The Neglected Paraphernalia of Practice? Objects and artefacts in Social Work identity, practice and research.

Abstract: Artefacts, objects and paraphernalia and their relationship to social work practice and identity have attracted little attention in social work despite their ubiquity in all aspects of our lives. This article introduces some theoretical perspectives on the qualities of artefacts and the nature of relationships between the material and social worlds; and considers the ways in which artefacts have been understood in social work research to date. It concludes by suggesting that noticing when and how social workers engage with artefacts may contribute to the development of our understanding of social work's relationship with the non-human world, and offer new insights into aspects of social work identity and practice.

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Introduction

Artefacts and objects have received little attention in social work, in part because social work as a discipline does not have specific paraphernalia of practice, as is the case in some other professions. But as inhabitants of the material world, we all engage with physical objects on a daily basis. This article addresses the place of artefacts in social work, through a review of recent research literature in this area. It explores some ideas about the qualities of artefacts, and considers some of the social work research that has acknowledged and addressed their significance. It suggests that paying more attention to artefacts may encourage us to consider our relationship with the material world and bring another dimension to our understanding of social work professional identity and practice.

Practising in a Material World

Some time ago, I wrote an article looking at the significance of dress in social work (Scholar 2013). I began by acknowledging that readers might feel that looking at the attitudes and practices of social workers in relation to dress was a frivolous and shallow preoccupation. However, it was something that I had heard colleagues talk about throughout my career in practice, and an issue that had sometimes arisen in discussions with practice educators in relation to their assessment of social work students. It seemed to me that dress might be more significant than we imagined. The findings of that exploratory study suggested a relationship between dress and professional

identity, and that dressing practices not only reflected decisions influenced by individuals' understanding of their professional roles and relationships, but could enable, constrain or otherwise affect those relationships and other aspects of social work practice.

Writing that piece prompted curiosity about the place of other material 'things' in social work, and about how objects, artefacts and paraphernalia might define and reflect professional identity and affect practice. Just as was the case with dress, I have had conversations with social workers and with social work students about negotiating, using, noticing, understanding and working with the material world - environments (e.g. offices, homes, prisons), equipment (e.g. computers, mobile phones, cars) and objects (e.g. bags, toys, photographs). This has included, for example, discussions about changes to 'traditional' office based working; the challenges of home visiting; and debates about the use of new technologies in practice.

The material turn

The significance of the material aspects of practice has been attracting increasing interest, particularly in the last ten to fifteen years, in various professional disciplines including organisation studies (Borgerson and Rehn, 2003), science and technology (Latour, 2000), marketing and consumer behaviour (Miller, 2012), and professional learning (Fenwick, 2012). Described as 'material culture', 'materiality' and more recently 'sociomateriality', a term coined by the organisational theorist Wanda Orlikowski (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008), theoretical explanations of the significance, role and nature of material entities are complex and contentious, arising from different theoretical roots and traditions (Fenwick, 2012:69; Reckwitz, 2002). Common to these approaches though is a move away from seeing human actors as the main players on the stage, with the components of the material world (the environment, natural objects and man-made artefacts) as a kind of supporting cast, to a recognition that humans and non-humans together produce the world as it exists and as we experience it (Latour, 2005; Schatzki, 2002; Fenwick, 2012).

Social work too has produced research that considers the physical and material context within which its practice takes place. Recent work has explored issues which are current in the UK context, such as Jeyasingham's research (2014) on hot-desking (i.e. when desks or work stations are not permanently allocated to individual workers but are shared resources) and agile working (i.e. involving 'time and place flexibility' - see The Agile Organisation 2010); the ways in which

space and environment affect child protection practice (Leigh, 2015); and the impact of technology (White, Hall and Peckover, 2009). Research by Ferguson (2008, 2010, 2011, 2014), looking at the practice of children's social work, has included attention to physical and material influences on practice, including bodily experiences, the home visit and most recently (2015) a conference paper on blue denim jeans, which suggested that social workers wore jeans not just for practical reasons, but in order to feel comfortable emotionally as well as physically, and to embody an 'ethic of equality'. There exists too work on the body in social work (Cameron and McDermott, 2007; McCormick, 2010); and a developing literature on social work's relationship with and responsibilities to the physical environment (Fogel, Bardull and Weber, 2015, Dominelli, 2012; Zapf, 2009). Although the primary focus of the work referred to here is on other aspects of materiality, references to the role of objects and artefacts can be found in much of it.

