

1 Introduction

In *Material Methods* I outline the methodological possibilities and implications of researching the material world. The book starts from the premise that the world is simultaneously material and social, as the things that surround us are an inseparable part of how our relationships to other people are mediated, and the environment, society and culture we live in. Things and materials – as they come into being and are transformed through relations with other things and people – are an inextricable aspect of who we are, our social relations, and even our humanity (Miller, 2010). The theoretical ways of approaching these entanglements between the material and the social are multiple, yet they all in different ways emphasise the active role that things and materials play in this process. We cannot just impose meanings onto things, as they are not passive but instead are ‘vibrant’ (Bennet, 2009) and may resist, surprise, challenge or excite us.

This vibrancy makes things and materials both exciting to research with as well as raises questions about how we can understand these material vitalities and the ways our lives are entangled with things. In this book, I take up the methodological challenges of how to explore the elusive, silent and complex dimensions of the material world and the myriad possibilities that researching with things offer. The impetus to write this comes from my own experiences of researching with material culture within a range of different projects, and an initial frustration with how to understand clothing as material culture. I wanted to understand what clothing was and to have a language to talk and write about it; I experimented with existing methods which took me on a journey using methods such as ethnographic observations, interviews, diaries, wardrobe inventories, collaboration with materials scientists, and getting people to write about and imagine with objects. In this book, I explore the possibilities for adapting existing methods as well as developing new approaches to allow us to foreground the material, become attentive to things and materials and the effects they might have.

What are material methods?

The term material methods is one that I have created to speak to the diverse ways of carrying out research within the areas of material culture and materiality as well as the expansion of creative methods as they move into the multi-sensory, embodied, visual and material. Material methods encompass both methods that are used to understand material culture and materiality, as well as methods that draw upon the materiality of things to generate data. Material methods are, therefore, both:

1. routes *into* the substantive field of materiality (even as the methods are simultaneously always part of that field) as well as
2. methods of researching *with* things.

The first sense in which I am using the term material methods addresses the implications of the material turn and the concomitant expansion of research into materiality, materials and material culture. Theoretical and empirical interest in the material world raises questions about how we can adapt existing methods to help us understand things, material properties and the effects that things can have. Methods such as interviews or ethnographic observations have a long heritage within qualitative research, and in this book I explore how these can be – and have been – adapted to allow material relations to be foregrounded. If you are a student or researcher who is already interested in materiality, this book will encourage you to think about what implications your theoretical understandings of materiality have for how you think about methods, as well as introduce you to a range of different methods that can centre the material.

The second sense in which I am using the term material methods is to explore methods that draw upon the capacities of objects to provoke. This builds upon the acknowledgement of the role that things have in research practices (cameras, audio-recorders) as part of the methods-assemblage (Law, 2004). Participants, researchers and the tools of research are all part of how the phenomenon that is being researched is configured (Barad, 2003). All methods are material in the sense that people and

things interact in particular contexts to produce knowledge. In this book, I bring together these understandings of the materiality of methods with theories of how things have effects (see [Chapter 2](#)) to explore how material methods (such as object interviews and cultural probes) involve an active engagement with the capacities of things to make methods provocative. This aspect of material methods dovetails with broader engagements with creative (see Mason, 2018) and live methods (see Back and Puwar, 2012). They are a way to help you think creatively about how you are doing research, as well as how you can understand and approach the material world.

Material methods as ways to provoke participants (and you as a researcher) is a theme I develop throughout the book and is one which can engage those of you who might not have a research focus into materiality but are interested in thinking creatively about methods that allow us to understand a multi-dimensional and multi-sensory world. In doing this, I am encouraging you to move beyond just thinking reflexively about the role of objects in your research methods to ask you to critically engage with the possibilities of thinking about things you encounter in your substantive fields of research as methodological possibilities. So, for example, you may be researching people's relationship to their workplace and think about this workplace as a material environment made up of corridors (see Hurdley, 2010), buildings, people, shadows, movements, chatter (see also Yaneva, 2013). These material facets of the workplace can be both a substantive focus as well as methodological possibilities as you engage with how to develop methods that draw upon the capacity of noises in the workplace, the arrangement of things on desks, the shifting lights in a building. The vitalities and agency of things to excite you, resist you, or affect you can be thought about as methodological possibilities. Adams and Thompson (2011) suggest that technologies and things can be research participants; things have effects upon researchers and in doing so can open up new ways of thinking. The provocative capacities of things and how you can become attentive to them are central to the methods discussed in this book.

Why is this book needed?

The 'material turn' (see Hicks, 2010 for a discussion) has led to a profusion of interest in things and materials within the social sciences and humanities; however, despite the proliferation of theoretical accounts of materiality and empirical work exploring specific materials, objects and contexts, there has not been a concomitant development that addresses the methodological consequences of thinking about material culture and material relations. The parallel fields of visual and sensory research, in contrast, include an extensive literature, which deals with the methodological implications of a renewed attention to the sensory and visual (such as Banks, 2001; Pink, 2009; Rose, 2016). The lack of methodological discussion within the literature on material culture is more profound than just a lack of books or articles explicitly focusing upon materiality and methods, as often even within articles using empirical accounts to explore materiality there is an absence of discussion or reflection on methods.

The recent spate of readers and handbooks on material culture are a case in point; they include chapters that explore the theoretical debates and orientations to materials and objects (such as Hicks and Beaudry, 2010; Harvey et al., 2014; Tilley et al., 2013), yet the methodological challenges and possibilities of researching objects often remain implicit. Epistemological concerns over how to understand messy material and social relations (see, for example, Law, 2004) point towards the need to think more critically about how to engage with these challenges methodologically. In addition, there are books that engage with specific theoretical positions and the implications for carrying out empirical research (in particular for the connection between new materialism and methods, Fox and Alldred (2015), but also for non-representational theory, Vannini (2015)). This book is the first book to explicitly engage with the methodological implications and possibilities of researching materiality as well as researching with things. It does this by bringing together a wide range of methods for understanding material culture, by offering a critical reflection upon existing methods as well as exploring more recent innovations.

The lack of literature focusing on methods and materiality does not do justice to the

wide range of innovative and thoughtful methods that are carried out in practice. As these ways of doing research are often not reflected upon or written about, many of these methods are not ‘named’. The process of writing this book has involved reading research that has employed material methods but does not discuss them, and thinking through the traces of these methods and analysis in what is written. Writing this book has also been a process of drawing together at times quite seemingly disparate projects and methods, as well as ‘naming’ some of these methods. I have drawn from a wide range of disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, geography, history, design, archaeology. While there are of course disciplinary specificities in how things are approached (see Hicks and Beaudry, 2010), theories already move across disciplinary boundaries, as material culture is an inherently interdisciplinary field. Thinking through and across disciplines has allowed me to see connections between ways of approaching things, which are simultaneously theoretical, empirical and methodological. Throughout the book I will note the discipline that specific approaches come from, as the heritage of methods matters. However, I have also found it very productive to think across disciplines, and to put disciplinary methodological approaches in dialogue with each other to advance thinking about material methods.

What kind of book is it and who is it for?

