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Excreting Variously

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Excreting Variously

On Contrasting as an Analytic Technique

CONTRASTING AS AN ANALYTIC TECHNIQUE

Empirical realities do not speak for themselves. In order to bring them out, analysis is required. How to go about this? How to turn promising fieldwork into salient ethnography? In this text, we propose the analytic technique of contrasting as one possible way. This technique helps ask questions, direct fieldwork, organize materials, and transform these into texts. Contrasting involves searching for tensions, resistance to affirming established theory, eschewing apparent coherence. As an analytic technique contrasting can highlight tensions within the field, among analysts, within literatures, or between field and literature. Its strength is that it does not mush particularities into generalities but cherishes specificities. It does not reiterate what others have written already but elicits distinctions that are worth noting: divergences that may be further explored, discrepancies that may be telling, differences that may be easy to erase but deserve to be made. Rather than resulting in the final word on anything much, contrasting leads to conversations.

Contrasting points to disparities. To show how this works, our collective considered empirical materials collected by the first author, who for her PhD research seeks to learn about practices to do with excretion.¹ The work of contrasting that we typically do when we analyze our own data gains relief when we work as a team. Take this excerpt from Justine's field notes, summarizing an interaction with Sandra, one of her informants. While looking at her toddler, Sandra says: "She usually wants to come with

me. ‘What are you doing?’ she asks when I am wiping. And she wants to give me the toilet paper. So she gives it to me and then we say bye-bye to the poop or to the pee. She is a bit afraid of the flushing, it’s loud of course . . . So I warn her. Now we flush, I say. *Spoelen* in Dutch.” “Eh, nice. So, she’s already interested in the matter?” Sandra: “It’s how we learn how to use our body, I guess, no? Just by seeing and imitating!”²

Invoking her child’s curiosity, Sandra proposes a theory about how we learn to use our body. We do this, she says, by seeing and imitating others. Irina, another informant, presents a contrasting theory about how we learn to use our body. “She always had Pampers, like the really good ones, and then . . . you don’t feel it if you pee, I think. So . . . [I gave her cotton underpants] just to let her feel her pants getting wet.” So (we conclude from this that) maybe learning how to use one’s body does not (just) depend on imitating but (also) on feeling oneself getting wet when peeing. But there are further possibilities. Irina continues: “And then time and again it was like, ‘Oh! Too late!’ But after she peed in her pants, I put her on the potty. I noticed that every half hour she peed a little bit. So I put her every half hour. And when I went out I put her [in] a nappy. I also picked certain moments, like when she woke up, first go to the potty. Before dinner, after dinner, before going to sleep, before we went out, when we came back. What do we do when we go out? First go to the potty. So she learned, in a few days, to get a bit of control over her peeing.” So, while imitating and feeling one’s wetness may help “to get a bit of control”—to learn how to use one’s body—habits, too (or so we learn from Irina) may assist.

Perhaps these add up: mothers, excerpts, and theories; the imitation, the wetness, and the routines. It might be possible to say that all these things matter together and to fuse them into a coherent narrative, maybe under an umbrella term. For instance the umbrella term of *individual control over one’s body* or that of *separation from one’s parent*. But—or so we have tasked ourselves to demonstrate—it is also possible to foreground the contrasts. To insist that different repertoires for living with and teaching children co-exist. That these incorporate contrasting theories about what it is to learn to gain control over one’s body. That they work toward different aims and each harbor their own values. And that, along with that, they have dissimilar effects on what becomes of the child, of the peeing, of the mother, and of the assemblage they jointly form. This, then, is the analytic technique of contrasting: eschewing a coherent narrative so as to focus on differences instead. The result is not an overview, not a grand total, not a Theory with a capital *T* but rather insight into potentially relevant distinctions. What

constitutes a relevant distinction depends on the analyst and her analysis. Below follow a few further contrasts that as a team we discern in Justine's field notes. The contrasts we identify—among ourselves, concerns, things, and words, or with the literature—exemplify what we find useful to pursue. There may be many more.

TEAMWORK

The point of collectively analyzing a selection from Justine's materials is not only to jointly explore and clearly elicit the contrasts that these materials hold. From the start we also envision the writing of this text. We orchestrate the occasion in the hope that this may help us to demonstrate how contrasting may work, not just in this case but, *mutatis mutandis*, in countless others. Perusing the material together, turning it upside down and inside out, we explore tensions within it and among ourselves. When first encountering the material we each bring along our own preoccupations, the literatures we happen to have read. This is how we wondered about plot, audiences, and concerns. Although an individual author can engage in contrasting, our team effort helps us to bring this analytic technique into relief. Putting all of our names above this text, then, seemed not only fair but also true to this method.³ It prompts us to not reconcile our varying takes but to keep the variation within the ad hoc team alive.

