

Accessing and Exploring Researcher Positionality through Diffractive Analysis: A Workshop (Cara Meixner, Ph.D.¹)


Reflexivity has been recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere... Diffraction is an optical metaphor for the effort to make a difference in the world... [it records] the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. -Donna Haraway-

Diffractive Analysis (DA)

- DA is “a commitment to understanding which differences matter, how they matter, and for whom” (Barad, 2007, p. 90). Specifically, DA looks at interferences and entanglements (human and material).
- DA is a way of meeting data differently— “reading insights through one another” (Barad, p. 71) and focusing on what those insights do and produce.
- DA inquirers “enter the assemblage” and seek “multiplicity, ambiguity, and incoherent subjectivity” (Mazzei, 2014, p. 743).
- DA is rooted in new materialism, which problematizes representationalism and focuses on matter and substance as vibrant, moving, and *doing*.

Diffractive Analysis' Critique of Reflexive Practice

<u>Reflective Practice</u>	<u>Diffractive Practice</u>
Humans and other entities are discrete and contained beings (Hill).	Bodies are “open systems with fluid boundaries” (Hill, p. 7; see Barad).
Subject-object binary creates “geometries of sameness” (Barad, p. 72).	New patterns are created by differences (see Barad, Dixon-Román, Hill).
Invites “the illusion of mirroring of essential or fixed positions” (Lenz Taguchi, p. 268).	Encompasses “the processing of ongoing differences” (Lenz-Taguchi, p. 268).



Reflexivity, like reflection, still holds the world at a distance. It cannot provide a way across the social constructivist's allegedly unbridgeable epistemological gap between knower and known, for reflexivity is nothing more than iterative mimesis: even in its attempts to put the investigative subject back into the picture, reflexivity does nothing more than mirror mirroring.
- Karen Barad

DA and Positionality: Examples

In *Inheriting Possibility*, Dixon-Román (2017) asks, “In becoming with the data on SAT preparation, how am I intra-actively produced by the product and phenomena of the SAT? In what ways am I mutually constituted by the analysis” (p. 134)?

Lenz Taguchi (2012) diffracts interview data from an encounter between her doctoral student and a six-year-old boy. Installing herself *in the data*, she reports on “an effect of being affected, where thinking and imagining exceed data and ourselves as researchers” (p. 276-277).

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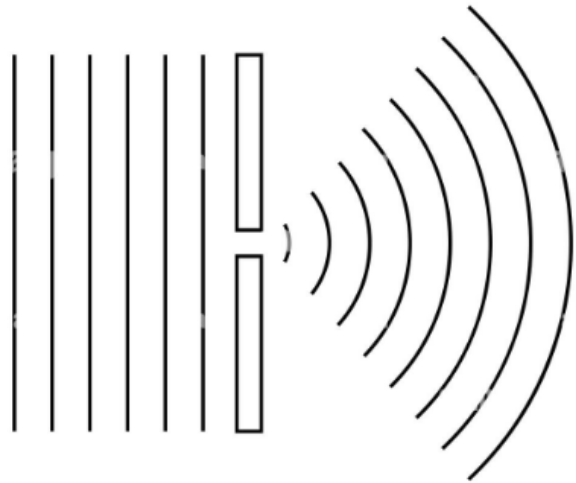
Doing DA

- Move from binary conceptualizations (e.g., present and past self, research and participants, etc.).
- See the self *in and of* the data—and the data *in and of* the self.
- Invite material and nonmaterial interferences and entanglements to encounter positionality anew. Ask, “What ‘different becomings’ are produced?” “What comes of unexpected² difference-making?”
- Consider new patterns and differences (i.e., superpositions) constituted through interferences (e.g., self entangled with place, material, persons, etc.).

Application: Think | Pair | Share

Please read the case below, drawn from Cher Hill (2017). Think about the questions that follow, then turn to a partner to explore ideas.

An Unexpected Pedagogical Event: Dr. Cher Hill took a group of pre-service teachers to the beach, instructing them to collect various artifacts (driftwood, shells, etc.) that would be culled together to represent their trajectories as teachers. While gathering items, several students located a severely wounded bird that they sought to comfort, shelter, and heal. This event refocused the students’ energies away from following Dr. Hill’s instructions to a task that felt more imminent: caring for the bird.



1. How might a reflexive accounting, for Hill, differ from a diffractive analysis of the unexpected pedagogical event? (Consider also how Hill might encounter her positionality through DA.)
2. Name the interference(s) and entanglement(s). (You can map these in the diagram above.)
3. What does a diffractive analysis offer that a reflexive undertaking may miss? Are they compatible?

Select References

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- Dixon-Román, E. (2017). *Inheriting possibility*. University of Minnesota Press.
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- Hill, C.M. (2017). More-than-reflective practice: Becoming a diffractive practitioner. *Teacher Learning and Professional Development*, 2(1), 1-17.
- Lenz Taguchi, H. (2012). A diffractive and Deleuzian approach to analyzing interview data. *Feminist Theory*, 13(3), 265-281.
- Mazzei, L.A. (2014). Beyond an easy sense: A diffractive analysis. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(6), 742-746.

² Diffraction is from the Latin *diffingere* (to break apart), named by Francesco Grimaldi who observed that light, streaming through a pinhole, did not behave *as expected*. See Hill, 2017.