#### MATERIAL OBJECTS, MEANING AND WORKPLACE IDENTITY

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the impact of material objects on people's identity at work. I address the significance of this question, arguing that materiality, particularly the place it holds in the lives of individuals, has been less considered in relation to people at work than in other disciplines such as consumer studies. My research questions are: to consider how people conceptualise objects at work, to ask how objects and people are mutually implicated at work and to identify how this interactivity impacts on people's identity at work.

I review studies on material objects in organizations and studies on identity, using literature from organization studies and psychology.

My data collection uses a qualitative approach based on participant-led photography. The literature review had raised the issue of many studies focusing on people at the same level in an organization. In order to develop this work, the participant group were selected from multiple organizations and different levels of employment. Participants were asked to photograph all objects in their immediate working spaces which had meaning for them. They were then asked about the meaning of the objects and completed a repertory grid analysis exercise.

The thesis' contributions consist in a specific focus on the place of materiality in identity in organizations for a wide range of workers. It draws on psychology in its use of mixed methods. It develops previous work in offering a view of materiality in practice as both representational and performative, affording practices and meeting areas of lack. It indicates that objects act as a collection through their connection to personal values which otherwise have no means of expression in the social and legal ordering of the workplace.

It is recommended that organizations take cognizance of, and respect, the place which things seen as personal objects play at work.

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## Introduction

The contribution of this chapter to the thesis is to outline the need for investigation of the place of objects at work, and specifically the need to investigate how objects contribute to people's understanding of themselves at work. I argue that while materiality has been of significance in other disciplines it has been less fully studied in the workplace. Materiality is important empirically because we work in physical environments where we interact with objects on a daily basis, and use them as a resource. It is important conceptually and theoretically because understanding how materiality achieves its effects on us illuminates how we respond to the social and contractual nature of the workplace. It is important methodologically because examining the interface of human and non-human materiality is a difficult task, when one has voice and the other does not.

I then outline my research questions and summarise the thesis.

### Prelude

First, a story. This thesis has its roots in a number of observations. I have never been able to settle to work or to relax in a room where I did not feel that the décor reflected something of me, mostly expressed through colour, or arrangement of furniture, but also through what artefacts are present or absent. I have shared this observation with many others, who expressed similar reactions. Much more proximally important however, was an incident at work, where I was a university lecturer. The university had, at my request, done some publicity shots for a leaflet about a course I was then running. We used one photograph in the leaflet and I thought no more about it until suddenly, without my permission, this picture featuring me – prominently! – was used both on a banner displayed at postgraduate fairs, and, even more alarmingly, was framed and on the wall in my building not far from my office. I was not enamoured of the politics at my university then, hated the 'corporate' pictures on the walls and was suddenly part of that corporate image. Many of my colleagues understood how I felt violated, but it proved impossible to explain my fury to my head of department. At the same time a colleague who worked with children, and who had a large toy parrot prominently in his room, was requested to remove it as unsuitable décor.

I had already become professionally interested in the impact of material objects' contribution to powerful practices and had published a paper on the effect of objects and décor in organizational boardrooms (Betts 2006). I began to think how objects might also be powerful at a much more local and individual level. This tapped into my interests both as a psychologist and as someone with a conviction that organizations are power-drenched places in ways which we often do not see because we are so entangled in them physically, professionally and emotionally. What kept me going when the writing and thinking on such a diffuse subject felt both evanescent and enormous, sprang from this conviction: that materiality needs to be given its due in in our organizational lives. One of the joys of this thesis has been that whenever people, from strangers at airports to Diocesan architects to my orthopedic consultant, politely asked what my doctorate was about, (with an only just hidden expectation of being either bored or baffled), they began to become very animated about their organizations. I could have had far more participants than I wanted, and was shown places where I would never have dreamed of being invited.

#### 0.1 Why materiality is important now

Materiality has long been a concern of anthropology, but in the last twenty years there has been a significant increase in interest in the material/social interface across a much wider range of disciplines. This is apparent in anthropology (Brown 2001; Ingold 2006, 2011; Dant 2006; Buchli 2002; Tilley 2006; Turkle 2011), in philosophy (Barad 2013; Bennett 2004; Taylor 1989), in consumption studies (Miller 2008, 2010), in geography (Massey 1994, 2005; Thrift 1999; Hetherington 1997), in gender studies (Tyler and Cohen 2010) and indeed in a field called material cultural studies (Tilley, Keane, Kuchler, Rowlands and Spyer 2006; Candlin and Guins 2009, *Journal of Material Culture*). Public consciousness and interest has also risen with, for example, the BBC's series on *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (MacGregor 2010) the recent (Autumn 2014) exhibition at the Victoria and Albert museum on *Disobedient Objects* and the 2015 exhibition of *Treasured Possessions* at the Fitzwilliam museum (Avery, Calarescu and Laven 2015).

This turn to the material has shifted the focus from one of a colonizing of objects by the human subject, to the way in which we are affected by the material in our relationships to others and to ourselves, at work, at home, and in our social relationships. Interest has moved from the presented, 'othered' (Parker 1997, 2000) object to the disputed way in which matter and meaning combine: how are our relationships with others and ourselves mediated through our relationship with the material world? In Pomian's (1990:6) phrase, 'it is an attempt to make visible the invisible social effects of objects and to rearticulate the subject-object divide'. How do we connect, define, resist, and find ourselves through objects? What is the connection between habitat and habitus?

Underlying this importance of materiality is a core question about the relationship between, at its bluntest, human and non-human materiality. While the thesis will examine theoretical

positions about this question as it progresses, there is a need at the outset to establish what kind of materiality I am interested in and how I am approaching it.

My interest is in material objects at work, that is, those things such as computers, telephones, ornaments, decorative pictures, and coffee mugs and the dynamic relationship which holds between these objects and the people who interact with them. The possible barriers, crosscutting fractures and imbrications of this divide/connection will be explored within the thesis. Briefly, fault lines fall between the idea of objects as representative of something, such as home, or friendship or resistance, through a semiotic understanding, as Harré (2002) proposes. Alternatively, they may be performative of interests in some way, as for example in ANT, or performative of organizational or individual practices and understandings as in many studies on space in organizations (Dale and Burrell 2008; Dale 2005) or hot-desking (Warren 2006; Elsbach 2003; Hirst 2011). They may be much more part of us than our Western ontology allows, as Ingold (2011) and Henare, Holbraad and Wastell (2007) suggest, being things we are enfolded in or live through or think with (Brown 2001; Turkle 2011). As Miller (2005, 2010) points out, the lines between 'objective' and 'subjective' can be drawn with greater or lesser persuasiveness in many places, or elided and ignored. Miller (2010) argues that people and 'stuff' are intricately linked: we are made up in a dialectical relationship by 'stuff' which can oppress as well as liberate and give control.

In the workplace such control through the environment is even more pronounced. How do people relate to materiality in a place of control? What is it, if anything, which we 'other' by 'objectifying' it and under what circumstances might we do this (Parker 2000)? Or how does materiality at work so partake of our lives as a humble unseen frame that we are intimately part of it, physically and psychologically, and even spiritually: materiality, in another pertinent point from Miller (2010), is there sometimes to make the immaterial immanent. In this thesis I adopt the idea that we are, on a day-to-day basis, unaware of the co-constitutive place of materiality

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at work, and seeks to explore just how the modest material objects which we can call 'meaningful' play a greater and more specific part in our lives at work than has been explored so far.

One of the purposes of this thesis is to explore how people perceive 'things' to be in relationship with them in the workplace, and how 'things' perform with other things and with people. In other words, how do the practices in which people and objects are enmeshed give each of them some agency and what is the nature of that agency? 'Subjects', that is, people, live with 'objects', that is, things which are not usually recognised as having the same kind of intentional agency as 'subjects', but what is the relationship between the two? This thesis adopts the position that objects and people are connected in a performative relationship: that as we live with them and they with us there arises a set of reflexive and even intuitive understandings that connect the practices and reactions which gather around the relationship. I recognise the entanglements of such socio-materiality (Jones 2013) and will examine in more detail in Chapter 1 the different positions adopted around this question.

A number of contextual factors contribute to the question of why materiality and its influence on the way we define and enact ourselves as people should be such a concern now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. One strand is undoubtedly about increased *individual* consumption, at least in developed nations. We have, and live among, a vast choice in material goods, and are increasingly defined by our consumption (Miller 1998, 2009, 2010; Du Gay, P., Hall, S., Janes, L., Madsen, A. K., Mackay, H. and Negus, K. 2013; Storey 1999; Turkle 2011). The things we choose to buy and to be attached to, form not just representations of ourselves but our very selves (Belk 1988; Schultz Kleine, Kleine and Allen 1995). Miller (2010), for example, says about homes:

...it is the dynamics of the home that is paramount, whether moving house, refurbishing a home, creating mess or merely moving stuff around. In each

case the persons are once again creating themselves through the medium of stuff. Miller (2010:99)

Turkle (2011) describes objects as emotional companions, *'we think with the objects we love'* (2011:5) and Paterson (2006:152) comments, *'...commodities help to articulate our sense of identity'*. This is not a modern phenomenon as Avery, Calarescu and Laven (2015:3) point out, in their examination of treasured possessions in early modern Europe:

The things in one's life... ...were customized to give them personal significance as their owners passed through different stages of the life cycle. Tiny objects could bear great emotional freight. Avery, Calarescu and Laven (2015:3)

Linked to this is a second strand in an increasing understanding of how materiality is reflected in *social* relationships and in how we are defined in our connections with others (Massey 2005; Turkle 2011). We connect with each other through the everyday things around us (Bourdieu 1997) and things are deeply embedded in our social life with their own life histories (Kopytoff 1986; Appadurai 1986; Hoskins 2006). Clothing, for instance, reflects a deep entanglement with sociality across many societies. The way a sari is worn in India has a huge social repertoire, and self-presentation through clothing in Trinidad is a significant part of relating to others (Miller 2010). Sullivan (2007) shows how blue jeans have morphed from workmen's clothing to being a cultural icon in the Western world, while in the workplace Nihalani, N. D., Kunwar, A., Staller, J., & Lamberti, J. S. (2006) illustrate the way in which dress is an important component of the relationship between psychiatrists and their patients.

Thirdly, objects help to locate us psychologically and physically and to give us a 'home'. Slotboom et al. (2011) identified the loss of possessions as significant in the poor rehabilitation of women prisoners, while Croatian migrants, in Povrzanovic Frykman's (2008) study used precious objects carried into exile to signal things about themselves: that they were good Croats and that they were family people. Being deprived of objects adds to punishment and loss, of self as well as home, and for prisoners this is part of their punishment. Objects act as resources for identity, as for example when older people move into care homes and have to select the objects which they will take with them (Lee, Woo and Mackenzie 2002). This connection to identity has not been considered in relation to work, another place where one can be told to leave all personal possessions behind and feel in 'exile'.

Morton (2007), in his study of the materiality of the house also suggests that memory and biography are key components in materiality's contribution to the self. Objects hold connections to our past, and such connections are complex, holding memories and dreams, pasts and potential futures. Hurdley (2006), examining primarily mantelshelf displays, writes of how '*private*' experiences of the self are manifested by means of display objects and domestic artefacts, emphasising the place of memory and time in connection with objects.

Narratives and objects inhabit the intersection of the personal and the social. Hurdley (2006:717)

One interesting point she makes is about a deliberate absence – for example, of photographs – as a means of individuation: *not* having stuff on show is also a way of saying something about yourself.

These indicative studies, to be filled out in the next chapter, posit that the way we relate to things is intricately and reflexively bound up with who we are and how we think of ourselves, not only showing our current view of ourselves but reflecting our histories and memories. Our possessions mark us out as people of a certain class, affiliation, and attitude, which we signal at home and in our social lives with considerable deliberation and often elan (Miller 2010; Turkle 2011). The presence, choice or lack of objects contributes to our understanding and valuing of ourselves at home and with our social circles. However many people also spend a great deal of time in another place, at work.

The fourth strand, then, is the centrality of materiality at work, and its contribution to how we signal and understand ourselves there through material objects. The need for further empirical investigation of this is underlined by how work is increasingly important in the amount of time it occupies (Knorr Cetina 1997; Dale and Burrell 2008). Knorr Cetina describes how, as relationships outside work become more fragile, and work hours extend, work increasingly becomes the place where we define ourselves. As at home, this defining is as much tied to the material, to the objects which surround us and which we choose to invest in by having them there, as to the work itself. 'Things' are what we 'live inside' (Knorr Cetina 1997) and what we think with (Dale and Burrell 2008). Materiality is not simply an add-on for organization studies, but, as for our lives at home, is something which is embedded in both discourse and practice. Humphries and Smith (2014) observe that objects, in a post-social research framework for organization studies, may be implicated as co-players at work through their materiality, their associated practices and the biography of the object. If the material dimension is significant in its impact on people at work, it is important to understand how it is influencing people, both for those who manage and those who are managed. This thesis makes a significant contribution in extending the work done on objects at home to those at work, addressing a similar relationship between material objects at work and an understanding of self in the workplace.

#### 0.2 Contextual studies of work, materiality and identity

This question, of how we are 'made up' by objects at work, is important **empirically** because over a working life we invest a great deal of time and energy, energy which is both physical and emotional, on being at work. We respond to work as more than just functionaries: Spicer and Fleming (2003), for example, speak of the 'cynical distance' which we are able to hold as people at work, reflecting on our own responses about who we think we 'are' at work. The specific link between materiality and identity has been a much less common focus of studies in organizations than life outside work. I will briefly indicate the range of studies which have been used to examine materiality at work and then highlight where this thesis differs from and builds on these studies to contribute a new understanding to the field.

A significant number of studies have examined not objects at work specifically but the space in which those objects sit. Although this thesis is not primarily concerned with objects and spaces at work, objects do sit in spaces. The link between objects and space is a complex one. Space is not a simple category. Space is in one way 'made up' by our being in it, by the practices which go on in it (Lefebrve 1974) and the understandings which accompany those practices. Massey (1994, 2005) writes of the way in which the concept of space is 'mobile' (Massey 2005). It is 'the everywhere of modern thought,' Craig and Thrift (2001). Importantly there is a contrast between space and place: as Tuan puts it, 'place is pause' (1977). Place is the single location within a wider complexity of space. Space may be our whole working environment while place is where particular things happen. In this thesis I am concerned with what happened in places which are personal, immediate to workers, because this is where the objects most closely reflect what objects may 'mean' to workers. As Dale and Burrell (2008) comment, space is discursive, material, social, and imaginary, and objects are part of this deeply social make up of space and place. Objects contribute to the making of place, to the way in which we choose to inhabit places and to understand them (Miller 2010). They are part of the imbricating inter-materiality of us and them located in space. We and they sit in a material envelope together. This concern with materiality and space is reflected too in Tyler and Cohen's (2010) study of women academics' marginalisation in their work spaces. Halford (2004), in a work-place study, moves beyond a simple sense of workspaces as places which are 'done to' people and 'received by' workers, to open them up as multiple, competing, dynamic constructions which are lived through and not in.

Brown et al. (2005) take a narrower focus specifically on territoriality in organizations, related to objects, which comes closer to the aim of this thesis:

Territoriality is not simply about expressing attachment to an object (e.g. I love my office); rather it is centrally concerned with establishing, communicating and maintaining one's relationship with that object relative to others in the social environment. Brown et al. (2005:579)

They emphasise the point made above, that objects and their impact are embedded in a social setting. They are concerned to see how people use objects as territorial defences, defences which may be difficult to establish, perhaps because of uneven power relationships (Tyler and Cohen 2010). They focus on place rather than space.

The important work of objects as relational containers, as places of attachment, is indicated by Suchman (2005) and by Knorr Cetina (1997). Suchman examines objects through their 'affiliative power', by which she means, 'the ways in which objects are not innocent but fraught with significance for the relationships they materialize' (2005:379). Objects are neither instrument nor commodity but reflect and materialize, in Knorr Cetina's (1997) phrase, an 'object-centered sociality'. In observing the process of the development of a photocopier, Suchman found it to be not only a strategic resource for the company but also to be set in a multitude of relationships linking subjects and objects. The object becomes a place of multiple affiliations, illustrating just how complex the place of something material in relationships can be.

For Knorr Cetina (1997), objects are continually-unfolding structures in their meanings, things that combine both presence and absence, and to which we not only should, but actually do, pay attention in a very close way. We are *'inserted in the object'* (Knorr Cetina 1997:13) in a way which includes our morality, in that they form part of the world to which we have to respond. These relationships are ones which contribute to an individual's identity, something central to this thesis. The studies of objects which connect most specifically to objects' implication in identity comes from explorations of hot-desking. Warren (2006) questioned people through their photographs about the way in which they related to hot-desking and linked decoration, spaces and meaning to explore '*material memories*' (Kwint, Breward and Ainsley 1999). She stresses that the memories which may be triggered by objects are hidden ones, caught up in networks of other memories and not meaningful except in the context of those memories, thus indicating, like Suchman (2005), that objects hold affiliative links to life outside work. Other studies of hotdesking (Elsbach 2003; Halford 2004; Hirst 2011) indicate that objects are able to provide distinction, make people miserable through their lack, afford resistance and offer relationships to spaces as well as people. Objects link to a wide swathe of people's experiential lives.

These studies take as their interest how hot-desking – the lack of a place to be – affects people, rather than starting from the place of identity, which is the focus of this thesis. They are concerned particularly with place, whereas this thesis addresses a wider understanding of the link between objects and identity. One paper which does do this, Tian and Belk (2005), examining *'extended'* objects in the workplace, suggests that objects connect us to other identities which are drawn into the workplace through objects, but does not examine any wider contribution which those objects might make, such as expressing something about the *'professional'* self at work, or how the objects might be achieving this effect.

This thesis seeks to examine, empirically and theoretically, how material objects in the workplace, that is, such things as work tools (e.g. computers) or decorative objects might be implicated, through a dynamic process, in the sustaining, defending and adjusting of a sense of self in the workplace. Do meaningful material 'things', which people interact with on daily basis, play any part in the '*identity work*' (Watson 2008) that enables employees to feel they are themselves in some way? How can people settle in the '*organizational landscape*' (Gagliardi 1996)? Dale and Burrell (2007), commenting specifically on organizational identities, point out

that identity is not simply a discourse but also an enactment, a relationship between materiality and the human players in that materiality. Parker (1997, 2000) indicates that an experience of organizational culture is a lived experience, and organization *'an unending process of contested classifications'* (Parker 1997:117). This empirical enactment is a key focus and contribution in this thesis, building on and extending these and other empirical studies on how we relate to the material dimension of the workplace.

Such enactments are part of our everyday existence, entangled in the 'job' we are employed to do. For example, mugs can be a potent symbol of relationship if they have a logo on them. In my own office we three who occupied it deliberately had mugs which had the 'old' symbol of the university on them as a silent and difficult-to-object-to protest at a new order. So, empirically, we need to be aware of the way in which materiality works to allow us to express and contain such things as resistance. The central question for this thesis is how materiality is part of the very stuff of our identity at work. It is important to understand this, in order to allow into the workplace a due respect for the controlling or influencing nature of materiality.

I am interested in what people find *for* themselves *of* themselves through objects at work and, building on other studies, to show how objects can be used for example to extend, hide, defend, and provide boundaries for us at work (Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz 2004; Warnier 2001; Tian and Belk 2005; Suchman 2005; Elsbach 2003). Further, the impact of materiality on how people experience themselves as individuals at work may be different to that experienced and explored in more domestic settings, where objects are accepted as sources of display about the self. In the workplace, objects are subordinate to the work itself and the significance of both tools and personal objects may take place more 'under the radar' than in our homes.

These questions are thus important empirically but they are also significant **theoretically**. Firstly as indicated above, some studies on objects in organizations have had *implications* for the study of identity, but have not addressed that with any systematic theoretical underpinnings. This

thesis makes an important contribution in addressing that lack. The specific topic of individual identity in organizations has more usually been addressed in theoretical terms. The major debate in organization studies, to be covered more fully in Chapter 3, lies in the question of whether people have, *pace* 'experience', a single core identity of any sort or whether we are, as people, made up of as many identities as we have roles, socially constructed through our experience applied to our present state (Harré 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Alvesson 2010; Beech 2008, 2011; Slay and Smith 2011; Parker 2000). This thesis seeks to build on such studies and to add to them formulations of identity from other disciplines such as psychology. The advantage of extending identity frameworks like this is to bring to bear some empirical frameworks which move beyond this debate (Mead 1934; Stryker and Burke 2000; Stets and Cast 2007) and which allow the practical work of the objects to be examined. Again, this is a contribution of this thesis. Furthermore, identity has largely been considered in organization studies through studies of people under pressure: this thesis is more concerned with the daily lives of people at work and how materiality supports, disturbs or renders more palatable what is going on.

A second theoretical point of significance lies in the way in which materiality is understood. Our approach to materiality has been grounded for centuries in a Descartian dualism where mind has been prioritised over matter. This grounding has been challenged in the last thirty years. This Descartian dualism of mind and matter has been softened through an examination of the way we relate to, and are mutually implicated, in our physical surroundings.

Gagliardi (1990) and Strati (1992, 1999), for example, emphasized the affective nature of material objects as aesthetic representations, or sense impressions, rather than functional objects. Whilst this thesis is not directly concerned with *aesthetic* senses of understanding, but rather with the construction of an identity through objects, the idea of objects as *places* of understanding is important. The understanding which happens in and through objects has become of developing interest in organizational studies in the last twenty years. Rafaeli and Vilnai Yavetz (1990, 2004) suggested, using a representational framework, that objects work symbolically, instrumentally and aesthetically, beginning to show the complexity of the work done by objects. Objects as symbols, as part of a semiotic tradition where the objects function to represent and call up in some way what they are pointing to, will be covered more fully in Chapter 4. The idea of objects as complex things, which produce responses in people that are greater than a simple symbol would, is taken up and developed in this thesis, contributing to the theoretical debate on objects as as actors in our lives.

The weakness of a symbolic approach in not addressing the viscerality of objects, the way their very materiality is part of their impact rather than simply as iconic pointers, or instrumental tools, has been contrasted with something more ontologically and epistemologically pluralist, particularly in anthropology (Ingold 2013; Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007). By this I mean that a theory of representation, in which objects are substitutes for, or pointers to, other things in our lives was challenged by a desire to give objects a stronger place, a place which reflected something of the material intransigence which we experience through them. Both Langer (1947) and Tilley (2006), for example, indicate that there are both connotative and denotative meanings to objects, that is, there is the object itself, how it is defined and then there is the work it does in calling up meanings, understandings and, crucially, practices.

This understanding, that non-human things may be as active as humans, underpins the debates on materiality at work. Actor Network Theory (Callon 1986; Latour 2005; Law and Singleton 2005), covered and critiqued more fully in Chapter 2, particularly provoked debate by its emphasis on the equivalence of humans and non-humans. Candlin and Guins (2008) in *The Object Reader* illustrated how the place and agency of objects had become increasingly multi-

# disciplinary. In a special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society* (2002) focusing on the agency or performativity of objects, Engestrom and Blackler (2002) commented that,

Enquiry into the ways in which organizations address objects that are partially shared, fragmented and disputed raises issues of fundamental importance to both theory and practice.

Engestrom and Blackler (2005:327)

This concern was echoed in Rafaeli and Pratt's (2006) call for an avoidance of 'artefact myopia' and in both Suchman's (2005) and Knorr-Cetina's (1997) emphasis on the how objects are things we affiliate to and are social 'with'. Objects are performative and that performativity is part of our understanding of ourselves at work. Whilst performativity has been examined in studies of jointly-held objects, (Suchman 2005; Rafaeli and Vilnai Yavetz 2004; Humphries and Smith 2014) it has had less exposure as a vehicle for examining individual identity at work.

In summary, the way in which objects act in our working lives has a plurality of possible trajectories for understanding these actions. The contribution of this thesis is to ground some of these positions in empirical work in organizations, examining how people relate in practice and through practice to material objects, and specifically how objects work to help create a sense of identity.

This thesis will therefore address each of these areas. Empirically it will examine how material objects were reported as being of significance in the lives of people at work. Theoretically it will discuss how the objects might be achieving their reported affects. Methodologically it will consider what might be possible ways of exploring the socio-material connection between human and non-human materiality.

#### 0.3 Summary: Focus of the thesis

This thesis focuses on how objects connect with identity at work. This is important because the way people feel about themselves at work and how they negotiate that feeling, of competence or incompetence, of 'fit' or of discomfort with the organization, is a significant part of how people manage their day-to-day sustaining of themselves at work. This material connection to identity is important in the workspace, which is a place where objects *at* work but not explicitly concerned *with* work sit in an odd place, hovering ambivalently between 'work' and 'non-work' as an almost invisible background, categorized as either part of an acknowledgment of dull powerlessness through an unexplored acceptance of them, or as the subversive undermining of commitment by the mute presence of something personal (Parker 2006). Workspaces are public arenas but house private (or semi-private) spaces. They are riddled with power politics, rules and norms in ways that are unique and differ from domestic settings. (Dale and Burrell 2007; Brown et al. 2005; Lefebrve 1974). This thesis, building on these studies cited, offers a major contribution to the field by exploring and evaluating how identity is held through materiality across these public/private domains of work.

Identity has been a central concern for consumption studies in relation to materiality but has been less connected to materiality at work. The contribution of the thesis here is threefold. Firstly, it concentrates on an empirical study of identity at work. Secondly, it extends the explanatory frameworks into other disciplines. This extends the work done on individuals and objects by locating the focus firmly within the individual understanding at work. Finally, it extends the methodological tools used to explore identity. Identity at work has largely been studied through discourse rather than materiality (Watson and Watson 2012; Svenningsson and Alvesson 2003; Alvesson and Roberston 2006). While this thesis does use interviews it also uses repertory grids, explained in the methodology, to give a further analysis of the work the objects are doing in people's daily lives.

#### 0.4 Research questions

The purpose of this thesis is therefore to examine how objects contribute to a sense of identity in people at work. My **over-arching research question** is:

#### What is the impact of meaningful objects in the workplace on people's identity?

The components of my original research questions were:

- 1 In what ways do objects act as a resource for identity at work?
- 2 How does the materiality of objects intersect with sociality at work?
- 3 In the light of 1 and 2 above, how do objects achieve their effects?

However, as the thesis progressed I became increasingly aware, through the literature, of the way in which objects and people may be seen as *jointly performing* the interplay of materiality in the workplace. I therefore refined these questions into the following:

- 1 How do people conceptualise objects at work?
- 2 How, and to what ends, do objects and people work together in the workplace?
- 3 How does this interplay of people and objects impact on identity in everyday life at work?

The **recommendations** of the thesis will include some consideration of how objects' materiality is important to both employees and employers and what cognizance should be taken of this. How might objects be taken into account in working practices?

#### 0.5 Overview of the thesis

In **Chapter 1** I address the question of how objects have hitherto been studied in the workplace. I do this through considering the epistemological framework in which they have been set, outlining the weaknesses and strengths of each account for this thesis, and justifying this approach. I begin with studies which suggest that objects work as 'representations' of the thing they refer to, citing semiotic studies as an example. I then outline some studies which suggest objects work through a more 'performative' approach. I examine accounts of Actor Network Theory and then move to more individually understood versions of performativity such as Knorr-Cetina's (1997) '*sociality with objects*', Suchman's (2005) '*affiliative objects*' and Hoskin's (2006) '*biographical*' accounts of objects. From that chapter I take forward the ideas of objects representing aspects of our lives which might be resources, of objects working in networks together and with the embedding environment of work and of the importance of the viscerality of objects which is acknowledged in theories of social performativity.

In Chapter 2 I outline an understanding of the self based on Mead's (1934) formulation of 'me' and 'l'. I review literature from Organization Studies, which largely uses discourse to examine identity under stress (Watson 2008; Korica and Moloy 2010). I also review studies which provide emerging evidence for a self which includes both role- based identities and is underpinned by a more long-lasting sense of self (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Watson 2009). From psychological studies I develop this longer-lasting self as the idea of an identity standard against which role identities are compared for 'fit', particularly in times of stress (Stryker and Burke 2000). Using Hobfoll's (2010, 2011) 'Caravan of Resources' theory, I argue that people actively look for resources that contribute to a positive sustaining of this longer-term self (the 'I') and which are also effective in the comparisons made between role-demands and this identity standard, that is, comparing the 'me' with the 'l'. Drawing on the material covered in Chapter 1, I contend that material objects, as much as discourse, form part of the resources which do this work, and that this has been a neglected part of identity studies in organizations. I also contrast my interest in studying identity on a day-to-day basis with the studies on workers under stress. From this chapter I take forward the idea of an identity standard at work in people in relation to materiality, and the need to extend the work on identity and materiality to more quotidian 'identity work' rather than identity work under pressure.

In **Chapter 3** I outline my methodology, in which I justify the use of a qualitative approach in this thesis. I explain and justify using photo-elicitation (Warren and Parker 2009; Warren 2009) and propose to ask participants to photograph all objects in their immediate working space which had meaning for them. I then consider methods which would evaluate these photographs, discussing the advantages and disadvantages of interviews and outlining why I use both this but also a further technique, Repertory Grid Analysis (Kelly 1955), in order to develop the data further. This method is part of the contribution of this thesis, as an extended way to ask about the meanings of the objects, seeking to find ways of comparing within the data as well distinguishing meaningful objects from the non-meaningful. Ethical issues in both interviews and using photographs are explored. Using Thematic Analysis (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012) the transcripts of both interviews and Rep Grids are coded into initial classifications and overarching themes. I outline some initial data from the study.

In Chapters 4-8 I present my data:

**Chapter 4** outlines an initial division of the data into objects which afforded relationships with others, with the self, with hidden things about the self and with the self at work. It then illustrates from the data the first of these themes; how the objects allowed people to form relationships with others in the workplace which were relatively transparent and open. Objects were found to offer places where people found affirmation, friendship, support and responsibility, through interactions with others such as the giving and receiving of gifts, the mutual pleasure in playing with objects on a desk, or sharing humour. Some theoretical considerations are drawn throughout the chapter indicating how the empirical analysis relates to the interplay of Mead's '1' and 'me' and to other theoretical studies such as that of Elsbach (2003), that objects offer personal distinctiveness.

**Chapter 5** examines how objects offer a way of relating to oneself through objects which are not readily shared with others but which hold something of significance for the everyday

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understanding and performing of personal identity. These include: wanting affirmation as a person, needing inspiration, holding things which are your own, and feeling safe. These findings are linked to the literature to highlight how objects meet needs which contribute to the self as part of Mead's construction of the self. I argue that the objects work performatively to gather the self through them and the practices associated with them, reflecting a power to distance the self from work, to hold an 'l' in the face of a work setting which may sometimes be uncomfortable.

**Chapter 6** explores how objects are a way of keeping things hidden yet in plain sight, and just what it means to have hidden, resistant, or painful objects at work. The objects were found to express unhappiness at work, disrespect for others and a desire for control. They also held some strong places of sadness. In particular, they held the strongest place of the core identity, what people thought of a 'really me', and they offered a perspective into how objects may have 'affordances' into many different parts of people's lives. Objects with a simple 'public' face, such as a beermat or a mug, were containers for much else.

**Chapter 7** indicates how people integrate and separate their professional lives at work through objects. Objects were largely seen as tools for the job, which reflected pride and satisfaction at work, a recognition of oneself as a good worker who also develops the self and others. Identity was constructed here more instrumentally through the way in which objects were used, but still retained a clear link to the need for personal distinctiveness.

**Chapter 8** addresses the place of the repertory grids in this research. It indicates how they revealed a strong and unexpected division between the professional and the personal self, raising questions about the object-led relationship between these two aspects of identity. The way in which distributed parts of the self, that is work-based identity and people-based identity, were joined through the objects was very clear. I go on in my discussion to develop the

significance of this for the thesis, exploring what might be the underlying connection between these two aspects of the self.

In **Chapter 9** I discuss these findings. In response to **research question 1**, drawing on data from chapters 4–8 and on the empirical studies covered in Chapters 1 and 2, I argue that the objects are working *both* representationally *and* performatively and that people both hold these two in daily practice and slip between them.

In response to **research question 2**, **again drawing on both data and previous studies**, I argue that meaningful objects offer a number of affordances (Harré 2002; O'Toole and Were 2008) and meet a number of lacks (Knorr Cetina 1997). These affordances include relationships, personal distinctiveness, and ways of containing, boundarying and holding the self. Through these affordances, people are able to express and support an inner sense of '1' in the workplace where this is lacking. I indicate how many objects, including work tools, can function in this way.

In response to **research question 3** I contend, drawing on my empirical data and on the work of Gell (1997) that the objects function as a collection. Following Gell (1998), I argue that objects' agency stems from an 'abduction' of agency between object and person in which the agency strengthens with daily practice. This agency allows the objects to act as part of a Caravan of Resources (Hobfoll 2011) for people at work, enabling them to enjoy, defend and uphold an inner sense of 'I'. I propose and illustrate from the data how this collecting is primarily grounded in the set of values held by the 'I' or inner standard. I also argue that the key link to the abducted agency of the objects is through their positioning in the workplace. Following Parker (2000), I indicate how meaningful objects at work are performative in response to the particular setting of the workplace, where certain formal regulatory frames act to inhibit the expression of personal identity. Within this framework, the objects are able to be the enactive site of two important things. One is the playing out of values, or 'virtue' or that part of the self which is not covered by the ordering of legalities or the social ordering of work. The other, relatedly, is that

the objects, through their connection to individuals' values, are the site of distinction of the self from 'others', of the 'I' from the 'me'. Work and others may offer one formula but the interaction with the objects is able to affirm and perform more than is shown to others. Values connect the objects into the everyday practices of work to uphold, express and defend people's identity on a day-to-day basis

**Chapter 10** draws the thesis to a conclusion, outlining the contributions made both to methodology and to the understanding of how material objects act as a resource for identity at work. It offers some implications for practice from the thesis, reflects on the process, identifies weaknesses of the study, and makes some suggestions for taking the field further. I conclude with a coda.

## Chapter 1

# Objects' meaning and doing: representation and performativity in organization studies

In this chapter I address the question of how objects have hitherto been studied in the workplace. I do this through considering the conceptual and theoretical debates and insights in which they have been set, outlining the weaknesses and strengths of each account for this thesis, and then justifying this approach. I begin with studies which suggest that objects work as 'representations' of the thing they refer to, citing semiotic studies as an example. I then outline some studies which suggest objects work through a more 'performative' approach. I examine accounts of Actor Network Theory and then move to more individually understood versions of performativity such as Knorr-Cetina's (1997) 'sociality with objects' and Suchman's (2005) 'affiliative objects'. From this chapter I take forward the ideas of objects representing aspects of our lives which might be resources, of objects working in networks together and with the embedding environment of work, and of the importance of the viscerality of objects that is acknowledged in theories of social performativity.

In the introduction I have laid out the focus of this thesis and justified it as an important topic to add to the literature on the place of material objects in organizations. I have argued that, while there is considerable interest in the relationship between materiality and identity, in other disciplines, the explicit link to identity at work through these material objects has not been as fully explored. This thesis contributes new understandings to the field by asking both *what* meaningful objects are doing at work to underpin a sense of self and *how* they are doing it. The background literature that frames the question comes firstly from studies of materiality in organizations and secondly from studies in identity. I will cover the former in **this chapter** and the latter in **Chapter 2.** 

#### 1.1 Linking both what objects do and how they do it

I return initially to the point I made in the introduction about what exactly 'objects' are for in this thesis and in this review. Objects in the literature on organizational studies have been conceived of very widely. There has been a move to consider almost anything as an object including organizational routines (Feldman and Pentland 2003), the concept of 'fashion' (Cappetta and Gioia 2006), linguistics (Cunliffe and Shotter 2006), epistemic objects (Mietinnen and Virkunnen 2005), diseases (Law and Mol 2010), and boundary objects in STS (Zeiss and Groenewegen 2009). However as indicated in the introduction, the focus of this thesis is on the *material* objects which surround people at work and which they find meaningful as opposed to this broader conceptualization. How does solid, visceral materiality interact with our solid visceral bodies and our imaginings and feelings?

Relevant background studies that explore the place of materiality in organizations come from disparate fields and are not easily drawn together as a discrete body of evidence on which to build. Often they are grounded in other wider debates spanning related disciplines. For example, studies on objects relating to space at work (Dale and Burrell 2008; Ward 2007; Herod, Rainnie and Magrath-Champ 2007) have a wider hinterland of cultural and political geography (Massey 1994, 2005; Lefebrve 1974; Bachelard 1969; Harvey 2000). Objects' implication in organizational change is nested in studies of technical systems (Orlikowski 2005, 2007; Haraway 1994) or reordering of place (Elsbach 2003). The emotional place of objects (Rafaeili and Vilnai Yavetz 2004; Hirst 2011) is connected again to organizational change, but also to stories of migrants and refugees, and to the way people connect to other parts of their lives (Tian and Belk 2005). Territoriality in organizations is embedded in issues of power and security (Brown et al. 2005).

The studies that address the specific place of material objects in organizations are thus often based in debates which are not directly relevant to this thesis, but these studies need to be gathered and marshalled as a set of indicative evidence on which to build a thesis about the place objects play as material resources for identity at work.

However as indicated in the introduction, this thesis is concerned not only with what objects do as resources in organizations but also in how they do it. I have therefore chosen to present studies of objects in organizations through their conceptual and theoretical approach, that is, what they take as their explanation for the effect which they see objects achieving. Such explanations range from the possibility that objects are 'representing' something in someone's life, to how they may be connected as parts of a network of powerful objects to make up people's lives, and to how they might in some way be enacting and performing people at work. I have chosen to do this for two reasons. One is because, as indicated above, the studies I am examining relate to larger hinterlands unrelated to identity at work and need a way of being drawn together. Secondly, this thesis addresses how objects achieve their effects as well as what those effects are, and to gather the studies on objects under those frameworks will help to make a logical transition into locating my findings in those debates. I will therefore weave the studies of objects in organizations into a discussion of the different epistemological lenses which have been adopted in exploring the connection between materiality and the workplace. This will provide a clear thread through the studies, defining from the literature the 'what' of what objects do, and locating it clearly and immediately in the possible 'how' of how they do it.

I will outline the theoretical position that underpins each epistemological approach and illustrate it from the studies, indicating where each approach can be built on but is, in the end, inadequate as an explanatory tool in this thesis.

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# 1.2 Icons and agency: Issues in the agency of materiality as a long standing concern

I begin with an illustrative example of a controversy, well recorded at the time, over religious icons in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, indicating how this struggle not only exemplifies the problem of thinking about objects and what they do but also highlights how this has been a matter of interest and of power for many centuries.

The earliest mention of icons comes from Eusebius' *History of the Church* in the third century (Barnes 2007). The practice of venerating icons of Jesus, the saints, Mary and the Trinity was common by then, but exactly what was being done in that venerating became a source of conflict as the objects themselves slowly came to be regarded as having mystical powers of healing and of being able to answer prayers. The conflicts lay firstly in who had power to control the meaning of the icons. Since many icons were in people's homes, this gave them a powerful unsupervised agency of their own (Ouspensky and Lossky 1952; Peers 2009a, 2009b) which stood over against the authority of the church. Secondly, icons became embroiled with other political agendas through the military rise of Islam in the eighth and ninth centuries, the religion that banned representation of God and saints, and that appeared to flourish for that banning. A question arose therefore about whether the veneration of icons, a widespread and popular practice, was actually heretical and leading to divine rebuke through the success of Islam. Were the objects and the practices around them having political consequences? Who had the right to define how such objects were thought about? These were powerful political questions.

The nature of that potential heresy holds the core question about objects and their effects. The central question was whether the image was a part of the person it represents, with the deity inhering in some way in the icon, or was the image simply a representation of the person, a useful and beautiful representation? Ultimately the decision in the mid ninth century, (843 CE) was that, in terms of agency, icons had equal standing with the oral and written traditions of the

church. They were to be venerated as such and not just as representations. They had power *in and of themselves*. As Peers (2009) writes *'Christ and his saints... ...assumed an essential relation with their images.'* (Peers 2009:2) Icons were divine and had divine power, a decision which chimed with the daily belief and experience of many at that time. However this was scarcely a purely theological decision. Rather it was attached to the changing politics of who was in temporal and in ecclesiastical power. The decision about the place of powerful objects needed to be controlled by those who are powerful.

This debate shows up some core aspects of the problem of objects in daily life. Firstly, it underscores how negotiated and political wrangling over potentially powerful objects held in private spaces and understandings, which still happens in organizations, is not a new phenomenon. How do people respond to 'clear desk' policies and why? Not new either is the experience of objects as personal resources, sometimes doing more than their surface appearance would suggest, in the places which people inhabit on a daily basis. And inherent in the story of the icons is the question of material agency: how do objects 'work'? The concern of this thesis is to examine how power is imbricated in the objects which people see as meaningful to them in their work spaces, that is, what kind of power is being enacted in the objects, who has it and to what purpose – and who might be concerned about this?

#### 1.3 Materiality and organizations

Materiality has become (a) matter of concern in organization studies following an initial focus on objects and aesthetics signalled by the founding of the Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism (1985). This interest in aesthetics, developed through work by authors such as Ramirez (1996), Gagliardi (1990) and Strati (1999), continues as a rich seam of study (Warren, 2006, 2008; Linstead and Hopfl 2000; Cummings 2000; Taylor and Hansen 2005; Hancock 2005). Within the focus on aesthetics there was a strand concerned with materiality: Gagliardi (1990) wrote about solid things such as chairs, and Warren (2008) writes of the impact of objects and aesthetics, but the core was in the ineffable and the sensory rather than on the psychological understandings which are at the heart of this thesis. Strong attention to organizational culture in the nineties largely ignored the impact of materiality (Schein 1990, 1996; Hofstede 1984; Ogbonna 1992), concentrating far more on social issues of power and how these were expressed, rather than the material medium through which power was given or taken. As Dale and Burrell (2008) point out, an interest in materiality in organizations was still a minority view in the late twentieth century, with much of the 'material' leached out of studies of material culture. However, a growing conviction that the corporal and material may be significant in organizations was strengthened through studies in science and technology (Latour 2005), consumption (Miller 2010), anthropology (Henare et al. 2007; Dant 2006; Ingold 2006; Tilley et al. 2006), social geography (Massey 1994, 2005) and art theory (Gell 1998) among others. Objects broadened to 'things' (Brown 2001) and became 'things we think with' (Turkle 2011) and 'things through which we think' (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007). Building on Schein's (1990) work, objects became recognized as being of significance to the making of politics in organizations (Latour 2005; Law 2009). The giving, receiving, inserting, withholding and even viewing of objects within organizations was recognized as a matter of power (Lefebrve 1991; Dale and Burrell 2008; Halford 2004; Candlin and Guins 2009).

Inevitably, as the question of just how people are imbricated and implicated in materiality unfolded, interdisciplinary and philosophical differences also emerged through the studies. As Dale and Burrell comment, *'humans are part of the material world, not transcendent gods or magicians able to manipulate the material without being incorporated or changed by it.'* (2008:210-211) This became recognized as more than a truism, but rather as a matter which needed to be incorporated into thinking about organizations.

The story of materiality in organizations in the last 20 years is thus one of an increasing emphasis on the effects of materiality, and in particular an exploration of the level of control

and agency which researchers afford to each player in the human/non-human, person/thing interaction debate.

#### 1.4 Representational and semiotic approaches

Early studies in materiality and organization focused on materiality as a variable in achieving efficiency. The way an office or a factory was organized materially was designed to be functional and to promote effective working. Kanter (1974) in *Psychology for Architects* urged builders to design for pleasantness and beauty as factors which would contribute to efficiency and productivity. Ornstien's (1989) analysis of the hidden influence of office design similarly cited office layout and décor as influences on organizational behavior which should be used to encourage efficiency.

Such instrumentalist approaches became more nuanced through a growing attention to a socially embedded understanding of materiality at work. If we return to the icons, two kinds of social embedding – at least – are possible. One is that icons are embedded in the stories told around them, both in social groups and by people to themselves about their individual history with icons. Objects may bring to mind and represent much from both past and present which gives them strong purchase. An icon may come to represent a community and be carried in procession as the 'flag' of that community. For ourselves, a photo may represent ourselves as members of a family (Tian and Belk 2005). The other social embedding is that objects work in a way which co-performs stories and lives; that the objects as material entities, not representations, are working to allow and enable certain practices and ways of being. The objects are being performative in that they actively change practices and understandings by their partaking in them. For example, an icon which is claimed to have helped someone in childbirth becomes venerated by others, and such veneration, perhaps with the icon present, with ritual touching or kissing, becomes part of the childbirth practices of a whole community. Closer to home, our clothes become performative of us in the way they not only reflect both

social ordering and group adherence, and where we choose to position ourselves in those orderings, but also reflexively affect the way in which we behave, think and speak in response to the reactions our clothes provoke in others. Our clothes become co-performers in ourselves (Butler 1990).

