

Review:

Niklas Alexander Chimirri

Michalis Kontopodis & Jörg Niewöhner (Eds.) (2010). Das Selbst als Netzwerk. Zum Einsatz von Körpern und Dingen im Alltag [The Self as Network: On Everyday Uses of Bodies and Things].

Bielefeld: transcript Verlag; 228 pages; ISBN 978-3-8376-1599-9; € 24,80

Key words:

everyday life
research;
biomedical
practices;
relational
materialism;
material-semiotic
perspective;
praxiography;
transformation;
actor-network
theory; critical
psychology;
material and
intersubjective
mediatedness of
the world;
emancipatory
potential

Abstract: In the investigation of human everyday life, the significance of the material still tends to be neglected. The anthology edited by KONTOPODIS and NIEWÖHNER presents contributions that draw on relational-materialist concepts in order to praxiographically study how both human and non-human agents transform (mostly biomedical) everyday practices. This review attempts to connect these material-semiotic descriptions to a critical psychological perspective. It highlights how the contributions' focus on material things' actions is valuable for further unraveling the human-world relationship. Meanwhile it questions whether the underlying conceptual framework allows for an emancipatory science which strives for transformations that reach beyond the mere descriptive level.

Table of Contents

- [1. Material Bodily Practices in Everyday Life: Content Overview](#)
- [2. What is Behind the Read](#)
- [3. Body Transformations and Disruptions: A Quick Ride Through the Contributions](#)
- [4. Very Thick Descriptions—And Then? A Discussion](#)
 - [4.1 In and out of ANT](#)
 - [4.2 Open questions and connectabilities](#)
 - [4.3 And what is the researcher doing?](#)
- [5. Transforming Practices? Concluding Remarks](#)

[Acknowledgment](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

1. Material Bodily Practices in Everyday Life: Content Overview

This anthology's title is misleading. But from my point of view, that is a plus. Because instead of merely lecturing about the everyday uses of bodies and things in various practices as the title suggests, it reports about human beings that are hurled out of the commonly perceived relative security of one's own "everyday life," and are suddenly confronted with a disruption—a disruption that in Western societies demands the person to grapple with the manifold body-related practices and technologies offered by their systems. The various authors "visit" these persons and the practices they are or were participating in. They offer praxiographic accounts that relate the affected persons' experiences to

everyday discourses, expert opinions, and especially to the use of material objects or things applied in the respective practices. [1]

As the editorial explains, the seven contributions share the common interest of investigating how bodies are performed or done via the multiplicity of agents involved in the various, mostly biomedical practices. Arguing from a relational-materialist perspective, not only "actors" or conscious beings, but also material things are part of the concrete practice arrangements and thus of the performative process of doing the (patient's) body. Things are understood as "actants" or non-human agents. They act on and with the other agents in a specific situation, and they carry specific materialities and meanings (consequently the approach is often termed material-semiotic, while these two dimensions are inseparably intertwined). Relations between the multiple agents in a situation create a network that may then become another agent in another network and so on. Even the body itself can be understood as a network formed out of a multiplicity of actors or body pieces (e.g., ZIMMER's contribution, p.62). [2]

This approach is most prominently associated with Bruno LATOUR and his work on *actor-network theory* (ANT) and has been especially influential in science and technology studies, sociology, and anthropology. The actor-network perspective offers the common ground for the anthology's investigations. Most contributors also draw on John LAW as well as on Donna HARAWAY's *cyborg* concept, while references to Michel FOUCAULT's work are rather tacitly implied than spelled out (although he is explicitly mentioned on the back cover). [3]