There is work to be done to bring together these and other examples of existing research on social work's intersections with and understanding of the non-human world, and to identify areas for further exploration, in order, as Bennett puts it, to 'chasten [our] fantasies of human mastery' (2010:122) and to give proper attention to the ways in which 'nonhumans make their mark' (2010:34) in social work as elsewhere. In this article however, my focus is specifically on the attention that has been paid to objects and artefacts in social work.

Objects, artefacts and paraphernalia in professional practices
Some cognate professions have particular objects and artefacts associated with them – for example, if one was asked to identify objects associated with nurses, doctors, lawyers or psychiatrists a list of artefacts readily come to mind e.g. uniforms, thermometers, syringes, stethoscopes, white coats, wigs, gowns, gavels, red tape, couches, straitjackets. Many of these could be described as 'tools of the trade', pieces of equipment essential for the practice of the profession (Connor, 2013:2), while others are anachronistic, serving no obvious practical purpose, but representing a profession to its practitioners and to the outside world (Rice, 2010). Objects and artefacts linked to social work are not so obvious. Before I had even considered writing this article, in an impromptu and totally unscientific Twitter experiment, I asked social work colleagues to suggest what items might be found in a 'social work museum' - these had to be physical artefacts of some kind, not ideas or theories. Books (containing ideas and theories!), diaries, pens, and computers were among the suggestions, but otherwise participants struggled to identify objects that were central to the identity and practice of social work.

This is not to suggest that objects do not play a part in social work. For much of the time though they are present in the background, unnoticed and only occasionally making their presence felt. Examples from my own practice include occasions when usually benign or useful objects become threatening, such as a home visit to a distressed and angry young person when I felt totally distracted by the pair of sewing scissors sitting on the coffee table; or present obstacles, as when one has to ask a parent to turn off the television without alienating them; or can be used to help make connections, for example, offering cigarettes to clients during prison visits. However, I have found little direct reference to objects and artefacts in social work in textbooks or practice guides used in the UK. There is material that considers how artefacts in the visual arts can be used in social work practice and education (e.g. photographs of refugees and asylum seekers, explored by Phillips and Bellinger 2011; and the work of Moxley, Feen-Calligan and Washington 2012). There are texts on communication with children that include suggestions about how to use toys, books and other objects in work with children (Lefevre, 2013; Tait and Wosu, 2013) and the notion of the 'transitional object' (Winnicott, 1953) has been influential in psycho-therapeutic approaches to social work with children and families. Some of the work by Ferguson referred to above makes reference to the way in which 'things' can influence interactions in practice (2011:62); and to the ways in which social workers may choose to use bedrooms when visiting children in their homes, in part so that they can interpret and make use of children's 'personal things', such as toys, games, books, pictures etc., in understanding their worlds, and in developing relationships with them. (2014:4). A recent example considering the relevance of objects to the practice of social work is to be found in Houston's guide on social work supervision (2015). This presents a model for reflective supervision, which addresses the impact of 'five key domains of experience on social life' (2015:8). Under the domain of culture, Houston makes passing reference to 'material culture', which he explains as 'the range of artifacts [sic] which give our life meaning' (2015:17). In suggestions for exploring its significance he concentrates on what he calls 'symbolic culture' - the 'concepts' which constitute social life, with a focus on communication through language and other signs, and on values, but is not explicit about the part played by objects and artefacts in this (2015:18).

Can attention to the 'things' encountered in our day-to-day work add anything to our understanding of practice or our professional role and identity as social workers? This article examines the treatment of artefacts in the social work literature as a contribution to exploring the relevance of ideas about materiality for social work as a professional discipline. The term

'artefact' commonly refers to physical objects made or shaped by human hand, such as tools, ornaments or works of art, although it can include any product of human activity, i.e. non-physical creations such as language and contracts (Vilnai-Yavetz and Rafaeli, 2006), or methods and assessment tools (White, Hall and Peckover 2009: Hoybye Mortensen, 2014:2). However, in this paper, the focus is on artefacts as physical objects encountered by social workers - the paraphernalia of social work practice and identity.

