

Object Medleys

Interpretive Possibilities for Educational Research

Daisy Pillay, Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan
and Inbanathan Naicker (Eds.)



Object Medleys

NEW RESEARCH – NEW VOICES

Volume 8

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Object Medleys

Interpretive Possibilities for Educational Research

Edited by

Daisy Pillay, Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan and Inbanathan Naicker

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SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-94-6351-192-6 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-94-6351-193-3 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-94-6351-194-0 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,
P.O. Box 21858,
3001 AW Rotterdam,
The Netherlands
<https://www.sensepublishers.com/>

All chapters in this book have undergone peer review.

Printed on acid-free paper

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As editors of *Object Medleys: Interpretive Possibilities for Educational Research*, we are appreciative of the contributions of many people. We are grateful to the chapter authors for their inventive research and their willingness to work together to open up understandings of connections made with, between, and through objects. We would like to thank the specialist peer reviewers who gave readily of their time and expertise. We also acknowledge Kenneth Mølberg Jørgensen and Tommaso Milani for their reflections on the book. We thank Moira Richards for her comprehensive and skilful editorial support. And we are grateful to Michel Lokhorst and his team from Sense Publishers for their assistance. Special recognition goes to Claudia Mitchell and Kate Pahl for sharing their insights and a wealth of knowledge at the 3-day international research symposium held in Durban, South Africa in February 2016: *“Not Just an Object”: Making Meaning of and from Everyday Objects in Educational Research*. The symposium and this book are based on research supported by the National Research Foundation¹ of South Africa, specifically by a UK-South Africa Newton Fund Researcher Links Grant, Grant Number 98067. Lastly, we are particularly appreciative of Chris de Beer for the striking and evocative cover image showing *izimbadada*, traditional Zulu sandals made by Mnengwa Dlamini from recycled whitewall car tyres. As Chris explained in his contribution to this book:

Izimbadada are synonymous with the dances of the Zulu migrant workers who brought the sturdy sandals, made from recycled motor car tyres, to the city during Apartheid. Maskanda and Mbaqanga musicians popularised *izimbadada*, the name being onomatopoeic for the sound the rubber soles make when walking and performing vigorous, athletic, traditional Zulu dances.

For us, this image evokes the plurality and possibilities of working with objects in educational research.

NOTE

¹ Any opinion, finding and conclusion, or recommendation expressed in this material is that of the authors and the National Research Foundation does not accept any liability in this regard.

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AND INBANATHAN NAICKER

1. COMPOSING OBJECT MEDLEYS

OBJECT MEDLEYS: THE PRELUDE

Object Medleys: Interpretive Possibilities for Educational Research follows on from a 3-day international research symposium held in Durban, South Africa in February 2016, organised by Daisy Pillay, Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan, and Inbanathan Naicker. The symposium, “*Not Just an Object*”: *Making Meaning of and from Everyday Objects in Educational Research*, was inspired by Claudia Mitchell’s tantalising question: “But how do we get at the meanings of these everyday (and not so everyday) objects, and how might their meanings enrich our research?” (2011, p. 36). The focus of the symposium was on working with objects (both tangible and symbolic) to produce personally, professionally, and socially useful understandings to enrich educational research. The symposium included a poster exhibition where participants presented visual images associated with objects that were connected to their own research. The symposium and exhibition brought together 34 local and international researchers (including many early career academics and postgraduate students) from multiple knowledge domains.

Keynote speakers at the event were two distinguished researchers with considerable expertise in working with objects in educational inquiry: Claudia Mitchell (McGill University, Canada) and Kate Pahl (University of Sheffield, United Kingdom). Each guest speaker gave a public seminar as a vital part of the symposium. Claudia Mitchell’s seminar spoke to the topic of “Object as Subject: Productive Entanglements in the Study of the Everyday in Educational Research.” Building on work across a variety of disciplines that looks at objects, things, and even “stuff,” and drawing on case studies where objects have been the subject of social inquiry, her talk sought to contribute to deepening an understanding of their significance to several approaches to participatory research, including autoethnographic studies in higher education. Kate Pahl’s seminar looked at “Dialogic Objects: Material Knowledge as a Challenge to Educational Practice,” where she considered the potential objects have for unsettling academic boundaries and ways of knowing by exploring the qualities of objects as they travel across diasporic contexts—to come alive, speaking in multiple languages and materialising new practices.