Thinking about things and the material world emerges from an engagement with that world; it is impossible to theorise materiality without thinking about stuff. This book situates material methods at the intersection of theory, the empirical and the methodological as the three cannot be separated. In the [next chapter](#), I raise and explore questions of how you can understand what things and objects are; these questions animate the chapters that centre on specific methods ([Chapters 3–7](#)). In this book I understand ‘the empirical’ as an engagement with the material world: defined in this way, the empirical runs throughout the book (not as separate to theory or methods sections) as each chapter is centrally concerned with methods for thinking about that engagement with the material world. The methods can help us to understand the material world, as well as being generated through an engagement

with the empirical. In the ‘methods’ chapters ([3–7](#)), specific empirical case studies are central to the exploration of how methods have been used to answer different research questions to highlight the principles and possibilities of each method. Given that often material methods are not written about or reflected upon, this is particularly important to show ways in which researchers have approached the material.

The book aims to introduce you to the possibilities of different material methods; it is not reducing particular methods to specific disciplinary or theoretical stances. Instead, through examples, I will show you the ways in which people have used methods and, by juxtaposing different approaches, I will tease out the possibilities these methods have. There are no ‘right’ methods for different questions, as methods allow you to do different things – no method can capture everything (Bhattacharya, 2009) – but exploring different methods can allow you to think about the material differently. I have written this book with the intention of provoking you to think creatively about how you could approach your research.

While the book is for anyone who wants to read or use it, it is anticipated that it will be of particular use and interest for those of you who:

- are carrying out research specifically into material culture and materiality and want to reflect upon current methods and explore alternative methodological approaches;
- encounter things/objects in doing your research and want to think about how to approach and understand them;
- wish to expand the possibilities of your methods and to understand what material methods can offer;
- want to know about and understand what things/objects are, and what place they might have in your research.

For all those who read the book it is intended to provoke you to think differently about your methods and the material world.

The content of the book and how to use it

The book covers the whole stage of thinking about research:

- How to orient yourself to things.
- The role theory has in setting up your empirical research.
- Specific methods – their potential uses as well as limitations.
- How to analyse data generated.
- How to present your research.

It, therefore, leads you through the entire process of research and can be read as a whole. It is also a book that you can dip into, if you have an interest in a specific method, or you want to think about how to analyse your data. [Chapter 2](#) sets up some of the core issues that run throughout the book as well as key issues and debates around what things/objects are, and as such is a useful starting point even if you are planning to read about a specific method. There are threads that run through the book, such as how you can attune yourself and become attentive to things. If you do not already carry out research into materiality you may not notice the role the material has in your research field, and if you do, it can be challenging to understand the material, given how dominant social science methods are people-centred and privilege verbal accounts. As a consequence, what it means to attune yourself to things, and how you do this, runs throughout the book, in terms of specific methods as well as data analysis. Other key ideas running through the book (that I have already introduced) are the vitality of things and the ways methods and things can be provocative.

In [Chapter 2](#), I outline what it means to orient yourself to objects and things in your research. I start the chapter by addressing key questions that you have to engage with when using material methods, such as *what are things, objects and material properties?* Thinking about them as objects, things or as entangled materials are not just questions of terminology but fundamental questions about how you understand what they are and how they work. This question will draw on different theoretical

traditions to open up different ways of thinking about things and the implications that this has for how you frame and approach your research. As part of how you understand things, the chapter then moves on to think about what *effects things have*. Drawing upon the emphasis upon the relational in many theories of materiality (albeit differently conceived), the chapter extends this to the methodological and empirical question *where do things end and how do you draw the boundaries of what you are researching?* As a whole, the chapter sets up a way of orienting yourself to things as I outline what a material-oriented ontology might look like: things or materials are central to an understanding of the world (this will be returned to throughout the book). Throughout the chapter I address the relationships between theory, methods and the empirical that underpins the book.

In [Chapter 3](#), I introduce object interviews as a material method. The questions that animate the previous chapter are extended here to show that how you understand what things are will impact upon how you think about and do an object interview. Seeing something as a thing or an object is both a theoretical question (discussed in [Chapter 2](#)) as well as a practical question as to whether to keep the item in its original context or carry out an interview in a separate setting (where people bring objects along). I develop the idea of an object interview as a space of encounter and/or space of connection to look at different ways of approaching object interviews. The differences and similarities between object elicitations and interviews are introduced to explore the potentials for the method. The chapter engages with how you can approach interviews as a material method and how you can centre objects which involves engaging with what types of things you use in interviews and how they can provoke responses in participants. As material relationships are understood as embodied and practical rather than verbalised, I outline the ways in which the verbal can be used as a way to understand the material world. The chapter finishes by discussing some practical considerations and useful techniques for thinking about doing object interviews.

[Chapter 4](#) explicitly picks up the ways in which material methods draw upon the provocative capacities of things by introducing cultural probes and arts-based

methods. The previous chapter on object interviews opened up the ways in which you need to pay heed to the materiality and material properties of things when thinking about interviews as a method of drawing out and eliciting responses. This chapter expands how methods can be material provocations through the examples of cultural probes and other design-based methods (such as speculative design) as well as arts-based methods (such as collage and play-based methods). Taken together, these methods are understood as drawing upon the playful and open-ended possibilities of things, as they can produce unexpected responses from participants. The methods discussed in this chapter have in common that they are developed within design and arts-based disciplines but exported more widely, as well as that they are often not discussed as material methods. In this chapter I explore the implications of methods crossing disciplinary boundaries as well as building upon the ideas from [Chapter 2](#) to think about how you can frame, think about and adopt these approaches as material methods.

Chapter 5 engages with the questions of how you can think about and research material relations, that is, things in relationship to each other. This picks up the key question introduced in [Chapter 2](#) – *where things end* – as a theoretical and empirical concern. Even if things are understood as always being in relationship to other things, materials, contexts and people you have to empirically decide on where you draw the boundaries of what you are researching. This chapter focuses explicitly upon both methods to understand collections/assemblages/sets of things as well as thinking about sets of things as methodological possibilities in themselves. It explores methods you might develop if you either have a particular theoretical stance on the relations between things (such as assemblage theory) or if you have a particular empirical interest in a collection/type of thing (such as music collections or a museum collection). It also interrogates what ways of thinking can be opened up if you develop *things-in-relations* as an empirical and methodological approach. The particular methods the chapter explores range from probate inventories and catalogues through to collection interviews or observations.

Chapter 6 outlines follow the thing as a methodological approach to research that

centres things as they move temporally and spatially. Follow the thing is an analytical and methodological approach to your field of study rather than a specified method/set of methods. I introduce thinking about things and how they move as a provocative method, which can provoke you as a researcher to think differently about your empirical field. Akin to the previous chapter where collections are introduced as a method for allowing researchers to think differently, follow the thing is explored as an analytical strategy that can open up how you develop your research questions and empirical research. The approach ranges from global commodity chain analysis through to smaller scale empirical sites where things are followed within a particular space. As such, it can be adapted to a number of different scales, empirical topics and methods and some of these potential routes are explored in the chapter. Here I pick up on the questions introduced in [Chapter 2](#) in terms of thinking about what things are (here addressed as what you are following: materials, things or relations), and where they end as you try to delineate the boundaries of what you are following.

In **Chapter 7**, I explore how ethnography has been developed for research into material culture and materiality. Although it has been used much more broadly than research into material culture, it has clear potentials and possibilities, which this chapter expands upon by explicitly thinking about it as a material method. The ways in which ethnography de-emphasises the verbal and focuses upon practices allows the material to be centred in methods, empirical examples and theory. The chapter picks up on the idea of ethnographic ‘openness’; this openness is empirical as well as theoretical as it entails being open to what you may find out, what objects and material relations are in a specific context (rather than deciding this through a pre-determined theoretical stance). The theory of what things are can emerge from fieldwork. Although ethnography is an approach and not a set of prescribed methods, the chapter outlines some of the specific methods that are used and how they can be adapted to think about materiality (such as observation, visual and artistic methods and participation).

