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Matter and Method: The Quest for a New-Materialist Methodology in Management Studies

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This paper offers methodological and theoretical contributions to the field of management at the so-called ‘turn to matter’ postulated within new materialist perspectives. It discusses more-than-human perspectives in management research and provides some methodological directions to support new materialist empirical investigations. Theoretically grounded on new materialism and posthumanism, the paper applies the assemblage approach that focuses on understanding the redistribution of agency to the network of people, things and discourses. In developing three exemplars of assemblages, it shows how it is possible to methodologically encompass the entanglement of the material, the organic, the human and the more-than-human to explore a phenomenon such as working from home. The paper concludes by reflecting on what new materialist qualitative research in management could become in order to generate new ways of imagining management, organizations and working lives, as more-than-human entanglements.

Introduction

This paper discusses the methodological implications of embedding sociomateriality (the entanglement of the discursive and the material) in the study of management and organizations, as several scholars (e.g. Ergene and Calás, 2023; Harding, Gilmore and Ford, 2022; Orlikowsky, 2006, 2007, 2010; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Scott and Orlikowski, 2014) urge us to embrace new materialism in order to produce new knowledge that recognizes the contribution of material things in shaping management practices. Sociomateriality implies that the material and the social are entangled and actively shape organizational (and everyday) life (Gherardi, 2017). To advance the engagement of management studies with the material, this paper aims to embed sociomateriality in methodological concerns so as to question conventions in management scholarship to foster novel

writing, analysing and theorizing of qualitative research (Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021). This effort is nurtured in recent contributions that explore the limitations of *human-centred* approaches (Calás and Smircich, 2023). The first limitation is related to the pitfalls of the so-called *conventional humanistic qualitative research* (St. Pierre, 1997) that has fallen into a predictable and disciplined pattern which relies on the conventions proliferated in positivist research. While scholars (e.g. Jackson and Mazzei, 2022; St. Pierre, 2013) have denounced that qualitative research has failed in distancing itself from the positivist conventions it sought to challenge, important contributions to crafting alternative methodologies have been made by researchers inspired by poststructuralism, postmodernism, actor-network theory and, more recently, new materialism and posthumanism (Calás and Smircich, 2023). The second limitation that pertains to the *human-centred* perspective inherent in qualitative research is that it revolves around language and interpretation, emphasizing individuals' sense-making in various organizational and work contexts. This focus neglects or minimizes the importance of materiality to centre the enquiry on the human and their opinions, experiences and/or relation to others and the structures and institutions they created.

Several scholars in the field of management (e.g. Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2014; Calás and Smircich,

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Authors' names are reported in alphabetical order as they have contributed equally to the writing of this paper.

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2023; Cooren, 2020; Fotaki, Metcalfe and Harding, 2014; Harding, Gilmore and Ford, 2022; Hultin and Introna, 2019) are increasingly engaging with new materialism and posthumanism to contribute to the rethinking of the relationship between human beings, work and organizational objects and the environment (Parmiggiani and Mikalsen, 2013). This impetus is due to the sway of Artificial Intelligence (AI), technological advancement and ecological threats on management and organizations, and the subsequent calls for *more-than-human* approaches to research (Ergene and Calás, 2023). These approaches consider more-than-human influences on the phenomenon studied, and not only include the role of animals, organisms or objects, but encompass much more, such as the climate, geography, ecosystems, politics, health systems and so on. They position humans as entangled in endless ways with these non-human entities. As reported by Cooren (2020), embracing this view becomes crucial to comprehending the intricate complexities of organizations. While an increasing number of studies explore sociomateriality, fewer contributions in management have discussed the methodologies that would sustain new materialist investigations of the workplace (Dille and Plotnikof, 2020).