I begin this review with a consideration of the first of these social embeddings: representational approaches to objects in organizations. One major form of representation arises from semiotics. Semiotics developed from the work of Saussure (1959) on linguistics (which remained semiotics' major home discipline), Peirce in mathematics, philosophy and logic (Freadman 1994), Barthes in cultural studies (Allen 2003; Culler 1983; Barthes 1972, 1988), and Bourdieu (1977) in anthropology. Objects in semiotics are signs and symbols that have no purchase in our lives apart from through the relational stories in which they are embedded, that is, they represent other things. They 'work' through historical and social webs of understanding. As we are engaged in these cultural understandings so we understand objects in particular ways and with particular associations, such as the national associations of a flag or the cultural associations of the place of a pound coin. It is we who give them agency. Semiotics suggests that we create the stories in which objects play their part, possibly in a way which is powerful and unexpected but which still preserves the Cartesian duality of matter being other than, and subordinate to, the mind which engages with the matter. From this perspective, the stories into which objects are placed have no contribution from the object: objects are only there as signs or symbols of schema which are already constructed through social experience. The material stands in for the social. In other words we can 'read off' the meaning of the objects from the socially and linguistically constructed webs of understanding which surround them.

In a special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society* on identity (2002) Harré makes this point, that our knowledge is embedded firmly in our social settings, with great clarity.

Nothing exists in the social world unless it has been introduced into that world by a human social and constructivist act. (Harré 2002:24)

#### Material objects, he argues, work only through their affordances, that is,

...the same material thing may have a great many different possible ways in which it can be used. Each is an affordance... ...thus a floor affords walking, dancing, placing furniture; a window affords a view of the lake, an escape from threat, a view for a peeping Tom. (Harré 2002:27)

Such affordances are bound up in the cultural narratives which we use and tell, whether part of

an expressive order, such as a building which affords talk such as admiration or scorn, or of a

practical order, such as a key which affords entry.

There is nothing else to social life but symbolic exchanges and joint construction and management of meaning, including the meaning of bits of stuff. To become relevant to human life, material beings must be interpreted for them to play a part in human narrative. (Harré 2002:32)

Such a forceful account has been maintained in a less strong way by others. In the same special

issue, Vandenberghe writes,

Humans and non-humans belong to different ontological regions... ...it's not the bottles of beer that keep builders together but the sharing of a form of life in which common plans of action are co-ordinated.

(Vandenberghe 2002:53)

The assertion is again that objects, in this case bottles of beer, as representations of a way of living, are embedded in the narrative structures and in the ways of action of humans and have no claim to being active in any other way. '*Non-humans*,' writes Vanderberghe, '*are indifferent to humans but also to non-humans and themselves*' (2005:54). To say otherwise is to decontextualize both humans and non-humans: such decontextualisation '*does not take into account the meaningfulness of the context* [which means that] *it cannot really take into account the meaning of the content of actions either*' (2005:55). Objects and actions lose their symbolic meaning if the context is lost, and this context is the history of the person. Vandenberghe goes on to say that although objects can be *personalized* through being gifts, this does not make

them anything other than symbols which allow humans to commune with others. Personal objects become, in this reading, things and not bundles of social relationships. Objects do not have agency in and of themselves.

Davison (2011) and Davison, Maclean and Warren (2012) explore semiotics in relation to the visual where the application is to public documents rather to than to the specific connection between an individual and their loved objects. Public documents can be 'read off' in terms of their cultural meanings. A similar semiotic approach was used by Hancock (2005) in the unravelling of the messages of a public advertising poster, but he, as others below, critiques the reductionism of semiotics, whilst stressing its usefulness as a critical tool.

The concept that objects are signs and symbols which allow human beings to relate, through objects, to themselves as well as others, is a well-argued and powerful one, as Pels, Hetherington and Vandenberghe (2002) and Woolgar (2002) acknowledge. However both of these studies, along with Hancock's, point to reasons why it should be a problematic approach. They indicate a need to redress the balance of sociality and materialism, to consider again whether there is a way to find an answer to the questions which materiality poses to us without reverting to a material/social dualism, in which mind is privileged over matter. Objects, they suggest, mediate between the social and material but in ways which are problematic and not subject to a simple divide. There is a need to explain how objects in some way actively perform in the relationships which happen between people and things through their sheer visceral, undeniable materiality. The way an object 'stares back' in Elkins phrase (1997) is not accounted for in a semiotic translation. The objects get in our way and form part of that way. To treat them as symbolic is to reduce their materiality to a surface. What it misses is the sense of a continuing and changing relationship with the materiality of the objects, the way in which they work within a particular setting and work *reflexively* to affect and alter an individual's relationship with themselves, with others, and with other objects. If we go back to the icons for a moment, we

could think about someone's own particular icon, the one with the chip in the corner and the extra thick gilding around the edges, or the grease-covered icon hung above the family stove which is as much part of cooking rituals as the pots and the food. It is the materiality of the icon which is as much part of its performing as its subject matter, or its nesting in a set of social relations.

Symbolism features in the work of Rafaeli and Pratt (2006), and Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz (2004), in a study of a green bus introduced in an Israeli town to suggest associations between corporate buses and environmentalism. They argue that objects act in three ways, instrumentally, symbolically and aesthetically. The bus was a public object, and did work symbolically, but not in any obvious way which could be 'read off' from the colour green, since people had different reactions to the buses, connected to their own aesthetic interpretation of the meaning of green and their own instrumental history of relating to buses. There was 'something more' than a simple symbolism, with individual's contexts being taken into account but the emphasis is still on the way in which green buses represented something to people, through their personal histories.

Similarly Tian and Belk (2005), in a paper that mirrors the interest of this thesis very closely, illustrate the overlapping nature of representation and 'something more'. They investigated how objects in the workplace serve to produce an extended self, where work-self and outside-work-self link. The links were shown through photographs of possessions at work, obtained by participant-led photography where workers took photographs of objects at work relating to different parts of their lives. Work-selves and other-selves, Tian and Belk found, were complementary. The photographs were interpreted as pointing to and encapsulating other selves, which were brought into the workplace as 'extensions' of the self outside work. They did 'represent' people as family people, or people who played a certain sport or were part of a certain group, and Tian and Belk are concerned to indicate that such object-representations

brought other lives into work in ways that were significant to people in their appreciation of themselves as more than workers. But the objects did more than that: although this was not a focus of the paper, people did sometimes connect to the real materiality of the objects. For example, one participant had an old calculator which had been with her through all her jobs and about which she said 'I love this calculator'. It was old and clunky but its bashed materiality and clunkiness were part of its functioning as a treasured object as well as being a useful professional tool. There was more to the objects than only representation. Their materiality was also part of their functioning. In this thesis I am concerned to explore that materiality explicitly, and how it relates to an understanding and expression of identity.

This 'something more' to representation, the actual presence of the object in its specific colour or weight, is seen in studies of migrants and refugees (Parkin 1999; Povrzanovic Frykman 2008) and prisoners (Slotboom et al. 2011), and those who inherit the losses of others (Navaro-Yashin 2007). Loss is representational, about the loss of freedom, or country or community. But it is also specific loss about specific treasured things to do with self or family. The people in these studies missed the actual tactile presence of certain objects – particular cooking utensils or objects which had been in the family for many years. Anecdotally, a friend of mine, in her sixties, has just been detained for possible deportation. She had her camera phone taken away and was given another one: as well as the indignity of this representation of loss of freedom, she struggles to get used to a new phone and misses the specific ways of the old one, how she knew the weight of it in her bag, had chosen the ring tone and recognised it quickly as hers, liked the cover and, above all, knew how to use it fast.



It might be helpful in exploring the complexity of how objects both represent and do more than represent something for individuals to think of an example close to home. In my university office there were two framed prints of exhibitions, one of an exhibition about Tibetan sacred objects, and one of an exhibition of Japanese paintings. I put them there as part of an agreed strategy in the shared office to 'cheer it up'.

Figure 1-1 Posters at work

Both pictures, I might argue tap, semiotically, into some larger cultural cognitive schema, about the significance of personal decoration in a space, or the place of multi-culturalism in my work. What semiotics does not explain to me is the comfort which I get from them when I return to my room after a difficult meeting, the plain joy I take in their positioning beside my desk where I can glance at them, the sense that I metaphorically hug them to me, and the sense that they offer me support as things which transcend mere office life. In some way I find inexplicable they are my friends. They have physical memories, of the exhibitions themselves and of carefully carrying the posters home. And they are not alone – there are other things in my office which also ambush me with their connectivity through memory and physicality. The sense that they only point to something about my interests is hard to accept. I react to them in so many ways which make connections with their materiality, and if I were asked to take them down I would feel the poorer for it and that I had been asked to remove something of 'me' which was somehow unacceptable or offensive. As with the migrants and prisoners, I have an attachment to these objects which works to bring me some security in an alien environment. This thesis examines that element in objects which is about 'me', on both a large (semiotic) and small (individual context) scale.

#### 1.5 What does a semiotic approach have to offer this thesis?

Representation, as suggested above, brings the strength of making connections across parts of our lives that are embedded in wider social networks and understandings. It offers an understanding of why some objects may be chosen at work rather than others; my pictures are 'allowable' and 'acceptable' objects as office decoration, in the way the parrot of my Prelude to the Introduction is not, because of the way offices are understood to be constituted as discreet, able to have things in them which colleagues or students or managers can instantly understand, can see what they 'represent' whether that be a commendable interest in art or a discreet covering of shabby walls. I have no power to bring what I like into the space which my employer controls, but at the same time my employer has no power over what such objects as they do allow say to me. So what they 'appear' to represent may be less than they accomplish in practice.

In relation to my research questions, representation can begin to answer all three questions: objects are *working* to provide representations of ourselves in our histories, they *connect to sociality* through their cultural embedding and they *achieve this effect* by being symbols of other things. But representation is not enough to explain the impact of the solidly material in the lives of individuals, the attachment to particular objects in their specific guise.

A representational reading of objects does not offer an explanation of the specific, material, individual connection I allude to above. Do we need, as Knorr Cetina (1997) says to 'allow for the possibility that objectual relationships are held in place by a mix of attachments and may in fact be sustained by their conjunction?' (Knorr Cetina 1997:14) Objects work viscerally, as Miller has demonstrated (2008); they comfort us through their material presence as well as through the associations made between certain of their elements and other parts of our lives. Turkle (2011) also emphasizes this viscerality, writing of how objects are an active life presence, categories though which we create ourselves, things we feel at one with. Objects, in Turkle's book, have life roles that are multiple and fluid; a beloved Ford car, for example, is described as like an extension of the skin, (Donath 2011) and a diabetic is at one with his glucometer (Cevetello 2011). Noble (2004) writes about how objects' 'accumulate' us, give us 'being' and include us in their histories. Brownie (2009) highlights, in a paper on music, the viscerality of musical experience, the hybridity of it as both material and social and the way in which music destabilizes the subject/object divide when in a social context. The 'material turn' in exploring organizations has also had much to say about other ways of conceiving the interplay of humans and things, with a conviction that there are other ways than representation of acknowledging the physical embroilment of objects in our lives at work.

Those other ways of interacting have been explored through taking into account the stubborn materiality of the objects referred to above. Objects in our lives may act as things that are part of the way in which our daily life happens, shaping our interactions with others, performing a role which is more than being a stab to the memory but which is creative of our understanding as well as reflective of it. Objects, things, may act as undefinable mediators between different parts of ourselves, performing some kind of linking work such as that between the self as a person of both professional expertise in the workplace but also a sharer of cynical humour about the workplace. The idea of exploring the performativity of objects has led to some alternative takes on how objects work. The notion of performativity, addressing the actual phenomenon of the physicality of the object, begins to unwrap the contested alterity of object and subject.

#### Dvora Yanow encapsulates the difference:

...from hermeneutics comes the notion that artefacts may be 'read' to discern the meanings embedded in or projected into them in the process of their creation. And from phenomenology comes the concern with situation-specific local knowledge derived from the lived experience of members of the setting under study. (Yanow 2006:46) 37

### 1.6 The performativity of objects

Performativity can be formulated in different ways but is intimately bound up with how we think about the agency of objects: what they *do*, rather than represent or stand for. Performativity is not a simple concept. It asks how objects are enrolled in a network of meaning which gives some measure of agency to both humans and non-humans and then has to decide how and how far that agency stretches. How privileged can objects be as actors in the human/non-human relationship?

One approach to performativity in organizations has come from Actor Network Theory, exploring how non-humans work together with humans in a way which allows material objects a part in influencing human activity rather being at the mercy of human cognitive frameworks. In considering this approach to materiality, I am looking to see what kind of explanations might be offered for the purposes of this thesis and how useful they are.

# 1.7 Actor Network Theory (ANT)

ANT developed out of the scientific work of Latour and Callon (1981) and Latour and Woolgar's (1979) studies in laboratories, studies which were concerned with examining how non-human objects worked to alter and develop understandings of theoretical and empirical scientific work. (Law and Hassard 1999; Latour 2005). ANT argues that humans and non-humans are caught up in a network which is both social and material, and in which no one actor is privileged over another. Agency, of both humans and non-humans, is equally caught up in the structure. ANT is not a theory but is a description of empirical practice (Law and Singleton 2014). Its epistemological position, shifting between a kind of performativity and semiotics, is seen in Law's (2007) description of it as 'material semiotics'.

...a disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities and methods of analysis that treats everything in the social and natural world as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations in which they are located. It assumes nothing has a reality or form outside the enactment of those relations. (Law 1997:2)

ANT, as Law and Hetherington (2000) indicate, is a search for a relationship between/within objects/people which would not simply inscribe another form of *difference* but allow for *equivalence*, a levelling of difference between objects and people. In a later description, Law (2007) says it is a *'sensibility to the messy practices of the relationality and materiality of the world'* (2007:2) or an *'empirical post structuralism'* (2007:6). It is concerned with how things get assembled, and how the power to do things emerges from interwoven practices between the human and the non-human.

In ANT, all actions are relational effects, which break down many accepted dualisms: natural and cultural, social and technical, micro and macro. Its crucial 'signature' breakdown lies, says Law (2009), in its ontological indifference to the nature of the actors in the network, in other words an indifference to whether one is speaking of people or 'things' when describing the flow of the network. All situations are conceived of as acts of becoming, or stances of becoming; no situation is fixed but is always a confluence of actants (Latour 1996) in a network of relationships in which people and objects are both actors and acted upon. The flowing of the network allows constant movement. Parts of the network are always more powerful than others and there is a constant shifting in relation to the loci of power. New members of the network get drawn in through points of connection with the problem, (that is, 'enrolled' subject to *'interessement'*) and the flow of power in the network means it is constantly translated into something else. Such constant translation has led to new descriptions of ANT as akin to the flames that make up the fire or rhizomes or fluids, things which are never still but regarded as a whole, always moving or

growing to respond to the environment and what is 'available' to the network (Mol and Law 1994; Law 2009).

This focus on the mutability of relationships between people and things, or things and things, to show connectedness not separation, is the major link to the subject of this thesis. If the people/things dualism is removed, then we can examine the resulting relationships as being networks in which we can try to inspect what part of the relational flow is the most significant, and which aspects of the network seem to provide the strongest pull within it at a given moment of inspection.

This is illustrated through the story of the Skye Bridge (Sage, Dainty and Brooks 2011). The proposed Skye Bridge was the subject of multiple moves among multiple interested parties. The story shows how over time, as costs changed, as the government drew back, as local people began to fight private initiatives in the face of spiraling costs, and as the government was exposed to media attention, various parties were enrolled through their interests and took/were given greater or lesser power within the conflict over the bridge. The bridge moved from a simple bridge connecting an isolated community to being a focus of political struggles, until a solution was finally found.

This story illustrates the different ways in which non-humans may be seen to be actors outlined by Sayes (2014). Non-humans in ANT, he writes, may be mediators, actants which change the collective through their circulation and which are changed by their circulation. They act through associations, though networks, which may have moral implications through their presence in the network. But Sayes too makes the point that in ANT the question of responsibility is elided through being descriptive. Who has what power to enroll things in the network?

ANT's most used application in organizations is to explore objects' presence and impact over time. ANT in organizations has often focused on sites of scientific practice, such as salmon fishing (Law and Lien 2013), hypoglycaemia, (Mol and Law 2004), arteriosclerosis (Mol 1999) or liver disease (Law and Singleton 2005), long distance control and sailing vessels (Law 1986), and aircraft (Law 2002a). More recently, to show the range of application, it has featured in stories of, among others, organizing over time (Czarniawska and Hernes 2005; Czarniawska 2004), the understanding of water (Carroll 2012); accounting practices (Briers and Chua 2001; Justesen and Mouritsen 2011), strategic planning (Bryson, Crosby and Bryson 2009), strategic organizing (Steen, Coopmans and Whyte 2006), low carbon planning practice (Rydin 2007), and of communication practices in journalism (Plesner 2009). Within these practices it has sought to find how the object(s) under scrutiny might be conceived and how it alters with the different practices associated with it. It has destabilized the object by making it multiple, or rather by demonstrating that in practice, as it is shared between people's experiences, it becomes multiple.

This is a major strength of ANT: it can plot the course of an object through practices and understandings over time, showing how objects and people influence and change the network around them, each mediating in the complex web of organising.

#### 1.8 Difficulties with ANT

The attraction of ANT lies in its promise to give 'things' some dignity, to make them less submissive to explanation from inside our human cognition, and to expose objects' visceral – and powerful – agentic effects within our lives. However it is not without its critics.

As Dale and Burrell (2007) point out, ANT is not agnostic about the human/non-human divide as it claims, but instead, maintains the Cartesian dualism of people and things, since the enrolment happens because *people* are interested in *things*, and not because things are interested in people. It is the people who have the anger, the need, the desire, surrounding the object and want to be involved with it. Similarly Donna Haraway (1991, 2013) forcibly suggests that ANT is not innocent, as it claims to be, about the realities, the networks, which we make and the choosing of players in that making because humans, in the end, have choices which non-humans do not have. ANT suggests that we don't know what we know or how we know it; we are only subject to the flow of the network and the relationships within that network. Our longings, our sense of fun, our outrage, are assumed to be unimportant background. Whittle and Spicer (2008) contend that ANT may have an unreflexive epistemology, being unable or unwilling to reflect on the production of its own narrative and to acknowledge the impact of other voices at the margins of the networks, such as our emotional responses.

Law (2007) counters some of these criticisms by saying that many ANT empirical studies are about 'studying up' rather than 'studying down', and that work *has* been done on reflexively thinking about the mode of production which ANT offers (see, for example, Law 2007). Perhaps the most telling part of his response to the criticism of the levelling of human and non-human in ANT is his acknowledgement of a moral dimension under discussion, that *'the good is being done as well as the epistemological and the ontological'* (2007:16). The problem then is how can the material play an active interest in the good on an equal footing with those who decide what the good is? To be fair, this point, that ANT is a way of telling stories, is put by Law (2009:141), 'The Actor Network Theory approach is not a theory... ...it is descriptive rather than foundational in explanatory terms... ...it tells stories about 'how' relations assemble or don't.'

This point, that humans and non-humans are not in practice equal, especially in making decisions about the good, is exemplified in the case of the Zimbabwean water pump (De Laet and Mol 2000). This pump, a superbly simple piece of engineering, is adapted and changed in use in many different locations until it physically barely resembles the original design. It is fluid. It is not a single 'thing' and ANT is able to show how it remains itself and yet is also a boundary-less object. But the pump itself did not decide its shape, nor what it was used for, and the gatekeepers of the networks were human. The water pump itself offered a place for the playing out of the 'good' of bringing water.

What this explanation of the pump's many forms does not do is have concern for the meanings which are experienced by the recipients of the water it produces. It is not interested in the physical affection someone may have for *their* pump because of the way they have adapted it, or in the valued social practices which may grow around the pump. ANT helps in understanding the complexity of an object's development as a moving target (Sage et al. 2011), but is less helpful in understanding the social *impact* of the object or in how objects offer anything to our understanding of our individual selves in relation to the object. What did the pump mean to individuals when it was in place? ANT is concerned with a macro-level analysis of an object and neglects more individual responses to objects. The interest of this thesis is in why individual people value objects as meaningful and what they are performing for individuals who choose them.

A recent review and critique of ANT (Sayes 2014) takes a slightly different turn in discussing what it means for non-humans to have agency in this framework. Concentrating on ANT as a *methodology*, Sayes argues that ANT allows agency to non-humans in a number of ways. ANT proposes that non-humans act to provide the *possibility* of society, that is, we are entangled with the non-human as a condition of our society being as it is. As part of this entanglement, non-humans act as mediators, that is, they '*are both changed by their circulation and change the collective through their circulation*' (2014:138). Non-humans gather us up and impact through their materiality on our moral and political framework, as for example in Latour's (1989, 1992) example of the seatbelt that constrains us and Callon's (1991) telephone that enfolds human practices in its technology. Sayes' emphasis is on the methodological aspects of ANT, and he suggests that ANT, through this mediating and gathering, gives objects a kind of proto-agency: that is, agency of a *different form* to that which we think of as intentional agency, but still a valid one. We should not discount objects as agents because we define agency as being human and intentional.

An a priori distinction between the agential capacities of humans and nonhumans ceases to be helpful if it acts to occlude, to stack our accounting enterprises before we have even commenced counting. (Sayes 2014:145)

What is missing from this persuasive account of the way in which objects are more than recipients of human meaning and manipulation is just how the agency of objects might be happening. How does the proto-agency work? Sayes' call for a more practiced-based account of our enmeshing with objects is taken up by others in a turn to a more situationally embedded account of the performativity of objects, to be discussed shortly.

## 1.9 What does ANT offer this thesis?

ANT has value for this thesis in a number of ways. Firstly, it offers the notion of human and nonhuman networks and the way in which objects may be implicated in many networks. This could go some way to answering my research question 2, about how objects and sociality link together. These networks may have different levels of influence or power in people's lives at different times and may be linked to other objects in a variety of ways. How might the toy given to a parent by a child for an office desk sit in a wider series of networks, such as a link to home, as a way of relating to colleagues, or as a form of protest against a clear desk policy? It may be that ANT can offer some help in thinking about the complexity of object 'performance', the way they may spread roots into many networks. A single object may have more than one 'meaning' as it links to different networks. The question, *'What networks is this object enrolled in and with what effects?'* is a useful one.

Secondly, ANT points to the way in which objects do have impact, that they are not passive in the lives of people but are able to connect and to alter perceptions. The meaning of an object may change as it becomes embroiled with new players in a network. The object does not simply 'represent' but may engage different interests over time. The introduction of a new office practice such as clear desk policy or a threat of change in employment status, or the

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introduction of a new object such as an updated computer may change the meaning of an object as it sits in new networks.

However what ANT fails to offer is an explanation of *why* something is important enough to be part of the network. For this thesis, this is a crucial question. Why, as well as how, are objects influential in affecting people's sense of self at work?

If we return to my pictures on the wall of my office, what could I take from ANT to help me think about them? A very short answer might be that they connect to multiple networks. They are there because a group of us decided we needed a brighter office but we had to agree on what was pleasant for us all. They are there because our employer would accept them. These things are interesting and important but what they don't say is why they have the impact that they do for me in this setting. What is that they afford for me to make them meaningful? ANT can describe what happens but not the full picture of why something is enrolled or not in the network; what it is that makes one thing of more importance than another to be enrolled. And finally, not a problem for ANT of itself but a problem for this thesis, is precisely its strength in exploring the mediating presence of objects over time and in the practice of many people and objects. This thesis is crucially concerned to examine the meanings of a set of objects for individual people and, while those objects might usefully be examined to see if they belong in networks, the specific tracing of that network *with others over time* is not part of the study.

If ANT does not answer the why question, where else is there to look? I move now to examine other versions of performativity which give greater weight to the materiality of the object and to the responses we have to the viscerality of objects, the way the object 'stares back' (Elkins 1997) at us. As he remarks, '[objects'] vision is forever incomplete and incontrollable, because it is used to shape our sense of what we are.' (1996:237)

#### 1.10 Performativity and enacting

The concern of this thesis is to examine the impact in practice of material objects on people's identity at work. The question is how does the material impact on the social? What other 'agential cut' (Barad 2013) can be taken across the sociomaterial assemblage?

ANT sees objects as equal players. Other formulations of performativity see them as more subject to human action and understanding. In particular, the emphasis is on the way in which objects are enfolded in practice, in the everyday, on-going interactions that set material objects up as co-players in our worlds, 'things' with 'effects'. The performativity of objects has a complex profile and I will indicate some of that complexity to show that, as with ANT, it is not a simple exercise to say where and how the social and material interact.

Butler (2010) writes of performativity as a way to think about an alternative to causal frameworks that destabilises the notion of constituted objects. For example, if we say that gender is performatively constituted then we are calling into question whether there is a stable entity 'gender'. Likewise if we think about there being performative effects of the state or the economy then we have to question the reified notion of 'the state' or 'the economy'. To speak of objects as 'performative', then, is to ask what *effect* they have and to question their reification as simply performing as 'a pen' or 'a mug' or 'a filing cabinet'. Their performance is defined by the histories and understandings of those who work with them and they in turn sit in and influence those practices. For example, as I sit with my pictures in my office, they work to soothe me as I turn to them and they are part of my history there, connecting me to my own past and to others who appreciate them.

In this move to distinguish performativity from semiotics and ANT, Orlikowski (2005, 2007) seeks to untangle the material/human interface in writing about technology in organizations. She

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suggests, like Ingold (2011), that the problem of agency exists because of the way we have conceptually carved up the world. Specifically in relation to the connection between humans and non-humans in technology, she writes of how the problem has been seen as *either* a techno-centric *or* a human-centred one, whereas the problem is one of 'constitutive entanglement' of 'recursive intertwining', where the social and material are spoken of in the same register (2007). She therefore offers a notion of 'material performativity' and 'human agency' – which effectively keeps the distinction between the human and non-human yet allows both some input into the story of their interaction, reminiscent of Sayes' (2014) point above about different kinds of agency. Building on the work of Barad (2013) and Latour (2005), Orlikowski proposes replacing an idea of social practices with sociomaterial practices, '*All practices are always and everywhere sociomaterial*' (2007:1444).

Defining sociomateriality further, Jones (2013) writes of the interpenetration of materiality and the human. He outlines a 'strong' view of sociomateriality, where the social and material are totally intertwined, citing Orlikowski's (2007:1437) ontological interpretation, 'there is no social that is not also material, and no material that is not also social.' In contrast, he proposes a 'weaker' form in which the social and the material are not totally one, that the social does not create the material. Oil existed before we knew about it under the North Sea. Like a Venn diagram, where humans and non-humans overlap, both humans and material substances have properties that are not acquired through interpenetration, and that are held separately through their very material separation. The sociomaterial happens where the two butt up against each other.

The attempt to explore just how objects are determining, constitutive, parts of organizational narratives and practices is taken up by Humphries and Smith (2014), discussing the story of an old photocopier. They use its material surfaces, scratched and battered, as a way to explore the relationships which are concurrent with the organizational stories told about it. They write in a 'post social' framework in which the boundaries between objects and people have been

dissolved into 'composite assemblages' (Humphries and Brown 2014). They further extend the possibilities of objects' agency by pointing out that objects are material parts of a time sequence: objects are enmeshed in practices, with their own physical and relational biographies, and these work to define what stories people can tell about them while they reciprocally influence the latitude of human performance. The networks which objects are part of in organizations, they argue, are not stable entities as ANT would suggest, but offer access into other networks, that coalesce around them and are embedded in the practices of the networks being described – one might almost say reified (Schinkel 2004; Carroll 2012). Practices contribute to meaning. Humans and non-humans are entangled not only through the materiality of an object, its presence in space, but also through the joint histories which they have, which work to create – and limit – what happens around and through them. They produce an 'analytical break' (Contractor et al. 2011) from dualistic thinking, as suggested by Sayes (2014) above. Again the emphasis is not on objects having agency per se as in intentional agency, but a constitutive impact on the stories that unfold in organizations. They are part of organizational practices, recurring scripts or plots (Humphries and Smith 2014). This is also the case for Fowler and Harris (2015) who argue for an approach to materiality based on Barad (2013). Objects work both as being in themselves and as 'becoming', as relationships. They are not representations but moving targets. When we focus on the materiality we miss the relationships and vice versa, just as electrons that can be both waves and particles. What this does is to underline how objects are enmeshed in practices and that their history as material 'things' is both relational and 'objective'. Things are always 'becoming' through their 'being'.

A further account of performativity comes from the work of Suchman (2005), writing of objects *'affiliative qualities'*. Her ethno-methodological account of objects stresses that there is an engagement between human and non-human which does not dissolve the difference between them but allows each to be performative in practice. Objects, she suggests, work as affiliations, that is, they are not innocent, but are *'fraught with significance for the relations they* 

*materialize'* (Suchman 2005:379). Objects as things-in-motion are disclosing agents in studies of the social world, that is, they explore regimes of value, exploring *how* people think about them, and they are able to show us the way in which such value regimes are implicit within the relationships between people and things.

*Objects and their positions are inseparable, subjects are always located and subjects and objects mutually implicate each other. (Suchman 2005:394)* 

Although her focus is on the multiple understandings of one object being transformed by multiple users, she also describes how objects allow us to think about ourselves, and to build accounts of ourselves. We are not neutral in our relationships with objects but are conscious of how they inform us about ourselves.

This emphasis on performativity is taken up by Dale (2005). Social processes and structures, and material processes and structures are, she argues, mutually enacting. The material and social are not 'innocent terms' (2005:652) and should not be separated out into mutually exclusive realms of analysis. In particular, following Merleau Ponty (1962), she points to embodiment as a key concept in this debate, stressing that embodiment is reversible: the body is 'sentient and sensible, sees and is seen, hears and is heard, touches and is touched' (2005:656). As a river has both structure and flow, carves its banks and is limited by hard rock, so the interrelationship of social structure and agency are intertwined. She illustrates this flow through a study of an organization over time. As a very open plan office, designed to facilitate employee flow and meeting throughout it, is filled to over capacity with new employees as the organization expands through privatisation, the new furniture is used to create enclaves and boundaries that prevent that flow. Interestingly, this arrangement of enclosures and more private spaces was a product of both the incoming teams and the original occupiers. Dale emphasises that the social and the material are joint players in the resulting relationships, that as people are more nervous so resistance becomes embedded in the social and material re-construction of the interior and embodied subjects develop in in mutual enactment with the changing materiality of the workplace.

This emphasis on the sociality of objects is reflected in Knorr Cetina's (1997) exploration of objects as places of 'lack' where the 'the self as a structure of wanting is looping its desire , 'through the object and back' (1997:16). She is writing largely in the context of 'expert selves' and how objects become a way into learning, of filling a lack. They can freight knowledge in the way they change an understanding, of both themselves and of the relationships they carry. As objects become embedded in our particular practices, they stabilize our identity as we stabilize them. In the objects which are meaningful to us, the relationship is one of mutual reconstruction. As I engaged with my pictures at work [Figure 1-1], the pictures changed my view of my work space and I found different forms of comfort and interest in it and in them in that particular space. They were acting on me as I was experiencing and re-interpreting them. A good illustration of this comes from Pink, Morgan and Dainty (2014) showing how 'safe hands' in a medical setting are not a matter of rules but of the way in which gels, water and gloves work together to create practices, which are subject to human performing to be effective. In the organizational studies literature on people and objects, this kind of relational performativity has been a strong theme. Many studies, following Suchman (2005), Knorr Cetina (1997), Orlikowski (2007) and Humphries and Smith (2014) have positioned objects as things which work with us to create such things as affiliation and friendship, self-respect and safety. Halford's (2004), study of an insurance company indicates how the loss of a personal space to decorate was particularly keenly felt by those who had been in the organization for over ten years. Not having somewhere to put photographs or plants and to have familiar things around, was experienced as depersonalizing and devaluing, to the extent that five employees, against regulations, shared identity numbers in order for one them to log on early and keep a set of desks at which their own group could sit together and make them their own. They were close friends outside work as well as inside and the internal proximity and the understanding that your desk was your home at work, with personal things around it seen and shared with others, was a central part of their working lives. They contributed to a sense of personal and group

identity. The objects and the spaces together performed the work of making somewhere 'home', of gathering 'material memories' in Kwint, Breward and Aysley's (1999) evocative term and cementing affiliations. Milward, Haslam and Postmes (2007) found that being able to own and personalize a desk space contributed both to expressing their own identity and forming a stronger identity with colleagues, with the objects again performing the work of relating and affiliating, as well as being expressive of self. Not being able to personalise your desk can contribute to resentment and to both individual and collective resistance (Barnes 2007), while Hirst's (2011) study demonstrated that not being able to use even minimal decoration in a hotdesking environment led to sense of loneliness and indifference, especially for those who did not work in the same centre all the time and who were physically pushed to the margins as 'vagrants'. People who got in early every day became 'settlers', able to psychologically 'mark' the territory of their desk by repeated occupation as well as personal decoration, thus leading the 'vagrants' to avoid it even when the 'occupant' was on holiday. The constant mobility led to a loss of both status and collegial friendship and support, as the 'vagrants' sat among semistrangers. This loss of a permanent space to sit led to a reduced a sense of identity, with work becoming just a job. Warren's (2006) study of a hot-desking environment showed up again how decoration was significant in that she comments on how few desks were actually unadorned in a formally hot-desking environment. Objects in the spaces were described as 'homely', as indicating 'my' desk, and as indicating something about both a personal and a collective identity, either explicitly or implicitly.

Such relationality begins to take more theorized form in Elsbach's (2003) study of hot-desking. In it she shows how non-territorial work environments were threatening because of the inability to display personal possessions. The most threatening loss encapsulated in personal possessions was that of personal distinctiveness, followed by social distinctiveness, that is, being part of a distinctive group. This was followed by the loss of personal status (that is, perceived personal rank in the organization such as the quality of the work station or room) and social status. There is a hierarchy of threats and of needs in the loss and retention of personal possessions in the workplace. 'My desk' with 'my things' is potentially threatening to others. As Wolfram Cox and Minahan (2005) remark, ornament expresses difference, and decoration is an artifice for claiming space.

This theorizing is extended in the work of Brown, Lawrence and Robinson (2005). Psychological ownership of objects or a space is rooted in three desires: for efficacy, for self identity and for a place of one's own. Psychological ownership of an object will lead to people being defensive and territorial around that object, and to mark out and control the territory in which it rests through both behavior and the placing of objects. Thus the performativity of objects may act negatively, as in the case of the 'vagrants' who felt they could not sit at an empty desk which had someone else's objects around it and was redolent of their presence.

Territoriality is not simply about expressing attachment to an object (e.g. I love my office); rather it is centrally concerned with establishing, communicating and maintaining one's relationship with that object relative to others in the social environment. Brown et al. 2005:579

Objects are relational and affilliative both for individuals with themselves and between individuals. The mutuality in each of these relationships is encapsulated in Burke's (2006) proposal that rather than using 'performance' to describe an interaction with an object, we can use 'occasion', and consider the occasions on which 'things' are being 'done'. This can be encapsulated in the idea of 'doing' - 'doing drugs' or 'doing lunch'. There is an active, ongoing, situated and intentional character to our 'doing' with objects in our daily lives.

Tyler and Cohen's (2010) study exemplifies more of this 'doing' in exploring the links between academic women's experience of themselves as women in spaces where they hide in and from the space at the same time. The space is filled with objects which represent much of what they are hiding from and taking refuge in, such as hiding from the 'spillage' of others and either actively hiding evidence of their home life or taking refuge in reminders of it. The women were not comfortable in their spaces but they made efforts to control and create boundaries through it by making it welcome, by actively managing the kind of impression they wanted to 'do' in their space. 'Doing' the space and the objects together made up the gendered response of the women.

I return here to the idea of affordances, that is, what the object can offer to different people, because it encapsulates the complexity of 'doing' objects. O'Toole and Were (2008), following Hodder (1987), distinguish between two kinds of material culture, that which is *designed* to be representative such as badges or uniforms or traffic lights, and the material culture whose meanings can only be deciphered through practices happening between the material and nonmaterial. In O'Toole and Were's (2008) study, a repair department in a factory had blocked off a door to the research and development unit, a unit which had previously been privileged in the company and went where it wanted and helped itself to what it wanted. As the company grew and demanded quality products, repairs became more significant and the door was blocked, signaling a political change but also a change in practices. R and D had to ask for parts not take them. So the door offered affordances for different people at different times in its work as a portal for privilege and status. The affordances it offered were embedded in practice. This point about affordance is taken up by Connor (2011) referring to the 'magic' of things: that they can do much more than their surface appearance might suggest.

O'Toole and Were (2008) have shown how a door can offer resistance. Suchman (2005) comments, 'the material resistances of objects are inseparable from the arrangements through which they materialize in practice' (2005:381); that is, the nesting in work-placed understandings is what gives them their qualities to resist. Halford (2004) similarly demonstrates how objects serve to offer a resistance to change in a new office. She writes of workers who have a sense of entitlement to space, and when this is contravened they resist through the arrangements which they make in the space, putting up barriers of material objects to create more private spaces in

an open plan office. As with the door and the object in the women's offices, it is the enacting which both 'does', and encourages more of, the resistance.

Objects can also be threatening. In my own study of boardrooms (Betts 2006) I showed how material décor such as framed portraits or large smart tables can threaten and make people nervous, as well as give confidence or afford a good impression to visitors. Past understandings and practices around these objects, in places where battles have been fought in the past, create new behaviours of defence or aggression. Similarly new technology for doctors (Korica and Molloy 2010) can be a source of threat to doctors as they struggle to maintain their professional identity, at the same time as being a way of displaying their competence as they learn to handle it and being a source of help to those who benefit from the technology.

These studies all point to a level of emotionality around objects which is not often *explicitly* explored as a reaction to relationships with objects, with the emphasis more usually being on the practices which they provoke. Rafaeli and Vilnai Yavetz (2004) make this important link to the vehicle by which reactions to objects lead to practice in their study of a newly introduced 'green bus' in Israel, supposedly implying a concern for the environment. Public reactions to it were vehement, and Rafaeli and Vinai Yevetz draw from this that emotionality as a response to objects is a significant part of the way in which objects achieve their effects.

### 1.11 Performativity in space

In the discussion of representation I alluded to how objects in spaces had, in work such as Kanter's (1974) *Psychology for Architects*, been seen as variables. In the studies above, space became a constructed reality through the way in people colonized it with their objects and performed around those objects. Spaces became 'mine' or 'not where I should go' or 'where I feel threatened'.

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Geographical accounts of space, work and employment, (Halford 2004; Felstead, Jewson and Walters 2005; Taylor and Spicer 2007; Ehrlich and Bichard 2008), stories of territoriality (Barnes 2007) and moral and social order (Fox 2008; Parkin 1999), stories of the home (Tian and Belk 1997; Morton 2007), and stories of performativity (Nash 2000; Sweetster 2000) combine to give a picture of space and place which shows the connecting links between materiality and practices. The place we occupy and the objects that surround us are important to our understanding of ourselves in our everyday working lives. They influence our performing of those lives. As people explore and experience objects in the space they occupy, they are doing far more than relating to particular dislocated objects.

The increasingly significant interest in space within organization studies is established and highlighted by the work of Dale and Burrell (2008). Drawing on Levebvre's (1974) tripartite division of space into spaces of representation, representational space and spatial practices, they argue that all space is socially produced, linking the absolute materiality of space with the history, and the practices and the presentation of that space. No space is innocent; all spaces work reciprocally to reproduce and to transform and mediate the practices and understandings which are connected with that space. Space is a connecting point for social and material relations. In this sense it is, as Massey pointed out (1994), highly political. Halford (2004) bringing this closer to the workplace, moves beyond a simple sense of work spaces as places which are 'done to' people and 'received by' workers, to open them up as multiple, competing, dynamic constructions which are lived through and not in. Places – and spaces – are mobile effects: they move and change with the people who occupy them.

Places are where people work (Harvey 1978); 'places are not given, rather they are socially constructed, the product of a host of human practices' (Ward 2007:169). Herod et al. (2007) refer to the significance of work spaces due to the 'absolute particularity of the mixture of influences found there' (2007:255). Ward goes on to consider place, space and scale as part of

different sets of wider relations and connections. Scale is important in the workplace: we act at different scales. In our own small everyday working spaces we are also reacting to and working alongside the larger scale of the workplace, while we also react to the small-scaleness of our immediate surrounding material objects. The objects this thesis is concerned with, the immediate objects in people's working lives which they have daily contact with, are set in a very particular small scale place, a place which limits the number of networks into which they might be drawn.

Dale and Burrell (2008), following Lefebrve (1974), argue that all space is socially produced through the practices which happen in it, a point echoed by Hetherington:

Places... ... are the effects of arrangements of spaces, times, things, people and events in materialities from which a naming process can be performed and difference established in that name and the values associated with it. (Hetherington 1997:6)

All of this points to the nature of work spaces as places which are not easily 'read off' in terms of their working. When we think about the way in which objects are nested in space, it is an equally complex task to say what they mean, because the space itself is not singular and the objects contribute to that multiplicity of meaning. So the emerging picture is one of objects which are significant in many ways to individuals and to organizations, but where the significance is not reducible to easy understanding and categorization.

The doing of objects, the occasion for objects to work where they have impact in response to the setting, as suggested above in relation to drugs, or lunch, is also influenced by the spaces in which the doing happens. Sweetster (2000), giving a theoretical twist to 'doing', points out in a paper on space and performativity that performativity happens through a particular 'fit' between the mental space and the corresponding represented space. Put simply, one can either have a descriptive fit between the two – in my kitchen I have a list of objects I want to buy on my next trip to the supermarket – or a performative fit, when I take the list to the supermarket

and it makes me buy or not buy certain things. Objects can work differently depending on the context. 'Blackcurrants' on my list in the kitchen is descriptive before I set out. At the supermarket where blackcurrants are not available I am impelled by 'blackcurrants' to think about the occasion of blackcurrants in use, and to think what could be a substitute for the pudding I want to make. The relevance to this thesis of this distinction is that under some circumstances objects may be only descriptive – that is my computer, my mug – but at other times they may be performative. At bad times my mug is a way of having a comfort time with coffee, or at good times that mug is my way of connecting to other people, through suggesting that we take a communal coffee break in the room I share. That distinction, between the descriptive and the performative, gives power to the objects to act as enablers and points of instigation of a new set of possibilities.

#### 1.12 Performativity and ethics

This emphasis on practice takes the story of performativity in organizations into a different area, that of ethicality. Dale and Latham (2015) write of objects as neglected 'Others' with their own radical alterity: their neglect, as they are denigrated, dismissed and discriminated against constitutes an ethical position which they address through a consideration of the body. Building on the work of Merleau Ponty (1962), they point out that human embodiment is also material. Our connection with materiality *as material beings ourselves* requires us, following Levinas (1998), to see our encounter with the 'Other' as a site of ethical responsibility. Encounters with materiality can provoke ethical disturbances: in their case the unsuitability of an assessment form for a disabled person and an encounter between an inexperienced researcher with a leaking catheter bag. The ethical disturbances are never singular: each encounter can offer different entanglements and choices. But the overall point, that our very bodily-ness leads to questions of ethics, is significant for this thesis. Such ethicality is also the focus of Pullen and

Rhodes (2015) call for an ethics of organization which is less rational and more acknowledging of the way in which we too are material objects through our bodies.

As Dale and Latham (2015) point out, organization studies, while evidencing a growing interest in materiality has *'tended to de-emphasise the materiality of the body'* (2015:168) largely leaving intact the delineation between living beings and material things.

Bodies are also in spaces. This is territory extensively covered by both Merleau-Ponty (1962) and by others such as Verela, Rosch and Thompson, (1992) and Thompson (2007) arguing that body and non-human materiality are inextricably linked, the body being the place of perception of a materiality which is full of emergent phenomena. For Merleau Ponty, the object of perception is immanently tied to its background, to the nexus of meaningful relations among objects within the world. Involvement with things is always provisional and indeterminate: we encounter meaningful things in a unified though ever open-ended world (Landes 2013).

#### 1.13 How useful is performativity to this thesis?

Performativity begins to offer a different kind of knowledge, a knowledge embedded in the entanglement of objects in our worlds and in our bodies, as opposed to objects as representations or objects as equal performers in a creation of networks. It is not a levelling, as in ANT, but a recognition of the interplay of object and subject which is multiply understood and politically configured in uneven ways. This is really valuable because it is the location of objects in the daily practice of them, the mutual 'doing', which is the concern of this thesis.

The object can be therefore be thought of as multiple in that it has 'effects', it 'performs', it offers 'affordances' into situations. And its purposes may change as it performs under different circumstances, even for the same person. This sense, that the object is not a single 'thing' but an 'effector', is a useful gloss on the ANT notion of objects being in multiple networks. They are not just understood differently by people, but act differently for the same person in different circumstances, and I will take that forward into my discussion of my empirical data. These studies have shown that the objects are entangled in sociomaterial constructions of self and materiality, but are less concerned with the inner psychological processes which might be active in this. Within sociomaterial studies the place of emotionality has rarely been a specific focus of study or consideration. The place of emotion in the relationship with objects will be of greater importance in this thesis, as a connecting thread for making links between the actions and understandings of sociomaterial practices.

