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How to cite this publication (APA)

Please cite the final published version:

Aagaard, J., & Matthiesen, N. (2016). Methods of materiality: Participant observation and qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 13(1), 33-46.

DOI: [10.1080/14780887.2015.1090510](https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2015.1090510)

Publication metadata

Title:	Methods of materiality: Participant observation and qualitative research in psychology
Author(s):	Aagaard, Jesper & Matthiesen, Noomi
Journal:	Qualitative Research in Psychology
DOI/Link:	http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2015.1090510
Document version:	Accepted manuscript (post-print)

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Methods of Materiality: Participant Observation and Qualitative Research in Psychology

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This article challenges the hegemonic status of ‘language’ as the primary substance of qualitative research in psychology, be it through interviews or recordings of naturally occurring talk. It thereby questions the overt focus on analyzing linguistic meaning. Instead, it is suggested that researchers should start paying attention to the material world (consisting of both human bodies and material objects) and what it means for how people live their lives. It is argued that this can be achieved by incorporating the concept of material presence to capture embodied and material layers of existence, and the method of participant observation is suggested as a viable approach to achieve this end. An empirical example of how authority is produced in a parent-teacher conference, not only through language but also through material objects and embodied being, is presented. The article concludes by suggesting practical guidelines for incorporating attention to materiality in qualitative research.

Keywords: materiality; participant observation; presence

“People do not act in a vacuum. Not only do they do things with words, but also they do things with things”
(Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007:137)

The purpose of this article is to argue for a new agenda in qualitative research in psychology. Taking up the concepts of *materiality* and *presence*, we wish to introduce theoretical groundings, methodological implications, and a working example of a material approach to qualitative research. The article first sets up arguments for the importance of surpassing a limited focus on qualitative analysis of meaning embedded in and produced through language, and instead argues for a broader approach that incorporates materiality. This is done by critiquing the hegemonic status of linguistic meaning in qualitative research in psychology, and arguing for sensitivity towards material artifacts and human bodies through a notion of *material presence*. This is illustrated through an example of how incorporating materiality in an empirical analysis opens up for new (and richer) understandings of the way people live their lives in social practices and why they go about it as they do. Finally, the article presents methodological reflections on materially sensitive research and argues for the use of participant observation guided by a three-dimensional approach to describing and understanding psychological aspects of social worlds.

Qualitative psychologies: Studying meaning in conversations

Although we are both qualitative educational psychological researchers and always identify our respective research projects as ‘qualitative’, we hold certain reservations to mainstream definitions of this methodological approach. Qualitative inquiry is traditionally understood as concerned with human attributions of meaning. In the influential *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2011), Denzin and Lincoln provide an inclusive definition of qualitative research arguing that qualitative researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the *meanings people bring to them*” (p. 3, emphasis added). Willig (2013) likewise asserts that qualitative psychological researchers rarely work with predetermined variables, because “qualitative researchers tend to be interested in the *meanings attributed to events by research participants themselves*” (p. 8, emphasis added). At first sight, many researchers may agree to these generic definitions. That qualitative research should devote itself to the study of meaning seems both innocuous and self-evident, and this qualitative concern for meaning is often juxtaposed with a quantitative search for causality. Geertz (1973), for instance, contrasts what he calls an “interpretive science in search of meaning” with an “experimental science in search of laws” (p. 5). Similarly, Brinkmann (2012) provides a clear table of differences that are traditionally assumed to distinguish qualitative from quantitative inquiry.

