

In Conversation: Mundane Methods and Material Methods

Vanessa May

Welcome to this conversation with Sophie Woodward, Helen Holmes and Sarah Marie Hall. And today I've got the great pleasure of having my lovely colleagues here, virtually in zoom. And we'll be talking about two books on methods that they have recently published. So, there's Sophie Woodward's book, material methods, and the book Mundane methods which was good that you've got it there on hand Mundane methods edited by Helen and Sarah. And I'll introduce the three authors very briefly. So, Sophie Woodward is professor of sociology at the University of Manchester and there she's also co-investigator for NCRM. That's the ESRC funded National Centre for Research Methods, where she leads on creative methods. And Sophie has a background in anthropology and is known for her research on material culture, everyday life and consumption. And Helen Holmes is a lecturer in sociology and a member of the sustainable consumption Institute at the University of Manchester and Helen has a background in geography so we're very, although Sophia and Helen are both based in in in the sociology department, are very kind of interdisciplinary backgrounds. And Helens work focuses on materiality, consumption and relationships. And she's also currently coeditor, co editor in chief of sociology, which is the flagship journal for the British Sociological Association. And Sarah Marie Hall is reader in Human Geography at the University of Manchester, where she's also a member of the Manchester Urban Institute. And Sarah is known for her work in geographical feminist political economy. And she's currently leading on an on an UKRI future leaders fellowship programme, called austerity and altered life courses, socio political ruptures to family employment and housing biographies across Europe. And Sarah is also co-editor of area. And I am Vanessa Mae, Professor of Sociology also at Manchester. And what kind of unites all four of us is that all four of us are members of the Morgan Centre for Research into everyday lives here at Manchester. And the Morgan centre is known for its work on creative approaches to qualitative research. And this is a topic that kind of unites the two published books that we're going to be talking about today. So, I'm going to introduce the two books very briefly. So, we'll take Sophie, you can hold up your version of your book, again, Material Methods, researching and thinking with things. And this was published in 2020, by Sage, and then Mundane Methods, Sara and Helen, each one of you can hold up, or both of you. Mundane methods, innovative ways to research the everyday, edited by Helen and Sarah, and the book was published in 2020, as well by Manchester University Press. So I thought we could maybe start by sort of talking about, because I know that all of you have a long standing interest in creative methods. So maybe talk a bit about sort of your interest in creative methods and how that has kind of led to your interest. Sophie in your case, you're interested into Mundane methods, and then Helen and Sarah your interest into everyday, studying the everyday. So, Sophie, did I say Mundane methods, I meant to say material methods. And that's something that should go into the blooper reel. So, Sophie, on material methods, and Helen and Sarah on Mundane methods. So, Sophie, would you like to maybe start?

Sophie Woodward

Yeah, sure. I mean, I think for me, it almost came in the opposite direction. I think I started off by being interested in stuff in material culture. And I, as I started to do that research, I became aware that actually a lot of the kinds of methods that I was familiar with, were just kind of inadequate to understand that. So exclusively verbal methods, for example, or even just how observational methods how we can really use those to understand things, rather than just to understand peoples and also to think about the relations between people and things. And so, I started to become kind of interested in material culture and the kind of interesting creative methods I think came after that, because I was aware of this kind of literature and resources on visual methods and on sensory methods. For I, there was a huge gap or absence of any literature on material methods on you know how we can use methods to understand objects. And I think what I found really interesting was the ways in which actually, a lot of kind of creative interdisciplinary methods were the ones that were really helping in this area. So, things like methods from design, for example. So, like cultural probes type methods, or even what's called kind of arts-based methods. So, a lot of creative methods, they're like kind of collage or other kind of even photography-based methods were really useful in helping understand stuff. So, for me, these were kind of result areas that I moved into, to really help me think about material culture.

Vanessa May

And I think that was something that and that's why I wanted to sort of bring up the fact that you, you sort of have these very interdisciplinary backgrounds. And I know, Helen, in your work as well, you draw from, like sociology, and geography and, and anthropology and so on. And I think that's something we can maybe pick up in our discussions is the kind of the interdisciplinarity of your books, as well. But then Helen, and Sarah, would you like to say something about your own background and creative methods?

