

Composing Collages

Working at the Edge of Disciplinary Boundaries

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Is it possible to think of methods in a way that does not turn them into a Procrustean bed for knowledge, cutting off any body part extending beyond the frame while stretching those that don't reach it? This chapter suggests that the answer to this question is yes. It is possible to work with methods not as instructions but as "heuristic devices" (Abbott 2004). The fundamental question is not "does the method allow this?" but rather "what/how does it help me discover?" Methods do not have to work like recipes in a cookbook. They can be "thinking tools" (Leander in Klotz and Prakash 2008). This chapter introduces *one* such thinking tool associated with an affirmative understanding of methods: the Composing of Collages (Leander 2020).

What?

In the humanities and critical social sciences (including decolonial, gender, and racial studies, see chapter 28—*Feminist Approaches*, and box x—*Postcolonial Insights*) methods have a poor reputation. They are charged with stifling observation, thought, and creativity by regimenting observations, disciplining knowledge, and providing a false sense of scientific security where none is warranted. They reinforce the regressive politics of science Rosana Paulino criticizes in her collage *Amor pela Ciencia* (fig. 12). Refusing methods—often by opposing them to theorizing—has therefore been the default position for the longest time and is still the norm in some areas including, for example,



Figure 12. Rosana Paulino: *Amor Pela Ciencia*. Print and embroidery on textile
Source: Courtesy of Rosana Paulino

political theory, the humanities, or visual studies. However, in most quarters, including the study of international organizations (IOs), this refusal tends to become a form of self-exclusion as the ability to articulate a methodology has become the *sine qua non* condition for doing research. Often therefore there is little choice but to own “methods” and develop a “pluralist” language for talking about them (Bleiker 2015). But how? Working with methods as Composing Collaborationist Collages is one avenue.

The term *composing* emphasizes that methodological choices constitute, define, and frame the observed (Austin 2019). We see what we look at as we decide which “paths” to follow in our research (Ranci ere 2009; Mitchell 2015). When we make methodological choices regarding which sources to focus on and how to deal with them, we are also “composing” our object of observation. When deciding what to include in our research on IOs we are composing a specific image of them.

The term *collage* signals an openness to variety and disjuncture. Collages are by definition made of heterogeneous materials and consequently draw on an open-ended variety of techniques to connecting these. When we work with IOs, there is a wealth of possible materials at our disposal including, for example, academic publications (secondary sources), documents, observations, interviews, visuals, smells, tastes, sounds, atmospheres, affects, concepts, and so on. The techniques and tools helpful for exploring them vary correspondingly as do the images generated by joining them.

Composing *collages* to explore IOs cultivates knowledge directing careful attention to (dis-)connections in view of making theoretical and empirical discoveries and contributions. It defies the disciplinary policing that ham-

pers cross-disciplinarity and novel agendas and research geared at discovery *tout court* by imposing questions, criteria, sources, and tools. The Composing of Collages actively invites and encourages research that draws inspiration beyond their own disciplinary boundaries and questions the boundaries of knowledge. Composing Collages is a method for doing disciplinary “edgework,” to speak with Wendy Brown (2009).

Why?

Contributing knowledge by working at the edge of disciplinary boundaries sounds like something most methods would claim to facilitate. Four caveats connected to the radical openness of the Composing of Collages, and the relevance of this for the study of IOs, clarify the difference Composing Collages makes.

- (i) Composing Collages is neither regimented by a specific “analytical framework” that posits what *questions* to ask nor is it confined by the regime of knowing imposed by it. This is particularly important for raising questions not already raised. For example, work on gender, race, or material agency that is now mainstream in IO research has only been possible because scholars did *not* “apply” methods associated with prevailing analytical frameworks, but instead mobilized methods to answer their own questions and often also to transform these questions. They simply refused to answer the “what is this a case of?” question. They were interested in problems that were not “cases” of prevailing theories and methods but obscured and deepened by them. This was/is no abstract consideration as the black woman in Paulino’s collage “love of science” recalls (figure 12). Strict “academic rigour” would have meant “rigor mortis” for the research agendas around class, gender, race as it tends to mean for innovative research agendas generally (Czarniawska 2016). Composing collages—mobilizing methods as heuristic devices—is a way of eluding this fate as it is associated with a decidedly “counterdisciplinary” (Koskenniemi 2012) view on research.
- (ii) Composing Collages allows multiple, messy *ontologies* (Law 2004). Contrary to many methods, it therefore does not assume that a singular, universal epistemic logic or world is pertinent for research (de la Cadena 2015). Rather, as “quantum physics” or “new materialist” anthropology, it admits the existence of mul-