	Qualitative inquiry	Quantitative inquiry
<i>Subject matter</i>	Relations of meaning	Causally related entities
<i>Purpose</i>	Understanding actions and events	Uncovering causal relations
<i>Ontology</i>	Performances that are done	Things that happen
<i>Methods</i>	Interpreting human actions, practices and cultural productions	Establishing correlations between variables
<i>Materials</i>	Texts	Numbers

This overt focus on meaning is closely associated with the so-called crisis in social psychology of the 1970s in which psychologists became fascinated with the performative role of language (Burr, 2003). Under the sway of a linguistic turn in postmodern philosophy, psychologists claimed that language does not merely represent (or ‘mirror’) the world, but pragmatically affects it and often even creates new possibilities for action. Many schools of psychology thus asserted that whatever they analyzed or dealt with were social constructions of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In the guise of discursive psychology, social constructionism, deconstructionism, and conversation analysis, much psychology accordingly went from a focus on inner, individual factors such as personality traits and attitudes to social relations and discourse. Qualitative psychologists began to pay close attention to language, narratives, dialogue, negotiation, and conversational positioning. This theoretical reconstruction of the psychological world located the psyche in social relationships. As Kenneth Gergen (1997) concisely explains it: “All that psychology traces to mental origins, constructionists might wish to explain through microsocial processes” (p. 724). Psychology, which

translated from Greek means ‘study of the soul’, thus became a study of “persons in conversation” (Harré, 1983:58). In the following, we will argue that although these aspects are crucial to an understanding of social life, a unilateral focus on linguistic meaning may neglect key aspects of our everyday lives (see also Brinkmann, 2014). Instead of rejecting language and meaning in any way, however, we argue for the need to supplement analyses of these phenomena with an attention to the concepts of *materiality* and *presence*.

Qualitative epistemologies: Including material presence

In an article on the recent advances in positioning theory, Rom Harré and co-authors (2009) unambiguously state that,

“The fundamental insight on which positioning theory and other alternative psychologies are based is the principle that psychology must be primarily the study of meanings. This principle can be taken further. The relations between material bearers of meanings are determined by those meanings, not by any material properties of the bearers as such” (p. 7).

According to this approach, artifacts do not count for anything substantial, but are viewed as projection screens for socially constructed meanings. Material artifacts are neutral “bearers of meanings”, symbols of underlying social mechanisms. Bruno Latour (2005), however, rejects such social scientific glorification of meaning at the expense of *materiality*: If meaning is simply projected onto a fashion detail such as fabric (“silk is highbrow, nylon is lowbrow”), then any talk of the materiality of the fabric becomes redundant. Even without the chemical differences between silk and nylon, the distinction would still exist. If we recognize and acknowledge materiality, however, we might imagine that without the nuances between the feel, touch, color, and sparkling of silk and nylon, *this* particular social meaning might not exist. According to this perspective, material artifacts have certain properties that lend themselves to the creation of specific meanings. Accordingly, meanings are not produced exclusively through social interaction and interpretation as Harré and colleagues argue, and it is unhelpful to regard material artifacts simply as neutral material intermediaries. Further elaborating this point, Latour uses the example of a speed bump on a university campus passage: Slowing down for a speed bump does not occur because of a driver’s willingness to obey the law, but because the material artifact translates the driver’s goal from “slow down so as not to endanger students” to “slow down in order to protect your car’s suspension”. While a traffic sign makes people slow down because of the meaning it signifies, a speed bump makes people slow down because of its material presence on the road.

Similarly, German literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004) argues that the metaphysical aim of much social science [‘metaphysical’ here construed as a movement beyond (*meta*-) materiality (*physics*) to a deeper layer of meaning] misses an important non-semantic dimension of existence and uses the term *presence* to indicate this palpable layer of our bodily and material experience. The Latin word *prae-esse* literally means ‘to be in front of’ and something that is present acts on human bodies and their ways of being in the world in a tangible way. This is a point worth emphasizing.

We are material beings, and presence and embodiment are two sides of the same proverbial coin. Gumbrecht wants to reaffirm bodily substantiality and the spatial dimensions of human existence and denounces the deconstructionist tendency to label people as naïve substantialists if they discuss material presence. Gumbrecht's point, however, is importantly neither anti-hermeneutical nor against interpretation. He simply seeks to challenge the hegemonic "enthronement" of interpretation as the exclusive core practice of social science. Instead, he advocates for an oscillation between meaning and presence. We find this argument very compelling and avidly concur with Gumbrecht's emphasis on embodiment and presence. In our perspective, analyzing psychological phenomena solely in terms of linguistic meaning is akin to analyzing songs solely in terms of their lyrics – intangible and incomplete.