Artefacts and Materiality

Theories about the nature of artefacts and 'material culture' originated in the work of archaeologists and anthropologists, who excavated, collected, described and displayed categories of objects and artefacts, often in ways that have been criticised for 'implicitly communicating the superiority of western culture' (Woodward, 2007:18). Although the study of material objects was a central focus of the activity of both disciplines, they were initially considered in metaphorical if not literal glass cases, isolated from the contexts in which they were created, used, exchanged, revered, feared or worshipped. Dissatisfaction with this approach developed during the late 20th century, when according to Hicks (2010: 29), practitioners of the disciplines became increasingly occupied with exploring the differences between the material and the cultural, and understanding the relationships between them. In his introductory chapter to *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture,* Dan Hicks (2010) charts the history and development of thinking about material culture, and excavates the development of ideas about material culture in archaeology and anthropology from the 1960s onwards, considering their contribution to and application in other academic disciplines. This has proved to be a challenging and contentious theoretical debate, as one reviewer of Hick's chapter put it:

> ….the history of material culture studies [is portrayed] as an elaborate academic game in which renowned contestants play off their positions vis-a-vis one another. The reader, offered a spectator's seat in the back row, is afforded the dubious privilege of listening in on the contest, as works like structuralism, semiotics, practice theory and agency get batted around. (Ingold, cited in Hicks (2010:79).

The work of the anthropologist Daniel Miller has made an important contribution to the understanding of the nature and role of artefacts, taking an interdisciplinary approach to exploring what he has called 'material culture' and more recently, 'materiality' (Miller, 2010:2). Over a long and influential academic career Miller has been concerned with our relationship to things, and has written about shopping (2001), cars (2001) and clothing, including the sari (Banerjee and Miller,

2003) and denim jeans (Miller and Woodward, 2011). Miller's theoretical position is that it is a mistake to distinguish between human 'subjects' who create and act upon material 'objects', arguing that the production of artefacts and objects is integral to the production of persons (Miller, 2005). In Miller's view, '...things guide us towards the appropriate way to behave' (Miller, 2010:155). His work explores our relationships with mundane, day-to-day objects, in a way that helps to ground his theoretical observations in practical and everyday experiences.

The Qualities of Artefacts

Many objects and artefacts are created to meet particular needs: some highly specialised and technical such as medical instruments or engineering tools; some more mundane, such as buckets or chairs. Such 'useful' objects have been said to possess 'affordances' (Gibson, 1986, in Connor, 2012:2); that is their form invites us to approach or address them in a particular way, for example, a scarf suggests that it should be wound around the neck. Things are a certain way because of the purposes they serve and the needs that they fulfil, and if we think about their qualities, it is often in terms of what they do and how well they do them. However, considering objects and artefacts more carefully reveals other qualities that may not be so familiar.

Invisibility - hidden in plain sight

A surprising characteristic of 'things' identified by Miller and others is the way in which, for much of the time, we hardly notice they are there. This is reflected in the absence of theoretical attention paid to objects, at least until relatively recently, particularly in the area of sociology and social theory (Dant, 2006:291). Latour, talking about the place of objects in sociology, puts this succinctly: 'Much like sex during the Victorian period, objects are nowhere to be said and everywhere to be felt' (Latour, 2005:73). In our everyday lives, in most circumstances, objects and artefacts blend into the background – they are 'highly visible but overlooked' (Rafaeli and Pratt, 2006:1). Miller talks about this as the 'humility' of things (Miller, 1987:86). When we do notice them, it turns out that even mundane objects exercise a surprising influence within our lives and upon our experience of the world. In saying this, Miller explains that he is not talking about individual objects, but the whole system of things, which teach us 'gently to learn how to act appropriately', playing their part in what Pierre Bourdieu called our habitus, the underlying unconscious order that determines the particular characteristics of a specific culture (Bourdieu, 1984 cited in Miller, 2013:53). Artefacts and objects contribute quietly to the environments into which individuals are born and to which they become habituated. It is only in certain circumstances that specific objects are noticed, for example, when they impact in some way on

something that we want to do or achieve; in Heidegger's terms, objects are 'ready-to-hand' when functioning as we expect; but when they let us down we take notice, they become 'present-at-hand', and only then do we begin to theorise their existence (Heidegger, 1962, cited in Ehn, 1988).

