

The Role of Objects in Shaping Practices:

An investigation into the Actor-Network Theory as a means to reveal the differences in human relationships with their childhood toys.

A dissertation submitted to the University of Wales Trinity Saint David
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Engaged Anthropology.

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This dissertation would not have occurred if it had not been for my introduction to anthropology through Howard Taylor, without whose patience and encouragement I would not have even envisaged commencing this journey. You believed in me, thank you.

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To my family; thank you for going without access to a kitchen table for the duration of this research. I can assure you it does still exist under the pile of paperwork.

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Abstract

The research for this dissertation was conducted at a national heritage site, Sudbury Hall Museum of Childhood, where the participants were exposed to a variety of toys that represented both their own and alternative identities. Its purpose is to critically reflect on the Actor-Network Theory in considering the wider picture of identity that may emerge when an individual is presented with toys that have a connection to themselves and their memories. By employing the Actor-Network Theory, and tracing networks of associations between human and non-human actors, this research aims to open up the differences in human relationships with their toys, thereby creating better access to how objects shape various practices.

The methods of informal conversation and participant observation were made at the site, and data were compiled through qualitative thematic analysis. From the conversations elicited, a number of overarching themes emerged. The themes revealed how people use toys to negate their way through life, to discover themselves, their relationships, careers, identity, loss and individuality. People use them to mix and share, and to pinpoint their own childhood. The research undertaken also revealed the capacity for toys to enable people to reflect on this journey. While making the observations and holding the conversations, the object, the toy, was clearly involved. The toys broke the museum setting down and frequently evoked a reflective response.

The expected outcome of this research was that the findings would be in agreement with theories on social construction, whereby people construct their understandings of the world through interacting in a social group and reflecting on each other's actions. The hypothesis considered the employment of the Actor-Network Theory as a means to provide a wider perspective on the agency of objects in this process. The data analysis supported this hypothesis, as by tracing networks of associations, to include both human and non-human actors, it revealed insights into the agency of both the actors and also of the objects themselves.

Chapter 1 - Introduction.

The research for this dissertation took place at Sudbury Hall Museum of Childhood during the summer of 2019. The museum is situated in the heart of the English Midlands countryside alongside a late seventeenth century manor house. This childhood orientated heritage site offers to prompt us to think about our cultural history and nostalgic memories, (National Trust 2019). As one of only twenty three museums, libraries and archives to benefit from funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the museum's current aim is to increase its representation of the diversity of childhood from traditional family units to the more challenging and complex aspects that many children have to face. There is a strong emphasis on community engagement, with regular school visits and collaborative work. The resident Betty Cadbury Collection is extensive in content and variety, and was donated to Sudbury due to the strong desire of the site to promote 'childhood', as oppose to simply exhibiting children's artefacts. The museum also offers a significant level of hands-on experience, with numerous opportunities to sample examples of children's work and play over the years.

Figure 1. Exterior View of Sudbury Hall Museum of Childhood.



Scope of dissertation

Toys are widely seen as universal (Lancy 2017), and therefore have the potential as potent symbols in the representation of shared social conventions. Toys offer a child the opportunity to practice cultural actions, but also, I suggest, to reflect upon the cultural environment around them and their own place within it. This dissertation aimed to explore the relationship between individuals and their toys, with a focus on the ability of the Actor-Network Theory, ANT, to reveal wider perspectives on the process of social construction through toys. The research

methodology of informal conversation was chosen, as the open format of this style of methodology fits well with the inductive form of ANT.

This introductory chapter outlines the three elements to this dissertation:

1. Toys in social construction.
2. Assessing the merits of the Actor-network Theory.
3. Conversation as a research method

Toys in social construction

The initial expectations of this dissertation were that the primary research conversations would demonstrate evidence of social construction through toys and play. There have been a number of studies that exist that consider toys in the process of socialisation (Ball 1967, Sutton-Smith 1986, Sweet 2016). These studies offer to agree or disagree with Mead's suggestion that the self is not initially there at birth, that it is something that develops during the processes of social experience and activity (Mead 1934). Anthropological theory posits that in order to survive in society, humans depend on shared social conventions and the implicit rules of behaviour that are acquired through this process (Strauss 1973, Eriksen 2010). The originality of this dissertation is that it aims to expand on these existing points of view by looking at human relationships with their toys, and thereby explore the possibility of further perspectives by employing The Actor-Network Theory, ANT.

Many of the conversations held with my interlocutors revealed evidence of social construction, such as toys that lead to particular careers, or reproduction of social class through the type of toys they received. However, the conversations that occurred also illustrated a multiplicity of agency exhibited by very independent childhood actors. The wide variety of play opportunities that a doll for example offered, demonstrated that while the doll may have influence on the content of play, its effect is not determinant. The insights revealed through this dissertation demonstrate how people use toys to negate their way through life, to discover themselves, their relationships, careers, identity, loss and individuality. Toys enable them to reflect on this journey, to create something of themselves, to leave something of themselves. People use them to mix and share, and to pinpoint their own childhood.

Assessing the merits of Actor Network Theory

As described by Claude Levi-Strauss, miniature objects, such as toys, are "not just projections or passive homologues of the object, they constitute a real experiment with it" (Levi-Strauss, 1966:24). Here Levi-Strauss is relating to the structuralist theory that objects have a role in

social construction. However, following the line of argument that objects are not passive, the aim of this dissertation is to further explore this structuralist view and offer wider explanations into the extent or variation of individuals' relationships with their toys using the Actor-Network Theory, ANT. According to Latour, ANT is about observing a network or association of things and people, where objects are made of a multiple of layers, thereby adding multiplicity to these associations (Latour 2005). My proposed method was to employ ANT in my fieldwork in an attempt to observe the ways in which people find value in objects, thereby illuminating the meanings that people attribute to things (Law, 2002:2).

Taking inspiration from Miller (2008) and Mol (2002), I hoped to see that if by tracing associations rather than connections, we can show that society does not solely determine the actions of the local actors, but also that there is agency of the objects themselves. The originality of this study was to provide access to toys within the museum to aid this process. Hands on opportunities to play were freely available in every gallery, and this opportunity was eagerly taken up by close to all of the visitors. Adults were seemingly grateful for the chance to re-experience their childhood through the toys presented to them. This resulted in an equally relished opportunity to express their thoughts on how they enacted their identity as children through their toys. The toys themselves also showed many ways in which they had agency, for example, the ability to transport the participants back to childhood, and the facilitating of 'another voice' to express themselves during the conversations. The museum offered a way to give the toys centre stage, allowing the illumination of the meanings visitors attributed them.

Conversation as a research method.

The methods for this research paper were participant observation and informal conversation. ANT, by its very nature of allowing objects to guide the flow, and requires informal or at least unstructured interviewing. Informal interviewing relies on the researcher conducting conversations at the field-site and making notes about them. Conversation was used to build rapport and, crucially to myself, "uncover new topics that might have been overlooked" (Barnard 2006: 211). In *The Comfort of Things*, Miller engaged with the personal collections of peoples' possessions in their own homes to "try to listen and learn from the materials that are on exhibition, to engage with the minutiae of everyday life to understand humanity as a whole" (Miller 2008: 7). Despite the potential difficulties with conversation as a research method, such as it being time consuming and complex, it proved to be a positive form of research methodology. I found that participants engaged more deeply in more intimate discussion when they had chosen the topic of conversation, and their comments were more widespread and insightful than any interview question I could have possibly come up with. The

participants were using their frame of reference. I would never have thought to have included topics that emerged such as transcending cultural divides, or the powerful need for toys to live beyond the owners death, if I had created interview questions around social construction.

Summary of introduction

This dissertation begins by examining the theories behind social construction, considering variations in prior studies which aimed to address toys as part of this process, both in the west and in other cultures.

Subsequently, the merits of ANT and the research methodology of conversation are assessed. They are evaluated as research styles, to establish their potential to reveal wider perspectives on the agency of toys.

The conversations that occurred during the research built on the positive findings of ANT (Latour 2005, Law 2002, Miller 2009). This dissertation reveals that relationships with toys allow humans to step back in time, create an individualist identity, reflect on their own position, negotiate boundaries, cross cultural divides and create alliances. Alliances help humans to succeed, the process of ordering and reordering is never complete, and my findings support the argument that toys perpetuate into adulthood to continue access to ordering and reordering of oneself (Rivera, Cox 2016; 8).

And critically, it transpired through the conversations and observations, that rather than simply vessels for social construction, toys are objects with multiplicity and agency.

Chapter two - Literature review

This chapter will look at aspects of literature previously available on social construction, and go on to examine studies particularly related to toys.

It will subsequently discuss prior thoughts on the theory behind, and the undertaking of the Actor-Network Theory.

2.1 Social construction

The discourse around toys is often through their role in social construction (Ball 1967, Sutton-Smith 1986, Sweet 2016).

Acknowledging the common thought that reality is social constructed, Scheler argues that human knowledge is given in a society as a *priori* to the individual experience, providing the latter with its order of meaning (Berger, Luckmann; 2005). Primary socialisation requires the child's significant others to mediate the society to the child, with the goal of producing a member of society that holds with the mutual identification within that society (ibid). Mannheim (1936: 89). takes this further, noting that the potential for the use of the theory of society to be used as a science, stating 'no human thought is immune to the ideologizing in fluences of its social context'. While I agree with this argument, it does not fully take into account the agency of the participants of this dissertation, nor that of the toys they encountered as children.

