

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Social Science &amp; Medicine

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/socscimed](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/socscimed)

## Commentary

## The lively challenges and opportunities of non-representational theory: A reply to Hanlon and Kearns

Gavin J. Andrews

Department of Health, Aging and Society, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario L8S4M4, Canada

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 18 July 2014

Accepted 2 September 2014

Available online xxx

## Keywords:

Non-representational theory

Health geography

Qualitative methods

I would like to thank Robin Kearns and Neil Hanlon for their responses (see [Kearns, 2014](#); [Hanlon, 2014](#)) to my recently published paper (see [Andrews et al., 2014](#)) that makes a case for non-representational theory in health geography. Although I did not read much fundamental disagreement in either piece, they raised two important questions that I will address separately in the following sections. The first relates to 'affect'; if and how less-than-fully conscious happenings and feelings might be captured and presented in research. The second is what the broader nature and scope of non-representational theory might be beyond my empirical case study.

## 1. Showing life showing up before it shows up?

The ideas in my paper were triggered by my feeling that a core concept in health geography – sense of place – requires a more nuanced reading. The current reading is a social constructivist one; a known experience that informs the production of longer-term meanings, identities and attachments (see [Eyles and Williams, 2008](#)). One longstanding approach puts people centre stage and observes and describes their health and illness experiences in order to unlock the social, cultural, economic, political and medical structures imposed upon them, and negotiated by them ([Kearns, 1993](#); [Parr, 2002](#)). Another puts place centre stage and thinks of

health landscapes as texts that can be frozen in time, then decoded in order to unlock hidden processes such as power and meaning, then (re)written in order to represent these processes ([Kearns and Barnett, 1997](#); [Gesler and Kearns, 2002](#)). Together these often overlapping approaches constitute, and frame, the lion's share of qualitative research in health geography.

I am however increasingly arriving at the realization that whilst this reading of sense of place, and the approaches used to find and convey it, are very good at 'getting at' certain things, they are too static and removed to tell the whole story. Specifically they do not acknowledge that before a sense of place finally 'shows up' as a conscious, personal understanding – however solid and long-term or fluid, momentary or contested (see [Relph, 1976](#)) – a sense of place is 'showing up'. By showing up, I mean quite literally turning up/arriving/and arising/happening. On one level this involves the basic ingredients of a sense of place coming together through space and time; assemblages of humans and non-humans being (re) created and interacting. On another level, showing up involves this physicality being detected by human bodies that react to it; what might be thought of as a very basic, incomplete yet powerful sensing. As [Thrift \(2008:58\)](#) argues "probably 95% of embodied thought is non-cognitive, but probably 95% of academic thought has concentrated on the cognitive dimensions of the conscious I".

Reflecting much of the broader literature in non-representational theory, my paper used the concept of affect to illuminate these aspects, and how they result in a self-generating, somatically-registered 'vibe' or atmosphere, streaming continually between the physical and known world. Affect however is a tricky concept and I can not offer a concrete solution or approach as to how it might be captured in a scientifically acceptable way. Part of why I can not is because non-representational theory does precisely what it says on the tin, existing to consider events that are not representable (i.e. they occur prior to what is representable and/or are not picked up in the process of representation and/or are falsely represented in the process of representation). Otherwise, quite simply, non-representational theory would not be non-representational theory. If one did try to capture affect (the actual bodily transitions), and/or the affective environment (their collective manifestation, provocation and happening in space-time), complexity would be a specific problem. As I proposed in my paper, affect initiates in atoms and molecules that form and change

DOI of original article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.02.037>.E-mail address: [andrews@mcmaster.ca](mailto:andrews@mcmaster.ca).<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.09.004>

0277-9536/© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

matter, that constitute full bodies and objects that feed into social life (see also McCormack, 2007). The process is influenced by all of these things moving and interacting simultaneously through these different scales. Thus affect – something that quite literally involves everything – is no easier to observe and record than events proposed by some of the latest progressive ideas in theoretical and particle physics. Both they and affect are similarly conceived through abstract theorization (although of course vast differences exist in the research that produces them in terms of underlying philosophies and principles, methods and definition of deductive reasoning). Afterthought would be another specific problem. As I also proposed in my paper, any contemplation of a less-than fully conscious feeling state inevitably involves a researcher's full cognition and their personally, socially and historically affixed interpretations that provide a false consciousness of it. Moreover, their written words, no matter how expressive they might be, can never directly expose a vibrant sensory happening, and will inevitably change it, deaden it and (miss)represent it to some degree. Thus, in short, affect can not be truly seen or conveyed.