Helen Holmes

You want me to go first, Sarah. So similar, sort of, to Sophie, really just finding that the methods that I was using were not particularly always that useful for the things I was interested in. And my work is really consumption focused, but very much on sort of micro practices of consumption, which involve a lot of materials, and really sort of working with with what people are doing within the home. So, it was really interested to try and find some methods that were much more suitable for that sort of really mundane, to use the word types of activities that we wanted to research. So again, borrowed from from different different disciplines, design, etc. And then obviously, Sarah and I have worked quite closely together for a number of years. And we were always talking about the difficulties, I think, in finding appropriate methods. And Sarah's got a lot of experience as well in other other sorts of methods that I've not really dealt with before. And we sort of came together to think about how we could apply these two mundane forms of research and who was out there doing sorry, my internet's unstable, who was out there doing doing doing what, really?

Sarah Marie Hall

So, yeah, I mean, I very much kind of sympathise with what you both said, I feel really similarly. And I think for me, a lot of thinking creatively with method emerged out of doing ethnography, and particularly as a geographer, do an ethnography, which, where ethnographic methods are common, I think doing long term ethnography it isn't so much. And that's where Helen and I really started talking about that. So, for her PhD, she did an ethnography of a hairdressing salon and i did ethnography with families.

And it was thinking about getting out those, for me, that was everyday relationships with more than observation and more than talking. So, I started experimenting with, with some photography, with diaries with life mapping, with go alongs. And then when we held the mundane methods event at the festival of social sciences, I think that was 2017 was it, Helen? we, we invited lots of people to talk about the types of things they were doing. And that was when it really opened up for us that you're just seeing how much interest there was and what other people are doing.

Vanessa May

Yeah, and also then thinking about, because what both of the books do very clearly is sort of sort of show that, that these, and I felt when these books were published, I felt finally these books were so needed. So, when I was reading the books, when they came out, I was like, these are these are sort of filling very important gaps. And this is where I'm starting to sound like a commissioning editor. But but what what were the gaps in the in the kind of the methodological literature that you'd sort of discovered in your own work that then led you to want to do the work of writing and editing these books?

Sophie Woodward

I mean, I, if I could answer this one, because I think that I, it's, I'm interested actually, in Sarah and Helen both talking about ethnography, because I also started, you know, life and anthropologists and doing ethnography, and I think, actually, what became, I became very worried that people do such interesting stuff around material culture, fascinating method, such interesting ways of understanding it, but they didn't necessarily write about it. And so, I think, for me, it was really about actually, you know, I'd hear sort of PhD students or other academics say, what's the methods book for for this, and that there isn't one and, and I kind of thought that that was really interesting. It wasn't that the research and the methods aren't there and they're not happening because they are, it's about the fact that either they're not written about or they're not framed in terms of material culture. So, I think often, you know, material methods like some arts-based method, there's lots of literature on this literature and design-based methods, but they're often not framed as material methods. And I think for me, that became a really interesting exercise to do and, you know, and I think, again, that I was aware of the massive proliferation of literature and creative methods and on explicitly on sensory or visual, but there was just so little on material methods. And I think that I felt that it was there, but it just really needed to be explicitly thought about and focused on. And I thought about this writing this book, a long time ago, but five years ago, before I had my youngest child, and I kind of came back and realise no one had written I thought I need to do this now otherwise, it's you know, it's kind of its, it is a definite gap.

Sarah Marie Hall

I think we were really interested in how we were looking across Helen and I were looking at across the different disciplines who work in and that there was all this stuff going on, again, like Sophie said that there were pieces in about method in papers, pieces in, in, maybe books, but not brought together in this way. And particularly with an interest in everyday life. So, some of the key readers in everyday life, the those those texts, they're often very conceptually focused, or they have case studies, but there wasn't much about methods themselves. And I think you asked about, kind of what really draws, drew was to, to want to kind of dig a bit deeper. And for me, as a geographer interested in time and space and relationships, I think what I always found was that there was there were methods that were exploring different spaces of everyday life, but not so much about relationships and across time as well.

So, I think, if I'm right in saying, Helen, we were really interested in just the sheer complexity of what was happening? as a way to make sense of the complexity of everyday life.

Helen Holmes

Agreed.

