

Non-Representational Theory and Ethnographic Research

“At first, the phenomena in question may seem remarkable only by their apparent insignificance. The focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions. Attention to these kinds of expression, it is contended, offers an escape from the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery, interpretation, judgement and ultimate representation. In short, so much ordinary action gives no advance notice of what it will become. Yet, it still makes critical differences to our experiences..”
(Lorimer 2005:84).

Introduction

- What is non-representational theory? And how can non-representational theory inform research that is more than just representational? In this short set of working notes I will tackle these two questions. It's not my intention here to write a long and in-depth survey of non-representational theory, as such writings can be found elsewhere (see references). Instead, what I want to do is outline 20 qualities of non-representational theory as I understand it, and exemplify the relevance of these qualities for the pursuit of more-than-representational ethnographic research. This is not an ultimate list, and the 20 qualities are neither ranked nor mutually exclusive. They are simply useful guidelines I have followed because I found them useful in an inspiring—rather than directive or normative—kind of way. Just a word a caution, though: my unique flavor of non-representational theory is particularly informed by cultural phenomenology, performance theory, and interactionism/pragmatism. Other currents within non-representational theory do commonly exist, but they are not as influential in my own approach here.



Vitality

Everyday life can be impulsive, vivacious, and spirited. Realist and representational theories and research often downplay these characteristics—portraying existence through the lenses of rational behavior, cognitive planning, and mechanistic predictability. Instead, non-representational theory and research focus on the liveliness of everyday interaction and attempt to animate their empirical renditions of such liveliness through methodological strategies that animate, rather than deaden, the qualities of the relation among people and their natural and built environments.



Hybridity

Representational theories are typically built on structures of binary oppositions. Such oppositions are built on dualist principles and on an atomistic way of explaining the world as a set of separate units. Non-representational theory and research view these oppositions as nothing but powerful inventions. The hybrid world they imagine, instead, depends on differences that crossover one another, that entail one another, that mutate into one another. Most notably, human and non-human life fold into each other, erasing the clear-cut distinction between animate and inanimate, metaphysical and material, the agentic and non-agentic. Therefore in this tradition “things” too, thus not only people, act and “speak.”



Sensuality

The lifeworld is endowed with a fleeting qualitative immediacy which we encounter through embodied, practical, meaningful orientations. These orientations are intentional, but not always reflexive in a cognitive kind of way. Whereas representational theories emphasize the cognitive and reflexive perceptual basis of consciousness, non-representational theory and research underline the not-necessarily reflexive and sensory dimensions of experience. Non-representational research, therefore, pays attention to the sensuousness of our presence in the world, as well as to the affective dimensions of our actions, and the habituated nature of everyday existence.



Fluidity

Fluidity refers to the property of being easily subject to change, to being in a constant state of process. Rather than through frozen and static models, therefore, non-representational theory and research view subjects of their inquiry through the lenses of transformation as a regular—not an exceptional—feature of life. Therefore, the focus is kept on adaptation, alteration, malleability, diversity, versatility, variability, and evolution. Research does not unfold in linear ways, and it allows itself to be capricious, inconsistent, mercurial, skittish, unsettled, unpredictable, dicey, haphazard, ambivalent, desultory, and skittish.



Relationality

Nothing exists in isolation from everything else. Relationality refers to the idea that actors of all kinds—people, material objects, ideas, “nature”, etc.—are embedded in an ecology of connections. Within such ecology actions inevitably affect others. Thus, non-representational theory and research examine the lifeworld as if it was a castle made of cards—with each card (or, outside of metaphor, each actor) resting upon an assemblage of others for its own existence and subsistence. Actors within assemblages, however, exert differing degrees of force and are therefore more or less powerful than others. Research, therefore, needs to be contextual and focus on rapports, differences, and interconnections.