2. What is Behind the Read

The editors' and contributor's focus on how materialities matter in everyday life and specifically in medical practices is what first got me hooked on this volume of the series "Embodiments/MatteRealities—Perspectives of Empirical Science Studies" [*Verkörperungen/MatteRealities—Perspektiven empirischer Wissenschaftsforschung*]. As KONTOPODIS (2012) writes in another context, the significance of materiality (and, by the way, also of everyday experiences) has been widely ignored in most psychological research. Being a psychologist myself who actually *is* working with a critical psychological perspective that conceptualizes everyday human existence as inseparable from the material world, I specifically dived into the read in the search for productive possibilities to relate critical psychology to the relational-materialist perspective. I was aiming at finding empirical work that conceptually refines the relationship between human and non-human agents, and that sheds a brighter light onto the reciprocity and mutuality of this relationship in everyday doings around everyday dilemmas, in the presented cases foremost across different biomedical practices. [4]

In this connection, it is important and worthwhile to mention that each one of the contributions builds on empirical material collected via qualitative methods by each respective contributor in always different settings. The contributions were thus created directly in and out of the everyday they investigate. All of the contributors spent an extensive amount of time in their respective settings

(ambulant and stationary care, a research & development lab, a dating website, patient's homes, etc.) doing multi-sited ethnographic, or rather *praxiographic* (MOL, 2002), research: They performed (participant) observations, held ethnographic conversations and interviews, studied the documents used in the practices as well as the underlying societal discourses. Their research was part of a three-semester "study project" entitled "Transformations of the Self" [*Transformationen des Selbst*], i.e. working groups of students from the Humboldt University of Berlin's Institute for European Ethnology that formed around a common subject matter. As the editors, who also supervised the project, write in the anthology's foreword, the objective of these projects is to "learn while doing research" [*forschendes Lernen*]. Knowing that these alternative forms of teaching and learning are increasingly marginalized due to the reforms in European higher education implemented in the last decade, the idea of gaining an insight into the results of such a noteworthy academic practice certainly increased my anticipation of the read. [5]

3. Body Transformations and Disruptions: A Quick Ride Through the Contributions

Most of the contributions deal with medical practices which followed an event that disrupted their everyday lives. They specifically focus on how the things or technologies employed in the practices enact the persons involved, and how these technologies are reciprocally enacted by the persons. While Stefanie ZIMMER (pp.25-54) investigates how machines are supposed to teach stroke patients how to walk again, Stefan REINSCH (pp.55-83) analyzes how teenagers diagnosed with cystic fibrosis (have to) learn to make the diagnosis part of their everyday life. Lydia-Maria OUART (pp.135-165) follows assessors commissioned by health care insurances and inquires how they quantitatively evaluate individual nursing care dependencies. What prevention in the context of cardiological rehabilitation may imply for the patient's life lies at the heart of Denny CHAKKALAKAL's study (pp.167-195), and Mirjam STAUB (pp.197-226) explores how breast cancer patients struggle to cope with their diagnosis between notions of individuality and collectivity. Other than these contributions, Nora WALTHER (pp.85-108) is not concerned with medical services provided to individuals that have experienced a more or less sudden disruption of their everyday lives. Instead, she looks into why women decide to themselves use contraceptive hormone implants, thus trying to avoid disruption. And whether the users of the dating platform gayromeo.com that Markus QUETSCH (pp.109-133) talked to actually have experienced or even are still experiencing disruptions remains uncertain. Nevertheless also his contribution investigates how bodies are transformed or done in everyday practices, and how the bodies as agents mutually relate to and constitute these very same practices. [6]

4. Very Thick Descriptions—And Then? A Discussion

4.1 In and out of ANT

Based on what the editors call the *relational-material perspective* in the social sciences, the contributions engage in material-semiotic analyses of everyday practices. They primarily employ the conceptual framework of ANT in order to describe the relations which were praxiographically approached in the various fields. The practices can consequently be understood via the situated interplay of a multiplicity of human and non-human agents, of actors and actants. In a specific time/space constellation, these agents form networks that can in turn become agents again once stabilized, or in turn fall apart and re-arrange. What strikes me most about this *perspective* (LATOUR calls ANT a perspective, cf. REINSCH's contribution, p.88) is its radical anti-essentialist emphasis of the processuality and the situatedness of interactions. Relative to the concrete situation and position in this situation, the relations between the agents can constantly be re-defined and described differently. This uncertainty and highly dynamic idea of a situated knowledge production allows for questioning and re-questioning all possible elements involved in a practice. The most obvious consequence is that transformational agency is not only ascribed to human beings, but also to material objects or things. All contributions seize this analytical possibility and dedicate large parts of their texts to the significance of the technologies in practice. [7]

