

Multimodal cartographies of mental health lived experiencing

Emma van Daal

Preverbal trauma is a lived experiencing that hovers at the edge of liminality, always on the verge of transforming into something else. Although it can slumber, it is very much alive, animating in surprising ways between spaces of people, place, and object. When stirred, preverbal trauma is encountered as half memories, vague sensations, and fragments that continuously unfold from and refold into lived experiencing, producing patterns of movement, inter- and intra-action, and dis/harmonious rhythms impossible to know with any certainty (van Daal, 2021).

The conceit of conventional theory maintains the position of knowing ‘what’ trauma does and how ‘to do’ trauma recovery. However, preverbal trauma emerges from a diffracting motion of doing of memory and emotions co-occurring and co-produced within a relational entanglement of bodies – an assemblage that decentres anthropocentric notions of mental health and recovery to a more-than-human conceptualisation of well-being and ‘intervention’. Multimodal mapping is a New Materialist mode of inquiry that I have developed that opens to new ways of understanding the potential of material elements and the physical environment on human experiencing. As a process, it is concerned with staying with the complexity of the affective, sensate, and haptic relays that disperses lived experiencing across, between, and through spaces that drive out becoming.

In working with traumatised infants (0–5 years) and their caregivers, I want to understand two things. First, how young children map spaces in unique ways that adults generally do not. For example, they do not sit and talk. They move around and through the space, reconfiguring the therapeutic spaces to suit their needs. They climb over, fall, and collide with furniture and walls, having far more contact with surfaces than adult bodies do. Second, how the materiality of the therapeutic space could support trauma healing. The furniture and soft furnishings are conceived as vital agents in processing trauma – they become objects that sooth, hold, and protect (van Daal, in press). Multimodal mapping has the capacity to apprehend the expression of preverbal trauma by showing how the sensory and affective relays circulate and converge, intermingling in messy and complicated ways.

Creating multimodal maps highlights how an infant and parent client are co-constituted by the physical and material properties of objects, things, and spaces. Combined, it becomes a milieu that can provide emotional, psychological, sensorial, and relational holding when the mind and body are giving way/has given way and continue to work and rework trauma in a simultaneous movement of thinking, doing, and becoming.



Figure 1. Emma van Daal, *Playroom configuration 3*, 2023, photo image, pen and tracing paper.



Figure 2. Emma van Daal, *Becoming-unbecoming entanglement*, 2023, photo image, pen and tracing paper.

References

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About the author

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Dr Emma van Daal is an infant mental health consultant and researcher, child psychotherapist, and arts therapist working in private practice and community organisations for the past 15 years. Her passion is early intervention of early life trauma incorporating the arts to nurture attachment and promote healing, having presented internationally on this work. Emma's practice, writing, and research is strongly influenced by New Materialism and post qualitative inquiry, enjoying/seeking interdisciplinary collaborations that innovate new ways of doing intervention. She has recently published on mapping the materiality of lived experiencing arguing to (re)conceptualise well-being, trauma, and mental health within a relational ontology.



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