Chapter 8 (the final chapter) looks at the phase of analysing and presenting your

research. I introduce the importance of connecting your 'data' back to the contexts in which it was produced and strategies to get yourself excited about your data. As material methods often generate multiple forms of data, the chapter will explore how to deal with your data set as a whole, as well as dealing with multiple forms of data. I encourage you to remain open to what you may find in your data, as well as open to how the material world emerges in your research. The phase of analysis is explored as an active, creative and imaginative part of the process of doing research. One of the key challenges it takes up is how to attune yourself to the material world, as well as how to retain the vitalities of things. This is true for analysis, as well as the processes through which you present and communicate your work, as the chapter explores ways of writing with data that foreground the material world, as well as alternative forms of presentation such as photo essays or exhibitions.

The book as a whole is trying to get you to be open to the possibilities of researching with things and to retain this openness throughout all stages of the research process: in how you orient yourself to things, your methods as well as how you analyse your findings. Using things as part of your methods can provoke people to respond in interesting ways as well as also provoke you as a researcher to think differently about your research area and what things are.

2 Orienting yourself to things

- *What are the methodological implications of approaching things as objects, things or materials?*
- *Where do things end and how do you decide on the boundaries of what you are looking at?*
- *What is the relationship between theory, methods and the empirical?*

This book develops ‘material methods’ to suggest ways to understand the material world, as well as routes into developing methods which engage with the capacities of things and materials to develop provocative methods of generating data. You may, therefore, be thinking about these methods as someone with little knowledge of what your theoretical framework might be or you may have a clear idea of what theoretical tradition you want to think methods through. Whichever perspective you approach these methods from, you need to think about what the ‘material’ means. In this chapter, I outline ways of orienting yourself to things, by engaging with a number of different theoretical perspectives within the fields of material culture and materiality. I engage with these theories inasmuch as they help to explore different approaches to understanding what a thing is; for example, whether it is better understood as a set of relations or whether you can think about ‘things’ as objects. The chapter is not, however, led by particular theories but is instead led by concerns that you will have as researchers in the fields of material culture and materiality, such as: what is a thing and is it different to an object? How do things have effects? Where do things end and how do you draw boundaries around what you are looking at? These key questions are introduced in this chapter and run throughout the book as methods pick up and address these questions in different ways.

Using material methods means understanding what is meant by the material, and so, this chapter will first unpack what is meant by terms such as things, objects, materials and materiality. I will draw upon theoretical debates to think about what counts as a thing and then move on to a discussion of how things can be understood

to have effects (or ‘agency’ as it is often discussed in the literature). Having established the different approaches to what things are and what makes them a thing, the chapter will move on to think about where things end (what relationship they have to other things and the contexts they are found in) which also implies engaging with how you delineate empirical fields of research as well as units of analysis. The chapter will then outline what I define as a material-oriented ontology, which works from the premise that things are not passive but are active, and entangled components of everyday worlds. This involves engaging with the question of how to orientate yourself to things. For those of you unfamiliar with material culture research, this can involve ‘tuning in’ to the often-unnoticed role things have in your research area. Things and material relations (Law, 2004; Henare et al., 2007) are centred in how you theorise, analyse and orientate yourself to empirical research as well as how you carry out your methods. I will also here discuss the role that theory has in how you come to develop your methods and challenge the assumption that you need to start from a defined theoretical perspective and then generate your methods. Instead, I suggest a more open and iterative approach to the relations between theory, empirical questions and methods. The purpose of this chapter is to get you thinking critically about what it means to study things, how can you approach them and what role theory has in this process. These will pave the way for engagement with the possibilities of particular methods in later chapters of the book.

Are you researching with things, objects or materials?

This chapter concerns itself with how to orient yourself to things. This involves engaging with what you think things are, whether you see them as objects, materials that coalesce, becomings, processes or sets of relations. If you are engaged in either researching *about* things (and so with a substantive interest in things) or researching *with* things (using things as a way to generate responses and data) then you need to engage with what things are, and what possibilities and potentials they have. Whether you write about things, objects, or constellations of materials is not just a

question of terminology, but these words imply that you are taking a particular ontological position. In this section I am not going to suggest that you 'should' use any particular word, or to adjudicate between different theoretical positions, but instead to explore how words such as objects can frame how you then approach and orient yourself to them in your research.

Objects may seem to be self-evident, they just 'are'. If you are not someone who has previously done research with material culture, or read the literature on materiality then it may well be you have never given much thought to what an object is. Miller (1987) talks about the humility of things, that is, how the things which frame our everyday worlds, actions and relations are often unnoticed. We are surrounded by things as they form the fabric of many of our everyday environments, and yet when we start to think more closely about them the question of what they are becomes more complex. In thinking about the limitations of the term 'objects', Ingold (2010) says that while his office is self-evidently filled with objects, when he goes outside and looks around he asks are trees objects? When they have algae on them is algae still part of the tree or is it a separate thing? Thinking about trees shows the limitations of thinking about the material world in terms of just the made world that surrounds us and extends our thinking to include the wider environment in which things are situated. In the following section I will discuss in more depth the question of where things end, and their relationship to other things.

Here, I want to elaborate on what it means to talk about things, objects, materiality and materials, as well as asking: what counts as a thing? You might take a CD to be self-evidently an object, but what about music? Thinking about the example of music as a thing challenges many of the assumptions you may have about what things are: that they are bounded entities, something you can touch and that they are solid. If you were to frame music as material it would involve interrogating it in terms of how it is connected in relation with other things (music players, speakers), what the substance/materiality of music is (the sound waves, the air) as well as the effects that it has: such as, how it makes people feel and how they move their bodies (see Bartmansi and Woodward, 2015 on vinyl). Approaching music as material

opens up new ways of thinking about it, as well as how you think about what an object or a thing is.

Perhaps music or trees are best not thought of as 'objects'. Ingold, along with other writers, has suggested that the word object shouldn't be used at all as it implies something closed off from and separate to the world. Objects stand in our way (Ingold, 2010) rather than being part of the flows of materials that make up our worlds. Instead, he suggests using the word thing, which he takes to mean a 'gathering of the threads of life' (2010: 4). A thing invites us in to participate, as it is part of the flows of life. Take a house, for example: for Ingold it is not a finished object that stands opposed to us, but instead we are part of it, as we continually repair and live in it. Ingold defines a thing as a 'gathering of materials in movements...and to witness a thing is to join with the processes of its ongoing formation' (Ingold, 2012: 436; see also Hicks, 2010). When things are understood in this way they are always becoming within changing environments; in this framework what people do with things – practices – are part of the things themselves.

