

Acknowledgements

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Behaviour Change from the Inside Out: *applications of psychosocial ideas to sustainability*

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Contents

Preface <i>by the editors</i>	1
Foreword <i>by Paul Hoggett</i>	3
Introduction <i>by Renee Lertzman</i>	4
Theme 1. Accessing beneath the surface	7
1. Creative engagements with climate change: applying psychosocial interpretations to existing survey data <i>by Jo Hamilton</i>	9
2. How we cope: an application of psychosocial methods <i>by Alison Armstrong</i>	15
3. Climate change, art and research methodology <i>by Wendy Hollway</i>	19
4. On "sustaining an attitude of uncertainty" in research: an experiment in self-interviewing <i>by Rosie Robison</i>	23
Theme 2. Relationships and groups	29
5. How personalities and participant interactions shape co-creative transdisciplinary processes <i>by Thomas Bruhn</i>	31
6. Psychosocial, trans-species and a radical sustainability agenda <i>by Matthew Adams</i>	35
7. Climate change and change agency <i>by Laurie Michaelis</i>	39
Theme 3. Change in cultural contexts	43
8. Exploring the role for psychosocial perspectives in Cornwall's environmental future <i>by Rachael Bice</i>	45
9. Understanding the Latvian and Estonian context using psychosocial perspectives <i>by Joanna Storie</i>	51
Theme 4. Everyday experiences	57
10. Deliberating everyday futures: a methodological reflection <i>by Catherine Cherry</i>	59
11. Unconscious defences or desiring production? Some reflections on everyday energy use, psychoanalysis, vitalism <i>by Alice Dal Gobbo</i>	63
12. Practice-ing SQUINs: experimenting with Single Questions aimed at Inducing Narratives <i>by Chris Foulds</i>	69
Index of psychosocial terms used	74

the analysis will attempt to remain sensitive to anxiety, denial and ambivalence within the data, as well as the broader structure of feeling that permeates the group discourse.

The hope is that through combining deliberative and psychosocial approaches, a deeper and broader exploration of the sociotechnical imaginaries surrounding the circular economy will be possible. Exploring how the personal narratives constructed around everyday consumption intersect with the futures envisaged by advocates of the circular economy will therefore be an exciting first step in examining the assumptions embedded within low material futures and the implications these may have for implementing transitions towards a more resource efficient society.

11. Unconscious defences or desiring production? Some reflections on everyday energy use, psychoanalysis, vitalism

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Alice is a PhD researcher at the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences. She is researching transitions in everyday energy use in the North-East of Italy. Since her undergraduate studies, she has been fascinated by psychosocial theory and methodology. For this reason she decided to attend the Behaviour Change from the Inside Out workshop with Renee Lertzman.

Introduction

"Our choices in matters of love are at the crossroads of 'vibrations', which is to say that they express connections, disjunctions, and conjunctions of flows that cross through a society, entering and leaving it, linking it up with other societies, ancient or contemporary, remote or vanished, dead or yet to be born."¹¹⁸

Not only in matters of love: our choices and actions happen at such crossroads in every instance of our everyday life. This I would like to illustrate in this essay. Starting precisely from the arguments outlined in the book *Anti-Oedipus*¹¹⁹, I will reflect on the limits of psychoanalysis in understanding desire, change and social organisation in ecologically relevant experiences. With the help of empirical material from my fieldwork, this will be contrasted to the vitalist approach that implicitly informs Deleuze and Guattari's work. According to them, *desire* may have a strong potential for overturning the current, ecologically destructive, socio-economic system. Does psychoanalysis repress potential by repressing desire itself?

¹¹⁸ Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (2000/1972). *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 352.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*. This work, co-written by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the Lacanian psychoanalyst Felix Guattari, is a critique of psychoanalysis as a practice/institution that, by locking desire into the Oedipal triangle of the family, aligned itself with societal apparatuses of repression. The Oedipal triangle (to which the title refers) relates to the child-parent group, and the desires of a child in relation to their mother. This framing then implies that desire involves a lack, because it is the desire of something that cannot be achieved (the mother). This negativity of lack becomes the very essence of life. Deleuze and Guattari argue instead that desire is a creative and affirmative force that invests all matter (thus the term 'vitalism'): *"desire does not lack anything"* (p. 26): it is *positive* and productive because it always associates new life flows and partial objects in a perpetual becoming.