Constructionism grew with Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (2005) work, *The Social Construction of Reality*. They argue that all basic knowledge and sense of reality is derived from social interactions. When people interact, their common knowledge of reality becomes reinforced. Lock and Strong (2010) agree, suggesting that meanings are developed in coordination with others rather than separately within each individual.

Berger and Luckman (2005) also acknowledge the concept of the individual apprehending themselves as being both inside and outside the society. If we apply this theory to objects, such as toys, could it be possible aid the understanding process? The findings of this dissertation pose the question: what if toys aren't only to practice the social, but also to practice rules that can be changed during play?

The Gergens (2004) discuss the foundations of social construction in terms of everything we consider real is socially constructed. Nothing is real unless people agree that it is. Whenever people define what reality is, they are always speaking of cultural tradition. They also argue however that social construction does not embrace universal truths, rather construction

embraces radical pluralism (ibid). I would like to expand on the current arguments surrounding social construction, suggesting that there is not only radical pluralism at a cultural level.

Where the sort of pluralism discussed in previous studies is about different realities between social frameworks, I have aimed to take it a stage further with internal, individual pluralism, suggesting that where paradigms of knowledge make sense of problems within a community, paradigms of toys make sense of an internal problem of reality (ibid). Also, Gergen and Gergen (2004: 166) state that “internalisation is never complete, so maintenance and transformations occur, with competing definitions”. I agree that each new form of representation offers new possibilities for constructing the world, aided by toys as a resource for interpretive reproduction. I would also like to evaluate their notion that “objects can be more informative than words” (ibid: 78).

2.2 Toys in Social Construction

There Have been a number of studies looking at toys and children’s play. The majority have been around structuralist theories, relating to areas such as gender and economy.

Foucault (1988), posits that most education is the result of social conditioning and our own identity is an internalisation of social norms. Bathiche and Derevensky (1995) suggest that cultural differences and child-rearing methods are likely to influence the toys and games with which children play. In addition, there is also extensive literature discussing childhood, and how gender, ideologies and the social boundaries of childhood are constructed, reproduced and challenged (Gagen 2000, McNamee 1998).

However, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002: 195) examine the problem of ascribing a single meaning to a doll, or the need to look for “socially prescribed ways as well as unconventional ways”, suggesting that the same doll can be used in different roles because it is through play that dolls achieve their meaning. And Brougère (2003: 100) writes that children see toys as an object to be interpreted as part of the game, and not judged for its own sake, “to project itself in an adult destiny through valorising representations from the child's point of view”.

Sutton-Smith (1997) states that play should not be defined only in terms of the restricted modern western values, and indeed, by looking away from the western perspective, Rossie’s study (2013) highlights some marked differences in how toys are employed in primary socialisation in Africa. In a similar vein to myself, Rossie used a detailed descriptive approach with a qualitative perspective when analysing specific children’s play, along with the cultural context in which this took place. He observes that toys at a young age are part of primary socialisation in North Africa, although adult interaction with a child at play is fairly rare, and

there is less evidence of adults leading the play than in the west, making the children more creative. He posits that “working through problems themselves may be advantages in certain cultures” (ibid: 128).

Rossie also considers the toy as an actor. My findings are akin to those of Sutton-Smith (1986) where he describes the doll or soft toy as a substitute companion in relation to North American childhood. However, Rossie’s research (2013: 79) in the North African regions, suggests that the function of a doll is limited to the game, “When the play activity is interrupted or stopped, the doll becomes an object, a material item that can be left on the spot or thrown away”. Here he aligns with Sutton-Smith in the notion that dolls, or toy animals, do not hold the same role as they do for European and North American children. Rossie writes that there is as far as he knows no explanation, but he does offer two possible arguments for this. One is that the child is not defined as a separate socio-cultural entity, and there is a clear distinction between being an adult and being a child, at which point childhood behaviours are dropped. Secondly, he suggests that by “living in strongly community orientated spaces they are well socialised in local cultural norms and there is no requirement for adult interference” (ibid: 137). Sutton-Smith (1997: 155) states, “The more traditional the society, the more likely the toy is a simulacrum of an adult occupation (a miniature spear, a doll); the more modern the society, the more likely it is a negation of everyday realism”. I sense that I will need to gain a lot more detailed information on the role of individuality and creativity in children’s games and toys from non-western non-industrial societies to validate this statement, but I have to admit that, within the limits of my research, my findings endorse these hypotheses.

Ball’s study (1967) looks directly at the toys themselves, stating “as scaled down versions of the adult world, they become part of the child’s experientially perceived reality” (ibid: 447). However, he does note that the care and attention these toys receive demonstrates a clear pattern of ascribed personification. The result is a level of assigned identity not typically applied to inanimate objects (ibid). It can be suggested therefore, that the “imputed identity and imagined response” (ibid: 448) transforms the inanimate object into an actor. Ball offers to support the theory that toys facilitate the process by which children prepare for various social roles, by acting as practice models and by way of rehearsal, thereby echoing the Actor-Network Theory of objects holding relations together. He goes on to recognise that the agency effect of toys, particularly dolls and soft toys is worth investigating.

His chosen method of study was to study the type and subsequent target demographic for toys available through toy retailers’ catalogues. While managing to find interesting connections among social types and subtypes, I feel that this type of research played more to the Durkheimian model he was originally trying to invert. As for Ball’s original goal of furthering the understanding of toys as actors in their own right, this does not to me appear to be

answered, and suggests the need for a method of research extending beyond the retailer's catalogue, which was my aim of originality with the employment of the Actor-Network Theory.

2.3. Theory and employment of the Actor-Network Theory

Having assessed theories of social construction, and toys as a part of this process, this section of the literature review aims to evaluate the Actor-Network Theory as a research method, and how to go about applying this method to establish wider perspectives on the secret life of toys.

Prior to the development of the Actor-Network Theory Deleuze and Guattari (1987) posited that it is necessary to reject pre-traced destiny of social theories, thereby allowing the study of multiplicity of a reality. By going beyond the borders that are set by these theories, and tracing associations, it is possible to see the results of connections between entities. The essence of these entities is shaped and reshaped, providing the process by which the actants that are involved have agency. Deleuze and Guattari call the ordering of these entities an 'assemblage', and because they are 'relational' this implies there is autonomy of the actant (ibid). As a function of this, they suggest that objects influence us constantly, and translation within the process of social construction occurs by negotiation. They also posit that to investigate you need to hear the actants involved. By employing processes such as the Actor-Network Theory, it is thereby possible to reveal connections, and why orders hold in a particular way.

The Actor-Network Theory, ANT, is about observing this network, or association, of things and people. Law (2002: 2) states that "the utilisation of ANT in fieldwork is without theory". The idea is not to start with a theory, such as power or organisation, but to start with a clean slate. Law suggests that from this we can see how some interactions succeed in stabilising and reproducing themselves, thereby generating a power or organisation with which we are familiar. By observing or following the life cycles and trajectories of objects, we can discover how people are drawn together in a network of relatedness (ibid). Proponents of ANT, such as Law (2002) and Latour (2005), suggest that its main tenet is that it allows actors themselves to make their own theories and contexts, to relate to their own metaphysics and ontologies. My findings agree that this ultimately allows the actors to express themselves. Objects are made of a multiple of layers, the objects add the multiplicity, (in this case the museum toys), and through my research I discovered that the concerns of the participants were different to each other, as they were to myself as a researcher. They used toys to share, to mix culturally, to hold personal expression, to pinpoint their own existence, to create themselves. Within the society, not by the society.

ANT requires the researcher to 'describe only', (Latour 2005). Description alone is not however an easy thing to get right, it is not easy to "find the uniquely adequate account of a given situation. It is not a network drawn *by* the description; it is the network used to *make* the description" (ibid: 12). An important element of ANT is recognising the difference between the *sociology of the social* and the *sociology of associations* (ibid), which are outlined thus:

Figures such as Marx (1883) and Levi-Strauss (1973) have provided theories and frameworks that have been widely used in the understanding of how social structures such as economics and power affect human relations. The structuralist view suggests that society is a critical entity, where the actors need social relations, creating the extreme illusion. This supports Levi-Strauss' notion that miniature objects are not passive in this structuralist sense, and is in accordance with Latour's description of the *sociology of the social* (2005). This is the tracing of connections that offer a social explanation, such as the reinforcement, expression and maintenance of society through societal glues.

However, in accordance with this dissertation, the *sociology of associations* suggests that by tracing associations rather than connections, we can show that society doesn't determine the actions of the local actors.

In his ANT style ethnography, Appadurai (2011) observes the ways in which people find value in objects, illuminating the meanings that people attribute to things. Although discussing commodities, his use of ANT throws up some similar hypotheses to my own. His suggestion is that the meanings that people attribute to things derives from transactions and needs. Although the west understands objects as inert, Appadurai states the paths are dialectical. Kopytoff (1986) points out that commodities are culturally regulated, yet their interpretation is open to individual manipulation to some degree. I concur that the emotional connection and recollection that my participants discussed around their toys reflect both sides of this argument. Toys allowed the actors to express themselves, and this in turn allows reassembling of their truth. I wouldn't go as far as Latour (2005) in suggesting that social explanation has become counter-productive. However, I do agree that by aiming this study at reassembling the social; "while not ignoring the already accepted collective realm [...], you can find the associations" (ibid: 3).

