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INTRA-ACTION

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“Intra-action” is a new term, introduced by Donna Haraway (1992) and further developed by Karen Barad. Its spelling expresses a relational ontology. “Intra”, derived from Latin, means “within”, “interior”, “during”. At the heart of Barad’s philosophy of agential realism, intra-action is closely related to diffraction and re-turning as research methodologies. These concepts express an ontological shift from individual to relational existence. Intra-action does not presuppose individualised existence before relations. This applies, not only to subjects, but also to objects. By contrast, the more familiar concept of interaction assumes that entities exist individually before they interact (act between, towards and among each other as separate entities).

(Barad, 2007, p. 184)

The short YouTube clip with transcript, *Three-Minute Theory*,¹ helps to introduce the concept of intra-action in the context of the Ebola virus. Intra-action reconfigures what any virus *is* (e.g., Ebola, SARS-CoV-2). Instead of assuming that a virus is a (tiny) *thing* or *object* in the world, intra-action helps us to think of it as a phenomenon. Why is this, what does it mean, and why does it matter?

Intra-action seems counter-intuitive. When I think of myself as a human subject, surely I exist separately from the coffee cup I am holding and from the chair I am sitting on? Also, for classical science, the world consists of interacting, but by separately existing parts that make up the whole (the world as a container). Although ‘interaction’ and ‘intra-action’ look similar, their work in research is radically different.

Intra-action involves rethinking and redoing our claims to knowledge (epistemology). This includes what we think the world is made of (our ontological beliefs), as well as our normative ideas about how we ought to live (ethics). Intra-action, Barad explain, “signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (Barad, 2007, p. 33) of what they call *phenomena*. Humans are neither subjects nor objects (e.g., me, the coffee cup or the chair) but complex phenomena (infinite entanglements). Intra-action is about connectedness *with* the world. It assumes that as individual humans, we have no control over the network of relations we always already find ourselves in, and how they affect us. Humans can distance themselves from other subjects and objects only in abstraction (through human-made categories). This could be, for example, by using the concept ‘I’, ‘woman’, or ‘child’.

Importantly, relations are not something we (as humans) create. Researchers can trace them across space and time (see diffraction). Working with intra-action, researchers avoid trying to have an ‘overview’ of fields, literature or bodies of knowledge. Instead, they pay attention to the entangled nature of the particular, the everyday, by disrupting binaries between, for example, public and private, world and thinker, inside and outside, domestic and professional. Being part of the world ontologically means that there are no determinate boundaries between humans and

between humans and nonhumans (see affectivity). All life is dynamic, fluctuating, vibrant and constantly on the move, albeit at different velocities – even rocks and other objects.

Intra-actions, according to Barad, cut together apart at the same time, which means that they are differentiated and entangled simultaneously. This way of seeing the world is different from Cartesian dualism – which dichotomises or makes binaries – cutting into two, the absolute separation or pre-existing determinate boundary of subject/object, culture/nature, here/there, now/then. Intra-action troubles Cartesian dualism, making the shift to a non-dualistic view of the world.

Intra-action also means that cause does not precede effect.² Instead, cause and effect are mutually constituted through intra-action, which holds them together and separates them at the same time. It is not just humans who intra-act, but the world is intra-acting all the time, and humans are part of the world's ongoing intra-actions.

An example of intra-action that Karen Barad provide in their book Meeting the Universe Halfway is the act of writing a book. According to Barad, they (Barad) didn't write the book and the book didn't write them. They and the book were mutually constituted and re/worked through intra-action.

Notes

1 See the book series website www.postqualitativeresearch.com for the text to go with this clip, which can also be accessed on: (see: <https://aabraahams.wordpress.com/2017/02/06/inter-intra-action-eng/>) with the video embedded in the text.

2 See also causality.

Further reading

Juelskjær, M., & Schwennesen, N. (2012). Intra-active entanglements: An interview with Karen Barad. *Kvin-der, Køn & Forskning*, 21(1–2), 10–23.