Each guest speaker also conducted and facilitated an interactive research workshop to offer symposium participants hands-on experience of working with objects for meaning making in educational research. Claudia Mitchell’s workshop centred on

“Things That Talk: Meaning Making through Autoethnographic Engagement with Objects and Things.” Kate Pahl’s workshop focused on “Object Pedagogies as Practice: Hearing Voices, Listening to Stories.”

Overall, the “*Not Just an Object*” symposium strengthened and extended local and international collaboration and networking in the emerging area of object inquiry in educational research. As Claudia Mitchell highlights in her chapter in this book, the study of objects is well established in fields such as archaeology, art history, communications, fine arts, museum studies, and sociology—but is still developing in education.

Multidisciplinary, interactive, and playful engagement with objects during the 3-day symposium offered participants diverse languages of, with, and about objects and visual representations of those objects. Together, the symposium and exhibition became “an ensemble which [portrayed] messages, of possibility and plurality” (Nordstrom, 2013, p. 252) and pushed the boundaries of what counts as evidence for generating new and different knowledges and ways of knowing in educational research.

Following on from the symposium, Daisy, Kathleen, and Inbanathan invited participants to contribute written object pieces to a collective book proposal. This invitation was also extended to other researchers who had not attended the symposium but had become interested in object inquiry through their involvement as colleagues and postgraduate students of the guest speakers, Claudia Mitchell and Kate Pahl. The invitation contained the following guidelines (adapted from Samaras, 2011, pp. 105–106):

Choose one object that captures an aspect of *your educational research*.
Consider the *suggested* prompts for writing about your object:

- Explain why you chose this object.
- Share what the object represents or symbolises about your educational research.
- What is the time period of this object?
- How does culture play a role in relation to this object?
- Are there others involved with this object? What role do they play? What is their influence on your thinking? Do they see things the way you do?
- What metaphor would you choose to represent, symbolise, and reinforce the significance of this object to you?
- Express an emotion that this object brings forth for you. Describe where that emotion generates from, and might extend to, in your educational research. Be descriptive.

Kate Pahl and Claudia Mitchell were each asked to contribute a book chapter based on the public seminars they gave at the symposium. Devarakshanam Govinden, a renowned South African researcher with expertise in literature and literary theory, postcolonial studies, and feminism, was also invited to submit a chapter based on her work with objects.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

A medley can be understood as “a musical combination consisting of diverse parts” (Medley, n.d.). By combining wide-ranging object pieces and perspectives from 37 authors, *Object Medleys* continues and extends the creative process of dialogue and exchange that was set in motion at the “*Not Just an Object*” symposium. The book is organised into two parts. “Part One: Object Memoirs,” offers retrospective insights from established scholars, Claudia Mitchell, Kate Pahl, and Devarakshanam Govinden, bringing together their distinct yet complementary theoretical and empirical vantage points and practices of working with objects.

The “Object Memoirs” section begins with a chapter by Claudia Mitchell, whose pioneering body of work on objects in social research (Mitchell, 2011; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002; Mitchell & Weber, 1999) was the catalyst for the “*Not Just an Object*” symposium. In her chapter, “Object as Subject: Productive Entanglements with Everyday Objects in Educational Research,” Mitchell explores how engaging with commonplace objects can enhance educational research. In particular, Mitchell makes a strong argument for the social responsibility of educational researchers to take seriously the use of objects and object inquiry in seeking to make a qualitative difference to schools, children, and teachers. Kate Pahl’s chapter, “Dialogic Objects: Material Knowledge as a Challenge to Educational Practice,” focuses on the the potential of objects to make education a socially just space where people enter on their own terms, with their stories and thoughts kept alive within the material potentialities of the object. In the chapter, she engages with an approach to object pedagogies that offers a challenge to hierarchical educational practices that can deny young people voice and agency. Through an emergent approach to objects and the literacies within, she advocates for a resituating of what matters so that people’s own entanglements come to the fore in the making of knowledge together. To close the “Object Memoirs” section, Devarakshanam Govinden’s chapter, “Not Just an Object: Exploring Epistemological Vantages in Postcolonial Thinking,” focuses on the different ways everyday objects become entangled in the performance of diasporic identity. The chapter engages with object inquiry by drawing on a postcolonial, diasporic lens. Govinden shows how domestic objects can have important implications for critical questioning of what constitutes history and culture, self and selfhood.