Agency - things making a difference

Although for much of the time then, the work of objects may be unnoticed, and their contribution unacknowledged, when they fail us or get in our way, not only do we notice them, but they can appear to us to have minds of their own: they can be 'obdurate little beasts' according to Miller, (2010:94). This relates to a second question about the nature of things that has been explored in the theoretical literature. Do objects act, and if so, how?   Arguments about the nature of agency are dense and sometimes impenetrable, presenting alternative interpretations that draw on different philosophical traditions (Hicks, 2010; Fenwick, 2012). Considerations of agency have in the past been confined to humans, and have involved fundamental philosophical debates about the nature of free will (Strawson, 2011), and sociological explorations of the structural constraints limiting the opportunities and freedoms that we have to make choices for ourselves (Schatzki, 2002:190). Agency has therefore been associated with intention. More recently, the notion of agency being limited to human actors has been challenged, as for example in Latour's Actor-Network theory (ANT) which proposes that objects and technologies are participants in the creation of the social world (Latour, 2005), and Schatzki's 'site' or 'social' ontology' (2002; 2010), which suggests that social ~~phenomona~~phenomena can *only* exist within orders of 'people, artifacts, organisms and things' (Schatzki, 2002:123). This is not to suggest that objects have independent purpose and intention, but that long-held ideas about separate worlds of the 'social' and the 'material' are misguided. At a practical level, these ideas bring into focus the ways in which physical artefacts, objects and natural phenomena can make their presence felt. In Schatzki's terms, agency in this context refers to 'doing' and 'employs responsibility, not intentionality' (Schatzki, 2002:191). According to Bennett (2010:21), while agency depends on the interaction of many forces, the 'smallest or simplest body or bit may… express a vital impetus'. The central argument is that things do make a difference. They act, if by 'acting' we mean 'modifying a state of affairs' in the way that kettles 'boil' water (Latour, 2005:71), or, in an example relevant to social work, in the way stair-gates 'keep' children from falling downstairs.

Symbolism – meanings and magic

Whilst Miller, Schatzki and others suggest that the material world cannot be separated from practice and other existential experiences, this does not prevent individual objects and artefacts from taking on symbolic, religious or magical significance; neither does 'the use of artefact as

symbol … in any way detract from its significance as tool, material worked, or environment experienced' (Miller, 1987:105). However, for Miller in particular the emphasis on a semiotic analysis of 'things', while having made a significant contribution to the study of material culture, did not go far enough, and in fact became "as much a 'limitation rather as an asset' (Miller, 2010:12), in that the focus on the symbolic qualities of objects can mean that other aspects of the relationship between objects and social life can be overlooked. Bennett makes a similar point. Considering a group of miscellaneous items caught in a storm drain, she argues that 'things' are not reducible to the contexts in which humans set them; they are 'never entirely exhausted by their semiotics' (Bennett, 2010:5). Nonetheless, it is probably true that many readers of this paper, if they think about the significance of objects at all, will be most likely to do so in respect of their symbolic power as markers of status, wealth or group membership, including membership of a professional group such as social work; and as expressions of personal or professional identity ((Dittmar, 2008 :36). This might include items such as clothing associated with a particular characteristic or role (Entwistle, 2000; Scholar, 2013; Wilson, 2003), or objects or equipment, such as the stethoscope (Rice, 2010). Objects can also take on 'magical' properties, becoming invested with powers and associations beyond their ordinary uses, such as buttons, keys and pins for example, whose affordances are richer and more open, so that these objects 'do more and mean more than they might be supposed to' (Connor, 2012:3).