#### 1.14 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have outlined two epistemological approaches to reading how objects achieve their effects, and have woven into them studies from organizations related to this understanding.

Representational approaches offer to this thesis a way of appreciating how objects might relate to others and to the self. It brings the strength of making connections across parts of our lives which are embedded in wider social networks and understandings. It offers an understanding of why some objects may be chosen at work rather than others, because of the way these are politically allowable. However that very point makes the weakness of the approach clear because it fails to take into account the *way* objects are political negotiating points for particular people in particular situations.

I addressed performativity in two forms. I initially explored ANT to find possible links for the thesis. The notion of networks of objects and people is a helpful one to contribute to thinking about the networks in which objects sit. It could be a very good spotlight on the overlapping and changing nature of these networks as work and home situations change, although as pointed out above, the setting of this study as cross-sectional in time and place would make that difficult. It also stresses the impact of both humans and non-humans in creating webs and meshes of understanding, fitting well with the aim of this thesis to evaluate how objects fit into people's understanding of their identity.

I then turned to a more enactive form of performativity, expressing the link between objects and practice through the idea of 'doing' objects and of objects offering 'affordances' into both actions and understanding. Many studies attested to the way in which this occurred, for example to create safety, express gender, enact space and relate to technology. These are powerful studies to link into this thesis, in their clarity over the way in which sociomaterial entanglements happen and involve emotional and practical reactions. Many of the pointers are significantly relevant to thinking about how objects work, and I will return to them in my discussion to uphold or develop them.

Performativity's base lies in the way in which objects and people work together to lead to both understandings and practices. The understandings however are located in the person, and performativity preserves this privilege of human over non-human. The objects are performative but have no agency outside the performative envelope which holds the two together.

A final strand of writing indicated that materiality has an ethical part to play in our dealings with it, and it with us, and I will return to this in my discussion.

# Chapter 2

# 'Being' at work: identity in the workplace

In this chapter I discuss the nature of identity and justify why Mead's (1934) formulation of a social 'me' reflected from others and personal 'I' responding to this reflection is the most useful for this thesis. I review literature from Organization Studies which provides emerging evidence for a self which includes role-based identities but is also underpinned by a more long lasting sense of self. From psychological studies I develop this longer-lasting self as the idea of an identity standard against which role identities are compared for 'fit'. Using Hobfoll's (2011) 'Caravan of Resources' theory, I argue that people actively look for resources that contribute to a positive sustaining of a longer-term self (the 'I') and that are also effective in the comparisons made between role-demands and this identity standard. Drawing on the material covered in Chapter 1, I contend that material objects as much as discourse form part of the resources which do identity work and that this has been a neglected part of identity studies in organizations.

# 2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I considered the place of material objects in organizations, specifically the way in which literature suggests they have influence or allow agency in the lives of workers. In that chapter I showed how material objects are important at work by critiquing the separation of social (human) and material (non-human) 'things', arguing that objects are caught up in our work lives by their unavoidable tangible presence: they are implicated through 'performing' and 'doing' multiple things, engaging in networks of people and things, and representing to us things which are important in our lives. What I took from that review was a strong understanding that the work objects do is complex, and that *why* they are able to do this is something that needs further exploration, along with what and how they have an impact.

As outlined in the introduction, we make sense of ourselves in our everyday lives at work by telling ourselves stories about ourselves. This making sense has commonly been referred to as identity construction or negotiation as shown in studies outlined in this chapter. We use many resources to do this and, as indicated in Chapter 1, some of those resources are material ones. This chapter will therefore examine how identity has been studied in organizations, in particular how it has related to materiality, and will suggest a way in which identity negotiation may happen.

This first section will outline the key theoretical issues in studies on identity, including work from both organization studies literature and from psychological literature.

## 2.2 Defining identity for this thesis

Brubaker and Cooper (2000) ask what work the 'blurred but indispensable' term 'identity' is being asked to do in studies of it across many disciplines. They argue that it has become too loose and broad a term for practical use, covering as it does both individual and group usages and political and personal formulations: if identity is everywhere, they say, it is nowhere. They comment,

> And quite apart from the pervasive concern with "identity" in work on gender, sexuality, race, religion, ethnicity, nationalism, immigration, new social movements, culture, and "identity politics", even those whose work has not been concerned primarily with these topics have felt obliged to address the question of identity. A selective listing of major social theorists and social scientists whose main work lies outside the traditional "home-lands" of identity theorizing yet who have nonetheless written explicitly on "identity" in recent years includes Zygmunt Bauman, Pierre Bourdieu, Fernand Braudel, ... Jürgen Habermas, David Laitin, Claude Levi-Strauss, Paul Ricoeur, Amartya Sen, Margaret Somers, Charles Taylor, Charles Tilly, and Harrison White.

(Brubaker and Cooper 2000:4)

This position is echoed by Stryker and Burke (2000) who point to the term 'identity' being used to fit the notions of a broad culture of a people, the association with a collective group who have a particular joint interest, or an individual's understanding of themselves. The concept of identity, say Brubaker and Cooper (2000), is '*riddled with ambiguity, riven with contradictory meanings and encumbered by reifying connotations...* ...with multifarious forms' (2000: 46).

Stryker and Burke (2000) outline both a 'strong' and a 'weak' form of identity in current writing, although even within these two there are different shades of understanding. The 'strong' form they clarify as an 'everyday' understanding, a semi-essentialist although increasingly nuanced, position, that there is some kind of core identity (see also Stryker and Burke 2000). Brubaker and Cooper (2000) coin the useful phrase a 'category of practice' rather than a category of analysis. This is an understanding of the self which veers in usage between something that people know about themselves and something that may be so fundamental as to be unknown except in very exceptional circumstances, such as under extreme pressure. It is about the particular claims which people make for themselves through their understanding of their histories, predicaments and trajectories. The 'weak' position posits identity as multiplly and socially constructed through the many groups we belong to, and unable to take a cultural or philosophical stand outside itself in order to have a stronger form (Harré 2002), in other words, functioning more as a category of analysis. The term identity in the organizational studies literature has increasingly been used in this second way, to indicate a range of identified selves including social identity (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas 2008), gender identity (Tyler and Cohen 2010; Alvesson 1998; Jorgenson 2002), work identity (Walsh and Gordon 2008; Witt, Patti and Farmer 2002; Sluss and Ashforth 2007), and professional identity (Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann 2006). In each of these studies, the identity in question has been a negotiated one. For example, in Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann's study of medical students, the students were asked to behave in ways which they felt were likely to be temporary to gain the approval of their trainers, and for Tyler and Cohen's women academics, their identity suffered from their proximity in their work spaces to men who

took up more space than they did. These different identities reflect both the roles people play and their understanding of themselves within these roles. Harré (1983), for example, and others (e.g. Kenny et al. 2011), assert cogently that this definition of self as socially constructed through our roles is an unarguable position, and that even though people may *feel* they have a sense of a core stable self, they are unable to step out of their cultural and social context to know this. Any attempt to find a fixed self is always inflected by situational socio-cultural factors. We are only 'performed' by our histories and circumstances. Indeed, Roberts (2005), using a Lacanian framework, contends that it is the very search for a core self which makes us unhappy. However there is a more recent turn in organizational studies to using the notions of 'social identity' to contrast with an 'inner self identity' which is in some way inflected by the social identity, and this call for a more 'practice-based' version of identity is echoed by Pratt (2012). Beech (2011), citing Watson (2009) for example, uses this division of an inner and outer identity in discussing how people move from feeling in a liminal identity space, 'outside' an organizational grouping, to where they feel they 'belong' and have a stronger sense of being themselves. A similar use of identity appears in Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane and Greig (2012) while Ainsworth and Grant (2012), underlining this point, suggest that social construction in identity has become 'tired'.

In this thesis my interest is in a 'strong' from of identity. I have commented above on the difficulty of defining identity. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) suggest that 'self-understanding' is a less reified term than identity for the common understanding, although still not very precise as a term. Most such 'strong' definitions of identity agree that in some way it involves a matter of reflexivity *about* the self *in relation* to others. So, for example, Giddens' (1991:53) defines it as 'the self reflexively understood by the person' and Stets and Burkes' (2000) definition is as 'the set of meanings that are tied to and sustain the self as an individual'. I use these definitions, and Brubaker and Cooper's (2000) suggestion of 'self-understanding', because they get close to what I want to explore, that is, what objects contribute to the sense of self as construed by the person

(at work). This thesis is interested in how we know who we are at work and how material objects help us to be or remain that person.

This strong form of identity, as a category of practice, has more usually been the preserve of psychology.<sup>1</sup> Psychological studies of identity, although including socially constructed formulations, akin to those prevalent in organization studies, also have a robust argument for a 'core self' in practice, albeit not an unchangeable one (Stryker and Burke 2000; Reitzes and Mutran 1995; Brown 2000).

I therefore draw on the work of social psychologists to underpin my understanding of identity. Within this tradition, however, which draws particularly on the notion of a socially constructed but reflexive self, there are still multiple variations. Elliot (2008) draws the distinctions and similarities, underlining how reflexivity and a response to it are common threads in a tradition of sociological approaches to identity.

Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionist approach proposes that the self is the agency through which individuals experience themselves in relation to others. As he says, *'to possess a 'self' then necessarily implies an ability to take one's actions, emotions and beliefs as a unified structure, viewed from the perspective of significant others, as others would view and interpret actions of the self' (2008:32)*. Mead proposes a self in two parts: that through which individuals experience themselves in relation to others (which he called 'me', as in 'what others do or say to me') and that part of the self which reflects on what those others say or do in reaction to us, (which he called 'I', that is, 'what do I think of this response to me') (Mead, 1934, Elliot 2008). 'I' and 'me' are constantly in play as we reflect on the events which surround us and engage, in Mead's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The original use of identity was in psychoanalytic understandings. In this thesis psychoanalytic understandings are not seen as an appropriate tool to explore identity because there are significant aspects which are not relevant to the research questions, even if I had the skill. For example, the place of the unconscious, the strong and complex influence of very early childhood, which is different in different psychoanalytic constructions, the very particular understanding of objects in certain formulations such as Wiinicott's or Klein's, or the place of universal symbols as in Jungian approaches, are all aspects of psychoanalysis which may play a part in people's attachment to material objects. This would make for a different thesis, needing to be far more focused on individual stories.

term, in 'minding', that is reflecting on what is going on within the individual as well as between individuals.

Mead's approach has been critiqued as being over rational and failing to take into account political and cultural implications for the development of the self. Goffman (1959, 1968) suggests that individuals do transcend their roles; they have a 'role distance' which allows them to achieve effects in relation to others by the conscious playing out of self presentation, responding to the context of the interaction. We watch ourselves but are also constrained by our circumstances, as in his work on asylum inmates (1968). Goffman's approach has been seen as both amoral (Gouldner 1956) and as a basis for a morality of tact and trust (Collins 1992) but his ideas of 'role distance' and self presentation are significant for this thesis in that they do take into account an awareness of social circumstances. Giddens (2009) posits a tacit knowledge and reflexive self understanding in our self mastery which again relies on a high degree of reflection and response to social circumstances.

This very brief account offers the idea of reflexivity and of how people do make comparisons with external pressures and respond to them, wherever those pressures may come from, as a base for approaching data generated by this thesis. Given that I was interested in people's personal understandings of the meaning they give to objects, it is hard to take into account the wider social context. I say this not because that context is unimportant, but because such attention to social settings would require a methodology which observed the settings in action, ethnomethodologically, and possibly used far fewer participants. I wanted to use as wide a sample of people as possible, for reasons explained in my methodology chapter, and this obviated against being able to do such a long term and narrower project. I therefore opted to adopt Mead's understanding of the reflective I/me interface as base on which to think about how people were responding to the objects. This position also begins to connect with the move

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mentioned above by Beech et al. (2012), to take a less strongly constructivist approach to identity.

This concept of 'I' and 'me' is also implicated in how children relate to others who are meaningful as friends and supporters, a potentially similar situation to the use of meaningful objects in adults. Damon and Hart (1988), describe children and adolescents as having two questions to ask about friendship: relating to another person evokes the question 'what have they got to bring to me?' while relating a possible friendship to one's self provokes the question 'what do I see about me through this friendship?' It addresses how self regulation and a self concept might fit together to say 'this person/object both impacts on me and also shows me something of myself through the meanings which I attach to it'. For example, this person likes playing football, and enjoys playing it with me; that confirms my view of myself as someone who is quite good at football, which is what they bring to me, and that I see myself as friendly in that they want to play with me. The parallel questions about *meaningful* material objects at work might be: 'how do the objects impact on me' and 'what kind of sense do I make of myself through my relationship with these objects?' The observation about children's friendships indicates just how early this reflective and reflexive 'I'/'me' dynamic is set up in relation to the social world.

### 2.3 Studying identity in organizations

Identity has been studied in organizations largely because researchers are interested in how people make sense of themselves at work, in a relationship which is transactional, subject to power differentials and to control over what is acceptable in a variety of ways; modes of dress, for example, or preferred means of communicating can be subject to considerable prescriptiveness. These studies on identity have had a number of different objectives, as Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas (2008) point out. The focus may be technical, that is, concerned with managerial interests of how to make people more compliant and 'effective' at work; it may

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be practical, examining daily decision making; or it may be hermeneutic/ emancipatory, seeking to uncover how people negotiate a sense of self. The majority of the studies on identity fall into the last category, seeking to understand how people work at and craft an identity in the workplace. That is also the focus of this thesis.

#### Studying identity through narrative

I begin with studies of identity using narrative as method because that has been the most common empirical approach. However I intend to show two things through this. One is that the concept of identity has become less reified through these accounts, with people indicating that there are different aspects of identity which they encounter during stress. The other is that this method by itself is inadequate for this thesis since it does not take into account the material context as an important contributor to identity.

The most common situation under which identity has been examined has been through researchers talking with workers, usually managers, at a time of change or significant pressure, to see how the workers reflect on what is going on for them, that is, to investigate what Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas (2008) and Watson (2009) call the doing of 'identity work'. The assumption behind these studies is that identity is best researched when it reveals itself under pressure, an assumption which this thesis challenges through its focus on the daily lives of workers and their negotiation of identity through non-pressured situations.

People can be seen to engage in identity work, therefore, when the routinized reproduction of a self-identity in a stable setting is discontinued, and this may be triggered by uncertainty, anxiety, questioning or self-doubt...Conscious identity work is thus grounded in at least a minimal amount of self doubt and self openness, typically contingent upon a mix of psychological existential angst and complex or problematic social situations.

(Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas 2008:15)

This focus on times of stress and change has indicated that individual workers do use self narratives to make sense of themselves to themselves at such time. Clarke, Brown and HopeHailey (2009) write of antagonistic discourses *within* the self at times of pressure, where managers speak of having to re-author themselves as 'moral beings' after promotion when they have to re-work their loyalties, both to their managers and to those they now manage. Svenningsen and Alvesson (2003), Watson (2008, 2009) and Ibarra and Barbalescu (2010) describe fragmentation and integration through self narratives as key work to be done in maintaining an identity which is being asked to change, to be undone and re-worked again as a new manager. Kosmala and Herrbach (2000) and Karreman and Alvesson (2009) write about managers who have to talk themselves into their roles through discourse, allowing resistance to emerge through narratives of life balance and autonomy, simultaneously distancing themselves from and complying with what they feel is demanded of them at work. The stories may have locale-influenced content: academics told themselves different stories about how they coped with insecurity through particular frameworks such as feeling imposters or aspirants in Knights and Clarke's study (2013) while Kuhn (2006) found similar locally influenced stories about time commitment in pressured organizations.

This struggle to re-negotiate the self under pressure at work is highlighted by Alvesson (2010) from the perspective of the researcher, suggesting that we recognise – and may have a predilection to hear – certain 'positions' within this struggle. People may be telling stories of self-doubt, or struggle or soldiering in some way or strategizing: in practice all these may be true of the individual and may morph as an interview develops. Nicholson and Carroll (2013) point out that in 'identity undoing' in new managers such reframing of how one responds to work is essential to retaining a sense of both personal and professional identity in the face of power.

Petriglieri (2011) theorises the nature of identity threat responses, defining adaptive responses into three different types of story-telling: derogating the source of threat, or concealing an aspect identity, which protects the self; concealing an identity; or restructuring the self by making it more positive and distinctive. Dutton, Roberts and Bednar (2010) suggest that there are multiple ways of being 'positive', through feeling virtuous in ourselves to being a greater part of the structure. Such adapting is reminiscent of the strategies used by hot-deskers outlined in Chapter 1 where the possession or lack of a personal space created a similar feeling of distinctiveness or insignificance (Elsbach 2003). Petriglieri (2011) also suggests that the response will depend on the salience of the identity under threat, a point to which I will return later.

Adapting can also happen at a group level which feeds back into an individual level, especially in marginalised workers. For example, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) and Baran et al. (2012) studied 'dirty workers': grave-diggers, oil workers and animal shelter workers who became a cohesive group through redefining the meanings of their work as something to take pride in as a group, taking back a moral confidence. Such marginalised groups also figure in a study of LGBT priests in the US (Creed, Dejordy and Lok 2010) who through joint narratives created for themselves a more coherent and more 'embodied' acceptance and defence of their sexuality. A group of graduate research administrators, made to feel challenged about their status in a university, adopted multiple narratives to maintain their prestige for themselves (Collinson 2004), while prisoners in a Helsinki prison who re-worked their identities (Brown and Toyoki 2014) and those who justified and accepted doing emotional 'dirty work' did this re-working through their narratives (McMurray and Ward 2014). Ashforth, Rogers and Corley (2010) point out that the way in which identities still differ in their content despite such group understandings over specific issues indicates again that identities are not unidimensional at work: other aspects of the self work in a 'cross-level' (their term) way to allow reflection on selves not involved in the group identity, and maybe contradictory to it. The point is that 'me' and 'l' work to produce different levels of the self, illustrated also in Toyoki and Brown's (2013) study of prisoners who used un-stigmatized parts of themselves to discursively redefine themselves as 'good' people. Unexpected outcomes of reworking of identity through change occur in Sturdy, Brocklehurst, Winstanley and Littlejohns (2006) study of MBA students who found that the changes came not

through work practices but through changes in discourse which allowed students to feel greater confidence in themselves.

The narratives, internal and external, that have emerged from these and other studies indicate the way in which managers feel they have to negotiate a sense of self. Too much 'stretch' – asking the self to change too radically – can lead to a number of techniques of resistance in order to defend the self. One may be exiting the organization: Kenny (2010), for example, writes of an employee at Enron who worked to re-identify herself in many ways, both as employee and outside work, but who in the end could not do the 're-authoring' of her morality at work enough to avoid whistle-blowing. Experience of negotiating identity under terms of abuse and stigma has also shown up how people use quite tortuous self-narratives – or silence – to protect themselves from gender or racial abuse (Lutgen-Sandvik 2008; Clair, Beatty and Maclean 2005).

Narratives were also used in exploring more creative and explicitly adaptive tactics used by younger people, who were experiencing tension at key developmental points in their early career. For example, medical students at a medical Boot Camp (Pratt, Rockman and Kaufmann 2006) spoke of how they used sense making via 'splinting, patching and enriching' techniques to negotiate their identity under pressure from senior surgeons. Splinting was about simply adding on something to their sense of self, rather uncomfortably, either because it was novel or because it was not something they would want to do permanently. Patching and enriching were things which either followed as they got used to something and adapted to it as part of their sense of being a surgeon, or were things they welcomed as part of their developing expertise, and these would become more permanent parts of their identity. They were conscious that they were being asked to change but recognised that they could make either temporary, essentially uncommitted but tactical, adjustments to their sense of self, or more permanent acceptances of change. An example of adapting where there was less feeling of choice, comes from Ethier and Deaux's (1994) study of Hispanic students in higher education in the USA, who spoke either of

very consciously making the effort to meld into their new American background or retreated into being more isolatedly Hispanic.

A more considered adjustment is illustrated through Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep's (2006) study of priests. These people were not being asked to make sudden adjustments in response to promotion or to training, but rather were developing their sense of self over time as various job demands presented themselves. The priests consciously created boundaries in reaction to demands from parishioners, thinking through who they were and who they wanted to be. They constructed a hierarchy of roles; being a parent or partner, for example, came before being priest for some of them, and this was a very firmly held position, suggesting some inner framework of how these boundaries might be created. There was a strong sense of the 'I' reflecting on 'me', of an inner self which made decisions about the roles which others expected, as psychological literature would lead us to expect. This study also picks up on Ahuvia's (2005) and Schultz, Maguire, Langley and Tsoukas' (2012) point that identity narratives inevitably tap in to life histories and key events in those histories. Past experience as a priest, mistakes made, were important in their reflection on their role. The 'l' is composed of past experiences which are able to reflect on the current roles of the 'me'. Obodaru (2012) goes a step further in writing about the 'selves not taken', suggesting, for example, that past potential selves could be used to make sense of the present selves. It could be used to apportion blame (if someone had treated me better in my last job then I wouldn't have to be here) or to be creative (I really wanted to do that before and now I could make it happen here).

Watson (2010) adds to this plea in suggesting that identity studies in organizations need to move beyond the 'narrative imperialism' into a greater consideration of life story, but does not include the material specifically in this.

This discussion of narrative-based stories of people who 're-author' themselves has firstly been used to show that, while they are telling themselves stories about themselves, the stories have

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emerged as very complex both in the way that they move between different parts of the self and in the way in which comparisons and balances are used to produce a new 'acceptable' story. This complexity has only just started to feature in organizational studies of identity and this thesis builds on the work that has been done to explore it further. However using only narrative, the conscious story, makes it hard to access other parts of the person.

Secondly, the stories people tell themselves have been used to study identity work in times of stress, when an identity may fragment and then integrate under organizational pressure. The focus of the studies has been to show how people do 'identity work' under these circumstances, by asking them to describe their experiences of themselves. They have identified the way in which the 'me' that receives input about how they should be, or how they are perceived, is taken by the 'l' and re-negotiated into something which feels acceptable to them in their work. The descriptions have illustrated that people are able to express how they adapt to strain and how they make choices within that adapting, based on what is important to them, whether that be keeping a work-life balance, choosing a group to identity with or accepting a temporary 'identity veneer' which will later be rejected. In all this there is evidence that people are making choices about what is or is not comfortable for them, and are possibly drawing on other parts of their lives to do this. Identity at work is not a single thing but composed of reflections on past, present and possible futures.

#### Three lacunae emerge from these studies.

Firstly, there is a lack of consideration of how materiality plays into the negotiating of identity at work. People are located in physical settings at work, which as Chapter 1indicated, have a significant impact on emotional experience at work. in this thesis I contend that such materiality plays a part in identity shaping.

Secondly, they have focused on times of stress, but identity work is an ongoing process and it is important also to consider how it is negotiated on a more day-to-day basis, both for organizations and for individuals. This thesis examines such times of small daily stressors but also times of achievement and collegiality at work, and how they impact on identity.

Finally, the nature of the comparators by which people make identity adjustments need to be explored. What are they using to build an adjustment and what is it about the new story which feels acceptable?

#### Studying identity through materiality

Materiality per se is fairly sparsely used as a resource for studying identity in the workplace. Studies which do show how identity is experienced through the material include the studies of hot-desking already referred to in Chapter 1 (Hirst 2011; Elsbach 2003; Warren 2006). The clear theme from these studies is that materiality, or rather its lack, can be a source of misery and loss of or confusion about identity. Warren (2006) illustrates how objects in hot-desking help to form 'nests' for people at work, and without such objects and the stability of a place to mark as one's own, people feel isolated on an everyday basis. A lack of things to distinguish themselves from others makes them fragmented, incoherent and under threat, both personally and socially, (Elsbach 2003) without things to connect them to others (Hirst 2011).

An alternative investigation into the positive use of materiality to underpin a sense of self or selves, comes from Tian and Belk's study (2005) on the extended self, discussed in Chapter 1 To re-cap, for Tian and Belk, the objects symbolised a range of identities which covered both work and personal selves, allowing the object-user the chance to access 'extended' selves, for example, selves at home or in leisure activities, through the materiality of the things around them at work. The materiality offers the self a way of connecting, of reminding about other lives and bringing biography powerfully into play. In a related study of people at home, Ahuvia (2005)

examined objects that people love and how they use these objects to work towards establishing a coherent identity. It is useful in its finding that people use three strategies: 'demarcating', 'compromising' and 'synthesizing'. 'Demarcating' indicated objects that were part of a core desired and valued identity, such as family photos, or reminders of particular significant events or of particular aspects of someone's life. 'Compromising and 'synthesizing' referenced objects which were more lightly held, and which might be given up easily or substituted. Again history and biography played a big part in the objects' categorisation. Some things matter more than others in people's lives in marking out for themselves who they are. In this there is a hark back to the boot-camp medical students who splinted, patched and enriched through their practices and discourse, feeling that some parts of themselves were more deep-rooted and significant in their practice than others. This significance was not rooted so much in biography as in the values and the practices associated with being a doctor.

Material objects can create identity challenges. Medical personnel using new technology, a particular form of materiality, were uneasy, and found their sense of self to be in constant flux as they struggled with new techniques; the presence of new objects was a source of discomfort, provoking a need for reassessment of themselves as competent workers (Korica and Molloy 2010). Kenny (2010) indicates that objects can divide as well as unite; that different understandings of objects in public places and different valuings of them can raise antagonisms in a 'dark side' of identification, through possessiveness and rivalry. In the hot-desking studies rivalry over space to settle produced similar antagonisms.

Space and place can also be implicated in identity formation; clinician-managers were conscious of how their professional identity was split in contradictory ways in the mobile as opposed to the local places where they worked (Ainsworth, Grant and Iedema 2009).

Firstly, in these studies people are indicating that identity is something both experienced and negotiated through material objects. Material objects in their work setting have power to make

people feel more or less 'themselves' as they want to be, lessened into a vagrant without a material base, discomfited by objects which challenge their expertise, linked in to other welcome parts of their lives. Objects are implicated in the re-working of identity.

Secondly, these connections with material objects are in play on a daily and routine basis rather than being pulled into action at a time of major change. The objects begin to highlight the continuous identity work which they enable. This thesis is concerned to build on and develop this practical implication of the objects in on-going daily identity work.

Finally the question of what comparator might be being used in deciding which objects are of more significance than others in framing a personal identity takes this chapter back to psychological understandings of how identity may be negotiated and built up.

#### Psychological approaches to negotiating identity

The distinction between an idea of self as constantly mutating through the adoption of different roles and that of a more reflective and longer-term self is beginning to be broken down in organizational studies. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) observe,

[In academic studies of identity]... we often find an uneasy amalgam of constructivist language and essentialist argumentation. This is not a matter of intellectual sloppiness. Rather, it reflects the dual orientation of many academic identitarians as both analysts and protagonists of identity politics. It reflects the tension between the constructivist language that is required by academic correctness and the foundationalist or essentialist message that is required if appeals to ``identity'' are to be effective in practice. Nor is the solution to be found in a more consistent constructivism: for it is not clear why what is routinely characterized as multiple, fragmented, and fluid should be conceptualized as ``identity'' at all.

(Brubaker and Cooper 2000:27)

Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas (2008), for example, connect identity re-negotiation with feelings, values and behaviour in a suggestion that identity is a process of becoming, in which some overarching understanding of enduringly-held values is significant. This comment is

echoed by Svenningsen and Alvesson (2003), who suggest that there is something more permanent in identity, a connective tissue between the selves variously experienced which allows for reflection and comparison between them. Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) speak of a need to accept that there is a measure of continuity in identity, and also of a need for coherence and distinctiveness, which picks up on Elsbach's (2003) study reviewed in Chapter 1, where a feeling of personal distinctiveness was the most crucial element for hot-deskers. Moreover Elsbach's study suggests a hierarchy of needs within the self in relation to resources and what they offer, which includes things which contribute to personal distinctiveness, personal status, social distinctiveness and social status, with personal distinctiveness as the most salient to identity formation. Meyer, Becker and van Dick (2006) in their study of managers make an interesting point that identity is different to commitment; that situated and deep structured social identities, based on values, are differently antecedent to exchange behaviour identities, suggesting that there are layers of identity which may have greater or lesser salience in restorying the self, reminiscent of Alvesson's (2011) range of identities. Some identities are more powerful than others.

With the above in mind, that there seems to be a *practical* experience of some felt core identity, I turn to psychological literature which attempts to integrate the two positions, drawing together the set of social roles and an inner core of identity. This work reflects on how they might work together in a way which has not yet been done explicitly in the organizational studies literature.

#### Ordering understandings of the self through' identity standards'

Stryker and Burke (2000), set out to show how an ordering of selves might take effect. The question they pose is, '*Given situations in which there exist behavioural options aligned with two* (or more) positions in networks of social relationships, why do persons choose one particular course of action?' (2000:286). In doing so, they outline how role identities are established

through their setting in social situations, yet also note the inner processes of self verification, (the 'l' of Mead). They suggest this inner process works via a set of standards which the 'l' holds about itself at any one particular time, a set of standards which says 'I am like this'. It is important here to say that this inner standard for Styker and Burke (2000) is *not* invariant. It is built up over time and through experience and so is very slow to change but is not unchanging, through further experience and reflection. For example, I may hold inner convictions about the nature of truth-telling. As a child I was taught that I should always tell the truth and that I should be kind and thoughtful, both central planks in my understanding of myself. As I meet situations in adulthood, the principle of not deceiving is modified. Sometimes not telling the truth is kinder and also more effective in gaining an ultimate kind end. Such a modification will emerge only after much reflection and experience. Role identities are more malleable, held more in response to situations, and may change much faster through changes in life circumstances. If I join a new music group, for example, I will quickly learn how we are expected to relate, both through the music and in terms of serious application to practice, and one group may differ from another. I may also prefer one group to another because it meets my inner standard of kind collaboration, so I may leave a group. The process of self- verification is about checking out the match between the 'l' set of standards and what the 'me' is being asked to do, or to hear, or to understand. What links the two, the connective tissue which brings the cognitive schema of the 'l' into the social behaviours and understandings of the 'me', is their common meanings. How far are the convictions in the inner standards, the inner set of values which make up the 'l', salient to the roles which are being played? These meanings, Stryker and Burke (2000) suggest, allow personal identities to be used as a comparator against role and group identities. In times of stress, the relevant standards that we hold about ourselves are held against the set of other values which we are being asked to adopt, and we compare them. If the identity standard is felt, in Stryker and Burke's word, to have salience, that is, it ties in with the new behaviours and understandings which are being proposed, then the match will be easy. If there is conflict, the

identity standard may override the new role, so provoking whistle blowing, or quitting. For example, as part of my core standard, my view of 'me', I value myself as a person who is concerned for equality. In my role at church, I was faced recently with an action from a very senior member of clergy in the diocese which I thought was discriminatory. I could either accept his decision in case there were repercussions on the church in some way, or I could challenge it. If I accepted it, then my core standard would receive a very hard knock indeed and I would have to ask just what I meant by thinking of myself as a supporter of equality. In the event I did challenge and my sense of myself as *actively* concerned with equality was palpably strengthened. This example illustrates how the standard is engaged with actions as well as reflections. Standards are developed performatively in engaging with life events, and they are applied with a recognition of situational factors. For example, I am in general a competent person and do new tasks conscientiously and like to do them well. Part of my core standard is doing things effectively. However when it comes to my t'ai chi class, I accept that I am a beginner, that there is a vast amount to learn and that I may be satisfied with very small gains in competence, as long as I am doing my best. I adjust my time frame at least, to say I will get better at it. We have choice, if we are aware of our values and standards.

In Korica and Molloy's (2009) study of medical boot-camp, comparison between identity standards and roles behaviours explains why some required behaviours were adopted temporarily, seen as things which were not cognate with the students identity standard of 'being a doctor', but other activities, which were salient to the 'l' of being a doctor, produced more permanent changes in the identity standard. A similar application is seen in Kreiner et al.'s (2006a) study of priests, where the priests were able to make a relevant hierarchy of their different identities and to be firm about the place each one had, signalling what was the overall identity which mattered, such as 'being a partner comes before everything'. In Ahuvia's (2005) work on synthesising, demarcating and compromising over identity in response to external pressure, people were again able to decide which strategy to use by reference to the inner set of values: a precious biographical object was seen as more salient than a more passing piece of personal decoration.

Stryker and Burke (2000), Burke (2006) and Freese and Burke's (1994) proposal about identity standards as a common meaning across roles resonates with the work outlined above from Svenningson and Alvesson (2003) and others suggesting that there is something overarching to identity, something more than a collection of role identities, which underpins whether and how new roles are adopted. Again to recap, other studies (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas 2008) propose that this overarching sense may be one of standards. This is important because if it is comparison with a standard of some sort which underpins and anchors the self in times of change, that may be at the root of the work that is happening through the objects in this thesis. Objects may be expressive in some way of the inner standards.

What resources do people have for accessing and, even more importantly, mobilising those inner standards? If they come into play how do they do so? We have seen how discourse allows them to be drawn into play, with people comparing how they feel in a new role with how they feel overall with themselves. But we live in a material world, and as I have shown in Chapter 1 people rely on material things as resources for expressing and experiencing their identity as much as words. What place does the material world play in that?

#### **Resources for identity standards**

*A* step back needs to be taken here into the wider concept of resources. People do use aids of various sorts in order to maintain, strengthen and rework their standards. In the example above relating to questioning a standard about discrimination, I had conversations with two people who know me well and who allowed me to explore the strength of my own inner values to reach a conclusion. Other more material resources which people may use to uphold their personal values may be the acquisition, or indeed the stripping of possessions. In the introduction I cited studies of prisoners, where the deprivation of personal possessions was a form of punishment,

perhaps almost of removal of humanity. Migrants too experience the loss of possessions as profoundly depriving of 'themselves', both individually and as a group. A Wellcome Institute exhibition of personal objects (Powell 2011) indicated how attached people were to particular objects such as a pot of baby teeth, or a souvenir from a holiday. These are strong expressions of the place of personal objects as resources for the self, defining oneself, allowing memories and attachments. Elsbach (2003) suggests that they also offer status and distinctiveness to the self. Research on consumer behaviour (Miller 2005) suggests that we actively seek out such resources. Resources may include objects or personal resources such as skills, past experience and friends, and this is as true at work as outside work. When I was a university lecturer one of my key resources was my friendship with others who felt as I did about the management regime and part of my fury at having my photographed used, as outlined in my prelude, was the fear of the diminishment of this resource.

Another related aspect of our social selves learned very early in life is how we are buffered by third party help at work in times of stress (Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Giebels and Jansen 2005; Terry, Nielsen and Perchard 1993). Other people are there as places of comfort, support, resourcing, and development. Objects may also be part of that very necessary buffering and I will explore just how that might work in my discussion.

Hobfoll's (2011) theory of Conservation of Resources (COR), developed in a work setting, suggests that one is supported at work as well as elsewhere through the marshalling and reworking of multiple resources, both material and psychological.

[COR] begins with the tenet that individuals strive to obtain, retain, foster and protect those things they centrally value. This means that people employ key resources in order to conduct the regulation of the self, their operation of social relations and how they organize, behave and fit into the greater context of organizations and culture itself.

(Hobfoll 2011: 117)

Hobfoll comments on the way in which resources come in 'caravans' within organizations and that individual resources, to be effective, need to be nested in an environment, or ecology, where 'passageways' can be created that foster resource creation. The 'caravan' may include many different types of resource, both for the completion of work tasks but also for the upholding of personal identities: colleagues, formal power, access to formal resources such as tools necessary to complete work, and personal possessions and friendships. The 'passageways' are routes which allow this to happen, such as access to training or chances to network or, I will argue, the ability to have personal possessions. Among the resources gathered will be the informal ones that are not dictated by work yet are crucial to feeling good at work, such as my group of colleagues referred to above. Without a desk, without personal items, the hot-deskers were unhappy: they lost the resources which gave them personal distinctiveness (Elsbach 2003). Who they were at work, not just what they did, became problematic, as they moved from feeling like an inhabitant to identifying as a vagrant (Hirst 2011). They had no 'caravan' or collection of resources which was of any significance to them. In other words the organization needs to allow ways in which resources can be marshalled rather than dissipated or forbidden, and these resources need to be able to include the physicality of the immediate environment.

Hobfoll's theory has largely been used in studies of stress and burnout, (Halbesleben 2006; Penney, Hunter and Vandenberghe 2011; Sun and Pan 2008; Westman, Hobfoll, Chen and Laski 2005; Alarcon, Edwards and Menke 2011) to indicate how lack of resources, both material and psychological, is detrimental to workers. It has also been discussed as over-general in its approach, (Quick and Gavin 2001; Thompson and Cooper 2001) and the proposed application in this thesis is an extension and refinement of the theory.

The important point here is that the resources we choose, or are able to create, contribute to confirming or denying the salience of an identity standard. If we think of ourselves as powerful

and have no resources in a situation, our identity as, for example, a person of power, or even a person able to make decisions, may need to change.

Resources are important for maintaining an identity but so is the loss of resources, as remarked above. Resource loss, writes Hobfoll (2011) matters more than resource gain, and people need to invest in resources in order to protect against resource loss.

What the notion of resources offers to this thesis is another view of how resources such as the objects in a person's work space may contribute to identity. They work by being confirming and instantiating supports to the idea of the self which people have. People actively seek them out to do this.

In his review of 'identity work' Brown (2015) highlights a number of areas where he considers more research is needed. Firstly, there is a need to address context, for example, the contexts of different types of organization or different cultural settings, in which people do 'identity work'. This thesis addresses one part of that question, that is, whether people across different work settings use material objects in similar ways and under similar conditions to do 'identity work. Secondly, he suggests that there is a need to consider the many processes through which identity work might be done, such as a focus on gender or on specific times of change. This thesis will consider the processes by which material objects serve identity across organizations in the kind of fine-grained study of everyday working life for which he calls. His third call is for a consideration of temporality, the multiple ways in which identity is construed over time, and this will be addressed through the way in which people may use objects to connect with past or future selves. Sense-making, his fourth area of possible development, will be addressed through two yin which areas of why people need or choose to do identity work under particular circumstances. This thesis will therefore address some current and necessary questions in a detailed empirical study.

#### 2.4 Summary

A number of powerful ideas about identity for this thesis have emerged from this chapter. Firstly, there is emerging evidence from organizational studies that people do experience themselves as having an identity at work over and above the role identities which they have.

People experience conflict over their identity at work particularly at times of high-level stress such as promotion or job change of some form. Many studies in organization studies have used such times as a way to look at the identity work which is being done to adapt to new roles, and have used discourse as the major tool for these studies.

Material studies in organization studies indicate that objects are significant players in the sustaining and re-working of identity, but such studies are few. Objects link to immediate unhappiness and lack of felt identity at work as well as to wider biography and to conflict at work.

In psychological studies, Stryker and Burke (2000) propose that identity consists of a slowlydeveloping underpinning 'core' self which will change only in the longer term, and more proximal role identities in which people reflect on the relationship between the core and the role. Identity work is done continuously as well as more intensely at times of stress. Hobfoll (2010, 2011) proposes that people actively look for resources at work to sustain their identity and material objects contribute to, but are not the total of, this Caravan of Resources.

In the light of my research questions, I justified the adoption of Mead's (1934) formulation of identity as an appropriate framework to develop ideas on objects and identity in this thesis.

# 2.5 How this thesis will build on Chapters 1 and 2

From Chapters 1 and 2 I take that people are influenced by materiality at work, in ways which are complex and contested, but which are effective on a day-to-day basis throughout work experience. In Chapter 2 I discussed the significant point that people do identity work continuously and that this is at least partly looped through materiality as a resource. I therefore need to examine participants' own understanding of what part objects play in their lives at work, an area of study not significantly addressed in the literature on materiality in organization studies, particularly in relation to identity.

**Methodologically**, many of the studies have been carried out using observation and interviews. In Chapter 3 I will address the question of the limitations of these methods and suggest that the addition of a further interrogative technique might add to the uncovering of object-led identity for people.

My interest is in the everyday work of sustaining identity rather than the negotiations of particular times of stress. How do people and objects work together to influence identity dayby-day in their working environment? Again this particular emphasis is important because it applies to all workers, not just those with the kind of managerial or professional jobs which are usually used in organization studies relation to identity in particular. In my methodology therefore I need to be inclusive of different types of worker, again a method rarely used in organization studies.

I will build on the material from these chapters in my **data analysis and discussion.** My data analysis will be data led but in the discussion I will use studies from these chapters to reflect on and indicate how this thesis both builds on and develops these studies.

In the light of Chapter 1, I also need to find a way to explore not only what the objects might do collaboratively with people but also how they do it. In the discussion I will therefore take the epistemological frameworks I have outlined, of representation, of ANT and networks and of performativity through practice, to show how they are both useful and limited for this thesis. I will also take the notion of a Caravan of Resources to ask how far the objects are part of that caravan.

# Chapter 3

# Methodology: Asking people about objects at work

This chapter reviews the specific research questions for this thesis.

The methodology, using elicited photographs of objects followed by interviews and a repertory grid exercise, is outlined and justified in relation to the research questions. The sample of participants is discussed and ethical considerations of the method are described. The method of analysis, Applied Thematic Analysis, is outlined and justified. Finally, the findings of two pilot studies are given, together with an analysis of the number of range of objects photographed as a precursor to the empirical analysis in Chapters 4–9.

My specific research questions emerging from the literature review are:

- 1 How do people conceptualise objects at work?
- 2 How and to what ends do objects and people work together in the workplace?
- 3 How does this interplay of people and objects impact on identity in everyday life at work?

The contribution of this thesis is to explore the place of meaningful material objects in people's working lives, and how that contributes to a sense of identity. As outlined in Chapter 2, there are few empirical studies which focus *explicitly* on the relationship of objects to personal identity as a theme in people's working lives (e.g. Tian and Belk 2005; Tyler and Cohen 2010; Elsbach 2003; Halford 2004). There are more which speak *tangentially* to the place of objects in people's

understandings such as studies in ANT, but the explicit connection of object to individual subject is not the focus of these studies.

This is an important area of study, because, as the literature review in Chapter 2 has indicated, objects or their lack are significant in many ways in people's lives. The argument I have assembled thus far is that objects may perform multiple functions within the lives of individuals at work. To recap, objects at work are, among other things, extensions of the self (Tian and Belk 2005) affiliative or excluding of the self with others (Elsbach 2003; Suchman 2005; Knorr Cetina 1997; Warren 2006; Hirst 2011), objects for resistance (Barnes 2007), 'Caravans of Resources' at work and elsewhere (Hobfoll 2011), linked to identity formation (Shortt, Betts and Warren 2014; Elsbach 2003), and epistemic objects which lead to shared knowledge (Ewenstein and Whyte 2009; Mietinnen and Virkkunen 2005), and players in networks (De Laet and Mol 2000; Law and Mol 2010). Many of these studies had one of two foci: like those of identity covered in Chapter 2 some were carried out with a focus on times of stress, such as studies in hot-desking, and how objects are significant as places of ownership of self and of relationships, while the focus was on objects that were studied through time and transformation through different understandings. One contribution of this thesis is to study objects in the workplace as *everyday* freighters of the self in an individual's understanding.

# 3.1 Challenges in designing the study

#### 1. Methodology

The focus of the thesis is not only what function the objects are performing but also how they are achieving these effects. The challenge is how to elicit data which would offer a convincing and credible story about both of these.

If I were only interested in the work which objects do it might have been possible to take a quantitative approach (Buchanan and Bryman 2009; Millsap and Maydeu-Olivares 2009; Bryman

and Bell 2015). I could have asked people to identity the objects which meant something to them and offered them a list of possible ways in which the objects could be said to be meaningful, a list culled from my literature review in Chapters 1 and 2. Such a list might have contained categories of 'friend', 'allows resistance', 'connects to home ', 'connects to others' 'allows me to feel like myself', 'makes me feel professional', etc. I could have counted these responses and looked to see what similarities there were. I could have asked them to rank how far each object fitted each category. But at the end of that road, I would have no more than a commentary on what had already been done by others and no real contribution. I have identified in Chapters 1 and 2 that I wanted to build on the studies I have outlined to ask some questions which went further than these studies. Specifically I wanted to ask:

- What work objects do for individuals in their daily lives rather than at times of major stress
- In what way people deliberately use objects
- How objects help to sustain a sense of themselves
- How objects achieve the effects they do.

I have stressed that in both studies of material objects and in studies of identity, the most common approach is to use narrative and to talk to people. This recognises that the stories people tell about themselves to themselves are subjective and emotional in a number of ways (Cassell and Symon 2004; Howitt 2011; Banister 2011; Silverman 2011; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015).

Firstly, people tell multiple stories about themselves and there would be no fixed narrative which would emerge complete and unchanging from the story of their relationship with objects.