The definition of things as changing and emergent is in part a reaction against the taken-for-grantedness of things – their presumed solidity. However, you might be doing research that leads you to want to think about the durabilities and solidity of things. In many instances, we are not always invited in as Ingold implies; things also resist us. Following Henare et al.'s (2007) suggestion of taking things as they are, if things are encountered as 'objects' then you must pay heed to this and understand them accordingly. An object is made of multiple materials and being an object is only a phase within the longer trajectories of the flows of materials which is contingent upon relations with other things, the air and the surrounding environment. Nonetheless, this period of its life as an object may be the period that your research is most directly focusing upon. Olsen (2010) suggests that focusing on things as relations (discussed below in more depth) means that their properties and the effects these have may be undermined. Think of a table; it has been created from materials and will be broken down into them, it exists in relation to other things and

its environment and may be repaired and change over time. It is still, however, identifiably a table for a considerable period of time, and its existence as a table matters. Ingold (2007) suggests that as no object lasts for ever, materials 'win' over objects or materiality. Using terms like 'winning' not only fails to account for the fact that even if its life as an object is short this does not mean that it is unimportant, but also 'winning' implies that one term is better than the others. Instead, you need to think about what you are interested in, how you are defining your terms, which also entails engaging with theoretical and methodological approaches.

Objects and things come to appear as opposing within the discussions I have introduced so far, and yet it may be that you find yourself sympathetic to both approaches and that you want to find a way to design your research that allows for both perspectives. Fowler and Harris (2015) offer a useful way of thinking about how to understand how things endure over time as *things-in-themselves* as well as being *bundles of relations*. They use the phrase things-in-themselves rather than objects, but their article is useful in showing that you can do research that considers the persistence, endurance and material qualities of a particular object while still acknowledging that the object is produced through historical relations. This is important, as many theorists would suggest that seeing something as an object and as a thing (as historically emerging through relations between materials) are incompatible positions.

Fowler and Harris (2015), by drawing on Barad, suggest that you can modulate between ways of seeing things as entities in their own right as well as emerging through historical relations. They use Barad's discussion of electrons (Barad, 2007) about how electrons are entities at the boundary of being a wave and a particle. Waves are disturbances of media; they intersect with each other and are diffracted as the interaction of waves produces an effect. A particle, in contrast, is a thing localised in space. You cannot see the electron clearly as both a particle and a wave at the same time. This is not just about different perspectives but importantly, is a **configuration**: through your research, methods and how you frame things, things are configured in particular ways. And so, if you approach, theorise and use research

apparatuses to see something as 'becoming' or as a wave in Barad's sense, then this is what your research will produce. The same is true for seeing something as an entity. And so, you can understand it as both becoming and as being, but to do so you need to shift between different research configurations, which may involve using different theories and methods.

This is a question then of *terminology* (whether you refer to objects, materials, things), of *ontology* (seeing things as bundles of relations or as bounded things which you encounter) and of *methods* (what you do to configure an object as an object). Rather than see one terminology as 'correct' you need to be aware that how you think about things/objects is part of the process through which things are configured. And so, to think about something as an object allows you to see and to understand how they are bounded, how they have properties and how you may encounter them as objects that may resist you. Switching and modulating between positions is feasible within one research project as Fowler and Harris (2015) show in their example of a Neolithic chambered tomb. They adopt this approach to understand this tomb as both an entity in itself as well as historically produced through relations in ways that are not contradictory.

Within the literature there are different formulations of this way of doing research that both acknowledges the 'object-ness' of something as well as how it is multiple. For example, Mol's discussion of the disease athero-sclerosis (Mol, 2002) which emerges though her ethnographic research highlights that the disease is both assumed to be a coherent entity (what might be termed its object-ness) as well as being materially multiple. This multiplicity is evident in the multiple material manifestations of the disease, which are configured through multiple sets of practices (so, for example, the symptoms described in a GP surgery and then examined by a doctor, an angiogram, an ultrasound). Law (2010) suggests you need to understand how things are ontologically multiple (that the disease is created and exists in these multiple material forms) as well as how the coherence of the whole as 'a disease' is achieved. To do this, you need to approach the disease as a coherent thing (even while being aware that this coherence is achieved), and through

ethnographic exploration explore the material multiplicity as well as how this coherence is produced. Even if the apparent object-ness of something is contradicted by multiplicities, you can do research that considers how the object-ness and coherence are achieved and assumed. This can be done by either applying a different theoretical lens (as per Fowler and Harris) or by seeing the object-ness as an achieved coherence.

Material culture, materiality and materials

When you are engaging with things in your research or methods, you also need to think about the ‘thing-ness’ of those things. A route into thinking about this can be asking: what makes one thing different from another? If you are doing research into memories and ask people to bring something along to talk about, how their memories are materialised through an old perfume bottle with traces of scent left in it or a photograph would be very different. The objects may have different meanings, but there is also something particular and different about what these things are, what they do and the impacts they can have. If you are going to take seriously the things that are part of people’s worlds, then you need to engage with these issues in planning and carrying out your research. Put another way, you need to engage with them as material culture, with their materiality, their material properties as well as the materials that constitute them. Different theoretical approaches emphasise different terms (or have different takes on the same term). Which word you use has implications for how you draw upon things in creating your methods, as well as how you understand the role that things have in your research.

I will introduce some of these key terms now to indicate how they have been used as well as to help you think about which ones you would use yourself and their differing connotations and implications. These terms are also useful routes into thinking about the different aspects of the ‘thing-ness’ of things that you need to think about when researching with things. Material culture is a term that has been used to suggest that things are not ‘just’ things; they are not separate to cultural or social relations but are an integrated part of them. Things are not passive, onto

which humans assert their will or impose cultural meanings, but are instead a key player within which people’s lives and worlds are mutually created. The term also refers to a field of scholarship (material culture studies/research) that has developed since the 1980s, particularly within anthropology that tends to explore ethnographically the ways in which people and things are co-constituted in different settings. Like many of the words that I introduce and discuss in this section it is a contested term; however, given that this rehashes many of the divisions already discussed between focusing upon things/objects or materials I will not go into that further here. The phrase material culture serves to bring together culture and the material and, therefore, challenges the idea that culture is either just symbolic or that it is a separate sphere to the material world. Instead, in taking a material culture approach, you are committed to exploring how culture is materialised in different contexts.

Materiality is a term that is used across a range of different theoretical perspectives, and while it is again a contested term it is a useful one to think through what it means in relation to your methods and research area as it allows you to start to attune yourself to the material world. Materiality in a basic sense refers to what the properties and capacities of things and materials are, and how these can lead to objects having particular effects. Take the example of the table I have already introduced. Part of its materiality is what it is made of; for example, it may be made of wood, which allows it to be sturdy as well as to be treated with oil to make it less susceptible to water damage, and to be carved in designs to make it an aesthetically pleasing part of someone’s kitchen. Its materiality is also its design, which is both aesthetic and functional, as the table has both the possibility of things resting on it as well as things stored beneath it. These facets of its materiality do not determine what it is, what it can do or how people interact with it; however, they encourage and lead towards some uses more than others. Materiality cannot, however, just be reduced to thinking about material properties, but also things like decay (DeSilvey, 2006), affective or dazzling charges of things (see Hicks, 2010, for discussion of these).