By examining this autonomy, proponents of ANT suggest it is possible to demonstrate the functioning of an assemblage, rather than an outside force as a single unified actor.

The importance of conversations as a research method in ANT.

In Daniel Miller's work '*The Comfort of Things*' (2009), he posits that his observations reveal that the closer our relationships are with our objects, the closer our relationships are with

people. He also discusses the importance of conversations and their resultant interpretation in this process, stating “how people express themselves through their possessions and what this tells us about their lives”, (ibid: 2). Aware that even in their own surroundings participants can be shy and embarrassed by direct questions, he chose to use a different approach by directing conversations towards the objects in the household. According to Miller, these objects are outward expressions of the owner, allowing access to an alternative voice. He states that his hypothesis was that “each conversation would reveal the unexpected, and he found this to be the case”. (ibid: 4). He predicted that he would find the unpredictable, but he admits that he was surprised to find the extent of connection that his participants had with the comfort of things. This echoes the findings of this dissertation, which align with Miller in that by exploring social construction through toys, I sense there is a deeper, more personal connection with toys than just a reflection of an overarching culture. Interestingly, in his conversations with participants, he was happy to “share his personal theories, observations, ideas and experiences in the form of reciprocal conversation” (ibid: 148). This showed a genuine interest in the participants, and how the material was likely to be used, and this is the vein in which the research for this dissertation was conducted. Conversation as a research method is covered in greater depth in chapter four of this dissertation, under ‘fieldwork methodology’.

Criticisms of the Actor-Network Theory

On board with ANT as this dissertation aims to be, there are nevertheless potential problems with this method of research. For one, it is difficult to remain focused that the premise is to observe only. As a female I am culturally assessed as a seasoned observer and conversationalist, yet I am aware that my engagement may not have been fully neutral in its task, resulting in a certain level of interpretation. In addition, my very presence could potentially alter the format of any interactions, and that this may present a possible interference with the outcome of the observations.

Latour argues that it is the ability to see a network of actors as a multiplicity opens up new levels of engagement with our social networks. In effect, my original brief. However, this is where potential criticism aimed at Latour’s theory may occur. Unless this rhizomatic pathway is continued into other areas of the actors’ networks, is it possible to obtain the full picture? In this concern picked up by Law (1992), who suggests that as the researcher is unable to follow the actors everywhere there needs to be some sort of ordering or selection, and I acknowledge this as a potential dilemma. Latour (2005) attempts to answer this criticism by suggesting that a framework or conclusion is not necessary, rather a localised description is sufficient to

provide useful information. The Actor-Network Theory has also prompted criticism as to whether it actually constitutes a theory at all. Amsterdamska (1990) raised concerns that a technique that is purely descriptive is unable to offer any explanation of the social processes. This structuralist view was in line with Whittle and Spicer (2008), who criticise the lack of consideration of external forces such as power, economics, gender or other hegemonic effects. Another key criticism of ANT is based on the difficulty of its execution. Latour himself (2005: 148) tackles these issues agreeing that in the act of description “it is not easy to find the uniquely adequate account of a given situation”. He admits also that the presence of the person making the study may themselves alter the trajectory of the agents, and that it is difficult to establish an end point or conclusion.

ANT traces the trajectory of both human and non-human actors in order to demonstrate how their interactions determine the ‘form of the social’, (ibid). ANT, I feel, offers an opportunity to see how things hang together, but I recognise some of the criticisms of actor network theory as a whole, for example the lack of consideration of external forces, or the difficulty in assessing an end point or conclusion.

Chapter Three – Fieldwork

This chapter commences by reviewing the primary research field site. It then goes on to describe the ethics fulfilment, and subsequently evaluates the methodology employed for qualitative data collection.

3.1 A review of the primary field site: Sudbury Hall – Museum of Childhood

Along the southern edge of the Derbyshire Dales lies Sudbury Hall Museum of Childhood. The museum is a sister property to a seventeenth century manor House, and provides project and education rooms as well as a number of galleries. The first part of this chapter takes the reader through the museum, using this as an opportunity to examine the effects that the museum may have on the visitors, and hence my participants' positions. There is a strong structuralist narrative to the exhibits, which needs to be taken into consideration. It will also critically reflect on the potential nostalgic effect that a heritage site such as Sudbury may induce, as well as the visitors' opportunities to engage directly with the exhibits, and indeed some of the toys themselves.

The museum website states that a trip to Sudbury is “a delight for all ages, discover something new, or relive nostalgic memories” (National Trust 2018). The museum itself is situated in the former stable block, where the architecture offers a glimpse of traditional English heritage. Through the grand entrance doors, the visitor is welcomed with a large accessible array of toys of yester-year, enticing them to interact and play. Visitors of every generation can be found sharing their sense of history and identity through the sharing of a game or toy. For Lowenthal (1998: 10) there is a distinction between history and heritage, “heritage is a celebration of the past, and history is an inquiry into it”, and the mix of grand architecture and the hubbub of play does suggest celebration.

Figure 2. Plan of the Museum Galleries.



The visit continues into the 'work gallery', where children are invited to experience the less palatable side of childhood past by operating laundry equipment and climbing mock chimneys. By using cartoon depictions of Victorian children, there is the risk of offering a romantic idealised depiction of child labour. The relaxed style chosen for the work gallery has the potential to idealise child labour. Bennett (1995) suggests that this type of compressed presentation enhances imagination, but may result in side-stepping the wider issue.

This particular exhibit also includes paper and pencils to allow the visitor to put forward their own views. This practice commonly exists among heritage sites and shows how heritage representation has shifted from canonical to representative, to a wider more common discourse for all (Lowenthal 1998). Bennett (1995), posits that national heritage sites are a significant authority in constructing a nation's past and mapping out its future, and Sudbury has a multitude of opportunities to reflect on the relationship between the past and the present.

From the work gallery we move into the home gallery. Sudbury's literature claims that the museum is "a nostalgic journey for all the family" (National Trust 2019), and in the home setting nostalgia is particularly present. Pickering and Keightley (2006: 920), describe nostalgia as a "yearning for what is now unattainable, simply because of the irreversibility of time". It is a key notion that permeates heritage discourses and practices (ibid). Theorists often see nostalgia as "a reaction against the irreversible" (Jankélévitch 1983: 299), and one that is frequently commodified (Robertson 1992). Nostalgia theory suggests that nostalgia is widely utilised by tourism (Smith 1984, West, Ansell 2010).

Despite the contemporary expansion of the use of nostalgia in heritage sites, Caton and Santos (2007) suggest that there is not simply one nostalgia. They posit that nostalgia is subjective, and that it is the misguided product of emotional attachments, rather than of any logical sense of reasoning (ibid). Many of the artefacts displayed in the home gallery were familiar to me from my own childhood, yet despite being aware of the strong use of nostalgia as a dominant discourse, I did not feel like a passive observer. I was left feeling "an appreciation of the past, not a longing for it", (ibid: 373).

The theory raised by Caton and Santos was supported by one of my participants. She observed and recognised many of the artefacts housed in a cabinet that was equipped with toys, books and children's artefacts dating from the Second World War. As a child of this era, this particular interlocutor of my research was left with no longing for the past. Indeed, she suggested the cabinet didn't even represent an accurate appreciation of it. For her, the items depicted a romanticised version of the events she grew up with.

Image 3. The war cabinet, a comic book on rationing.



In addition to nostalgia, the home gallery presents a number of exhibits that raise the complex story of identity. A large and well stocked cabinet in this gallery is entitled "What I want to be when I grow up". Artefacts include a plastic 'Bob the Builder' digger, and a 'Sindy Doll' washing machine. According to Sweet (2016), during the 1940s and 1950s, toys were not particularly gender assigned. However, by the 1980s and 1990s, toys were more overtly segregated for boys or girls in "accordance with exaggerated adult ideas of what children want from ideas of masculinity and femininity" (ibid: 2). Sweet's findings suggest that the representations of children's toys have become unrealistic in gender manifestations, which is unfortunate as toys provide children an opportunity to rehearse for adult life (ibid).

Thomas, (1991) suggests that despite their materiality, objects have the capacity to change their salience according to their curation. Furthermore, that the time narrative of the exhibits offers a greater concept of material culture than the objects on their own (ibid). However, despite the strong structuralist and time-line narrative, a great number of my interlocutors showed clear independence of thought, demonstrated by the variety of interpretations they offered on the material culture exhibited, particularly during instances where they were able to access the toys directly. Men were not shy to play tea sets with their grandchildren, and women happy to dress up as 'Knights of Old' in the story room.

The finale of the museum tour is the toys gallery. This spacious hall houses a large number of cabinets containing toys of all kinds. However, the vast majority of these toys are of western origin. Bessiere (2002) suggests that heritage, such as a monument, skill or material item, must be considered as an identity marker and distinguishing feature of a social group (Bessiere 2002). The vast majority of exhibits at Sudbury are of British origin, a deliberate curatorial decision. There are however a limited number of black dolls, some eastern puppets, and a Chinese ivory puzzle. However, with the exception of the puzzle, these items were manufactured in the west, using *their* interpretation of the cultures they are proposing to represent.

Figure 4. Image of Chinese puzzle as exhibited in toy gallery 8.