In the other work we do, many of us attend to the material infrastructures in and through which human relations take shape. Taking this preoccupation along with us, it immediately strikes us that Sandra does not just say that children may learn from imitating others but also allows her child to be present as she herself uses the toilet. In the day care center where Justine conducted observations, children likewise witness each other using the toilet. The infrastructure invites this: a row of small toilets and a collection of potties share a joint space. Hence, or so someone in our group suggests, in both cases the situation is orchestrated in such a way that imitating another person's body techniques becomes possible. Someone else wonders about the differences between imitating parents and imitating other children. A third person points to a possible thread that unites the excerpts: all are about the art/work of acquiring a separated body. But Justine warns that the achievement of "becoming independent" is "all over the literature"; it is a classic trope in developmental psychology. Another team member then wonders about the "independence" involved: Independent of whom? Of what? Not of the toilet, for sure,

nor of the people, technologies, and bacteria downstream from the place of flushing that are variously involved in cleaning the wastewater. So we look for another phrasing. Instead of saying that each child acquires their own separate body, we agree that it might be better to say that when it comes to excretion children realize different kinds of dis- and re-entanglements.

Which kinds of entanglement might be relevant here? Jointly we come up with a preliminary list (listing is an important tool for contrasting): (1) Spatial entanglement (being together in the place where one excretes) allows for the imitation of body techniques. (2) People's bodily sensitivities may be entangled, at least some of the time: parents say that sometimes they feel the discomfort of their child in their own bodies, but not always—sometimes, they admit, they have no clue. (3) As they are metabolically entangled, a mother breastfeeding a child may need to abstain from foods that would give the child diarrhea. (4) Caring entanglements occur, for instance when a child hands her mother toilet paper or when a father skillfully refreshes his child's nappy so that the floor underneath remains clean. (5) And then there are the entanglements of excreting humans with a myriad of stuff: nappies, potties, toilets, seats to sit on, steps to climb up, water to flush. And so on. Recognizing this diversity of entanglements points our attention in different directions: toward spatial arrangements, sensitivities, diets, cleaning practices, material tools. This list is open: questions, sites, situations, concerns, tensions might be added as the analyst sees fit.

After a few further detours, someone reiterates a contrast between two techniques that may help a child shift from excreting in a nappy to doing so on a potty or toilet: learning to feel (e.g., thanks to wearing cotton underpants or walking around with a bare bottom) versus acquiring a habit (e.g., going on the potty "before we go out," "before bed," "before a meal"). But in the material further techniques are yet to be found: earlier we mentioned imitating; we also come across such things as rubbing a child's back to relax her, distracting a child with a toy, reading stories about children—or bears—using potties, and so on. Justine's informants do not restrict themselves to using just a single technique but combine them. Although it may be compelling to classify parents (for instance distinguishing those who "have a clue" from those who don't), we opt to classify techniques instead. This contributes to (but also builds on) a social science tradition that does not study people but practices. But if within the team most of us share that propensity to foreground practice, that still leaves many other

issues pending. Analyzing together, we are careful not to collapse our responses to the materials into a single team view. We keep moving, picking up new concerns, discarding them, picking them up again in a different way. And so the potentialities in Justine's materials proliferate.

CONCERNS

The parents who figure in our materials express a variety of concerns in relation to the excretion practices of their children. At some point the child should cease to need nappies, learning to go to the toilet to pee or poop. Parents are under pressure from others as they work to achieve this feat. One mother tells Justine about her aunts, for whom it is a sign of good parenting if a child is potty-trained by the time she is two years old. Another mentions primary schools, where toilet skills are an entrance requirement for four-year-olds. But the parents don't just hope that their child will acquire the necessary body techniques; they also want to be good parents along the way. This can mean many things: offering structure, giving guidance, setting rules, creating the right circumstances. Parents tell Justine they do not want to force anything, aiming to remain gentle, avoid shaming, keep things light. At the same time they prefer to not bother other people: keep the floor of the rented apartment clean, worry about the effect of diapers on the environment, eat without bothering others with the smell of excrement. And so on. Many norms are mentioned. They may be at work together but they may still be contrasted.