Performativity

Non-representational theory and research zero in on what actors *do*. This focus on action—by people or other kinds of actors—emphasizes the importance of ritualized performances, habitual and non-habitual practices, and the various scripted and unscripted “doings” of which everyday life is made, no matter how seemingly mundane or unimportant. Performativity does not mean, exclusively, that life is a stage—in the dramaturgic, Goffmanian sense. While interaction at times does have dramatic qualities, the idea of performativity underlines the broader relevance of concerted actions—or “events”—in our mundane existence.



Corporeality

People's presence in the world is embodied. Non-representational ethnographic research thus begins from the researcher's body as the key instrument of knowing about others and self. Passions, orientations, moods, emotions, sentiments, sensations, dispositions, colors, sizes and shapes, and skills—of the researcher him/herself, and other people—thus work as the bodily “fluids” enlivening all interaction and ways of knowing in which ethnography is embedded. From fatigue to enthusiasm, melancholia to keenness and everything in between, non-representational ethnographic research is affected by the body's capacity to affect the world and its capacity to be affected by it.



Materiality

The capacity of the world to affect us on the basis of its material qualities is what we can call its “agency.” Textures, shapes, weights, colors, sizes, functionality, style, malleability, capacity, speed, tonality, fragrance, taste, style, portability, rhythmicity—and many, many more properties of material objects matter greatly. Non-representational ethnographic research tends to these qualities and their relationality not in an attempt to describe them and explain them realistically, but rather in the hope of evoking in inevitably partial ways their affectivity, and the hope of provoking for us a new imagination open to the multiple, often incomprehensible ways in which material objects are animated.



Affirmativity

Affirmativity refers to the affirmative power of experience. Experience is direct and immediate in its grasp of the lifeworld. Experience is the avenue through which meaning unfolds, without the necessary mediation of symbolic representation. People do not mentally construct the world through cognition, and then act. They do not “attach meaning” to the world, as if the world awaited their plans and schemes for its genesis. Non-representational ethnographic research thus privileges not what other entities things stand for (e.g. symbolic codes, ideologies, value systems, etc.), but rather how they stand for themselves.



Sustainability

Sustainability is the property of a method that does not exhaust or deplete the very resource it utilizes. Non-representational theory is a polemical, emancipatory, critical theory: it aims to criticize exploitative actions in any context—economic, political, environmental, etc. Similarly, non-representational ethnography cannot ignore dangerously unsustainable practices and must be outspoken against them and practically engaged to defeat them. Therefore it should be public and politically committed, while being respectful, and ethical. It should also help us imagine new, more sustainable futures.



Ineffability

The drive behind representational research is to mimic the world through realistic description and valid and reliable explanation. For non-representational theory and research, instead, the lifeworld escapes a human grasp keen on authentic reproduction. Therefore rather than represent it, we *evoke* multiple impressions of it. The lifeworld is often mysterious and incomprehensible. As if populated by uncanny presences, the “ghosts” of that lifeworld haunt the non-representational ethnographer, seducing him/her to attempt a thick description and imaginative interpretation that merely flirt back with reality.



Potentiality

Non-representational theory and research do not follow axiomatic theoretical laws or aim to exercise control through deductive models, but rather find inspiration in the generative, poietic, expressive power of the arts. Ambitious in its experimental drive and irreverent spirit to provoke change, non-representational ethnography will be playful, energetic, and vibrant. Rejecting the values of prediction and replicability, non-representational ethnographers are captivated by—and aim to captivate with—a transformative sense of wonder. Rather than abide by traditional methodological rules, non-representational ethnographers need to ask themselves about the creative and promissory potential of innovation, strangeness, and aliveness.



Consequentiality

The key focus of representational research is on what things symbolize—what they denote and connote, what codes they inform, what values they defer and refer to, etc. Instead, the key concern of non-representational theory is on what things—material objects, performances, discourses, etc.—do. Semiotic and material resources act in virtue of their power in an ecology of many other actors. Non-representational ethnography, therefore, shows how the actions of actors are consequential not in light of what they stand for, but in light of what they achieve, how they work, what they afford, whom they serve, and how so.