So, the museum has a structuralist narrative and plays on nostalgia, but importantly for this research, the Sudbury Museum of Childhood holds toys of every type, representing every possibility of play experience, and play is encouraged. Visitors are engaged with appropriate questions and activities, and the vast array of hands-on exhibits offer an excellent opportunity to observe the agency of toys in action.

Having given an overview of the field site, this chapter will now go on to describe the fieldwork process, to include the ethics, and subsequently the methodology employed for data collection.

3.2 Fieldwork Ethics

Prior to the research, engagement in the project was sought in collaboration with the site's Partnerships and Participation Manager, Thomas Bamforth (March 2019). Following our conversations, we agreed that this study would take place over six months, with my attendance at the museum being one day a week, to be completed in September 2019. The role engaged in was similar that of a usual room guide, but it was made clear before the research started that my time spent at the site would include this study, and that I would be engaging in conversation with participants. Participants were exclusively adults over the age of 18. From my exploratory time spent at the field site, and while conducting a pilot study with family and friends, it was anticipated that there would be approximately one significant conversation per hour, per four hour visit.

Awareness of the project was provided by the National Trust through a notice at the entrance to the toy gallery, giving an opportunity to make an informed consent to participate. I was identified as the researcher through a National Trust named identity badge, and in addition a

University of Wales Trinity Saint David student card. Verbal consent was obtained as part of the conversation. Participant anonymity was made clear verbally, and also implied through the lack of request for any personal data (Association of the Society of Anthropologists 2011).

The methods for this six month fieldwork study were a combination of participant observation of on-site activities, and elicited conversations with the museum visitors. Reflection carried out throughout the study was also made to reveal any deviations from the intended direction of the study, should they have arisen.

The data were compiled in qualitative style with a thematic analysis in mind. Field notes were transferred onto password secured storage. The primary anticipated risk was that of potential upset to the participants due to conversations around childhood and identity. Managing this risk was via a robust following of university's Research Ethics and Code of Practice (2017 – 2020), the currently available field site protocols, and a continual reflexive practice by myself. Reflexivity was inclusive with the site management.

3.3 Fieldwork Methodology.

With the Actor Network Theory and inductive analysis in mind, this dissertation employed the methodology of conversation. Conversations were elicited with very open comments, which allowed the participant to take the lead. These were predominantly along the lines of “have you seen anything interesting?”, or “brought back any memories?” Very often conversations were started simply through discussions of the weather, or if this was the participants first visit.

This chapter will now discuss conversation as a research method in general, and then go on to describe a more personal perspective of how it evolved in actual practice.

Conversation and observation as a research method.

Driessen and Jansen (2013) consider small talk as the core to ethnographic research, a basic social skill as well as a central ingredient when working in the field. They assert that, in their experience, conversation is better than interviews for fieldwork, and that the skill of “hanging around” should be taught along with interview and focus group techniques (Geertz 1998). I agree that it gives a rounder access to information that is difficult to access otherwise, and expanding conversation away from a prior given theory “could be central to understanding local culture.” (Driessen and Jansen 2013: 250). The authors suggest that communion or ‘chat’ is a crucial phase in ethnographic research. Closely related to small talk, it is about keeping responsive and not focusing attention on a particular subject (ibid). I equate this with ANT, in that free flow of conversation and ideas allows for the spread of multiplicity. By being receptive

and spending time in developing a relaxed meeting space, I found that people revealed their inside knowledge. Judith Okely (2010) discusses fieldwork in terms of free association and free passage, similar to the concept of ANT.

Where one holds the conversations can have a big impact on their success. I tried a few different areas of the museum, at different times of the day. One particular session was spent in a small gallery with numerous crafting activities available. It was half term week and there were plenty of young families taking part. Starting and maintaining conversations proved fruitless, the distraction of participants being exacerbated by the noise levels.

John Van Maanen (2011: 164) suggests that “interviews, sample surveys, focus groups, replace lengthy in situ immersion”, but I argue that they limit insights. Further critics of informal interview styles such as conversations argue that it is seen as vaguely defined and unstructured with no validity or replication (Driessen, Jansen 2013).

There is also an increased issue with consent ethics. Small talk as an unobtrusive style of field work is difficult reconcile with informed ethics. Bernard (2006) talks about the hard work required to engage, recall and recite conversations post conversation. While discreet with my note taking, prior notification of my presence was placed in the museum, and my purpose of finding interesting insights for my degree was discussed during conversations. I placed my methods somewhere between informal and unstructured interviewing, where unstructured interviewing consists of a plan, rather than a theory in mind, with little or no control over the participant's response, but with their knowledge of my purpose (Bernard 2006). Driessen and Jansen (1998: 251) hold that participants should be informed about the fieldworker's goals, but do not feel it necessary from an ethical point of view to repeat the research intentions during general conversation, “Informal talk in general should not present an ethical problem in fieldwork as long as interlocutors know that they are dealing with a researcher”.

Researchers' perceptivity of conversation as a research method

During my research it became evident that it is not only the content of the conversation between the researcher and the participants that connects them. This form of improved understanding may even be crucial when it comes to thick description. A big part of being human is the connection made by looking, smiling, exchanging words and gestures, “all of which may provide additional ‘backstage’ information that is difficult to elicit otherwise” (Goffman 1990: 114).

In addition, there are potential drawbacks of focused single line questioning seen in the interview format. Interview questions often contain preconceived ideas or theories of culture and may produce socially 'correct' answers (Blok 2000). I agree with Blok that this form of research has the potential to direct the interviewer. Interviews may also have an air of formality which doesn't occur with conversational methods of research. Interviews may offer increased qualitative numbers, but do they open up alternative possibilities?

I also align with Stoller (2009), that conversation is an intense activity. Trying to find the best words and questions, memorize what has been said and expressed through gesture, make mental notes, and react accordingly took some doing. In addition, the conscious effort of respecting privacy and personal space whilst coming across as friendly and safe required some practice. Driessen and Jansen (2013: 252) assert that researchers can "be trained to control open-contact situations by practicing how to take the initiative to make contact, invite others to speak, be responsive, remain alert, and show interest in or let oneself be guided". I argue that whilst this may be true to some degree, the best way to "control open-contact situations" is by not controlling them at all. My findings were that spending time with people, chatting informally yet remaining attentive to your goals takes practice, but can lead to better results with reciprocity and equality of conversation, or "communicative competence" according to Hymes (1972).

It can be an additional bonus of open conversation that in principle anyone can be approached, rather than only the persons one has planned to interview. There were many occasions during my time at Sudbury where an interlocutor who was not particularly interested in joining a conversation eagerly stepped forward to add their story as the conversation unfolded. Reticence was overcome through reciprocity and equality of conversation, and whereas I feel many participants would not have attended or participated in formal interviews, their observations were ultimately offered, and with great care of thought.

Even though my research wasn't part of a long term ethnography with a consistent set of participants, I was looking for the 'lived experience', covering more potentially sensitive views on childhood and identity. Conversation and observation were undoubtedly enhanced by the presence of the toys themselves. It would be quite difficult to have a vast array of toys to hand at an interview, but by observing participants engaging with the toys, it was possible to see the multiplicity of agency being enacted before me

Chapter four - Data analysis

Miller (1987: 105-106) argues on Bourdieu (1977) “although the object may be closely associated with the most fundamental and hidden aspects of socialization, this does not mean that it must be analysed only by determinant rule-based objectivist procedures, since as an instrument of social strategy it retains a high degree of flexibility”.

By employing the Actor-Network Theory, and thereby avoiding determinant rule based procedures, this chapter analyses how the object, the toy, revealed itself as an instrument that retains a high degree of flexibility. Acknowledging Latour’s work in *Reassembling the Social* (2005), the themes created by the analysis described in this chapter show not only how the toys are actants in allowing participants to express themselves, but also how they allow them to make their own contexts and relate to their own ontologies.

This chapter commences with the methods of qualitative data collection used, continues by outlining the seven overarching themes that were revealed, and subsequently provides a more in-depth discussion on the type of conversations that lead to these themes.

4.1 Qualitative data collection method.

Data were collected through informal conversations with museum visitors. The field-work took place weekly over six months being completed in September 2019. Four hourly session produced an average of three or four significant conversations per session. Significant is defined here as those lasting twenty to thirty minutes or more, those that showed a particularly strong emotional response from the participant, or those that brought a new perspective missing in other conversations and observations. This resulted in fifty seven conversations and observations available for analysis. From the conversations elicited, seven overarching themes emerged; (See Table 1; Page 22). Interlocutors were predominantly in the age groups twenty to thirty five (those with young children), and sixty to eighty (those with grandchildren or visiting alone or in groups as heritage tourists), (see appendix 1, page 46). My observations during fieldwork suggest that while the visitors to Sudbury demonstrate not a particularly wide mix of social groups, there is a wide mix of ages. Although my premise was to avoid a selection of participants from token categories by employing conversations rather than interviews or questionnaires, I recognise that the demographic of the type of visitor attracted to this heritage site was somewhat doing this anyway.

The level of encounters was varied, some conclusions arising from multiple similar conversations, but a rich narrative of relationships did also arise from singular but very in-

depth conversations. Aiming to stay true to ANT, I tried to concentrate on the objects, but conversations were prone to take an unpredictable course. In accordance with the ethical requirements of anonymity (Driessen and Jansen 1998), the details of conversations were required to be suppressed, but in a way so as not to alter the interpretations and results. This led me to the conclusion that the most appropriate type of analysis for the style of research for this dissertation was qualitative.

