

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

New materialism(s) and systemic psychotherapy: Does it matter? (PART 1)

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Abstract

This paper is one part of a two-part series. Part one provides the theoretical groundwork for New Materialisms (NMs), while part two establishes the connections between these theoretical foundations and systemic practice. Therefore, the aim of this work is to delve into the core concepts of NMs in the field of systemic psychotherapy. Its genesis is inspired by our collaboration as doctoral students in systemic psychotherapy. New Materialisms represent a contemporary and heterogeneous movement that has emerged from the works of key proponents from diverse fields: philosophy (e.g. Deleuze and Guattari), anthropology (e.g. Viveiros de Castro and Ingold) and physics (e.g. Barad). They are characterised by a theoretical and practical ‘turn to matter.’ We will outline how NMs differentiate themselves from the ‘linguistic turn’ proposed by a moderate version of social constructionism, which we believe is endemic in much of systemic psychotherapy research and practice. We will discuss both the potential innovations that NMs could bring to the systemic psychotherapy field and the criticisms they could provoke. An invitation to consider the implications of NMs upon the systemic field is extended. Although we acknowledge that systemic psychotherapy and NMs are two disciplines driven by heterogeneous drivers, we posit that both are

practices of freedom from stability and identity, which open up fields of differences where new possibilities for life can be invented.

KEYWORDS

epistemology, new materialism(s), ontology, systemic psychotherapy, turn to matter

Practitioner Points

- New Materialisms (NMs) are a contemporary heterogenous movement characterised by a theoretical and practical ‘turn to matter’.
- The key tenets of NMs are: (i) flat ontology, (ii) the politics of radical difference, (iii) the decentring of language, (iv) a non-human social world and (v) a new take on relationality.
- NMs differ at both the epistemological and ontological levels from the previous strands developed within the field of systemic psychotherapy, which are embedded in heterogeneous onto-epistemological positions such as first- and second-order cybernetics and social constructionism.
- Instead of focusing on the connection between two stable entities in a relationship, NMs’ relational onto-epistemology considers the ‘in-betweenness’ that creates the conditions of possibilities for the emergence of those entities.
- NMs invite systemic psychotherapists to challenge the ‘linguistic turn’ assumptions, according to which materiality is produced by discursive practices, by exploring how that very materiality of the world may have an impact on the discursive practices that both systemic psychotherapists and clients employ in their everyday unfolding lives.
- NMs provide a frame for systemic psychotherapists to look beyond humans and include the inanimate and non-human in thinking about relationship and context.

INTRODUCTION

This paper stems from the disturbing philosophical provocations that New Materialisms (NMs) have generated when we were introduced to this new movement. This meeting with matter and finding its place within the field of systemic psychotherapy has intrigued and challenged us but at the same time fostered our ability to engage with complexity. Rooted in Deleuzian and Guattarian philosophy (Fox & Alldred, 2018, 2020), NMs have a focus on a flat or non-hierarchical ontology, and they assume that our knowledge of reality is based on physical matter. The NMs movements could be said to honour the complexity in an even more nuanced way than we are used to as systemic psychotherapists. As our texts and readings were increasingly inspired by or derived from NMs, the need for us to grasp the perspectives of this movement arose. This paper is the first of two, with the primary aim of shining a spotlight on NMs and contributing,

alongside others (e.g. Jude, 2017; Salter, 2022), to the debate on how they are relevant and useful to systemic psychotherapy theory and practise.

This paper outlines the theoretical framework of New Materialisms (NMs) and their connection to systemic psychotherapy theory. Our subsequent article illustrates the practical implementation of NMs in systemic psychotherapy practice. We posit that, by doing this, we foster the opportunity in the systemic psychotherapy field to stay with the trouble (Haraway, 2016) and to be open to the possibility of experiencing the relational world we are knotted with as full of multiple partialities. This paper is not a research paper following a conventional methodological path, but rather a scholarly founded introduction of NMs concepts. According to the 'linguistic turn' proposed by a moderate version of social constructionism, the problem is located within discourse and language and in the understanding of us as human beings who create the social world we are living in through our conversations (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). This paradigm has given us a foundation from which to envision realistic and positive change for our clients. However, a focus solely on language considered as the primary medium and the most appropriate metaphor (Cromby, 2012) to describe, study and research human actions and experiences has moved the systemic field away from an interest in the mattering of matter, which includes spaces, places and bodies. The present article posits that political issues such as poverty, sexuality, racism and disabilities are not solely created in language, but are very material conditions producing embodied and lived experiences which are unfolding outside the realm of discourse.