For instance ZIMMER, who, due to a cerebral hemorrhage, has to re-learn walking herself, tested two machines developed in rehabilitation robotics. She illustrates how something deemed as "normal" as walking is also a practice that was once learned, and how this ability may need to be re-learned after a disruptive event. However, the treadmill-like machines that are supposed to assist the patient in "learning to walk," pre-suppose a pre-calculated way of walking, e.g., an average tread height when climbing stairs. Echoing one of the engineers she interviewed, she terms this the "engineerical norm for walking" [*ingenieurscher Normalgang*], pointing to the fact that the "average" walk based on a collection of quantitative data undermines the uniqueness and polyvalence of an individual's walking practice. Hence the machine acts on the patient's body by exclusively "teaching" it the walking norm. [8]

Other contributors similarly expose how quantitative data and statistical probabilities are turned into facts for living. For example, CHAKKALAKAL describes how blood pressure values and the technologies measuring it take center stage in the lives of patients with cardiological problems. With DUMIT (2002), he explains that there has been an underlying paradigm shift in the medical sciences, re-defining the patient as *inherently ill* rather than *inherently healthy*. Consequently, in order to live a good and healthy life, prevention via (technology-mediated) self-monitoring becomes quasi-indispensable. For cardiology patients, this means that they are required to constantly check their blood pressure in order to be warned about anomalies that might indicate a manifest risk. The values are thus fetishized, pretending to expose a factual truth

about the patient's body, and the patient's mind cooperates with the medical staff to seek out ways to optimally control the inherently ill body. Besides obviously reproducing the mind/body divide via this practice, the "blood pressure work" (p.187) *per se* also produces (presumably unintended) consequences: One of the patients reported to have stopped self-monitoring his blood pressure—it just stressed him out too much. [9]

Overall the contributors offer very thick descriptions of the various practices they participated in, and they show how the multiplicity of non-human agents forms networks in relation to the human agents entering the practice. These descriptions mostly draw on the concepts provided by ANT. When it comes to explaining or interpreting the (societal) meaning of the interrelations or networks, however, the contributions also consult various concepts that point beyond the relationalism of the ANT framework, e.g., *somatic individuality* and *biosociality* (in STAUB), *normalization strategies* (in REINSCH), *Aristotelian classification* (in OUART), or the *inherently ill* paradigm. In principal, this move appears totally legitimate. Nevertheless, it leads me to raise three questions:

1. Why do the contributors recur to (seemingly more stable and less relational) concepts when interpreting their findings?
2. How do these concepts relate to ANT concepts, as well as ANT's philosophical, epistemological, and ontological pre-assumptions?
3. Why are the concepts not being discussed across contributions? For instance, somatic individuality and biosociality seem to be analytically valuable terms across the various medical practices explored. Eventually they could have been refined or reformulated thanks to the contributors' findings. [10]

4.2 Open questions and connectabilities

The anthology offers no answers to these questions, and I am not able to provide them either. But I would have wished for them being discussed on a more fundamental level, especially in order to "carve out" the interconnections between the manifold concepts employed as well as the single contributions' implications for future debates. Instead the contributions stand side by side rather than conjointly arguing for similarities. Therefore it was difficult for me to filter out whether the contributors were actually arguing for more than the (undoubtedly important) phrase: Mind materiality when describing how humans are (being) positioned! But what do we (humans) make out of these descriptions? Is there something generalizable to be drawn from these, e.g., in order to refine the concepts in play, to help them create a more precise picture of the human-world relationship? And more broadly: Does the relational-materialist perspective ever even seek some sort of generalization, does the ANT framework actually allow for conceptual refinements? And does it furthermore strive for emancipatory transformation, or plainly said, for bettering the everyday life of people? [11]