Qualitative research is particularly suited to subjective research as it offers insight into social, emotional, and experiential phenomena (Giacomini 2000). Through a variety of research methods, it is designed to reveal understandings and perceptions, to explore facets of culture and to understand how theories are linked to outcomes. Qualitative studies tend to be small scale, focusing on a more intimate, limited number of cases, resulting in more in depth and contextualised results (ibid). Qualitative research covers designs such as informal interviews and direct observation (Pope 2007).

The type of method chosen is often determined by the theoretical perspective being considered which then provides a suitable framework for the research (ibid). Potential theoretical questions associated with my research were; Is there a socioeconomic theory or paradigm, for example social constructionism. Is there a cultural or idealist theory for example, a cultural requirement for early childhood independence? Is there a materialist theory such as structural and Infrastructural forces, for example technology and environmental factors? However, the question posed by the Actor-Network Theory is, should we even be looking at the nomothetic?

Braun & Clarke (2006: 78) are proponents of thematic analysis, suggesting “it provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other kinds of analysis”. Also, as it is a method rather than a methodology it is not tied to a particular theoretical perspective, which links it well with ANT. By using thematic analysis, it is possible to identify interesting and important patterns in the data to address the research or reveal something about an issue (ibid).

However, there are potential problems facing this form of research. The use of conversation and observation are more open to interpretation, and caution needs to be used to demonstrate how the research has been collected and analysed (Roen 2006). Lofland (1971), suggests that it is not necessary to overcomplicate grounded theory text analysis. There is a potential for over complication of participants’ contributions. He posits that a few well-chosen and to the point insights from participants can offer presentation of data that allows the reader to ‘understand the story’, to in a sense, feel the conversations that occurred. A potential problem in text analysis is simply too much analysis, which therefore requires careful reflection on the nature of analysis and interpretation (ibid).

This style of analysis reveals how an approach based on ANT addresses issues that cognitivist approaches minimize (Braun, Clarke 2006). ANT study focuses on wider, more dynamic events, getting away from the frequent use of contained theory. My findings support the argument that it allows the researcher to reveal the wider context, where it is easier to identify the divergence of interests among actors, (ibid).

4.2 Stages of analysis for this dissertation

This dissertation employed Braun and Clarke's six steps to thematic analysis, in particular reflexive thematic analysis, as it is well suited to the Actor-Network Theory's premise of allowing the actors their voice.

Stage 1. I began by getting familiar with the data – reading and re-reading the transcripts. Making notes about early impressions. For example, long term closeness to childhood toys, not shy to play in public spaces.

Stage 2. Next, I began to generate initial codes, inductively, providing codes to each comment that captured interesting points. What kept coming up? Heirlooms, playing freely.

Stage 3. Then came searching for themes, for example, the purpose of toys. Themes were predominately descriptive, that is they described patterns in the data. Preliminary themes plus any miscellaneous were revealed. From this came a table, for example, what sense of nostalgia was evident, where was material culture represented? Next was the search for what overlaps occurred that caused these themes.

Stage 4. This stage involved reviewing the themes. Shuffling them round for a better fit, to better capture what the participants were saying. Were there any sub themes? Was I trying to fit too much into a theme?

Stage 5. Defining and naming themes turned out to be an easier process than expected. This involved "identifying the 'essence' of what each theme is about" (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 92). In this analysis, the perception of toys as an heirloom was an overarching theme that was rooted in the other themes. From this it was possible to create a thematic analysis that illustrated the relationships between themes, and from this emerged what the participants thought of their toys, how they identified with them and their perception of what their toys meant to them.

Stage 6. This final phase involved weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts. Defining themes presented in this phase identified what was interesting about the themes, and how the themes fitted together to tell a story about the data, revealing implicit meanings within the data.

Figure 5. Table Showing Themes Taken from Conversations Logged.

THEME	TOTAL NUMBER OF OCCURANCES	CONVERSATION LOG NUMBER
Evidence of cultural reproduction	28	2, 5, 6, 8, 10, 17, 19, 21, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, 33, 34, 36, 37, 40, 41, 43, 49, 51, 52, 54, 55, 56
Cultural Variation	5	1, 7, 22, 23, 53.
Changing material culture	5	5, 11, 35, 38, 39.
Nostalgia	13	2, 6, 10, 14, 25, 27, 28, 29, 37, 38, 41, 47, 49.
Adults still play	8	4, 20, 26, 29, 32, 45, 47, 48.
Soft toys are for real	14	3, 9, 11, 12, 15, 18, 28, 36, 38, 42, 43, 44, 46, 50.
Love, loss, heirlooms	12	3, 6, 13, 14, 16, 28, 24, 31, 36, 41, 43, 57,

4.3 Analysis Interpretation

One aim of this dissertation was to evaluate the suggestion by ANT that objects such as toys have agency, and this became evident when the conversations were reviewed. It is not only a case that the toys were objects that had an influence on the child. They also had an influence on the conversations taking place. Would any of these conversations have taken place without the presence of the toys? As well as the toys in the cabinets, there were numerous opportunities to actually handle and play with the toys. Tea sets, puzzles, dress-up, blocks, teddies and reading material were all readily available and encouraged to be used. While

making the observations, and holding the conversations, the object, the toy, was clearly doing something. The toys broke the museum setting down and frequently evoked an emotional response. They added significantly to the insightful outcome that ANT offers. This is demonstrated in the conversations that took place. The examples given are condensed segments of the conversations that occurred.

Figure 6. Hands-on puzzles, toy gallery two.



4.3.1 The Seven Overarching Themes

Theme 1. Evidence of cultural reproduction

This theme was present in twenty eight conversations. Interlocutors demonstrated evidence of how their relationship with toys influenced their future life. Using the insights taken from these conversations, there is clear evidence of cultural influence in categories such as class, gender and race. Sudbury toy galleries house a number of toys that can be identified as gender specific, Barbie dolls and china tea-sets in pink florals for girls, tin soldiers and wooden forts for boys. A number of participants remarked on this, although many suggested that the cultural expectation had not been followed:

I recognise most of these toys from the 1960's. My brother had the building bricks set, and I had the flower arranging. I have to say though, looking back, that we played equally with both. We enjoyed playing together with them.

One couple were visiting from Germany. They spent quite some time looking in one particular cabinet:

We notice that the German toys are particularly well engineered. The quality and complexity of them stands out to us. It's really good to see that, even with the toys.

A less enthusiastic visitor showed some sadness and acknowledgement of social status when observing the extensive variety of dolls;

This museum is full of stuff I wanted. It's a bit sad really. The Cabbage Patch Dolls, I really wanted one, everyone had one but me.

This observation of have and have-nots was reiterated by a gentleman in his seventies who was enjoying the display of toy cars:

My pocket money only stretched to the Match-box. I couldn't afford the Dinky. I had to go to my friend's house to play with the Scalextric!

Clearly, the toys most recognised and discussed by participants were gender specific. Some were demonstrating socioeconomic understanding. None more so than a conversation held with an English couple in their seventies. They were expressing surprise, and pride, at the presence of some German language children's books on display:

I bet there weren't many houses with those in. They were in German and English. No-one spoke German in our household, but there was an understanding that we would have a broad education. An expectation that with private education, we would speak another language.

These conversations showed gender, nationality and class recognition, and how toys are used in the promotion of cultural reproduction. However, one gentleman used his toy farm to develop his thoughts on his future career, using the agency of the toy to explore his desires despite his dad's best efforts:

This is what I always played with, my toy farm. This is all I ever wanted to do. Tin tractors were great, but when you get on a real one, they are hard work! My father bought me a wind up train as they were all the rage in the 1940s. But really it was him that wanted to play with it. I just wanted to play with my farm.

The themes of these conversations revealed the interplay between toys and social dimensions such as gender and social class. However, there was also evidence of the creative aspect of the children themselves, participating in the construction and reconstruction of the boundaries that determine their play. The gentleman who spoke about choosing to play with his toy farm was using a play sequence to negotiate transformations with his father, or reassembling the social (Latour, 2005). ANT argues that network paths are dialectical, and by illuminating the object it is possible to find the value in them.

Foucault (1988) argues that most education of children is from social conditioning, with which I agree. This is what I expected to see and did indeed find, as demonstrated in this theme. Even to the point of watching it being recreated for the next generation. However, in view of my further observations, I suggest that with toys there was an agency beyond teaching culture to our children. To Foucault (1997) it's about legitimising authority. But if it's all about authority how can we learn? Explicit teaching is important in a culture, but my findings correlate with McClaren (1980) in that we need autonomy to learn the multiplicity of possible ontologies.

The next themes to be reviewed, as revealed by my research, offer further support to more independent thought on behalf of the toy user.

Theme 2, Cultural Variation.

A number of participants were visitors from abroad. These visitors were particularly engaged in the exhibits and very willing to be involved. They expressed the ways in which the exhibits differed to their memories of childhood. Using excerpts from the five significant conversations presenting with this theme, it is possible to see the representation of toys in cultural variation.

One international visitor remarked on how she didn't recognise a lot of the toys on display:

I just had one doll, no bears or soft toys. I only know Winnie the Pooh and Paddington from my adulthood. They simply didn't exist in my home country.