How you think about the capacities of things, their material properties and the

impact these have depends upon what you are researching, how you are using things in your methods as well as what analytical angle you are taking. There are many different theoretical approaches to materiality to help you think about how you will approach the thing-ness of things. I will introduce two theoretical approaches here to show how different theories to materiality can be useful when orienting yourself to things. The first is an approach that I have used within my research into clothing: Miller's theory of objectification, which attempts to overcome the dualism of subjects and objects. Miller (2005) sees materiality as incorporating 'the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological and the theoretical' (2005a: 4) and so not just the materials an object is made of. Drawing from Hegel, Miller's theory of objectification positions the objects of mass consumption as a central part of the development of the self and of culture. The subject externalises itself in objects (such as when you see yourself in things), which is then re-appropriated as the self is subsequently changed through our interaction with things. It is a dynamic process of 'becoming' (Miller, 1987: 33), which happens continually as it is never 'resolved' as the subject and culture are progressively developed. Subjects and objects do not pre-exist the process of objectification as 'the very act of creating form creates consciousness or capacity such as skill and therefore transforms both' (Miller, 2005: 9). It is a theory that allows us to engage with the interrelations between people and things and does not place them in opposition. I have found it very helpful in thinking about how people refer to an item of clothing as being 'me', or are unable to part with clothes that effectively externalise relationships to others.

Another approach to materiality that has been very influential is found within actor network theory (ANT) approaches, where materiality is a relational effect (Law, 2010; see also Yaneva, 2013): materiality cannot be separated out from the enactment of relations. Law suggests that in highlighting the 'relational character of materialization' (Law, 2010: 180) this is ANT's most distinctive contribution to understanding materiality as it can be observed in practices. Although developed in laboratory studies, this approach to materiality can be applied more widely. Materiality can be understood in different ways and which understanding you use then affects how you frame the research you do. In Miller's work, materiality is

dialectic emerging through the relationships between people and things; in ANT, it emerges through practices and the relations of things with other things. While they are very different takes on materiality, what these perspectives have in common with other ones – such as new materialism or assemblage theory (see Edensor, 2011) – is that materiality does not concern itself with the fixed properties of things that determine how things will behave/how people will interact with them. Rather, materiality is emergent. You cannot just seek to find out what the properties of an object are, and then claim to understand its materiality; instead, which aspects of the material matter, as well as how they emerge through processes and relations, are also important to understand. This is not to elide the differences between positions, as the application of a position like Miller's might lead to a focus on the interaction between people and their things, whereas an application of Barad's new materialism (2003) leads to an emphasis upon the 'intra-action' of elements through which things and matter are formed. However, a key point to take from this is *you cannot take things and what they are for granted*.

You can neither take things (such as a table) for granted, nor can you take the properties of things for granted. To think about materiality entails a consideration of both the **materials** of what things are made, as well as the material properties of things. The historical disciplinary division between the natural material world and the social sciences means that the study of materials has been a separate area of the natural sciences. As a consequence, the properties of things have historically been interrogated through a range of scientific methodologies. More recent developments within the social sciences point to the ways in which material properties are not fixed but instead are emergent (see Drazin and Kuchler, 2015, for a discussion of this). Barad (2003: 821) talks about 'matter' (like materials) having an 'ongoing historicity', as she focuses on the processes through which bodies and matter are formed. It is worth noting that seeing the properties of things as changing and emerging is questioned within some of the literature by those who see some properties of materials as absolute and other properties as emerging in particular contexts. What is for certain is that you cannot take material properties as read or fixed; even if you are not doing research that follows or focuses upon materials, you

still need to be aware of material properties and propensities when you use things in research.

Thinking about material properties involves thinking about what they are made of and how they are designed as well as the specific contexts of their use. These context specificities include the environment, cultural contexts as well as the bodies that interact with things. One way of thinking about this is offered in Gibson's (1979) discussion of the relationships between medium (e.g. air) substances (such as rock) and the surfaces of things. The affordances of things call forth relations between bodies and things in particular environments. The implication of this position is that material properties do not stand alone, but exist in relation to other people, the environment and how people perceive them. For example, a table has the possibilities for you to put things on it and for chairs to be placed next to and under it. This can offer a useful way of thinking about things in research contexts as it opens up the relations between things, people and the environment/context they are in.

What can things do? What animates them?

One of the key principles discussed so far is that things are not passive; we cannot just impose meanings on things. This section will engage specifically with this question of how things have effects; one way this has been discussed in the literature is through the concept of **material agency**, which helps us to think about things in terms of what they do rather than just what they mean. This is exemplified in Gell's discussion of artworks (1998) in terms of what the artworks do, not just what they mean. In thinking about how objects have agency, Gell distinguishes between primary and secondary agents; objects are examples of secondary agents as they lack intention but have causal efficacy. However, the intentions of humans can be distributed through them. So, for example, if someone was designing a shoe they couldn't just impose sexiness upon them, but instead through working with the fabrics and shapes, the shoes come to carry or externalise the maker's intentionality. The shoes can have effects as people may see them as sexy. At the same time,

moving beyond Gell's position, the shoes can, in Latour's terms, act back, and if the heels fall off, or their shape gives your feet blisters, through the materiality they have thwarted the externalised intentionality of the designer and the wearer (see Woodward, 2003, for a discussion of this).

Although agency is conceived very differently within Gell's work and within ANT or Barad's new materialism – they all share an understanding of how agency is not the 'possession' of an individual, but in Barad's terms (2003) is a doing, or a performance (Pickering, 2010) emerging from the interplay of humans and non-humans. This allows you to focus in research on what people do with things, and what role things have in those interactions. While Gell introduces the idea that agency cannot be reduced to human intentionality, ANT positions extend this further to imply even more radically that agency doesn't have to imply intentionality (see Harvey and Knox, 2014). In Latour, material configurations shape relations and can thus be understood as social actors; Latour's position on agency is well illustrated through the example of the Berlin key. The shape of the key and of the locks means that you have to lock the door behind you; this example usefully shows that things and material arrangements (such as locks and doors) have effects on how people are able to act. In ANT, the focus is not whether things have agency but instead starts from the premise that people and things exist in relations and are defined and produced through those relations. Agency emerges from these networks. In this formulation, it is impossible to divide up what is human or non-human agency. Even though the processes of purification that accompanied modernity sought to present the human and the technological as separate (Latour, 1993), in practice human and non-humans have always been entangled.

Agency is a useful way of thinking about:

- what effects things can have;
- how these effects emerge from how people and things are connected to each other;
- how you can attune yourselves to the active role that things play in the world.

These are issues for how you orient yourselves to the empirical content of your research (to think about how objects have effects in particular relations and settings) as well as the materiality of methods (for example, as will be discussed in the [next chapter](#), an object interview will involve you thinking about the potential and actual effects particular objects might have).

Agency is a contested concept within the literature as other writers instead focus upon what animates things and materials (Ingold, 2010) and what makes them vibrant (Bennet, 2009). Ingold suggests that the word agency is only necessary for researchers whose definition of things/objects has involved severing them from the contexts that make them alive. Instead, Ingold (2007) suggests that we are all swimming in a world of materials, as what enlivens things and people is the generative flow of materials. If you understand things as being ‘in life’ (by which he means part of the entangled flow and movements of materials) then you do not need to look for life in things (Ingold, 2007) in the form of agency. If, in designing your research, you were to orient yourself towards the flow of materials then you would be focusing upon how materials come together to form things within particular environmental contexts. When you think about what effects things have, you need to think about which perspective you would adopt as this – along with what you understand things/objects to be – impacts upon how you frame your research.

It is worth noting that even though you need to think about how you understand things and what their effects are, this does not necessarily mean deciding in advance between whether you are looking at material agency or how things are animated by the flows of materials. Many theories of agency effectively bring these two aspects together and so offer another theoretical route. For example, in Barad’s position agency emerges through the relational effects of elements and things intra-acting. Indeed, Bennet – although coming from a different position to Barad – discusses vibrant matter in a way that exemplifies this, as she suggests that material formations and matter are vibrant. This vitality is defined as the ‘capacity of things...not only to impede...the will...of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own’ (Bennet, 2009: vii). When

thinking about these different theories, you need to think about which theory fits with what you are trying to find out. I have here only been able to offer a brief introduction to a complex theoretical area, which has aimed to introduce you to some of the possible routes for thinking about the ways in which things can be understood to have effects.