Upfront the editors emphasize that the relational-materialist approach is a political endeavor (KONTOPODIS & NIEWÖHNER, p.17). Certainly the transformations

of the self as well as the practices that occur when the multiplicity of agents relate to each other are inherently political. But considering the everyday life focus that is already laid out in the anthology's title, I wonder: What do the findings imply for further living those scrutinized everyday lives, or rather: to make them better? What *possibilities for (human) action* arise out of the very thick descriptions offered? [12]

When, for instance, ZIMMER writes that the uniqueness of the disabled individual's walking motions needs to be borne in mind, why not argue for a *design for all* (TOBOSO, 2011) that questions the whole idea of "special needs" and "disability" by acknowledging that every individual has special needs and (dis)abilities? WALTHER's contribution closes with the notion that the contraceptive hormone implants produce a new corporeality that allows for an alternative interpretation of femininity, as hybrid and gender-neutral. Without contesting this possibility, what does this mean for everyday practices? In my eyes, the hormone implant could also be understood as another biosocial technology that prevents men from having to deal with the risks and troubles of doing contraception. The economic functionality of creating a whole new market for preventive technologies could have been more emphasized as well (also in CHAKKALAKAL's contribution). OUART's description of how the evaluations of nursing care dependencies quantify the patients' everyday lives for economic purposes could have asked more specifically for the reasons the assessor believes this quantification to be the only feasible way for safeguarding "social justice." Also QUETSCH's contribution could have investigated more deeply the online dating platform users' subjective reasons for "adjusting" to the platform's requirements, thus consciously reducing their personal life experiences to the profile's superficialities. The concept of the "conduct of everyday life" [*alltägliche Lebensführung*] (HOLZKAMP, 1995, 1996), for instance, could have offered a more processual and especially intersubjective understanding of why and how REINSCH's young interview partners struggle with their cystic fibrosis diagnosis: In this contribution, it is described how parents and medics try to persuade the teenager to comply with their efforts to normalize the child's life. Instead of also looking at how the other involved individuals' (also the friends') conducts of everyday life create possibilities and hindrances for the teenager to again live a good life, REINSCH focuses, just like the other adults in the practice, on how especially the child itself needs to change its attitude towards the sickness via an alternative articulation of normality. Finally, STAUB writes about breast cancer patients and how they cope either individually or collectively with their diagnosis. Collaboration or collective possibilities for action, however, are not discussed in this context. Rather collectivity is thought of in terms of identifying with each other or rather each other's "fate." [13]

4.3 And what is the researcher doing?

Relating the contributions to rather (human) action-oriented discussions and concepts raises doubts about whether it is only the descriptions offered here that lack an emancipatory, transformative potential. Sure, it is claimed that transformations or translations happen all the time, each time agents relate to

each other and form a network. But these transformations just seem to happen without any conscious actions. To me, it appears as if the relational-materialist emphasis of the things' actions (whose existence I would not doubt) marginalizes the actual *human* action possibilities. In ANT, all agents are considered symmetrical in the relation. But in research practice, humans are not considered as that relevant anymore for the constitution and stabilization of a network, or so it seems. Why else do none of the contributions really consider the researcher's active participation in those networks out of which the empirical material emerged? How can a researcher scrutinize the networks in a practice, closely look at the multiplicity of agents involved, and then forget about her_himself also being an agent—and even the most powerful agent, as it lies with the researcher to interpret the material-semiotic relations in the practice and make the interpretation available to a readership. Although the contributors engage in praxiographic research in order to explore what people do instead of what they think (KONTOPODIS, 2012), they nevertheless publish *what they think was done* in practice. [14]

