sensorially attentive research practice (Bates, 2013). Video diaries attend to bodily experience. Instead of distancing the

body through language or stripping it of its smells, tastes, textures, and pains, video offers the possibility of creating data in more physical and sensory registers (Stoller, 1997). The hints and traces of bodies shown in different acts and contexts provide a glimpse into the participant's life that would have been hard to access with other methods (Muir & Mason, 2012). Silverman (2007) notes that research interviews do not give researchers privileged access to how people behave. Pink (2003) states that research videos are not realistic representations but expressive performances of the everyday. Use of a video camera encourages research participants to engage physically with their material and sensory environments to show the ethnographer their experiences corporeally (Pink, 2009). Video diaries create a space within which bodies can be seen, heard, and felt. They generate a sensorially attentive research practice that captures a sense of the elusive body and illuminates some of the more invisible dimensions of everyday life (Pink & Leder Mackley, 2012). It provides the opportunity to generate different ways of knowing bodies, creates a more immediate empathy of bodily experience (Myrvang Brown, Dilley, & Marshall 2008), and attends to some of the details of embodied life that often escape talk and text-based approaches (Lorimer, 2010).

### **Embodied Socio-Cultural Research and Social Action**

In a study done by O'Neill (2002), conducted with women working as prostitutes, life stories were combined with performance using the ethno-mimesis research method. By focusing on life history work with women working as prostitutes and by experiencing women's stories represented through live art, O'Neill felt that this method would further understanding of the complexity of sex, sexualities, desire, violence, masculinities and the relevance of the body-the gendered body, the imaginary body, the performative body, the social body-within the context of modern times. In her approach, she used stills from a video/live art performance titled: *Not all the time...but mostly*. The video/live performance was put together with transcripts of interviews with women working as prostitutes fusing dance, text, sound and video.

Ethno-mimesis takes as its starting point sensory and performance ethnography. Performance ethnography provides an alternative representational format to print-based articles and papers to present results from ethnographic studies. Performance approaches consist of partial, plural, incomplete, and conditional understandings, not analytic distance or detachment, the traits of the textual and positivist paradigms (Conquergood, 1998). According to Becker, McCall, Morris, and Meshejian (1989), performance ethnography,

Deprivileges the omniscient author and reduces the dominance of the analytic voice; it makes it easier to communicate emotion and mood as well as facts; and it acknowledges openly, instead of trying to hide or apologize for, the constructed character of social science data. (p. 95)

Performance ethnography makes more available the argued and multiple versions of reality, and the unheard voices and experiences of individuals who may consider themselves powerless. The audience is brought into the action and invited/enabled to live through the experience "as though they are having the experiences and emotions the performers represent" (Becker, et. al., 1989, p. 93). Performance is an act of intervention, a method of resistance, a form of criticism, a way of revealing agency (Alexander, 2004). Performance becomes public pedagogy when it uses the aesthetic, the performative, to front the meeting of politics, institutional sites, and embodied experience. According to Schechner (1998), performances

“mark and bend identities, remake time and adorn and reshape the body, tell stories and allow people to play with behaviour that is restored, or twice-behaved” (p. 361).

Ethno-mimesis, as developed by Maggie O’Neill (2002), is reflexive and phenomenological but it is also critical and looks to praxis as in the theatre work of Boal (1985) and Mienczakowski (1995); the socio-cultural research of Fals Borda (1988) and the filmic work of Trinh (1991). For Trinh, writing and filmmaking produce alternative representations of women’s multiple realities and experiences. In undoing the realist ethnography project, she seeks to show that there is no single dominant vision of the world but rather multiple realities, multiple standpoints, and multiple meanings. O’Neill sees herself as located within Denzin’s sixth moment. Denzin (1997) states “Ethnography’s sixth moment is defined in part by a proliferation of interpretive epistemologies grounded in the lived experiences of previously excluded groups in the global, post-modern world” (p. 54). O’Neill states that the new ethnographies have the ability to *move* as their defining reflexive feature (p. 74). To *move* not only in the sense of encouraging the other and self to action, but also to move in the sense that ethnographic representations are filled with sensuousness, with feeling and emotion in tension with constructive rationality, our *out there* sense of being in the world. She states that praxis is moved through a *politics of feeling* (p. 74).