In this brief exposition, we have deliberately downplayed the differences between Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) and the Heideggerian ontology functioning as backdrop to Gumbrecht's concerns. Notably, the flat ontology of ANT entails that human and nonhuman entities should be studied symmetrically, while phenomenologists might be less inclined to fully accept such radical symmetry. Attempting to outline these intricacies or to reconcile these two perspectives, however, is beyond the scope of this article (for an illuminative discussion on the commensurability of the two approaches, see Rosenberger, 2014). We simply wish to make the very pragmatic point that the concept of 'material presence' points to a dimension of existence that ordinarily escapes our analytical craftsmanship. A strict bifurcation of science into interpretive and causal approaches, *Verstehen* and *Erklären*, tends to overlook this vital component of human comportment, cf. the quote "There is nothing in the universe except meanings and molecules" (Harré & Moghaddam, 2012:2). In other words, we are trying to identify and claim a 'third space' between the textual realm of language and meaning on the one hand, and the mechanical, law-governed nature of Galilean science on the other. To be clear, we are not trying to throw out the qualitative baby with the bathwater and this 'third space' is decidedly not some sort of demilitarized zone between interpretive and causal approaches. We explicitly situate material presence within the realm of qualitative inquiry. Echoing Gumbrecht's concerns, our argument is not *against* interpretation, but *for* an oscillation between linguistic meaning and material presence.

Qualitative ontologies: Other treatments of materiality

In recent years, critical realism has also taken up the debate on materiality, acknowledging the importance of recognizing materiality in psychological analysis. This approach argues that, while language constructs our social reality, there is a material dimension to life that is 'non-discursive' or independent of our understanding of it (Sims-Schouten, Riley & Willig, 2007). The argument in this perspective is that this so-called real ('non-discursive') material world has a stable ontological status that lies outside the realm of the socially constructed (the 'discursive'). This kind of critical realism moves away from textuality, meaning, and deconstructionism to grasp the real as the hard, external ground of analysis. We, however, have two issues with this conceptualization of materiality.

Firstly, we do not conceive the material as being separate from the social world, having some sort of independent status from which it can work upon the social. Without committing to any specific ontology, we believe that meaning and materiality are deeply intertwined. Let us revisit Latour's speed bump: If, instead of a car driving over the speed bump, we envision a kid riding a BMX bike, it is easy to imagine the speed bump becoming a ramp that tempts the kid to ride faster to do a daring jump. Although the physical properties of the speed bump do not change, the situation does, and the material presence of the speed bump now invites a very different kind of participation. Accordingly, the speed bump does not hold an essential, stable reality as critical realists argue, but is inherently "multistable" (Rosenberger, 2014). Material artifacts are thus situationally embedded and emerge as particular artifacts in human interactions whilst at the same time inviting particular ways of participating.

Secondly, when critical realists speak of the material dimension of our lives, they tend to speak of either biochemical or economic and social structures (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007). When discussing material conditions, for instance, they speak of the influence of "unemployment, low income and impoverished education" on paranoia (Cromby & Harper, 2009:338) or they mention the effect of "current government policy towards childcare provisions" on motherhood (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007:103). These macrosocial factors are treated as real or non-discursive as opposed to the discursive resources and practices that are available for human sense-making. The problem with such an approach to materiality is that it reifies and takes discursively or rhetorically constructed 'hard realities' (e.g., money, the economy, policy, or corporations) for granted, which means that it fails to recognize their status as historically situated discursive regimes. (Packer & Wiley, 2012). Hence, critical realism reproduces a dualist ontology in which the move towards materiality is a corrective that works by going back to e.g., the physical or economic foundations of the real world. This is emphatically not the kind of materiality we are trying to get at. Our concept refers neither to the scientific materialism of natural science (e.g., physiological, biological, or neurological causal models) nor to the distribution of material wealth through economic structures.