A visitor from Australia expanded on this point:

I recognise the 1960s toys and the 1980's toys, but not so much the ones in between. We only got the same toys in Australia from the 1980s. My parents were playing with toys they brought over in the 1960s, like the Fisher Price dog, but the 1970s toys I don't recognise. I notice as well that Australia seems to align with America rather than the UK with how they name toys. There was a lot in the papers at one time where the Teenage Turtles were called 'Hero' in the UK, and 'Ninja' in Australia and America. They were saying the UK didn't like the violent connotation of 'Ninja'.

However, in contrast to the above, an interesting conversation took place with an interlocutor who grew up in India. She described her childhood play at her place of birth, and after she had moved to the UK. She made some interesting points on the similarities she found that helped her to settle into UK life. In India she played Pāñca, or five:

This involved balancing five stones on the back of my hand, and I recognised this as Jacks in the UK. I also found it easy to join in with games such as playing with a ball against a wall, juggling, British Bulldog and hand-clap games. Although the rhymes were different, the fundamentals were the same. And I have noticed that my grandchildren still play these

games, with new more modern songs, so there are differences but similarities between countries as well as generations.

This particular conversation reminded me that play can simply be about learning hand eye coordination and other physical skills. But more importantly, that despite toys being seen as promoting a certain culture, toys and games offer the agency to allow the participant the opportunity to cross a cultural divide, and to recognise themselves within this transition. Toys, as well as defining exclusion in social relationships, offer a means for inclusion, with children actively participating in this process. This correlates with Law (2002) whereby observing or following the life cycles and trajectories of objects, we can discover how people are drawn together in a network of relatedness. Here a simple ball game constructed the setting for the flow of information from one actor to another, during what could have been a challenging translation.

Theme 3, Changing material culture

Another theme that came up regularly that I hadn't anticipated was that of the changing material culture of the toys themselves. Toys tell us a lot about the world in which we live. They can reflect fashions or important events. They can show us what materials and technology people were using. There were five conversations where this theme particularly dominated. I spent quite some time chatting with two gentlemen in their eighties:

I lost all of my toys because I was obsessed by digging and they all got dug into the garden and left! They've been built over now.

His friend joined in and said his fascination was for anything electrical, torches, radios, trains.

I went on to be an electrician. I saw so much change. My mother was born in 1910 and she only had candles in the house. Now I Skype my grandson in Australia.

He went on to produce his smart phone out of his pocket and show me pictures of his great-granddaughter playing with her doll. We mused over how the past is now in your pocket, a sort of personal archive that goes with you everywhere. Will his great-granddaughter need nostalgia if she has a continual access to these memories through the images in her pocket? This gentleman had lost his connection to his toys, but the next generation will have a very different perspective on looking back. I did wonder if the exchange I had with this gentleman would have happened if I had been conducting an interview or using questionnaires.

Further conversations that reiterated this theme echoed how generations are easily pinpointed, no more so than with the material culture of toys. Many participants showed surprise at the young age of some of the exhibits. Sudbury has recently acquired some

electronic board games from the 1980s that include technology such as play mobile phones, reflecting the changes that take place so quickly in material culture. One couple in pointed out a 1960s Bakelite building set, with a plethora of sharp points. They wouldn't allow that now, they sighed, "too much health and safety". The move from wooden toys, to plastic, to technology was highlight a number of times:

My children's toys already look old fashioned. The grandchildren's rooms will look very different with all this technology.

I found one man in his seventies chuckling at the memory of *insisting* his teddy bears had tea-bags and not loose tea for their tea parties, a new fashion at the time. Children it would seem, are not just imitators of the adult world but may also act as commentators for change. Goodman (1978: 161), mentions an example of two four-year-old American boys caricaturing the behaviour and intonation of two adult women, "not just to mimic but to mock, to show power, suggesting that symbolic reversals are potentially subversive".

Kline and Smith (1993: 184) suggest that this shows "a subtle transformation of children's cultural expression - sentiments, social attitudes, values and play form". Bathiche and Derevensky (1995: 59) agree that "children's game/toy preferences might serve as convenient markers of societal changes". According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987) objects influence us constantly in the translations that occur through negotiation, as my participants revealed. These conversations also highlight how accurately we can pinpoint our own existence. That we can step back and see the wider picture and know what part we had to play in it. Through toys we can reflect on our journey, recognise our childhood and ourselves.

Theme 4, Nostalgia

One of the interactive exhibitions at Sudbury asks visitors to recall what they did and didn't like about their childhood. A lack of consensus of opinion unfolds, with positives being no television, playing in the street and home-made toys. But in contrast, other respondents suggested that life was a lot harder back then, school dinners were horrible, and you started work at a very young age. As mentioned earlier, one participant didn't recognise the rose tinted toys of the Second World War shown in one cabinet, her recollection was something quite different to the way in which society was trying to sell the war to its children. There were no cartoon teddy bears shopping for rations. She could see for herself it was terrible, full stop.

The museum was however very useful according one participant, as her daughter "can see from their visit just how lucky she is now". But is she? Of the thirteen conversations in the

theme of nostalgia, one gentleman chatted about his childhood growing up near to an American army camp based in the South of England just after World War Two:

They took us children in big trucks up the camp for parties. We were each assigned a soldier and were given jelly and sweets. It was done to foster relations between the UK and the US. The only toy I can remember having was Meccano, but we started work at twelve in those days, so we understood money. By fifteen I was in my first job, working in the army camp.

Interestingly, this conversation came around to the topic of the army base while we had been chatting about children playing outside. I had mentioned that I used to play on a disused army camp as a child, and this comment sparked this particular memory for the visitor. As Bernard (2005) notes, during conversations, be yourself, be authentic, this way you will gain the confidence of your interlocutor and increase the chances of revealing a wider discourse.

A further conversation about the wartime childhood of a man in his eighties:

I was born in 1942, right in the middle of the war. My father was away, and my mother was working in a factory. There was no money for toys. My friends and I all played outside. We used whatever was to hand for toys, washing lines for skipping ropes, bottle tops, sticks for rounders. Cricket was beyond us as we couldn't make a bat. We worked as a team. If someone had some old wood, someone else some wheels, we would get together and build a cart. None of this mattered though, because we didn't know any difference. We were happy just playing in any way we could.

At this point he did remember something which changed his expression;

The first toy I remember was some tin soldiers that were on my dresser one Christmas morning.

The man became noticeably emotional at this point. The memory alone of this particular inanimate object disclosed that it had agency.

Miller (2009: 60) talks of nostalgia, of how toys “evoke some childhood escapade, not protected from use but stored for use”. He adds “objects such as toys trigger more than just the object, they trigger for example the moment when you received it, with a strong visual impact on the memory” (ibid: 130.) Equally though, this man’s early childhood toys were created by himself and his friends. The agency of these home-made objects was as a useful bonding mechanism. Play objects constructed the setting for defining social relationships. They added multiplicity, allowing the children to express themselves and allow connections.

Theme 5, Adults still play

This is another theme that took me by surprise, although only eight conversations echo this, there were numerous observations. As mentioned, the museum has toys accessible throughout. Dolls, dressing-up, train sets, puzzles and building blocks. Parents would frequently start to play with a small child, and then when the child moved on to something else, they would carry on playing. Very simple five piece puzzles, or plastic train sets became items of fascination and intense concentration for the adults to play with alone. The tea set offered further chance to play. Parents and grandparents were using the tea set to prompt social construction certainly, but also, I sense, to return to a time lost to before their secondary socialisation.

Figure 7. The tea set, toy gallery one.



Grown men were happy to pour pretend milk and sip on invisible tea in public, in front of a crowd of strangers. The opportunity to go back to their early childhood was relished. Singing 'happy birthday' whilst holding a plastic cake was commonplace. I even observed one or two men tidying up the tea sets, having visited the site *without* children;

I'm enjoying this, I'm being me.

The interpretation this dissertation reveals from these observations that the relationship with toys offers not just a prescribed identity, but the opportunity to find and re-find our own identity, using toys as a way to negate reality. Or in the words of George Bernard Shaw (1918), "We don't stop playing because we grow old, we grow old because we stop playing".

Also, crucially, the toys had agency. Without the presence of the toys, none of these observations would have occurred. The opportunity to re-live an earlier experience, or sensation, would not have been possible without them. It is interesting to note here that the

tea rooms at Sudbury had recently introduced a new system of serving a large dish of food with accompaniments directly to the table. The aim was to encourage families to share the meal out amongst themselves, thereby increasing the opportunity to naturally draw together the family network. I see this as a perfect example of the agency of objects in practice. The ANT premise is that by observing the lifecycles and trajectories of objects, we can also discover how people are drawn together in a network of relatedness (Law 2002). Evidence shows that this has been well demonstrated at Sudbury, both in the restaurant and in the galleries themselves. By offering toys to play with, Sudbury have given the ideal space to explore how networks are created and maintained, and they are consciously continuing this backstage, within the restaurant. People and objects influence each other. Observing the multiplicity of combinations that could be explored by the network of associations, such as the shared dish of a family meal, can reveal the nature of groups, identity and actions.