NEW MATERIALISMS AND THEIR KEY TENETS

Presenting NMs' key tenets will be no easy feat, due to their heterogeneous, complex and differentiated nature. Indeed, from our joint understanding and efforts, we propose that it would be more coherent to use new materialism as a plural noun due to this movement's differentiation. Having said that, we are inclined to be inspired and challenged by that strand of NM much influenced by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1990a, 1990b, 1994, 2006a, 2006b, 1988; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Deleuze & Parnet, 1987). Within the realm of social sciences, 'new materialism(s)' has become an umbrella term referring to a range of perspectives generally focussed on a 'turn to matter' (Fox & Alldred, 2017). Although materialism was a significant feature for early Western sociological theorists, such as Durkheim, Weber and Marx, who recognised the link between human consciousness, the material and their relevance to the production of society (Durkheim, 1984; Marx, 1975; Weber, 1930), NMs' mattering of matter is situated within another dimension: It distances itself from the assumptions that the material is inert and fossilised. The kind of materiality NMs are advocating for is vitalistic: Being a passive thing, materiality does not need any more to be set in motion by external agents but is more and more conceived as endowed with the power of agency of its own; Fox and Alldred (2017) explained that NMs acknowledge non-human agency that has been mostly applied to science and technology studies. However, NMs are a broad field of study that draw upon perspectives from philosophy, quantum physics and feminist theories (Coole & Frost, 2010). To understand the origins of NMs, we must briefly delve into what a 'turn to matter' means for sociology and the other social sciences before looking at the implications for systemic psychotherapy. Amongst its many claims, NMs assert that the distinction between the social and natural worlds has been taken for granted and that the materialist strand within sociology has gradually been diluted over the last century. For example, idealist influences (which take the view that human beliefs, values and ideas shape society) began with Mead, Weber and Simmel, and led through Schutz's

phenomenology to interpretivism, humanistic sociology and some forms of social constructionism (Berger & Luckman, 1971; Fox, 2016; Fox & Alldred, 2017; Nash, 2001; Shalin, 1990), which have fostered a mechanistic account of materiality; such an account has produced at least two key consequences in regard to the conceptualisation of the material world, namely that matter is both passive and separable. The passivity of matter entails that it lacks agency and that its movement is due to the active energy of an external and intentional subject. The divisibility of matter, instead, implies two further assumptions: (1) the Cartesian mind–body divide, which has brought the prejudice that cognition is not an activity of the materiality of the body, and (2) the ‘atomistic understanding’ of the material world: matter can be divided easily and unproblematically. In this vein, in an anti-systemic perspective, a whole is just the sum of its parts. We posit that the core components of NMs are:

- A flat ontology: All forms of hierarchical systems (top-down and bottom-up approaches) are rejected, as NMs posit that there is just one matter (Univocity of being) which encapsulates the complexity of diverse modes of existence. These modes of existence form attributes of the same matter. Everything, from the materiality of bodies to thoughts, feelings and language itself, is ever-unfolding and contingent attributes of the same matter (Deleuze, 2021; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Deleuze (1990a) defines these attributes of this same matter as ‘dynamic and active forms’ (p. 45) not emanating (a process where the distinction between the creator and the created remains) from substance but expression of it. Being remains univocal, although it is expressed in a myriad of differing attributes. However, substance is thus expressive, as it expresses itself in attributes, attributes, in contrast, are attributive, as they express a particular essence of the substance (Deleuze, 1990a).
- The politics of radical difference: Inspired by the concept of difference (Deleuze, 1988, 2006b) instead of that of identity and representation (‘dogmatic image of thought’ Deleuze, 2006a, p. 35), NMs posit that fixed totality cannot exist, as we live in a world that is in constant flux. The kind of difference Deleuze and Guattari are advocating for is never a difference *from*; rather, it is always a difference in itself, one that is not subsumed under any category of identity. Deleuze (1994) has indeed imagined a different difference, a difference neither in relation to identity nor in relation to resemblance, an ‘ontological difference’ (p. 9), an ‘absolute difference’ (p. 9), a ‘pure difference’ (p. 20) and ‘difference without negation’ (p. 20). According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the rhizome is the best way to designate multiplicities (another word for difference in Deleuze and Guattari). Deleuze writes in *Two Regimes of Madness: Text and Interviews* (2006a) ‘multiplicities are reality itself. They do not presuppose unity of any kind, do not add up to a totality, and do not refer to a subject’ (p. 310). Different from the arboreal system of derivation, where first there are the roots, then the trunk and only finally the leaves of the tree, in a rhizomatically knotted world, we are always in the middle and in a process where multiplicity is what characterises matter (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Therefore, the material world and its contents are not fixed or static things but rather relational, contingent and in constant flux (Barad, 1996; Coole & Frost, 2010; Deleuze, 1994). As underlined by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) ‘if the tree is filiation, the ryzhome is alliance’ (p. 25). Whereas the former imposes the verb ‘to be’, the fabric of the latter is the conjunction ‘and ... and ... and’.
- Decentring of language: Within NMs, language is no longer prioritised as the only and primary metaphor of human action and no longer considered a self-sufficient cipher for understanding the others. It is instead one amongst many other ways to interact and relate with others (Deleuze, 1990b). It is important for us to underline here that we do not want to give up on