Vanessa May

Yeah, and what I sort of what I particularly love about both books is that they are, they are also there they are in no way, just this sort of technical How To books, sort of methods books of this is how you how you do this method. Of course, there's that there is a lot of a lot of, there's a lot of advice in the books for people who do want to use these either material or mundane methods to sort of help them along. But but more than that, the books are very much rooted in these more methodological and theoretical discussions. So, Sophie, in your case, it's about the ways in which materiality is so inherently a part of social life. And then Helen and Sarah, your discussion around, because the book does open with a various theoretical discussion about the significance of the everyday, but then also understanding the everyday not only as a as a substantive topic of study, but also as a as a as a methodological approach. So, would you like to say a bit more about kind of your choice in approaching the writing of this book in this way? So that it isn't it is a theoretical engagement with these debates as well.

Sophie Woodward

Yeah, I mean, I think from my perspective that our I think I consider sort of the audience to my book to be twofold. One is people who do research and material culture and know all of these debates around materiality, and they want to think about methods. But also, for the other audience would be people who are interested in creative methods and want to explore this, they don't necessarily, they aren't necessarily inherently interested in materiality or material culture. I think particularly for those people, it is really about understanding that it isn't just another method to kind of add to the repertoire, it is actually really about engaging with stuff and things and that you can't really do the method without doing it. So even if you do say one of the most common methods would be something like an object interview, you can't do it without really having an understanding of the thing itself. And also having your own understanding, because there's so many different approaches to what an object is what a thing is. And I don't in any way want to be prescriptive about that. But I think that actually, it's just about encouraging people to think that they need to engage with those questions, because methods aren't separate. And, and the final point to say is that I have, I'm really interested in the relationship between theory and methods, because I think the way in which we write journal articles sort of presumes theory, then methods, then empirical, which we all know in practice is nonsense, like none of us sit and decide on our theory. And then the methods that match actually, it's much more kind of going in between methods theory and empirical. And I think I really wanted to explore that a little bit in terms of this particular area, because I think that methods are so theoretical, empirical, they're not, never just, I use my recorders to do this. And that was something that I really wanted to engage with.

Helen Holmes

I think I can add a little bit to that, I'm sure. Well, part of the aim with the book was that we wanted it to be a really broad audience. So, we wanted undergrads to be able to pick it up and use it postgrads,

established researchers. So, it was getting that balance, right, really, between the theory and the the more methodological approach practical side. And so, we wanted something there that would engage those who were interested, perhaps more and exploring the theory more and I totally agree with Sophie's point that it's not one than the other. It needs to be a Much more sorts of integrated. But we also wanted it to be an easy sort of pick up and go, Oh, well, someone did this, my research is similar, maybe I could have a go at that method when I'm jogging or walking on a surfboard, etc. Just to give an example

Vanessa May

As we all do

Helen Holmes

It's that some of the mobility section I should have there, but something that was easy enough for people to pick up and engage with it quite a bit more of a very practical level, but also could understand that theory behind it as well. And to give it that grounding within the everyday and obviously, you know, the mundane aspects and what we mean by Mundane methods as well.

Sarah Marie Hall

Yeah, totally exactly what you're both saying, I think it's delicate balance, isn't it between ensuring that we take our, these these different fields of interest seriously, and show that they have a longer trajectory, and that they can be taken seriously in theory and in practice, but then also showing that they're really exciting and interesting. And I think one thing that Helen and I really had to work around was, how do we make sure that the text is accessible, whilst also getting at this complexity I mentioned before, and we jiggled around with the different themes that we should have. And in the end, I think we settled on a section on materials and memories, one on senses and emotions, and one on mobilities and motion, we had to try to think about how how we could make sure that readers would pick up the book, but then also be able to access some of these sometimes can feel quite dense conversations with something that had an obvious into it.

Vanessa May

Yeah, and I thought we could now sort of just sort of, sort of go slightly deeper into the books, I'm not going to quiz you about them, but just to give a flavour of the kinds of things that you're kind of drawing upon or talking about in the, in the book. So, Sophie, for example, one of one of the things because there's, there's so much I mean, your book is so rich, because it does go through the different theoretical approaches to materiality and the materiality of social life. And then also goes through different methodological approaches. And, and I mean, I loved all of the chapters, but one that I particularly found interesting, but maybe because it was new to me, apart from I'd heard Sophie talking about this in meetings, but to read it was fascinating was, for example, the chapter on cultural probes as material provocations, because I think this really speaks to the kind of methods as playful and open ended. So, your book is very much also a kind of a, I wouldn't say a challenge to social scientists, but it is an encouragement to social scientists, that we, we can be more playful, more experimental with the kinds of things that we do out in the field. So, do you want to just, I'm putting you on the spot here?