Paradoxically, it is exactly Donna HARAWAY (1991) who has criticized this researcher's *view from above, from nowhere*: Such a *third-person perspective* pretends that the researcher could ontologically objectify the surrounding world and the relations therein without being involved in it him_herself, without reflecting upon his_her own ontological status in the relationship (SCHRAUBE, 2012). So while HARAWAY's *cyborg* concept is widely utilized in the anthology (especially in WALTHER), this overarching epistemological issue is unfortunately not dealt with. [15]

5. Transforming Practices? Concluding Remarks

The anthology convincingly pleads for looking more closely at the everyday life practices with (biomedical) technologies, and emphasizes the irreducible relevance of these technologies by ascribing them agency. However, the relational-materialist concepts presented here do not seem to call for looking beyond the descriptive level, do not ask for how these might contribute to changes in societal practice. Nevertheless the questions the contributions pose are significant for how we humans live our everyday life, and how we conceive of normality, health, illness, a good life. Challenging common understandings of the various fields and practices therein by posing these questions directly in and to the field is a first step towards realizing the transformational potentials in practice. Consequently the contributors make no secret of research being inherently political. This insight makes the investigations so interesting and readable, and one may wish for more researchers being aware of this undeniable fact. The next step, then, would be to refine the (evidently rather rigid) conceptual framework applied, so that future work may not only describe transformations in practice, but actually promote them. [16]

Acknowledgment

I wish to thank Paul Sebastian RUPPEL for giving me valuable advice on the first draft of this book review.

References

- Dumit, Joseph (2002). Drugs for life. *Molecular Interventions*, 2(3), 124-127.
- Haraway, Donna J. (1991). *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Holzkamp, Klaus (1995). Alltägliche Lebensführung als subjektwissenschaftliches Grundkonzept. *Das Argument*, 212, 817-846.
- Holzkamp, Klaus (1996). Psychologie: Verständigung über Handlungsbegründungen alltäglicher Lebensführung. *Forum Kritische Psychologie*, 36, 7-112.
- Kontopodis, Michalis (2012). How things matter in everyday lives of preschool age children: Material-semiotic investigations in psychology and education. *Journal für Psychologie*, 20(1), Art. 6, <http://www.journal-fuer-psychologie.de/> [Date of Access: March 1, 2012].
- Mol, Annemarie (2002). *The body multiple: Ontology in medical practice*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Schraube, Ernst (2012). Das Ich und der Andere in der psychologischen Technikforschung. *Journal für Psychologie*, 20(1), Art. 7, <http://www.journal-fuer-psychologie.de/> [Date of Access: March 1, 2012].
- Toboso, Mario (2011). Rethinking disability in Amartya Sen's approach: ICT and equality of opportunity. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 13, 107-118.

Author

Niklas A. CHIMIRRI, Dipl.-Psych., studied psychology, media & communication studies, and politics in Berlin, Padova, and New York City. He is PhD fellow in the Graduate Program *Social Psychology of Everyday Life* at Roskilde University, Denmark. His research project explores how media technologies become subjectively relevant for the conduct of everyday life of kindergarten children.

Contact:

Niklas Alexander Chimirri
Department of Psychology and Educational Studies
Doctoral School for Lifelong Learning and Social Psychology of Everyday Life
Roskilde University, P5
P.O. Box 260
4000 Roskilde, Denmark
Tel.: +45 4674-3028
E-mail: chimirri@ruc.dk
URL: <http://forskning.ruc.dk/site/person/chimirri>

Citation

Chimirri, Niklas Alexander (2012). Review: Michalis Kontopodis & Jörg Niewöhner (Eds.) (2010). Das Selbst als Netzwerk. Zum Einsatz von Körpern und Dingen im Alltag [The Self as Network: On Everyday Uses of Bodies and Things] [16 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 13(2), Art.7, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs120270>.