

26

DIFFRACTION

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Donna Haraway initially proposed the notion of a diffractive methodology as an alternative to reflection and reflexivity. She considered reflection or reflexivity as an optics that produces sameness, preferring instead an optics of diffractive patterns, which enables differences that matter. Haraway drew on the work of Trinh-Minh-Ha, who troubled the colonising logics of binary thinking about identity difference – self and non-self /Other – as apartheid. Minh-Ha saw the need to disrupt or queer the binary logic of identity and configure difference differently (Barad, 2014a). Haraway was instrumental in reading Minh-Ha's account of difference through the figuration of diffraction. Diffraction patterns map the *effects* of difference rather than just where differences appear (Barad, 2007, 2014).

Karen Barad (2007) took diffraction forward as a *physical phenomenon* which is part of wave behaviour – what waves can do – whether they are light, water or sound waves. Diffraction is where waves “combine when they overlap and the apparent bending and spreading out of waves when they encounter an obstruction” (Barad, 2007, p. 28). In combining, waves can be amplified by being superimposed upon one another, or they can be nullified, depending on the relative height and the phases of the overlapping waves (whether they are in phase [crest to crest] or out of phase [crest to trough]). When waves overlap or encounter obstructions, they form patterns of difference. Barad use this physical process of diffraction as a methodology that engages affirmatively with difference. It is a rich concept to think-with and is central to their agential realist framework.

In a diffractive methodology, the details of one theory or philosophical position are read attentively and with care *through* rather than *against* one another to come to more creative insights. Barad propose a diffractive methodology because it is an affirmative engagement, rather than critique, which they regard as a potentially epistemologically damaging process of distancing, othering and putting another theoretical or philosophical position down. A diffractive methodology is thus not setting up one approach/theory/oeuvre against another but rather a detailed, attentive and care-full reading of the ideas of one through another, doing justice to the ideas expressed in the text. A diffractive methodology produces ‘inventive and generative provocations’ and the possibility of transdisciplinary approaches to issues under consideration. Diffraction as a process also focuses on differences that matter and questions of ethics and politics. By making new patterns of meaning that matter, a diffractive methodology is both constructive and deconstructive rather than destructive (Barad, 2014a).

Exercise

Consider the ways in which critique is different from a diffractive methodology. How might giving feedback to peers in an academic review process be enacted using a diffractive methodology. What would be the effect on the reviewing process?

This is an important question to investigate. In a footnote, Barad (2014a, p. 187ftn 63) explain that there are many different kinds of critique, and that diffraction is indebted to those put forward by Marx, Nietzsche and Foucault. They note, however, that diffractive analysis and critique differ in their ontology and temporality: the latter (critique) “operating in a mode of disclosure, exposure and demystification” (destruction), while diffraction is “a form of affirmative engagement” creating new “patterns of understanding-becoming” (construction and deconstruction) (Barad, 2014a, p. 187ftn 63). Ontology (the subjectivity of the researcher), epistemology (critique and diffraction as method), and ethics (response-able reading of texts) are all entangled. Hence, the preference for diffractive reviews in this book series. It is also the reason the entries in this book are diffractions rather than reflections. At the same time, no binary is set up by the columns.

The lines in the table do not indicate binaries or dichotomies – a ‘cutting apart’. The lines strengthen the always already existing relationality between qualitative, quantitative and postqualitative research. As Barad (2007, p. 466) insist, “even a [Cartesian] cut that breaks things apart does not cause a separation but furthers the entanglement!”

TABLE 26.1 Diffractive reviewing practices

<i>Reflective review</i>	<i>Diffractive re-view</i>
<p>Reviewer is the expert, has an overview of the fields in question and uses his/her superior knowledge to make comments and help ‘fix’ or ‘strengthen’ the text.</p> <p>Example: Reviewer 1 “the author has the necessary distance to discuss this phenomenon in education.”</p> <p>Reviewer 2 “This is a clear, well designed, and coherent article that stems from an ongoing intellectual engagement with the philosopher’s ideas.”</p> <p>Reviewer 3 “There are personal comments in the chapter I find interesting, but that may be inappropriate for an academic journal.”</p> <p>Cartesian cut Breaks apart in different directions. The review doesn’t add connections but uses difference to be critical (through identity as foundational) to replace, rather than affirm and add, to produce a new insight (i.e., new for both reviewer and author). Mind you, Barad (2007, p. 466) argue that “even a [Cartesian] cut that breaks things apart does not cause a separation but furthers the entanglement!”</p>	<p>Re-viewer and author are in conversation producing new insights (also for the reviewer).</p> <p>Example: Reviewer 1 “Pg 1 Line 33. Not sure why own is in speech marks” Author “it is to emphasise individualised existence of selves – the key idea of this paper is to trouble anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism”</p> <p>Reviewer 1 “This is helpful as it makes me think: Doesn’t a self have some kind of own existence (singularity)? I am thinking of physical existence. Your speech marks make me wonder whether the relational brings selves into some individualised existence, but as part of the phenomenon. Selves are not just social, conceptual. So maybe selves exist individually and not (simultaneously), thereby disrupting binary logic. Would you agree with that, and if so, perhaps you can take that new insight up in your chapter?”</p> <p>Agential cut Cutting-together apart: there is no outside or view from nowhere. A re-view tunnels like a worm would do in com-post, adding affirmatively to what is always already there because ideas and texts are porous without boundaries (like fresh coffee percolating). Bodies affect and are affected. They are moving away from identity and who said what and when, because ideas are always already entangled with past, present and future ideas (and mothers, children, pet animals, sea, wind, etc., that made those ideas possible).</p>