Creativity

The notion of creativity—of a wilfully expressive, autonomous, freely-generating subject—has undergone much criticism. Non-representational theory is duly skeptical towards passé romanticist notions of a creative subject. But retaining a certain amount of humanism is important. The non-representational ethnographer then should find inspiration in the value of a qualified creativity—tempered by the idea that creation is always situated, intertextual, and somewhat indulgent. Non-representational ethnography *needs* to be creative if it wants to achieve political relevance. Thus creativity becomes a means to the broader end of public consequentiality. What good is a revolution if no one can dance to it?



Multimodality

Because of its focus on affect, on sensuality, on creativity, on artistic and transformative potential, and on the public value of knowledge, non-representational ethnography cannot limit itself to one mode—writing—and only two media—the book and the journal article. Multimodality allows non-representational ethnographers to animate the lifeworlds object of their inquiry through multiple modes and diverse media of communication, different genres, and styles. Multimodality is not practiced to provide a more faithful representation (as in “triangulation”), but rather to enliven multiple, perhaps competing impressions. Since it often requires collaboration, multimodal projects can reduce the romanticist overtones of individualist creation.



Reflexivity

Non-representational ethnography shares with other post-structuralist research a strong disinterest in absolutist, universal knowledge. Because no research is value-free, the knowledge generated by non-representational ethnographers is personal and situated. Without becoming self-obsessed or indulgent, reflexive ethnographers position themselves squarely in their own research, sharing their work as both a personal narrative and an intellectual perspective informed and shaped (not “biased”) by experiences, dispositions, objectives, and skill. By being reflexive on how their presence colors the object of their inquiry, researchers’ interpretations become more, not less, robust in light of their open-endedness.



Proximity

Non-representational ethnography is embedded in place. Emplaced ethnography pays attention to how experiences of the field are colored by that place's material properties. The spatialities and temporalities of the field must be tended to, reflected upon, and lively rendered by an ethnographer—whether or not one's research focuses on geographical issues. Ethnographic representation, therefore, is best when situated in the here and the now. Use of the emplaced and embodied present tense (rather than the timeless ethnographic present), of the first person, and wherever possible of a subjunctive tone are crucial. These rhetorical strategies allow the ethnographer to be close-at-hand, rather than distant.



Mobility

Movement is the lifeblood of action and the dynamic underlining the genesis of the lifeworld. Rather than a mere topic of research, practices, experiences, and representations of movement lie at the very core of the research act. Non-representational ethnographers are therefore sensitive to how their mobility into, within, along, and out of the field informs their—and their informants'—ways of knowing. Non-representational ethnography cultivates the use of mobile methods of data collection, and whenever appropriate situates ethnographic representation on the move as well—avoiding sedentarist and nomadic ideologies.



Immediacy

Non-representational theories of time stress the multi-dimensionality of the present. The present time is repetition and difference, anticipation and transformation of the future, and the virtual unfolding of multiple happenings. Non-representational ethnography is sensitive to the multiple temporalities of the present. The immediacy of the ethnographer's experience and the rendition of such experience are therefore informed by temporalities such as rhythmical recurrences (e.g. minutes, hours, days, weeks, seasons, years), the elusiveness and unpredictability of events, and the contested, contradictory, and conflicted practices through which virtual futures are actualized.



Partiality

Non-representational ethnography does not aim at comprehensiveness the same way much qualitative research does. In order to achieve comprehensive research strategies such as grounded theory slice data horizontally—subdividing datasets into progressively narrower categories, identifying themes within them, and selecting representative tokens. Non-representational ethnography aims at evoking and provoking, rather than reporting and illustrating. Therefore data are tackled diagonally, not in order to squeeze meaning and trends, but in order to create a sense of action. Rather than the logic of a grid of branches, non-representational data organization may very well follow the stage aesthetics of a lightshow—adumbrating possibilities, beaming ideas, bedazzling and enlightening while remaining aware of what it simultaneously, inevitably, shadows.

Selected references on non-representational theory

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