The relations of things: where do things end?

Running through much of the discussion so far is the importance of thinking about relations between things, people, materials and environments in understanding the material world. Thinking about how things relate to other things, to people or how materials relate to each other is important in thinking about how you orientate yourselves to things, as well as how you define what your empirical field is. Even if you take a position that things only exist in relations and that these relations are infinite, you still need to draw a boundary around what you will be focusing on in your research. To put it in more familiar language, you will have to define your field of study and units of analysis. This can be one of the most challenging things to do in designing and carrying out empirical research – limiting and placing boundaries on what you are researching – and this issue is one that will emerge throughout the book.

This involves thinking about the boundaries of things themselves. Returning to the example of the tree that Ingold introduces (2010) – is the algae on the tree part of the tree, a separate thing, or is it a hybrid thing? DeSilvey’s work (2006) on an abandoned homestead in the USA (which will be discussed in depth in [Chapter 8](#)) asks some of these questions through the things she encountered, such as items that are decaying, where mould cannot be separated out from the thing it is on. This is true for less obviously hybrid examples; take a jumper that has an oil stain on it that can’t be washed out. The oil stain is part of the jumper. Through the histories of the jumper, how it was worn, its relations with other things, the jumper has been materially changed: an oil stain that cannot be removed is now part of that thing. When you consider this in terms of the histories of a thing, you can see that things

themselves – like an item of clothing with an oil stain on it, or a tree with algae growing on it – have emerged from relations between things and materials. The jumper hangs in a wardrobe alongside other items of clothing and the tree with algae on it stands next to some grass, a fence and myriad other things. They both, therefore, exist currently in relation to other things. This is dynamic and shifting as items of clothing are moved, selected for wear or repaired or a fence decays, grass is cut and new flowers grow.

This example of clothing (see Woodward and Greasley, 2015 for more discussion) highlights both things *as* relations as well as being *in* relations with other things (see Harvey and Knox, 2014, for a full discussion). The relations between things and elements is a key pre-occupation within many different strands of the literature as material relationality is at the heart of ANT, non-representational theory, new materialism and assemblage theory. The approach you take has implications for what you focus upon empirically:

- If you were to approach things *in* relations, you might develop a research focus on how people relate to objects as well as how things relate to other things.
- If you were to approach things *as* relations, then you might think about:
 - What the relations are that have produced the thing. What are its material histories?
 - How are the relations between materials happening now? This might involve observations as these relations unfold.

The precise way in which you explore the relations between things or things as relations emerges from which theoretical route you take – as I have already suggested, material relationality is a key aspect of many theories, all of which have different methodological implications (see Chapter 5 for an elaboration of some of these). As I suggested briefly with the example of clothing, thinking about *things as relations* or *things in relations* are different approaches you can take. You may also find you are developing an approach that attempts to take account of both. And so, a

wardrobe could be approached as a set of relations between things, as well as things that are relations.

One of the things you need to think about then is what your empirical focus is, and what is (are) your unit (or units) of analysis. These decisions are based upon how you want to approach the phenomenon in question, which will be influenced by your theoretical framing. So, for example, Boyer and Spinney’s 2016 research into new motherhood focused upon the analytical units of an entanglement (between the new mother and non-human elements) and affective engagements (between baby, mother and the material world) as a way to understand the process of becoming a new mother. Having clearly defined units of analysis meant that the research offered new insights into motherhood as materially constituted. The issue of how you think about and frame your units of analysis is one that will be addressed throughout the methods chapters (with a particular emphasis upon this in Chapters 5, 6 and 8). Your units of analysis may be directly following from a defined theoretical position (see Box 2.1 for some examples of this). What is important to think about is that understanding what your unit of analysis is, is a process through which you:

- frame an issue as material (so, for example, new motherhood as in the above example could have been approached through just interviewing people about their experiences);
- frame the material in a particular way (so, for example, if you carried out research into bridges as material infrastructure, you could take the approach of seeing the bridge-as-relations and in doing so you reframe the solid and enduring material structure as changing, and as a material achievement not as a solid ‘given’).

Material-oriented ontology

This chapter has so far been led by some of the core questions you will have to think about when researching with things; in doing so, I have drawn upon different theoretical positions as a way to consider how you can think about what things are

and how they have effects. In this section, I would like to more explicitly address the role that theory has in the process of orienting yourself to things in your research. Before thinking about the implications of different theoretical positions for doing your research I will first outline what I am calling a **material-oriented ontology**. An ontology can be defined in a basic sense as what you think the material and social worlds are that you are researching – how you understand the world. I am using the phrase material-oriented as, whatever theoretical perspective you draw upon, when researching with things you are orienting yourself to the material world. Adopting a material-oriented ontology means according a central role to things/objects/materials in the world/particular phenomena you are researching. Broadly defined, a material-oriented ontology is one which positions things and materials as an integral and entangled part of social relations and worlds. People, relations and things are all co-constituted as things play an active role in the uses and meanings that they come to have.

A material-oriented ontology is one which does not prioritise people or ‘the social’ or ‘culture’, but instead sees social relations as being simultaneously social and material and things as playing an active role in the materialisation of personhood and culture. It is centrally concerned with critiquing a dominant humanist ontology that centres people; this humanist ontology sees objects as passive things onto which people impose meanings: they are acted upon rather than helping to constitute and frame actions as well as acting back. A material-oriented ontology critiques but does not reverse this; that is, people are not considered peripheral to objects but instead materials, things and people are entangled. The emergence of a human-centred ontology is one which has been linked to disciplinary separations between the natural and social sciences, where the former is the domain of the material world and the latter the domain of culture, society and social relations.

While there are different theoretical positions that might all broadly be defined as centring the material they can be understood as having different material ontologies (see [Box 2.1](#) below for a summary of some of these), which have epistemological implications (your understanding of what counts as knowledge). [Box 2.1](#) is not

comprehensive but instead aims to give you some sense of the variance (as well as similarities) between widely used theoretical positions. Even within specific perspectives there are contentions over what particular terms mean or how things are approached (for example, see Muller (2015) on the similarities between ANT and assemblage theory or Harman (2009) on the similarities between ANT and phenomenology).

Box 2.1: Ontological stances and epistemological implications of key theories:

New materialism (see Barad, 2003; Fox and Aalred, 2015)

- **Ontology:** all matter is relational; matter has the capacity to effect. Things do not pre-exist these relations as entities are relationally produced through relations to each other.
- **Epistemology:** configurations of matter which include different material elements (even non-humans and the research apparatus); assemblages (there are clear connections to assemblage theory outlined, which is often seen as part of new materialism).

Actor network theory – ANT (see Latour, 2005; Sayes, 2014; Law, 2007; Baiocchi et al., 2013)

- **Ontology:** the social is not an entity but is something that is assembled, de-assembled and reassembled (Latour, 2005) through human/non-humans in relation to each other; action comes from how humans and non-humans are in relations with each other.
- **Epistemology:** the process through which humans and non-humans come together and interact; practices (material), observations of how actors emerge and move.