However, the comparison with the shared restaurant meal is where one of the criticisms aimed at Latour's theory came into view. A concern picked up by Law (1992) is that unless the rhizomatic pathway is continued, can we really obtain the full picture. He suggests that the investigator cannot follow the actors everywhere and that there hence needs to be some sort of ordering or selection. Should my research have followed the participants into other areas of their lives, such as the family meal? Latour (2005) attempts to answer this criticism in his work where he suggests that a framework or conclusion isn't necessary, rather a localised description is revealing enough to provide useful information.

Theme 6, Soft toys are for real

Although already aware of the power of attachment to soft or character toys (Bowlby 1973), I was not prepared for the overwhelming way in which this was to be reflected in my findings. People, at least those visiting Sudbury, are passionate about their dolls and teddy bears. When a doll or bear is given to a child, it is an object, without a persona, without a name. I found that the child is active, not passive, in the creation of this persona, it being a duel event in the creation of a live entity. The child, and the doll or bear, create agency together, which is multiplicitous in its journey. Fourteen conversations in the research dealt explicitly with soft toys:

I have a bear that I have had since I was small, so he's very old now! He's still wearing the jumper that my grandmother gave to him. My mum made an outfit for me and one for the bear to match. My sister had a lot of operations when she was little, my bear had the same ones, stitched with wool. He's very precious. He's falling to bits now and lives in the airing cupboard, but that doesn't matter.

There was the teddy bear who had to have and wear his own gas mask during the war. The doll with an ugly scar from a doll hospital repair. The panda bear who was left with strict instructions in mum's care while the owner was at school, (and followed him on to university). Another lady explained how she had grown up as an armed forces child. The toys would come from the camp 'thrift shop', which allowed a certain amount of recycling when families were re-posted. One toy she was not willing to let go of though was an Action Man:

I refused a Barbie doll, I wanted an Action Man. It was my Dad you see.

These conversations reveal the meaning that toys acquire through their trajectory of children's play. This is not to say that the form of a doll does not influence the content of play, its effect however is not determinant (Sutton-Smith 1997). Toys are inductive in the form in which they allow a child to see the world. Despite the normative settings provided by a culture, there is considerable room for creative work by children themselves. Soft toys it would seem are particularly invested with personal meaning, and I am in agreement with Hebdige (1995b: 30), that "people appropriate the objects of consumption to construct moral projects not necessarily intended by the producers". Complementary to this is Appadurai's (2011) ANT approach to objects and their transformation of meaning in different contexts, describing how the meanings people attribute to things often derive from transactions and needs. But this theme on 'soft toys are for real' clearly demonstrates that it is still the individual providing the attribution.

Theme 7, Love, loss, heirlooms

I found that a particularly fruitful place to stand within the museum galleries was next to the exhibit 'Uncle Bruin bear and Priscilla doll', (see figure 9). Priscilla doll, and Mr Bruin bear, were donated to the museum when their owner died. The note accompanying the exhibit explains how they had been together for nearly a hundred years, and that it was beyond the family to separate them after their owner's death, hence their donation to the museum. This story aroused possibly the highest number of individual comments during my fieldwork time, with twelve significant conversations. There were themes such as love, loss, heirlooms, and the impossibility of letting go.

Figure 8. Uncle Bruin bear and Priscilla doll.



While discussing Priscilla and Uncle Bruin's cabinet life, numerous offers were made to me from visitors wanting to donate their childhood toys. It appears that as you age objects become reduced to one or two that come to stand for your life. My participants appear to deal with the prospect of their own death by wanting to leave something they are attached to in a safe, long lasting place. A childhood object arguably has the ability to remind you of who and what you were connected to, and crucially the numerous participants that approached me about donations show that people do not want to let this go. I was repeatedly asked who to contact to donate toys that simply could not be got rid of at the point of death. Soldiers' forts that had no male descendent to be left to, repaired dolls that the grandchildren were scared of. There was clear evidence of significant distress at parting with these things.

My daughter had a number of soft toys when she was little. As she got older, she decided to sell them at a second-hand sale. She said she would rather not know what happened to them, than to see them go to a family member and be mistreated. I felt physically sick to see them being sold. I had to look away. She kept one or two though, she just couldn't split with all of them.

Toys were providing a strength of emotion that produced physical symptoms such as and fear, loss and even nausea. They were providing an opportunity to confide, and to form a type of personal relationship that is hard to see go. Wanting to donate toys rather than them being lost forever could be seen as showing how the toy is a representation of oneself, not just a representation of society. I posit that transitional toys are not transitional. Nor are they solely an embodiment of society, they are clearly an embodiment of the owners themselves. Otherwise, why would it be so crucially important for them to remain in safe keeping after their death? Not necessarily by a family member, just by a safe pair of hands. They have an agency that is actively achieved. Children actively participate in the process of identity creation and

maintenance through the preservation of their toys, which is demonstrated in the value attributed to them.

Chapter 5 - Research Findings

This chapter illustrates the contributions to this field by drawing on the findings of the empirical chapters. The research findings of this dissertation are addressed here in three parts.

1, The merit of the Actor Network Theory.

2, The merit of conversation.

3, Toys have agency.

Collectively they support the hypothesis that toys have agency and multiplicity in the assembling and reassembling of truth. The originality of the research is in the direct engagement of toys and their trajectory to reveal how orders emerge.

5.1 Assessing the Merit of Actor-Network Theory

ANT is interested in the connections that occur between humans and non-humans, believing that everything that exists in the world is the outcome of an interaction between human and non-human actors (Latour 2005). This dissertation has aimed to attribute equal value to people and their toys, to demonstrate how they influence each other, and what effects they have on their actions. According to ANT, this chain of networks has potential to produce change in the course of action of the 'actants' (ibid). Using this approach to research offers not only the more direct outcome of how these entities perform together, but offers the additional factor of insight. Tracing connections in this flattened perspective allows the researcher to move away from taken-for-granted organizational and institutional structures and theories, the background from which data is often collected.

This dissertation supports the understanding of the value of ANT to better understand the material culture of toys. The analysis goes beyond existing explanations of identity connections of adults with toys, which tend to focus attention on gender, economics and class assignment. It does so by moving away from solely looking at what occurs within the boundaries of a community and cultural theories. It prompts thematic analysis of moments to explore the process of connection with toys, including the role of non-human actors. Previous studies adopt a positivist approach seeking to provide causal explanations in the form of statistical relationships among behaviours (Rivera, Cox 2016). Marshall (2008) suggests moving away from the cognitive tradition which can be seen as offering individualistic, static and representationalist views of organisational phenomena.

The findings of this dissertation propose that toys are actors, and are able influence entities within actor-networks that are made of social connections such as economics, material objects and so on. Following Law's ideas on control, an actor relies on the support of other actors, be they human or non-human to achieve control (Law, 1992). To ensure compliance they need strong relationships with other actors of the network (ibid). Here, their relationships with toys allow them to step back in time, create an individualist identity, reflect on our own position, negotiate boundaries, cross cultural divides and create alliances. Alliances help humans to succeed, and "the process of ordering and reordering is never complete", (Rivera, Cox 2016; 8). I suggest toys perpetuate into adulthood to continue access to the ordering and reordering of oneself.

5.2 Assessing the Merit of conversation

The collection of data in the research study reported here comes under interviewing, "albeit the informal end of the scale, characterised by a lack of structure and control" (Bernard 2006: 210). There are a variety of interview situations based on the amount of control we desire to exercise over people's responses, conversations being the least formal.

My findings agreed with Bernard (2006) in that, as the participants know that you are conversing with them to elicit information, there is no point in trying to hide this. Indeed, once my research had started in earnest, I had no shortage of takers. I had apprehensions about the sign and identification badges deterring participants, but more often than not, once these things were in place and my research had started, people would seek me out and say, "are you the lady doing the research", thereby highlighting to me my own position as part of a network of associations. There is always that balance between holding conversations with people before they know your intentions, and not attracting only one demographic of participant, those who have a certain confidence of personality to take part, but the combination of signage seemed to be acceptable, and quite often I got the impression that once a conversation had started by those most willing, others who had initially seemed reticent began to be drawn in. The additional advantage to a conversation over an interview is that there is more room for balanced turns, (Spradley 1979). It is a case of keeping the subject matter focussed on a topic, here aided by the material culture that is the toys, while giving the respondent room to lead with the content of the conversation (ibid).

Bernard's rule (2006) is to let the informant provide the information that they think is important, which I feel overlaps well with ANT, making conversation preferable to interviews for this particular research method. Bernard also talks about the researcher being silent to allow the respondent to be reflective (ibid). One excellent thing about toys is that they are an

exceptionally good medium for being reflective. At Sudbury's sister site, the Manor Hall, the objects on display are the contents of the seventeenth century house, having little in common with the visitors. They want to learn about the objects, but don't have many connections with them. Toys, however, evoked a huge response to every visitor I observed during my time at the Museum of Childhood. It seemed that reflecting came naturally, with no prompting at all.

Lofland (1976) warns against prompting or probing by the use of leading questions. By this he means avoiding directing the conversation with obvious or specific questions. My own approach was to simply enquire, have you seen anything interesting in the museum, has anything brought back any memories? I endeavoured to stay true to ANT and let the participant take the lead. Any direct, interview style questions may have answered my original suspicion that toys are used in primary socialisation, but may not have unearthed the natural turn of the conversation that so many participants had around their strong emotional connection with their toys. I was mindful of bringing it back to the toys, although I found that I did not really need to do so.