tiple, contradictory, and perhaps incommensurable logics to be at work at the same time and in the same space. In IOs, multiple cultures and beliefs coexist. More strongly, so do different ontological “realities.” In IOs, different professional practices inhabit partially connected worlds irreducible to each other that produce different policy initiatives. Composing Collages is particularly useful for shedding light on the relations and frictions between these multiple worlds and the implications of this for IOs.

- (iii) Composing Collages is also open to a wide range of *sources and data*. Many methodologies provide strict instructions for how to regiment what counts as data. Working with Composing Collages is different in this respect in that, in line with anthropology, it invites combinations of sources (Latour 2005; Czarniawska 2007; Ingold 2008). For IO research, this openness is interesting for heuristic reasons. It encourages us to explore a variety of sources—images and/or sense-making beyond language (Mitchell 2015; Howes and Classens 2014; Introna 2018; see also box d—*Carnal Sociology*)—either in relation to existing lines of research or to generate novel ones. More than this, the openness to heterogeneous sources, and the pragmatism this allows for in terms of what is required for any specific study, is appealing to IO researchers constantly negotiating restrictions stemming from, for example, political sensibilities, confidentiality, or limits to access/participation.
- (iv) Composing Collages is not limited to a specific *form of research communication*. On the contrary, it connects the heterogeneous in shifting ways. It can move beyond the narrative not only to the lyrical (Abbot 2007) but also to images, videos, objects, and beyond. One might imagine also exhibitions or performances. For IO researchers who often have the ambition to convey their research results to an audience beyond the scholarly, this openness has considerable advantages and remains a reason for working with the approach.

How?

Is it possible to provide “instructions” for how to do counterdisciplinary research by Composing Collages? The answer is (paradoxically?) yes, pro-

vided the instructions are commensurate to the ambitions. Four *hows* appear particularly central to the Composing of Collages:

- (i) *Establishing a fit between research focus and method*: For the Composing of Collages, this is particularly challenging. The method does not come with predefined criteria for how to do this. Rather researchers are asked to establish the fit thinking it through, possibly adjusting it in the process of doing the research. This is unsettling for those who think that methods are there precisely to fix this fit. However, it is also an advantage. Research is done to discover things not already known. To revisit assumptions about the fit between focus and method once basic “cultural competence” is acquired is therefore a considerable advantage for any research that explores something not already known (Neumann in Klotz and Prakash 2008). More affirmatively, mobilizing methodological choices, combining and crossing them, can serve as a “heuristic device” generating research foci (Abbott 2004).
- (ii) *Working imaginatively*: The radical openness of Composing Collages leaves little choice but to exercise methodological imagination, pragmatically adjusting to and working with the ready-made and available in each given context. Imagination is called for in the engagement with sources, analytical tools, concepts, theories, and writing/communicating scientific findings. This makes research creative and fun (Haraway 1997). The risk that it detonates the disciplinary canons is steadily diminishing. The expanding space made for imaginative forms of work and the pressure to prove “impact” and “relevance” conspire to locate imaginative forms of research and research communication more acceptable. For instance, exhibitions are increasingly part of scholarly communication, for example, about the governance of human rights and torture (Jasanoff 2017; Austin 2019).
- (iii) *Flattening Epistemological and Ontological Hierarchies*: To work with Composing Collages allows and requires a flattening of the hierarchies that permeate research. At the core of the Composing of Collages sits the idea that the best way of providing a grasp of the world is *not* to construct an empirical generalization or a general explanation even if delimited by “scope conditions” but to accept that also concepts and theories are situated and inexact. Collaging

therefore strives to give voice to and show the observed on its own terms. To do this demands making space for the nontheoretical and nonacademic, that is for nonacademic practices, images, sense-making, resonances, atmospheres, artifacts, documents, filing practices, track-change software, big data, tracking technologies, and beyond. To Compose Collages is to collaborate or colobar *with* the observed to gain knowledge rather than simply “objectifying” it (Bourdieu et al. 1991; Haraway 1997; de La Cadena 2015).