(Continued)

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<i>Reflective review</i>	<i>Diffraction re-view</i>
<p>Assumes binaries</p> <p>Words, things and people are separate ontological entities. Reflection is an inner mental activity, where a researcher supposedly takes a step back, distancing him/herself from the <u>data</u>.</p> <p>This enables power-producing binaries, such as expert/novice, insider/outsider, academic/practitioner, theory/practice.</p> <p>Representational</p> <p>Words mirror nature, reality, etc. (<u>culture/nature</u> binary presupposed)</p> <p>Assumes reviewers can have an overview of the field, can identify gaps and identify what is lacking.</p> <p>Even in reflexive research, the idea is to interrogate and identify how one's self is implicated in the research.</p> <p>Outsider perspective</p> <p>A perspective from a distance, as if the reviewer is ontologically separate from the text she is reading using criteria external to the work itself and imposed from the outside. It is assumed that judgement about texts can be objective. The kind of objectivity that assumes the objective/subjective binary (with intersubjectivity as an alternative).</p> <p>Being an outsider is meant here ontologically, not epistemologically</p> <p>Knowing is a mental, cognitive process inside the human; separated from <u>emotion/affect</u></p> <p>A reflective reviewing process involves going back to the text as if it is a thing in the past that is static (unilinear time assumed) and an object for the reviewer.</p>	<p>Disrupts binaries</p> <p>Disrupts <i>power</i> producing binaries that thrive on identity. Regards the human not as an ontological, but a political category (Man-made). Not about essence or identity but on <u>be(com)ing</u>. Reconfigures ontology (science of being).</p> <p>Importantly, it disrupts the theory/practice binary (conceptual/empirical), so the theoretical and practical are read through one another. Practice is not an application of theory.</p> <p>Nonrepresentational</p> <p>Words and things, nature and culture are all entangled and can't be re-presented. No big picture, or map, or overview is possible.</p> <p>Insider perspective</p> <p>The reviewer is ontologically part of the world and the text. She thinks with the text as if she is entangled with it. Many factors influence her reading – many unbeknown to her (e.g., the <u>atmosphere</u>)</p> <p>Redefinition of objectivity. Doing justice to the complexity of the world that should be understood as transdisciplinary. So, in higher education, we tend to use socio-cultural theories. When diffracting, the perspectives of other disciplines (geography, biology etc.) are woven through the topic at hand. The entities that have been erased and ignored from social sciences are made visible (also at quantum level).</p> <p>Being an insider is meant here ontologically not epistemologically. There is no outside ontologically.</p> <p>Knowing is an iterative performative practice that leaves marks on bodies/sediments the world</p> <p>No cognition/affect binary assumed</p> <p>A creative doing that is not intentional – an undergoing-in-doing (Ingold, 2015).</p> <p>A re-view is a dynamic process of thinking together with and through the text as an emergent, open, in/determinate process</p> <p>Paying attention to the differences and the fine-grained details that matter</p> <p>In/determinate and</p>

<i>Reflective review</i>	<i>Diffractive re-view</i>
<p>A reviewer is a person who has responsibilities:</p> <p>Reviewers are individuals with rights and responsibilities for their reviews. They are supposedly anonymous, so can't be held accountable for their reviews by the author.</p>	<p>Response-ability:</p> <p>The re-viewer makes it possible for the 'other' to respond (includes the nonhuman). A transindividual commitment to undo the injustices committed to those who are (also) no longer there (as well as our 'own' childhood 'selves')</p>

Further reading

- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press. Chapter 2.
- Juelskjær, M., & Schwennesen, N. (2012). Intra-active entanglements: An interview with Karen Barad. *Kvinde, Koen og Forskning*, 21(1–2), 10–23.
- Murris, K., & Bozalek, V. (2019). Diffraction and response-able reading of texts: The relational ontologies of Barad and Deleuze. *International Journal for Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32(7), 872–886. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1609122>
- Murris, K., & Bozalek, V. (2019). Diffracting diffractive readings of texts as methodology: Some propositions. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 51(14), 1504–1517. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2019.1570843>

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