Secondly, the relationship which people have with the material world includes its visceral impact and while this thesis, as identified in the introduction, is not concerned with aesthetics, it is concerned with the relationship with material objects that are in sight and can be touched and moved. This material aspect of the objects creates a narrative which is subjective and personal.

These considerations meant it was important to take an approach to exploring the relationship between people and materiality which acknowledged the subjectivity of both the data and the means of production of that data. All of it would be grounded in their interpretation of the objects and my interpretation of their stories. Yanow (2006) suggests that there are two aspects to investigating relationships with artefacts. One is the actual relationship between the artefacts and the subjective meanings for people, what is 'done' with them and experienced, and what is attempted to be expressed about them. Secondly, this meaning must be interpreted, because it cannot be perceived and grasped outside the relationship with the human participant. The researcher has to deal with knowledge which belongs to others' first- hand experience, and it has to be interpreted through the researcher's life world. So we construct data rather than gather it.

Essentially then, I had to think of an interpretivist approach. As Duberley et al. put it,

'accessing and understanding the actual meanings and interpretations actors subjectively ascribe to phenomena in order to describe and explain their behaviour through investigating how they experience, sustain, articulate and share with others these socially constructed everyday realities.'

(Duberley, Johnson and Cassell 2012:125)

### 2. Practical constraints on the method

If I wanted to examine the relationship between people and material objects at work, one way to do that is to be with them, observing and asking questions on a day-to-day basis, checking out what was said against what was done and generating theory inductively (see, for example, Hammersley 2013). However I could not use such an ethnomethodological approach, working in organizations for a number of weeks observing and noting and having conversations, because I wanted to include a wide variety of participants, both part time and full time and across sectors, in many different workplaces. I will discuss further why I wanted to do this under 'choosing participants', section 3.3 below. This desire to include a range of working patterns led to another practical constraint. If I wanted to meet with people who worked part time they were likely to have limited time in the workplace, and so possibly be unable to meet during working hours. For others, part time or full time, there might be issues of privacy if they shared a working space and wanted to talk about things which were private in some way. I could not just sit with participants to look at their objects, nor could I ask them to bring the objects elsewhere if, as might be likely, this included heavy pieces of office equipment such as computers or filing cabinets. There might also be objects in places where I could not go, if someone worked part time and needed to be interviewed outside working hours, or if they worked in the offices of those senior to them. Despite my interest in the materiality of the objects, I had to find a way of exploring them which was consistent for all participants.

I also had to find a method which would engage people who I had not met before in talking about some quite intimate aspects of their lives, based around the import of things chosen as personally meaningful.

These constraints, principally the two about either not always being able to extract heavy or fixed objects and not necessarily always being able to interview in the presence of the object, led me to choose to ask people to identify and photograph 'everything in your immediate working space which has meaning for you'. To anticipate slightly, I then interviewed them using the photographs and also did a further exercise, both discussed here.

# 3.2 Participant led photography

I chose to use photography in order to allow me to ask about the objects even if they were not present. However, in all but 4 of the 39 interviews I was able to sit with the participant in the presence of the objects. Given my interest in the materiality of the objects as things which are performative this was useful, as I could ask further questions. For example, if a photograph was taken in close up I could see how large or small it was in practice, an interesting point when many of the treasured objects were actually quite small in themselves. However using photographs meant that all participants used the same method. I therefore used Participant Led Photography (PLP) (Warren 2005; Warren 2009; Vince and Warren 2012) with a group of diversely employed workers ranging from professionals in long-standing jobs to cleaners who worked for four hours a day and had no place which was specifically their own at work.

Participant-led photo interviewing (PLPI) is a participatory, qualitative method that involves asking research participants to take a set of photographs on a theme given to them by the researcher. These photographs then form the basis of a semi-structured interview where the participant explains the meaning and significance of the photographs to the researcher – generating rich insights into the research topic.

The use of Participant Led Photography (PLP), (Harper 2002) based on the work of Wang and Burris (1997) in health and social care using photo voice, is increasingly popular as a research method in a range of disciplines. Van Auken, P., Frisvoll, S. and Stewart (2010) argue that this method has a number of advantages. One is to provide tangible stimuli for more effectively tapping into informants' tacit, and often unconscious understanding of representations, images and metaphors. A second is to help reduce differences in power, class and knowledge between researcher and researched: asking participants to generate their own photos is a means both of giving them control over the research matter and of engaging them in their own stories, putting their own subjectivities centre stage. This offers both insight and interest into what is being done *with* rather than to them. Meo (2010) in a study of schooling found that it opened up some unforeseen dimensions for analysis in the impact on children taking the photographs, and was useful for establishing rapport between researcher and children. Catalani and Minkler (2009) found that photovoice appears to contribute to an enhanced understanding and to empowerment in building community. In working with children, Jorgenson and Sullivan (2009), and Mandleco (2012) found it, again, helped to establish a balance of power in gaining data from a potentially reticent group of people. In tourism Westwood, Morgan and Pritchard (2006) and Rakic and Chambers (2011) advocate using photo elicitation and photo ethnography to widen the range of tourist responses and understandings in a variety of settings.

In organization studies Ray and Smith (2011) comment that photo elicitation is an underused method in organizations, a comment echoed by Davison, Maclean and Warren (2012) and Schrat, Warren and Hopfl (2012). However a special issue of Visual Studies (2012) builds on previous work (Warren 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009; Warren and Parker 2009; Shortt and Warren 2012; Vince and Warren 2012; Ng and Hopfl 2014) to offer considerable insight into the use of PLPI in organizations. In the editorial, Warren points out that PLP can usefully aid in the communication of, and construction of, professional and workplace identities, as illustrated not only in the study of hairdressers by Shortt and Warren (2012) but also by Warren's (2006) study in 'hotnesting'. Photography can show up unexpected aspects of identity: using photographs of their office spaces as stimuli, participants in Warren's (2007) study of working space chose to take photographs outside their office – or through the windows. Through the photographs, participants defined their 'workspace' more broadly than the researcher had originally conceptualized it. It can also lead to unexpected developments: for example in one of my pilot interviews there was a soft toy in the photo which was not mentioned. When I asked about its meaning the reply was, 'that's not meaningful to my work'. Spotting things which the participant does not comment on can give insight into the underlying understanding of a question which appears simple but which can be interpreted with different understandings. I will return to this point in discussing my pilot interviews in section 3.11 below.

Using photographs is a way of flattening power between interviewer and interviewee. Warren (2005) points out that the simple physicality of sitting side by side rather across a table is a significant point in relation to this; it may help to make a more equal conversational setting and also allow the discussion of emotional issues which would be more problematic face to face (Scarles 2010). The photographs act as a point of embodied 'ignition' (Scarles 2010) which offers a uniting point and supports this smoothing of difference between photographer and interviewer. '*The image becomes a means of generating and communicating data rather than simply being a text to be read off.*' (Warren 2008:572). This was really important for me since I was talking with people I had not met before and who needed to trust what I was doing. Having *their* photograph to share was a powerful way of showing my interest in them and their story.

# 3.3 Choosing participants

As indicated above, I wanted to use participants from a range of occupations and working patterns. I wanted to do this because there was very little else which addressed this question with the focus that I wanted to have on identity. The question of the sample of people to be asked to participate was of great importance to the theoretical stance of this project. In much of the organizational studies literature covered in Chapter 1, the studies had been done in one organization. However a single organization may affect the way in which objects are viewed, either because people are unhappy there (Hirst 2011; Elsbach 2003), or because objects are encouraged or discouraged. Studies also tended to focus on discrete groups within organizations, such as managers, hot-deskers, or medical students or vicars. (Tian and Belk 2005; Suchman 2005; Elsbach 2003; Korica and Molloy 2010). I wanted to build on and develop this work by studying a wide range of participants using maximum variability sampling (Saunders 2012). This allows the key exploration of my research questions: is there anything which would emerge across a *range* of occupations and employment contracts as fundamental to the way in which people relate to the material culture of their working environment?

Participants would therefore include:

- part time and full time workers
- professional and non-professional workers
- those with their own personal work spaces and without them, for example, cleaners or porters
- those based in offices with others or working alone
- those with organizational clear desk policies and without them.

This sample, as stated above, overcomes the limitation of a single workplace with its own norms, practices and understandings. It provides an opportunity to compare the impact of material objects on people with many different experiences of work. Although the numbers would be small in each category of employment, so not allowing comparisons, say, between those working in communal spaces and those working alone, what it would afford is the picture of what may be common to all participants. It would not in any sense be a representative sample in a quantitative way but it would begin to address the question of how to build on more specifically-located studies, such as people at different levels in the same organization, or the same level in different organizations.

# 3.4 Finding the participants

Having decided on a broad sample I then had to find participants. Accessing participants in qualitative research, as Noy (2008) remarks, has been an under-addressed area of the research method. Kitto, Chesters, and Grbich (2008) outline a number of commonly available, non-probability sampling approaches, including m*aximum variation sampling*, seeking

representativeness of all aspects of the topic in terms of participants, and snowball sampling that is networking from one difficult-to-access type of participant to a wider range of participants. However I decided to adopt *convenience sampling*, which consists in studying easily-accessed individuals or groups. This technique obviously presents its own ethical dilemmas of the 'insider' type, that is, the researcher is using groups somehow known or available to them, and is possibly the weakest form of sampling in terms of allowing concepts to be generalised (Farrokhi and Mahmoudi-Hamidabad 2012).

In order to do this I used two strategies. One was to identify people I knew already who worked across a range of organizations such as schools, legal firms, universities, local authority services and voluntary sector organizations and to ask if they would be interested in participating. Even if they themselves weren't I then asked if they would be willing to allow me to ask for volunteers in their organizations, thus also using a 'snowball' sampling technique (Noy 2008; Atkinson, R., & Flint, J. 2001; Cohen and Arieli 2011; Yin 2011) recognised, as indicated on above, as useful in hard to reach populations.

I was thus able to gather a sample of 36 participants, plus two whom I used for my pilot study.

Asking people for two hours or so of their time is not too difficult if people have control of their working hours and many of those who I approached, using a range of contacts, were able to do this. Participants used lunch breaks, after work or even during work hours if they had permission. However, it was much more difficult to find permission and access to people who worked as part time cleaners or porters, for example, people who had close supervision, limited tasks and who may well have another job to go to after they had finished at the one in which I had approached them. I therefore had to find organizations where I already knew someone who could act as a gatekeeper and allow me to ask for volunteers. While, as always, the existence of volunteers in a sample may affect the results (Noy 2008; Yin 2011), the nature of the knowledge I was pursuing was not quantitative and statistical but subjective, making the question of

volunteer 'bias' of less significance. Sampling is always a trade-off between statistical rigour and subjective understanding (Yin 2011; Somekh and Lewin 2005) and in this case my interest was in subjective understanding.

### 3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical practice in interview research is addressed in many textbooks (see, for example, Yin 2011; Somekh and Lewin 2005; Denzin and Lincoln 2009; Silverman, D. 2013).

My ethical practice statement was scrutinised and accepted by the ethics committee of Surrey University where I was registered at the time. I sought consent from managers as well as participants if this was appropriate, and gave the managers a letter outlining what I was asking for, the same statement about the project as participants were given and a separate consent form to allow a participant to be a part of the project if that was appropriate. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the project at any stage, and given a number to contact if there were any complaints. They signed a written statement to give consent. Sample letters and consent forms are attached as Appendix 1

All data would be password protected on my home desk top computer, and if kept in hard copy would be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my house. Participants were assured of confidentiality around both oral interview tapes and transcripts and photographs. There were many opportunities for identification: a photograph with people in it in the background, identifying information on a computer screen or pinned to a noticeboard, a personal photograph or a child's drawing with a school name or their child's name on it, all gave scope for identifying where people worked or who they were . Participants were assured that I would remove or hide anything in published photographs or transcripts which would lead to them or their place of work being identified, with all participant names to be changed in any published data. Participants also gave me copyright of the text and photos, for use in the PhD. thesis, in conference presentations and in published papers, with the above proviso of anonymity.

A consent form cannot guarantee sensitivity around emotions. I had to be careful how I engaged with people and to be sure that they were comfortable with the level of disclosure they were offering or *felt* they were being asked to give even if it was not my intention. The remarks above about the levelling effect of sitting side by side over a photograph taken by the participant are pertinent here. It was easier for a participant to stop talking if they wanted to when not having to make eye contact.

There are particular challenges in using PLP (Vince and Warren 2012). Participants needed to feel comfortable about their use of the camera. I gave them the camera for a day, with a quick tutorial on how to use it if necessary, in order to let them find a private time for taking photographs. My instruction to them was *'please photograph everything meaningful to you in your immediate working space'* with freedom to define *meaningful* and *working space* as they wished. I returned to collect the camera at a time we had arranged, printed the photos immediately and then interviewed people.

I also needed to choose an interview location conducive to photo viewing, safety, and privacy. This was easy if someone had a room of their own, or a space which was uninterrupted but occasionally it was negotiated with a manager, and never proved problematic.

# 3.6 Challenges in interviewing

Somekh and Lewin (2005) outline some of the problems associated with interviewing. They indicate the need for trust, and for a sharing of power which can never be quite equal. I was deeply aware of these and sought to overcome them by both physical and psychological means. Spending time with participants explaining the study before they agreed to it was one way, and one participant looked me up on line to check out my 'kosher' – as he put it! – research

credentials! Sitting in a way which gave us equality as we looked at the photos was another but I was aware, especially with those who were cleaners or porters, of the distance between our working experience. Very discreet sharing of personal information, about family, such as number of children, or about hobbies, such as musical preferences, in the course of the interview, sometimes helped to establish common ground. So also did getting muddled over some electronic leads, and being grateful to my participant for good-temperedly helping me out.

Somekh and Lewin (2005) refer to creating and solving mysteries in social research and this emphasises that what is being created in an interview is a problematic with multiple possible solutions. The aim is to create a 'picture' that is acceptable to both researcher and participant.

Alvesson (2012) suggests that rather than treating interviews as 'simple' reflections of reality, they might be thought of through a number of different situational and relational 'lenses' such as accounts of situated social accomplishment, or as identity work in itself, as cultural script application and so on. Using these metaphors for the interview in a way which is reflexive in its attempt to avoid a single 'reading ' of interview data, acknowledges that interviews are influenced through a large number of framing factors which may or may not be apparent to either of the participants, and that the *interview process itself* needs to be taken into account as a form of evidence. Interviews are not transparent windows: Only,

'If accounts deviate from scripts/moral storytelling elements, if they cannot be explained in terms of political interest or efforts to avoid embarrassment through putting together a reasonably coherent talk ... then they can perhaps be seen as strong indicators of how an interviewee experiences the focused social world. '

#### Alvesson 2012:129

Both the context of the interview and the assumptions of the interviewee and interviewer crucially affect what conclusions may be drawn. If participants felt they were being pressured into giving 'right answers' in any sense – most likely, for example seeing me as a representative of the organization – it would make their responses different. I assured participants that no one

except myself, them and whoever read my papers would see the responses they gave, but Alvesson's point is that one can never be totally sure of the frame in which people give responses, a point echoed by Seidman (2012) and Rubin and Rubin (2011). Riach (2009) writes of the symbolic mastery of the interview and the need to reflect on the factors which create different symbolic frames for participants and researchers and highlights this through her account of 'sticky moments', moments of participant-induced reflexivity, where the interviewer is pulled up short by a participant intervention and researcher and researched are conflated. Revelations about unpleasant moments at work, for instance, occasionally made me check myself before I joined in too heartily. The frame in which I and they were working matched most closely to that of sense-making, as we explored why they had chosen to select any particular object.

A further contextual factor in interviewing is that of dress. I was also aware of my status as 'researcher'. Here I did what I could to blend in in terms of my dress with whoever I was meeting. But there is no way of truly unpacking how the participants saw me. I was also conscious of my need to listen hard to try to understand jobs which were unfamiliar to me, and not signal this unfamiliarity as a point of difficulty in communication.

Pink (2009) suggests that interviews are usually treated as a representation of a perceived reality with some realist elements of facts such as places and events. However she emphasizes the fluid, ongoing interactive nature of interviews as *'social, sensorial and emotive encounters'* (Pink 2009:83) and as an *'emplaced activity'* (2009:84) where attention also needs to be given to the physical place of the interview. In this case the place was always chosen by the participant, so I was a 'guest' there, offering participants the right to show me around and be in charge of the space, which contributed to a greater degree of relaxation in participants.

It is impossible to tell how much or how little of the material generated was done so because of success or failure in establishing these relationships.

### 3.7 The process of interviewing

My first question during the interviews was, 'Tell me what was meaningful about this which made you photograph it?' That was enough to help people focus on the rationale they had been given. From there I took my lead largely from them until they seemed to have said all they wanted to about the object. Each photograph sparked a conversation; because people were sharing emotions and experiences about their lives I had to respond and did it with as much reflexivity as I could, checking out what they were saying to ask if I had understood correctly. I both audio-recorded and made notes in case the recorder malfunctioned. On one occasion when the tape recorder failed I typed up my notes, emailed them to the participant and asked if she thought they were a fair record of what she had said. I gained her consent before using them.

In the interviews I was aware of the need for reflection and for reflexivity. Firstly, it was unusual for some of my participants to be interviewed; cleaners are not often seen as material for research purposes in organizational studies, whereas lawyers, teachers or managers are far more used to making up responses to questions about work. So the context of the interview for some of the participants was more unusual and possibly anxiety producing than for others. One participant was quite hesitant and said *'oh I'm not very good at this'* and I had to simply wait and behave encouragingly while she found the words she wanted to say. Secondly, and relatedly, the process of research was more familiar to some than others so my status as a researcher was more threatening, possibly, and productive of a less 'equal' feeling conversation. It may also have felt less comfortable to be in a small office used by a supervisor, however supportive that supervisor was. Because I was not part of their everyday life it was impossible to know just how these factors affected the responses when we were outside their work space, even if in the same building.

Some situations did give me very strong pause for reflexivity. On one occasion a participant began to cry over the way in which her photographs represented her. She was a very bright cleaner, who could obviously have achieved much academically given a chance but her life circumstances had not offered this. So, in the rep grid exercise, when she began to see how strongly her cleaning tools contrasted with other things she had chosen to photograph she was really grieved. I wondered after at what point I should have picked up this contrast, and what she was able to do with the grief afterwards. It was not new sadness, she told me, but I was sorry to have raised it so sharply.

Reflection over the transcripts indicated my 'interview style' (Finlay 2002) as one of acceptance and warmth and interest; how participants would have responded to a more detached style is unknown. Sometimes I was aware that participants rambled on a bit but it felt to me to be reassuring and accepting of what they said, rather than cutting them off when I felt I had got the 'right' answer, and sometimes extended talk helped clarity. For example, in a transcript of someone who always went out at lunchtime I noticed that he became more definite about the reasons for this as he talked on.

# 3.8 Moving on from interviews to repertory grids

Interviews, as I have discussed, are not simple representations of reality, and photo-elicitation produces rich and dense texts from the discussion of the photos. I was aware that my participants would have had time to think through why they were photographing them, and this slightly pre-digested reasoning could form the basis of their responses to my question about why they took it. The narrative they might tell would already be partly there, however much I probed further. I knew that I wanted to find a way of examining the relationships with objects further to see what else might be 'meaningful' in them, in a way which presented the objects in a new light. I wanted to examine in more depth how objects that had similar labels might have meanings which did not emerge from the interviews. For example, how might objects which were all labelled as being 'for the job – work tools – just about the job' actually have *different* meanings? Hobfoll's (2011) Caravan of Resources theory indicates that people build resources which are helpful to them at work. I wanted to see what other meanings these objects might hold as 'tools', for example as 'making me feel efficient' or 'being an example of something I take pride in'. In support of finding such a tool, Guest et al. (2012) suggest that mixed methods research can elicit further contrasts and themes from participants in research based on interviews. I therefore decided to use a Repertory Grid analysis, described in detail below, in which objects are compared with each other.

This might be seen as a desire to reduce the potential data to some kind of stripped-down essences, and sit in stark contrast to the rich free-flowing data which emerges from interviews. However the methods are complementary. The objects have been identified *as a set* by participants themselves, linked by the choice of them as meaningful and bracketed off from objects which were important but not meaningful. The interviews allowed many associations to develop around the objects in answer to the question, 'What was meaningful about this object that made you take the photo?' However the objects are also alike *in themselves* in their inclusion in the category 'meaningful'. Repertory Grids, focusing on the objects as a set, have the power to ask how the meanings *within* these objects are varied or similar. They offer a tool for presenting the objects in a new light yet still focusing on their meaning.

The use of both interviews and repertory grids is a contribution of this thesis to the field, where the usual approach has been to use only interviews. Asking participants to make such further distinctions, and considering the way in which object relates to object in terms of meaning for people is a novel extension of the exploration of people and materiality.

#### 3.9 Repertory Grids

#### Background

Repertory Grids (hereafter called rep grids) are based in the Personal Construct Psychology of George Kelly (Kelly 1955; Banister and Fransella 1986; Fransella 2003; Bell 2003). Their purpose is to examine how people interpret or construct their world. They were originally developed by George Kelly in a psychotherapeutic context (1955) and formed part of his Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) approach to psychotherapy. Rep grids are now used in a wide variety of research arenas from learning to organizational change to engineering. For example, the technique was used by Berg and Rumsey (2006) to analyse responses to new sound technology, by Coshall (2002) to interrogate tourist views of images of London, by Henze, Van Driel and Verloop (2007) to examine teachers' knowledge of science models, in management (Easterby Smith, Thorpe and Holman 1996), and by Zinkhan and Braunsberger (2004) to understand consumer behaviour.

Kelly (1955) formally developed his theory through a consideration of three connected propositions: that we each construe an understanding of ourselves, that the constructs people have are socially embedded and that people can change their constructs (Niemeyer and Bridges 2004; Butt and Burr 2004). The theory suggests that in examining their own lives, and making sense of the decisions they make, people find regularities in their actions and thoughts, regularities which allow them to make predictions about future behaviour patterns. The process of such construing is an active one, involving attention to day-by-day events – and in relation to this thesis, we might speculate – objects. The organising principle for the regularities, Kelly argues, is one of contrasts. In construing an event, a relationship or an object, people not only assert what it is but what it is not, and this helps them to define the regularities of their behaviour. We make our definitions through contrasts. It is through the appreciation of one's own constructs and the possibility of *other* ways of understanding, other ways of construing

what is going on, that people are able to shift their understanding. So, for example, in construing parenthood and what good parenting means a parent may have a construct about good parenting being 'listening' *rather than* 'ignoring'. Another parent might say good parenting is about 'listening' *rather than* 'replying too quickly' or 'listening' *rather than* 'thinking that you want as a parent is more important ' or 'listening when the children want to speak' *rather than* 'asking them to speak when you have time'. The point is that while many people might have the idea that good parenting involves listening, exactly what that listening means is defined by the response to the question, 'Listening *rather than* what?' Whatever something is, it has a contrast against which this is set. The exploration of these poles, which are not 'opposites' but contrasts, is core to the practical application of the theory.

Finally, at the level of social embeddedness, the constructs are recognized as lying within a network of relational family and cultural contexts which influence and are influenced by individual understandings.

The crucial part of the repertory grid analysis is the selection or generation of the elements, which must all relate to a theme. In this thesis the theme which united the elements and made them into a set was 'objects which are meaningful to me at work' and the elements to work with are the photographs of those objects. I could have used the objects themselves but as described earlier this was not practicable. The elements need to be generated by the individual who is going to use them, because they need to be expressive of *that person's* constructs.

The procedure in a rep grid study is fairly straightforward. The participant is presented randomly with any three of the elements and asked to specify in what way any two of them are alike and different to the third. It is important here that the differences are not identified as simply a 'not that'; for example, if an object is described as 'useful' the other pole of the construct needs to be not 'useless' but may be something like 'restful' or 'decorative' or 'playful' or 'about people' or whatever the respondent can be encouraged to discover as a way of contrasting with what they feel 'useful' means. The elements are presented in threes until the constructs emerging are becoming repetitive or until all possible triads have been presented.

### 3.10 Application in this project

In this project, the rep grids were done immediately after the interviews. Some people initially found it hard to make these distinctions and had to be encouraged to think a bit longer in order to explore the contrasting pole, but after one or two tries understood what was being asked. The most difficult bit was finding an opposite pole which was not the simple opposite: 'about my family versus not about my family' rather than, say, 'about relationships versus about communication'. In order to record the results, I numbered the photographs and had a grid on which I marked all the numbers at the top and noted with ticks and crosses which two of the three presented were alike and which one was different. At either side of the line on which I noted this I wrote the construct poles which were generated. Any further data generated was noted on a separate piece of paper.

It is possible to 'ladder up' and 'ladder down' on the elements. Laddering up asks respondents explicitly to move into their value systems by asking why that construct is important to them in relation to the distinctions being made. Laddering down asks for more detail about the distinction being drawn, 'Tell me more about the way in which things are obtrusive/supportive.' For example, if someone created the construct 'about friendships' as opposed to 'about work colleagues', one could ask, laddering up, 'What is important about friendship?' If the reply is 'they support you' then laddering up again would lead to the question, 'Why is it important to be supported?' Laddering down leads to concrete examples: what does this colleague actually do which is different to what friends do; can you give me an example? However it is very time consuming and I used it only where respondents were using a similar distinction all the time. I used it then because it was a way of getting people to be more specific about their constructs. One respondent used the categories 'work' and 'rest' very frequently, and another 'work' and 'being away from work' or 'being elsewhere'. I then asked them to talk about why these categories were important to them. it didn't change the categories they used, only gave them some light and shade as, for example, in 'I like to be by myself if I'm not actually working' or 'I do this job in order to achieve my other ambitions around sport'.

Methodologically I think that it was easier for people to do this task after the interviews, when they had become accustomed to talking about the objects in a relaxed way. At the same time it may be that they had developed some tropes about the objects already. It did not feel like that; people worked hard to find alternatives in the exercise and sometimes initially, as noted in the methodology, had to be encouraged to find contrasts which were not simply opposites such as 'this is work' and 'this is not work'.

#### 3.11 Analysis of the interviews

I carried out two 'pilot' interviews, which were significant in making some changes to my method. My initial instruction was to *photograph anything which has meaning for you in your immediate working space*. As mentioned previously, I noticed in one photograph a soft toy that had not been commented on. When I asked if this was significant the answer was, 'yes but it's not meaningful *in the workplace'*. It seemed that the instruction had been interpreted to be about things which were meaningful as an employee, a point which opened my eyes to the possibility of interpreting me as being someone only interested in their status as an employee. At this point I therefore changed my question from *'photograph anything meaningful'* to *'photograph everything meaningful'*. Because my attention had been drawn to the process of selection in this way I also chose to add to each interview the question, *'Is there anything in your work which is important but not meaningful?*' The significance of this was to clarify further a distinction which underlies my research questions, between objects which have impact and objects which do not. Something may be of great importance in day-to-day work but have no

emotional heft at all. If people do make this distinction, it could help to clarify what the objects with meaning are doing for the individual.

All the interviews were transcribed, noting laughter or particularly long pauses, with pauses indicated by a row of dots. The rep grids were typed and along with them I kept the photographs which I had numbered and my grids which I had made as people talked.

In order to analyse the data, I turned to a practical development of grounded theory, that is, Applied Thematic Analysis (ATA) (Guest 2012), an approach which responds through coding to a full set of data. ATA is similar to grounded theory in that it generates codes which are then refined, but it also allows for comparison with extant literature in the refining and interpreting of these codes. It has also been written about as abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2012; Charmaz 2008, 2014), where a similar point is made that it holds a mid-point between grounded theory's position (Glaser and Strauss 1967) of no preconceived ideas and the framing of a research question in a purely theoretical setting, such as a Marxist analysis of a question. Timmermans and Tavory refer to this exploring of data with a later application of relevant theory as an *'informed theoretical agnostic'* (2012:169). While this still allows for the iterative rounds of coding and memo writing of grounded theory, it also allows for the place of other work in the field. From Chapter 1, for example, I take the ideas of objects bound up in networks, of objects performing such things as relationships, and of objects affording a variety of resourcing.

I would use the data I had generated to form some initial ideas through coding and comparing, and then return to the literature to see how that might sharpen or negate what I had formulated.

Abductive analysis had a further advantage for this thesis. True grounded theory requires a return to the field for checking out the theory generated through field-notes and analysis.

However I had limited time with my participants. Access to them was hard to negotiate for even a short time and return visits would be extremely difficult. I had to use the data generated in one visit.

I therefore had 36 interviews and my notes and photographs as 'raw data' and had to make sense of them.

Analyzing the interviews was done through nVivo, because it allows large numbers of interviews to be mined and bits of text separated into different coded areas. I found it very helpful as way of controlling large amounts of data. I read and re-read the interviews, finding initial open codes for the data as I did so. Following Guest et al. (2012), I firstly used open coding and then went on to form some higher order axial codes which then were resolved into selected codes. The open codes became more refined as I went through the interviews, so that some codes were expanded and others reduced. For example, my code about relationships soon expanded into relationships with a number of different foci, such as affirmation, self- protection and professional/non-professional relationships among many others. I asked a colleague to code four of the interviews with no knowledge of my coding and she used very similar open codes to mine. I generated 40 open codes. As I moved into axial coding the codes began to be gathered up into 10 themes such as 'positive relationships with others', 'expressing how I feel here', 'how others might see me' and 'private meanings'. Finally, I refined the codes into selected themes as used in Chapters 4–7. This was not easy: I finally decided that that the presence of hidden meanings was the most unusual contribution of the data and used that idea of public/private objects to refine the data into the degree of openness or hiddenness of object meanings to others. This seemed to accord with the idea of identity: the work the objects were doing as resources was sometimes inter-relational and sometimes intra-relational but within each of these the objects were resourcing people.

Analysis of the rep grids was slightly different. The number of constructs generated depended on the number of photographs taken and the number of comparative triads which could be presented in consequence, but almost all participants produced a table of constructs of between three and 14 lines (one participant took only one photograph). Because in these grids what is being generated is a table of opposite poles, for example, '*resting versus work'*, '*my responsibility versus everyone's responsibility'*, '*pleasure versus work'*, '*guilt versus responsibility'*, '*tool for the job versus relaxation*' or '*communication versus working alone'*, the coding was done without using nVivo. However the same method of open and axial coding was used, through reading and re-reading of the lists to generate sets of similar 'meanings' such as '*something for work versus about me'*. The coding was clearer with an overarching and interesting theme of a strong division between a 'work-self' and a more personal self.

Using nVivo was helpful, and I reflect on this more in my conclusion. The dilemma I found with it was how far to allow it to 'lead' me through its power to match words or phrases, and spent much time making sure that the sense of what I was reading matched with the code to which I originally allocated it. I originally had 41 codes, of which 'relationships', 'a sense of self', 'professionalism' and 'things which inspire, comfort, help, protect or provide boundaries ' (each of these a separate categories) were the most frequently used, with over half the sample using them and two thirds of the sample using the first two. These reduced through much re-reading and trial and error to 10. An example of my trial and error is that I spent considerable time thinking about how the data fitted into a category called 'invested in work' or 'not invested in work' and also around 'inwardly focused or outwardly focused'. I found the meta codes ultimately by homing in on the way in which the ability to hide things and the way in which some objects related to secrecy, privacy and boundaries seemed to be important. This was unexpected and interesting and led me to refine the 'relationships' category into relationships with others and the self.

The fuller data analysis and the connection between the two sets of data is set out in Chapter 8 and forms part of the discussion.

The pilot interviews also helped to clarify and simplify my explanation of the rep grids.

#### 3.12 Basis for the empirical discussion

In order to begin my analysis I will describe how many objects were chosen and some of the objects that participants photographed in order to show something of the way in which they went about defining the objects which they chose.

The number of pictures ranged from 1 to 27 with an average of 11. There was no correlation with level of work: a senior lawyer took 23 and a porter took 27, a senior local authority worker took 1 and an independent consultant took 3. Size of work space was also immaterial, with people occupying similar work spaces taking very different numbers of pictures. Similarly, stage of career also had no correlation with the number of photographs: for example, of two senior lawyers, one took 23 and the other 5, while of two porters of similar age and stage, one took 27 and the other 8. This did not seem to reflect level of commitment to work or engagement with it. The one person who was clearly unhappy in his work and determined to leave, a young law graduate looking for further training and currently unable to find it, also took 8 photographs.

The objects that people chose to photograph included both work tools, such as computers and phones, and many objects which crossed the border between work and non-work, such as calendars, mugs and 'practical' toys such as pencil pot holders. Very occasionally someone photographed a colleague but this was usually in the context of their supportive work and included the colleague's desk. If a colleague is referred to in the data I have used the desk as a 'shorthand' for the work which the colleague does.

#### 3.13 Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the aim of the methodology, to generate data that would answer my research questions about the place which objects play in the forming and sustaining of identity for people at work. I have argued for and justified a qualitative approach to this, by showing how the appropriate data for my research questions is based in understandings rather than in quantitative 'counted' data. I then contended that Participant Led Photography was the appropriate method to gather data about which objects were meaningful, because of restrictions on the ability of all participants to have chosen meaningful objects with them in the interview. The ethics both of interviewing and of using photographs were discussed.

I then argued that the meaning of objects in the interviews needs refining for two reasons. Primarily, I wanted to extend exploration of the way in which objects identified as 'meaningful' relate to other objects in this category, in order to show how they are acting as a resource for the individual at work. I also wanted to refine categories that might emerge such as 'about work', which might be similar across a number of objects. I therefore carried out a rep grid exercise. This mixed-method exploration of the place of objects at work is a new development and contribution to the field. These two data sets will form the basis for the empirical analysis.

I argued for an analytic approach, Applied Thematic Analysis, which is appropriate to the subjective data which the methodology will produce. I do have some theory to draw on from Chapters 1 and 2, but it is not clear how it might relate to the understanding and performing of personal identity at work, and the coding needs to generate themes which can then be related back to theory and extend it, rather than beginning from theory.

I now turn to an analysis of the empirical data.

# Chapter 4 Engaging objects

In this chapter I firstly present the themes into which the data was coded. I then argue that one way in which some objects are meaningful and 'engaging' to participants is as objects which offer relationships at work. Such engaging objects 'afford' and 'perform 'a social dimension to work. This is achieved through their particular material display and through the way in which others respond to that display. I indicate that participants appear to be reflecting on the 'me' which is seen and the 'l' which they feel they wish to express. Being sociable at work through objects offers participants a way of relating which was over and above relating through words alone.

### 4.1 Overview of the empirical analysis

The empirical analysis will be presented in five chapters. The first four of these chapters refer to data gathered from the interviews. The analysis of the repertory grids will be presented in a separate chapter as related, but differently generated, data. The data from that chapter will be both contrasted with, and located in, the findings from the interviews.

As explained in the methodology (Chapter 3:11) the data were coded using Thematic Analysis to generate initial codes. This produced 41 codes which were then re-coded into four overarching themes, namely:

- <sup>1</sup>Objects reflecting relationships with others
- Objects reflecting relationships primarily with the self
- Objects reflecting relationships with hidden aspects of the self
- Objects reflecting doing the job

Each theme is not necessarily of the same length in this analysis, rather they are threads of different weight and thickness which are woven into the whole sense of being at work. The significance of the themes will differ for different people, but my concern in this thesis is to indicate the *range* of work done by objects for people at work and not to focus on individual stories.

While some objects will be presented in the data chapters this is not to say that the other objects were not significant. Rather I choose to present objects which are *illustrative* of the theme I am discussing since a fully inclusive set would be very repetitive. I indicate how all the objects were of significance in the way they were divided into work and non-work in Chapter 8, and I show how they gather together to form a meaningful collection in my discussion.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> I have one caveat here. I have used the word 'reflecting' rather than 'representing' because in the light of Chapter 2 on what 'work' objects might be seen to do, I want to avoid pinning the label 'representational' on them since it is too restrictive. To recap very briefly, an alternative reading for objects was that they might be 'doing' rather than representing: so a soft toy may be 'doing' a relationship rather than 'representing' it. I have therefore chosen to use reflect instead and in my discussion will examine this use more deeply in relation to the findings.

The connection between the themes and the literature reviews of Chapters 1 and 2 will be briefly indicated but will be much more fully taken up in the discussion. At the end of each theme I will also indicate what I will take forward into the discussion.

I include photographs of the objects where possible. Because in some cases it was impossible to anonymize the organization concerned I am unable to use them, and I indicate where this is the case. Where there are faces, or small sources of identification, such as headed paper or computer screen logos, I have removed them for anonymity.

### 4.2 Objects reflecting relationships with others

Firstly, in reflecting relationships there are objects which were described as primarily there to form or express a relationship with others, and almost all participants had such objects. They were described as fulfilling no clear utilitarian purpose in specifically completing a job or contributing to it, even if they could *potentially* be functional. The themes coded from this data include:

- Objects reflecting receiving affirmation, respect and mutual support
- Objects reflecting friendship
- Objects reflecting shared humour
- Objects reflecting relating to colleagues through the space itself
- Objects reflecting a sense of responsibility to others.



Figure 4-1 A selection of objects from this theme

#### Objects reflecting receiving affirmation, respect and mutual support

One of the ways in which an engagement with others was reported to me is through objects that were explained to me as offering and carrying affirmation, respect and mutual support. The objects act to affirm people's status as friends and colleagues who were valued for more than their job.

Thank-you notes are one such object. They may be from grateful clients or colleagues within or outside the organization. They may be tributes to mark leaving a job. Such concrete material marks of respect and acceptance are of great importance to almost all of the participants, indicating how, at work, relationships with those around us are valued as affirming and supporting. David, a teacher who is a senior year tutor in a large comprehensive school, photographed a note from a pupil who had come to say thank you for teaching her. He had taught the class about Buddhism and some different ways of expressing emotion through physical actions. The note read, *'I came here on my pilgrimage and I spun around in 2 180° turns to show my thanks for teaching me.'* 



'There's thank you cards, two from members of staff, and then there's this fantastic one.

#### Figure 4-2 David's thank you card

David appreciated the thanks from all the card givers. However there is also something in the materiality of this particular note which is much more performative than a simple declarative thank you. The scruffiness is pupil to teacher, not colleague to colleague. The movement-as-thanks performance which it conjures up, and which was learned as something appreciated and understood between giver and receiver, is enacting something about the relationship which is more than the thanks. It is a concretizing of something valued and built between teacher and pupil.

The object is performing the relationship, holding material enactment of appreciation both in itself and in what it conjures up.

Other thank-you notes show a similar link between materiality and message, such as the one in the lower right corner of this next photograph, in Diana's office. Diana works for a local authority at a senior level, has been there for two years but is bored and looking to move on. It is a small card with a black and white photo on it and I reproduce it to make a related point about the calendar alongside it.



Figure 4-3 Diana's thank you card

'that's my latest thank you card, and because it's black and white I've put it – you know... it won't last for ever... it's nice that someone said thank you for something I did for them... she knows I love black and white photographs... I love my Ansell Adams calendar.'

The fact that it is black and white means a lot, since she really enjoys and does black and white photography. The material object expresses something over and above the formal thanks it was conveying, about noticing and confirming the particular distinctive tastes of the receiver, again more than just a comment on a job well done.

Expressing thanks and appreciation happens through objects other than cards. Winifred, a university lecturer in ergonomics and design of many years standing, told me:



Figure 4-4 Winifred's pencil pot

'This is a pencil pot given me by a student who became a PhD student – I supported her all the way through undergraduate and her PhD – we had a relationship that was halfway between a work relationship and a friendship – we walked and talked for a long afternoon in Prague. I was really touched when she brought that back from holiday'. The pencil pot has her name on it (erased) and is a quirky thanks, again not a formal thank you but a reference to times spent at conferences abroad together. It is a gift which is personal but does not overstep the mark of student/supervisor. The object is expressive of the relationship as well the thanks. Winifred's response to it is emotional and visceral. Like the cards above, it holds a warmth which was unexpected for the recipient.

Although these objects are visible to others, they are not public gifts, not certificates or 'prizes' for loyalty, but marks of esteem in a very informal way. Having them on show is expressive of a distinctive personhood, someone who relates to others individually and values that relating enough to want to show it to both self and others. Their materiality allows this silent affirming.

Such objects are unsolicited. Even when people never met, respect and support can be important. A cleaner, Jenny, who works for four hours a day, shares a resources cupboard with others on different shifts, and they each make sure the resources are topped up.

'I've never met the night lad who works here, or J, [name of

think oh well I'll leave it, she'll have enough [stock] for when

she comes on. I'll go down and get a box of each and bring

them up and then stack them up, yeah... we look out for

colleague] because she starts at half past one. But I don't



Figure 4-5 Jenny's cleaning materials

The expressions of support here are enacted in the material objects. Without the actual providing of towels and cleaning materials for each other the on-going supportive relationship, a relationship which is important to those working as cleaners, would not exist. It is not one sided: the relationship is reciprocal and has built up over the time Jenny has been working there. She

each other'.

would be upset if it was not reciprocated and is proud of the way in which the objects express the mutual values of her and her colleagues.

A similar example of object-led support which built respect and friendship came from Victoria. Victoria works for a housing association, and has worked her way up from being a clerk to her current position as a PA to one of the directors. She is immensely proud to be doing that and attributes it to her hard work and professionalism in her role.

She photographed a letter tray:

'It's my job to take the post to the receptionist at 4 o'clock. X (colleague) is supposed to frank it first. But if she's busy, sometimes she's really busy, I'll frank it myself.'



Figure 4-6 Victoria's letter tray

The letter tray was the site of the relationship which allows them to support each other. The relationship would be there without it but the object is almost an 'installation' of the relationship, the performative material in and through which it builds and deepens.

These objects work to bring to mind and underline both the pleasure of a trusting relationship and the value of the knowledge that one can share support, both in giving and receiving.

Anabel, a secretary in a large legal firm said about a colleague's desk,



Figure 4-7 Anabel's colleague's desk

'That's her desk and she's very meaningful to me because without her, she's got me out of a few scrapes, you know, when things have gone wrong...' Like Victoria's letter-tray [Figure 4-6], the desk is both illustrative of, and instantiates, the supportive relationships between Victoria and Anabel and their colleagues, both in giving and receiving. They are the place where the relationship was formed and is meaningfully developed. The objects freight and develop the relationship through daily practice not just through their presence.

This group of objects therefore illustrate how people connected with each other in ways which were affirming of their status. The objects express that support, and give 'proof' of the relationship, acting as situated players in the relationships.

A different sort of relating happens through the very well-known cartoon characters on Rupert's bookshelf. Rupert is a senior lawyer in an international firm who has been there for many years. Changes in legal practice are very welcome to him but the changes in office practice are not and he successfully resists, through his seniority, the idea of offices as non-personalised spaces.

'People say, why are they there and I say well, because they [the makers of them] were clients and I was given them when I did the job, to say thank you...'



Figure 4-8 Rupert's gifts

The appreciation of his work from his clients is important, and he values the way he has been given these reminders of an interesting, difficult and quite high-profile case. While they absolutely affirm a sense of himself as very competent lawyer, they also tap into other relationships, *'No one else* [in the office] *does this, has toys and other things in their office'*. He added, *'It's also ideal when people bring their children in... ...it softens the atmosphere'*. The toys are important in both distinguishing him in the office setting and to relating to new clients. The objects serve as sites for multiple relationships.

#### **Objects reflecting friendship**

Friendship has meanings for the participants which seem to be different than those of affirmation and respect. Friendship was recounted to me as something more temporally long-lasting and which happens outside the workplace as well as inside.

Norma is a young personnel assistant in her first job at an NHS rehabilitation centre. She works in an office with one colleague, and said,



Figure 4-9 Norma's animals

'we [each] have lots of animal things, like magnets and highlighters. We give each other them at Christmas... and when I come in [to work] I'll say have you been playing with my animals, she'll mess around deliberately, we do that. Just silly things, friendly things.'

Because Norma and her colleague share an office, they would have had to develop a working relationship. The objects are an enactment of something over and above that working relationship, a practice signaling friendship as well as a formal relationship. The friendship is built and deepened through the 'playing', and takes on a life of its own through the toy animals.

Jemima is in her second job in Human Resources in a fairly tough environment in sports-centred organization. She described the chick on her desk:

'The chick – a present from my co-worker last Easter. She still works here and we're friends outside work too. It makes me



smile, like her. If I left I'd take it with me but maybe not to work. It would go in my memory box.'

The chick produces a smile, 'like her': the object leads to the same reaction as the person, through its materiality and appeal to Jemima's sense of humour. The whole little object brings the relationship alive with what it means to her. Despite the fact that the co-worker is still there, the chick speaks of something more enduring than the daily routine interactions of the office.

A practical 'tool' a little office tidier, holds a material connection for Mary, an office administrator in a university:



'That was a present from a colleague who was my assistant for three years and I really have got a lot from that working relationship and she gave that to me as a desk tidy with a little sense of irony... it just reflects that personal connection.'