Considering Artefacts in the Social Work literature

 While objects and artefacts do make an appearance in social work practice based and research literature as discussed above, in writing this article I was interested in the extent to which their role had been directly considered in research, and how this had been theorised. This selective review of the literature focuses on material published since 2000 (in English), which directly addresses objects, artefacts, things, equipment or paraphernalia and their significance for the professional practice or identity of social work. To be included, papers had to have their primary focus on physical artefacts, as opposed to non-physical human creations or other aspects of the material world, such as non-human organisms, and environmental entities such as landscapes or weather (Schatzki, 2002:181).

Several strategies were used to search for material for this article - a 'traditional' search of the peer reviewed research literature using electronic databases and adopting a systematic approach (as opposed to a full systematic review); hand-searching of individual journals considered relevant to the topic (*The British Journal of Social Work; Social Work Education: the international journal;*

Qualitative Social Work and *The Journal of Material Culture*); 'snowballing' from reference lists, and a digital search using Google Scholar, reportedly now 'the most inclusive of the world's bibliometric systems'(Writing for Research, 8.12.2014).

Results and Limitations

The literature search revealed little material that specifically and directly addresses artefacts or objects and social work practice and/or identity, and identified only five peer reviewed papers (excluding Scholar, 2013, referred to above), and one article published in an online social work professional journal, (Orton, n.d.). Two of the peer-reviewed papers were concerned with artefacts as social work archive or heritage material (Chambon, Johnstone and Winckler, 2011; Daly and Ballantyne, 2009); two reported findings relating to artefacts (assessment tools, and cars) which were by-products of the authors' research activities and not the original focus of their work (Hoybye-Mortensen, 2014 and Smith, 2003), and the fifth set out to examine the role of a specific artefact - the car - in social work practice with children (Ferguson, 2010). The article by Orton describes how student social workers were required to take photographs of artefacts that represented their perspectives and experiences during field work, and the contribution that this made to their learning. This was included as the focus is on the artefacts that form the subjects of the photographs rather than because of the photographs themselves.

Given the limited number of results, the search was extended to scope material referring to artefacts and practice and/or identity in other health and social care professions. This yielded a further eight relevant articles relating to occupational therapy (Hocking, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c), medicine and health care (Johan, Berlin and Carlstrom, 2010; Pink, Morgan and Dainty, 2014; Rice, 2010; Topo, and Iltanen-Täähkävuori, 2010; Twigg, 2010) and physiotherapy (Nicholls, 2015). These papers are not discussed in detail here, but are referred to where relevant in the later discussion section of the article.

Findings

This section considers the way in which artefacts and objects have been treated in the Social Work literature and the theoretical approaches used to understand and account for their role and significance. The papers discussed do not share overarching themes, but do have artefacts as their central focus.

The papers by Daly and Ballantyne, (2009) and Chambon et al, (2011) both deal with the preservation, presentation and interpretation of historical artefacts relevant to the heritage and

development of social work. In both cases the material concerned relates to organisations working with children, and is dominated by texts and documents. Daly and Ballantyne describe the rationale and approach to 'repurposing' exhibits from a specific exhibition – *The Golden Bridge* - presented by the former Heatherbank Museum of Social Work at Glasgow Caledonian University. This was based on the migration of children from Scotland to Canada between 1869 and 1939, and especially the 7000 children sent to Canada by William Quarrier of the Orphan Homes of Scotland (Daly and Ballantyne, 2009:46). As well as containing text-based displays, the original exhibition included some artefacts, including copies of annual reports known as 'Narratives of Facts', original photographs and a replica of a Victorian girl migrant's trunk containing clothing and other items. The paper describes how the physical exhibition has been 'virtualised', with added multimedia materials to enhance the original displays, and how additional archival material from the Quarriers archive was digitally preserved and incorporated into the resource.[1]   The focus of the paper is a description of the materials, a discussion of the approach taken, and an account of the technical and legal challenges that had to be negotiated in order to complete the work, drawing upon literature and research on museums, libraries and digitisation. The artefacts are important because of their content and subject matter rather than as objects in their own right. The content is concerned with issues central to social work's role, that is, child welfare policy and practice, and attitudes to the family. The authors argue the value of its digital preservation for the study of social work history, which contributes to the profession's sense of identity. (Daly and Ballantyne, 2009:45).