Norms can be identified, but they are not necessarily ours: we do not seek to establish who is and who isn't a good parent. We are neither out to critique, nor to praise. Instead we observe norms of good parenthood at work, finding contrasts between them. We juxtapose them with concerns of our own, such as what kind of entanglements potty practices display and which body techniques are mobilized and taught while engaging in them. In our analysis the parents are informants: they offer information about practices. We may learn from them how, as these practices unfold, children disentangle themselves here, re-entangle themselves there, and variously keep on excreting. The parents and their hopes and fears are relevant to that story, but so, too, are other people and a myriad of things. Hence, a mother who says, "I put her on the potty and she pees," may be primarily interested in norms that adjudicate the *I* who does the putting (am I doing this well?) and the *she* who pees (very good). We, on the other hand, may be at least as

interested in values to do with the potty. Is it comfortable to sit on? Does the child like it or prefer a toilet seat? Which body techniques are invited, facilitated, or allowed for by the various things involved in practices of excretion? As we shift our attention from body techniques to the material tools—the things enabling the techniques—we imply a contrast between the parents, who are trying to be good parents, and ourselves, who are researchers also of material infrastructures, of things.

THINGS

But wait a minute. Parents care about things as well. When asked, they tell us about the purple plastic step that helps a child climb up to the toilet seat, the cotton underwear that does not absorb pee. About different brands of nappy, more or less easy to put on, more or less absorbent, more or less expensive. The contrast between informants and analysts lies in the fact that the parents relate those things to their goals and want them to be instrumental. For us, by contrast, tools are not so readily submissive. We wonder what they do to those who use them—even if they do not act alone. The toilet paper doesn't make a mess of itself, but when it hangs from a holder it is attractive for a toddler to play with. The parent who wants to avoid this may collaborate with a cupboard to put the toilet paper someplace high, out of the child's reach. But if, by contrast, the toilet is too high for a child to reach, a plastic step may be brought in to assist. The thin inlay in the cotton nappy can be thrown out when a child has pooped, whereas it can be washed and used again when it has been dirtied by pee only; thus washing machines are involved as well. And so on.

Different things afford and deny their users different possibilities. Both the potty and the step make it possible for a child to keep her underwear clean, but while these things share a similar purpose, their other effects are different. The potty can be transported into the living room, whereas the step only does its work if it is next to the toilet. When carted around, the potty affords the excreting child the comforting presence of others; using the toilet may come with the added pleasure of immediately flushing and thus taking leave of one's excrements: "bye-bye." The potty has to be rinsed every time it is used, whereas flushing allows for a similar degree of cleaning of the toilet. Contrasting the objects helps the analyst to move beyond the question of whether material things act, to specific descriptions of how they act and to what effect.

Traveling between languages is hard work. In Justine's conversations with parents and educators in Amsterdam, the language spoken was mostly English, a second or third language for many of those involved. A few conversations were in French; the odd Dutch word seeped in, as did fragments of Arabic. Of the authors, only one has been an English speaker from the start, but as he grew up in South Africa, other speakers of English tend to quibble with his choice of words. So, writing this text in English requires translation, convergence, adaptation, obedience. At the same time, linguistic differences also form a resource for illuminating contrasts.

For instance: In the everyday English in which our materials are written, children who manage their excretion without the use of nappies are called *potty-trained*, suggesting that some form of training was involved in order for them to achieve this state. In Dutch, by contrast, such children are called *zindelijk*. The word has "thoughtful" in its etymological history, with senses (*zinnen*) resonating in the background. A child who is *zindelijk*, or so the word suggests, is old enough to be reasoned with. Achieving this state does not depend on dedicated training; the child, rather, is afforded room to grow into it. The French word *propre* is different again; in this context it translates into English as "clean." As does the Arabic word *nadeef*. Justine's informant Sara analyzed its particularities for us: "The word usually used [for potty-trained, *zindelijk*, etc.] is *clean*, but I never liked that term, so when I talk, I say she is *without diaper*. You would say for example: 'Yasmine became clean/Yasmine *nedfat*.' In Jordan for the daycare I had to fill in a questionnaire for registration and one of the questions was if my child was clean. I had no idea what they meant. I was, like, of course she is clean! [*both laughing*]."

But if it is possible to draw contrasts between words from different linguistic traditions, this may also be done between words that are all English. Take the term *excretion*. We decided to use this word, although it only rarely appears in Justine's materials. Parents talk about *peeing* and *pooping*, or even *pissing* and *shitting*—words that sound offensive in an academic English text. *Excreting* has the advantage that it is technical and thus accentuates the difference between day-to-day use of language and academic convention. We hope that it helps, too, in keeping at bay the frowns, giggles, and other signs of unease we encounter when others learn what we study. If the term *excretion* is a formalization, it may help to make our topic respectable, acceptable in academia and writing. *Excretion* has the

added advantage that it draws together “peeing” and “pooping,” and this serves our analysis. For although the metabolic transformations involved are quite different, they enroll similar things (from nappies to sewage systems) and involve comparable bodily techniques (imitating, sensing, habituating). In this instance, then, we take care to background, hide, a possible contrast and within our word *excreting* draw the different activities of “peeing” and “pooping” together.