language. Indeed, what is at stake at this point is the representational cipher of language, not language in itself. We are wondering together with Deleuze (1990b) whether our words can do something more than just represent the world that is presented to us. If language is just a representational medium, we are falling back into the dogmatic image of thought. Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense* (1990b) tries to move away from the logic of representation to that of palpation through the concept of *sense*. *Sense* according to Deleuze is the event when a particular proposition comes into touch with the world. It is the boundary between meaning and matter, a virtual dimension belonging neither to words nor to the world, to the liminal space where they meet.

- A non-human social world: The social world goes beyond humans alone (concerning agency and the actions that produce the social world) and involves the inanimate and non-human (Braidotti, 2000, 2013; Delanda, 2006; Latour, 2005). Nature and culture are not seen as separate, binary realms, and the physical and social have reciprocal material effects in a world that is in constant flux (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 1997.) This is the 'natural consequence' of the univocity of being – the One expresses itself in the many but does not become lost or dispersed in this heterogeneity. As being is univocal, no distinction between layers is possible. In a flat rather than dualist ontology, categories do not exist a priori to their actualisation, differently from structuralism. However, this is not a movement towards universalism, as the attributes (categories can be attributes) of this same matter are infinite and always folding, unfolding and refolding (May, 2005). Particular attention is given to what bodies can do rather than what they are.
- A new take on relationality: MNs change the conceptualisation of the relationship which is no longer what connects two or more diverse entities but instead what creates the possibility of the emergence and unfolding of those entities. Relationships thus are not something taking place between one and another but are rather the in-between that creates the one and the other. First, there are relationships, and then, there are bodies. The focus is now on the conditions of possibility for the emergence of entities which are always partial (Deleuze, 1994, 1988). Relationships to Deleuze (1994) are thus pivotal genetic conditions under which something new can arise. Furthermore, this new conceptualisation of relationships moves us away from structuralism, passing from the idea of closed (relying on internal relations) to open systems where anything could connect with anything else (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987).

With this in mind, NMs are concerned with what matter can do rather than what matter is, and how it unfolds (Coole & Frost, 2010; Fox & Alldred, 2017; Rosa et al., 2021). The material world is posited to be relational, plural, open and multifaceted, cutting across dualistic boundaries between natural and social worlds. The heterogeneity of this movement has been underlined by many scholars (Fox & Alldred, 2018), and some are suggesting using the word 'new materialism(s)' as a plural. To navigate such heterogeneity without undoing its intrinsic complexity, we refer to Gamble et al. (2019), who have distinguished three different strands within the realm of NMs: (1) vital new materialisms, (2) negative materialisms and (3) performative materialisms. Vital new materialisms emerged from Deleuze's 1960 reading of Baruch Spinoza with a focus of an ontology of immanent power, known as 'conatus'. The theorists of this strand, such as Bennett (2010), posit the existence of a vitality intrinsic to materialisation pre-existing its entering into connection with other material and non-material bodies. Negative materialisms are a strand inhabited by speculative realism (Meillassoux, 2010) and object-oriented ontology (OOO; Harman, 2018) characterised by a commitment to the assumption that 'matter is non-relationally external to thought' (Gamble et al., 2019, p. 121). This strand risks ending up cutting thought off from materiality by postulating that materiality exists independently of human perception. Performative materialisms, as seen in

the works of Barad (2007) and Kirby (2017), are a strand claiming that ontology and epistemology do not exist independently but are instead co-implicated and mutually constituting. The most striking element of this strand is Barad's proposal of an 'onto-epistemological' account of reality, which Barad herself calls agential realism (2007), whereby the world in its becoming is materialised through the processes of intra-action.¹ Despite this heterogeneity of thinking, this movement can be characterised as post-humanist and post-anthropocentric, thus shifting humans from the central focus of attention in social inquiry. NMs are interested in the interplay and relationship between the subjective human experience (which is not considered stable) and matter, which is in constant flux and motion. As systemic thinkers we are interested in, inspired by, drawn to and curious about the implications of the NMs claims. Furthermore, if systemic theory considers the relationship between the interconnected 'parts' within any given system and its impact on the unfolding of the 'whole', then we must also consider the relationship between the immaterial and material (regardless of whether they are human or non-human).