- (iv) *Checking Positionality through Frictions*: Logically following from the above, as anyone acknowledging the situated nature of knowledge, those Composing Collages must grapple with the “positionality” of the researcher and its consequences for what can and will be observed, understood, analyzed, and written (see box c—*Multipositionality*, and box x—*Postcolonial Insights*). “Reflexivity”—that is reflection on one’s own research practices—remains crucial in Composing Collages. However, in addition to reflexivity collaging relies on the frictions generated in collaboration as a check on positionality. The flattening of hierarchies and mobilization of a diversity of materials provide information. More significantly, they place the research in perspective. Instead of assuming that positionality is best dealt reflexively, by looking into a mirror, Composing Collages mobilizes frictions, as Paulino shows when juxtaposing scientific texts about race with the embodied black woman (fig. 12). The “disturbances” generated in the encounters with heterogeneous others marks the points where positionality matters for research (Czarniawska 2007; also Bourdieu et al. 1991; Law 2004).

What Challenges?

Composing Collages is a methodology geared to support discovery, imagination, and creativity. These are values professed by most researchers. However, they are also values exceedingly difficult to practice in real academic life (and beyond). Academia is inherently conservative. It is the guardian of authoritative knowledge. For good reasons, academic institutions see themselves as bulwarks against fads, fashions, fabrications, and fakes. This makes them suspicious of claims to novelty and calls for change. Academic institutions therefore often generate processes where research that disturbs established truths, orders, and hierarchies is unwelcome, actively discouraged, marginal-

ized, and if possible buried (Stengers 2000; Law 2004; Csarniawska 2016). Methods are core to academic disciplinary disciplining. Innovative method (by definition!) fails to faithfully “apply” analytical frameworks, “conform” to “the cannon,” and “live up to” established “standards,” “criteria,” and “expectations.” It breaks and transgresses them. As it departs from authoritative knowledge, innovative research also necessarily challenges the academic foundations and guardians of that authority. Researchers practicing such methods (and this includes composing collages) therefore balance on the narrow ridge separating disreputable impostors and respected researchers. Their work is on the edge and must remain there (Brown 2009). The alternative is submitting to the conservatism of conventional academia and reinforcing it on the one hand or driving the dissolution of academic authority exposing all research to manipulations, markets, and solipsistic manias and turf constructions on the other. The peculiar “edgework” required to remain in balance on the ridge poses three challenges to the Composing of Collages.

The first is internal to the research: the challenge of justifying methodological choices without reverting to disciplining disciplinary criteria. This assumes a methodological literacy and fluency considerably higher than what is needed for those who resort to ready-made instructions. Yet in many contexts little is done to nurture such literacy. Methods training is mostly narrowly focused on the quantitative, statistical, and formal, leaving researchers ill prepared. To become autodidact is a time-consuming commitment made at the cost of research. Better, broader, and more varied method conversations are much needed. (This book is a step in that direction.)

The second challenge is related to the outward communication of methods choices to externals who have a say over, are involved in, or are concerned by the research. This includes among others peers, students, scholars from academic specialties beyond one’s own, but also obviously the professional world, like IO practitioners, and wider society. All have more or less articulated assumptions and expectations about “methods” (Jasanoff 2017). Conveying methodological reasoning that breaks with these unarticulated assumptions requires researchers to master their own reasoning, as well as locating it in relation to the prevailing “common sense” of others.

The third, most significant, challenge is therefore posed by the temptation to “pragmatically” take ready-made shortcuts and/or surrender to the nostalgia for firm foundations. Giving way to this temptation throws the researcher off the edge, back into bolstering the conservatism of academic conventions, and back into “the science” Paulino’s collage criticizes (figure 12). To avoid this, there is little choice but that of tackling these challenges. This chapter is an invitation to do precisely that.

To Go Further

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