Renewed methodologies are a response to the fragmentation, plurality and complexity of living in postmodern times. Renewed methodologies take social research outside of binary thinking, between the spaces of the linear narratives and firmly challenge identity thinking. The challenge to identity thinking involves putting first certain discourses and developing mixed methodologies through modern work on the inter-relationships between ethnography and performance arts-what Denzin describes as ethnodrama/ethnoperformance (Denzin, 1997). In O’Neill’s study, she uses ethnographic, participatory action research work with women in the sex industry and the representation of ethnographic work through live art/performance. She terms this mix ethno-mimesis and defines it as the mimetic re-telling of life stories in visual, artistic form and a focus upon the transformative change involved in participatory action research. This approach involves working in partnership with performance artists, writers, poets, film-makers, photographers and participants in the space between ethnography and art, creating a *potential space* full of transformative possibilities (O’Neill, 2010, p. 47). In representing ethnographic data in artistic form, we can access a richer understanding of the complexities of lived experience, including the *immaterial*, the *unsayable*, those aspects of lived experience that are hard to put into words. Mimesis is not intended to mimic or reflect reality, but to encourage a moment of awareness through which we can develop a critical perspective that includes empathy as sensuous knowing. Knowledge is produced, forcing us to leave rationality behind and reach towards a more sensuous understanding that includes feeling interest as well as rational thought (O’Neill, 2010). Working with an ethnographer and an artist, the storyteller can find the ways and means of representing their story aided by the shared process.

Renewed methodologies deal with the contradictions of oppression and the difficulty of our lived relations in the twenty first century. For Denzin (1997), new ethnographies can help to change the twenty first century because “a text must do more than awaken moral sensibilities, it must move the other and the self to action” (p. 21). According to Millar (1992), the performative is political,

Performative praxis can rescue and empower disadvantaged culture on the other hand it can bring into being something inaugural, something unheard into the world...art changes the society into which it enters. (p. 56)



According to Adorno (1978), in focusing on the details of lived experience and trying to say the unsayable, the sensual, the mimetic, we can approach a politics which weakens identity thinking and binary thinking. In art works we are able to access what is normally unseen, hidden, overlooked. Ethnographic research and artistic representations can inform each other through the production of texts (e.g., film, literature, performance, and dance) as *feeling forms* (Witkin, 1978). Art, literature, film, performances can help us to critically reflect upon social issues.

Ethno-mimesis as the ethnographic life story and dance/performance as live art represents a recovering and retelling of lived experience as embodied performance. It recovers the tellings of the oppressed and marginalized as being on the margins as well as the tellings of resistance to disempowering social structures, practices and processes. The performance text focuses our attention on the performing body. Our feeling involvement in the ethno-mimetic text comes from the tension between what is played out and the relationship the audience has with the performance; the sensuous knowing, the performance and the narrative voice. Ethno-mimesis creates spaces for the voices of marginalized people and in doing so challenges stereotypes and encourages those participating and the audiences to get ready for change in useful ways. O'Neill (2002) suggests that in exploring the hybrid space between ethnography and art, we occupy a third space, a potential space/dialogic space where transformative possibilities and performative, visual, and textual outcomes can occur through *subject-reflexive feeling* (Witkin, 1978) that may feed into cultural politics and praxis.

In terms of my own research project, I am interested in looking at how I can use the ethno-mimetic approach with women who are recovering from addictions and trauma. In this case, I would want to look at how women can use their bodies to free themselves from oppression rooted in their bodies. Using a modality like performance ethnography, I would want the women themselves to create their own stories to perform in front of an audience and/or to be recorded on film. This story would be acted or danced on stage for each woman in the study. The idea is that by telling their stories in a body-focused way, they can re-create themselves and find new stories to tell themselves. In effect, changing the way they relate to their own bodies and to the bodies of others. As mentioned in the section on postmodern feminism and somatic theory, by changing the reiterative acts that they have used to cope with trauma and finding newer reiterative acts to express and relate to themselves, they can change the relationship they have to themselves and to others. Taking this one step further and performing their stories, according to performance and sensory ethnography, this in turn changes how the audience/viewers relate to themselves and others by having an empathetic response. That the audience members themselves are changed, body by body, leading to larger scale change.

The ethno-mimetic approach to research using performance/live art allows the combined power of contemporary feminist theory, somatic theory, socio-cultural research, social action and alternative forms of representation to intersect. This approach works towards overcoming oppression at the level of the body, in the bodies of the participants, the researcher, the performers and the audience, to effect social change. In this way, false dualisms of mind/body, male/female, civilization/nature, on which oppression rests, can dissolve as we become both embodied and political.

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### Author Note

Sharon N. Stopforth is in her second year of the doctoral program in Social Work at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Sharon is a practicing counselor and has been specializing in the areas of abuse, trauma, addiction, depression, and anxiety for the past 15 years. Sharon is a Certified Integrative Body Psychotherapy practitioner and hopes to further research in the field of body psychotherapy and is interested in exploring the connection of the body and social justice. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Sharon Stopforth at, 8 Deercrest Way S.E., Calgary, Alberta, T2J 5W2 or phone: 403-259-3427.

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