For using contrasting terms does not always create space in which to roam, does not always offer the listener or reader freedom, alterity, a choice that is to be celebrated. For contrasting one term with another, one reality with another, one set of values with the next, may seem to set up the future as bending to your choice, but it may also form a binary trap. For instance, adults may ask a toddler in their care: “Do you want to go on the potty or use the toilet?” Here, the child is offered discretion as to the tool, the thing, to excrete on. But at the same time, by stealth, the child is told what to do. Sit, excrete, or at least try to. A binary may sneakily work to turn a question into an instruction.

LITERATURE

Academic analyses talk about materials to audiences. They do not just frame empirical realities; they do so in dialogue with literatures to which their audiences, too, may relate. Hence our reluctance to write about children becoming “independent,” which, as Justine remarked earlier, “is all over the literature.” We don’t want to readily affirm what has been remarked already. Does it seem obvious? Then why not try to doubt it instead? Hence, in contrast with “the literature,” we here might want to argue that children who learn to excrete on a potty or a toilet do not become independent at all. Instead, they shift their dependence from nappies to potties and toilets. Hence, rather than celebrating that children liberate themselves from adults, we trace the webs of agencies and attachments in which people and things act and are enacted. In relating to the literature, other contrasts can also be made. Consider for instance the term *inter-embodiment*, which “encapsulates the notion that apparently individuated and autonomous bodies are actually experienced at the phenomenological level as intertwined” (Lupton 2012, 39). Yes, parents “say that sometimes they are able to feel the discomfort of their child in their own bodies.” However, using the term *inter-embodiment* to describe this may be precipitous. For this ability to feel what others feel may be fleeting—or, as we have put it: “sometimes, they

admit, they have no clue.” What is more, in our analysis, feeling the discomfort of another person’s body is connected to other entanglements; in our preliminary list we included spatial, metabolic, and caring entanglements. Such specificities are all too easily generalized in theoretical abstractions, mobile terms, of which *inter-embodiment* is one.

There are also contrasts to make with authors to whom we are closely related, such as Abrahamsson (2014), who argues that “shit” does not just happen but requires a lot of work. From professionals who care for people with constipation, Abrahamsson learned that excreting depends on particular ways of eating and drinking, on the ability to relax one’s bowels, on not being too scared of the smell of excrement, on feeling safe—and so on. A lot of things are involved: “sewage systems, metaphors, textbooks, doctors and therapists” (125). In our case, too, many f/actors are involved in excreting, but constipation is rarely mentioned. Hence it is not the fact that people and things collaborate that makes the difference between the cases but rather the hows of the collaboration and also the stakes. The parents in our materials do not so much worry about whether defecation will happen but about where, when, and how. They are not concerned about bowel motility per se but about such things as changing a child’s nappy in time so as to avoid rashes, or taking enough extra clothing along to be able to change after an accident, or holding a small body over the toilet seat so that it does not fall into the toilet bowl. It is in such specificities that the contrasts lie.

And then there are contrasts to be made with earlier literatures on contrasting. Those literatures may not be about excretion, but for all that they may still add depth to a treatise on “contrasting as an analytic technique.” In our literature list you will find a few titles in which this technique has been deployed for analyzing materials closely related to excreting: washing (Pols 2006), tasting (Mann 2018), eating (Yates-Doerr and Mol 2012), cooking (Ibáñez Martín and de Laet 2018), metabolizing (Vogel 2018), composting (Abrahamsson and Bertoni 2014). Others talk about sites and situations, about topics, that may seem to be further away: human disabilities (Moser 2005), animal diseases (Mather 2014), spirits (Jensen and Blok 2013), words (Mann and Mol 2018), the world (Law 2015; Omura et al. 2019). The list could easily be expanded—but as all texts, this one has a word limit too. And we care to still mention that there are, from way earlier, ancestral texts to consider as well. Where to start? With Michel Foucault, Chantal Mouffe, Marilyn Strathern? The more relevant question may be what all these authors used contrasting for: to insist on the possibility to escape

from what seems self-evident (Foucault 1969); to argue that politics is not necessarily about reaching consensus but may be shaped as an ongoing negotiation with one's enemies (Mouffe 2005); to keep alterity in focus instead of submitting everyone and everything to Euro-American schemes (Strathern 1991); to avoid the choice between going along with one's field or going against it, as contrasts foreground the criticism, the otherness, within (Mol 1992). In this text we have engaged in contrasting to demonstrate this analytic technique, to show that even practices that seem to go without saying, such as excretion, may turn out to be full of complexity and tensions when they are put into words. What, do you think, might the analytic technique of contrasting allow you to do in your own work?