This said, each of us know that a sense of place has important early physical and felt stages because we each live life in the moment – every second of every day. As I write this response, for example, many things have happened in the last hour, by chance in my home office. Some of what happened involved a great deal of my conscious thought, which I can now clearly recall (e.g. the contractor working in my house appearing round my office door to ask questions, the questions themselves, my answers). A lot of it did not require much thought on my behalf, which I can now only vaguely recall (e.g. the music he played, the bangs of his hammer, various internet information that flashed unread on my computer screen, the taste of my coffee). Meanwhile some of what happened I did not think about at all, which I can not now specifically recall (I 'guess' these could include the repetitive actions to type, subtle movements of my legs and arms to undertake simple tasks or for comfort). I am sure however that whatever my consciousness at the time or conscious recollection now, all of what happened in the last hour of my life rolling out was indeed my life. It all contributed in some way to the time in my office, how it felt, and my feelings about it now.

Thus, there are always basic actions and feelings involved in attaining a sense of place which occur as life itself surfaces. These can be as important as any point that might be perceived or reached through more conscious thoughts and relationships. If one fails to acknowledge these, one fails to understand a vast arena of agency, experience and spatial life. Ultimately a failure to acknowledge them has left an academic understanding of sense of place that is ignorant of some of the key elements in its own making, that is somewhat lifeless and static, a conclusion reached without full consideration. This is slightly ironic, as Lorimer (2005) points out, because if one looks closely at more recent humanistic work – particularly by Yi-Fu Tuan, a scholar so influential in early ideas on sense of place – there is an increasing acknowledgement that the happening and sensory experience of places gives individuals the power to emotionally and cognitively respond and develop meanings (see Tuan, 2004).

So if we as researchers can not, or perhaps will not ever, precisely observe or record affect or the affective environment, the question then becomes what else can we do to account for the movements, interactions, transitions and registered vibes at the early stages of a sense of place? I argue that this involves three lines of inquiry. The first considers the social, cultural, economic and political processes in the creation of localized assemblages that we think of as affective in particular ways, to round up the contributing factors in affect. Recent empirical work by Foley, for example, (Foley, 2011, 2014) is illustrative of such an approach. It explains

how therapeutic landscapes are really localized therapeutic assemblages constituted of certain ingredients that are material, inhabited and performed (as affects) and others that are more metaphoric and meaningful (see also Duff, 2011; Andrews et al., 2013; Atkinson, 2013). The second line of inquiry is interdisciplinary in nature and quite ambitious. That is to engage with neurobiology, neuropsychology, environmental psychology and other disciplines not typically well connected to health geography, to help understand the tiny moments and the processes that link physical action, environmental and bodily sensations and full cognitive recognition in humans (see McCormack, 2007; Thrift, 2008). To more substantively explore these disciplinary understandings of the 'how of spatial pre-cognition and cognition', alongside geography's understandings of the 'what, where and when' of spatial life (see Kitchin et al., 1997), as part of a synthesized art-science that non-representational theory seems to beg (see Vannini, 2009). The third, that can be informed and enhanced by the first two, is to continue to critically open up the active worlds of health and health care through the development of research styles that attempt to capture, present and even change life (see below). This would further develop and theoretically elaborate the concept of affect through continued empirical exploration.

Life initially happens, and is sensed, registered and shared at this level. Just as there is no way of escaping this part of life, there can be no opting out of researching it. In terms of difficulty, just because affect cannot be precisely observed or measured, does not mean that it does not exist. Just because affect cannot be easily articulated, does not mean that it can be ignored or regarded as a barely relevant background. As Thrift (2008) argues, these are excuses that only serve to perpetuate what is actually a wanton neglect. Affect is used by political, economic and cultural interests at all scales, and is increasingly the way through which people expect, engage with, understand and experience places. Indeed, it is our responsibility to steer (health) research in that direction.

## 2. Towards the non-representational 'style'

Kearns (2014) mentioned the need for a greater understanding as to what non-representational theory is in terms of what I am specifically advancing. He also expressed concern about how one might move beyond personal narrative (the academic 'selfie') and talk principally about other humans and activities. My paper, based largely on an empirical case study of wellbeing moments in daily life, probably does not help build the bigger research picture Kearns is looking for. For this I refer Kearns to eleven key facets that together create the overarching style of non-representational theory that can be applied in numerous health and health care contexts (see Dewsbury et al., 2002; Dewsbury, 2009; Thrift, 2000, 2008; Cadman, 2009; Vannini, 2009; 2014a for aligned typologies – interlocutions, tenets/principles). It is a style that constitutes more than just a tweak here or there: rather, it involves the fundamental things looked for and at, the methods employed and the way the world is engaged and presented. Thus, style is a particular way of 'going about research' to present, animate and reverberate life's liveliness and happening: (1) To present the 'on-flow' of life; the moving, processional frontier of existence as it rolls out creating space and time. This involves a constant potentiality (for rapid changes of direction) and fluidity (for transition and adaptation) directly at this point of emergence. (2) To embrace a 'relational materialism' that emphasizes the equal importance, and co-evolution, of human bodies and non-human objects, a 'performed relationality' that emphasizes how these bodies and objects are networked, assembled and interact, and a 'trans-scaled relationality' which emphasizes how life in any one place – however modest – is complexly connected to ideas, bodies, objects, events,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7333087>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7333087>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)