Instead, material presence is linked to the microanalysis of bodies, spaces, and artifacts. This is in addition, not in opposition to the linguistic focus of discourse analysis. We believe this remains true to the spirit of discursive research as spearheaded by Michel Foucault. In fact, Hook (2001) argues that the concept of 'discourse' as used in most qualitative research today bears little resemblance to the concept as it was used by Foucault. Based on a close reading of Foucault, Hook argues that Foucault was acutely aware of the materiality of power relations. As Foucault (1980) warned us, "nothing is more material, physical, corporal than the exercise of power" (p. 57f). This is a warning against *pan-textualism*, the claim that everything can be analyzed as text. Furthermore, Hook (2001) argues, merely adding 'con-texts' (e.g., political, cultural, historical) to one's study of 'text' does not suffice. "Power", he claims, "cannot be fixed, or apprehended in the meanings and significations of texts, but must be grasped and traced through the analysis of tactical and material relations of force" (p. 530). In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), for instance, Foucault patiently and thoroughly maps power's various investments in the body. "Here, each facet of discursive commentary is led and substantiated by the minutiae of various corporeal rituals of bodily discipline, which, in their

impact, would seem clearly irreducible to an exclusively textual focus” (p. 532). Ultimately, the material arrangements of power enable certain speaking rights and privileges, just as they lend material substantiation to what is spoken. Without reference to such materiality, discourse analysis is reduced to a play of semantics, “a decontextualized set of hermeneutic interpretations that can all too easily be dismissed” (p. 542). By joining this discussion, we hope to add analytical thoroughness to qualitative research in psychology (see also Di Masso and Dixon’s (2015) recent call in this journal for an approach that moves beyond the futile binary of discursive practices and ‘real’ features of the physical world). We now turn to a brief empirical example to illustrate the analytical repercussions of our argument.

An empirical example: Studying authority

In a recent anthology, Pace and Hemmings (2006) argue that classroom authority is negotiated through symbolic interactions between teachers and students. These microsocial processes consist of local contextual dynamics shaped by larger sociocultural factors such as race and class. In other words, authority is to be understood as a socially constructed phenomenon. Closely connected with this perspective, Mehan (1996) argues that ways of speaking that draw on discourses of expert knowledge hold more power than ways of speaking that draw on everyday knowledge. Based on a study of teachers, parents, psychologists, and members of the administrative committee in meetings called after a child has been referred to a school psychologist, Mehan shows how the school psychologist is actively positioned as ‘the expert’ through linguistic interactions. This position provides the voice of the psychologist with more authority than those of both teachers and parents whose knowledge is of a more everyday observational nature. Ultimately, teachers and parents are rendered silent. Authority is revealed as socially constructed through microsocial processes. This approach to authority plays a significant role in the current literature on the relationship between parents and teachers in home-school partnerships (e.g., Lareau & Horvat, 1999). While this strictly linguistic approach is fruitful, we argue that it simultaneously neglects certain aspects of actual dynamics occurring in practice. This point will be illustrated by an example taken from the second author’s investigation of parent-teacher conferences with Somali diaspora parents in Danish public schools. In this study it became abundantly clear that, in addition to verbal interactions and historically constructed positions, authority was actively produced and sustained through material presence.

The study was an explorative ethnographic investigation of the way in which Somali diaspora parents and teachers in Danish public schools participate in home-school collaboration in general and parent-teacher conferences in particular, focusing on both their respective experiences of this collaboration and the conditions for participating. The families were followed for 18 months. Participant observation was conducted in their homes, in the afterschool programs that their children attended, in the classrooms, in school staff rooms, and at parents’ nights. Teachers, parents, and school principals were interviewed and parent-teacher conferences were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with notes including drawings of the set-up of the room. A total of nine parent-teacher conferences with Somali diaspora parents and 11 with ethnic Danish parents were

recorded. The analysis drew on positioning theory, which was introduced as a dynamic and immanent alternative to the static and overarching concept of 'role' found in social psychology (Davies & Harré, 1991). However, research drawing on positioning theory tends to favor verbal negotiations of positions and does not incorporate the embodied and material aspects of positioning (Matthiesen, 2015a). The following situation is an excerpt from field notes taken at the beginning of a parent-teacher conference:

Field notes, 10.10.2012

It is twenty minutes past three in the afternoon. A Somali diaspora father, Ibrahim, and his nine-year-old daughter, Rahma, enter the third grade classroom and shake hands with the teachers, Kate and Andreas. Ibrahim sits down on a third grader chair at a small desk with his hands in the lap and his knees knocking against the desk. His daughter sits next to him. The two teachers are positioned on the other side of the desk on two office chairs. In front of the teachers are several piles of paper. There is coffee and water and a bowl of candy on the table. They have 20 minutes to discuss Rahma's educational progress.

First of all, notice how the presence of coffee, water, and candy contributes to creating a homely atmosphere similar to that of a living room. Then ask yourself, "Who can be said to live here"? This is the home of the teachers, and as the parents and pupils enter the room, they are greeted as guests. Even before anyone utters a single word, the teachers have been positioned as the hosts of the conference by virtue of the location of the meeting, i.e. the classroom. Secondly, whereas the teachers sit on adult-sized office chairs with cushy pillows, the father sits on a tiny chair designed for young children. This prompts a rather peculiar alignment of bodies. This borderline comical scenario is later pointed out to the teachers, who explain that because of the duration of the meetings and the number of parents attending they have to sit comfortably throughout the sessions and that, unfortunately, this section of the school only has a limited number of adult-sized chairs. Finally, the papers, notebooks, and prepared list of topics for discussion in front of the teachers enact the teachers as people of authority who have important knowledge worth conveying. Parents and pupils, on the other hand, tend to enter the parent-teacher conferences less prepared and sit somewhat passively at the receiving end of the interaction.

In this example, the materiality of the classroom obviously affects the possibilities of participating in the interaction. Teachers are actively positioned in an asymmetrical role of authority compared to the parents through interactions that are thoroughly mediated by material artifacts. This is notably not something teachers do consciously: The position as host is inscribed into the very structure of parent-teacher conferences, the explanation regarding chairs seems wholly valid, and if teachers omitted an agenda it would most likely be considered a lapse of professionalism. Material presence is not to be understood instrumentally ('object X is used by person Y to accomplish Z'). It is not even something that is easily put into words. It is simply recognized by the actors involved in the situation. The father immediately sees that it would be impolite to take charge of the conversation, as this would undermine the authority of the 'hosts', i.e. the teachers. One could, of course, argue that the chairs function merely as symbols of a pre-existing hierarchical relationship. And it is true

that the materiality of the classroom does not produce this hierarchical relationship *ex nihilo*. In fact, linguistic analyses of parent-teacher conferences showed that much of the positioning work did in fact occur through conversational dynamics (Matthiesen, 2015b). Also, equally sized chairs would not have magically dissipated the asymmetrical hierarchy. However, positioning does not occur only through symbolic meaning: The large body of the father uncomfortably shifting place on the small chair, hands placed politely in his lap because he has nowhere else to put them and no notes or agendas with which to fiddle, contribute to an embodied experience of awkwardness and subservience that is enhanced, but not exclusively produced, by symbolic meaning. Any time a person is ‘positioned’, this is also quite literally a material process (e.g., being positioned on a child’s chair). In our example, this positioning is both awkward and uncomfortable at a rudimentary bodily level. So yes, the example is symbolic, but it is also material. Like Bourdieu’s (1979) Kabyle house, the classroom not only symbolizes the social order, it enacts that order and prefigures the action of the people inhabiting the classroom (Kalthoff & Roehl, 2011). By broadening our vision to include material presence, we see that *not only* is the authority of teachers produced through historical, structural and interactional processes, it is *also* produced through bodies, spaces, and artifacts (see also Benjaminsen & Sørensen, 2011). In the following section, we investigate what this insight means for qualitative researchers who wish to include a focus on material presence.

