



New Materialisms, Embodied Practices: Using the Walking Interview to Explore Human-Nonhuman Relations

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Abstract

The Western system of knowledge is structured around an axis of interlocking conceptual opposites, of which foundational are the mind-matter, culture-nature, man-woman, human-nonhuman binary pairs. Feminist new materialisms in the social sciences formulate substantial critiques of these dualistic metaphysical assumptions, contributing to the ongoing cross-disciplinary conversation around materiality, nonhuman agency, and ecological issues in the Anthropocene. Dismantling the dualistic Cartesian-Newtonian framework that underlies our mental representations and practices of engagement with the 'other,' they advance alternative modes of conceptualising human embeddedness within the more-than-human world. In my doctoral research project, I set out to explore people's lived experience and sensuous engagement with nonhuman nature. The aim is to enrich the theoretical discussion with phenomenological accounts of embodied experience, so that readers can more easily grasp the significance of new materialist discourse, and to identify potential ways in which these frameworks may be brought closer to mainstream sociological concerns. Using a phenomenological approach informed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, I conduct walking interviews situated in urban parks. Analysing participants' (accounts of their) experiences with(in) nature, I seek to test some of the highly abstract concepts circulating in the theoretical field (e.g., entanglement, intra-action, significant otherness). In line with the ethos of feminist new materialisms, this study pursues 'knowing' as a direct material engagement with the world, as proposed by feminist theorist Karen Barad. In practice, it dismantles the mind-body, human-nonhuman dualistic pairings, accounting for the embodied nature of perception and including the environment as an active participant in the interview process.

Keywords: embodiment, human-nonhuman relations, new materialisms, phenomenology, walking interviews