Figure 4-11 Mary's office tidier

The object is not just a reminder of a relationship, nor a thank you for anything; it plays out materially the way in which Mary's untidiness had been a bond between the colleagues and when in use – as it is on a daily basis – the using brings the relationship to life *in the practice* as well as the memory, encouraging tidiness.

This illustrates a point about office friendships: that they have to be muted in the sense that they are not the prime purpose for meeting. The silence of objects is perfect for this. Another friendship was expressed by Gerry, an IT manager for a local authority, who told me,



Figure 4-12 Gerry's Lamborghini

'A lass called Amanda [a colleague]... around my birthday I'd say if you're going to get me a present a Lamborghini would be nice... and she bought that model one... it's symbolic of friendship. It was nice of her to get it and I didn't expect it.'

Although Gerry described the object as 'symbolic' of friendship, the actual object is important. Chocolates would have been far less indicative of the nature of the friendship, even if still symbolic: the Lamborghini brings dreams which Amanda recognized and was sympathetic to, and the object dynamically plays out that sympathy, sitting on Gerry's desk.

Some objects were often described as being there to remind people of a sense of themselves as being more than about work, and of having a 'friendship' identity which was wider than work.

Matthew had left a very senior position in a financial company to work for a local authority for personal reasons to do with his family. He took only one photograph, of a note his daughter had stuck to his desk.

'I often bring her into [her]work, she works locally, and she must have just stuck it on there while I was away from my desk and it just makes me laugh, the fact that she put it there.. .it's a reminder of her.'

Figure 4-13 Matthew's note

The relationship is solidly there without the object. What it brings is immediacy and also, in relation to identity, a form of personal distinctiveness. His daughter did this without his knowledge, it was quirky and affirming and absolutely about a relationship which is like no other. It is a reminder but it is also far more than a photograph of her, because it brings the knowledge that she was there, in the space, interacting with his space and his computer. The object brings her into his work. Matthew said, *'if I moved desks I'd throw it away, but while I'm here I'll leave it'*.

Some objects were described as being there to remind people of a sense of themselves as being more than about work, and of having a 'friendship' identity which was wider than work.

Lucy is a consultant in a group which carries out evaluations largely of publicly funded bodies. She commented:



Figure 4-14 Lucy's photo

'I like to have personal things on my desk to remind me that I'm actually human and have a life outside work. I went there at Christmas with friends so I have that to remind me.'

The photo brings the holiday back but more significant is why she has it there, the need to feel human, to be more than just a worker, claiming a distinctiveness for herself through being someone with friends.

Jana, a very experienced sole-trader HR consultant in a tiny space, made a related point in speaking about a little Maori doll which she doesn't really like but,



'It's from a friend, a really close friend, who I wish lived closer and it's difficult to connect with because of time differences. To have some things around which makes it [the space] not utterly functional is important.'

Figure 4-15 Jana's doll

For Jana as for Lucy, these objects are 'doing' relationships.

Such active 'doing' is reflected also for Carl, an academic who is within five years of retirement, in a photo of himself and a number of colleagues:



Figure 4-16 Carl's photo

'I see the people from this group disappearing [from my workplace]... it highlights how transitory things are – it's a bit sentimental really, I'm going to hand it on to the last person left in the photograph'.

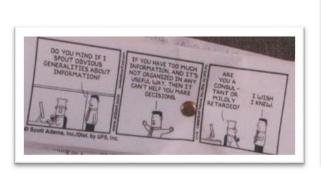
The photo is about friendships at work but it also carries other messages. It signals his credentials as an academic but also, for Carl, holds a sense of his career, which was coming to an end. The photo contains both backward and forward looking messages about transience at work.

These objects therefore seem to express, to 'do' friendship, through their indication of people who have been and who still are significant. They are material indicators, which on a daily basis enact a world of friendship where people are, or have been, thoughtful of you and offer a sense that life at work is more than just 'doing the job'. The significance of these material objects might be seen by comparing them to a word of friendly greeting or thanks. The words are transient, the objects are visceral conveyors of an enacted relationship.

Even parts of the building were regarded as 'friends'. For example, Joy, a cleaner, explained 'that water cooler – it's a little bit of the social scene. You can guarantee, if I'm in the kitchen and someone comes in to fill their water bottle, I'll get chapter and verse on their life...'

#### **Objects reflecting shared humour**

The humour that can be expressed and shared through objects was often spoken of as a vital part of their life at work for many, almost always being about an ironic defensiveness. Mark is a consultant in the same firm as Lucy. He said about his Dilbert cartoon: *'this is ambiguous, taking the mick out of consultants – I've sent it to a few others...'* and the Ricky Gervaise one was also something he reflected on. The cartoon says at the top 'You will never work in a place like this again. This brilliant – fact'. *'it's surreal – a bit like life here sometimes... several of us enjoy this,'* commented Mark.





#### Figure 4-17 Mark's cartoons

Mark is able to share his sense of the surreal nature of the office with his colleagues without actually being disrespectful. Wihout the objects his attitude would have been harder to express, but he enjoys the shared quiet ribaldry over them.

Tom works in PR for an international legal company. His job is uncertain, and due to be reviewed in six months' time. He has had to work very hard and creatively to attain his current role and would good-humouredly express his frustration sometimes. He has a rubber brick.

'It's a prop for some advertising we did, but I like it – I pretend to throw it at people...it lets me express my frustration sometimes but it's funny too...'



Figure 4-18 Tom's rubber brick

Throwing a rubber brick is a good muted way of doing the same frustration which Mark expressed through his cartoons, allowing the irritation to show, amusing others, but keeping it within office limits.

Rupert has a number of very playful objects which have a defensive side, working against the severity of a lawyer's office. Bertie the Bear sat on his shelves:



'He's a real demon for interpreting post mortem reports in fatal accident cases. We discuss it with Bertie because he understands these things. People give me a very strange look... it's just to entertain them and throw them off balance... it lets people see there's a human side to what's going on. It's just less formal...'

Figure 4-19 Rupert's Bertie the Bear

Veronica, who worked in the training arm of a university education department, has a chicken clock whch she uses when training people in rooms with no clock. She has had it for years, and while it is a source of much humour it has also crystallised her thoughts about the work place.

The shabby kitsch object is a point of expression about her resistance to a work place which is becoming more monochrome and controlled.



'The chicken – it's dreadful, just dreadful – I inherited it at work – but it's useful and I've had such laughs with [students with] it – if I wasn't allowed the chicken [at work] it would be the beginning of group think, real regression.'

Figure 4-20 Veronica's chicken

'Boys are stupid, throw rocks at them' is written on Alison's pencil sharpener, a present given within the office but prominently on view. Alison is a property manager for a large financial organization.

'It was a present one Christmas in the office... it's a pencil sharpener so it does have a function as well... everything at work has to have a function... ...but it is something people pick up and laugh at... it's definitely about me.'



Figure 4-21 Alison's pencil sharpener

The object carries a great deal: the way it was given in the office, as a part of a friendship group, and how it recognises a message about Alison herself and her feisty attitude. There was a clear understanding between her and the person who had given it to her about Alison's approach to life, which was *sotto voce* but also on view.

Diana, who had the black and white thank you card [Figure 4-3], has a mug which is slightly different as an object for relating, and it lies somewhere between this theme and the next. It

indicates her fierce desire to not be identified with her current place of employment, and it amuses her. She took her current job because she was made redundant and she doesn't plan to be there very long.

She signals this with her mug, here with the logo turned away.

'So what I've got is... my special [mug], which nobody else gets to have, which is [from] my previous job. Which totally pisses off any management here when I use it. Especially [my manager] when I went to a meeting he goes, "Diana, you're still using your (old employer) cup. I wonder why that is?"



Figure 4-22 Diana's mug

For Diana it is more than just resistance: it is a signal to herself that she will not be in this job for long, because it is somewhere she finds unpalatable. It crosses between this theme and the next because it is not purely about others but also a message to herself: nobody else gets to have that mug, and its humour is quite grim.

#### Objects reflecting relating to colleagues through the space itself

My findings were that the work space was used in a number of ways. Space was firstly spoken of as something objectified and concretized, functioning as a 'thing', which was part of many participants' experience of being at work.

Roger's old office, in the Housing Development organization for which he worked, had been a small enclosed room with no windows in a back corridor, and he now worked in a glass walled office with others around him. So for him, the outlook was important: space appears to be a way of feeling human warmth and connectedness.



Figure 4-23 Roger's office view

'That's the view across the office I can see out of my room and I like the vista, the other desks. I much prefer this type of environment, with the implication that the personal space is small, than the old environment which is, it was, a walled room, disconnected from people... my old office was just cold space.'

Kate, like Jenny, works for four hours per day as a cleaner in a university and photographed a big reception area. 'It's the first port of call people go to for information... people know there's somewhere to go for help and that's important. I can tell people they'll get help there...' Her picture is a recognizable space so not reproduced here. Its significance lies in the way she connects to people through being able to direct them to a particular space where they will get help, an important part of her job.

Human connections are also important for Joseph who, as an arts director, has responsibilities that take him daily throughout a huge building spanning four floors and encompassing two major performance spaces as well as offices and catering spaces.



Figure 4-24 Joseph's office

'I would consider all four floors of this building as kind of home, but this space here, with my boss and x and y [names of colleagues], is very much our own, in that respect, and you know there's a kind of dotted line across there where you sort of see people tentatively trying to step over...'

The spaces within spaces for Joseph, the particular performance space which he is responsible for and the office space he works in, indicate different kinds of connectedness all of which he values for the people in them. These include his immediate colleagues with similar artistic responsibilities, managerial and estates staff, and the public who came into the performance space. The different spaces are the places which daily unify his working life and he understands himself and his work through them.

While the immediate space may give a sense of connection, sometimes the space itself was reported to me as a place of feeling that one is keeping in touch with the organization. Rebecca, whose retail organization has a strictly enforced clear desk policy, photographed the screen in the works entrance hall, which I cannot reproduce for reasons of anonymity: *'It keeps you in touch, helps me feel this is my space, not just my desk space, keeps me in touch with all this wing where I work'.* Carl, again with an unreproducible photo, said he keeps his door open deliberately to stop feeling shut off. *'I don't have an open door policy. I keep the door open to feel connected.'* 

#### Space as a signal to others

As well as this understanding of space, there were also references to the way in which objects *arranged* in the space were done so with particular purposes, which might be reflective of needs, fears or responsibilities. An individual space can also be a place into which others can be invited. The arrangement of the space may have the deliberate purpose of saying something about the person, of presenting a self to others, reflected in such objects as Sarah's carefully-positioned welcoming chairs and postcards:

'I want a space where I can sit and chat and it feels less formal... more relaxed... so I put the postcards on this side of the desk, as a sort of icebreaker... and the chairs are there and in their own space but people can see the postcards...'



Figure 4-25 Sarah's postcards and chairs

Sarah is a Personnel Director in a Housing Association where she has worked for four years. The objects here are about performing the space, performing Sarah's wish to make her visitors feel relaxed as well as to signal something to herself about her care for people and her need to make sure that they see what she wants them to. For Sarah, being in a room with glass internal walls means that arranging her room is important. *'...I like people being able to see in and I've arranged that side of the desk. I'm happy with it... that area is linked to people, people and events...'* 



Figure 4-26 Lucy's office

For Lucy, her little Buddha significantly moved around with her.

'I have a little Buddha on my computer and if I don't put it on every day when I bring my computer in, someone says "where's your little Buddha?"... I forgot it today.'

The Buddha is not a deliberate way of connecting to people but has become so, as others have noticed it and noticed her daily practice of placing the object on her computer. Such noticing of the object is also about noticing her and her way of being. This is one object which is deliberately moved around with the computer, forming a material link for Lucy wherever she is working with something deeply significant to her about her values, and also forming a link to others.

In summary, space viewed as 'a whole' seems to work as a place where people often invest something of themselves, experience themselves as being individual yet connect to wider aspects of the organization, experience some control, and experience themselves as relating individuals, all key themes for this thesis.

#### Objects reflecting a sense of responsibility to others

Human connections are also about responsibility which was spoken of as bringing pride. Victoria was responsible for some filing cabinets a corridor's length away from her desk, and said,



Figure 4-27 Victoria's filing cabinets

'that is my immediate working space too, along with my office – I'm up and down that corridor all the time and in my manager's room keeping the files in order – that's where the filing cabinets are, in his room. I look after them, I make him keep them in order.'

She was proud to be allowed into these spaces, to feel that she had responsibility there and could tease and cajole her manager into being more thoughtful about the tidiness of the space.

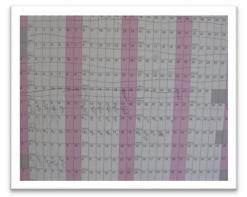


Figure 4-28 Jemima's calendar

Jemima is in her first job as a line manager and very proud of the way she manages her colleague. 'I line manage her and I want to make sure she has the right experiences to put on her CV. I remember when I

started my course, that she's doing now, and how hard

it was and I felt it would never end and I'd never have a life again – I want to help her with that. I'm very proud of the way I manage her and helping her to have those important experiences. The calendar – it has the dates of handing in assignments when I did the course last year – it reminds me to encourage her to keep going'.

#### 4.3 Summary

The contribution of this chapter is to illustrate how objects are both the carriers and the performers of relationships at work, things that mutually 'do' relationships with those who interact with them. The divisions I have suggested are not mere taxonomies, but places of emotional enactment of relationships. I underline how objects enact and afford the experience of a variety of relationships at work which may have been there without them but which are amplified and given expression through the objects, such as Lucy's Buddha: without it being on her table the relationships would not have been expressed in this particular way, the acknowledging of her values in the placing of the Buddha. Similarly the letter tray and the store cupboard are the relationship: their material heft is to let it flow through the objects and back.

What I take forward from this chapter is that notion of performativity, of objects affording and performing relationships. However, I will also briefly make connections to my discussion via some other points in the literature.

This chapter illustrates how, using Suchman's (2000) notion of lack, desire is shown to loop itself through objects. The contribution of this chapter is to show how those desires in this case are for certain things in relation to others: for the recognition, friendship, shared humour and support which come from object-related connections at work. The objects also 'hold' a sense of *personal* distinctiveness as defined by Elsbach (2003) and some *social* distinctiveness through their positioning in sight: people are able to see and understand and share the meaning. The contribution of this chapter is to give much greater definition to that distinctive sense of a relating self experienced through objects in the workplace.

Establishing a sense of identity is at work here through the way in which people respond to the relationships established through the objects. The question being asked and answered through the objects is what of Mead's 'l' and 'me' is there in this object: what is there of 'l' which is being expressed and then what is the response of those who interact to give 'me' feedback? In this chapter, the objects are expressing the need for relationships and the 'me' which has the feedback encourages or discourages the extent to which those objects are able to achieve the desire of the 'l'.

# Chapter 5

## Ventriloquist objects

In this chapter I explore how the data illustrate people's relationships with *themselves* through objects. Such relationships are not designed for sociability. However they are 'speaking' silently to participants about themselves, and may be designed to speak to others on behalf on the participant, hence to be acting as 'ventriloquists' for participants.

I argue that the objects afford and perform experiences of personal distinctiveness without openly claiming such distinctiveness, something which participants felt was otherwise lacking at work but which is important to them. The chapter serves to demonstrate how people hold a variety of needs quite closely, acknowledging them to very few people, if any. They are often places of quiet resistance and the objects serve to give them place and voice.

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter is distinct in its focus from the previous one. In the previous theme, the objects were working to facilitate open, deliberate, transparent exchanges of some sort between people. The objects in that theme carry relationships which are about easily acknowledged friendships and relationships, open for all to see and inviting comment and response. The self expressed in and through them is done through the relationships with others which they facilitate.

I now examine how objects express and nurture a more inward sense of self at work, which does not have to be shared to be experienced. The objects here are distinguished from those in the previous theme by being about people supporting themselves *for* themselves, rather than about seeking or appreciating support from others. As such, the work the objects and people are coperforming may not be overtly visible, although the objects may sometimes be designed as performative 'messages' for others. In addition, there is space in a more privately held view of the self for more criticism of power relationships at work, and more place for private resistance, a trope which runs through all the sections of this chapter.

Data supporting this theme is presented in the following sections:

- Objects reflecting a desire for distinctive 'positioning'
- Objects reflecting motivation or inspiration
- Objects reflecting a sense of 'mine' or 'part of me'
- Objects reflecting emotional safety and boundaries
- Objects reflecting dreams of things which cannot be talked about to others at work.

#### **Objects reflecting a desire for distinctive 'positioning'**

Objects in this category seem to reflect a desire to let people know that you 'are' something, but without expressing that explicitly, or inviting comment on objects. In the example of Sarah's use of space and postcards, cited in the previous chapter [Figure 4-25], she expressed how she uses objects very deliberately in one part of her office to engage with people. However she also has carefully displayed objects which have another purpose. Such objects are there to:



Figure 5-1 Sarah's sculpture

'....this side of the office, around my desk, is about me and my personality...I'm not as boring as people might think...'

'...say something about me.....'



Figure 5-2 Sarah's coaster

In her mind the space is divided up, with others positioned at the table looking at her, and at the postcards stuck on the outward facing part of the desk, and 'Sarah herself' defined by the objects on or behind her desk. They are 'about her' but not explicitly. What she wants the carefully-chosen objects to express is something unsayable verbally, that she is interesting and has a certain personality which she wants others to notice. The objects are working to confirm and demonstrate something about her which is important for her to signal *to* herself *about* 

herself. It is the most purposeful manipulation of objects within my participants, where something is arranged with a very specific performative 'message' to others about the self.

In this example the space is divided up and different objects 'perform' different aspects of the self. In contrast Rupert uses single objects for 'double' meanings, like the picture on the wall just visible here along with another that was about to be hung up.



'I'm human at work. I'm unusual in that I do insist on having an individual picture to the extent that I think I've broken all the rules by getting the maintenance people to put a picture hook in the wall... Nobody does it. I don't think there's a rule against it. There may be. If there is I've overlooked it... I've got another one to put up...'

Figure 5-3 Rupert's pictures

The pictures, along with the Disney toys referred to in Chapter 4 [Figure 4-8] which 'soften the atmosphere for children' speak to him about 'being human', and the need he feels to assert this at work, which he is able to do through objects if not through his legal work. But they also afford a protest, as evidenced in the ironic comment, '*if there is* [a rule] *I've overlooked it'*. These objects work *for himself* as a way of feeling he has made the point that (his) reason and humanity belong at work. This cannot be expressed explicitly but it can be done through material objects.

Another 'positioning' object is Andrew's cross in his office. Andrew is another senior lawyer, a partner in his firm. The cross is pinned to his notice board and he commented about it:



Figure 5-4 Andrew's cross

'That's obviously the most important thing in terms of... it puts everything into context... you know, living the life all the time... I don't think anybody's said anything about that particular thing but you couldn't really miss it because when you come in it's right in front of you, in your eyeline, isn't it...'

For Andrew it does not matter if others fail to comment on the cross because he has literally pinned his colours to the mast of his notice board and claimed some identity ground for himself. Without this quiet proclamation he would feel something central to him is missing in the office. The *object* as message is unequivocal but unobtrusive, not hidden but not insistent. It performs himself to himself.

Andrew's other way of individual positioning is equally expressed in objects. His holistic approach to life, really important to him, is also reflected in his photographs. He took several photos of his total space because he found it impossible to separate things out.



Figure 5-5 Andrew's office

'...everything works together... if I moved offices I would keep every little thing, even the broken things, the redundant things. They are part of me... we had a new person once who tidied up while I was away. And she [the new person] said "I thought I should, just to help you out...", because she's just joined you see, and she's trying... I was like "Oh thank you very

much". And I saw my secretary, and she said

"Well I tried to stop her and she wouldn't. I told her you'd hate it". '

The objects are exactly him in work, every broken bit of them. Without that arrangement he does not feel truly himself. The accumulation of objects and the way they are arranged in his office – one could almost say 'curated'- expresses something of what he *is*.

Alison's 'Shoes' calendar is thought of by her similarly: 'it's very useful but it's definitely a reflection about me!' Shoes featured also on a mug, a mouse mat and postcard: as she commented,



### Figure 5-6 Alison's 'shoes' objects

'It's about not being just a number or a statistic in the office, you know, you need to have some personality....I need to feel I'm here.'

The objects provide material evidence to herself that she is resisting the label of simply being an employee, and their daily use is a material, almost visceral, acting out of the 'other' Alison in the workplace. Others could read the objects as fun, but for Alison it is also a way of 'being herself'.

Mark, like Andrew, has a 'messy' desk about which he told me,



Figure 5-7 Mark's desk

'it's the sign of a creative mind [said slightly ironically] but it's the way I work, people understand that about me... If people want me to be productive, I expect things to work – I want a quick fix, not a mess around... As long as it works, I don't mind. 2 lamps [on my desk] one works, one doesn't, I don't mind. 2 phones, one

doesn't work, one does, so what? It's about getting the job done. ...it's the way I am.'

The objects are there purely to serve his need to work well for himself. Asking him to rearrange them 'tidily' would be a real affront to his desire to get the job done to his satisfaction. The objects are about that drive to be productive about his work, and not to be distracted by the need to work otherwise than as *he* feels comfortable. He sees no need to conform to anyone else's strictures about the objects that support him. The precise objects are perhaps 'immaterial' to what is core about Mark, but these objects are a functioning material expression of it. His insistence on this being the way he needs to work has in it some slight truculence, and he would resist being made to work otherwise.

These objects are 'doing' these people, expressing people in their material statements that those relating to them are not just workers but have a distinctiveness which is important to them to experience. The objects seem to be able to hold and meet this need. The materiality is perhaps a way of saying something important about the self *without actually saying it*, without having to expose something which may be quite sensitive and private, or inappropriate to expose.

### **Objects reflecting motivation or inspiration**

Some objects were reported as offering a sense of personal inspiration. One focus of this inspiration was about being more effective at work and I will cover this in Chapter 7 on objects reflecting professional identity. Much more often, what was being aspired towards appeared to link to values other than effectiveness at work.

An object-led example of this search for the expression of values comes from Diana. She had some fruit teas and the wrappings have mottoes on which she would occasionally pin up on her notice board. A larger photograph of her board [Figure 4-3] shows just how small these are, and yet important to her. As she explained to me of one,



Figure 5-8 Diana's teas

She experiences it as a tiny support for her courage and perseverance in a difficult work situation. Another material enactor of 'how to be' is Lucy's postcard of Bob Marley about which she said,



Figure 5-9 Lucy's Bob Marley postcard

'I love his eyes and I love his teeth and his locks and I think he just sort of solidifies in a way how you should live your life apart from getting stoned everyday which I've no doubt he did! But it just conveys such a lot of hope and warmth and love. I think he's a great guy so... well he's here.'

Bob Marley brings into Lucy's work place some values about how she wants to be on a daily basis, without making them over-explicit to others, or even defining them very far in words. 'Hope and warmth and love' are value-laden terms. The object is enough to act as an emotional conduit to her inner life, viscerally producing an effect which is significant to Lucy.

Joy was inspired by public pictures of ex-students in the corridors of the college where she cleaned, photographed in the 1950's.

'I liked this one...follow your heart'.



proper way, it was more pure then. They would earn rewards. And these people that's what they did in those days... it's a time which I just wish would have lasted for ever... now everything is handed on a plate. It's just maybe a bit old-fashioned. I think you should earn things and not just be given them.'

She told me, 'I look at it every day. They did things the

### Figure 5 10 Joy's photograph

The pictures encapsulate her view of how things should be done. To others this might be a representation of old-style education. But for Joy this picture has a very particular impact, *not* expressive, as it could have been, of privilege or of gender bias in education, or of a valuing of sport in education, but of something *not* apparent through the picture, namely doing things the proper way and 'earning' your qualification. The material picture carries her own values, and brings *herself* into the relationship with it. It inspires her to hold onto her beliefs despite being 'old fashioned'. In that sense the picture is jointly performing and 'doing' herself.

Sometimes objects act as inspiration in times of stress. Mary said,

'some days can be just a blur and you haven't time for you... I think it's just so important more than ever to just have some personal objects around you to remind you that actually this is you, it's not all about work, and not to lose sight of that. My snail... everyone plays with my snail...'



Figure 5-11 Mary's snail

'Not losing sight' is a telling comment: the objects are in sight as a way of encapsulating and expressing that careful and deeply-held notion of the self being more than a work 'persona'. This example is reminiscent of the way in which in the previous theme [Figure 4-15] Jana had the Maori doll to remind her that she was more than just a worker. In that theme the emphasis was on the objects as freighters of relationships and a desire to connect: here the emphasis is on the enacting of personal values which might not be expressed to others.

Actively bringing himself into moments of stress is important too for Carl, who said quietly in our interview,



'This is a picture from my childhood, when I felt a great sense of freedom – a time which will never be repeated – it reminds myself of it. Something about me – I look at it if I'm a bit cheesed off.'

Figure 5-12 Carl's picture

The picture is not about day dreaming but about affirming something of himself. It is not only an escape into that landscape but an affordance into his understanding of himself as having a history which is still present, accessible through the materiality of the picture when he's 'a bit cheesed off'. Biography is present and powerful through the objects.

Alison had an object which had slightly serendipitously been given to her but which she finds reflective of herself at work, and has chosen to keep by her desk.



#### Figure 5-13 Alison's picture

'I became the admin person for arts liaison, [because I was interested] ...we bought this piece and I was sent this printout, I think it was just like a "Thanks for looking after things", and I actually really like it... it's entitled 'My Many Coloured Days'. And I just really, as soon as I saw it I loved it, and I thought actually that's a reflection on my days in the office, as it were, no two days are the same... I can think that on a bad day tomorrow may be better...'

While the picture 'works' through its colour in a drab office, and might do so for anyone, what gives it is emotional heft as a material object for Amanda is the connection to *her* work, through the way she acquired it, and through her connection with its title as well as its colour. The everyday experience of a varied working life is instantly encapsulated in it, bringing comfort in the knowledge that each day is different. The thought once held comes back unbidden as the daily practice of looking at it happens.

Jane has had many jobs in her life before her current one, as senior executive in a health

organization. She has a very expressive cartoon pinned very low on her wall beside her desk, carefully out of sight from everyone else. 'It's been with me for fourteen years, it's got me through four jobs, I just love it.'



Figure 5-14 Jane's cartoon

What gives this object its impact is its deep appeal to her sense of humour which has lasted her through fourteen years and four jobs. Its presence is an immediate connector to all they have both been through and survived together. It connects to ups and downs of her life, and to how 'get through' those. As the constant practice of relating to it happens, the object becomes a 'friend', whose feedback is that they would resiliently survive again. For Jane, her biography was one of survival and her sense of humour, shared with this old friend, was integral to that survival. They performed her life together.

Finding inspiration for your own skills and abilities through objects was apparent for some participants. Geraldine had a set of treasured books, relating to her work as an academic historian, which she reads quietly in lunch breaks. She spoke of them as a way connecting her to her own very valued interests.



Figure 5-15 Geraldine's books

'...it's the depth of the knowledge. During August I've been taking them off the shelves and reading them on my own at lunchtime which has been wonderful. My first love. My innate passion. My interest in the human condition. I don't need them for my work, they're too detailed for student teachers, they're here because I love them...'

Feeding 'herself' like this is extremely important to her, and the objects work not as an August escape but as an enactment of what she values, a carrier of her 'innate passion'. The objects themselves are sources of inspiration, whether she took them off the shelves or not, full of her own interest in *'the human condition'*. They encapsulate in a concrete way that she is a person who is, again, more than the sum of her employment; that she needs to preserve 'herself' in that employment and not be limited by it.

Inspiration could also come from the way in which the material object allows you to achieve things which were satisfying. For Gerry, his computer, is inspiring for him in and of itself:

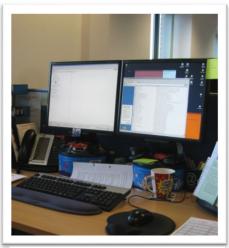


Figure 5-16 Gerry's computer

'I've got it set up how I want it... I said I needed two screens and they let me have them ...I love this set up... I can look for new ways of doing things, improving things, streamlining things.'

The double screen plays out his sense of his value in his workplace, that he is recognized as someone who deserves two screens to achieve what he wants. It is not just a reminder, but an actual hands-on physical enjoyment of the supportive resource for him, which lets him do what he wants to as a professional at work. He and his computer together are able to achieve something in a way which he could not alone. The computer's two screens are an active player in his ability to do the things he valued, and to feel valued.

Tom had very recently been able to carve out a job for himself in Communications in his firm and it was under resourced. He had to fight for a good camera.

'This one... it belongs to another office but I borrowed it and they haven't asked for it back. I really like it, it's what I need to do the job well, but I have to fight for resources... like fighting for my job...'



Figure 5-17 Tom's camera

I include this example because for Tom the materiality of the object impacts in many ways. His uncertainty about his job unless he does it well, his conviction that he could do it well and his frustration at having to be slightly devious in getting resources are all gathered into the object which he admires and values. Using it is a practical demonstration of his skill, and a material connection to that and to how the skill is not as valued as he would like. In the object are his faith in himself and his belief that he is worth his job, but also the understanding that he is a fighter who can get resources. The power of his employers to make his job precarious is met by his own small power to be devious.

Adam is an estate worker in a health organization, where he has worked for ten years, after originally just coming as temporary job. His inspiration is quite mundane in one way but very telling.

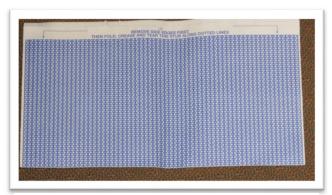


Figure 5-18 Adam's pay check

'...even though I like working here, I wouldn't work here for nowt, you know what I mean! You wouldn't work, that's what people go to work for, isn't it... that's the end result of all your labours'.

He had opted to photograph his pay check because it really is why he does the job, however good his working conditions.



But Adam also photographed the space he worked in, emphasizing how space can be an object in itself.

Figure 5-19 Adam's workspace

'That photo was looking down towards the park. It's sort of like a privilege to be working in such a nice place. I did use to appreciate it but sort of talking like this actually I thought "I can't believe I'm getting paid to work here".'

The space and the paycheck go together. The paycheck is the material reminder, a representation, of the money which Adam earns, and which he values. The space on the other hand, which Adam felt to be something he was looking at 'objectively' for the first time, is a different kind of motivator. For him it is a privilege to be at work. The space is a potent enactor of that enjoyment, a co-worker for him.

There is a suggestion in many of these examples in this section of a link to something very deeply held, a form of values which are expressed through the objects. The objects seem to carry a desire to be inspired about life at work as something more than work. They facilitate the creation of a space which is multiply able to nourish many parts of the worker, and which are – deliberately – very far from obvious to others.

### Objects reflecting a sense of 'mine' or 'part of me'

Many people had things which were classified firmly as 'mine' even if on public display. 'Mine' could be about the things which accompanied you through your working life, offering some perspective on continuity, despite changes at work. Mugs in particular were important.



Figure 5-20 A collection of mugs

Mary had a mug which she described to me as, '...the only thing that I had with me through all the job changes that was mine.' It is 'her' in that it holds a sense of continuity in its very material self. No other mug would have done this. Geraldine too had one, 'it's big, white and bright orange. It's been with me through all my office jobs. I'd be upset if it broke'. In fact, mugs had an inordinately large presence within the data as personal objects. For Paul, a porter in a university medical department, if anyone used his mug he would give it to them; he feels almost ritualistically that it is his and no one else's, and if anyone else used it he would simply ask them to keep it. Adam has a mug which always has a broken handle, because of his outdoors job where things get knocked about, but it is always of his favourite football team and others know not to use it. Lucy has a nice porcelain one, 'not too heavy, not too thin'. Gerry said of his mug with 'computer nerd' on it:

'this stuff, my computer mug that one of the supervisors gave me, it just makes it more of a warmer environment I suppose rather than just, I'm a robot coming to work, nothing there and I think it's important from an emotional perspective, to have some warmth as opposed to just coming to work'.

Tom said about his mug, *'it came from a friend who was living with me and he left it when he moved out...we're not supposed to have mugs in the office so it's a another little bit of rebellion'.* More rebellion showed up in Veronica's mug, *'The owl* [old corporate symbol] *has been stripped from our lives, replaced... Having an owl on your desk is a bit contrary. But not dissent like putting your head above the parapet. I don't use it outside the office. '* 

Rebellion, tactile pleasure, reminders of continuity, all come from these mugs and many more, but these messages are held privately in the daily practice of simply having a drink. Mugs are acceptable at work, but afford a great deal of choice in their material make up, either through the actual material they are made of or the messages they carry. Their portability means that they can be taken from job to job easily and brought into other parts of a building as a way of carrying around part of yourself. They may almost form a boundaried 'personal spacearound the mug.

Another form of personal space which was 'mine' was illustrated by Paul, who had no room of his own and who told me,



'that's my locker. Just... something which is yours, you know what I mean, it's somewhere, I suppose like an... not an extension of your house but it's somewhere you can put your personal things. Not... you know... just... have your own stuff, books... just... yeah, an extension of your house, of your home, and you know what I mean it's just yours, sort of thing.'

### Figure 5-21 Paul's locker Having a personal area is important to him because he is ambitious and likes to read and can keep his books private, away from other people. The little space in his locker is purely about him, just his. The comment *'an extension of your home'* feels as though for Paul, this truly is boundaried space, space which hardly counts as work space but which embodies something of a *'home person'* at work.

### **Objects reflecting emotional safety and boundaries**

Objects like the locker are both 'mine' and mark a boundary. It seemed to be important to people to mark the way in which they were more than just owned by the organization and could hold that feeling under difficult circumstances. Objects reflecting emotional safety were usually in very public spaces, but they have profound private meanings, and were sometimes spoken of as indicating boundaries around the self/other/work.

Matthew is very unhappy with wearing anything other than a suit at work.



'We had an away day and had to dress informally... I absolutely felt terribly, terribly uncomfortable and out of place. I'm sure it won't affect my performance but it's mentally, I do not think that that's right'.

Figure 5-22 Matthew at work

Through wearing the right clothes, he encapsulates himself as a worker. The clothes delineate where he is and what he is about. He asked someone else to photograph him with a colleague, since she was retiring that day, and used it to illustrate his formal dress.

Veronica expressed another sort of boundary that worked for her in the room,

'The big difference is that with one or two notable exceptions you don't have the same warmth and openness outside this room... that's why I took a photo of the names on the door. With people outside, the quality and relationship is different. It's not that I feel emotionally unsafe – it's just different when you shut the door'. (The photograph is too identifiable to reproduce.)

For some it was about making deliberate boundaries between work and home. Lucy said,



Figure 5-23 Lucy's corner

'That little corner, that box, that has all the stuff that's work related that I keep meaning to read, because I try not to take work home.' Darren is an estate manager but inside a large financial organization where he is responsible for the ordering and supply of stationery for the whole firm, a huge and pressured job. He found some protection in a busy life through his water bottle.

'My water bottle. Always on the desk – it's my bit of respite – lets me carry on if I need a break, mentally as well as physically. It's a chill out point. This job is stressful – the water is my time out, just for me. It just gives me a bit of time....'



Figure 5-24 Darren's water bottle

Taking a time out for a drink of water is more than a health concern for Darren although he could justify it like that. His water bottle is also about guarding his time, making sure that he takes a few moments out in times of stress.



Figure 5-25 Mary's door

'That's not a door that's an escape route' was Mary's comment on the door to her room.

*`...if you just think "Oh stop the world, I want to get off", it's what you use to just get away, have five minutes to yourself or walk round the block.'* 

For Mary, she and the space outside the door were a collusive unit, a way of escape from pressure. Just knowing 'outside' was there was enough to be able to resist the overload.

### **Objects and dreaming**

Mary escaped literally. But other ways of escaping the routine of work lie in the elsewhere of your head, in day dreaming. Many objects serve to offer a way of escaping for a few minutes like this. Val is an accounts manager with a police organization. She has three things for day dreaming: a calendar of mountains, a mouse mat with a photo of her skydiving, and the view from the window:





Figure 5-26 Val's calendar and mouse mat

'...just a few seconds of escapism from the day to day struggles...When I look at my calendar I think 'I've climbed that' or 'I'll be there next weekend...'

The calendar was a present from her husband, and the mouse mat shows him as well, so the objects are also redolent of that relationship of joint occasions of adventure as well as being tangible occasions in themselves of joint affection. It's not just 'that's a picture of me and my husband skydiving'. Rather it is a 'that is the relationship which I have with him which will continue and I am going to day dream that for a moment.'

Lucy has a calendar as well:

'York – where I grew up – where someone special to me lives – I look at my calendar and think about it'.



Figure 5-27 Lucy's calendar

The calendar freights both her history and current memories.

Marie, who worked as an assistant director in the social services department of a local authority, commented on a picture of a harbour near her home:



'when it's, we've had terrible weather up here, when it's been snowing and we've been looking at the clocks thinking "Oh God, it's freezing, all the heating's broken", all those things. And when you look at it, you think "Oh well, summer's just round the corner".... it's reminiscent of days out in that town and the summer. It keeps me going.'

Figure 5-28 Marie's photo

The photo again might be a representation in that the boat and harbour have a delightful postcard look about them. But for Marie it also captures *material* memories and promises of future summers. And each of these examples works to offer escape through the *familiar* thing in the object. The object is important in itself because of associations other than simply the

representative picture. It holds other parts of the self. If contrasted with a year planner, which would do the functional job of reminding about the date equally well, the emotional heft of the calendars shows up clearly.

Some things are half in this theme and half in the next, holding both private values and something a bit hidden. In Carl's office is a Celtic cross, with some shells in front of it:



'the cross... it relates to me, to my holistic view of life – the Celtic tradition, everything is inter-related... my space is so much about me, about my identity. I picked up the shells on a beach in Ireland this summer – they're important to me... the Celtic nature tradition again...'

Figure 5-29 Carl's Celtic cross

Unlike for Andrew, the cross is not a statement for others but only about himself; there is nothing evangelical about it and he keeps his understanding of himself as a Christian of a particular tradition well hidden. He did not talk about the moment of picking up the shells or why they were there but he wanted them in front of his desk to bring to mind and carry something of him.

Equally half private is Lucy's view across the street to the park outside.



'sometimes in the summer my husband and I would meet for lunch out there, I just think about it'

Figure 5-30 Lucy's view

And Rupert has a bobbin because his parents were both mill workers:

'...looking at that, at the bobbin and the textile background, just makes me, every so often if I'm thinking carefully about it, makes me realise where I've come from and where I've got to, which is sometimes useful to remember.'



Figure 5-31 Rupert's bobbin

He did not say much about this, but wanted his humble origins there in a big corporate work space, as reminder to himself not to abuse his own position of power, an interesting reflection when many of these objects were about resisting the power of others.

The objects could perhaps be thought of as portals. The day dreaming, the entry into other lives and spaces, is channeled through them, but also kept contained by the materiality of the objects. But they are small things, which gave specific boundaries to the entry elsewhere and limit the time around them.

### 5.2 Summary

This chapter illustrates how objects that may be in very public spaces have profound private meanings. The objects work to carry and perform, through daily practice, the preservation of a sense of personal distinctiveness for the self rather through relating to others. Such distinctiveness might be through the particular positioning of objects, the expression of values through objects, resistance to authority and protection of the self or preserving something as 'mine' rather than anyone else's. What the objects are facilitating here is the maintenance of a 'personal' self, over against a work self, which confirms a personal distinctiveness for people.

To connect this again briefly to some of the literature from Chapters 1 and 2, the objects are illustrating Elsbach's (2003) desire to be hold their own sense of being distinguishable from others in the workplace, linking to Brown et al.'s (2005) need for a distinctive self at work, and to meet the lack of such distinction produced by being an employee (Suchman 2005) through quiet resistance and the establishment of boundaries. It seemed to be important to people to mark the way in which they were more than just owned by the organization and could hold that feeling even under difficult circumstances.

In the literature review I commented that much work in organizations on identity had focused on times of turbulence. While none of the people here felt that life was particularly turbulent, the experience of an inner self was sometimes spoken of as connected to times of temporary stress. The connections to the self which people wished to mobilize were perhaps nearer the surface at such times. The stretch (Kreiner, Hollensbee and Sheep 2006b) between the work self and the more personal self felt as 'I' is addressed through the affordances into an inner identity offered by the objects.

# Chapter 6

# **Hiding objects**

In this chapter I explore how people understand themselves through objects which they keep hidden from others or 'hidden in plain sight'. A number of themes emerged, which largely coalesce around unhappiness of one sort or another: feeling out of control and needing in some way to take back that control or to hide from others that it is not there. Objects also came into this category when they were 'orphaned' with nowhere else to be.

### 6.1 Introduction

The third theme I interpret is concerned with the objects that hold the most private meanings, things which are either not something to be openly communicated or are deliberately and physically hidden. It is about difficult things often not connected to the job but catching biography. This is one of the most surprising findings of the research. Participants talked about these objects, explaining how certain objects hid a variety of emotion for them; unhappiness, disrespect, ambition, guilt and collusion. Yet they still chose to photograph these objects and, in some cases, have them on display where others could see.

Once again hiddenness related to a number of different themes:

- Objects reflecting unhappiness in work
- Objects reflecting unhappiness outside work
- Objects reflecting disrespect for managers or fellow workers
- Objects reflecting privacy
- Objects which belong neither to work nor home.

### **Objects reflecting unhappiness in work**

One way in which the objects were reported to work is by 'holding' unhappiness in a way which seems to make it present but manageable. In locating a feeling of longing in objects, this sentiment shows a lack of something which was deeply emotional and powerful.

Joy the cleaner is nearing retirement. She spoke very sadly of her missed educational opportunities and her longing to learn in a university rather than clean there. Her cleaning trolley always represent 'humdrum work', and as she told me,



Figure 6-1 Joy's trolley

'that's what I am... [only a trolley]. I did attempt to spruce it up yesterday but I really don't get... you see, the trolley, it doesn't talk back to me. I can't have a conversation with the trolley... even sometimes if you're sat in a room sometimes you can talk to four walls but you can't talk to a trolley.'

To anyone else the trolley is a useful tool but Joy feels it is 'herself', and it enacts and holds in it all the pain of the educational loss. The statement above came during the rep grid exercise, and as the trolley was used for the third time in a set of triads she began to weep and I terminated the interview. The trolley is hugely performative for her, carrying all the pain of her lost opportunities. She contrasted it with a picture of a classroom,



'...it's a classroom. Where you can create a real future. And I think of that, I was born too early. And I think I now wish that I could be in that classroom there... and if I was taught by [a member of staff] I would learn so much...'

Figure 6-2 Joy's classroom

The trolley to her is herself as she is at the end of her working life.

Paul the porter is frustrated in his job, and very keen to try to develop his career, an ambition not shared by his colleagues. His frustration was expressed through a number of objects. One was the chair at the 'front line desk', used by all the porters on different shifts. However there is no computer on the desk, and this lack of technology for someone hungry for training and to do the job well is a real point of bitterness.

'...we have to ring people when deliveries happen and they're not in... they [my colleagues] still work with an old fashioned system, pen and paper. And I said well this is the age of computers... and they won't have it, they say "no, if you have a computer then they can check on you"... I don't understand because that's



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Figure 6-3 Paul's desk
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the way forward but they won't have it... and they [the organization] would train us...'

The desk is conspicuously without a computer which is why Paul took the photo. This is an interesting example of a painful 'missing' object. Paul would like the IT training and the opportunity to show himself to be efficient at his work, but he is held back because the

computer is resisted by others. In a related vein, his newspaper was on show to others and he photographed it because it is more to him than a paper to read, although he chooses not to tell others why.

'I do brain training things in it... the crossword... and I like to train my brain... I go the library and read at lunchtime... I don't tell people... they don't need to know...'



Figure 6-4 Paul's newspaper

In the previous theme [Figure 5-21] Paul also said of his locker that he kept books in it but did not photograph them. They are not on view but kept in the place which was 'an extension of your home'. For Paul the objects are really important parts of the self he wants to develop; despite lack of money and no obvious way forward he is still able to distinguish himself from those around him and from the acceptance of the institution that porters did not need IT skills. For both Joy and Paul, there is a lack looping through their objects. The objects *are* the lack, performed daily.

Unhappiness with management rather than with her lack of progress is part of Jemima's life.



Figure 6-5 Jemima's hand cream

'...on there is my hand cream. I use that all the time. It's Marks and Spencer's magnolia and I use it because my, it's the scent my mum used to wear and it reminds me of her. If I have a bad moment I'll put some hand cream on and just smell my hands and it reminds me of my mum – we're very close. No one knows why I do it.'

The perfume is potent, in every sense. It has smell and that smell is a comforter. Although other people know that she uses hand cream occasionally they have no idea of the emotional connection which is there, the way it is bringing more than smooth hands to her work. As with the trolley, something with one overt purpose is performing something else of great significance. Things hidden in plain sight, such as in all these three examples so far, have an overt story which can be spoken of, but they have another story which is more significant to the identity of the object owner. The feedback received from others to the 'me' might be that, for example, Paul is pushy about getting a computer, or Jemima looks after her hands nicely. But that does not speak to the '1' which is holding a very different identity standard about what might have been, or what could be.