“Part Two: Object Beginnings,” communicates new voices, new insights, and new possibilities for working with objects in educational research. Each chapter includes several pieces written by new scholars in the field of object inquiry in South Africa, Canada, and the United Kingdom. These researchers, many of whom are early career academics or postgraduate students, have engaged in object inquiry from a variety of perspectives and using diverse approaches. Their individual object pieces were woven together through dialogue with the book editors, Daisy Pillay, Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan, and Inbanathan Naicker, who coauthored with the new

scholars in the spirit of peer mentoring and reciprocal learning. Each chapter offers a distinctive, multifaceted, and polyvocal (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015) exploration of interrelationships between objects, lived educational experiences, and wider social and cultural concerns.

The first chapter in this section, “The Vanda, the Rose, and the Baobab: Inspirational Display Objects as Fertile Sites for Opening up Narratives of Teacher Researcher Professional Identities,” is authored by 11 Southern African teacher researchers in higher education: Theresa Chisanga, Gladys Ashu, Pamela Mavume, Mandisa N. Dhlula-Moruri, Mukund Khattri-Chhetry, Sookdhev Rajkaran, Lazarus Mulenga, Nkosinathi Sotshangane, Nareen Gonsalves, Peter du Toit, and Daisy Pillay. The chapter focuses on objects as spaces for developing new perspectives and priorities about what teacher researchers in higher education can be, and can do differently. The chapter reveals how objects can provide important clues about how teacher researchers in higher education negotiate their daily lives and choices as moments of possibility and hope for self-transformation.

The next chapter, “A Stove, a Flask, and a Photograph: Learning Together through Object Inquiry in Self-Study Research,” builds on and adds to a rich history of object inquiry in self-study research by teacher educators. The chapter brings together the voices of three Southern African teacher educators, Mandisa N. Dhlula-Moruri, Makie Kortjass, Thokozani Ndalení, and their doctoral research supervisor, Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan. Through object monologues and dialogues, this chapter presents individual and shared learning about how everyday objects can become more meaningful for educational researchers and educators. The chapter further illustrates how collective object inquiry can connect educators and educational researchers who often work alone.

To follow, is the chapter by Southern African educational leadership researchers, Sagie Naicker, Sibonelo Blose, Freedom Chiororo, Rashida Khan, and Inbanathan Naicker: “From a Crutch to a Bus: Learning about Educational Leadership Research and Practice through Referencing and Mapping of Objects.” In this chapter, the authors engage with Riggins’ (1994) concepts of referencing and mapping of objects in educational leadership research and practice. The chapter shows how knowing in educational leadership research and practice can be enhanced through object inquiry.

“A Tin Bath, a Cooking Pot, and a Pencil Holder: Object–Self Dialogue in Educational Research” by Lisa J. Starr, Zanib Rasool, Haleh Raissadat, and Daisy Pillay, combines perspectives and reflections from four researchers working in universities in Canada, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. The chapter demonstrates how dialogue with different domestic objects can open up spaces for advancing fresh insights into social constructions of the researcher self, and for openness to alternate ways of thinking and knowing as instruments of social change.

The subsequent chapter, “Spontaneous Shrines and the Studio Desk: Learning from Working with Objects through an Arts-Informed, Practice-Led Lens,” is the result of a transcontinental exchange of ideas between Shauna Rak in Canada, Adelheid Camilla von Maltitz in South Africa, and Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan. Both Shauna and Adelheid are artists, researchers, and art teachers (artist–researcher–teachers). The chapter gives a storied, visually illustrated account of Shauna and Adelheid’s theoretical and practical experimentation in relation to objects, while also showing the meaningful purpose that working with objects can bring to art, teaching, and research practice. This chapter offers insights for both artist and nonartist researchers and teachers into working with objects with arts-informed, innovative, and pedagogical consideration.

“A Microscope, a Stone, a Cap, and a Lampshade: Objects as Conduits for Recognising Teaching Practices as Teacher Leadership in Higher Education,” is authored by five Southern African higher education teachers, Tamirirofa Chirikure, Angela James, Nomkhosi Nzimande, Asheena Singh-Pillay, and Inbanathan Naicker. The chapter focuses on how objects can serve as tools for thinking and reflection about teaching practices as teacher leadership. Drawing on the concept of object practice, the chapter shows how, through object inquiry, teaching practices can be understood as teacher leadership in higher education.