Chambon et al (2011) are more concerned with exploring theoretical approaches to the interpretation of artefacts, rather than the preservation or presentation of archival material. Their work looks at the archives of the Toronto West End ~~Creche~~Crèche, Canada, a philanthropic organisation providing child care support to families with working mothers, which celebrated its centenary in 2009. Instead of treating the documentary records that make up the greater part of the collection

as 'disembodied words' (2011:626), which they suggest is the usual approach of social work researchers, the authors claim that they take account of the materiality of the annual reports, minutes, working documents, newspaper clippings and photographs that are included in the archive. Their article focuses on three aspects of the archive - presidential statements written by each of the two co-founders of the charity; photographs reproduced in the annual reports of 1930-1938; and the records, contained in a large ledger, of the 'Happy Helpers' club for school age children, a document which incorporates material handwritten by the children themselves. Their

discussion of the differences between the presidential statements pays no attention to physical attributes of the documents, but focuses on the two 'voices' in the texts. However, the treatment of the photographs and ledger does suggest that the authors have approached these as physical artefacts. They offer a detailed visual analysis of photographs included in the annual reports, some of which are reproduced in the article, and provide descriptions of the contents of the images and an interpretative discussion of them as ' "densely coded cultural objects" ' (Wells, 1977, cited in Chambon et al, 2011:632). Similarly, in their discussion of the ledger, they consider the document's physical characteristics, commenting on '...the ink stain, the smudge, the erasure and rewriting...' in handwritten entries by the children (Chambon et al, 2011:639). Even so, their theoretical context for the analysis of the archive is principally that of textual analysis - whether the 'texts' under consideration consist of written or visual material - and the reports, photographs and ledger are treated as cultural artefacts, offering opportunities for discourse analysis and revealing 'messages about the values, practices and orientation of the organisation' (2011:641), of value and relevance to an understanding of the history of social work.

Hoybye-Mortensen's (2014) article also deals with documents as artefacts, but addresses their significance and use as material objects. The documents concerned are manifestations of assessment and decision-making tools used in social casework, 'expressed' in paper forms and questionnaires, or as laminated documents illustrating assessment models such as the Welfare Triangle, used in Denmark in the assessment of children's needs (2014:8). The author describes this paper as 'explorative', as the findings emerged from data collected for another purpose - a doctoral study ~~anlysing~~analysing the 'impact of decision-making tools on caseworkers' room for discretion in decision-making' in the Danish public sector (Hoybye-Mortensen, 2014:4). The study participants were family counsellors working in child protection (all qualified social workers), job counsellors (qualified social workers in half of the municipalities studied) and homecare counsellors (either nurses or physiotherapists). In analysis of group interviews with a total of 30 participants, she noticed examples of workers using these artefacts in their interactions with clients. Her analysis suggested that workers used them in direct work with service users, when they felt that their actions and decisions were being questioned. They showed, shared or referred to these artefacts to illustrate and explain points (particularly the case with the Welfare Triangle), to justify asking sensitive questions and to support their explanations about decisions on entitlement to and allocation of services (2014:7). Drawing on the organisational literature, Høybye Mortensen proposes that the use of artefacts amongst her study participants may be

associated with demonstrating professional legitimacy, given the increased regulation of public welfare organisations and amongst some workers, perceived or real mistrust of them by their managers and by the public. The artefacts, she suggests, represented 'authorised' models of practice which enjoy greater respect than the independent decision-making of professionals, and also had symbolic functions relating to the organisations employing the workers involved. The author also considers the argument that the introduction of artefacts into organisations can have an effect on practice, and can explain why certain ways of doing things may be changed (Miettinen and Virkkunen, 2005, cited in Høybye Mortensen, 2014:3).