Physical surroundings too can be a source of almost despair, where objects are designed to bring comfort. As Geraldine told me,



'I stared at that dreadful notice board, with the black and white notices, and I used to think "I can't stand this, I can't stand that I've got no food for my soul and my eyes... ...I've got to have something decent to look at. I was becoming so depressed. I was, it was really, I was – well, not depressed, that's an exaggeration obviously, but I was not enjoying coming into the office. Because

Figure 6-6 Geraldine's notice board

there was nothing to warm the soul. So I put the pictures up. For relief, and it's just to see those vibrant colours.'

*'Warming the soul'* is powerful language. Geraldine again seems to be expressing a fundamental need, a lack, which came from the environment and was met through the objects she puts up as a defence. The lack is an emotional one, a feeling that something in her was 'not being fed'. There is an object-led indication that, by her own inner standards for herself, what was needed to be an acceptable environment is not there.

Tom's frustration with his managers [Figure 5-17] is expressed in what appears to be 'only' a toy rabbit, christened Warren in the course of my interview, whose role he described only half-jokingly as,

'he guards me... Sometimes people come round and tell us to clear our desks, then Warren goes behind the computer and slowly creeps out again.'



Figure 6-7 Tom's toy rabbit

Warren is there ostensibly as a gift from a colleague but actually as a protest, and he simply creeps back when frightened off. Tom is a fighter, as evidenced in his attitude to the camera above.

These objects work in daily practice to both express low level unhappiness and frustration, which is hard to put into words at work, and to offer some inner resistance.

One other kind of 'hidden' is expressed by objects that were important to someone but not to do with work. Dan works in the IT department of a large legal organization. He is a fitness fanatic, who brings many food supplements into his office but, at least initially, did not keep them on show. Many of the fitness supplements are tucked away in a drawer.



Figure 6-8 Dan's fitness supplements

'I used to hide it... I really don't want to talk about it to people... I don't have things on my desk. I don't go looking at other people's desks.

Fitness is absolutely something fundamental to his view of himself, and he described his diet in enormous detail for about half of our interview, but it is not something to be shared. The objects hold a very significant part of him; they are in the workplace but not of it. He is there to do IT, but the fitness supplements are a core part of what he is.

There is an interesting link through some of these objects to embodiment as part of the self. The smell of the hand cream, the delight in aesthetic pleasure, the enjoyment of physical fitness, are all part of an embodied response to work, which is inexpressible in any other way. While it may not be the only response to unhappiness, and conversations might also express some of the

frustration, using objects to create an embodied sense of safety and pleasure is something rarely directly observed in organizations.

Space functioned as a 'thing', as discussed in Chapter 4, in that it was photographed and experienced as an object, something which is outside the self yet has an impact. On more than one occasion people expressed resentment of a particular space, and of what it seemed to signal that the organization thought about them. The space signaled a lack of emotional safety; people are asked to enter or be in places which were uncomfortable or which felt uncaring. It was their space, but it was unpleasant. Joy has to eat her lunch in the tiny and rather grubby estates workers' cabin which she didn't photograph as there were people in there. '...that's what they thought of me, that I could eat my lunch there.' And Darren has to walk several times a day through an eerie underground basement.



Figure 6-9 Dan's underground basement

'Why did they put the supplies cupboard down there? They didn't have to. I walk through this long boiler room maybe four or five times a day, it's weird, I do weird things like running or singing. It's a weird space.'

Such spaces make people feel that the organization does not care about them, is lazy and thoughtless in what they offer as a working and relaxing space, and provoke a defensive response which is uncomfortable: singing, running. The space may be another area of embodiment: my body has to be here, which is part of me, and I am not comfortable with this space. Space has an impact negatively as well as positively. The objects here seemed to be a part of both the concretizing of those small resentments or indignities, and a way of making them more bearable, of saying that if others think I am worth this then I have to somehow show myself that I am worth something different. Being unhappy at work is a common enough experience. It is easiest to speak about when there is something very obvious and concrete to define that unhappiness, such as money or bullying or changes in work times or work load. It is harder to speak about the small everyday aches that are there at work. The objects are actively brought into play as resources that are performing something of the self in a response to a sense of indignity.

### **Objects reflecting personal unhappiness outside work**

Diana has a beermat from her travels in New Zealand, where she was born, and a postcard from her brother,

'And it is quite a bit of a wrench, because when I first moved here he'd ring me every day, so, you know, and talk for quite –now he's in New Zealand I think I've spoke to him about five times, so we've gone from that to hardly anything at all.'

The beermat also represents a kind of lost happiness:

'Yeah. I mean this is – and I didn't have it on my desk, because it's been getting so battered, that I'm really upset about it. And it's, when we travelled, we went to this island, and that's the only thing I've got from... That's the only thing I've got from this treasure island. But I've been



Figure 6-10 Diana's beermat

using it, and as you can see it's all like battered now, but I don't want to lose it.'

A constellation of unhappiness seems to reside in her objects, personal and professional, as in the mug from her old job described above. [Figure 4-22] The question here is, what is the beermat 'doing' at work: why is it here and what is it performing? This question links to Lucy's postcard of Bob Marley, and her calendar, already described. [Figures 5-9, 5-27]. Both have unhappiness associated with them as well as the more delighted-in emotions described above. Bob Marley's postcard, apart from being about his attitude to life, was also described as:

'And this is a card written to somebody who I never posted it to, and the somebody I never posted it to lives in [York], so actually if I was being completely honest, the calendar and the card **have** got sentimental values for reasons of my past but also some current stuff.'

These current things are not about work, but were held at work.

All these objects have happiness associated with them but also hold difficult *current* relationships which were important. They have a presenting aspect, of holidays or home, but what they are 'doing' there seems to be allowing acknowledgement of pain in life which is very present but not admissible as part of work. Other people may deal with such conflict differently, and there are many ways of coping with the personal problems/work interface, but in this case the objects seem to be places where this connection is held and acknowledged; that life does not go away because we are at work but it also needs to be not overtly part of a professional self at work.

### **Objects reflecting hidden disrespect and control**

These objects reflected ways in which participants are able to show some sense of control in a working life where the values they work with were felt to be incongruent with 'work' values. Joy has some cartoons which she loves tucked away inside her cleaning cupboard; she knows they would be disapproved of in that setting but she keeps them anyway.

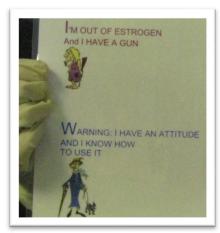


Figure 6-11 Joy's cartoons

'I look at it and I think 'yes' and you know it's inspiring, I have times when I think maybe negative then I read something like that and I think yep, onward and upward. Just the little old lady with the walking stick, I mean who's going to listen to you anyway... but I just thought it was so funny...'

Disrespect, or at least an ironic distance, (recalling the 'cynical distance' of Fleming and Spicer 2003), is another reaction to what was recounted to me by many as 'irritating' or 'disrespectful' management. Disrespect in response may be hidden literally, as for Joy, but also in an object in plain sight, so that only the owner and possibly a few others are aware of the meaning. Rupert has a monkey on his desk and the monkey represents the suited young managers who tell him what to do. Few people know what the monkey means, as he explained it to me,



Figure 6-12 Rupert's monkey

'A definition of a monkey, certainly within this place, [for me] is a non-lawyer who is placed in a position of authority over us... in a position to direct what the rest of us, who are, hopefully, who actually do know what we're doing.... But the interesting thing is the monkeys don't really know what the definition is... but when they come in the monkey and I know.'

The monkey expresses hidden disdain for the 'monkeys' who run the organization. This disrespect is hidden in plain sight, not to be shared, but a very private comment.

Winifred smokes in a room, forbidden by organizational policy, and only the cleaners know and collude with the forbidden habit. Winifred teaches ergonomics and her office as she described it was full of 'old tat'. The ashtray nestles amongst this as something which she can claim as valued for its teaching usefulness, so remains 'hidden' in its function as an actual ashtray.



Figure 6-13 Winifred's ashtray

'Well there's guilt about smoking. But there's also some certain delight in the sort of subversive action. I suppose the actual thing itself is – where is it, there – it's a glass lid. The box is somewhere else in the room, and they are originally fridge containers. Old tat. Teaching tat.'

Some objects were presented to me as being more about the need to have some control over work, not in any deeply anxious way but simply to preserve a feeling of doing the job well. There was no criticism involved, only an inner need for a confirming sense of being effective. A beautiful pen given to Jemima by her mother, and by request, is an object which signals *to the owner* that she is someone to be taken seriously as she carries it to all meetings with senior managers.



Figure 6-14 Jemima's pen

'the pen...it was a gift from my parents – my mum chose it, she knows I like pearl. I asked for a pen because I look young and I feel people don't take me seriously. Having a nice pen is a way of making me feel and look more

professional... no one knows why it's so important to me and I wouldn't tell if I was asked.'

Without the object Jemima's sense of self-esteem is lessened. The object has many functions. It acts as a support and a concretization of Jemima's professionalism for her, both through her possession of it as a 'serious 'pen and her presentation of herself in meetings with it, and it connects her to her mother.

This reflexive aspect of such objects is implicated in most of these hidden things. Their 'work' is to reflect back something not otherwise expressible.

For Kate it was very important to her to keep toilet signs clean and prominent. Kate is disabled and works with her disability as best she can. She said of these toilet signs:





### Figure 6-15 Kate's toilet signs

'I'm disabled myself, so that means I, do you see what I mean? I'm disabled myself so it's nice that there's disabled toilets, if you understand what I'm saying. Care for people with disabilities... yeah... And that's showing people how to wash their hands, with going on the swine flu. So it's advising them. You know, just generally, to be careful, make sure they wash their hands when they've been to the toilet, and so... because it's important to make sure that you keep safe, and to make sure that everybody knows...'

She is privately proud of the way in which she helps to indicate to others, especially other disabled people, how they can get help to take care of themselves.

The objects here are private in that they speak to the self more than to others, confirming and acting out desires for personal safety and effectiveness. Rebecca, working in a strictly enforced clear desk environment, has her notebook, which is the one thing she can use at work in order to remember what has taken place in meetings. She spoke of choosing it,

'it's the one place I had some control over what I have at work, that and my lanyard and mouse mat. I spent ages choosing it...'



Figure 6-16 Rebecca's notebook

Control is apparent through the objects in relation to the self at work, to be discussed in Chapter 7, but is manifested also in hidden ways, bringing objects into play quietly without the label of control but with the label of 'mine' or 'about me' or 'about my place with others' or 'I can detach and laugh at this'. Control was about bringing into play something which speaks of a robust, resistant, person who uses the objects as resources for the reminder and the exercise of this person.

### **Objects reflecting privacy**

Such hiddenness extends to ways in which people are quite deliberately private, not hiding things but choosing not to display objects about themselves. The desire to remain private may be signalled by the deliberate lack of display of anything that is personal, through either a desire not to let people know about your personal life or a sense that it is in inappropriate to bring personal objects into work.

Privacy may also stem from a sense that this is only the work place and not somewhere where you plan to stay too long. Terrence is a law graduate, unhappy because he has failed to get on the next stage of his professional life. Alone in the sample, all his objects are to do with work. He has nothing which was not a tool and his rep grids were totally about the different functions

which tools performed.

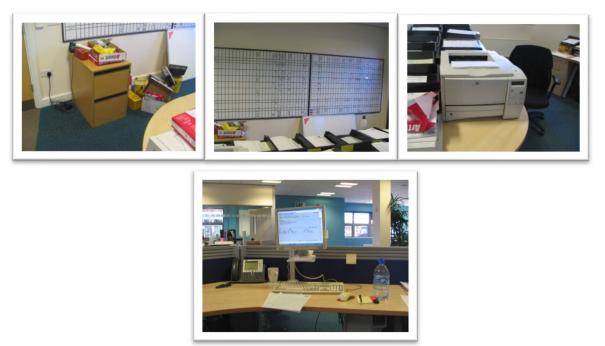


Figure 6-17 Terrence's work space

'I've been here 9 months. It's not my long term job. I want to go back to law school'.

The lack of meaningful *personal* objects is a key point in itself, which may signal a strong sense that work is a place where you do not and don't wish to belong.

Some interesting boundaries about space were also expressed. Veronica could have had a room of her own according to her rank in the organization 'but it would have been a problem to have a room on my own - what does that say about who you are? People crammed into rooms are doing as much [work] as I am. A principle there for me – it's personal – I don't want people to think I'm better than them. That's very very important to me. I don't want people to think I'm better than them. That's her idea of being someone who doesn't like being signaled as differently important. As she goes in and out of the room with three names on the door and shared untidy spaces, the space itself is performing part of her desires and understandings of herself.

Mark's privacy is indicated by his deliberate lack of personal objects, again an example of the lack of objects being significant.



'My desk is about my job. I'm quite closed. I don't discuss my personal life at work... there's no need to and the desk reflects that.'

Figure 6-18 Mark's desk

### Objects which belong neither to work nor home

Some objects are hidden because there is no obvious place for them to be. They are things which are felt to belong only in liminal spaces, somewhere between home and work which people want to keep but don't want to keep at home. Geraldine has a small tin of pencils, tucked away behind some files, which were removed for this photo:



'I've had it ever since I can remember. It does matter to me. There's not much in it but I'll give it to my grandson when he's old enough.'

Figure 6-19 Geraldine's pencil tin

Sarah has a briefcase full of old thank you cards and mementos of past work experiences and friends, hidden in plain sight,

'there's bits of stuff there's nowhere to put. It's in a corner. I've put a couple bags on top of it as well [which I moved to photograph it]... I've put on the front of it, because I guess it is, precious to me, you know, if anything happened to me then please give it to [my husband]'.



Figure 6-20 Sarah's briefcase

These are examples of things which were explained to me as having nowhere to be. Some things were taken home and brought back again because they didn't belong there. Winifred has a collection of such things described as 'old tat'.

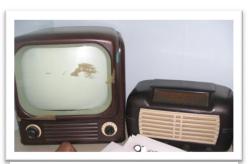


Figure 6-21 Winifred's 'old tat'

'Well those things are there because when we came to move house, nearly 10 years ago, my husband was saying, "You really shouldn't have these things, we don't use them. Perhaps we should dump them". And I really, really didn't think they should be dumped. I will rescue them, I take in all the lame ducks! So they

came to work... and they are objects I can use in my teaching but that's not why they are here...'

Her desire to rescue lame ducks is masked by their occasional use in teaching, but they have no other place to be and are precious to her. Objects may be in the workplace because they are 'orphans' but still precious.

Sometimes in thinking this through I was simply at a loss to know what the objects were holding and containing, although they seem to be part of a pattern, as in Winifred's desire to pastor students and generally look after things and people, or Geraldine's focus on aesthetic pleasure as in a picture or a in a pretty box. The rep grids went some way towards clarifying what people were thinking but when I examined the rep grid data around these 'orphan' objects the constructs used such as 'private and personal vs work' or 'past and future vs present' shed no deep light on it. It was only as I came to my discussion that I became closer to a possible explanation.

## 6.2 Summary

This chapter illustrates how objects function in people's lives at work to afford a space where they can hold and enact a deeply emotional part of the self. The theme of hidden unhappiness and resistance, and of other kinds of secrecy, is one of the most interesting findings in this thesis. Although being unhappy when without physical objects at work, as in hot-desking (Elsbach 2003; Hirst 2011; Warren 2006) or even in prison and in migrancy (Povrzanovic Frykman 2008), was clear in the literature review, there was no hint of the way in which people *deliberately* engaged with the unhappiness or frustration of their lives through objects at work. The objects afford both present comfort, as in the hand cream or doing the crossword, or going to the library in secret, and also hook into another possible scenario, that of 'outside work' or 'alternative to present work'. They allow into work spaces the wider biography and time scale of an individual, affording another way of asserting that people are more than the work contract allows.

In terms of how these objects are working to hold and contain secrets of all sorts, it is again in the daily doing of them that they are able to be effective. Without the continuous effort to distance himself, Paul would be very unhappy at the prospect of staying for ever in this job. Without the reminder of time past and to come in her little box, Geraldine might feel more trapped in her work space. The ability to feel in touch with yourself and the things that matter comes from the constant 'doing' of yourself in these ways.

Identity is served richly through the hiding objects. They hold much of what is of significance to people's core identity as the moral dimensions of being at work are negotiated, and as these other demands are weighed against the salience of more inwardly-held identity feelings. For

example, resistance features for Rupert, Joy and Winifred in quiet, rather resentful, ways which are also freighted with humour as a carrier- it is moderately good-tempered resistance, expressing irritation with the values of the behaviour being demanded. People's values are stretched and patched and bent to meet what is most needed, calling to mind Pratt et al.'s (2006) medical students, the re-authoring of a moral self through change (Clarke Brown and Hope Hailey 2009), and the considered balance of Kreiner, Hollensbee and Sheep's (2006a) priests who worked out what they would and would not respond to.

# Chapter 7

# **Professional objects**

In the interview data people spoke more about 'personal' objects than about the place of objects as reflectors of a working self. This chapter is therefore less weighty than the previous chapters, but still of crucial importance to the overall picture of the place of objects in people's identity at work.

I argue that objects at work reflect and 'do' the part of the self that is 'professional' in a way which is satisfying to the participant. The objects reflect an ability both to perform and to 'be' at work with confidence. They also act to resist pressure from the workplace and afford significant control.

# 7.1 Objects relating the self to work

In many ways the three previous themes of relating to others, to the self and others, and to the private self are mirrored here, for example, the themes of control and a relationship with the space around, but what emerges as extra is the additional specific focus of being engaged in a job. In relation to materiality, I contend that the 'work persona' is not split off from the rest of the person, but at the same time there was an aspect of being at work for people in this study which draws into play some different responses. This theme extends the object understanding of the person as someone specifically 'doing a job' by examining object-led understandings which were designated as being about the 'work self'.

In the participants' expression of a sense of professionalism or 'doing a good job', a number of themes emerge:

- Objects reflecting control
- Objects as creators of a working space
- Objects reflecting pride and satisfaction in the work role
- Objects reflecting taking care of the self professionally
- Objects reflecting caring for others at work.

# **Objects reflecting control**

Planners, post it notes, clocks and calendars were all cited as tools which reflected a desire of their users to be in control of their work. This was a strong theme for almost all participants; there was both pride and pleasure in doing a job well.

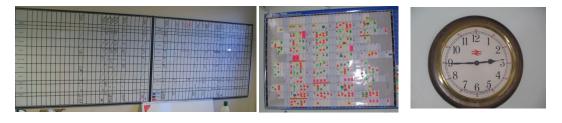




Figure 7-1 Ways of control

Planners of all kinds feature as ways of controlling the life in the job. Carl's comment was typical,

'My wall planner and my clock, it's about going out and coming in, it's about being professional, planning.'

A similar concern with planning features for Winifred.

'that's the doorway with schedules on it that students use to know where we are and book tutorials... and my planner... they're all about keeping a grip of what I'm supposed to be doing, and where I'm supposed to be. I could have put my diary into one of the pictures as well, they're all about trying to be organized.'

Calendars say things about planning even if they are also reminders of nice places. For Val,

'The calendar, the essential Christmas present... something I can enjoy looking at on a day to day basis for the next year. ...but also, obviously a very practical reason for having a calendar as well, in addition to obviously your on-line diary on the computer... so to me it's very much a personal basis, it's inspirational but it's also essential'.

Taking control of time and planning is crucial for many as part of the job they do, but the time keepers, especially calendars, often have a personal connection as well. For example, Val's calendar is also featured as a place of daydreaming and escape [Figure 5-26].

Post it notes were photographed by two people, and in relation to them Anabel reflected,



Figure 7-2 Anabel's post its

'It just flags something out to me that I need to deal with... lets me do things as competently and efficiently as I can... my memory isn't enough in this job'.

Kate said that the tools were, 'what I use to go and do my job with, and my trolley, it makes my job quicker... and plus it's safer for you as well, not to carry stuff... and it shows how there are different products you have to use, different chemicals.' But mixed up with the idea of job efficiency and safety are notions of taking care of other people, not just oneself, 'the different products, it helps to take care of the environment, to help people'. Other people are important too for Tara who spends almost all her day doing emails. 'If you don't do that, if you don't cope well with this, it really holds up other people... so that was why I took that screenshot. You can see just how many emails you get'. She photographed her computer screen which makes the organization too identifiable to reproduce.

Adam told me that the cigarette end holder on the wall of a building where he cleaned outside is something which he feels is important to doing his work well.



'I think they're really, I don't know, I think they're useful, really useful. They really help me in my job. Otherwise people would throw them everywhere. You know... it's cleaner for everyone, makes cleaning up easier.'

Figure 7-3 Adam's cigarette end holder

Lucy has a love/hate relationship with her computer. This was important enough to her in her work for her to photograph it with the screen switched off.

'It facilitates the writing of reports and it also sort of chains me to my desk... it encourages me to get on with things.'



Figure 7-4 Lucy's computer

A slightly different stance on tools as facilitators of efficiency came from Brian, a dentist who had trained in India and who talked about his tools as 'friends'. One particular pair of forceps is deeply connected to his life history, always kept where he knows its location and lent to others in the practice only as long as he is in his surgery. He described it as his 'lucky forceps' and feels more in control of his extractions if he was using them. Control also featured in the way he always uses three swabs, feeling that he can visualise the way the extraction will go and where he will need the swabs.



Figure 7-5 Brian's forceps and swabs

'You need luck in the job.'

For Brian the tools are significantly more than simply instruments. They are co-workers in his practice. He can do a professional job successfully without them, but his inner feeling about what puts him in control and makes each procedure successful is looped through them.

For people as professional workers, control is important and centre stage. It is legitimate and indeed necessary to feel that you are coping with work, as well as using objects in all the more personal ways I have described in Chapters 4–6. The objects which are brought into play seem to be more than a material confirmation that you are managing the events around you well. They are rather co-actors in the 'managing well', ways of reassuring and enabling, of allowing people to sustain the sense of an effective persona at work. Their materiality is a way of staying embedded in this effective state: without them, people feel less competent and able. The objects create reassurance and meet a lack of security about effectiveness.

### Objects as creators of a working space

I have written about the nature of space as an object in Chapter 4. However it is important to some people to *organise* the space as something where the location of the *objects* in that space say something about you as a worker.

Andrew, whose desk area was shown in Figure 5-5, was quite defensive about what he felt to be a chaotic space and commented,

'My desk is a real mess, really, I think, and I'm not one of these people who has a paperless office, and I know a lot of people are good at that but I like to have a lot of paper around me, because I like to have the files I'm working on my desk because the clients ring me all the time and the ones I'm dealing with at any one time I want to be accessible.'

The objects are about being professional and their collective arrangement is part of that professionalism. Similarly, Rupert described his office.



'Even though it looks higgledy piggledy I could put my hand, well fairly quickly on any piece a paper that I'd want to use.'

Figure 7-6 Rupert's office files

He is thoroughly professional and is proud of that but the distribution of the objects and the objects themselves indicate his wish to work in his own way.

Likewise Rebecca works in an office where a clear desk policy is enforced and no paper is allowed in the work place apart from some necessary confidential files. Her most precious possession is her notebook:

'We aren't allowed paper so I bought this notebook and it's become the most important thing in my life at work it's all my notes, all that lets me remember what I'm doing.'



Figure 6-22 Rebecca's notebook

I used this illustration earlier to show how control could reside in hidden ways in things on public view. In that instance the emphasis was on having a sense of control in an environment where personal objects were restricted. Here it is about her ability to do a good job. The multi-valent nature of so many of the objects is illustrated here by its importance also to her sense of doing her job well.

### Objects reflecting pride and satisfaction in the job

Some objects were explained to me as expressing people's pride in the job, the approach they took to work and the effort they put in. This was different to the recognition of others through thank you notes, which I discussed in Chapter 4. It was instead about an inner understanding of the effort which was being put in, not needing any recognition except that participants knew they had done a good job.

Adam really felt good about bagging up dead leaves.



#### Figure 7-7 Adam's bags of leaves

'It gives me a feeling of satisfaction. Yeah, yeah it does. And you know that you've kept the area tidy and people aren't going to slip. I even do that bit there, it's council but I do it cos that's where visitors arrive. Yeah, that's given me satisfaction.'

Professional pride in what came back to him from students, to whom he given unstintingly, permeated David's comments. David's thank you note described in Chapter 4 [Figure 4-2] is about his personal appreciation of particular relationships, but his student year book, for the group he had taken right through their time at the school, is also a source of enormous pride and a sign to him of his effectiveness and commitment. He said of it, *'this was my first work persona... ..I threw everything at this lot in terms of my... a lot of my passion and a lot of interest and that's a big one for me in terms of something that I've done and taken through.'* The photo of the football team, of his GCSE and A level maths set, and his commitment to an expedition he had led were all spoken of as signalling his total enjoyment of and commitment to his students.<sup>2</sup> The objects encapsulate and, for him, enact the history of his commitment and pride.

Alison showed a similar quiet personal pride through a set of objects which have great significance for her. She plays for a work netball team and they had won several local championships. She began to collect the trophies and put them on a little shelf in her area of work.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The photos are too identifiable to reproduce.



'There's a real sense there of you being part of the organisation in a way that's bigger than your job.'

Figure 7-8 Alison's trophies

She was delighted when others began to do the same for other office-based sports teams which had been successful. In a busy office it is a small reminder that she is able to contribute more to the organization than just her work. She does not mind if others make no verbal comments.

Joseph spoke of a far less public, but still utterly central, pride in the work he had done in the arts centre [Figure 4-24] which he illustrated through two objects.<sup>3</sup> '*This is... well basically the brochures [*for the performances] *over the last year ... ...something I'm very proud of '*. The plans used to develop the building, pinned to his notice board, are equally meaningful, '*And it was in a sense only me or a few other people within my company that understood how we were going to use the space, and the board of trustees... and they had their faith in us, I think.'* 

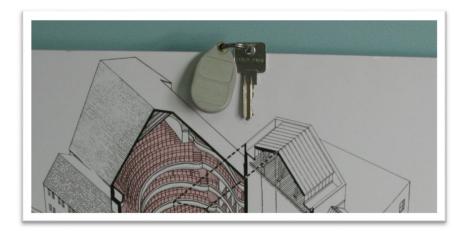


Figure 7-9 Joseph's key

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The centre has not been identified since it would then be possible to identify Joseph.

That sense of being valued, of the Trustees having faith in him, is reflected as well in the key at the top of the picture. *'I casually popped my key-ring here at the top, which has got one key on it, and this is the key to the whole estate... there's only a couple of us that have this kind of key.'* For Joseph, even if no one commented, he had done a brilliant job, evidenced and carried in the plans and brochures and the key which entrusts great responsibility to him.

### **Objects reflecting taking care of the self professionally.**

There is much about the pride in the job which involves taking care of both self and of others. Taking care of the self is about development, and for many it was a source of evident pleasure. For Paul, pigeon holes form a benchmark for him as a really effective worker.



Figure 7-10 Paul's pigeon holes

'The reason I took a picture of this [pigeon holes] is because it's a tester sometimes because all these green things are people who are in the offices but it always changes every couple of months or years. And what it does, it tests your knowledge'.

He works very hard find out and remember where staff had moved to. There is pride in his development, and the pigeon holes where he puts correspondence carry material evidence for him that he is more adept at his job than his colleagues.

Presentation to others as well as oneself can be part of taking care of oneself professionally. Jemima commented on her own dress.

'I like to dress smartly... I think that's part of being professional. When I was at X it was a job in the private sector, quite nasty sometimes, very male, and I was straight out of Uni and I had to get people to take me seriously, get directors to do what I asked them.' 'Sometimes... I always wore suits, formal clothes, and I have a wardrobe of formal clothes. I feel I dress more formally here than most. I like to wear dresses and usually heels. It's part of being professional, of getting people to see you as professional.'

It is the very material, literally, which makes Jemima a professional in her view. Without the clothes which speak of an inner picture of what makes a professional, she would not feel she was doing her job. Dresses, heels, actually constitute a part of her being in her role. The accoutrements are materially part of what make her up as a professional worker.

There is a distinction here between Matthew's hatred of being in non-formal dress [Figure 5-22] and Jemima's smart clothes. For Matthew, it is a sense about himself, that in *any* work place he can only work comfortably in formal suits, even at an away day. For Jemima it was a conscious presentation of herself in a persona at work in a male-dominated environment where she is young, which she expected to be noticed by others and which expresses something about her career. It might be different if she were in an environment where 'professionalism' was differently marked.

### **Objects reflecting caring for others at work**

People also took photos of objects which communicate the desire to take care of others in the work place. I will return here to Kate's reflection on her cleaning job described above Figure 6-15. Whilst she spoke of it as a reflection on herself as a disabled person, it also functions to show her level of responsibility in her job.



Figure 7-11 Kate's workspace

'It's important to make sure that you keep safe, and to make sure that everybody knows...'

JB: Who do you think is responsible for that safe environment?

'We all are. The university as well, and us as staff. I think we all should be responsible really for it, we should all take responsibility, because it all means you're a lot safe.'

The link into her own disability again shows the fundamental multi-valence of the objects: they had force in a number of different parts of the self.

Caring for others professionally takes a slightly different cast with Jemima's care for her assistant. She had a calendar from the year before with dates crossed off when assignments had been filled in to remind her of gaining her own professional qualifications.

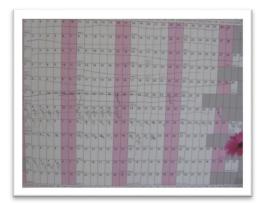


Figure 4-29 Jemima's calendar

'...I line manage her and I want to make sure she has the right experiences to put on her CV and she's doing that course now... I'm very proud of the way I manage her... this reminds me to ask her about her assignments and if she needs help...' The out of date calendar is a concrete reminder to her of the strain of writing assignments and the encouragement needed. Giving that encouragement is a part of her professionalism, which she was reminded of daily in the calendar.

Supporting others is important to Winifred. As she commented,

'So the tissue box is because of – that it's the relationship with students, primarily. The intensity of some of the, particularly pastoral case, that goes on in this room. But also academic care and, you know, and the fact that people get covered in snot and tears at some point, I suppose, is the heightened end of it... sometimes

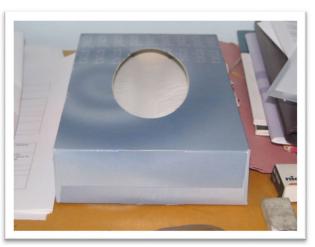


Figure 7-12 Winifred's tissue box

recognising yourself thirty years ago. And maybe also because I think I might be reasonably adept at doing that kind of thing, and it makes me think it's worthwhile me being here, more than any of the teaching, probably... It's what earns my salary.'

Winifred sees wiping away tears and encouraging students as a crucial part of her work persona. The tissue box is part of her relationship with the workplace, what earned her salary.

# 7.2 Summary

The most prominent finding in this theme is the way in which work is not spoken of primarily through the objects as part of relating to others. Instead the objects are spoken about as encapsulating how people were conscious of doing a good job for themselves, setting their own standards. Somehow the objects encrypt this, are a kind of shorthand and a material reminder of this underlying satisfaction in often doing more than the job required. Embroiled in all that is often a lively and active memory of people's life history and how this impacts on their current attitudes to work. The objects are showing how that job is made satisfying, bearable or personally meaningful.

In this they recall Knorr Cetina's (1997:5) description of objects in Chapter 1 as the 'embedding environment in which expert work is carried out ...an emotional home for expert selves'. She cites objects as extrinsically useful and intrinsically valuable, which neatly underscores the idea that they have multiple frameworks in which they can be, and in these data are, understood and experienced. They are both useful for many expert things, but also offer the escapes, the sense of pride and the comfort which are needed at work. They call up both the way in which work has to be done and explicitly how that work is done when concerns about whether it is palatable or not are put aside. In this theme, perhaps more than any other, the link to admissible personal values was most apparent.

Because of this openness, the way the objects were working was also much more transparent, or, at least, more simply described. This positive connection for workers, the way they use objects to express what they put into work of themselves, is not highlighted in the literature and is important for both workers and managers. Private showcasing may enjoy and flourish on public affirmation. The objects, to pick up on Rafaeli and Vilnai Yavetz's (2004) distinctions, are working instrumentally to express and reinforce standards for the self, and symbolically in what they show about the person, but they are also acting as co-supporters of a felt identity, as agents in the reinforcing of this.

Identity here is strongly performative. The objects are reminders of how work is taken charge of to perform to a standard that is acceptable. The history attached to the objects may be significant; Brian's feeling of 'luck' or 'good fortune' in always using three swabs and training his dental nurse to provide these certainly had such elements but they were upheld by practice.

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When people spoke to me of their tools there was often an element of distance, of appreciating that they were important but not really liking them in the way they liked the objects identified in previous themes. The tools seemed to be there to show the demands of the job and to be a way of achieving those demands, rather than being relational, and yet they were chosen as meaningful. Just how this connection might be made will be part of the discussion.

# **Chapter 8**

# Objects in conversation with other objects

In this chapter I outline the findings from the repertory grids. The method is elaborated with examples to show how the constructs emerged. The main findings are that the grids indicated a very clear division between the personal and professional self, that these divisions are marked by more emotional language around the personal self and that the objects appeared to be working together in some way as a collection. These findings will be addressed in the discussion. Lastly, I indicate the salient points which I take forward into my discussion.

# 8.1 Introduction

This thesis is rich in data and I have already presented a great deal. One more data chapter, albeit brief, may feel a bit heavy or even extraneous. However the repertory grids in the end were so crucial to my thinking about the objects that I present here their very particular contribution.

To recap from the methodology chapter: the purpose in asking people to do the rep grid exercise was to find a way to encourage them to find more overarching themes than in the interviews in their reporting of why the objects were meaningful. The two methods produce different ways of approaching the objects for people. The interviews were discursive, allowing a wide discussion of what was 'meaningful' in the objects but inevitably straying from that occasionally through the conversation. They worked to open up a range of aspects of participants' lives, without necessarily making much connection *between* objects. The rep grids focused on asking participants for deeper reasoning about the rationales *within* their choices of objects. If, in the interviews, things had been defined as having similar meanings, such as allowing a momentary escape or being about relating to people, the rep grids asked for distinctions *within* these meanings. In what way was one form of escape, or relating, different than or similar to another? I hoped through the rep grids to find such differences.

### 8.2 Comparison with, and extension of, the interview data

I emphasise my reasons for using the rep grids because, while the data presented here may appear similar to that presented in Chapters 4–7, the findings from this chapter led to a very significant part of my analysis.

Firstly, what is very clear in the rep grids is the powerful contrast that people expressed between the self literally 'at work', in an employed role, and some alternative sense of self. This contrast between being a 'professional' or something being 'about work' as opposed to something being 'about me' was clear across all participants. The 'personal' ' or 'non-work' self highlighted in these data was not necessarily in conflict with the 'work' self, but was held very distinctly as separate and contrasted. While the idea of a 'work self' was clearly expressed in the interview data, and presented in Chapter 7, the distinction between 'work' self and an alternative self was really sharpened in the rep grids. Over half of the constructs created contained something about 'work' as one pole of the construct, and some formulation of 'not work' as the other.

One of these contrasts was about things that are tools for a job, as opposed to things that are personal in some way, a contrast which also showed up in the interviews and which I have illustrated in Chapters 4–7. A similar theme, but much stronger than in the interviews, was an explicit contrast between work space and other real or imagined spaces, reflecting the resting and day dreaming and being protective of the self again referred to and illustrated in Chapters 4–7. Work time and *'my time'* and particularly *'my history'* or *'my future'* was a third theme,

which was less strongly apparent in the interviews, and included 'things which will last for me' and 'passing work things'.

What was different here was the way in which these core constructs were very clear. A number of participants, for example, were extremely specific about their objects referencing only *either* being at work, *or* about escaping in some way, into rest or future or past time. Others had strong core themes about things being mine or not mine, or about what was public and what was private, or being 'about me personally, my identity' or 'only about me at work'.

This brute contrast in the expressing of the meaning of the objects for participants raised the question for me of why and how these two contrasting sets of objects were connected. Why did they *all* have meaning? What was combining the two significant aspects of work and non-work?

This sharp distinction also showed up in the words used to express the non-work self, which were very much more emotive and powerful than in the discursive interviews. I offer two examples here to show both how the method was used and to illustrate this point.

### 8.3 Examples of rep grid data

To re-cap on the methodology: a set of elements, in this case the photographs which each participant took, is presented to the participant in random sets of three. They are asked to say in what way any two of those three are alike and different to the third. This is recorded on a grid and there are two examples presented here. This recording grid has the numbered elements across the top, which were the photographs taken by the participant and which I had numbered. As the elements are presented, the construct generated, about how two of them are alike, is written down in the left hand column and the contrast, that is, in what way the third one is different, is recorded in the right hand column. The elements are presented in threes until the same constructs keep coming up or all possible combinations have been recorded. In order to make clear what I am doing here, two rep grid tables are shown. I have chosen these examples as illustrating the themes which I have outlined above, of a clear distinction between a work and a non-work self, and much more emotional use of words around the 'alternative' self descriptions. The elements are the photographs that were numbered, and then presented in triads in no particular order, just looking to see when the constructs had started to repeat.

A fuller version of these examples is given in Appendix 3, with the rep grid tables attached.

## Example 1



In this triad (one of 10) Carl described the clock (1) as being about *'function'*. The other two (5 and 7) were described as being, by contrast, about *'me beyond the working context, about my pilgrimage through life, about freedom, about talismans which sustain me.'* 



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In this example, Carl described the train (2) as something which 'sustains me, gives me a sense of childhood well being which I can retrieve from it' while the other two (4 and 7) this time are about 'the working environment, both technical and people'.

In both cases, the distinction between the work self and the alternative self is clear and the language about the alternative self is richer in description and less curt than in the work related constructs.

All Carl's constructs show this distinction, between a quite rigid description of work as functionality opposed to biography, or work as control and a release into the freedom of memory or a brief break with coffee or books.



# Example 2

In this first triad (one of 11) from Winifred's objects, the contrast is between her public face (2 and 3), 'what I'm prepared to say about me' and the real planner, warts and all (8), 'it's not just where I need to be, there may be elements of personal stuff in there as well, stuff which is private'.



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1

In the second triad, the distinction is between me as someone with training qualifications (14) 'anyone else could do that job', and me as an individual personality (7 and 1), 'no one else could have been given the pot, no one else does the comforting with tissues which is how I personally work [with students]. They're more private, cryptic, reflective things.'

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In Winifred's constructs there is a strong sense of the private, the guilty (over smoking), the sense of being weak-willed and indulgent to herself over having bits of 'tat' in her room, the inner compulsions, and the way in which the work objects are her 'public face' but don't show anything of her 'other self' and are much less transparent.

These two examples give some indication of the kind of language used, but it was apparent for all participants. The examples are numerous. Geraldine spoke often of the pleasure which her more personal reading and scholarship had in the past and would in the future offer her. It would be *'lively, creative, indulgent, deep, and private'* while her connection to beautiful art was *'visceral'* and *'holistic'* as opposed to the functionality of work. Sarah spoke at length of feeling uncomfortable with her back to a door, and how she would work very hard to feel *'safe'* and *'protected'* by not doing this, of not wanting to be *'trapped'* in a space, and in Chapters 5–8 I referred to her careful placing of furniture and objects. This contrasted with her more prosaic descriptions of her work area. Diana spoke of *'not wanting to put roots down,'* of *'taking a first step of faith even if you don't know the end, just taking a leap'* ,of things being *'shallow here, there's no depth'*, a fuller version of her desire to move on referred to before. Lucy spoke of

feeling warmth and affection, cosiness and attachment around her objects, and also how her personal life was in disarray, as opposed to her computer which chained her to her desk. The rep grid exercise somehow encouraged a revelation of some deeply personal investments and responses to the objects: the language was one of the values which people held in connection to the objects.

## 8.4 Rep grids as collections or networks

This finding, of strong themes at the heart of many people's rep grids, expressed in language where the brevity of descriptions of work tools contrasts with the richness of those for non-work objects, begins to indicate a really important aspect of the findings of the rep grids exercise in showing how the objects worked *together*. All these objects, despite their differences in description, are meaningful for people at work and are connected. What seemed to be emerging was that what people are doing is effectively setting up a collection or a collation of things which are meaningful to them, that is, the objects have a connection *as a group*. These objects are in some way holding, doing, performing, representing something which holds them together as well as allowing them to act individually. They are not only reflecting everything that I covered in Chapters 4–8 but doing something more, especially in connecting what are experienced as work selves and alternative selves.

This suggestion recalls the idea that the objects may be in some way enrolled in a network. Studies in ANT examined in Chapter 1 (Law 1986; Law and Singleton 2005; Mol and Law 2010) indicate that objects are enrolled in a network through a system of power, of *interessement*, that is, that such enrollment happens when there is a common reference point of interest for the participants in the network. The question here is what is the common reference point that is holding the objects as 'meaningful'.

I suggest that the objects are a collection. The idea of collecting has been explored by many people (e.g. Belk 1988, 1995; Pearce 1994) but not in this context. The usual starting point to

look at collections is to examine things which people have drawn together deliberately as part of a group of specific things. The rationale behind the suggestion in relation to the rep grid findings, that the objects work as a collection, is different because they are not a deliberately drawn together set of objects but they do seem to be a set of objects which have a linking thread, that is, they are chosen as meaningful at work. When, as mentioned in the methodology, I asked people if there were things which were important to their jobs but not meaningful in their working spaces they readily pointed to a range of things identifiable in this category. For example, Victoria had taken a photo of her desk which had a soft toy on it. I asked if that was one of her meaningful objects which she was going to discuss with me, and she replied no, it was important but not *meaningful* in this context. Joseph showed me the schedules which were vital to his work, never far from his hand, but not meaningful. 'Meaningful' was a different category to 'important'. This thesis is concerned to know what that 'meaningful' category is. If the objects work as a 'set' then there is a question about what is excluded, bracketed off, from this set and what is included.

I will return to the idea of collecting in my discussion, linking it to a sense of identity. For now it stands as a significant finding from the rep grid data.

#### 8.5 Summary

The contribution of this chapter is to indicate how the findings from the rep grids added to the findings of the interviews outlined in Chapters 4–8.

Firstly, in relation to what the objects are achieving, the objects seem to be holding a clear distinction between the work self and another self, an alternative self which often contained concepts of emotionality, sensuality and alterative times and places. There was specific reference to having a work identity and a more general sense of themselves which was wider than this work self. In relation to the 'me' and the 'I', the objects seemed to say that 'yes this is me, a work person reflected in these objects, but it is not all that 'I' am'.

These data support the findings from Chapters 4–8, where similar categories about a work self, and about a self in relation to, for example, others, time, space, control and ownership as 'mine' were apparent. However the difference here is in the very strong *contrast* with a work self and yet a connection to that self as well.

In relation to how objects 'work', the rep grids begin to indicate that objects may be working as a network in some way, to have connections with each other and a linking thread which enrolls them into a set of meanings.

In previous chapters I have indicated how objects were seen to 'afford' and 'perform' various understandings and practices. In the rep grid exercise the performance of the objects was indicated through the contrasts and through the gathering of them: as indicated above the 'performing' was centrally a division between the self at work and the self as more than work. The objects afforded the overview of this division, but also the connection: that all these are performing a meaning about myself but they reflect that I am like this.

These themes, of division and connection and of emotionality of some sort, will be gathered up and addressed in the discussion.

# 8.6 What will be taken forward from these data chapters into the discussion?

In Chapters 4–8 I have explored the data which was generated by the interviews and the rep grids. From it I draw the following points which will lead into my discussion.

To recap, my research questions are:

- 1 How do people conceptualise objects at work?
- 2 How and to what ends do objects and people work together in the workplace?
- 3 How does this interplay of people and objects impact on identity in everyday life at work?

In order to address these questions I take from my data analysis:

That there is much evidence in these data that people pay great attention, in a subtle and often unspoken, even to themselves, way to the material objects in their work spaces. They evidence not only a conceptual understanding that objects are significant, but also an emotional understanding which is much more apparent to them on a day-to-day basis. I will explore the nature of this understanding in my discussion.

There is evidence too of how people and objects work together to afford opportunities for a range of social and private practices and understandings. These affordances are often looped through a lack of some sort, such as a need for social connection, for control of the workplace, for preservation of the self, or for managing the connection of private sadness in the workplace. They also worked to link biography to the workplace. In my discussion I will examine these affordances in more depth and how people and objects inter-relate to achieve them.

In relation to these data I posit that the setting of the workplace is significant in what the objects are effecting. The workplace is what makes the objects co-performers as a third player in the understandings; the objects do the work they do because they are in the place of employment with the particular orderings which happen there. In addition the silent materiality of objects in that socially and physically narrow space is part of what gives them their particular heft.