Sophie Woodward

That's fine. That's fine.

Vanessa May

I know that, you know, cultural probes quite well. But could you just say a few words about cultural probes, for example, and how they might work?

Sophie Woodward

Sure. Yeah. So, it's, it's a method that originates in design. So, Bill Gaver, and his team created it. And it's actually relatively new, I think, I can't remember the exact year about 1999 kind of time that it was first created, it was created in the world of design to think instead of thinking there's a problem, how can we design something to solve it, it was designed to be kind of open ended experimental explorative. And, and also to kind of on challenge assumptions. So, they did it with older people. And they use kind of playful methods. And actually, playfulness and older people often is not an association people have. So, it was incredibly influential, it's been used in lots of different ways. And Bill Gaver himself has been very critical how it's been used in disciplines like sociology, because he says, what they do is they just use it to kind of make things look a bit more interesting, or they try and shoehorn it into how sociological research might ordinarily take place. So sorry, he doesn't just target sociology. But and I found that really interesting, because I think actually, there's a lot, loads of ways in which we can apply this to sociology or to other kinds of disciplines. But I think the key is, it's about thinking differently about how it's done. And we cannot use it to say, right, okay, I'm going to generate systematic data on people's experiences of this particular thing by using cultural probes, by definition, they are open ended, and they are playful. And I think that I find that challenging. And I think it is challenging to us, it's a kind of shift in how we think. And actually, often I think qualitative research more broadly has had to defend itself against you know, quantitative research and the centre, which you have to be rigorous. And of course, we do, but rigor shouldn't have to mean that you're generating systematic data. And actually, the idea that you can use methods to kind of be playful and explorative. And, and also acknowledge that might not work. So, you could do a cultural probe and generate rubbish data or just get nothing. And actually, that's kind of part of the process. And I think that we are not necessarily always that well equipped to do that. And so, I think it's really challenging but there's so much potential in that for, for using methods that provoke people to think differently, but also to provoke us to provoke us as researchers to think differently about our topics. You know, if we're using kind of playful methods with older people, it challenges us to think differently about preconceptions, for example, about ageing populations. And I kind of love the idea of a method as challenging us as not just challenging the people that we research with, but also also making us think differently. And I think, for me, that's what methods should really do. And that's kind of what you know, something like cultural approach kinds of allows us to do.

Vanessa May

Yeah, I think that playfulness as well, it just to make a plug for the work of a, of a Morgan centre colleague of ours, Jennifer Mason's paper on facet methodology. And, and one of one of the kind of the important messages in that is, again, that similar encouragement for social scientists to, to dare to be playful, because we can, we are sometimes a bit too serious, maybe. I mean, we do serious work, but we don't, not all of it has to be deadly serious that there can be a playfulness involved. And that playfulness can be very important in terms of learning new things and like you said, so for challenging

us as well. So, like, I like that formulation that it is challenging us to think differently, and maybe maybe unsettling our previously preconceived ways of thinking about things and people's people's lives. And then sort of going to Helen and Sarah's book, like you said, there's these three, there's the three sections, a section on materiality, memories, and the second one is sentences and emotions. And then the final section is mobility and mobility or movement. Motion, motion, motion. Yeah. And it's interesting that you because you've both written and so Helen, you've got a sole author chapter in there on objective interviews and Sarah, you've written a chapter with your colleagues on food and cooking. So those both fall within the materiality and and emotion section. So, it's interesting that this this discussion, then is, is very much centred around around materiality. So, I thought, I've only asked you about your own chapters, I won't ask you to remember possibly what your, what your colleagues wrote three years ago. So, Helen, I thought your chapter on object interviews, again, was really interesting, because it it did what Sophie's book also does is it kind of explains that you have a, you have a very clear understanding of the kind of the nature of materiality or material objects. And you're kind of I think, in your research, you've been particularly interested in sort of relationships, would that be? Am I interpreting your work correctly here? So, material objects, as woven into relationships? Or how would you maybe term it yourself?

Helen Holmes

Yeah, the connections, I think that relationship that objects enable relationships to have, I suppose is the way I think I use the term borrowed again, from Jennifer Mason material affinities. So how we connected to objects and things around us and how they connect us to people and places and times gone by etc.