NEW MATERIALISMS AND THEIR RELATIONAL ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGIES

Epistemology and ontology are both branches of philosophy tussling with questions that are different but connected. Whilst the concept of epistemology was brought to the attention of systemic theorists by Bateson (1972, 1979) who used the word 'epistemology' in many ways, as underlined by Dell (1985), the concept of ontology in the systemic field has been relegated to a marginal position. Bateson (1979) insisted on the assumption that everyone has an epistemology, and those who believe otherwise, generally, have a very bad one. As suggested by Pocock (2015), epistemology refers to how we know what we know, whereas ontology denotes what there is to know. In the development of systemic psychotherapy, we have witnessed a reduction of what there is 'out there' (ontology) to how we know 'what we know' (epistemology). NMs' onto-epistemology challenges such a reductionism by assuming ontology to be the study of what can become (i.e. there is no longer such a thing as an ontological given) rather than the study of what there is. It is well known that systemic theory forefronts relationality, but NMs challenge the traditional conceptualisation of what is a relationship. In NMs, relationship ceases to be the connection between the one and the other and, instead, becomes the 'in-between' that creates the one and the other. Reality, therefore, is an ever-unfolding effect of my relationship with partial objects (Cavagnis & Krause, 2022). This position implies that we are always in the middle, and being in the middle means that a point of departure has already been chosen. From this point of departure, certain orientations unfold, whereas others are not even imaginable. In this regard, Sara Ahmed (2007) using phenomenology to understand the notion of whiteness, has pointed out that orientations are about how we begin, how we proceed from such beginnings and the directions we can take from such starting points. Ontology and epistemology are pivotal culturally situated beginnings within systemic thinking that NMs put into play. Within the different strands of systemic thinking – namely, first- and second-order cybernetics as well as the 'linguistic turn' constructed by social constructionism – epistemology and ontology are always separated by a hiatus and placed in a diverse hierarchy of importance. First-order cybernetic systemic thinking is purely ontological, where there is one and only one reality out there that we can objectively comprehend and capture (Palazzoli & Boscolo, 1994; Watzlawick et al., 1971). Second-order cybernetics conceptualises ontology and epistemology as complementary stances due to the integration of the observer in what is observed (Luhmann et al., 2013; Von Foerster, 1984); the way the observer sees (epistemology) determines what can be seen (ontology).

Social constructionism, in contrast, as Gergen (1994) pointed out, is ‘ontologically mute’ (p. 72). This places its whole emphasis on epistemology, where the way we socially construct and represent the world around us through language almost disregards its ontological facet, i.e., the materiality of the world. NMs challenge how systemic thinkers have conceptualised ontology and epistemology on two different yet intertwined layers. Firstly, it advocates that there is no such a thing as a single fixed and monolithic ontology, but instead there are ontologies; it ceases to deal with what is ‘out there’ that is knowable from a transcendent position. This anthropocentric and humanist Hegelian ‘God-trick’ (Haraway, 2020, p. 587) is no longer allowed within NMs. We (as persons and clinicians) can no longer step out of the world and the fabric of relations that makes up them and us. We are entangled² with the material world we live in (Barad, 1996); we (our pre-individual subjectivity³ and that of our clients) are contingent upon this ever-unfolding becoming⁴; transcendence is taken over by a purely flat ever-becoming immanent⁵ non-binary unfolding. Secondly, the binarism between ontology and epistemology does not exist within the NMs’ framework, as ontology and epistemology would intra-act⁶ with each other. Such a flattening of this mutually exclusive and hierarchical binarisation opens possibilities that have yet to be explored by systemic psychotherapists. Epistemology ceases to be transcendentally and hierarchically superior to the formless and inert materiality of the world (i.e. the ontological facet); it ceases also to be a mechanic standing back self-distancing reflexive activity upon a material ontology. With such an orientation we can suggest that, in an NMs framework, the word ‘ontology’ can be replaced by the word ‘ontogenesis’; our knowledge of the world must come from our direct involvement and intra-action with the processes of the world we are knotted with. If things are not but become, why should we use ontology, meaning the study of being. We see ontogenesis, meaning the generation (becoming) of being, as a more consistent and correspondent description of the world we live in.