I posited that objects were performing identity in that they were the site of, and co-player in allowing people to establish and maintain relationships with others and themselves. As others reacted to the objects or the objects were active in particular settings of control or unhappiness, they were allowing people to reflect on the gap between the 'me' of work and the 'l' of their felt 'personal' selves.

Finally in Chapter 8 I posited that the objects were performing the collecting of the self in some way which allowed both very work-related objects and far more personal objects all to be significant. In my discussion I will examine what it is which forms the basis of this collection and how it links to identity.

# Chapter 9

# Holding the self together at work

In this chapter I return to my research questions and address each one in turn, referring to the literature reviews of Chapters 1 and 2. I illustrate how people conceptualise objects at work as both representational and performative. I use the concepts of 'affordance' and 'lack' to show how objects are entangled agentially with people at work. I draw on the work of Gell (1998) to conceptualise how meaningful objects at work act as a gathering up of the distributed person at work, and as a place of support for values at work, a part of the 'ordering' which is not recognised in the legal and economic frameworks of employment.

In my introduction I established my research questions, based on the literature, as being an overarching interest in **the impact of meaningful objects in the workplace on people's identity.** I then refined this into three further questions, namely:

- 1 How do people conceptualise objects at work?
- 2 How do people, and the objects which they identify as meaningful, interact at work?
- 3 How does this interaction relate to people's identity in their everyday working lives?

In this discussion I address each of these questions in turn, showing how the data has provided answers to each, extended the work done by others and offered new insights and solutions to each question. 9.1 Research Question 1: How do people understand objects at work? In the literature review in Chapter 1, I outlined firstly how materiality could be thought of through a strict Cartesian mind/body dualism in which objects were representations and reminders of other parts of our lives, embedded in a story built up through social interaction. Key writers cited in this tradition were Harré (2002) and Vandenberghe (2002) and a number of authors (Rafaeli and Pratt 2006; Tian and Belk 2005) wrote in ways which could be interpreted as part of this symbolic approach. The alternative position I indicated was one where objects play a more performative role, through networks as in ANT, or through an intermingling of material objects, bodies and action such as, for example, in the work of Miller (1999), Orlikowski (2005), Suchman (2005), Knorr Cetina (1997), Dale (2005), Dale and Burell (2009), Barad (2013) and Humphries and Smith (2014). In this view objects work performatively, that is, they work, in Miller's (1999) phrase, to allow material objects, through our interplay with them, to express immaterial responses. They both give us control and oppress us in the active, particular circumstances of small- and large-scale human settings, and in particular in the setting of the employment contract where objects are limited by someone else's diktat.

In the data, the objects did work as representations at some level. Most 'representations' were of work. Carl (p180) cited the computer as 'about work', as did Anabel [Figure 7-2] and Winifred (p180), but underneath the 'it's about work' was another story – about the way in which computers exerted pressure from emails, or from work demanding to be done, and they were linked, for example, to friendship when others helped you out. The clock and the calendar [Figure 7-1] were similarly double-edged; they were reminders and representations of a working life which had to be done well and controlled but also were reminders of what was on the calendar, whether it was pictures from holidays or home, or marked off days when professional assignments had to be handed in for a colleague. As representations, these were reminders of what people were there to do, to take their responsibilities seriously and to act as professional people, and they were also representations of holidays or a home life. In their 'work role' representation they were part of Brown et al.'s (2005) tripartite division into what people need at work, one of which was to be able to be an effective worker. In their other 'role' representations they were reminders of being a person with particular enjoyments, giving Brown et al.'s sense of self.

However, the objects' meaning for people was far more than representation, demonstrated by the very clear way in which the objects were embedded in practice. People thought about the objects as both representations *and* as things that had an impact on themselves, as illustrated above. The work tools were about relationships and about being. This recalls much of the literature cited in Chapter 1 where the emphasis, to re-cap Yanow (2006) is on, *'the concern with situation specific local knowledge derived from the lived experience of members of the setting under study'*. (2006:46)

One of the key points of this thesis is that the objects slide, or perform a dual role, between this representative mode and something else, because in the workplace they have to be either justified as tools or be small enough to be fairly 'invisible'. This recalls Miller's (1999) point about the modest and framing effects of objects. To fill out these examples, Jemima's pen [Figure 6-14] functioned as both a practical tool for work but much more as a visceral statement that she was both a qualified professional and a loved daughter. The resistant mugs of Chapter 5 [Figure 5-20] were certainly useful as coffee containers and might represent a break at work, but their use, their everyday filling and lifting and viewing were purely resistance. Other examples of such dual sliding are Geraldine's history books [Figure 5-15], there as part of her working 'persona' as a history specialist but a source of enormous pleasure to her personally; David's thank you notes [Figure 4-2], legitimate at work to show how he is a good teacher but far more redolent of personal appreciation and relationship; Jenny's towels [Figure 4-5], tools of the job but actually the site of friendship. Rupert's Disney toys and other objects [Figure 4-8] could be both

expressive of humanity towards his clients and others, so 'allowable' at work, but also expressive, and certainly thought of, as showing a certain amount of resistance against a regime which, in his view, had become increasingly sterile. The daily use of Victoria's letter tray [Figure 4-6] was precisely the ground of the supportive relationship, and Sarah's objects designed to make people feel that she was *'less boring than people might think'* [Figure 5-1] were there because words would not do this: the objects were about her attachment to certain interesting travels or art work. And messy desks were not just 'representations' of how someone likes to work but were the way of working itself; as Mark said, *'it's the way I am'*. [Figure 6-18]

The objects are both representative, in order to legitimise them, and performative through the histories and practices around them.

The point about this movement is made by a number of writers. Orlikowski (2000, 2005, 2007) comments on how it has been a problem in technology that the discussion around the human/machine interface has been seen as *either* a techno-centred *or* a human-centred one. But the performativity of the objects makes it neither, rather something in between, which she calls material performativity. The cartoon which had been there through many jobs, [Figure 5-14], the mug which similarly been a good companion [Figure 5-20] were reminiscent of the way in which in practice these objects were held over time, and had a life of their own. The objects here were material, with time frames and biographies of practice, and the question is neither what do the objects do nor what do people do with objects but how the two enact the material performativity between them. The objects, as Barad (2013) and Fowler and Harris (2014) indicate, are both point and wave, both representation and performer depending on the frame of seeing and practising. The data presented here are not the work of a straightforward cognitive reminder of something, but more the visceral trajectory of things into emotions, Brown's 'thing theory' (2001), Miller's 'stuff' (2010), Ingold's 'stuff we live inside' (2006) and Turkle's (2011) 'evocative objects', all attest to the power of objects through their materiality to

get under our skin, inside our bodies, and be co-inhabiters of our emotional and practical lives. This is not to say that there is no element of the semiotic about them but the objects, as participants talked about them, are enactments of the meanings, not representations of them. Objects will tap into larger cultural values about what it means to be at work because it is impossible to step out of the wider cultural framework. For example, frustration and low-level resistance, or a desire for control, are well-recognised phenomena at work. Friendship has a particular western ways of being expressed, and it is recognised at work in our Western world as needing to be kept low-key. But the way the objects are at work here, although it contains those understandings, is as much reflective of the individual performative landscape of participants as to the cultural norms around them.

The thesis has empirically demonstrated how people experience this duality on an everyday level with many objects in one person's practice. This dual role of objects, as both formal representations and as markers of a practice for the self, reflects the hidden knowledges and practices which inhere around the objects. (Interestingly, participants commented that it was only in the identifying of objects to photograph that they became conscious of quite how the objects were of significance, underlining their 'framing' effect.) This offers an important empirical contribution in showing how people do hold multiple understandings of significant objects and how this is experienced in their lives at work.

What does not seem to happen is that people connect their objects together in any conscious way. They are not aware of the networks in which these objects sit for themselves, apart from the setting of the workplace, which might disallow some objects or provide pressure or companionship through mutual play with the objects. The objects are theirs alone, and it is one of the purposes of this thesis to tease out just what the network which might be in play is based on. What mutual 'interest' might be at work?

This highlights a key point for this thesis: that the objects are functioning in a restrained and multiplly 'occupied' environment where the objects function with people in an interplay of managed external control. One of the strong constraints the workplace produces is on both the number of things which can be 'on display' in any working environment and also on the type of things which can be in that space. The relationship with materiality in the workplace is thus part of a very particular meshwork of understandings. The objects and people at work are both changed by their being present in the workplace, and change it.

I have illustrated from my data just how people understand objects as both representations and as performative players. This develops the work done in the studies of Chapter 1 by the specific empirical demonstration of such dual understanding. People are able to hold such duality and the objects cannot be confined to one or the other.

# 9.2 Research Question 2: How do people, and the objects which they identify as meaningful, interact at work?

A number of theoretical outlines in thinking about the 'work' of objects were presented in Chapter 1, and the question raised in that chapter underpins this discussion, namely whether objects, that is material things, function to represent something else, such as home or relationships, or whether they act performatively in a subject/object entanglement of agency. As illustrated above, I argue that people hold both positions in practice, but the key problem to address through this second question is what holds the objects together in daily practice. Many of those studies, although about objects, had their primary focus in some other concern such as space and territoriality (Tyler and Cohen 2010; Brown et al.), the impact of hot-desking (Halford 2004; Hirst 2011; Warren 2006; Elsbach 2003; Milward, Haslam and Postmes 2007), the placing of objects in networks of practice (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Law and Hassard 1999; Law and Singleton 2005), the impact of technology (Orlikowski 2007), of gender (Tyler and Cohen 2010), of space (Herod, Rainnie and McGrath 2007; Dale and Burrell 2007), of comfort and connection to ourselves and others (Turkle 2007; Miller 1999), or embodiment as a neglected issue (Dale and Latham 2015; Pullen and Rhodes 2015). The picture built up by these studies is one of objects being important per se, as part of our sociomaterial assemblage in the world (Jones 2013) and as objects being important to our construction of ourselves as people who find comfort in having familiar objects around us, but the focus was not directly on the objects. The focus of this thesis is to put the objects centre stage and explore how they contribute to the way in which we perform them and ourselves at work.

To address this question, I use two concepts in particular, those of 'affordance' (Harré 2002; O'Toole and Were 2008) and 'lack' (Knorr Cetina 1997). I use these because they work in my data to separate out, as well as to connect, the agency shown by material objects and those who interact with them.

In Chapter 2 I referred to Harré's (2002) concept of affordances, and how:

...the same material thing may have a great many different possible ways in which it can be used. Each is an affordance...thus a floor affords walking, dancing, placing furniture; a window affords a view of the lake, an escape from threat, a view for a peeping Tom.

(Harré 2002:27)

O'Toole and Were (2008) similarly used the idea of affordance in their study of a door which afforded resistance between two competing groups in an organization, but they extend the range of 'affordance' to encompass not only what can be *done* with an object physically, but also how an affordance can be *constructed* in the interplay of objects and people. The same object may construct many affordances *relationally*, in the same way as Harré argues that the same object may afford them physically, and so the object becomes a social player for people. As I noted in Chapters 4–8 there were many occasions when the objects could be interpreted as active players in more than one theme, when the object afforded multiple uses. For example they might be both a tool for the job and an indicator of pain, as in Joy's trolley [Figure 6-1], or a tool for the job and a way of dreaming and escaping as in Val's calendar, [Figure 5-26] or an object which reflected both relating and resistance like Tom's mug [Figure 5-20].

A different frame is offered by Knorr Cetina's (1997) concept of objects as being a place where lack and desire loop through them to help achieve desired states. Objects, she suggests point to a 'structure of wanting' (1997:13) and says further, 'objectual relationships are held in place by a mixture of attachments and may in fact be sustained by their conjunction' (1997:14). Objects afford the place and means to do things and experience things, but they also function as an expression of the missing, the material making and meeting the immaterial emotional lack.

Affordance and lack go hand in hand through the data, recalling how Jones (2013) and Orlikowski (2005, 2007) write of there being no material which is not also social. Both affordance and lack are seen in the data in three ways: as they appear in relationships, developing a simple understanding of relationships into something much more complex, as they appear in the way people create resistant boundaries and personal safety, and as they appear in how people seek to be effective at work. I shall address each of these in turn.

#### Affordance, lack and relationships

Affiliative relationships illustrate the most common of these demonstrations of affordance and lack. While the forming of relationships through objects at work is in some ways an obvious thing to happen, the data presented here is indicative of very much more than just seeking human contact or light relief at work. Relationships were afforded through both *shared* understandings and pleasure, and through objects where the relationship was held more privately. Examples of the affordances for relating where objects were working transparently *between* people include, among many others, the affirmation held in Norma's small desk toys which she and her colleague played with [Figure 4-9], cartoons such as Mark's Dilbert one [Figure 4-17], Tom's rubber brick to throw at people [Figure 4-18] and Gerry's Lamborghini on his desk [Figure 4-12]. These were publicly displayed and sources of public amusement. The

objects afforded a particular resource, that of relating and connecting. But relationships happened in less obvious ways. Other relationships were less transparent but no less held in the objects, as in Jenny's case [Figure 4-5] when she filled a store cupboard for people she had never met. It would not exist without the objects. Some relationships were 'displayed' but not obviously so, such as the thank you notes whose materiality was also important, and the pencil sharpener on Alison's desk [Figure 4-21]. Many work tools were also places of support and relationship, such as Victoria's letter tray [Figure 4-6] or the tables and chairs in Sarah's office [Figure 4-25]. The way in which what are superficially 'work' objects become imbued with meanings which are significant and relational is an important development in the understanding of how objects afford relationships. They afforded and performed the connection: they concretized it, brought into being a way of connecting which would not otherwise be available in the workplace, where opportunities to *express* such connection are rare. The objects do not just work as exemplars of the relationship but are active players in the building, expressing and sustaining of relationships. Their materiality, the way they can be thrown, moved, pinned up in different places, positioned prominently or less prominently, be used on a daily relational basis – all of this materiality is part of the material playing out of the connection, with those who are there, who are elsewhere, who are current friends or friends lost touch with. The relating is not just about making daily work relationships more human but about bringing into work the knowledge that one is a relating person. To that extent the objects are reminiscent of what is carried into exile (Povrzanovic Frykman's 2008; Lee, Woo and Mackenzie 2002), players of relationships which freight current, affirming meaning from the past, or affirm in the present in jointly understood material practices.

I have said that objects loop through lack. For example, Jana's Maori doll [Figure 4-15] and Lucy's calendar [Figure 5-27] were both spoken of as being supportive in assurances that they were not just 'people at work' but had friends outside work. Lack also showed itself perhaps in just the need to have supportive relationships at work for most people, to feel valued. Carl's picture and reminder of his colleagues meant a lot to him [Figure 5-21] as did Winifred's pencil pot [Figure 4-4]. The knowledge that one was not alone at work was clearly important and the material objects were able to express this. Feeling that one was appreciated, which is rarely expressed by managers, was also afforded by material objects.

The sense of lack looped through objects has particular traction for these objects because they are in the workplace, a place which is belongs to someone else, where one is 'othered', but where one has to be 'at home' (Parker 2000). Lack of appreciation, the need to feel some commonality with others apart from work, to experience humour connected to work and to be able to offer something to others all play their part in making the objects sites of meaning. For some people the lack was much less apparent, and although there were meaningful objects they were few, as in Matthew's single object. This is an interesting comment, not on how much people are committed to their work but on the place which it plays emotionally in their lives and perhaps on individual personality: some people are just more private than others. Whatever the number of objects, the influence of the workplace is seen in the discreet limiting of the relationships through the materiality: the objects express and hold a particular relationship of shared humour or mutual respect but the relationship needs to be low key in the place where one's ostensible function is to do a job. The objects work to contain and limit the relationships. Too much interaction over them would possibly be resisted, on either side. The affordance was into just what was felt to be appropriate in the work setting and enough to meet the lack. Doing this expressing via materiality offers a way of eliding the work relationship whilst also retaining it at work. In the same way, attaching emotional connections to objects for oneself rather than expressing them vocally keeps them safely away from the employment contract.

This empirical exploration of the terrain that others, as indicated in Chapter 2, have pointed to (Suchman 2005 on affiliative objects; Knorr Cetina 1997 on objects as places of desire; Turkle 2007 and Miller 1999 on the imbrication of objects in relationships) has shown up some rich

examples of this terrain but also developed it. What this study adds to Suchman's (2005) and Knorr Cetina's (1997) proposal is firstly, some really detailed illustration of the *range* of attachments which are being performed through the objects. Secondly, and vitally for this thesis, the data illustrate that these attachments are held *materially*. They are rarely spoken of in emotional terms, but hold the relationships without words and are part of the daily practice of relating. Above all they both hold affordance and meet a lack.

#### Affordance, lack and personal distinctiveness

As indicated above, Elsbach (2003) suggests that people express a need in the workplace for both personal and social distinctiveness and status, with personal distinctiveness as the most important of these. This need for distinctiveness was underlined in Hirst's (2011) study of hotdeskers who arrived after other desks had been 'bagged', feeling like 'migrants' and 'vagrants' without a place of their own to nest in, lacking a home and a feeling of being of much, if any, significance. It was also strongly apparent in Warren's (2006) study of hot-deskers. Wolfram-Cox and Minahan (2005) also stressed how decoration adds to an expression and holding of the self at work. This thesis builds on these studies and develops a much richer picture of how distinctiveness is sought in a wide variety of ways other than display to others. Such distinctiveness was played out in different ways through materiality, and indeed was the hallmark of many of the objects, that is, the way in which they marked the individual as themselves in some way, either to themselves or to others.

Firstly, a sense of personal distinctiveness was expressed as a common desire across participants, and objects played their part for almost everyone in this: even the lack of objects was cited to be about being 'private' as for Mark, Matthew and Terrence. Secondly, however, it was *performed* and *practised* in different ways by individuals. This is an important contribution of this thesis: materiality was a very powerful way of establishing, experiencing and holding individuals and individuality, in their own way and to afford responses to their own particular 'lacks' at work.

The need for objects that acknowledged personal distinctiveness was demonstrated again through both personal objects and through objects which might look like work tools but were far more than that. The distinction which objects afforded may be on display for others to see: Alison's shoes [Figure 5-6], Rupert's toys [Figure 4-8], and many personalised mugs and calendars were all there to claim this individuality. I have commented before on how objects, being few in the workplace, have to play many roles; the objects which afforded public signs of relating also afforded this distinctiveness, such as the thank you cards, valued for their particular acknowledgement of something about the recipient, the little Buddha which was only there as a personal statement but became a relational one, or the particular kinds of toys which Jemima and her colleague enjoyed playing with, an kind of object banter. Many mugs and calendars all attested to the way in which people used objects as portals for experiencing personal distinctiveness, for in some way 'being themselves'. Other objects affording distinction were less obvious. The leaves that Adam bagged up were a source of pride for him, a claiming that he did things well, and that he was someone who enjoyed his job outdoors [Figure 7-7]. Dan's sports supplements [Figure 6-8], Joseph's key [Figure 7-9], Tom's camera [Figure 5-17], Joy's hidden cartoons [Figure 6-11], Brian's relationship with his forceps [Figure 7-5], and Paul's brain-training paper [Figure 6-4] played the same role of affirming, in a place where individuality is hard to maintain, that they were distinctive. The objects marked this distinctiveness without obviously claiming it: it would be gratuitously offensive to boast of how someone liked you enough to send you a gift or a thank you card, but having it in sight did mark you out for yourself as worthy of it.

The need to experience individuality through materiality was clear even in strictly enforced hotdesking environments, such as Rebecca's [Figure 6-16], where she was still very concerned to choose her distinctive lanyard, mouse-mat and notebook as things which she felt gave her a bit

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of individuality, apparent both to herself and perhaps to others and gave her a bit of control in her work environment.

Lack loops through all this desire for being oneself and 'other' than both work and others at work. The workplace is not an easy arena in which to assert individual feelings or values or to hold on to a clear sense of being unique. The misery felt without this sense of distinctiveness is shown up clearly in Tyler and Cohen's (2010) study of gendered spaces at work where women feel minimised and ignored through a lack of personal space, and in Hirst's (2011) study. The need to have 'touchstones' which assert individuality to oneself was seen in Andrew and Carls' crosses [Figure 5-4, Figure 5-29], things which drew into the workplace values which were pivotal in their lives, and the physical objects, while very small, are crucial in their importance. Their material presence was a constant signal of what was central to their lives. They were not handled but their visible physical presence was important as a check-in, a reminder of the core of their way of living which may, at a low level, be violated at work. Jenny's connection of her work with her disability, expressed through her valuing the signs which encouraged people to take care of themselves [Figure 6-15], was similar. The important arrangement of space for Andrew and Matthew were absolutely about their distinctive styles, as were Geraldine's pictures to 'feed her soul' [Figure 6-6]. This is strong personal distinctiveness, a firm statement to the self of this is how I am, as well who I am. I am someone who has needs, who lacks things at work about confirming who I am and I use these objects to show myself to myself.

Lack in this seeking after personal distinctiveness, therefore, is looped through the need to feel individual in a place where individuality counts for little – one is always expendable! This puts a different slant on Belk's (1988) and Tian and Belk's (2005) work on the extended self. In those studies the objects were described as being connections to and representations of the 'extended' self at home and in social relationships. The findings in this thesis do not uphold that position. My argument here is that the objects which connect to other aspects of the self than

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'work' are rather gathering in and performing, not just other roles, but other *aspects* of the person which were felt to be missing such as humour, being a person not a job, or having a valued place. Connections to home and to others outside the home seem rather to be *part* of the mesh of relationships which support people at work. They are drawn into the network of relationships which affirm an identity at work, rather than drawing the self out. The material reminders of being distinctive are a reflection of an inner self-concept which plays out through the objects. They are not reminders of an extended self, but performers of a gathered self. The workplace functions as a space where people need to feel 'themselves' and material objects play their part in creating the space at work where people 'belong'.

#### Affordance, lack and boundaries

In the literature review of Chapter 1, boundarying was identified as literal, carving out territory in which to be (Brown et al. 2008; Elsbach 2003) or becoming apparent through objects that held different understandings for different people, boundarying knowledge (Suchman 2005; Ewenstein and White 2009). In this thesis the object-led boundaries are extended from these practical divisions into things which work to hold and even to hide, different parts of the self, reflecting lack as well as affordance. In one way every object was a boundary object, in the same way as they were a source of personal distinctiveness and for the same reason. They were a way of saying 'this is the 'l' who is at work.' I will return to a discussion of identity in answering my third research question.

These boundaries appeared most definitively and universally in the rep grids where a strong separation was described between the work self and other understandings of the self. It was clear, as presented in Chapter 8, that the objects were performing lives at work in which people understood a work self to be a very distinct and separate part of the whole self at work. This was one finding where the choice of a wide sample of participants was particularly effective, since the finding held for the majority of the sample. In Chapter 8, for example, Adam, the estate worker, and Jenny, the cleaner, were definite about some things being 'just tools for the job' as opposed to a wide variety of other constructs for their other objects. Very many objects were reminders of being other than workers: people cared about holidays, about their sports, about having beautiful pictures, about the warmth of a space, and much more. A contribution of this thesis is to demonstrate empirically that object-led connections are of great significance in the preservation of the self, and in holding the boundary between work and other parts of the self which they needed to be in touch with. Being distinctive is a form of boundary, but the boundaries were there to preserve something, to prevent it being taken over.

A particular form of boundarying happened through objects spoken of as carrying resistance. Resistance was presented as about personal distinctiveness and about lack, of control and of individuality, but it was also presented as an opportunity to be transgressive in a way unlikely to be noticed or sanctioned. Resistance was shown in many ways in this study, but the objects were able to make the resistance very subtle and unspoken, both allowing the 'cynical distance' of Spicer and Fleming (2003) but also providing another experience of the self as apart from work, as not complicit in those practices which were felt to be in some way transgressive of the self. So Winifred's ashtray [Figure 6-13] and Tom's and Veronica's mugs [Figure 5-20], Rupert's monkey [Figure 6-12] and Tom's rabbit [Figure 6-7], all of which were cited as objects of resistance, were also about defining and boundarying the self. The objects were often barely noticed by others, but for the owners were powerful reflective messages of who they were, and of what they did not want to be as unprotesting people. Resistance is directed both inwards and outwards, but the objects held it. They were the site of the resistance and the resistance itself: simply having the objects was performing resistance. This is reminiscent again of Suchman's (2005) affiliation through objects, and also of Knorr-Cetina's (2002) point that objects work emotionally and psychologically to give emotional purchase into lives at work, to supply the 'embedding environment' in which people can flourish.

The lack which these objects are meeting was spoken of as a lack of control where management was felt to be perhaps petty or slightly bullying. The level of negativity felt is important. Nothing was being done which was illegal. Rupert's resistance was only to what he perceived as overmanagement, and Tom was resentful of insecurity, a not uncommon feeling at work in the current climate. Their objects expressed equally low-level resistance, but enough to make them feel that there was something of themselves making a protest. This ability of objects *in the workplace* is important, where formal complaints would lead to much greater consequences. The objects are active and performative.

The object-led boundaries were also reported to me as things put in place when people felt the need for some level of safety. They were about preserving and maintaining parts of the self which felt vulnerable in some way. Safety was experienced through many objects. Objects could be buffers and consolers from the small rejections, hurts and disappointments of daily life at work; a reminder of how Helliwell and Putnam (2004) suggest that friends at work buffer us, and that we consciously look for that resource. Jemima and Matthew, for example, felt formal clothes made them feel 'themselves', and also gave a feeling of protectiveness about their careers. Safety might signal being emotionally held, through spaces which are kept hidden such as Paul's visits to the library and the books in his locker [Figure 5-21] and Joy's cartoons in her locker [Figure 6-11]. The holding might be more explicit as in Jemima's hand cream, and pen, both redolent of her mother [Figure 6-5, Figure 6-14]. For Sarah and for Geraldine the safety was simply having something there which belonged nowhere else but was precious. Veronica expressed emotional safety about her room.

Momentary escape was another such safety boundary. A door to escape from [Figure 5-25], a calendar of shoes to look at [Figure 5-6], and a jokey cartoon which has 'got you through' many jobs [Figure 5-14], a calendar [Figure 5-27] or a view from the window [Figure 5-26] are there to help in short term moments of stress, to say that there is another world where I am not this person who is under pressure but someone who can and does relax and have a sense of humour

or fashion or goes on holiday or enjoys being outside. These objects, boundarying off the work self from another self, give an escape route out of work, a way of being not 'owned' for a few moments. They are a material resource to hold the self in momentary rest or escape or reassurance. This has several effects: people are able to cope but it also reinforces a 'work self' which can withstand the pressures of work better for having them around. They are linked to biography and memory (Morton 2007; Kwint et al. 1999; Miller), but work through the instant 'activation' and co-playing of those memories. These objects, more than others, offered places of privacy in public.

One way of activating this measure of escape was through the ability to cross time frames through the objects. A past pain may be held by the same object which allows a future dream, such as a Lucy's calendar or postcard. A present frustration, such as sitting at a desk where others will not allow computers, as for Paul, may be a propeller into a plan for the future, a preparation for a different future and rejection of a past. Geraldine's small copy of a painting on a noticeboard [Figure 6-6] may be comfort now and a dream of another life ahead. A photo may be into another world where things are done 'properly' [Figure 5-10]. This carrying of time in objects has been referred to by Obodaru (2012) with reference to 'The self not taken', but the way it is also a positive resource has not been mentioned. They are not so much reminders as material controllable portals into past and future times which are of present significance. This ability of the objects to hold many frames of time together in a way that allows someone to connect past present and future selves together is not something which emerges from the literature specifically related to organizations and materiality. It is part of our checking of the identity standard: am I doing what I want here, how can I change it to be more like the 'I' I want to be?

A similar and co-related movement is also seen through the affordance objects offer into crossing spatial boundaries. Calendars, photos, postcards, all allow movement to another space, outside the window, to the park, to the sea, to a holiday. Each of these attests to the power of

objects to be active in gathering up the self. 'I' is larger than 'me'. What people see and respond to at work is only a fraction of what is felt to be 'I' and the objects allow that fraction to be little larger.

An interesting finding from this thesis was that some painful objects were kept at work. They were often connected to things, usually relationships, totally outside work. What these objects appear to be doing is again gathering up the different parts of the self. The pain seemed often to be about irresolvable things: in work, Joy's grief over her lost opportunities in many ways, Darren's fierce determination to make more of himself despite his colleague's truculence over not using a computer, but also Lucy's postcard to someone '*but she never sent it*' and Diana's beermat, part of her grief at the changed relationship with her brother and her irritation at having to be in that particular workplace. If there are emotionally difficult and ongoing things happening outside work, things where you feel a lack of education, or love, or certainty, these are also part of yourself even at work and may need to be acknowledged, but they can be both allowed and contained in a materiality which is bounded and hidden. A small glance at it may allow some time for 'working' on the problem without being totally absorbed by it, a reminder that there is something here to resolve for yourself, to hold, to let simmer, but not at this moment to have to make decisions about. It is another form of control, another 'affordance'.

#### Affordance, lack and effectiveness

Brown et al. (2005) suggested that people at work have a need to feel effective in their work. Such effectiveness may be taken for granted by managers except in the dereliction of effectiveness and the objects work to afford a personal message to the self of that competence. The data attest to this in a number of cases: Adam was proud of his bagged up leaves [Figure 7-7] and Rupert of the fact that he could put his hand on any piece of paper very quickly in a messy office [Figure 7-6]. But the objects also worked to allow a measure of control under pressure when, for example, the emails are bing-bonging all day, as for Anabel [Figure 7-2].

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It was only as I wrote and re-read and re-thought what the data meant that I began to realise the power of what I had heard in the rep grid exercise: that *all* the objects' work is done in the context of work, and almost all of what they do is about making someone able to function as a worker. The specific lack of feedback from managers which is compensated for by personal feedback and feelings of satisfaction is a crucial part of the effectiveness of the object/person interplay. But different people expressed different levels of needing to be inspired, or to escape in order to be effective and I will explore this below.

#### Summary of research question 2

I have spent some time indicating how objects are intricately bound up in the emotional lives of people at work, how they operate to allow mutual performing of the self through the affordance to act and to dream and at the same time the opportunity to loop desire and lack through their presence. Objects are like story tellers, freighted with what people bring to them and with their own power to change lives. I have indicated how meaningful objects manoeuvre for people at work through their meanings, offering a changed perception, giving us emotional wriggle room. The world which feels awful can be laid to rest for a moment by a picture or a door or some hand cream. Meaningful objects work in the unconscious or semi-conscious parts of daily *practice* in which they 'stare back' (Elkins 1996) at us. Their performativity consists in the almost unnoticed, unspoken and uncodified interactions with the objects that add up to a practice. The meanings which they have are connotative, rather than denotative (Langer 1947), working with our emotions and bodies as well as our minds. They are about the '1' that is experienced and understood as a standard against which we make sense of life in the workplace. Work is not all there is of us.

I have extended the work covered in the literature review of Chapter 1 in a number of ways. Theoretically I have drawn together a number of approaches to the power of objects from some scattered literature which, while being concerned with materiality in the workplace, often had a specific focus other than the objects per se. I have shown how objects work together in very complex ways with people not only to relate to others but to afford a strong sense of self in the workplace. A range of objects has been shown to be implicated in a range of supportive work for people, and people use these objects to perform a range of selves. These selves are shown to cohere around emotional responses which concern themselves with bringing into the workplace a strong sense of a wider self than work. Theoretically I have shown how objects both afford active engagement with them, as, for example, relators or comforters or providers of safety or resistance or biography and also experience from them a place where lack can be met; the objects slip from one to the other at need, and usually without thought, thus contributing to the debate about how objects connect to sociality. The way workplace tools are also included in the relationality is particularly interesting in a field which tends not to make a connection between tools and people's understanding of themselves at work.

# 9.3 Research Question 3: How does this interaction relate to people's identity in their everyday working lives?

My third research question relates to how people experience the work of objects in relation to their identity specifically in the workplace. The question will be addressed through three components:

Firstly, I will consider what is the specific theoretical, as well as practical, link between the set of objects. Secondly, I will address how this links to identity, and finally I will examine why it is that this link is so important in the workplace

The objects were implicated in many aspects of people's lives at work, and were a major tool in people silently expressing what they felt they were at work and what they wanted to add to the workplace persona. The tools were able to work across a range of personal areas and seemed to link to emotions of all sorts. To explore this further I return to the finding from the rep grids (Chapter 8) and from the work above, where the objects were seen to act as a set. What might the connecting theoretical thread as well as the foundation of a practical 'practice' be across this very fluid network of objects and people?

ANT has used the metaphor of networks to examine how objects cohere in relationship to humans across stories of the workplace, and I have indicated these in Chapter 1. ANT takes as its central plank that objects and humans play equal parts as actants in the networks, which are built over time and through different interests coming together. A number of questions arise. Firstly, what kinds of networks might be happening around the objects in this thesis and are they the kind of networks ANT is able to address? Secondly, is the levelling of actancts, where subject and object are equal actors, actually in place here?

The kinds of networks ANT addresses are those where there are multiple interests expressing different and equally valid understandings about an object, often working through time to point up the multiple facets of any single object. For example, the Skye Bridge (de Laet and Mol 2000) was seen differently at different points in its development by different sets of people and the Zimbabwean pump was an object which was not stable, but multiple because it could be configured in alternative and equally valid ways by interested users. The networks were of changing and differently weighted interests, influenced by each other through the passage of time. The objects under consideration in this thesis are also enrolled in networks but, to recap my argument of Chapter 2, my interest has been not in how they are understood by *many* but how they play out in one single person's life. In some cases the objects are designed to be relational, are at least half directed at others, as in Rupert's Disney toys [Figure 4-8] or Alison's pencil sharpener [Figure 4-21], but this is not their prime function. The trajectory is not as a tool for many, and others do not usually have an interest in asserting their control of any particular object. While, however, the ANT version of networks is not appropriate here, the concept of networks does have a connection to Hobfoll's (2013) notion of a caravan of resources. I indicated in my methodology chapter (Chapter 3) that I asked people the question 'is there

anything in your workplace which is important to you but not meaningful' and people were able to identify things without hesitation: Geraldine, for example, indicated her computer, Joseph a set of schedules, Victoria a soft toy, Sarah her telephone, none of which had been photographed. These objects were not resources, only adjuncts of the job. They were able to be excluded from the network. And in Chapter 8 on the rep grids I indicated that people were able to say very firmly that there were two essential parts of themselves acting together in a network at work with meaningful objects at work throughout and across the network.

My second observation about ANT was that it levels the action between objects and people. In Chapter 1 I indicated that ANT had been taken to task for its lack of attention to the social setting for objects (Haraway 1994; Whittle and Spicer 2008) and the impact that has. I would argue that the setting is important here: the objects are enrolled not only through the understandings of an individual, but also both constrained and defined in their effects through the setting of the workplace. They are performative: the precise level of their involvement will be discussed below, when I consider the work of Alfred Gell (1998).

In this understanding of the work of objects in the workplace, the concept of performativity I argue to be at work is that of Orlikowski (2007) in speaking of socio-material practices and Humphries and Brown's (2014) 'composted assemblages' in which objects are *influential* and *performative* co-players but not equal players. I would argue that this is the position of most of the studies in organizations to which I referred in Chapter 1 and is illustrated in the response above to my second research question. Objects are performative *of us* as individuals, within the individual's habitus, their ways of acting, being and thinking in the workplace. They function as resources but what makes one object chosen against another? The way in which the objects were seen to gain their power through their daily practice and to be actors in a reflexive way, linking into the personhood of the individual, led me to consider the work of Alfred Gell (1998)

for two reasons. One is the particular form of object agency which he proposes. The other, more importantly is the notion of distributed personhood.

#### **Objects and Agency**

Gell's major work, *Art and Agency* (1998), outlines an 'anthropological theory of art', which in practice is a theory about any (created, but in this thesis deliberately chosen) object that has a relationship with a viewer/recipient. In other words, as he admits, he is not interested in aesthetics but in the work of art *objects*. I had not considered his work in Chapter 1, because he is not writing in the context of organizations.

The major stimulation for this work is his interest in the relationship between the art object and the creator/viewer and how this plays out in terms of reciprocal influence. Gell is interested in the power of objects in social relationships. His significance to this thesis lies in his attempt to define, as does ANT and other forms of performativity, the way in which an object plays an *active* role in the relationship between people and things. He explores a domain in which 'objects' have the same value as 'people' in social settings, by virtue of the existence of social relationships between persons and things, and between persons and persons *via* things. It is a sharp contrast but also a parallel to ANT, in that Gell's focus is not on *levelling* the dualism between objects and people but in the performativity which happens in and through the relationship between the two. His theory is also distinctive in that he regards art, that is the presentation of objects with meanings attached, as a system of action intended to *change* the world, rather than simply to describe what is performing between object and person.

Gell suggests that the simplest way to imagine a theory of art in anthropology, (which, he observes, is itself a theory of social relations), is to suppose that there is a theory in which persons or 'social agents' are, in certain relational circumstances, substituted for by objects. Not that the objects become anthropomorphically 'people-like' but that in their impact they 'work' on people in the same way that other people 'work' on us.

Gell describes this process as the *abduction of agency*, that is, the objects take their agency from the combination of the creator of the object, the object itself and the recipient: agency is located in the social setting, embedded in people's lives and actions and reactions. This is what allows him to ascribe agency to objects, because they have particular meanings to particular people, and work also with other objects to offer agency to them. For example, my pictures in Chapter 2 gained agency from each other via me because they were together in my room, reinforcing each other. Gell suggests there are two kinds of agents. There are primary agents, which he defines as those entities endowed with the capacity to initiate actions or events through will or intention, and secondary agents, entities not endowed with will or intention by themselves but essential to the formation, appearance or manifestation of intentional actions. Objects largely function as secondary agents. For Gell, they are '*agentic but not causal*', a key distinction. Objects are in a network but it is a individually localized one, where objects and people do not have the same powers. Secondary agents gain their power via their history with primary agents.

A brief example: when my computer refuses to deliver my emails (and refusal is how I experience it), I experience my computer as having agency and I experience me in the position of the 'recipient' in the relationship. Agency is *abducted*, in Gell's word, *between* me and my computer. It is constructed, or construed, through the relationship between me and my computer, through our history, and through the desires that I have for it to perform well. So my computer is a secondary agent, not able to initiate events through will or intention, but essential to the manifestation of the particular actions which are 'provoked' in me by it. This is enough to allow for agency rather than for causality. The computer did not cause me to be angry but I certainly experience it as being an agent in producing anger in me.

Gell focuses on the biographical nature of such 'anthropological' relationships:

Anthropological relationships are real and biographically consequential ones which articulate to the agent's biographical 'life project'. (Gell 1998:11)

This is important because the way in which objects 'work' may, and probably will, have history attached to it, history which encompasses both previous experience of the object and a history of similar situations, as both Morton (2007) and Warren(2006) suggest. So my computer's agency is diluted because I know at another level that I have in the past successfully called in someone to fix it. Agency is connected to time. We give and receive agency through the meetings we have with objects and some of that agency comes from our previous experience with these objects.

Critics of Gell, for example Bowden (2004), contend that Gell ignores the wider social context, the 'genuinely shared beliefs and values on which different societies are based' (Bowden 2004:323). While this is true, as indicated above, my focus in this thesis is on individual understandings of particular objects in particular practices, and a wider consideration of their place in societal understandings would be a different, albeit interesting, study. A more serious question for this thesis is raised by Morphy (2009). Gell, he says, fails to explain *how* objects do the work he outlines for them as agents, but rather simply goes back to saying *that* they do; that they have agency because they have impact, a question I address below in relation to identity. Layton (2003), following Gell, indicates that the impact might be working at any time sociologically, psychologically, semiotically or aesthetically, and these categories are all ones that can be pertinent in questioning the 'how' of objects' agency as well as the 'what'.

The link to Gell for this thesis comes from the idea that we are in some way attached to objects, and our attachment allows the objects to be, as Gell describes it, agentic but not causal, calling out responses but not necessarily being the sole agent in creating those responses. That attachment, suggest Schultz Kleine et al. (1995), comes through a desire to affiliate to others or to maintain our independence, to manage change or to remain stable. The strength of attachment is shown in the amount of Mead's (1934) 'I' felt to be reflected in the object and that strength is often strongly connected to a trajectory through our past lives. The objects are not innocent but fraught with our histories, both past and future.

The abduction of agency between object and person, the object gaining traction from the person and reflecting that agency back in future interaction, is a helpful framework for this thesis. At work the objects are chosen as meaningful for many reasons, but their positioning gives them a dual agency. Firstly, they are created as 'meaningful' through the experiences around them in the first place, which may have happened inside or outside work. The thank you card which is treasured, for instance, was given agency by the one who wrote it because she was expressing something relevant to them both, and becomes more meaningful by being kept and cherished. The 'resistant mug' or the cartoons take their agency firstly from their choosing by someone and that agency is strengthened through sharing them and using them in daily practice. They continue to be agentic through the way they are kept, looked at, and experienced as a container and player of personhood. To ground this in a few examples from my data: the pen [Figure 6-14] has agency through the mother who chose it as a mother of pearl object which she knew would give pleasure, and it gains more agency from the use and the continuous place it is given as a marker of being a 'professional'. The 'hidden in plain sight' beermat [Figure 6-10] works both to keep pain at bay, because it is being dealt with at some level, and as a reminder of general unhappiness because it is kept there. As it is kept there the daily practice abducts agency to give the object greater power to have its effects. The object's agency becomes stronger through the practice. This recursive agency is a useful way of thinking about the performativity of the objects because it signals some identity twice over. Firstly, in the choosing or receiving or encountering of the objects in the first place, with the associated response, and then through the continuing response which is offered to them.

This leads to the corollary of this theory, as objects gather up agency from one person, that of the distributed person.

#### Distributed personhood

Gell (1998) proposes that we are 'made up' as beings of more than the body. Our being includes those things to which we give agency as their creators (nail clippings, presents, secret postcards) and from which we receive agency (a 'lucky' tool, a toy monkey, a cleaning trolley). There is a collection or collation of ourselves which is 'out there' as well as 'in ourselves'. The implication from Gell's idea is that those things I love, which I have invested in and cherish, are also a part of me and, he says, can be used against me, an interesting gloss on why such things may be held very quietly and secretly. What is not known cannot be used. This is not to impute life to these objects. It is that, for each of us, those objects which we see as being of significance in particular settings form, for each person, a distributed part of themselves because they are indexes of that person which combine to create, in some way, a distributed but integrated whole.

This sets up a very different notion to the idea of the extended self suggested by Belk (1988) where a core self is surrounded by other *roles* which we play, and which we understand in their context, for example, as parent, student, or citizen. In that formulation, objects act as symbols for others and ourselves of our roles: a sticker, a badge, a photo. For Gell, the objects of the distributed self are far less controlled, and offer power to others.

We suffer as patients [in his particular sense] from forms of agency mediated via images of ourselves, because as social persons we are present not just in our singular bodies but in everything in our surroundings which bears witness to our existence, our attributes and our agency ...

#### (Gell 1998:103)

The data used above to illustrate affordance and lack serves to show how objects and people were entangled in a mesh of values about themselves expressed through the objects. Bits of people were lying around but they were bits that made up a particular person and often had strong themes which gathered together significantly. Let me ground this idea of the distributed person in some examples from the data. In the chapter on rep grids (Chapter 8) I indicated that for many participants the constructs divided very strongly into only two basic constructs. For example, Adam had essentially only two, being at work and being away from work, while Val similarly had as her two being at work or being elsewhere – on holiday somewhere indicated by her calendar and mouse mat and open window. Geraldine focused on present and future pleasures, through her reading of Greek history, 'to *take into the future'*; through her pictures '*to feed the soul now'*, and through her little hidden box from her past to give her grandchild as opposed to the dreariness of work, and her own aesthetic pleasure and her own development. Winifred had as themes things which covered herself as a professional, concerned to look after and be available to students, and a much more transgressive self who smoked and kept 'old tat' in her room, 'taking care of the things no one else wants': throughout she was concerned with taking care of things or people. In each case, what was demonstrated was how the objects fitted into a pattern of values, gathering together the self. Paul's approach to pigeon holes [Figure 7-10], which tested his knowledge of where staff had moved to, was as much about his ambition to develop himself as were his books and the visits to the library. It is the very materiality of the objects which allows this crossover of values from work to a more personal self to happen in the workplace. Such values are not openly part of work, but they are a core part of how identity is negotiated there. The materiality acts as a collection of things which are the self in their meanings. Having them there allows this to be acknowledged and unacknowledged.