Fauzanah Fauzan El Mohammady, Wendy Rawlinson, and Daisy Pillay, in their chapter, “Mount Merapi and the Trencadis Bench: Negotiating Personal–Professional Identities through Working with Photographs as Treasured Objects,” engage in an exchange of ideas about photographs as treasured objects. The chapter reveals potential openings for new ways of imaging and negotiating nonlinear and multiple personal–professional identities. Introspective thinking prompted by working with photographs as treasured objects unfurls possibilities for making visible the muted voices and the multiple stories of self that can enable a deeper understanding of the struggle between “who am I” and “how I want to be known by others” as a creative, dynamic, and relational tension.

“Shoes, Suitcases, Stones: Creative Engagement with Ourselves as Artist–Researcher–Teachers through Object Inquiry” brings together self-reflexive research by four South African artists who are also university educators: Tamar Meskin, Tanya van der Walt, Lee Scott, and Chris de Beer. The chapter is presented as a performative, collaborative object inquiry, in which the authors perform distinct roles. The four artists act as the lead players, while Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan offers poetic commentary at key moments. Using dramaturgy as an analytic tool, the chapter shows how objects can become points of departure and vessels for creative engagement with self in educational research within the domain of arts and design.

The final chapter, “A Religious Object Medley: Objects as Signifiers of the Values, Beliefs and Practices of Servant Leaders” by Theresa Chisanga and Inbanathan Naicker, draws on servant leadership as a theoretical lens to explore

objects as signifiers of the values, beliefs, and practices of servant leaders. Theresa's medley of five object pieces, juxtaposed against the attributes of servant leaders, reveals the evocative nature of objects in teasing out values, beliefs, and practices of servant leaders.

THE BOOK PEER REVIEW PROCESS

Essential to the development of this book was ensuring that quality standards for scholarly publication were observed. Every chapter of the book presents original research, and was peer reviewed prior to publication. The chapters were individually reviewed by independent peer reviewers who contributed prepublication advice and expertise. Drawing on the peer response guidelines that were used in Pithouse, Mitchell, and Moletsane (2009), the prompts for the peer review feedback were as follows:

- What do you find most interesting or significant about this draft? Why?
- Do you have any questions about this draft? For example, are there any points that are unclear to you or that you think could be explained more fully? Why?
- Do you have any particular suggestions for how the authors could enhance their discussion of some of the following issues, as relevant to the particular focus and purpose of the chapter:
 - the positioning of the chapter in terms of professional, disciplinary, sociocultural, national, and so forth, contexts;
 - the positioning of the chapter in relation to theoretical vantage points;
 - ethical concerns in engaging in object inquiry;
 - methodological challenges and complexities in engaging in object inquiry;
 - diverse approaches to object inquiry, for example, memory work, arts-based methods, poetic inquiry, narrative, dialogue as method, and so forth;
 - what counts as data and analysis in object inquiry;
 - the potential of objects in generating interpretative portrayals of lived educational experience;
 - what difference the object inquiry might make—the so-what? question.

The peer review comments were sent to the book editors, each of whom also reviewed the chapters and added editorial remarks for the purposes of additional guidance or clarification. The chapters were then sent back to the authors for them to revise and rework as per the peer review recommendations. To provide support and assistance, the editors were involved in ongoing communication with the authors as they revised their contributions.

OBJECT MEDLEYS: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THIS MAKE?

How do we get at the meanings of everyday (and not so everyday) objects and how might their meanings add new significance to our research if, as Shanks (1998)

explained, “the [object] is itself a multiplicity, its identity is multiple” (p. 24)? This unique edited book brings together 37 researchers from diverse contexts and multiple knowledge fields to a shared space in which subjects and objects, living and non-living, entangle as medleys to open up understandings of connections made with, between, and through objects.

The book is distinctive within scholarship on object inquiry in that a large part of the research presented has been done in relation to Southern African educational contexts. This research is complemented by contributions from scholars based in Canada and the United Kingdom who have brought their object memoirs and pieces into dialogue with Southern African voices for the purposes of mutual exchange, learning, and growth.