Non-representational theory (see Lorimer, 2005; Vannini, 2015)

- Ontology: the world/body cannot be read through or reduced to texts; core concept of affect is understood as the body's capacity to be effected and to be moved and to move/affect.
- Epistemology: doings/practices/bodies and affective dimensions (not just representations).

Assemblage theory (see Deleuze and Guattari, 2004; DeLanda, 2016; Bennet, 2009)

- Ontology: multiple heterogeneous forms come into relations to each other. The capacity to affect/have agency emerges from the assemblage. Relations change and are tenuous.
- Epistemology: how elements come into relations with each other, how these relations are maintained, and what effects they have. Things as assemblages as well as being in assemblages.

Ecological/entanglements perspective (see Ingold, 2010)

- Ontology: the world is made of flows of materials that are entangled. This is as true for people, things and environments as we all come to live through the entanglements of materials.
- Epistemology: materials, how they flow and connect; things as entanglements of materials.

Objectification (see Miller, 1987, 2005)

- Ontology: the relation between people and things is processual, dialectical and co-constitutive.
- Epistemology: how people interact with things (use, store, make, dispose of).

Phenomenology (see Merleau-Ponty, ([1945] 1962), Adams and Thompson, 2011)

- Ontology: centres the world as we experience it (prereflexivity); things are part of our bodily and emotional experience in the world (perception of the world is also how it invites us to act).
- Epistemology: how things/technologies habituate and shape actions and how people perceive the world.

These theoretical positions are all different ways of orienting yourself to things; and if you use these to carry out your research these will have different implications in terms of how you define your empirical area, which methods you use and how you carry out your analysis. I have already introduced some of the challenges of defining your units of analysis in the section on the relations of things; one route into developing and defining what your unit of analysis is can be through theory. For example:

- If you are drawing upon assemblage theory (this is picked up in more depth in [Chapter 5](#)) you might focus upon an *assemblage* as your focus/unit of analysis. Edensor (2011) uses assemblage theory (deLanda, 2016) as an approach to a church in Manchester. This allows him to think about the church as an assemblage, the entities within this as assemblages (such as a door) as well as being part of larger assemblages (such as the city).
- If you are drawing upon ANT, your focus might be on *heterogeneous entities*. For example, Yaneva's (2013) research into architecture

approaches the building as heterogeneous, which entails focusing upon (among other things) the sounds, people, shadows, qualities and forces of the building and its materials, practices and events.

- If you are drawing from new materialism, such as Barad's emphasis upon the intra-action of elements (and not inter-action of discrete things), you might then focus on a *configuration* of the world (2003: 814) including your own position as researcher and research apparatus.

What are the links between methods and theory?

While theoretical positions may lead to analytical routes of approaching things, the relations between theory, analytical routes and methods are not pre-determined or fixed. This is particularly notable when you consider the relations between theory and specific methods, as there is no match between particular methods and theoretical positions. So, for example, even though actor network theory approaches often entail researchers using ethnographic methods, alternative methods can still be used within the same theoretical framework (for example see Nimmo, 2011). Throughout the book, I will introduce specific case studies of research projects that are explicitly situated within some of the theoretical positions mentioned in [Box 2.1](#) above to show some of the possibilities for how people have developed research and adapted methods.

One of the implications of which theoretical position you take can be that they highlight the limitations of current and dominant methods. If the world is understood to be fluctuating and at times disordered, many conventional social science methods are unable to deal with this as through data generation and analysis they produce worlds that are ordered and coherent (Law, 2003, 2004). Methods produce understandings of the world, as well as absencing other possibilities; conventional methods, such as the semi-structured interview, centralise people and their accounts and as such can make things absent. If you ask questions that centre people's experiences, opinions and meanings then the ways in which objects play a critical part in how people experience their worlds may be made absent. While some new

methods for thinking about the material are needed, existing methods can also be rethought and adapted (for example, see [Chapter 3](#) on object interviews).

Methods do not just access what you are trying to understand but also enact the world; Law and Urry (2004; see also Law, 2004) in their discussion of the methods-assemblage outline how the methods you use help to create particular realities. The sense in which methods are performative is also mirrored in other discussions (such as Barad where methods are part of the configurations of what you are researching). Law and Urry suggest that methods (2004) create the substantive fields you are looking at. Methods are not just an afterthought that 'unlock' a social world of phenomenon but are also pivotal in producing the phenomena you are studying. The materiality of methods is a central part of this methods assemblage. In this book, I am not just acknowledging and reflecting upon how methods have effects but instead the materiality of methods is something that I am encouraging you to explicitly draw upon as a way to generate data.

Much as there are multiple material ontologies there are also multiple epistemologies. When you are thinking about your epistemology, you are thinking about what counts as knowledge about materials or things. Even within a broadly categorised theory such as new materialism, there are many theoretical differences and nuances. So, for example, I have used Bennet's version of assemblage theory (see Woodward and Greasley, 2015) in interpreting my research into wardrobes, but there are clear differences between how Bennet thinks about assemblages to how DeLanda or Deleuze do for example, whom many of these ideas derive from. It can be useful to think about the genealogy of a theory – that is how it has emerged in relationship to other theories – and seeing how it is categorised can help you understand it and its implications for empirical research more. However, getting too caught up in how theories are categorised and the often very subtle differences between theories within a particular category can cause you to lose sight of what really matters about that theory or what you are trying to do with it. I used Bennet's theory because when reading it I felt that it helped me to think analytically in a new way about my research into clothing. I also found her ideas around the vibrancy of

things was at the heart of what I was trying to do in my research into dormant things within the home.

It is also worth noting that you may engage with material methods and not identify your research as fitting within any of the theoretical categories outlined above. This is not only because it is not an exhaustive list, but also the categorisation of ideas into ‘theories’ or schools of thought often loses some of the nuances or subtleties of particular theories or ideas. The important thing to think about is to make sure that you critically engage with what your ontology is; that is, how you are understanding things and their place in the world. Some of this involves questioning and critically engaging with what your assumptions are about what objects are, whether they are objects at all, and what place they have in people’s lives.

It is important to reflect upon what place theory has within the process of developing your research topic. There are a number of different routes into how you think about and develop a research topic; there is often a presumption that you start with the theory which gives you your ontology – such as you read some Barad and go on to develop your epistemology and methods from this. However, this is only one route, and even in practice if you start from theory with an interest in how this helps us to understand the world, then you will often find yourself modifying this, shifting between ideas as you come to think about this in a substantive context. In my own research, which has predominantly been into different aspects of material culture, I have never started with ‘a theory’ but instead have often been struck by something in the world. This is informed by things I have read, but the selection of particular theories comes after, as a way to help me develop research questions, to think about what it is I am looking at. So, for example, when I did my research into women’s wardrobes, I was struck by the ways in which the literature on fashion reduced it to ‘fashion’ rather than as clothing, which seemed so far removed from my own observations and experiences of how people kept, wore and passed on clothing. As I started to hone the research project and thought about what I was looking at I drew on the theories of Miller (1987) and Gell (1998) to think about how I could see clothing as material culture. It was only after I had done the research that I started to

think about how Bennet’s theory of assemblages would be a useful route of analysis (2009).