Smith (2003) found that cars emerged as an 'unexpected category' in the analysis of interviews with 60 social care workers and 12 counsellors about their work-based experiences of fear. He explains that he wrote this article to discuss how findings emerging from research can influence the direction of a study, as well as to explore the implications of the findings themselves. His substantive work was not concerned with ideas about materiality and he takes a psycho-dynamic approach to the analysis and interpretation of the significance of the car. Although some of the 31 references to cars in the interviews were 'relatively innocuous', other accounts suggested that cars have the capacity to touch on something 'far deeper and more resonant' (Smith, 2010:155). In one instance, a worker described how a dangerous service user used her vehicle to communicate a threat to the worker, by following her and parking close behind her so that the worker could not manoeuvre out of the parking space. Smith says this participant's account suggested something 'profoundly frightening', presenting a threat to her 'very identity' (p.156). Other participants' contributions included descriptions of their cars as places of safety, providing the means of escape from threatening situations, interpreted by Smith as examples of the car functioning either as the 'secure base' (Bowlby, 1988, cited in Smith, 2010:157) or as a 'transitional object' enabling them not only to return to the safety of their office base, but he suggests, to their 'pre-traumatised' selves (p.158).

Cars, and their use in the practice of social work with children and families, are the focus of Ferguson's 2010 article. Here, he addresses the car as a space for therapeutic work with children, using mobility studies (Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2007; cited in Ferguson, 2010) as a theoretical framework within which to explore the significance of the car as artefact or object. He takes a historical approach to examining the development and impact of transport in social work practice, and looks at the interplay between modes of transport and the timeliness, geographical reach,

flexibility and type of service that social workers have been able to provide to children. Drawing on social workers' detailed accounts of time spent with children in their cars from case records of the 1950s-1970s, Ferguson provides examples of the work that can take place during car journeys. He argues that transporting children between foster placements or to contact visits, provides opportunities for social workers to employ skills in relationship building, tuning in to children's emotional experiences and supporting them on literal and figurative journeys 'laden with deep consequences, endings, new beginnings and change' (Ferguson, 2010:134). The car is revealed as a 'powerful object' (Ferguson, 2010: 135), but he points out that despite its ubiquity in social work practice, its role has been neglected in recent years, partly as a consequence of changing expectations about recording practices. He argues that the significance of the car, both in terms of a space for practice and as material artefact should be afforded closer attention.

Orton (n.d.) reports on one of six themes that emerged from a research study in South Africa, using 'non-traditional' methods to explore students' perceptions of fieldwork practice. She gave Polaroid cameras to eight female students and asked them to take photographs of artefacts encountered during their placements, and to complete a 'reflection worksheet' for each one, giving a title to the photograph, describing the artefact and reflecting on its significance and contribution to learning. This was followed by a 'photo-elicitation' interview with the researcher, to provide more depth and detail. Students produced photographs from three 'domains': inside the agency, outside the agency, and in the 'personal domain'. One of six themes identified in the analysis of the data was 'Inspiration, coping and hope' and this is described in the article. Examples of the artefacts chosen included a statuette of Jesus Christ holding a child (captioned 'Hope' by the student), and from one student's personal domain, a bottle of beer (captioned 'Hypocrite'). This short article, written for a social work general readership rather than for peer review, is light on theory, but Orton suggests that the everyday objects that formed the subject matter of the photographs carried symbolic and metaphorical meanings for the students, and that the project gave them a new way of expressing the challenges encountered in placement.

A place for artefacts in social work practice, research and theory?
Although there is currently only a small body of literature touching directly upon artefacts in social work, the qualities of 'things' identified in other research and introduced earlier are discernible in the research reviewed here.

For Smith and Høybye Mortensen, specific artefacts 'emerged' from the background of research focussing on other issues, surprising the writers and making a big enough impact for them to go on to explore their significance in more detail, and to uncover previously unexplored ways in which social workers, social work practice and artefacts are connected. These examples of the invisibility or 'humility' of things (Miller, 1987) are mirrored within research in other professional disciplines, even those that make use of specific or specialised tools and equipment in their practice. For example, Nicholls (2012:449) in a Foucauldian discussion of physiotherapists' treatment beds notes that they are so familiar that practitioners rarely question why they are designed as they are, and 'no one writes about them in the literature'. Pink, Morgan and Dainty (2014), in an ethnographic study exploring what they call the 'safe hand' (trained, sterile, caring) among community nurses and physiotherapists, discuss the items carried by practitioners in their bags and cars, and identify hand gel and gloves as examples of 'taken for granted...or...quiet...materialities that enable practitioners and patients to stay safe in health care' (p423).