Qualitative methodologies: Including participant observation

As previously argued, the current focus on linguistic and verbal aspects of social life may be seen in relation to the linguistic turn in social sciences (Burr, 2003). For instance, Harré and colleagues (2009) argue that life “unfolds as a narrative, with multiple, contemporaneous interlinking story-lines...” (p. 8). And narratives do indeed play significant roles in our lives, not only in here-and-now dialogues as positioning theory points out (Davies & Harré, 1991), but also in allowing us to establish somewhat coherent identities (McAdams, 1993). But a lived life is constituted by much more than dialogues and narratives. As Charles Taylor (1995) argues, much of our involvement with the world “flows from an understanding that is largely inarticulate” (p. 170). We brush our teeth, check our phones, drive our cars, and do our shopping in mundane pre-cognizant ways that may never make it into narrative forms. Yet these everyday practices and ways of being in the world help constitute the lives people lead. They are indeed central to understanding why we say and do things in certain ways. Unfortunately, methodological attention to the materiality of social practice still remains scarce (Jefferson & Huniche, 2009). A focus on linguistic meaning has limited qualitative psychology to mostly using interview research as the primary source of knowledge (Højholt & Kousholt, 2014). Doing qualitative psychological research, in other words, has become synonymous with “collecting data in the form of naturalistic verbal reports” (Smith, 2008:2). But interviews favor verbal interactions and thus do not necessarily take into account how people bodily and perhaps silently engage and participate in concrete social and material situations. The qualitative interview privileges the voices of human actors, but things remain mute. As Estrid Sørensen (2013) puts it, “Materiality shares its silent existence with the body” (p. 122). This means we may have to ‘get to’ things through other approaches. Achieving greater sensitivity to material presence entails certain methodological consequences for qualitative psychology.

With these limitations in mind, we suggest that engaging solely in interview research entails the risk of becoming an anthropocentric research approach that fails to capture our everyday intertwinement with material artifacts. Only by including material presence in their analyses can qualitative psychologists overcome such “humanist bias” (Roehl, 2012a). Our own strategy of circumventing humanist bias is a methodological analogue to the oscillation between meaning and presence, namely oscillating between interviews and participant observation. The method of interviewing draws on the empirical fabric of language and often applies the analytical concept of ‘meaning’. The method of participant observation, on the other hand, allows for consideration of the empirical fabric of materiality (plus embodiment) and applies the analytical concept of ‘presence’. In other words, we have to have an *ear for meaning* and an *eye for materiality*.¹ All this is not to deny that one can probe at material presence through qualitative interviews. Indeed, the first author has tried to do exactly that (Aagaard, 2015). But in analyses of unfolding sociomaterial situations, participant observation becomes an imperative supplement to the “naturalistic verbal reports” of speaking subjects.

But when can we say that someone is doing participant observation? As Wittgenstein (2009) put it, “Roughly, when he puts himself in a favourable position to receive certain impressions, in order (for example) to describe what they apprise him of” (p. 196). Getting in touch with the material presence of the world requires us as researchers to be *there* with our bodies in a direct and spatial relationship to what we are trying to study (Brinkmann, 2014). We have to get out into the practices we study and situate ourselves amongst the people, discourses, and things. This, of course, also entails reflexively considering one’s own material positioning as a researcher. Here we follow Haraway (1988) in accentuating the embodied nature of all vision and the situatedness of scientific knowledge. As Højholt and Kousholt (2014) argue, “A position by the blackboard gives a different angle and perspective on what is happening in the classroom than a position beside the children” (p. 326). But apart from finger-wagging and exhortations, what can we offer the curious researcher? In the next section, we outline three concrete and down-to-earth guidelines to help researchers study material presence.