The contingent onto-epistemology, which NMs are advocating for, rejects the idea of a unified subject by postulating the existence of a relational, contingent and embodied subjectivity. In other words, not only are we always dealing with partialities, but also we ourselves (as researchers and clinicians) are partialities (Cavagnis & Krause, 2022). As partialities in a process of constant differentiation, we do not recognise ourselves and our relationships as pre-existing entities. We encounter others as well as ourselves affectively through our bodies, and the affections flowing in those bodies. We are no longer unified subjects who are identified as stable entities; instead, we are unfolding partialities that can palpate emerging entities.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SYSTEMIC PSYCHOTHERAPY: A POTENTIAL INVITATION TO NEW MATERIALISMS

The advent of second-order cybernetics in systemic psychotherapy is characterised by a shift of an interest from the objective observations made by an independent and detached system upon another independent and detached system to the observations of the observing system considered as autonomous and autoreferential (Von Foerster, 1984) and ‘operationally closed’⁷ (Maturana & Varela, 2012, p. 79). The most striking change is the shift from a focus on patterns of behaviours (as seen in structural and strategic therapies) to an interest in patterns of meaning of the observing system (as seen in Milan systemic therapy). In practice, systemic psychotherapists who work in a second-order cybernetic frame are interested in how meaning is co-constructed in the linguistic domains between autonomous and operationally closed systems (Maturana & Varela, 2012) as well as the relationship of language and meaning. This change in practice marks the second wave of systemic psychotherapy (Dallos & Draper, 2000) as noted in key systemic training textbooks, at least

in the United Kingdom. It was this shift to the focus on meaning and language that sowed the seed for the growth of social constructionism in the field of systemic psychotherapy. Unlike constructivism that places more attention on the operations, which are observations, of an autopoietic cognitive system (Maturana & Varela, 2012), social constructionism emphasises the social interpretation and the intersubjectivity of language, family and culture (Hoffman, 1990). Social constructionist ideas are pivotal in the expression of postmodernist ideas that provided, in contemporary systemic psychotherapy, the platform to theorise about the space of intersubjectivity (Flaskas, 2002). The concept was first introduced in sociology by Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their publication *The Social Construction of Reality*. Interestingly, systemic psychotherapy only opened its door to social constructionism after over two decades of development (of social constructionism) as compared with its social science counterparts. The work of Gergen in social constructionism (1994) has been most influential in systemic psychotherapy. Hoffman (1990) argued that social constructionism is essentially a product of American culture. Amongst the range of systemic psychotherapy approaches, the collaborative approach of Anderson and Goolishian (1992) is most informed by social constructionism. This approach was further developed by Anderson (1997). As a moderate version of social constructionism continues to gain popularity in the practice of systemic psychotherapy in the United States and the United Kingdom, the place of systems theory risks fading into the background. Dallos and Urry (1999) espoused taking a ‘third-order cybernetics’ framework which binds social constructionism with system theory. This is also known as the third wave of systemic psychotherapy, perhaps more so in the UK and US contexts. Whilst social constructionism can be added to the repertoire of tools in promoting social justice and creating social change within systemic psychotherapy, it does not come without its limitations. Hacking (1999) cautioned against jumping on the bandwagon and taking a reductionist approach in the use of social constructionism. He argued that social constructionism is not always able to liberate people and that not everything is a social construct. Whilst the philosophical underpinnings in the different strands of systemic psychotherapy offer new ways of thinking and practice, they also have their constraints. We do not discount the usefulness and relevance of ‘old’ theories in the history of systemic psychotherapy but see our grapple with NMs as a production from the ‘plugging in’⁸ (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013) of NMs with previous systemic theories, and vice versa. Each new ‘wave’ in systemic psychotherapy does not replace or take over the previous ‘wave’; rather, they continue to be alive and interacting with one another. Therefore, NMs have the potential to plug the gaps in language, meaning, iterative discursive effects and the materiality of bodies. In other words, NMs bring materiality back to the systemic field without rejecting the useful insights of other waves in systemic psychotherapy, such as the linguistic turn.

NOT FALLING IN LOVE: THE SEDUCTIONS OF NEW MATERIALISMS AS NOVELTY

The influences and positioning of those who spearheaded NMs – such as physicist Barad, social scientist Latour and philosophers Braidotti, Deleuze and Guattari – should not be negated. We believe that the development of a new contemporary philosophical perspective such as NMs does not represent a panacea for all the challenges we are encountering in the practice and research of systemic psychotherapy. This is why it is important for us (as researchers, clinicians and students of NMs) to expose some of the critiques implicated in this new movement: Are NMs a white place? Is there an implicit and hidden Eurocentric-racist white episteme within NMs? NMs’ relational onto-epistemology challenges two well-known Western assumptions:

(i) agency as solely a human capacity and (ii) the dualist ontology that has been prevalent in the social sciences creating fundamental dichotomisation such as human and non-human, animate and inanimate, mind and body and nature and culture divide (Fox & Alldred, 2018). Such actions of 'epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo, 2009, p. 159) that NMs are calling for run the risk of becoming paradoxically acts of epistemic disobedience *solely* towards Westernised pre-assumptions considered endowed with a universal truth if NMs scholars do not realise the cultural situatedness of such starting points. The fact that Columbus (representative of a white-privileged, academically biased, westernised, patriarchal position) has discovered non-human agencies as well as flat ontologies does not mean that those positions were not already reachable in non-Western culture. Rosiek et al. (2020), for instance, pointed out that there is a lack of engagement with Indigenous conceptualisation of non-human agency in NMs literature. This brings to question why NMs scholars refer mainly to Barad's agential realism⁹ (2007) when the field of Indigenous studies has already been working with the notion of non-human agency. According to Kibler (2022) this is due to an act of 'epistemological settler colonialism' (p. 82). In her citation network analysis, she has underlined how the citing behaviours of NMs scholars privilege Euro-Western understanding of human and non-human agency instead of making references to Indigenous lines of thinking. Hinton et al. (2015) in their provocative article 'New Materialisms, New Colonialisms' wonder whether NMs are a form of new colonialism given the fact that a link in the paradigm of NMs is lacking with post- and decolonial theories. They underline the necessity for NMs to explore the way through which bodies are marked by ethnicity, race, nationality and gender/sex materialises. Indigenous authors such as Vine Deloria (1999), Michael Marker (2018) and Paula Gun Allen (1975) are by far less cited than, say, the ontologies of Barad and Deleuze. This maintains unquestioned the way Indigenous scholars interrogate NMs. For instance, Vine Deloria in his *Spirit and Reason* (1999, p. 223) writes:

Indians do not talk about nature as some kind of concept or something 'out there.' They talk about the immediate environment in which they live. They do not embrace all trees or love all rivers and mountains. What is important is the relationship you have with a particular tree or a particular mountain.

Deloria is here underlining that in the Indigenous tradition the emphasis is on the particularity and situatedness of a specific relationship rather than on the general laws of how things become typical of the Western tradition. Watts (2013) has examined how the concepts of human and non-human agencies are circulating between the frameworks of Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe cosmologies as well as Western ontological and epistemological frameworks. She posits that, within Indigenous frameworks, people come from cosmologies (histories of creation) where the intersections between the female, animal, plant, mineral and spirit worlds are not myth or legend but are histories of what really took place. These cosmologies are based on the assumptions that land is alive, and thought and place were and are never divided. In this line, Rosiek et al. (2020) underline that there is a clear difference in the aims between Eurocentric and Indigenous literatures engaging with human and non-human agency: Whereas the former are more engaged with a justification of the possibility of a non-human agency against the presumption that matter is passively awaiting the discovery of a human subject, the latter, by presuming the existence of non-human agency as underlined by Laguna Pueblo scholar Paula Gun Allen (1996), are more engaged with the doing rather than with the justification. While NMs are still concerned with the Western struggle against the poisoning legacy of the Cartesian dualism, which by separating mind and nature has contributed to the emerging ecological crisis of the Anthropocene¹⁰ geologic epoch, Indigenous lines of thinking

– already engaging with the doing and not with justification – are proposing a reconfiguration of orientation towards a matter that is able to both think and act. By being part and not the centre of the environment that is beyond human exceptionalism, agency (the capacity to act) and thinking do not belong only to human beings. In this vein, Indigenous scholarships are already ready to act in, instead of still thinking about, an environment in which human needs cannot be prioritised, as each single human has a particular relationship with the immediate environment (e.g. a singular tree, river and mountain) that they inhabit. Such a singular tree, river or mountain is considered vital for both the terms of this specific relationship. Prioritising the need of this human is similar to prioritising those of the specific tree, river or mountain in Indigenous scholarships. Each human cannot be thought about without this very specific relationship with this tree, this river and this mountain. It is interesting to report here that some attempts to bridge the two literatures have been explored: For instance, Little Bear, in a lecture about the possibility of collaboration between Native and Western science in 2011 at the Arizona State University, underlines that three of the main tenets of Native science – (i) things are forever in motion, (ii) everything is a combination of energy waves and (iii) everything is animate – are closely related to the new ideas in Western science of non-human agency and diffraction. De line (2016) tries to weave together the Baradian concept of diffraction and the ‘all my/our relations’ concept used by Cree and Métis people, referring to the acknowledgement that all is a continuum, always in flux in all our relations. Despite these attempts to bridge the two literatures, as pointed out by Mignolo (2009), the Western world implicitly assumes that Indigenous scholarships have ‘wisdom’, whereas Anglo-Americans have ‘science’. Behind such a trick, which turns Indigenous knowledge into something which is ‘not science’ or ‘pseudo-science’, lies one of the necessary steps for a socially just world, namely the decolonisation of Indigenous scholarships. When those scholarships are referenced, they are very often treated as just situated pseudo-scientific knowledge with no universal truths according to Western scientific knowledge. It is exactly such universality of the truth that Indigenous scholarships are challenging. Referencing Fanon (2008) and Wynter (2003), we can suggest that the main issue lies in the fact that the contextual knowledge of the ‘negro’ (Indigenous scholarships) is examined and scrutinised by the scientific gaze of the white. Whereas Indigenous knowledge is studied and deepened in relation to Scientific Western Knowledge, the reverse is not necessary. It is this ‘scientific white gaze’ that is at stake in Indigenous scholarships. It is not a question that, in current times, Barad’s impact on NMs remains arguably one of the most influential. Her background in theoretical physics is a very different starting point from those of the other Western philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari, and this should not be dismissed. We hold the view that she does not attend to the complex nature of social phenomena in the manner in which she claims. Barad’s work is greatly influenced by one of the founding fathers of quantum physics, Neil Bohr, which formed a generalised basis for a more local and contextual research perspective on how objects behave in both natural and social worlds. The overlap between the language of ‘quantum physics’ and the language of social phenomena results in an equation between the natural and the social worlds. This equation, in our view, risks falling back into the realm of first-order cybernetics. By equating the natural and social world, not only are we running directly into a dichotomisation because we are assuming that those categories are ontologically given, but we are also negating social issues such as exploitation and inequality. If we define Barad’s concept of intra-action as ‘the mutual constitution of entangled agencies’ (2007, p. 33) – where agency refers to the ability to act – we think that it is interesting from a systemic perspective to make the distinction between intra-action and interaction clear because systemic therapy was born with the concept of inter-action. Intra-action posits something completely different at an ontological level. ‘Inter’ means ‘amongst’ or ‘in the midst of’, whereas ‘intra’ means ‘from within’. In interaction, when two systems interact, they still maintain a certain degree