Having noticed these 'quiet' artefacts, the social work researchers represented in this article have emphasised different aspects of their significance, with the symbolic qualities of artefacts receiving the most attention. All the studies reviewed here make some mention of objects and artefacts as symbols, even where other qualities and theoretical perspectives are considered. The capacity of artefacts to carry meaning is evident: the psychological symbolism of cars for Smith's participants, the symbolic freight carried by the artefacts selected by Orton's social work students, and the semiotic analysis of photographic material by Chambon et al. Høybye Mortensen suggests that artefacts can become 'symbols of the organisation' in which they are used (p.9). In my own work on dress (Scholar, 2013), social workers were explicit in talking about how they used clothing to demonstrate social work values, suggesting that dress plays a symbolic role in constructing and maintaining professional identity. This emphasis on symbolism is common in research on artefacts in other disciplines; for example in Rice's (2010) consideration of the stethoscope as a symbol of medical identity and Fiol's and O'Connor's (2006) examination of the symbolic power and functions of artefacts that have represented the US medical profession over the last hundred or so years - the black bag, the white coat and more recently the EMR (electronic medical record) (p14).

Within the social work and related literature, there is an acknowledgement that through their symbolic properties, artefacts can sometimes influence actions and relationships. Berlin and

Carlstrom (2010) in a study looking at the effects of artefacts on a trauma team in a Swedish hospital, note that having been assigned symbolic values, 'Artefacts control actions' (p.416). These ideas resonate with the notion of the 'agency' of objects, although the basis of agency is not necessarily or only attributable to the symbolic power of artefacts, and as already suggested, the theoretical debates about the nature and basis of agency of non-human actors are complex. However, among the social work papers, those of Ferguson (2010) and Hoybye-Mortensen (2014) come close to suggesting that artefacts have an inherent capacity to 'act', sometimes beyond or irrespective of the symbolic meanings that we ascribe to them. They do so in influencing the manner in which practice is undertaken, and by making certain things possible and others difficult or impossible. Finding ways in which to explore, represent and theorise this and other qualities of artefacts discussed here, which many may feel they have experienced but perhaps have not articulated, is work that has yet to be done in social work.

This review of the social work literature, suggests that closer attention to our relationship with the objects we use and encounter in our work may have the potential to offer another dimension to our understanding of aspects of social work identity and practice. While artefacts are but one aspect of the material world, we might benefit by taking more notice of them, making them visible, paying attention to our relationship with them, and tracing the way 'things themselves participate to produce and sustain practices' (Fenwick, p 81). Rinkenin et al (2015:871), discussing their use of (solicited) diary data to research the part things play in everyday life, point out that '…one method of catching sight of the complexity of object relations is to review ordinary people's accounts of an ordinary day'; and within social work, the everyday practices of recording and reflection, particularly reflective writing, might offer valuable research tools and resources, as some of the work considered here suggests. As Fenwick (2014) puts it, to fail to take account of the role of the material, in professional practice and beyond, omits important aspects of the complexity of the world and our experiences within it, and "tends to privilege human beings, as though our intentions, thoughts and desires are separate from the materiality that makes us".

Conclusion

The literature reviewed here addressing artefacts and social work suggests then that despite the fact that we all encounter artefacts throughout all aspects of our lives, inside and outside work, as professionals, and as service users, the implications of this and its relationship with theories about the material and non-human world more generally has been a neglected area in social work

theory, and has attracted little explicit attention in the analysis and development of practice. This is partly because social work as a discipline does not make use of many discipline-specific artefacts. From time to time social workers may find themselves challenged by objects encountered in practice, or engaging with the symbolic qualities of artefacts, both for themselves and for service users, but ideas concerning the significance of objects have not been widely considered in social work. Artefacts need to be noticed before they can be theorised, but doing so may provide social work with a new perspective on how workers, service users, technologies, artefacts and other aspects of the non-human world connect, and what this might mean for professional knowledge, practice and identity.

1.The virtual exhibition can be viewed at http://content.iriss.org.uk/goldenbridge/

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