Practical guidelines for qualitative researchers

While interviews are mainly about talking and listening to people, participant observation involves watching, sensing, feeling, and being present with people and things. Doing so makes it possible to analyze how humans cope with materials, contrary to how they make sense of materials – or how they make sense of themselves with the help of materials (Sørensen, 2009). This move means expanding the qualitative scope to include artifacts like tables, chairs, cars, and computers. But how are we to accomplish this analytical shift? How do we cultivate such sensitivity? Before answering this question, we emphasize that the concept of ‘material presence’ is merely a *sensitizing concept*

¹ An anonymous reviewer astutely noted the ocularcentrism of the latter metaphor, and perhaps a *feel for materiality* would be a more incisive expression, but we find the alliterative juxtaposition of ear and eye quite fetching. In any case, the latter metaphor is meant to include all other senses.

designed to orientate researchers toward relevant aspects of reality (Blumer, 1969). As such, the concept does not provide fixed rules and procedures, but solely suggests “directions along which to look” (ibid.:148). We will, however, try to outline three tentative guidelines: 1) Use posthumanist analytical strategies, 2) study material presence in terms of agency/structure, and 3) draw situational maps.

Firstly, Tobias Roehl (2012a) lucidly combines social constructionist insights with concepts from ANT and phenomenology to propose three analytical strategies for the study of materiality:

a) *Symmetry*: Closely associated with ANT, the point of this strategy is to emphasize the material agency of artifacts in our everyday practices. As Roehl puts, it, “One has to suppress his or her humanist assumption that human beings act and material objects are simply used” (p. 114). Ask the question: How does this object act upon the human being? In the abovementioned example from the parent-teacher conference, the small chair acted upon the father by instilling awkwardness and a sense of discomfort in him. If we treat artifacts as actors that do something, we can make their contributions to social practice visible. Whether this strategy is an ontological stance or an analytic heuristic is left open to the researcher.

b) *Emergence*: For proponents of the social construction of technology (SCOT), human actors are actively engaged in attributing meaning to technological artifacts. Artifacts are thus subject to ‘interpretative flexibility’, i.e., their meaning is not yet fixed. The strategy of emergence explores the ways in which human actors interpret and appropriate artifacts. As is evident in this description, the strategy is closely associated with the classic idea of meaning-attribution in qualitative research. As such, we will leave it at that.

c) *The ‘broken hammer’*: According to a Heideggerian account of tools, material artifacts ordinarily reside in the background of our practices and not at the center of our attention. In other words, equipment becomes transparent in use. Whenever we experience a breakdown, however, this disruption lights up the normal functioning of things and breakdowns may therefore be considered a fruitful opportunity to reflexively consider the normal role of artifacts in everyday practice. In everyday practice, chairs are mostly invisible to us, because they do not seem to hold any significance for social life. Third-grade children sit on their third-grade chairs. Teachers sit on their office chairs. No one notices this, because chairs function as everyday tools that fade away into the background of our practices. When one places an adult man in a third-grade chair, however, the chair suddenly sticks out in its conspicuousness.

Taken together, these strategies help us pose important new questions about our bodily engagement with things and how this entanglement mediates our actions and perceptions.

Secondly, it is helpful to study material presence with an eye for the age-old schism of agency and structure, which in this respect may be conceptualized as the distinction between *body one* and *body two* (Ihde, 2002) or, with a more eloquent phrase, between *incorporation* and *inscription* (Hayles, 1999). Body one is the Merleau-Pontyan body that corresponds to our agentive, motile, perceptual being in the world. When examining the lived body, the ‘*corps vécu*’, a researcher might ask how we human beings actively incorporate material artifacts into our embodiment. Aiming specifically at the educational aspects of such incorporation, Roehl (2012b) provides a list of interesting

inquiries: “How are students engaged by different material objects in the classroom? What is amplified in these different media, what is subject to reduction? In what ways does an object invite some forms of engagement with it, how does it inhibit other forms?” Body two is the Foucauldian social and cultural body. Although obviously inseparable from body one, this is the materially and semiotically positioned body. In this type of decentered analysis of embodiment and material presence, we might ask how certain bodies are inscribed in relations of power. Again, Roehl (2012b) provides a list of questions for educational researchers: “How are students performed by material objects? What kind of student subject emerges in the engagement with the material object? How are students bodily affected? What kind of school lesson emerges? How is classroom discourse transformed via the object?” It was this latter type of analysis that was exemplified through a description of authority at a parent-teacher conference.