At the core of new materialist and posthumanist perspectives is the extension of agency and power to non-human entities, in an attempt to go beyond the view that ‘the natural world and technical artifacts [are] a mere resource or raw material for technological progress, economic production, or social construction’ (Lemke, 2017, p. 85). Scholars such as Barad (2007), Bennett (2010) and Braidotti (2013) aim to reconceptualize the traditional notion of a human being and reject the subject/object divide that privileges one over the other (Ferrando, 2019). In doing so, they ‘deconstruct the material/discursive binary’ (Kuby, 2017, p. 880) and argue that everything (including inorganic matter) displays agential capabilities. Furthermore, apropos the relation between reality, researcher and method, Barad (2007, p. 185) goes further and argues that reality (ontology), what is known (epistemology) and ethics are inseparable, forming an ‘ethico-onto-epistemology’.

Drawing on our own narratives of working from home as empirical material, this paper contributes to methodological innovation by putting to work the assemblage approach (*assemblage* is the translation of the French word *agencement* used by Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; see also Buchanan, 2017 and Nail, 2017). Such an approach focuses on the understanding of agency as distributed within a network of people, things, discourses, narratives and other forces. It goes beyond a conceptualization of the assemblage as a concept and emphasizes the ‘action of matching or fitting together a set of components, as well as the result of such an action’ (DeLanda, 2016, p. 1). Assemblages as an ap-

proach, therefore, encompass the *concept* (the multiplicity of elements), the *product* (the action of bringing together the elements) and the *process* (the establishment of relations between the elements). DeLanda (2016) refers to this approach as assemblage theory, while others refer to it as assemblage thinking (e.g. Diaz Ruiz, Penalosa and Holmqvist, 2020). We use the term assemblage approach to reflect the work of Deleuze and Guattari, as well as the body of literature that has been inspired by their work. This approach allows researchers to become sensitive to the more-than-human elements that make up the space of work, as well as to what the more-than-human elements *do*. In this way, the knowledge about the workplace that emerges embraces the actions/agency of something which is usually ignored in management studies (e.g. dust, papers, books, machines, tables, chairs, smells, animals and other forces). In addition, the embodied emotions entangled with these things are evoked in the narratives to open up multiple and alternative visions.

By bringing together new materialism (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Puar, 2012), posthumanism (Braidotti, 2019; Ferrando, 2019) and Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) assemblage approach, this paper offers methodological and theoretical contributions to the field of management and the study of working from home. In terms of methodology, the paper advances a new materialist research approach in management by building on the work of several scholars (e.g. Brinkman, 2015; Coole and Frost, 2010; Fox and Alldred, 2017) who attempted to unsettle traditional qualitative research. Furthermore, it addresses the need for innovative methodologies as raised by the special issue call and for revisiting the relationship between theory and data in qualitative enquiry (see Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021). In advancing methodological knowledge of new materialism, we developed three assemblages (presented below) that show how a new materialist methodology does not follow conventions and dismisses proceduralism (marked by conventional terms such as research design, sampling, data set, coding and so on) to embrace the contingency and instability of knowledge in a material world that is not fixed, but relational and dynamic. The paper offers a methodology without method (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016) that pushes us to (re)imagine, (re)think forward (Lather and St. Pierre, 2013), appreciate and translate into writing the chaos constituted by the entanglement of matter and meaning (Barad, 2007). Theoretically, the paper advances management knowledge by discussing philosophical concerns regarding the inseparability between theory and method. This is very important as conventional management research and writing tend to separate the theory from the data analysis, only to bring the method to the service of theory to discuss the findings. The paper, therefore, contributes by arguing that by dismantling the dualism

theory/method, this approach centres the understanding of the phenomenon studied in its complexity.

In the next section, we offer some theoretical insight that sets the scene for understanding the process of ‘thinking with theory’ and for the discussion of the three assemblages that follows. The assemblages are presented as exemplars of cartography of the workplaces in the homes of the authors. In the final section, we develop a dialogue between theory and methodology and offer an assessment of why a new materialist methodology that merges theory with methods is desirable to advance management research.