My conclusion is that small talk is underappreciated. It gives you a greater opportunity to reveal insights not on the original programme. Incidentally, I took the opportunity to train and participate as an exhibition facilitator at a neighbouring heritage site, Kedleston Hall, which was underway at the same time as I was conducting my research at Sudbury. The format at Kedleston was engaging visitors to think about the exhibition using three fairly open questions. Over a four hour period, my colleague and I managed to obtain seventeen responders, an impressive amount. But I was left feeling that the responses were greatly limited, compared to those I obtained through my research conversations at Sudbury.

5.3 Toys Have Agency

The sheer delight and the desire to recreate the creative opportunities toys provide was evident through my conversations with participants. My findings suggest that toys as an object with agency allow a multiplicity of layers with which to engage with society, where we are free through toys to explore all the truths, and we have the opportunity to express individualist thoughts. This would define toys not as a mode of social reproduction alone, but that they also allow an agency that adults long to return to and find difficult to let go. At the meta level, Gergen, and Gergen (2004) state that two way dialogue that occurs in social construction is important. The private world of the mind is central, if we are to believe everything is true then we will never empower change, as we won't be motivated to act (ibid). In accordance with this, the observations of this research demonstrate that when a toy is given to a child, there is multiplicity of ways in which the child is motivated to act.

The participants I engaged in conversation, appeared not simply as constructs, but as actors, recognising that at least at some time in their past they have an ability to determine the *form of the social* (Latour 2005). Here arose one of the key findings of this research: it transpired through my conversations and observations, that toys were objects with agency, allowing the person to re-enter their childhood, to express themselves, to hold their own contexts and ontologies. So, while agreeing with Latour (ibid: 29), that reassembling the social demonstrates how “with new laws and catastrophes etc., we need to shuffle new conceptions as previous definitions become irrelevant,” I would take this argument further to suggest that the actors are able to re-visit conceptions of definitions through their relationship with toys.

On the wall of the stairwell to the museum is mounted a Chopper bike. One man in his fifties was clearly affected by the presence of this object:

My Dad got me a Chopper bike one Christmas. He hid behind the sofa. He was as excited to give it to me as I was to receive it! I loved that bike so much. It meant freedom you see. I could take myself off through the village. I went everywhere, and nowhere.

Here undoubtedly the bike had its own agency. It both enhanced and structured the actions of this young man. I was particularly intrigued by the concept of it taking him ‘nowhere’. He was inferring that he had an open road of choice, presented to him through the bike. According to Sutton-Smith (1997), freedom of play like this also has the role of simply making life better, more tolerable, and more fun. In *the Ambiguity of Play*, he observes “We constantly seek to manage the variable contingencies of our lives for success over failure, for life over death. Play itself may be a model of just this everyday existentialism” (ibid: 228). Does the Chopper bike offer a passage to freedom, a way to negate reality? The palpable response of the bike hanging on the wall reminded me again how the research process I had undertaken was heavily enhanced by the agency of objects. Would I have made the same observations, or held the same conversations, if toys weren’t available for the participants to engage with? They provided the ground for my participants to experience memory and emotion. Reactions to objects also demonstrated how they had the power to make emotions last and expand.

Chapter 6- Conclusion

This dissertation draws on the wider debates on social construction, by employing the Actor-Network Theory and the art of conversation in research. The research undertaken here, through the material culture of toys, questions Durkheim's initial premise of social science, and suggests instead that people are autonomous actors with more fluid actions. By putting social science to one side and starting with peoples' relationships with objects, we can reveal the multiplicity of ways in which a child is motivated to act. By employing the Actor-Network Theory, toys can show the juxtapositions between cultural expectations and something the child can reflect themselves in. Every object to a child is new to the child, and until it has found its place in their identity, we cannot assume or presume a child's relationship with that object. This dissertation supports the perspective that society does not determine the action of the local actors, and that objects have their place in creating new concepts, (Latour 2005).

This dissertation also proposes that toys offer an opportunity to cling to individuality and to maintain one's true identity. Material objects have the agency to help express individualism as well as the needs of the wider society. The seven themes revealed demonstrate how people use toys to negate their way through life, to discover themselves, their relationships, careers, identity, loss and individuality. Toys enable them to reflect on this journey, to create something of ourselves, to leave something of ourselves. People use them to mix and share, and to pinpoint their own childhood.

Through the Actor-Network Theory, it has been possible to open up this wider perspective of agency and the multiplicity of reality. Other studies look at this with a prior theory, and without the focus on the toys themselves. The main tenet of ANT is to allow the actants to make their own theories and contexts (Law 2002). The concerns of the participants were different to one another, and by following the trajectory of objects, it was possible to illuminate their human and social context and value. As objects, the participants toys created equivalences between challenging conditions, and allow them to become part of a network of relatedness (Latour 2005). By using conversation and observation it was possible to engage in this process in the minutia.

Conversations and objects are key to this dissertation. Direct or more formal interviews can induce shyness. Objects allow the participants to express themselves, therefore the objects have agency by allowing them to access an alternative voice to the one required in an interview situation. The fieldwork site is also key. Although there is a structuralist, nostalgic narrative, there are a lot of hands-on opportunities. Conversations require skill, but you get rounder

access to information that is difficult to access otherwise. By expanding conversation away from prior given theory, we can gain a better understanding and insight. Conversation has advantages over interviews. Participants joined me in this research who were reticent at first. They chose what was important to them. Conversations were held amongst the toys, resulting in an increased awareness of emotions and identities. The two way process of balanced turns opened up and lead to trust and enjoyment of the experience of sharing thoughts. There was also a greater opportunity to gain the thickness of a meaning from a gesture or emotion.

The conversations elicited for this research demonstrated, as expected, themes of social construction, cultural variation and changing material culture. However, despite these themes reflecting my expectations, there were a broad range of themes that defied my expectations. Toys offered inclusion across cultures. They provided as way of pinpointing one's own very personal existence, stepping back to see our own identity, recognising our childhood and ourselves, not solely part of the wider picture of society.

Of the themes that emerged, two of them were particularly unexpected. One was that adults still play. The abandonment with which adults were happy to play independently with young children's toys in public was a joyful surprise. The second unexpected theme I entitled love, loss and heirlooms, and I consider this as the perspective that the use of ANT opened up to the widest degree, and encompassed all of the other findings. People see their toys as directly intertwined representations of themselves. They wish to see them retained after their death, not necessarily willed to a family member, but somewhere that would keep them alive, look after them, and keep them safe.

Looking forward, there is a growing literature by social researchers on childhood where gender identities and ideologies or the social boundaries of childhood are constructed, reproduced and changed (Clark, 2010, Montgomery, 2018). Using this dissertation to look to the future, there are a number of reasons why it is important to understand the material culture of toys, particularly when related to children, for example, economics, physical wellbeing, environmental factors, intercultural understanding, disability, and cultural reproduction. By considering the child's point of view, opportunities are increased to improve child welfare. The western society of today affords children relative autonomy, but to what extent do toys give children the confidence to appraise the society providing them with them, to evaluate their position in them?

The findings of this dissertation conclude that Actor-Network theory is well suited to research in this area. It removes boundaries to reveal complex issues that are not well understood through traditional methods, ensuring that user perspectives are reflected in how data is acquired, and meanings are constructed.

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Appendix

Appendix 1.

Participants were identified as 56% female, 44% male, falling into the following age ranges.

The fifty seven participants were spread between 20 and 90 years of age, with a moderate reduction in visitors of age range 40-50, suggesting visitors attend with children or grandchildren.

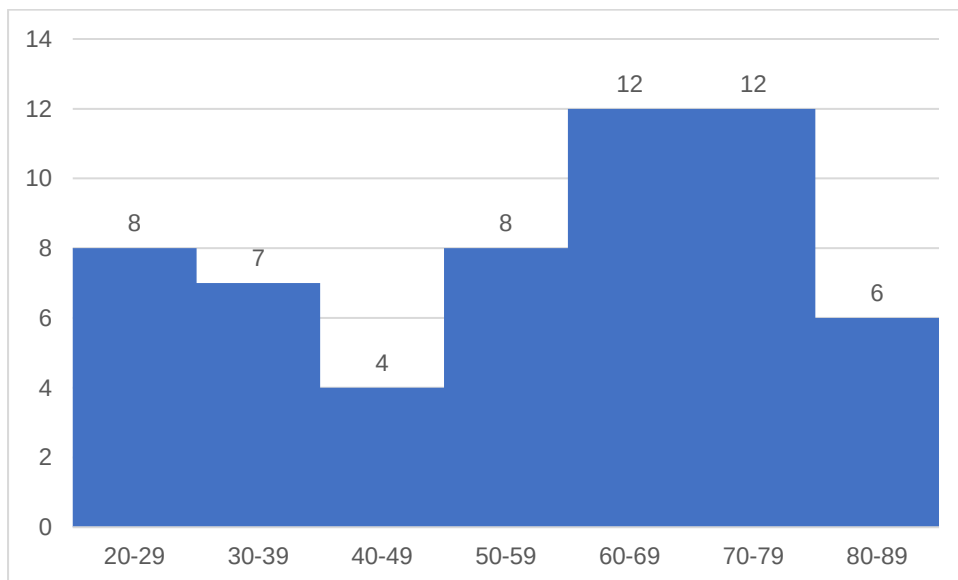


Figure 9. Graph showing age range vs number of participants.