An excellent example of a materially sensitive analysis in which both inscription and incorporation are considered is Hallam, Lee, and Das Gupta’s (2014) study of art classes in two Staffordshire primary schools. The authors carefully describe how primary school children and their teachers rearrange desks and remove their chairs during an art project so that instead of being seated in rows, the children now form small ‘artistic communities’ around tables that have been pushed together. This spatial positioning of bodies and tables means the students’ individual artworks can be seen and commented upon by other children. The artistic process becomes ‘public’, so to speak. As such, materiality is an integral part of the creative process by shaping the way the students and teachers interact. Conversely, what is ‘privacy’ without walls, doors, and locks? Of course, there is a major element of social negotiation to publicity and privacy, like any teenager trying to discipline her parents to knock before entering her room will tell you. The point is that, in addition to this social dimension, psychological processes are always materially mediated. Hallam and colleagues (2014) focus explicitly on material constraints or what we have called inscription, but they also provide a splendid example of incorporation by describing how the teacher tries to teach the children to use charcoal to sketch. This is a process of skillfully trying to integrate the charcoal as part of one’s artistic body. And, indeed, what is creativity without tools? As Tanggaard (2013) argues, “creativity exists in the dialectical relation between individuals and materials” (p. 24).

Finally, we encourage researchers to draw *situational maps* portraying major human, nonhuman, discursive and other elements that influence a particular research situation (Clarke, 2005). One must try to describe the situation: Where does the situation unfold? What does the room look like? Who are present? What do they do? Which props do they use? How does that influence the human participation? Who and what matters in this situation? What elements make a difference? Which actions are made possible by an artifact present? Which ones are hindered? How do artifacts change our experience, and thus our relation to the world? A material artifact necessary to engage in this type of practice is obviously a notebook in which to write down observations, but also to draw sketches of the situation. Alternatively, the researcher could take pictures of the elements with her smartphone or a pocket camera. Situational maps and/or pictures serve a threefold purpose: First, they provide an overview that helps you examine your situation of inquiry thoroughly. Secondly, they become important mnemonic devices: Just like a voice recording may help you remember a past conversation, situational maps and pictures will help you remember spaces (and their artifacts).

Thirdly, situational maps and pictures provide the reader of an article with nice visualizations of unfolding sociomaterial processes (for an excellent example, see Benjaminsen & Sørensen, 2011). In conclusion, the basic principle underlying all our practical suggestions for researchers aiming to include material presence in their analyses of psychological aspects of being in the world is the following: Think three-dimensionally.

Conclusion

In our field of educational psychology, it is important to understand that classrooms are not only places of communication, but material worlds consisting of human bodies, chairs, desks, blackboards, laptops, notebooks, bags, windows, walls, doors, etc. This insight applies to all qualitative psychological research that is interested in the lived reality of our everyday lives. However, this fundamental intertwinement of human bodies and material artifacts is often neglected in psychological accounts. Acclaimed author Haruki Murakami has given the following advice to young writers, which psychologists and other social scientists may also heed: “Every time you write, ask yourself: Could this scene take place in a hot-air balloon? If the answer is yes, then it probably should”. The point, as we see it, is that we have to consider the material surroundings in which human existence is inextricably embedded. Taking these circumstances seriously means analyzing the role of material artifacts in social practice. We have therefore argued for the importance of incorporating the concept of ‘material presence’ into analyses to ensure thorough and vigilant descriptions that encompass the complexities, dynamics, embodied susceptibilities, social interactions, historically produced norms and meanings, vacillating and changing realities. and yet tangible, anchored tenaciousness of social life. While this may indeed be an argument for mixed methods, it is a decidedly qualitative variant of such epistemological strategy that entails the use of both interviews and participant observation.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper that have helped improve the manuscript.

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