A Deleuzian-Guattarian encounter with unconscious desire

Deleuze and Guattari¹²⁰ propose that it is necessary to bring *joy* into psychoanalysis. In Deleuze's lectures on Spinoza¹²¹, joy and sorrow are defined as 'affect'. According to Deleuze-Spinoza, affect is a "lived passage between one state and another"¹²². States, in turn, are compositions of objects, bodies, body-parts, thoughts... Each of them is characterised by a certain potency: the potency of doing, of acting in the world. The affect of sorrow is a decrease in potency, while joy corresponds to its increase. When Deleuze and Guattari suggest that psychoanalysis in its commonest form is characterised by sorrow, they mean that psychoanalysis tends to decrease bodies' potency to act in the world. This happens mainly because desire is entrapped in the Oedipal schema and defined in terms of: lack (of the object), law (submission to the Law-of-the-Father) and signification (desire referring to something else: the Oedipal dynamic itself)¹²³.

Arguably, the current psychoanalytic psychosocial interpretation of subjectivity as dominated by repression, anxiety and defence largely follows this legacy¹²⁴. Its methodology¹²⁵ focuses on words (sometimes non-verbal expressions) produced through intersubjective interactions between people. These words are taken to signify and stand for repressed thoughts or feelings. Deleuze and Guattari felt this "Oedipal analysis imposes a transcendent use on all the syntheses of the unconscious, ensuring their conversion" into "transgression, guilt, castration"¹²⁶. There is thus the danger of reifying and reproducing a 'sorrow' neglect of the demands of singular desires, which thwarts their creativity and potency. Meaning that if you encapsulate desire in pre-defined schemas you do not 'listen' to its demands, therefore its capacity to act creatively is decreased.

In contrast, a joyful research method for psychosocial research in the field of sustainability seeks to unleash unruly 'desiring productions': the making of always new, joyous, material-semiotic relations. But to do this one needs to redefine desire. In a Deleuzian-Guattarian perspective, desire is no longer the deep, buried, secret of an individual psyche, nor even a product of intersubjectivity. They talk about desire itself, without-a-subject, as a stream that cuts through objects, bodies, technological artefacts and ideas. In its productive activity desire brings together elements and thus forms assemblages. Material elements such as objects, technologies, bodies and their affects¹²⁷, form 'machinic assemblages'. Semiotic elements like language produce instead 'collective assemblages of enunciation'. In the next section I present an example of an assemblage by way of illustration.

120 *Ibidem*, p.111-113.

121 Deleuze, G. (2013/1978-1981). *Cosa Può Un Corpo? Lezioni su Spinoza*. Verona: Ombre Corte.

122 *Ibidem*, p.118

123 Deleuze and Guattari (2000), (see footnote 118), p.111.

124 Key references in this context are: Lertzman, R. (2015). *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement*. London: Routledge; Weintrobe, S. (ed.) (2013). *Engaging with Climate Change: Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London: Routledge; Randall, R. (2009). Loss and climate change: the cost of parallel narratives. *Ecopsychology*, 1(3), 118-129.

125 For an overview of the approach, see for example: Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2013). *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: A psychosocial Approach*. London: (Sage).

126 Deleuze and Guattari (2000), (see footnote 118), p.111.

127 For the theory of assemblages see: Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (2014/1987). *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, especially pages 23, 40-41.

An example: car-assemblage

The photo below, from my own research, talks about an assemblage. I call it "*the car-assemblage*".



Car, house, mountain... et-cetera. Copyright © Alice Dal Gobbo

Valerio's car is always parked in front of his house, ready to go, although it partly forecloses the splendid view on the lake in front of it. It intersects with a number of things: houses, mountains, roads, lakes, people... The car had its own agency when Valerio chose to live in this house: it was close to the motorway. Valerio's body is often taken over by the car-assemblage. At the same time, Valerio's desiring productions invest the car with an excess: libidinal intensity. He enjoys car driving; he emphasises his expertise and his driving big cars very fast on the motorway. The car-assemblage is thus held together by lines of desire. But these are not properly 'his': such lines traverse Valerio yet come from other places and other points in time. Some of them come from the past: the mobility of his family when he was young, which pairs with the fact that now he lives where his family roots are. Other lines also reach towards the (un)imagined future, giving Valerio the feeling he can move away whenever he wants. These are accompanied by those that follow modern discourses of freedom, discovery, cosmopolitanism, adventure (Valerio was a passionate reader of XIX century adventure books when he was young) - which themselves correspond to global capitalist material flows of money, commodities and desires. This shows how, in assemblages, proximate elements acquire libidinal intensities from lines reaching from the past, the present, the future, other societies. In such way, their elements are made to 'stick' together in definite forms ('territorialisation'). The car-assemblage is territorialised around a modern and technological 'gadget' of the Oil Era by a repressive social structuring of desires. Its force is evident in the fact that Valerio's investment in the car does not seem to be shaken by his being an environmentalist and former member of the Green Party. In fact, as a geologist, he does not believe in human-made climate change.