Box 2.2: Some ways into a research topic: theory, methods and empirical observations

Some possible routes are indicated here that shows how theory, methods and your substantive areas might connect. When you read academic articles that include empirical research, academic convention determines that they are presented sequentially starting with the theory, the methods and then the empirical data that is subsequently analysed. This can give the impression that our research starts always with theory. Instead, I want to open up the possibilities of different routes into thinking about materials. The list below is not exhaustive and none are ‘better’ than the others:

1. theory – how you see the world (ontology) – develop empirical focus – develop methods – theory helps us analyse this.
2. substantive interest/notice something particular in the world – theory to develop your thinking or to frame what is interesting – honing substantive area – methods – analysis.
3. sense of what the world is – your ontology (often influenced by academic literature you have read) – theory to help you frame it – methods and substantive.
4. empirical field – ontology – theory (see discussion of Henare et al., 2007 below).

The routes outlined in [Box 2.2](#) are all intended as sequences (to show the ‘starting point’ in each different scenario) but are also by definition *iterative* as you will move back and forth between things you read, what you find out about your topic, as well as ideas around methods. The routes are, therefore, all simplifications as, in practice, you may spend a lot more time going back and forth between your example, your theoretical perspective and your data and your methods. In addition, as academics or students we have already read numerous theoretical and empirical studies, which

may implicitly frame how we see things. Methods and theory cannot be separated out from each other; the shift away from methods that centre human experiences towards recognising the human and non-human entanglements is both a methodological as well as theoretical shift (St Pierre, 2011; Fullagar, 2017). Hence, in this book, although this chapter outlines how to orient yourself to things, theoretical positions emerge in different ways in the ‘methods chapters’, as it is impossible to separate them out.

Your understanding of what things/objects are may also emerge from your research. This is explicitly formulated by Henare et al. (2007) who propose not having a predetermined idea of what artefacts/objects are before starting ethnographic fieldwork but instead understanding them based upon how they are conceptualised, used and talked about within particular contexts. Instead of taking the material world as universal (such as that trees are trees or houses are houses and so on) and that people have different interpretations and representations of these things within cultures, they suggest that your starting point for understanding what things are should be how things are understood, used and interacted with in a particular context. You should *take things as they are*. Empirical research does not come after theory but instead you can use it to think about the possibilities of and potential inadequacies of our pre-existing theories as well as how to define them. What you find in empirical research starts a dialogue with theory, where theories both help explain what is happening, as well as the data helping to modify of existing theories

Conclusion

This chapter has encouraged you to think about how you can orient yourselves to things. This involves thinking about what things are – whether you think of them as objects or things or entanglements of materials, or entities in relations. These are not just issues of terminology but also of ontology as they are central to how you understand things and how they are part of material and social relations. Although this chapter has introduced and drawn upon a number of theoretical debates, these theories are centrally concerned with, and useful for, how you understand and

approach the material in your research. It is concerned with:

- what you think things are;
- what effects you think they have;
- where things end;
- what your unit of analysis is.

These are key issues that you will need to bear in mind throughout the book and animate many of the discussions of specific material methods. In the rest of the book each chapter introduces a particular method (along with connected methods); whatever method you are interested in exploring more, you will need to think about how this would look depending upon how you define and understand things and what your analytical or theoretical angle is. Different theories or approaches do not always mean you follow certain methods as, for example, you could employ a method like ethnography or object interviews from a number of different perspectives. This chapter has sought to provoke you into thinking about what things are, what they could be and how you might approach them. These questions still animate the rest of the book as I introduce and develop specific material methods; these methods continue to open up the possibilities of how you can think about and approach the material world.

The material methods that I discuss in the following chapters are not just tools that you can employ once you know your perspective. Instead, the methods are part of the process of provocation – they provoke us as researchers to think differently about a particular phenomenon, as well as provoke different responses from participants. I do not want you to read this introduction and think that you have a definite idea of how you see the world – your version of a material-oriented ontology. Instead, the material methods I discuss are a key part of helping us to develop this. Methods are not secondary but instead are a way of allowing the material to be part of your understandings. The materiality of methods and the materiality of the world can cause you to think differently. Different theoretical perspectives can open up how you see things and the role they have in your lives – so too can methods.

3 Object interviews and elicitations

- *How do things provoke people to respond?*
- *What kind of knowledge do object interviews generate?*
- *How do the words people use help us to understand material relationships?*

The questions introduced in the [previous chapter](#), around *what objects are* and *what effects they can have*, animate the discussion in this chapter about the possibilities of object interviews as a method to get people to talk about things. How you understand what things are impacts upon how you carry out object interviews – as these questions about material ontology are also methodological, empirical and practical questions. Object interviews are a method that can both help us to understand materiality – and so may be helpful if your research question arises from, or centres upon, the entanglement of subject-object relations – and can also be used as a way to be creative with standard interview techniques.

At first glance, object interviews appear to be one of the most accessible methods for researchers looking to explore creative methods, as interviewing is a method already familiar to many researchers. However, researching *with* things means you still need to understand how different things can have effects in different ways. So, for example, if you are doing an interview on familial memory, then participants will respond differently to a photograph of their family, a bottle of their mother's perfume, or being asked a question about memory without reference to any objects. Doing an object interview means critically engaging with the materiality of particular things as well as how people and objects interact in material, sensorial and embodied ways.

This chapter will start by outlining what object interviews and object elicitations are to think through the commonalities as well as the subtle differences in focus and what this can afford. I will develop a way of thinking about object interviews as *encounters* as well as *spaces of connection*. It will then outline the connections

between what your theoretical approach is to how you ask empirical questions in an object interview. The chapter will move onto some of the practicalities of carrying out an object interview, starting with key questions to consider when planning an interview (such as what types of object you use or whether objects are discussed in context). The chapter will end with a section on useful techniques for carrying out the interviews. As a whole, the chapter aims to arm you with a critical awareness of researching with things (how you frame things, how to understand this as a material method), as well as techniques that may help you in carrying them out.

Object interviews and object elicitations: spaces of encounter and points of connection

In its most basic sense, an object interview is an interview that incorporates objects into the process of doing an interview. They might be self-selected by participants – a more common practice – or ones that you bring along yourself as the researcher (Sutton, 2011). Object interviews may explore things 'in context' where interviews may take place in people's homes looking at things in situ, in a museum touring the collections, or they may be in an 'interview context' where participants are asked to bring objects with them. The types of objects used may vary from being personal objects (that people own), belonging to other people they know, or owned by an institution. You may be asking people to respond to individual objects or whole sets of them depending upon the type of objects you are interested in, or what your research interests are.

Within the literature, you may find the terms object interview (Woodward, 2015a) or object elicitation (Iltanen and Topo, 2015; Bell, 2013) being used and find yourselves wondering what the difference is between the two. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, there are some subtle differences in what these terms evoke. One of these differences lies in an object interview being framed as *an interview* and the other framed as *an elicitation*. An object interview may be an interview that is adapted to incorporate objects (such as Woodward, 2001) or an

produced (Kvale, 1996) in the interchanges between the interviewer and interviewee, in a particular context (setting, timing). For object interviews, the object(s) that the interview centres on are an integral aspect of the interactions that constitute the interview. Rather than knowledge being produced inter-subjectively as assumed in the conventional semi-structured interview (see Nordstrom, 2013, for a critique), it is produced in the interchanges between interviewers, interviewees *and objects* in the interview setting.

Box 3.1: Example: things as active participants in interviews

In my research into dormant things (things people keep but are not using any more, Woodward, 2015b), I asked people to show me and talk me through things they are keeping but not using any more. The interviews were, therefore, led by the objects that people had as I asked them to tell me about them, and then if people were not forthcoming