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have proposed contrasting as a technique. Rather than helping to reduce rich ethnographic material to a single explanation or argument, this technique foregrounds tensions that resist easy assimilation into a coherent narrative. Rather than adding up fieldwork details into an exhaustive story, this technique works with open-ended lists. Rather than serving this or that theory—let alone Theory with a capital *T*—it invites playing with words.

Although no recipe exists for how to do work with the analytic technique of contrasting, in the protocol that follows we offer some helpful suggestions. And for now, in conclusion, let us provide a summary. Contrasting assists in making strange what we take for granted: its aim is to rob easily used concepts of their self-evidence. It multiplies versions of reality and ways of understanding what mundane practices are about, rather than reducing them to a one-size-fits-all type of explanation. On a good day, contrasting brings out specificities of the field you are exploring as well as specificities of the disciplinary tradition that forms the background of your analysis. Good contrasts set up productive tensions and will make you think—but, in turn, they depend on good thinking as well.

A crucial move in deploying the technique of contrasting, then, is to resist the urge to assimilate specificities under a single frame. Do not aim to provide a holistic overview that erases tensions and differences, nor try to make your findings fit a grand theoretical term such as *independence*, *inter-embodiment*, or anything else. The point is to resist unmediated rehearsal of established theories. Instead sniff out the tensions that such theories tend to erase. Adapt them, attune them to your case. Along the

way it is crucial to carefully disentangle the concerns of your informants (for instance, with being a good parent) from your own (say, with body techniques, dis/entanglements, or analysis). And then, attending to words is essential: instead of translating empirical realities in overarching analytical terms, you might want to remain concrete and stay close to your informants' ways of wording in order to explore where they lead and what they may or may not achieve. Finally, an analysis of mundane practices benefits from being put into relief against the background of a wide and varied body of literatures. Instead of seeking to offer a final understanding of anything much, an exercise in contrasting should result from and invite interesting conversations. Please, be adventurous, not scared.

PROTOCOL

- Look at your material. Stay with it. Suppress the urge to assimilate specificities under a single frame, don't dream of providing a holistic overview, nor try to make your findings fit a grand theoretical term.
- Make an open-ended list of contrasts you encounter in your materials. Do not just try to fit the contrasts we highlighted in this particular case to your site, but consider the contrasts that emerge there.
- Consider the different things, people, f/actors, values that those contrasts bring up or involve, and maybe start another open-ended list. Then, go back to step 2 and expand the list.
- Consider how the different concerns of your informants relate to that list. Be mindful to not just take these concerns on board; instead, think of how to study them (e.g., wonder whether and if so how they transform across practices). Maybe start another open-ended list. Then, go back to steps 2 and 3 and expand those lists again.
- Consider your own concerns. To do this, keep in mind your own position in relation to the site. When drafting your lists, be mindful of how language plays a role, which words you choose (*choose* being a case in point: Do you really want to use that word?), where they come from and how they traveled, and how different literatures and their concerns might be relevant to them. Summarise this, too, in a list. Then go back to steps 2, 3, and 4 and expand those lists again.

- With all those lists at hand, outline an argument/article/text you might want to write. In doing so, however, do not draft a single outline but a few contrasting ones; three tends to work best. Playing with the differences between them will help you figure out what might be the most urgent or most interesting text to write. That is to say: not in general but in your specific site and situation: here, now.
- Also expand this bullet-point protocol list, and don't read it as a linear walkthrough but rather as an open-ended exercise. You may do that alone, but why not with others? Give it a try.

NOTES

1. In this text we use the term *excretion* for practices of both urination and defecation. See the section “Words” for further discussion of this terminology.

2. Excerpt from an interview conducted in Amsterdam in 2017; taped, transcribed, and edited here for readability. All names were changed.

3. Coauthoring, of course, surfaces the collective character of research, which is all too often masked by the fiction of the single author. We met several times and collectively chose the stories for the chapter; all discussed, many of us wrote, others edited, all commented. Gathering everyone a year later for the revision process proved trickier; some sort of togetherness in time and place seems instrumental to collective work.