In line with psychoanalytic rhetoric, it would be possible to interpret his position as a splitting-and-denial mechanism: Valerio being so invested in the car that he needs to protect himself from guilt by denying the negative effects of car use on climate. Working through such unconscious conflicts,

'mourning'¹²⁸ them, could open a path of reparation for his own unconscious sense of guilt, which would possibly lead to him giving up car use. But, as Deleuze and Guattari provocatively ask: "*are these determinations of the unconscious, or is this the way a priest sees things?*"¹²⁹ Is this not a way for further repressing desire? What if one thought of desire in terms of potency and production? If there is the need to understand why some assemblages are so full of intensities, before locating libidinal unconscious investments in a subject one should ask about the properties of such assemblages. What can Valerio's body do within the car-assemblage? The car-assemblage also affords him increases in potency, connections: possibilities for artistic creation, discovery of places, encounters... Often these spill out of socially sanctioned and repressive production. For example, mobility and social relations have allowed Valerio to participate in a friend's experiment for growing vegetables in an innovative, independent and ecological way in his backyard. One thus discovers that desire also has de-territorialising force: desire constantly resists being defined. Always irreducible and revolutionary, it produces - and its products are real, not imaginary. It has produced salad and potatoes in the backyard.

Interlude: on methodology

According to a Deleuzian-Guattarian perspective, agency is the property of the "vibrations" connecting assemblages, not in subjects. Research methods, then, need to take into account not just human beings and the semiotic process in which they are involved, but also the power of objects and materialities¹³⁰. Thus, I designed my research as an ethnography of everyday life, which included both observations and interviews. I took part in my participants'¹³¹ daily lives and practices - looking, touching, feeling and experiencing with them. This 'installed' me, for a day, within common energy assemblages. I also talked to them, because words are the expressive sides of assemblages. Words are important - but are only a part of what needs to be considered. During my observations, I have followed lines of desire; yet, I never wanted push them 'in', towards allegedly interior dynamics or conflicts. Joy was not a psychic event but a good encounter between a body and an object, a making, a creation: productive life. Death was sorrow of lonely hopelessness: dull reproduction. The past and the future (the-way-things-were-when-I-was-young, the-way-I-would-like-them-to-be) were active agents in present assemblages (not imaginary phantasies) as they gave or foreclosed very real material and/or symbolic affordances. My task as researcher has been to (provisionally) register these properties but also to make de-territorialising desiring productions resonate.

Thoughts by way of conclusion

My argument is not intended to be a justification for Valerio's excessive use of the car, nor an argument for its desirability. It underscores, though, both the complexities and ambivalences of any of the practices in which we are socially immersed. They are often at once reactionary and revolutionary; socially aligned and resistant. How can we deal with the ambivalence of such

unconscious productions? This brief analysis of the car-assemblage suggests that subjective will is not as determinant as we like to think, when it comes to opening possibilities for change: exterior things, bodies (or body-parts), libidinal flows, discourses, technologies... these seem to 'act the subject' far more than the subject is able to act on them. Psychoanalytically-focused psychosocial literature often implicitly suggests the possibility that recognising and working through interior conflicts might be the door for deciding to adopt a different, more sustainable, lifestyle¹³². As an alternative, I propose a more joyous way in which the social scientist can contribute to a sustainable transition. Perhaps we can capture and spur the singular and unexpected creativity of not-yet-coded, unruly desiring productions in order to resist that destructive, but well organised, social production of desire that is called global consumer capitalism.

128 Randall, R. (2009); Lertzman, R. (2015) (see footnote 124).

129 Deleuze and Guattari (2000), (see footnote 118), p. 111.

130 Deleuze and Guattari (2000), (see footnote 118), p. 111.

131 These were to be 'ordinary' people. From the town of Vittorio Veneto and its hinterland, I drew a sample of participants aiming at 'maximum variation', different ages, gender, socio-economic backgrounds and statuses. The reason why I chose this locale has to do with one of my project's main interests: exploring interconnections between the 2008 financial crisis and sustainable lifestyles.

132 This attitude is in line with the old Freudian motto "*where id was, ego shall be*" (in: Freud, S. (1991/1932). *The Dissection of the Psychical Personality*. Lecture 31 in: *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. London: Penguin Books) and yet it encapsulates what is arguably the most reactionary implication of psychoanalysis. For a profound and 'unruly' critique, see: Lacan, J and Miller, J-A. (ed). (2013). *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. London: Routledge. I would also like to underscore the fact that, in the case of projects like Carbon Conversations, we may also find *social structuring* (i.e. a degree of repression) of desire in the name of the agenda of 'sustainability' as established in institutional discourse. See: Randall, R. (2009). *Carbon Conversations: six meetings about climate change and carbon reduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge Carbon Footprint.