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Subtheme 1.3 : Epistemological discussions about theoretical and empirical studies

SYMPOSIUM

Psychology and Materiality: an Empirically Founded Conceptual Debate

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Virtual materiality: How do we conceptualize materiality embodied and enacted in computer gaming, imagery and night dreams?

Key words: Virtual materiality, agential realism, night dreams, computer games, imagery

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There are two questions that feed the curiosity of this paper: a theoretical question connected to the conceptualization of materiality across the real/virtual divide and an empirical question connected to the understanding of virtual experiences in children's lives when studied in relation to bullying practices in school.

The theoretical question concerns the conceptual challenges that arise from empirical data which contain 1. children's narratives about matter and meaning as they intertwine in their nightly dreams, 2. the observations of children's computer gaming practices as well as their recounts of them and 3. the consumption of other media products like movies, reality shows, YouTube videos etc. How do we theorize 'matter' in such dimensions? Is it possible to theorize virtual matter as 'materiality' in line with any real life materiality?

What conceptualization will help us understand the character and effects of the skeleton army, which came across the sea to drown the boys in Phillip's school class: a central scene in one of the dreams he recounted? Are the boat and the water in that dream materialities? Discourse? Part of some kind of enacted subjectivity? How will our decision of which theoretical path to follow guide our attempt to understand the enactment of despair? Would our choice of path produce a focus upon Philip's physical responses and perhaps even include discussions about how the chemical brain processes occur in relation to the encounter with the skeletons? Should dreams be discarded as analytical input to discussions about materiality? How far can we develop and stretch our conceptual understanding of the material? (Søndergaard 2009b)

Theorizing creates new patterns of visibility and invisibility - with all the potentialities in between. Bullying research is a field that begs for new theorizing and new analytical tools. (Søndergaard 2008, 2009a) It is a field that deals with children's individual and collective processes of becoming, of materializing and of entering in and as agentic part(ner)s of the human and non-human world. But current theoretical premises in

that field rely heavily on psychology's humanist approaches. And this is where the second question that feeds the curiosity becomes relevant.

The empirical question concerns the meaning of the virtual experiences of children in relation to their material, cultural and subjective becoming, which in turn also affects the available patterns of social relating and mutual material enactments that form some of their agentic premises.

My theoretical approach to bullying emphasizes the phenomenon as enacted by multiple interacting forces including discourse, materiality, subjectivity, technology etc. Bullying practices are not seen as mere effects of encounters among particular kinds of personalities - rather as effects of multiple inter/intra-acting forces (Barad, 2007; Højgaard & Søndergaard 2010 in press) and among these also subjectivities in terms of what we use to recognize as desires, anxieties, memories, experiences etc.

Among these many interacting forces technologies play a crucial part – as do bodies, whether they are fighting, playing, dreaming, loving or hating bodies. And as do weapons - whether in the shape of virtual weapons of the computer games (as in e.g. Battlefield, Counter Strike, Grand Theft Auto), or those from gaming scenarios and movies revisited in night dreams; or sophisticated inventions of weapons merging into cyborgs be they imagined, dreamt, drawn, watched in movies or recounted. These weapons play a central role in much child play and interaction whether the weapons are imitated, transformed, ridiculed, enhanced or something entirely different.

In psychological and social literature dealing with effects of for instance violent media products, most commonly the voices split into two predominant positions: one claiming the aggression to have great impact on the behavior of and among child users (Gentile & Gentile, 2008; Grossman, 2000) – the other claiming that aggression is merely play (Durkin et al., 1998), an outside to the real life of the children. A few would take the argument a step further and claim that gaming violence provides an opportunity for harmless drainage of inner tensions. And yet other researchers try to mediate between these positions, most often arguing that for particularly vulnerable children these media products may produce aggressive behavior, but for healthy children they have no impact.

But the enactments across real and virtual realities need more complex conceptualizations. Bringing the challenges connected to potential conceptualizations around virtual materiality into the realm of agential realism may be a productive way to approach the obvious need of more sophisticated understanding. Karen Barad argues that “matter is produced and productive. Matter is agentive, not at fixed essence or property of things. Mattering is differentiating, and which differences comes to matter, matter in the iterative production of different difference” (2007: 137). Following ideas from Judith Butler (1993) and Donna Haraway (1991,1996) she emphasizes, that substance cannot be fixed, materiality is a doing, possibly a ‘congealing of agency’ (Højgaard & Søndergaard 2010 in press). Her conceptualization of agential realism and the neologism of intra-activity imply productive entanglements among discourse, matter, subjectivity, time, space etc. One of her ambitions is to consider how agential realism can contribute to a new materialist understanding of power and its effects on the production of bodies, identities, and subjectivities. Virtuality, however, is not directly addressed, but the openness and the very complexity-sensitive character of her conceptualizing ambitions provide an interesting platform for further development including virtual materiality and agency.

If we choose to proceed along this line – some of our steps would include attention to the following points:

1. Working with virtual realities first of all undermines a pure realist conceptualization of materiality. We need to be able to think materiality in and as process, including changes and sedimentations. Conceptualization has to emphasize matter as transformative, intra-acting, as doing, and as entangling with discourse and subjectivity – in and across time and space.
2. We need to address the extent to which the concept (materiality) can be expanded without losing access to mutual and productive meaning making among researchers, which calls upon questions like: would all matter have to be productive in relation to real life matter to be recognized by researchers as ‘materiality’? Or are virtual effects sufficient for matter to be recognized as matter?
3. In what terms would we understand material inventions, material transformations or transportations involved across dimensions? In what terms would we understand and perhaps contest the virtual-real-divide as a consequence of a new conceptualization of virtual materiality? These questions

become crucial when we follow matter in and across real life, virtual experience, recounted imagery, night dreams, YouTube videos and even further. Some may already have recognized Phillip's skeleton army as a transport/transformation from Lord of the Rings, DVD 3, the army which Aragon calls out from the mountains to help him defeat the enemy that tries to invade Minas Tirith – the phosphorescent green skeleton warriors that defeat everything including orks and trolls, however in Phillip's dream transformed into a virtual threat to him and his class mates who in real (social-material) life live the ambivalence between war and death as 'real' existential threats versus virtual imagery and play. What agential potentials arise for Phillip as this ambivalence is addressed in respectively real and virtual life? What discursive-material effects may be seen across the divide – effects in terms of intra-activity across real and virtual?

My intention in the paper is to invite co-reflection on the potentials for theoretical development and empirical analyses arising from these challenges connected with virtual materiality.

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