The objects chosen to be meaningful in this thesis are speaking in a very particular way because they are speaking not as individual objects but as a chorus. They are acting in some way as a selected group of objects, 'that contribute to and derive extraordinary meaning from the entity (the collection) that this set is perceived to constitute'. (Belk 1990:141)

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So the objects form a collecting of the self at work, which has clear boundaries around it as indicated above by my question about non-meaningful objects. The connection of identity to the collections which people make is an idea supported by many researchers. Clifford (1994) suggests that while collecting as a form of self identity is not a universal experience, it is so in the western world. 'Collecting has long been a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self' (Clifford 1994:260), and he talks of 'collecting and display... as crucial processes of western identity formation' (ibid). Stewart (1984) proposes that the collection is not representational but a hermetic world, closing the gap that separates language from the experience the collection encodes. It is about the making of a subjective domain. The collection encapsulates something about the person and is a world into which one can withdraw. For Miller (1994), it is the making of a dual relationship, a process between subject and object. I argue that in the same way the meaningful objects that people have around them in what they define as their working spaces act to compose an order which is crucial to their own place in that space. The collection of objects works materially, temporally, to be a defined space and place which is crucial to their 'being' at work. Pomian (1990) talks about the division and connection between the visible and the invisible in relation to collections. The material objects are the visible face of an invisible thread which binds the collection, the material which 'incarnates' the immaterial.

#### Values as a connecting thread in the meaning of objects

In the course of this analysis I came to the slow conclusion that at the core of the 'resource identity work' (that is, the connecting which makes something a personal resource at work), what was going on for people through the objects was a connection to the values which they held most closely, arguably part of the slow to change inner standard of Stryker and Burke (2000) and Burke (2006). Many things pointed to this. In particular the objects, in the interviews, provoked some deep and grounded reflection on the way people were valued by others, as friends and supportive colleagues; about what they valued in themselves, wanting to show that they were not wholly lost in their professional lives; and about the channels which objects made to allow help when feeling devalued or unhappy. The object-actors were portals to allow into play something which was both emotionally and cognitively active and which could be called up very quickly in private times, and they were things that were in sight all the time. I contend that the thread binding all the objects was that of values. Holding a central core of values tied the objects together, and meant that they were all able to share in the affirming and expressive work of identity support. To return briefly to the important but *not* meaningful objects: as Charles Taylor (1989) comments it is the *way* things matter which is important to their being meaningful.

In the chapter on identity I outlined how Hobfoll (2011) describes the 'caravans of resources' which people use to establish and to sustain their sense of self, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously. To recap:

COR begins with the tenet that individuals strive to obtain, retain, foster and protect those things they **centrally value**... COR posits further that what is centrally valued is... a positive sense of self'.

#### (Hobfoll 2011:17 (my emphasis))

The idea of values as part of the core standard, which is held and reflected on in more transient role identities, is hinted at but not explored explicitly in many studies. Suchman (2005) refers to a 'regime of values' expressed in objects, and Carlile et al. (2013) maintain that values are the concept which has been left out of material studies. Harré (2005) writes of values, a search for the good, as the core of identity, Clarke et al.'s (2009) manager spoke of re-authoring herself as a moral being, and Ahuvia (2005) wrote of 'demarcating' things about the self which are non-negotiable. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003:1186) write of a manager who, in times of trouble, says she needs to *'focus on something which is good for you'*. Kornberger and Brown (2007) illustrate how a discourse of ethics was a key part of the authoring of individual identity for a group of not-for-profit workers.

When Clarke et al.'s (2008) manager spoke of *'re-authoring herself as a moral being'* during a time of change and medical students spoke of *'patching, splinting and enriching'* their working identities (Pratt et al. 2006), what they were doing was comparing the way they were being asked to act with what felt right for them. How far could they bend their values without too much stress? Elsbach (2003) underlines the need for personal distinctiveness and the set of values which people hold about themselves forms part of that distinguishing. Petriglieri (2011), writing about identity threat, suggests that possible responses to such a threat will be being protective of the salient part of the identity under threat, that is, protective of its values.

These scattered hints are given theoretical grounding in two sources. One is Hitlin's (2003) specific proposal that at the heart of our identity is a sense of values. These values are built up over time and may change slowly but they are the reference point for any person faced with change or stress. I contend here that at the heart of the collection of meaningful objects is a 'tying in' of a sense of the values which are most closely held by someone. These link the objects and are the reason they are held as meaningful while other things which are important to the mere doing of work are left out of the set. These values are held as a way of maintaining a sense of distinctiveness, of being oneself at work in the face of all the other pressures to adopt other roles. This thesis argues that material objects in use form part of that coping, but not only under conditions of stress. Identity is also enjoyed and expressed in a *positive* way through materiality, where positive values are brought into play.

For participants in this study some objects called up very deep emotions, things not lightly spoken of at work and sometimes never spoken of. They related to a scheme of things bigger than work, connected to past and to future lives, offering a place of *evaluation* about themselves and the contrasts between their place in the world and their place at work. And they inhered in, and drew out a form of practice: of looking, relating, sharing, touching, thinking and

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feeling which was all underpinning a great deal about who they were and how they made evaluations about themselves at work.

To underline this point: the notion of emotions as cognitive evaluations, as expressions of reflection on underlying and deeply held values, helps to link together the open and the hidden, the professional and the personal. It is of particular value in shedding light on what the hidden things are doing, as it concretizes them as places where evaluation is going on, where people are mulling over and bringing to bear their values on what is uncomfortable in their lives yet/and too important to be left at home.

These emotional reactions as *evaluations* also make the link to identity. Our values are the slowest part of our identity to change, forming, suggests Hobfoll (2011) and Stryker and Burke (2000), the major part of the identity standard against which other identies/roles are measured. The objects are holding these values, as sites where affection, stability, a way to feel at home, or comforted bring them to the fore at times of emotional reactivity, allowing an evaluation to take place which is purely internal to the self in its immediate impact and which is upheld and expressed through the objects. Such day-to-day identity work is not easily read off, but the objects 'work' to illustrate and exemplify it.

This linkage of values to the resources that support our identity is a core finding of this thesis. The way the objects are discriminatingly selected as meaningful indicates the underlying place which they hold in the working lives and identities of individuals. Through the objects, people are holding and expressing the values that are central to them as people at work and outside work, and using them to express, uphold and defend their identity. There may be other things which are in the caravan of resources, because people actively seek such supports; power of various kinds or physical resources to do the job well. But the way in which those resources are used, and indeed the very resources themselves are redolent of the values which are in place as a core part of people's identity. There is nothing to say that these values will not change but if they do it is slowly, and in response to pressure exactly as Stryker and Burke suggested was the case with the identity standard, the 'l'.

In this section I want to concentrate on two significant points. One is how 'identity work' is done in the workplace. The other is the significance of the workplace itself on how people experience material objects.

In the data chapters I referred to the work of Mead (1934) on identity, using 'I' and 'me' to show how objects both reflected the impact of others and allowed reflection on this impact. I will refer back to Mead's concept through this discussion of what the objects are affording and use it to develop the idea of the objects performativity, but also to develop Stryker and Burke's (2002) formulation of an 'identity standard' which operates through the me/I reflection.

As indicated above I argue that objects and people are working together to allow people to defend the values they uphold for themselves when these are lacking in the workplace.

To this end, the meaningful objects form what Hobfoll (2011a, 2011b), as discussed in Chapter 2, refers to as a Caravan of Resources, where people actively seek such resources as are in their power for sustaining the self at work. This gives a new slant on the idea of networks. In ANT the objects were drawn into the networks as they gained traction or *interessement* and what I propose here is that the traction or interest which gives the objects their place in the network or collection is that of connection to values. If, for example, Andrew were to lose his faith the cross and all the values which are associated with it in terms of his life might change, or if Kate were to be seriously bullied and harassed by her organization about her disability she may withdraw her support for her colleagues. The values are looped through the objects in the same way as the desires are, and the desires are driven by the values.

To ground this in the data, as people engage with work and all its controlling or difficult aspects, they experience this as Mead's 'me' which is reflecting back to them how they are seen at work. In response, the objects, in plain sight and without words, are able to counteract or confirm this experience through their silent freighting of values. The world which feels awful can be soothed for a moment by a picture or some hand cream or a Celtic cross. It is the daily 'staring back' of the objects (Elkin 1996) which offers shelter and resistance against control. This is done by connecting to the values which are held in the objects.

The objects afford a way of attracting and displaying the responses of others through their materiality. These responses provide material for the Mead's (1934) 'me', the external feedback from others on how they see you. The 'l' responds by being selective about these objects, choosing to have in the workplace those objects which are salient to the inner 'l'. Not all gifts from students are on display, nor are all thank you notes, but only those which are felt to accord with particular parts of the self: the Buddhist teaching, the black and white photos, the toys which were enjoyed by both parties playing with them. The objects chosen were of value to some inner part of the self which was expressed through the way they were chosen as 'meaningful'. They provided part of the caravan of resources (Hobfoll 2011) which people gather for themselves at work. The objects actually speak for the self, to meet the need of the 'l', and to confirm its presence and expression in the workplace: 'l' am here, recognised and valued both by myself and others.

In terms of identity, this is a crucial point for this thesis. The objects are acting as chosen resources to reflect people to themselves and to 'perform' themselves in everyday life, through interaction with them. The I/me interlay is complex; as things are done at work in a way which offers a disturbing or upset form of 'me', perhaps stress over work, or a colleague who is being unpleasant, the objects work to involve the identity standard of Stryker and Burke (2000). The objects question whether how 'me' is being presented reflects a picture of how 'I' thinks about itself. The objects hold that standard, through what is being invested in them, and work to bring it into play as a defence, and as a consolation and buffer. 'I' am not what the 'me' is hearing, I am more or other than that. Their materiality is important because they are there constantly to

hand and to eye whenever they are needed. Their materiality is vital because it allows them to be accessed whenever they are needed, imbricated in the daily round of other jobs. They are an essential part of the caravan of resources which supports me at work, emotional touchstones for reassurance and pleasure. They don't just remind, they 'work': the thank you cards, the crosses, the cartoons, 'stare back'. As in my introductory story about icons, the objects are not mirrors but more two-way filters, both giving and receiving.

#### **Objects in the workplace**

The interplay between people and material objects I have explored is in a particular setting, the workplace. The sense of lack looped through objects has particular traction for these objects because of that setting.

As Dant comments, 'at our place of work we manipulate the material world in routine ways regulated and specified by someone else' (Dant 2006:70). This is true of the overt functional role of the worker. The workplace is an environment where one is doing a particular job, and in a contractual relationship to be doing it. Anything over and above that, to do with the expression or burden of the self, is 'irrelevant' and has to be expressed in subtle and *sotto voce* ways. This gives materiality a peculiar importance: as Dale says, 'It is this level of triviality and taken for granted-ness that makes the significance of materiality both hidden and powerful' (Dale 2005:653)

Secondly, the workplace is also a confined space for objects. Whereas in the home one may choose whatever objects one wants to be in place, at work there are different conventions and regulations but whatever they are, the number of objects in anyone's space will be limited. If they are to contain something about the self that containing will be complex and concentrated.

Thirdly, the workplace is an environment where it is not easy to ask for comments, either on one's work or, more particularly, one's personal value. Such comments may come from a manager in the course of the working day, but expressions from colleagues are less common, since such expression is not part of the working contract. They are much more likely to be expressive of a personal relationship rather than the recognition of an effective piece of work as an employee. They are expressing something which sets the relationship on a human footing rather than an employee footing, recognising the emotional within the workplace, and perhaps recognising the lack of appreciation or support which frequently happens at work. Doing this expressing via materiality offers a way of eliding the work relationship whilst also encompassing it by remaining in the workplace.

Objects in the workplace offer enough support to get by. Their presence is as low level as the irritation, lack, or negativity of work may be. But they allow workers to feel themselves sufficiently to accept what the workplace offers.

To underline what the objects and people are doing together for people's sense of self at work I draw on Parker (2000), who, as referred to before, in a discussion of culture outlines a 'unity/othering' model of culture. He writes,

If we want to understand what a particular sense of culture is we need to situate it within something like an intention – a distinction between 'us' and 'them' which tells 'us' who 'we' are. (Parker 2000:224)

He goes on to say, 'organizational segmentation [is] used for different identity work at different times' (2000:224). I would argue that the positioning of objects in the workplace is precisely what gives them the traction that I have outlined as a resource for identity at work. At work, as Parker points out, there are various segmenting and ordering positions, such as gender, or space or occupation, white or blue collar.

But there are also three other higher 'orders' being brought into play, specifically those of legality, of 'social order' and of ethics, or virtue. Organizations are required to observe legal frameworks which are transparent in their formal framing, and one may have recourse to these

if very unhappy and with specific, legally-recognised cause. Social order, such as one's place in the hierarchy of the organization, who has the power to hire and fire, to order the removal of objects or not, is regulated by formal office within the organization, and while it may be abused, as the legal framework may be, overt resistance is difficult to justify. Only Rupert and the monkey knew who the monkeys were! Finally, while the organization may have externally facing 'ethical' statements and policies about both its connection to the world and its treatment of employees, the order which is not available for transparent external negotiation is that of the ethics of the self, or even, to use an old-fashioned term, 'virtue'. While the expression of any part of the self through objects may vary through different jobs – some may need greater protection of the self, some may encourage more open relationships or make greater cohesion between work and other selves – the expression and defending of the values of the inner 'l', however that is understood by the individual, will be in place on a day-to-day basis. At times of major stress the values may be articulated, but are held in less difficult times through the interplay, the checking in with, the objects. It is the very narrowness of formal structures, the restrictions on the self which bring it into play. This connection to the sociality of work, the contrast between the contractual basis, the strength or otherwise of the ordering and the strength of the desire to assert oneself over a particular salient aspect of the self, combines to make certain objects do certain work silently, the work of personal values and virtue.

The work setting has the effect of making these points of assertion *sotto voce*, literally unexpressed in words. It is not safe, in the work setting, to express mild discontent or longerterm mild resistance, in forceful ways. The objects are able to manage the everyday malaises of work in a way which confirms, at least to the individual, that putting up with is not the same as accepting.

Examples from the data to support this might include Terrence, who had no personal objects at all because this was not where he wanted to be, as a law graduate looking for legal employment.

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Although he completed his work with great efficiency, there was nothing of 'him' there and the organization had no right to make him 'sociable'. Similarly the organization has no 'right' to make one express or not express protection of the self through objects, but when Matthew was asked to wear casual dress he hated it. Gerry was insecure at work where a hot-desking environment meant that personal objects were formally banned, but managed this by using objects which expressed his discontent:

Every now and then someone comes round and tells us to clear our desks and Warren [the toy rabbit] goes behind the computer. Then he starts to creep out again...

Parker (2000) writes of the 'unity/othering' model, in the context of this individual enactment of some common understandings. The attractive idea of what is 'othered' through the sociality of the setting suggests that people are 'othering' themselves, by the distinctions they put around themselves for themselves. The objects are able to enact '*I am other than 'just' my work persona*'. There is my identity as opposed to the picture of my identity that work offers me and that others may offer me, and I affirm that othering through the objects. The objects perform my relating to others, my ambition, my desire not to be here, my longing for some beauty in work, my distinguishing of myself as lonely or resistant or in pain or able to escape for a bit. The objects are the site of my humanness against myself as a contracted employee. They compare what is shown of 'me' in the workplace with the identity standard, by illustrating and enacting the lack, the gap between what is felt to be seen and what is experienced as 'me', with all the longings, attributes, need for comfort, need to feel and effective, and need for secrecy outlined in the previous section.

In so many cases, as indicated above, the objects were connecting to the sociality of the workplace through the particular playings out and enactings which they afforded to people. Just to point and polish this, the selves materialized through the objects are selves reactive to a particular setting, enacting and performing with and through the material objects to which they

attach meaning, values which are of great importance to a preservation of identity. This will be enacted and performed both in relation to the general contract of work and in relation to the particular setting and the particular person.

### 9.4 Summary

In this chapter I have drawn on the data presented in Chapters 4–8 to discuss my findings. I began, in answer to my first research question, with a discussion of how people think about objects at work, recalling the debates outlined in Chapter 1 on representation and performativity. I concluded that people are able to hold objects as both representations and as places of performative practice. As representations they are 'about' home or an interest or a professional duty: as places of performativity they are about preserving the self which is held apart from work.

In answer to my second research question, I discussed how the objects offered two particular aspects of performativity, the meeting of lack and the affordance into some kind of response. Through these two channels in particular the objects served to play a strong part in both allowing and evoking responses through them and with them. These responses were particularly clear at times of stress.

In discussing my third question, I found through the rep grids that the objects functioned as a group, and developed this idea through Gell's notion of the distributed person, and through Hobfoll's notion of a caravan of resources to suggest that people actively invest meaning in these objects in order to gather together and express their conviction of themselves as a person in a greater way than their work roles allow. In response to research question 3, I demonstrated how the objects were more than representations of something. The objects are complex in the way they contain affordances into more than one aspect of work life. ANT's notion of networks was invoked because the objects are seen, particularly through the rep grids exercise, to be functioning as a collection or 'collation' of the self. Gell's (1998) theory of abducted agency was

put forward to contend that objects are agentic but not causative, having agency through the meaning first offered to them which is then strengthened through daily practice and experience of interaction with them. Gell's theory of the distributed person was used to discuss the idea of the objects as a collection. Such a collection needs a principle to make it unite and Hitlin's (2003) theory of values was used, together with literature from Chapter 2, to contend that the objects work as values-driven orderings and defendings of people's identity standards.

# Conclusion: objects as practice

# 10.1 Retrospect

This thesis was provoked by my sense of violation when my 'corporate' picture was displayed in public without my (unnecessary under the terms of my employment contract) permission. The resulting fury and resentment developed, alongside my previous interest in the impact of material objects in places of power (Betts 2006) into an enquiry about how material objects which have meaning for people are entangled in our understandings of ourselves

In this thesis I have shown how people at work use material objects to express, uphold, defend and enact a sense of identity through connecting with their values. I did this through firstly outlining the relevant literature on objects in organizations. My framework for that, justified by the disparate nature of the studies done on materiality in organizations, was to use a number of theories of object agency, specifically semiotics, and performativity, including ANT. I critiqued each one for its suitable application to this thesis on objects as a resource for identity in organizations. From this chapter I took the ideas of objects as networks of some sort, and objects as performative co-creators of an individual's working space, significant in making up a an emotional and physical territory, to coin a phrase, an 'objectscape'. This objectscape is held through the materiality of the objects and the 'doing' of them in daily practice. In particular, the lack of objects could lead to unhappiness and a sense of diminishment.

I then examined the way in which identity has been studied in organizations, with some reference to psychology. As a theoretical underpinning with explanatory weight for this thesis, I outlined Mead's (1934) concept of 'me' as the person who others reflect back and 'l' as the inner sense of self which may make adjustments to or defend what is said about 'me' (Petriglieri 2009). Identity has particularly been studied in organizations through discourse under conditions of stress, indicating that people use a range of discursive resources to 're-author' themselves

either temporarily or in the longer term (Beech 2008, 2011; Kosmala and Herrbach 2006). Younger people in training were more likely to make short-term changes, while those in longerterm careers made more permanent changes (Pratt, Rockman and Kaufman 2006). Psychological literature added to this picture in considering how identity has been defined as consisting of an inner 'identity standard', which is slow to change, alongside more temporary role-based identities (Stryker and Burke 2000). The inner standard, built over many years, provides a yardstick against which newer roles may be measured for 'fit' when people are in a situation which requires change. As a result, either the inner standard may be modified or the new role identity may be rejected or manipulated to fit.

Other relevant studies have focused on participants who were of similar grades, in the same company, and had similar employment contracts (for example, Elsbach 2003; Warren 2006; Alvesson and Robertson 2006). I was interested in how people with different kinds of employment contracts and different work settings responded to material objects and therefore chose to use a cross-sectional study of people, selected on an opportunity basis.

I asked participants to photograph all meaningful objects in their workplace. I subsequently interviewed them asking about each object what the meaning was to them, and then did a repertory grid exercise with them. The data were than coded using nVivo and following an Applied Thematic Analysis framework of coding and refining the codes (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

In my findings I presented the data in five chapters. I indicated how objects are implicated in transparent relationships with others, with more guarded relationships, with hidden relationships and with a professional self. I then presented the data from the rep grids in which participants were found to have a strong conceptual division between their professional and their work selves. I discussed these findings in the light of the literature I presented. My final conclusion was that people and objects work through a practice of interaction which allows the objects agency through the practice, through their materiality, their history and their dual role as both representations of such things as holidays, and as performative players of the emotional practice of that representation. The practice is about bringing into play the core values which people reconnect to through the objects, and which support and defend the self through daily stress in the workplace.

# 10.2 Empirical contributions

Firstly, as indicated above, this study moves beyond the extant literature in examining the way in which people across a range of employment contracts interact with objects on an everyday level, with the focus firmly on the individual and the objects they choose as meaningful. Other studies have focused on the life of a single object in many people's experience (DeLaet and Mol 2000); on people at the same level and in the same company; in both identity studies and in studies of materiality at work (Tyler and Cohen 2010; Tian and Belk 2005; Halford 2004; Hirst 2011; Elsbach 2003); and on the discursive negotiation of the self in times of major stress in identity studies (Svenningsson and Alvesson 2003; Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Kreiner, Hollensbee and Sheep 2006b). None have focused on the interplay of objects and people in their daily lives in the context of a theoretical framework for identity.

It is important empirically to recognize that, as Miller (2010) and others such as Turkle (2011) have shown, we both take and express our sense of self at least partly from the social understandings experienced in materiality. In this thesis, almost all employees do use material objects to build a range of understandings that allow them to relate to others and to themselves, and to experience and express both positive and negative responses to work. Even without a physical 'home base', individual workers still relate to their environment with an emotional response. Such things as low-level resistance, relationships, or unhappiness may well

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be hidden but are still there and are an important part of an employee's life at work. In particular, inimical physical aspects of work such as unpleasant surroundings or objects indicating lack of opportunity to develop may be low-level irritants which affect people at work and which they have to work hard to negotiate. Our relationship to our material surroundings at work has an impact on our perception of ourselves as people.

Secondly, I demonstrate empirically how people do have a very strong *performative* as well as emotional relationship in the workplace with the objects which surround them and which they define as meaningful. Although others such as Tian and Belk (2005) and hot-desking studies (Warren 2006; Hirst 2011) had indicated that such relationships were there, I extend this work considerably. I indicate, drawing on work from psychology, that these objects, which include work tools as well as personal semi-decorative objects, act as a linked caravan of resources (Hobfoll 2010, 2011) to offer a range of emotionally supportive practices which extend beyond ether a simple cognitive response to an object, or an unconsidered emotional response. The link between these objects and the practices associated with them is that of individual values, which people bring into play through their interaction with the objects, particularly at times of lowlevel stress. When these values at work are challenged in some way, people use the objects as way of meeting a lack (Knorr Cetina 1997), and of reassuring themselves of their identity as more than just workers.

This pattern and cohesion in the performative practice of objects offers a new and very significant contribution to the work on materiality in the workplace. The importance to individuals of material objects as everyday places of expression and support of themselves as people needs to be recognized as offering people some control over the workplace, in retaining a sense of themselves as more than just their work roles. People bring themselves to work and the objects perform those selves in multiple ways, with 'tools' functioning also as entangled, performative, places of personal support to meet various lacks. They are complex sites of

enactment. Without any control over their material objects, however vestigial, people feel like migrants in the workplace. In addition, the strength of the comparison between the core values and the level of disjuncture being felt may lead to significant decisions about staying in the job or leaving. Materiality is an intrinsic part of organizational life at work.

## 10.3 Conceptual contributions

My findings indicate that people and objects are entangled, following Barad (2013) and Humphries and Brown (2014), in ways which are both representative and performative. The objects are representative, that is 'about' a relationship of some kind, but they are also active players with abducted agency (Gell 1998) from the person who interacts with them and offers them this meaning. The objects function as a *practice* as well as a representation. This builds on and extends much work done in the field of sociomateriality at work, as indicated in Chapter 1.

This notion of agency also develops the work of writers such as Knorr Cetina (1997), Suchman (2005) and Dale (2005) who argue it is crucial that we understand how our imbrication in sociomateriality happens in the world, by showing how objects can multi-task in the workplace as both representations and performances, and as places of lack and places of affordance. This suggestion from practice into the debate about how objects function is a significant contribution of the thesis. It illustrates, through practice, the conceptual point of a rapprochement between the positions of those who hold that we see the world of objects as representations and those who maintain a much more performative view.

I argue theoretically that the work objects are doing is to hold the values which people hold as part of their 'identity standard ' and that people gather such objects together as a caravan of resources. I propose that the underlying link between the collection of resources which people draw together through material objects is that, through the objects, people are able to connect to their values to defend themselves in a place where values are often not transparent or negotiable, a finding which is new and specific to this thesis. While Miller (1999) suggests that values underlie much of consumerist behaviour, this specific link to the way in which values operate in the workplace is a contribution of this thesis both practically and conceptually. In particular, the way in which objects work to hold and hide private emotions and resistance is a novel contribution.

The importance of the contribution lies in its recognition that, in practice, the abducted agency of Gell (1998) can work to overcome the conceptual divide, and link representation and performativity by acknowledging the way in which objects develop agency through practice and habit, forming the link between habit and habitus referred to in the Introduction.

The thesis also makes a contribution by considering the specific location of the workplace as an influence on the effects of material objects. Through defining the organizational regulatory scaffolding for people, it contends objects fill the place of private values, of the expression of 'virtue', or at least of the identity politics which has come to replace virtue. The objects are the place where people can evaluate how they are feeling as moral people and take some action to defend their morality, which otherwise has no legitimate way of being expressed. This *theorising* of the place of materiality in the workplace, while brief, is something novel within the literature.

#### 10.4 Methodological contributions

Much that has been done in the study of materiality and of identity at work has been done through narrative, primarily using interviews. In this thesis I used a mixed method research which allowed me to examine the relationship of object with object rather than only with the participant. The strength of this exercise became apparent in the results, when a very clear pattern emerged. Objects were seen largely as either about a work self or another self, and the emotions showing through the language used about the 'other self' was much richer than through the work-related objects. This offered two ideas to take into the discussion. Firstly, there was discussion of a clear distinction between and work self and another self which seemed to accord with Mead's 'l'. Secondly, there was also a clear connection between these selves through the meaningfulness of the objects.

This finding formed a significant part of my thinking in my conclusions, encouraging me to think about what held the objects together as a meaningful collection. This mixed method approach was really rich in the way it made participants think more deeply about the meaning of the objects. It was not an easy exercise for them to do, and some struggled with the idea of 'no right answer', but a couple of goes made it become easier and many people were very intrigued by the ideas they came up with.

Such mixed methods research begins to answer Brown's (2015) challenge to find more integrated ways of interrogating material objects.

#### 10.5 Research prospect

Further research in this field would be interesting and there are very many possible directions. In terms of those studied, comparing senior and junior staff in one organization, or using staff from an organization like a call centre or a fast food chain would be interesting, as would comparing similar cohorts from different organizations. Methodologically there could be different ways forward, such as using an ethnographic approach in which people are studied on a long-term participant observation basis, which might show much more clearly what is used to foster identity. For example in my research I have no idea of the kinds of supportive conversations which happened between people that may have been far more effective at reordering a disturbed or upset feeling at work, or been a far more effective long-term basis for support. Things are not given in appreciation, for example, without there having been a great deal of verbal interaction to produce the thanks. Such research may downplay the impact of materiality significantly. A more psychological approach using the lens of a personality assessment might serve to distinguish between those who use material objects at work more constantly and those who choose to remain more private and perhaps unencumbered by personal objects at work. A stronger focus on individual stories might show up some patterns related to biography which may have strong influence over people's attachment to objects. Any one of these might challenge my conclusions.

I have also focused very little on space in this thesis. My original literature review covered a great deal of ground on this but I realised that most of the work on space and place was not explicitly related to how objects were used or placed in that space. Lefebrve's (1974) tripartite formulation made me realise that the objects would form a 'scape' for people, as I discovered boardrooms to be spaces of representation (Betts 2006) but looking at how objects were placed and how people moved around them was not a focus of my research, which I regret. It would have made the interviews longer and needed different recording, but it would be an important extension to this research.

### 10.6 A brief extension

I have indicated that my position on object agency is that objects gain their agentic, although not causative, power through being embroiled in daily practice. This inter-being, I have suggested, is held in the way meaningful objects are embedded in values which are already significant to the person, and which therefore make the objects a site of vulnerability as well as strength.

In some anthropological literature on objects a radically alternative type of inter-being is proposed (Ingold 2006, 2011; Bennett 2004, 2010; Barad 2013), suggesting that we are one with the material, rather than separate in any way. In particular, one of the strongest turns in the relationship between people and things comes from Henare, Holbraad and Wastell (2007), who acknowledge Gell, although critically, as one of their predecessors in their search for a new way of thinking. In their book *Thinking through things* they ask the question, *'What would an artefact-oriented anthropology look like if it were not about material culture?* ' (2007:1). They take a 'radically essentialist' cut across materiality, considering the meanings of things not to be separate from their material meanings: that is, something is not a 'simple' physical object with meanings attached but something to which other meanings may legitimately be linked. An

example will sharpen this and make clear what it is they are asking. In Cuba diviners have a particular powder. This powder, they say, constitutes their divinatory power. It is not that it represents power: it *is* power. Henare et al.'s question is, what are the theoretical possibilities opened up by powerful powder? How do we accept that powder is a thing



Figure 10-1 Angel

which can be 'thought' in different ways? What does our world look like if we let the objects lead us into new ways of thinking about what is there in the world, what is ontologically 'true'? That is, can we accept that powder may be thought of in different ways?

Rather than setting up frames of reference with which to analyse, they treat things themselves as *sui generis* meanings. They carefully distinguish between the analytics of things and the heuristics of things. Analytics parse. They offer a classificatory scheme, which can be supported or rebutted or tested or refined. Description, 'parsing', stands outside the objects and puts them into categories of meaning according to a pre-ordained scheme. Heuristics merely locate, say that 'this is understood like this'. They carve out the field which might offer a different analysis completely. Heuristics, for Henare et al. (2007), means allowing that objects may mean other than *we* think they do. We have to allow truth to the meanings which others give to things. They are not looking for a new episteme but for new ontologies, that is, allowing the things, objects, to offer their own ways of thinking.

Performativity here is taking a hugely different turn. In fact this is not about performativity at all, in the sense that objects interact with us, but much closer to a sense that objects are simply colivers with us in the universe. It is a very exciting and attractive idea, and hard to get one's head round. For example, sitting in my study, I look up at a photograph of small angel. I know where the angel is located, in a place to which I have a deep connection. I have touched and sat with this statue and know how it feels - actually made in China, of plastic! I have a good understanding of 'angel-ology' after years of interest. It attracts me, it makes me think and even do things which otherwise I might not do, such as dancing in front of it. What I cannot do is think how this statue might be, in some way, other than it is. How could it be 'aggression'? Or 'grief'? It might act on me to produce either of these things, depending on what I bring to it at any moment, it might 'perform' in my life through its impact, and it might be argued that there is some agency between the maker of the angel, the statue itself and me. But I cannot think of it as something it is not. Which is not to say that it isn't possible to think that. Only that I do not 'know' or 'feel' how to do it. I began this thesis with a reflection on why I had been attracted to this subject. I have been interested to observe my reactions to objects in my work space at home, where there is no regime to rail against, while writing this thesis.

I have decorated my study with things I love, a riot of angel pictures, soothing linen curtains in an attempt to make it cell-like and calm, a very comfortable office chair, and some small relics of when it was my son's bedroom. It is my space. I am very protective of it and its physical appearance and arrangement is really important.

My son has recently completed his own doctorate and he said on a visit home, 'Mum, you work much more physically than I do'. It was a kind comment on a space covered chaotically in books and papers, but a comment indeed on how having the papers in view, however untidily, made me feel more in control, surrounded by 'friends' who were helping me complete this thesis.

I noticed too the ability of these material things to speak of how I am doing: neat piles at the end of a completed piece of writing, total flooding chaos in the middle of a difficult patch. I noticed too the old friends which were neglected because they were not speaking to me of the thesis: the car which never got cleaned although I hated its dirty state, and the grass which rarely got cut. They were ignored in favour of what was increasingly of overriding importance to my sense of self. My values were caught up in these objects: the papers were about my life history, about doing what I really loved and having time to do it. The objects tapped into other aspects of me as well: wanting to live simply, not spending my retirement shopping! We bunked up together to let me be myself.

Finally the flood of papers became a controllable channel, and slowly the neglected things came back into view. Now I am looking forward to tending them: apart from people I need to see there is the falling-apart kitchen, the weed-ridden garden, the unframed pictures – things which might have offended me before I paid so much attention to the writing which enchanted me, and their neglected state will offend me again as they are allowed to regain their meaning. All of which says to me that the place objects have in our lives is never less than significant.

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#### Information sheets, consent forms and interview schedule

#### Information sheet for participants.

My name is Jan Betts. I am doing a research project at the University of Surrey (specifically a PhD) and would like to ask if you would be part of this project. I have already done a masters degree and have a number of research papers published, and have been responsible for supervising other students in their research work whilst a lecturer at Leeds Metropolitan University. My work is being supervised through the School of Management at the University of Surrey, and has been given a favourable ethical opinion by the University Ethics Committee.

The aim of this research is to explore how people see themselves at work through the objects which they have around them. I am interested in how much of themselves people bring to their identity at work and how this is expressed through their relationship to any objects which they use on a regular basis or feel particular attachment to. I am interested in this because how we relate to the objects which we have to use everyday or which we like to have in our work spaces, can affect how we work and how we see ourselves at work.

I am asking people firstly to take photographs of objects in their immediate working spaces which they consider meaningful. There is no limit to the number of photographs which may be taken and you may choose as many or as few as you like. They may include furniture, decorative items, things brought in from home, tools which you use, other people, written or drawn things and many more. I will leave the camera with you and you may take them over a day or two if you wish. At this point I will arrange with you a place or places for the interview(s) to be conducted which is acceptable to you, allows you privacy and security, and is suitable for recording.

Once the photographs have been taken, they will be printed immediately, on a printer I will bring with me, in order for us to be able to work with them easily and to complete the second half of the interview as detailed below. I will then ask you to talk about why you chose each object to photograph. I will make notes while we talk about this and also tape record the interview with your consent.

Once this part of the research is done, I will ask you to do a short exercise involving the photographs where I ask you to make comparisons between the objects and their meaning to you. This will also be taped and I will also take notes.

The two interviews will altogether take about 2 hours. This may be done in one session or in two, according to your availability, but if it requires two I will ask you to make them within a matter of days.

#### At no point on the tapes will I identify you by your name or organisation.

Once the interviews are conducted, I will have the tapes transcribed by someone who does not know you, and will send you the written transcription for your agreement that it is a true record.

If at any point during the data gathering process you want to stop the interview and/or withdraw from the project for any reason you have a right to do so and I will immediately stop. I will then return my notes and the photographs to you and erase the tape and digital photographs. I will use the data to write my research project and research papers. This may include articles published in academic journals and those presented at academic conferences. I will be happy to explain this further to you if required. **Again at no point will you be identified by name in anything I write, and any identifying faces or names in your photographs will be covered up.** . You have the right to see anything I write which includes data which you have given me. All data will be stored on a password protected computer and hard copy will be kept in a locked filing cabinet when not in use. If there is any identifying object which you would not want me to use in public, or would want obscured, please tell me.

My contact details should you need them are: Jan Betts Email:jan@spudling.demon.co.uk Tel: 07801071184

If you wish to speak to anyone for any reason about your participation in this research, please contact, in the first instance, my supervisor: Dr Sam Warren School of Management University of Surrey Guildford GU2 7XH Tel 01483 682116

#### **Consent form for participants**

I have read and understood the information sheet which Jan Betts has given me in relation to her research project 'What is the place of material objects in the creation and understanding of identity at work?'

I, the undersigned voluntarily agree to take part in this study on a date agreed by myself and the researcher.

I have been given a full explanation of the nature, purpose, location and likely duration of the study, and of what I will be expected to do.

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions on all aspects of the study and have understood the advice and information given as a result.

I understand that I can withdraw from the project at any time I wish without needing to justify my decision and without prejudice and all data relating to me will be either given back to me or erased.

I consent to take photographs and be interviewed according to that information sheet.

I consent to assign copyright of the photographs I take and the interview material to Jan Betts.

I understand that I will not be identified by my name or my organisation's name at any point in any of the data gathering or research presentation

I understand that the tapes will be transcribed by someone who is not known to me.

I understand that I will be given the written transcripts of the tapes and asked to agree that they are a correct record.

I understand that I have a right to see any research papers which relate to data I have provided.

I understand that all personal data relating to volunteers is held and processed in the strictest confidence, and in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). I agree that I will not seek to restrict the use of the results of the study on the understanding that my anonymity is preserved.

I confirm that I have read and understood the above and freely consent to participating in this study.

Signed (Participant) Date Signed (Researcher) Date

21 Adel Park Gardens Leeds LS16 8Bn

#### Dear

I am doing a research project at the University of Surrey (specifically a PhD) and would like to ask if you would be willing to support my research. Until August 2008 I was a lecturer at Leeds Metropolitan University and I have a number of research papers published. My current work is being supervised through the School of Management at the University of Surrey. I attach an information sheet about the project which I summarise briefly below.

The aim of my research is to explore how people see themselves at work through the objects which they have around them, either personal or supplied by the organization. I am interested in how people relate to the objects which they use on a regular basis or feel particular attachment to, for example their personal belongings such as mugs or pictures, and their work tools. I am interested in this because how we relate to the objects which we have to use everyday or which we like to have in our work spaces, can affect how well we work and how we see ourselves at work. One of my interests is in the impact of such objects in different kinds of work space, such as open plan offices, hot desking spaces, smaller shared rooms, or single space offices. Might people feel and work better if they have more personal effects around them?

The benefit of this project to your organization would be an increased understanding of how people view their work spaces and what they value in them as an aid to effective working.

The commitment which I would ask of you is about 2 hours of time for each employee. This time would be spent in participants taking photographs of the objects they relate to in their work spaces and then being interviewed by myself about them. All data will be held as confidential and in the use of any data, including photographs, all identifying labels for either the person or the organisation will be hidden.

I've had a number of very positive responses from both public and private sector organizations and would be very pleased if you would be prepared to support the project. My telephone contact details are below.

Yours sincerely

Jan Betts

Tel 0113 2676788 Mob 07801071184

#### **Consent form for managers**

I have read the information sheet from Jan Betts about her project 'What is the place of material objects in the creation and understanding of identity at work?' and I have also read the consent form for participants.

I give consent for ...... to be interviewed according to the information sheet within the working day/in a lunch hour/ before the working day but on work premises/after the working day but on work premises.

I understand that neither ..... nor the organisation will be identified by name either on the tape or on the written transcript

I reserve the right to ask that the time of the interviews be changed if ...... is needed for emergency working duties, for example as cover for a colleague off sick, and will allow the interview to be arranged for another day.

Signed (Manager) Date

Signed (Researcher) Date

#### **Interview Schedule**

#### Instruction for taking photographs:

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this project.

Now you have a camera which you can keep for a day or longer if you think it necessary. I will give you instructions about how to use it.

What I would like you to do is to photograph everything in your immediate working space which has meaning for you. You may decide for yourself what those things are and what you think of as your 'immediate working space'. I suggest you think about it as you go about your work for a while, before you take any, then choose what you want to photograph.

Please don't talk to any other colleagues about your choice before you take the photos, as they may influence you.

You may take as many or as few photos as you like; there is no set number. I will collect the camera either at the end of the day or as soon as convenient for you.

#### Interview one: looking at the photos

**Primary prompt question**: I'd like you to tell me what it is about this photo which has meaning for you.

**Further questions** will depend on the response, but will be designed to make sure the participant focuses on and clarifies the meaning which they wish to give to the photo.

#### Interview two: repertory grids

**Instructions**: I'm going to take all your photos, which all have meaning for you, and show them to you in random sets of three. I'm going to ask you to tell me how any of two of them are alike in their meaning for you and how they differ from the one which you see as being the odd one out. I'll go on presenting these threes, in different combinations, either until we have run out of combinations or until you are finding it hard to think of a new kind of difference.

### Participants in the project

Adam Alison Anabel Andrew Brian Carl	An estate worker in a university A property manager in a large financial firm An administrator in a large finance company A lawyer in a large national firm A dentist A university lecturer
Dan Darren	An IT support worker in a large financial organization
Darren David	Estate manager in a legal firm A senior teacher in a comprehensive school
David Diana	A director in a local authority
Geraldine	A university lecturer
Gerry	An IT manager in a local authority
Jana	A consultant in organizational development
Jane	A department head in a university
Jemima	A personnel manager in a voluntary sector institution
Jenny	A cleaner in a university
Joseph	An arts director
Joy	A cleaner in a university
Kate	A cleaner in a university
Lucy	A consultant in the assessment of third sector projects
Marie	A senior executive in a health organization
Mark	A consultant in project management
Mary	An administrative assistant in a university
Matthew	A finance officer in a local authority
Norma	A personnel assistant in an NHS rehabilitation unit
Paul	A porter in a university medical department
Rebecca	A Human Resource manager in a retail organization
Roger	A senior manager in a housing development company
Rupert	A lawyer in a large national firm
Sarah	A director in a Housing Company
Terrence	A logistics manager in a housing company
Tom	A PR manager in a large legal firm
Val	An accountant in a police force
Veronica	A university lecturer
Victoria	An administrator and PA in a Housing Company
Winifred	A University lecturer

#### An illustration of rep grid data using the examples from Chapter 8

To re–cap on the methodology: a set of elements, in this case the photographs which each participant took, is presented to the participant in random sets of three. They are asked to say in what way any two of those three are alike and different to the third. This is recorded on a grid and there are two examples below. This recording grid has across the top the numbered elements, which were the photographs taken by the participant and which I had numbered. As the elements are presented, the construct generated, about how two of them are alike, is written down in the left hand column and the contrast, that is, in what way the third one is different, is recorded in the right hand column. The two photographs which have been selected as 'alike' are marked with a cross in the grid and the other one with a nought. The elements are presented in threes until the same constructs are offered or all possible combinations have been recorded. Two rep grid tables are shown below. The elements are the photographs which were numbered, and then presented in triads in no particular order, just looking to see when the constructs had started to repeat.

#### Example 1

I attach the two sets of three photos as they were presented.



Photos number 1,8,12 were shown to the participant. She said (line one of the grid below) 1 and 12 were about written things and 8 about verbal things.



With photos 5, 11 and 12, she said (line two of the grid below) that the difference was about being what she does, or her responsibility, or someone's else's job to do. This is a nice illustration of how the rep grids address the complexity of the objects, since the same object, (photo 12) was labelled as 'about written things' in one presentation and 'not my responsibility' in another. What they mean depends on what they are

contrasted with, which is why the elements need to be presented until a pattern of constructs begins to emerge. In this case, many of her constructs (in the left and right hand columns below) were to do with levels of responsibility, showing this to be a key construct in her thinking about what these objects are signalling and in how she relates to them.

Elements	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Construct x													Construct o
Written	x							0				x	Verbal
Admin and filing	x		0									x	To do with others at work in my space
What I do					x						x	0	Not my responsibility
Printed or electronic					x						0	x	Written
My responsibility		x								x		0	Generic, everyone uses them
l look after these	x		0	x									Not my responsibility
My responsibility to access these					x			x		0			Everyone contributes to this
<i>My</i> <i>responsibility</i> <i>to keep these</i> <i>in order</i>	x	x									0		Everyone responsible for these.
Product							0				x	x	To do with people
Someone's responsibility to write			x			0				x			Financial data

For my second example I again attach the photos for the first and second triads.



In this first triad (line one of the grid below) the contrast is between the public face (2 and 3) and the real planner, warts and all (8).



In the second triad, (line two) the distinction is between me as someone with training qualifications (14 and 7) and me as an individual (1).

Elements	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
Construct x															Construct
															0
Public face		x	x					0							Real planner.
															Warts and all
Me as an	0						x							x	Training,
individual															qualifications
Cute junk,					x			0		x					Outcome
personal															driven,
value															purposeful,
															got to do
Longer											x	0		x	momentary
period of															
use															
Just there,											0	x		x	Guilt,
work stuff															negative
Weakwilled						x	0				x				Not mine,
indulgent															not to do
															with me
															personally
Social						x	0				x				No
activity															connection
															with others
Public, work		x						0	x						Private,
stuff															more cryptic,
															reflective

Replaceable,			0					x		x	Gifted,
from work											stolen, found
Replaceable,				x			x		0		Hard to find and replace, personal
Facing outwards		x			0	x					Facing in to me, compulsions

In this grid, looking at the left and right hand columns, there is no overarching theme as there was above, although public/personal divide is one which recurs and there are several which in that personal capacity speak of objects signaling being weak willed, guilty, compulsive, indulgent, and reflective, and objects as gifted, stolen and found, all private activities, and very emotive words.

These grids show how the constructs emerged although I took much fuller notes of what was said and as noted in the methodology, the rep grid exercises were recorded and transcribed with the interviews.

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