of independence. The entities exist before they encounter one another. However, this is not true in intra-action, because systems materialise through intra-actions, and the ability to act emerges from within the relationship and not from outside of it. The idea of intra-action is important for us as systemic psychotherapists because it gives us a new way of thinking about relationships. Relationship ceases to be the link between two entities, and it becomes the genetic possibility for the two to unfold. It is an inside-out, instead of outside-in, perspective.

However, it is our claim that assuming a pure intra-acting and contingent perspective runs the risk of disregarding both historical and cultural aspects as it has happened in narrative and dialogical approaches in systemic psychotherapy. Thus, a quantum-mechanical understanding of the intra-action of phenomena does not come without its dangers. Perspectives such as post-colonial, queer and feminist theories critique NMs for their reductionistic focus on social class and non-attendance to the complexity and intersectionality of power between races, social divisions, genders and the systems and process of oppression (Coole & Frost, 2010; Crenshaw, 1989; Rosa et al., 2021). Ahmed (2006, 2008) cautioned on the movement's 'newness' and invites us to consider the issues emerging in NMs literature – such as universalism, colonialism, eurocentrism and related erasures of race, sexuality, gender and dynamics of power. She further asserts that Barad's NM assumes that everything is reducible to language, and that postmodern feminists disregard corporeality altogether; she positions most of them as social constructionists who do not engage with the materiality of the body.

Several critiques towards the main tenets of NMs could be made from the perspective of systemic psychotherapy. For example, by assuming a 'pure' intra-acting perspective about the materiality of bodies, the historical and developmental dimensions related to the materialisation of those bodies could be missed. To address this issue, the concept of partialities could be a resource. What is materialised from within the relationship is discrete potentialities that complicate the other previous materialisation unfolded up to that moment in a process of constant differentiation (Cavagnis & Krause, 2022). From a constructionist position in systemic psychotherapy, the whole field of NMs could be regarded as a 'social construction'. However, by accusing NMs of being a 'social construction', the systemic field is still placing humankind at the forefront of both the material and non-material. As a result, this reifies such a primacy, which is one of the issues that NMs is challenging.

CONCLUSION: NEW MATERIALISMS AND SYSTEMIC PSYCHOTHERAPY AS PRACTICES OF FREEDOM

In the present paper we aim to build on the new directions NMs offer to the field of systemic psychotherapy, which directly responds to some of the limitations of the linguistic turn. We aim to foster in systemic psychotherapists a sensibility for and a disposition to remain open to how the very materiality of the world can have a role in the way people speak, act, think and feel. Putting this assemblage to work is a complex task and ambitious venture, but we are aware that this might spark interests in systemic psychotherapists to think about NMs in their clinical practice. Although NMs have a wide range of concepts that are useful to systemic psychotherapy, our intention is to focus on a few of them in this paper. We would like to underline the connections between Barad's intra-action and its consequences for the concept of a unified subject. By moving from interaction to intra-action, we are producing a world that is ontologically and not just epistemologically diverse. Intra-action fosters the possibility of attending to a world full of multiple partialities. The relationship, which can be considered a cornerstone