Vanessa May

Yeah, yeah. And you give us examples from your own research around material affinity. So, you give us examples of how in your interviews, you were able to pay attention to the very materiality of the objects. And again, I think that is something that that is, I think, unusual in mainstream sociology, at least, and might speak to your kind of interdisciplinary background maybe that you're interested in the very materiality., so might do sort of remembering back to your your interviews, what was the significance of the materiality of, of these objects that people were telling you about?

Helen Holmes

I think the thing key really, for that particular piece of work was that it wasn't just about the objects it was about the objects in use. And it was those objects in use that sort of brought the materiality to life. So, it was based on a just to give a bit of background on a project on thrift, a three-year projects on thrift. I'm interested in contemporary forms of thrift. So, I would go into people's homes and would basically be asking them in a roundabout way, how they were thrifty and what what objects they used to be thrifty? And what came out from that project is that lot of people had things that had been handed down to them or given to them by relatives, and they were not like the heirloom type. You know, things like stained glass cabinets. They were things like spades or pans, or bits of furniture like everyday furniture that were still very much in use. And participants would talk about how that materiality of the objects and the memories that are evoked came to life when those objects were in use, such as using the grandfather's spade in the garden or you know, cutting some bread up with the grandmother's bread knife, which was a Sheffield steel one, you know, and it was those sorts of really poignant sort of

moments, but very again at that micro level, that mundane level that brought the the object to life, but also the memories of the attachments and affinities that were connected to, you know, the relationships with with people who had passed or was stil, still around, and times and places, etc.

Vanessa May

Yeah. And I think that also then speaks to the other two themes that you're kind of looking, practice. So, what these objects are used to do, what people use them for, and then biography, how they are interwoven in these kind of relational biographies of people. So that was fascinating. And then Sarah, your chapter with your colleagues was on food and cooking? And so, would you like to say a bit more about these cook alongs?

Sarah Marie Hall

Yeah sure

Vanessa May

and the discussions you have with people?

Sarah Marie Hall

So, it was part of a project looking at cooking classes as a space for thinking about alternatives to or speaking back to austerity measures and thinking about community as a space for kind of eliciting some of that personal and political action. So, we kind of, unusual for some of the work I've done before, we actually went to a specific kind of venue and space, where it's usually I would go out and do ethnography that's a little bit more kind of, that centres as it goes, rather than go to somewhere specific. But it was really interesting. So, we, there were these cook along classes that we went along to a colleague, Laura Pottenger, was part of the cook alongs, I went to some, and then we did some follow on interviews afterwards. And this, you know, this chapter was, it was a challenge to write, but I thought that if we were asking others to write about their creative methods, and I should have a pop at it, as well, and, and so the chapter we have in the book is about how the materiality of food is transformed through cooking practices. And that this is something that can be seen in go along methods. So, we look at how the food transforms literally from raw materials to part cooked to kind of these creations to them being eaten together. And it thinks about tracing through that materiality as a method unto itself. And so yeah, I found that really interesting. I think one of the things I really enjoyed writing the chapter was, we'd ask authors in the book to think about how their method could be adapted in into different spaces or times and practices. So, kind of really have to think through well, where else could this be used and thinking how we could use it in crafts and woodwork thinking how it could be improved. So, we really missed that we should have probably, or we would in future, have used some video ethnography work, thinking about Dawn Lyons, time lapse photography. So, it was really nice to kind of write the chapter alongside reading some of the others too. And I guess the other thing I wanted to mention that we've not mentioned already, is that I think that there's a labour when it comes to innovating with method. And whilst it can be exciting and playful, that can sometimes be a lot of pressure to to show how your method is rigorous and valuable and fits with certain frameworks. And what I've noticed is that a lot of people doing that work tends to be people earlier in their career. And I think there's a real courage and boldness to PhDs in other careers and taking on that work, but it comes with a labour to it. And so, we really wanted to make sure that that voice and that group, not that

they're homogenous, but that people who are on the cusp of developing new methods were really part of the collection and support you know, their careers sometimes in their first experience of writing anything.

Vanessa May

Yeah, yeah. So, hopefully your books will have a big impact on our methodological discussions from here on in, in the in the many fields that the books cover, so you know, sociology, human geography, anthropology, and so on and so on. So, I want to say a big thank you to Sophie, Helen and Sarah for taking the time out. It's a lovely, lovely day outside. You know, even though it is Manchester so thank you all for talking to me about your books. So, for anyone listening, I can heartily recommend Sofia's book material methods and Helen and Sarah's edited book mundane methods.