Object Medleys illuminates the promise of objects in generating sociocultural and autobiographical interpretative portrayals of lived educational experience. Moreover, the original research depicted in each chapter expands scholarly conversations about what counts as data and analysis in educational research to highlight the interpretive possibilities of objects, situated within pressing societal questions (Mitchell, 2011). Educational researchers who mediate meanings of and from objects “are not apart from the trajectories of objects, subjects, culture, society, and discourse” (Nordstrom, 2013, p. 253). The exemplars in this book illustrate how working consciously with objects locates researchers within and in response to those trajectories as they try to make sense of them. The object memoirs and pieces interwoven in *Object Medleys* offer diverse, innovative modes and lenses for representing, interpreting, and theorising object studies. Taken as a whole, *Object Medleys* shows how researching education through studying the meanings we attribute to, or make from, objects defies binaries and linearities—to reveal how lived educational experience is open to new and different reworkings and re-visionings, with critical implications for social agency and social change.

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PART ONE
OBJECT MEMOIRS

CLAUDIA MITCHELL

2. OBJECT AS SUBJECT

Productive Entanglements with Everyday Objects in Educational Research

We live in the middle of things.

(Turtle, 2007, p. 6)

Entanglement: a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with.

(Nuttall, 2009, p. 1)

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I explore how entanglements with objects of the everyday can serve a productive function in educational research. The writings of Sherry Turkle and Sarah Nuttall serve as useful anchors for this exploration. Objects have interested me across a number of research studies, ranging from work with teachers and the artefacts of school as memory prompts (Mitchell & Weber, 1999), to work on children's popular culture and the place of very young children's expert status in studying material culture as can be seen in girls' knowledge of Barbie or GI Joe (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002). Indeed, it was this work with children that spurred me to go further with the idea of objects and things and to consider the idea of *not just an object* (Mitchell, 2011), particularly when I also considered the profound linkages between memory and objects. But I also began to see this formulation of not just an object as key to accessing in a very economical way what is so often the urgency of social research. I recall the words of a 15-year-old girl in a township school in rural South Africa who made the assertion during a workshop on HIV and AIDS and gender-based violence: "Ma'am, you can get AIDS from lipstick" (Mitchell & Smith, 2001). Her assertion was a stark reminder of the entanglements of the everyday that carry an urgency to them. Clearly, the girl who made this statement was not talking about the transmission of HIV through lipstick at a literal level but she was signalling the idea of entanglements. How do we study transactional sex without an understanding of the meanings of objects (in this case, the four Cs: cash, cars, cell phones, and clothing) as currency?

Daniel Miller (2010, p. 116) made a similar observation about "matter of life and death" in his book, *Stuff*. Citing the work of Layne, who studied the significance of things and objects in relation to late abortions and stillbirths, Miller wrote:

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Layne showed how parents in the US dealing with late foetal loss and stillbirth insist that at Christmas time a gift is given to the person who should have been, or from the person who would have been. She tells of the trouble parents take to dispose of the layette, the things bought for the envisaged child, as part of the mourning for the death of the child. The central fear of these parents is that other people will think that what they have lost was not a human being, a child, but a mere thing. The paradox is that it is primarily through material things that they find the most effective means for insisting upon the humanity of their child, that they were not just not just a thing. (p. 136)

To draw attention to these intricate and profound entanglements may seem obvious, but the idea of trying to study the significance of these entanglements in the lives of the groups with whom we work offers a promising approach to deepening an understanding of everyday realities.

OBJECTS ALL AROUND

The topic of object as subject is one that can be difficult to write about. At the very moment that I sit down to write about objects, I become ever more aware of the objects around me—on the kitchen table and even the table itself: the half full glass, the slight clutter of objects in my reach (a few CDs, a stray clothes peg, several books about objects and then of course the very thing that makes it possible for me to write, my Lenovo laptop). Thoughts of objects and things can be dizzying. It is impossible to avoid the material world. Even if we participate in some sort of cloud (operating system) much of the time (online, LinkedIn, or connected), our lives are still full things and objects that make the virtual possible—cell phones, chargers, adaptors, laptops, iPads, docking stations, desktops, flash drives—all objects and things in and of themselves. There is now an emerging body of object work that is about technology as objects. Some of it is linked very powerfully to memory work, as Lukas Labacher (2016) wrote in an account of his first cell phone. Along the same lines, David Buckingham and Rebekah Willett (2009) examined the various devices that young people have used over the years to produce videos: Super 8 cameras, camcorders, and different versions of cell phones. Sadie Bening, an artist and filmmaker in the United States, wrote of the Fisher Price PXL camera she was given as teenager, and of her outrage at being given a toy, and of her resistance, which turned that camera into a medium unto itself (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002).