for systemic psychotherapy, significantly changes its status: Relationship is no longer what connects stable identities; rather, it is what creates the conditions for the emergence of entities which are always partial. Where does the human subject (both the therapist and the client) end then? If the subject is no longer a transcendently given entity, but rather a partiality, it can no longer be an adequate point of departure. The systemic psychotherapist and the client are multiplicities themselves, always materialising in their expression. Their meeting is always new and singular. They are always partialities without any kind of identity attached to them. Bridging social science, in our case systemic psychotherapy and a body of philosophically materialist-informed works, poses serious challenges which, for us, call into question the diverse aims that these two different disciplines pursue. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggested, philosophy aims to produce new concepts to grapple with a world that is not constrained by 'the dogmatic image of thought' (2006a, p. 35), which Deleuze defined as a way of thinking and conceiving of the world where representation is the central element. Systemic psychotherapy instead aims at producing changes in stuck systems reiterating the same old solutions to a presenting problem. Hence, it is clear that these two disciplines are driven by different aims. To bridge this gap, we posit that these two are practices of freedom from both stability and identity, which opens up fields of differences where new possibilities for life are envisioned and experimented with. These practices are both perturbing and challenge us to think differently: How can we see what we did not see before? Within the field of systemic psychotherapy, as in other social sciences, we have witnessed a 'linguistic turn'. This movement in the turn to language has resulted in discourse to overshadow the materiality of the world. Our concerns are related to uncritical and unreflective approaches to language that postulate a clear and neutral relationship between a word and a thing. Our emphasis on language is related to its use and its pragmatic effects. By embracing the disruptions offered by NMs, we reject the assumption that materiality is produced by discursive practices. In an anti-humanistic framework, we posit that the materiality of the world can be experienced outside of (and not just exclusively within) language and discourse, which are not just commentators of the material and the corporeal but are instead characterised by material dimensions in themselves. In our second paper, we apply the NMs framework to a clinical setting, inviting the field of systemic psychotherapy not only to explore the impact of discursive practices on the materiality of the world but also to attend to how this very materiality of the world surrounding us has an impact on the discursive practices that we and our clients employ in our everyday unfolding lives.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All listed authors of the manuscript have agreed to the listing. All authors have seen and approved the manuscript. All the authors were responsible for the collective designing of the work.

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Endnotes

- ¹In this article, the authors are referring primarily to vital and performative new materialisms. Negative materialisms are not further elaborated in the present article.
- ²According to Barad (2007), each bit of matter (or ‘thing’) is entangled with everything else in a materially specific way. This entanglement is a strong and deep connection, and is constantly reconfigured via intra-actions.
- ³‘Pre-individual’ is a term Deleuze takes from Simondon (2009) to refer to the conditions of possibilities from which an individuated being emerges. Different from an individuated being, pre-individual is more-than-one; it is a realm of possibilities (virtual) from which individuation unfolds.
- ⁴Becoming is a concept used by NM to challenge the idea of fixed entities (identities); it is the process through which what there is (only one substance) manifests itself in heterogeneous forms, which fold and unfold constantly.
- ⁵‘Immanence’ is a term NM has derived from the philosopher Spinoza referring to the assumption that, in an ontology of immanence, hierarchies are banned owing to the univocity of what there is (one univocal being). As suggested by May (2005), Japanese origami is a good though simple metaphor for the idea of becoming and immanence: in an origami no outside elements are introduced into the paper, which folds and unfolds in diverse figures, being heterogeneous expressions of the same substance (p.38).
- ⁶‘Intra-action’ is a term introduced by Barad (2007) to contrast and challenge the term ‘inter-action’, which presupposes that bodies and other materialities are entities pre-existing their interaction with the world and are endowed with a transcendent essence awaiting actualisation. Intra-action instead posits that the agency of the entities is not inherently bounded to the actualisation of pre-established essences, but it expresses the assumption that bodies and other materialities are discrete entities unfolding and producing themselves through a mutual relationality. Thus, entities as bodies and other materialities cannot be neatly and clearly separated by boundaries. Their ability to act emerges from within the relationship (i.e. ‘intra-’ instead of ‘inter-’) and not outside of it.
- ⁷This refers to a system in which the operations are not determined by external factors but rather are operated according to its own structure and organisation.
- ⁸‘Plugging in’ is a term taken from Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateau* referring not to a concept but to a process of making new connections.
- ⁹This theory is inspired by physicist Niels Bohr, who is one of the founders of quantum physics. It posits that the universe comprises phenomena or objects which emerge through particular intra-actions. These phenomena or objects do not precede their interaction.
- ¹⁰‘Anthropocene’ is a term describing a geological epoch in which human actions have set in motion changes able to have effects on geological processes.

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