I am also reminded of the pervasiveness of these objects of the virtual world even in contexts where electricity and the Internet are limited. When I conducted a photovoice workshop with a group of women in Korogocho, an informal settlement in Nairobi, on the topic of women's economic empowerment and access to childcare (Mitchell, DeMartini, & Muthuri, 2016), several of the participants produced photographs of dumps and waste sites that contained, along with all the needles and

sharp objects that are so dangerous to their children who might wander in if there is not adequate supervision, images of cast-off hard drives and computer screens (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1. Digital dump

The presence of these material objects representing the virtual world is a reminder of the notion of travelling objects and global mobility, but also misplaced objects and the impact of Global North trash on the environment. More than anything, however, these objects are a reminder of Sherry Turkle's notion of things presented at the beginning of this chapter, and that they can have different meanings depending on the situation of the beholder and the context of the object. Ironically, perhaps, trash is a focus of study in the artistic world. As Julian Stallabrass (2009) observed of images of trash:

Context is everything in the construction of critical meanings. Irving Penn made refined black and white platinum prints of pieces of trash which he had picked up and then shot in the studio against pristine white backgrounds. Torn from the company of the environment and their fellow objects, they lost the largest part of their significance. These isolated fragments were treated like new commodities by this successful commercial photographer, becoming renewed as abstractions, and most of all revealed themselves as discrete objects and as prints for purchase. (p. 422)

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The images of trash produced by the Korogocho women offer a different angle on trash. However, in both the work Stallabrass wrote about and in their work it is clear that our relationships to things and objects are typically not simple and straightforward. For the group of women who produced the image of the computer hard drives that had ended up so close to where their children play, the objects are dangerous ones, but also entangled with access to child care, having few economic resources, and perhaps being victimised by global commodification. For another person an image of computer hard drive may evoke a nostalgic memory of entanglement, as we see in Lindsay's (2003) analysis of the TRS-80 computer from Radio Shack from the 1980s.

OBJECT STUDIES

To date the study of objects has been primarily outside educational research with the vast body of work that looks at objects, things, artefacts, material culture, and "stuff" as Daniel Miller (2010) wrote, cutting across such disciplines as art history, museum studies, fine arts, sociology, archaeology, and communications. As scholars from such diverse backgrounds as media and technology (Turtle, 2007), science (Daston, 2004), archaeology (Hodder, 2012), museum studies (Wood & Latham, 2014), and anthropology (Brown, 1998, 2004; Miller, 1998), and the interdisciplinary area of object studies (Candlin & Guins, 2009) have highlighted, the analysis of material objects offers the possibility of theorising abstract concepts in a grounded manner and, in so doing, expands the possibilities of what counts as evidence in research. In addition, objects are meant to be seen—and photographed—as Marina Warner (2004) argued in her introduction to *Things: A Spectrum of Photography, 1850–2001*. "Photographers", she wrote,

have a special relation to the mystery of thingness, for a photograph so often reaches out to possess and stay the moment when the thing was there, in the here-and-now that was happening when I was there or you were with a camera or another means of making an image. (p. 10)

The study of objects, as I explored in *Doing Visual Research* (Mitchell, 2011), lands nicely into the area of participatory visual research in that the objects and things as material culture in the lives of participants conveniently carry meaning. The work of Stephen Riggins (1994) on the sociosemiotics of things seems particularly helpful in combining the idea of the visual (seeing the object through photography), something that is complementary to work in the area of photovoice and participatory video, with analyses that highlight the connotative along with the denotative. While the work of object study remains open-ended within Riggins' tools and approaches, there is nonetheless a framework that suggests a type of entanglement. One set of questions focuses on the denotative: What is the object? Where is it typically found? Who uses it? A second set of questions about the connotative allows for more personal interpretation. Interestingly, the idea of brief personal essays about a particular object or thing has evolved into a genre of its own as can be seen in a range of writings such