Assembling and positioning the work

New materialist ontologies and epistemologies centre on the entanglement of the researchers and the material environment within which knowledge is produced. We explore these entanglements by focusing on a series of sociomaterial readings of the workplace related to the topic of working from home. In analysing our space of work, we are inspired by Jackson and Mazzei’s (2022) approach, termed ‘thinking with theory’, which helped us escape from rigid analytic procedures. Jackson and Mazzei (2013, p. 261) invite qualitative researchers ‘to use theory to think with their data (or use data to think with theory)’ and to refuse any pre-given method to ‘plug in’ the data and the theoretical concepts, to open up the process of knowledge production. In this approach, they were influenced by Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) work and argue for liberation from methodological constrictions and ‘conventional dependency on procedural method’, to craft a research approach ‘outside of method’ (Jackson, 2017, p. 666). ‘Plugging in’ the data and the theory leads to the production of knowledge as an emerging assemblage of theory, data, method, meanings, subjectivities and so on. Within this approach, coding and data reduction are seen as commodification.

The assemblage (what could traditionally be the analysis of data) becomes the device for describing and examining the entanglement of human and non-human elements affecting the performance of spaces, objects and practices (Feely, 2020). Embracing the embodied and affective entanglements of everyday life, researchers abandon the ‘interpretive imperatives, limiting the so-called analysis’ (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013, p. 262) to produce new knowledge within and beyond the relationship with the material space/place of work.

In the following sections we present three assemblages as ‘slices of lives’ that produce knowledge about our home workspaces. These assemblages represent entities, singular in their individuality, where ‘[we] had no methodologies, no methods that [we] could plug into the study. [We] only had theories. [We] had to invent through

repetition and differentiation (Deleuze, 1994)’ (Nordstrom, 2018, p. 216). We observed our home workspaces, but we have not produced a description to subsequently be analysed with the use of a conventional method; instead, we abandoned the security of analytical procedures to put into practice imagination in research.

The assemblage is central in Deleuze and Guattari’s theory and refers to the integration, connection and organization of objects/subjects, qualities and concepts, and how these are arranged to provide context for their meanings (Bend and Priola, 2023). It is a sociomaterial becoming of different forces and elements (e.g. humans, buildings, artefacts, plants, sounds, smells, emotions, narratives) belonging to seemingly incompatible planes of existence that dynamically coalesce to produce something (Feely, 2020). They are constantly in relation, becoming something different as they evolve and transit from one state to another in space and time (Barad, 2007).

Methodologically speaking, research based on the concept of assemblage does not seek to merely understand its composition, but tries to grasp ‘the in-between, a set of relations that are inseparable from each other’ (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007, p. viii) and focus on *what the assemblage does* and *how it functions*. Attention is placed on the productive relations between elements temporarily composing the assemblage/phenomenon under investigation (i.e. the home workspace). These emerge as an intricate, non-hierarchical and non-linear entanglement affecting each component in a disordered, fluid and unstable way (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) to create any kind of structure, from behavioural patterns to ecosystems, spaces, organizations and workplaces (Livesey, 2010).

Empirically, we centre on working from home, a phenomenon that has become more widespread since the Covid-19 pandemic, across many job roles and organizations; in particular, we analyse the home workspace as a sociomaterial phenomenon. We offer three different assemblages of the workspace at home as exemplars to present the varieties and possibilities of sociomaterial research. Working from home has attracted the attention of management researchers in the last few decades, as they try to understand how it changes work and organizations. More recently, interest has focused on the effect of the pandemic on work and the future of work (e.g. Adisa *et al.*, 2022), while earlier literature centred on the adoption of flexible work (in time and space) to meet the needs of increasingly competitive markets, and on issues related to workers’ turnover (Stavrou and Kilianotis, 2010), recruitment, burnout, retention, commitment (Shepherd and Mathews, 2000) and work–life balance (Beauregard, 2011). During the Covid-19 pandemic, lockdowns have forced millions of workers to remain in their homes, blurring the boundaries between work and home-related activities. The impact of the

pandemic on the lives of people has pushed organizations towards the implementation of post-pandemic hybrid and remote work models. These changes have led to the drastic transformation of working life and workplaces, and to the revision of meanings of work and well-being, organizational culture, collaboration and employee relationships (Shankar, 2020). Furthermore, new concerns emerged in relation to the capacity of private homes to act as functional offices (Pestonjee and Pastakia, 2022).

Within the management and design literature, studies have claimed that organizational outcomes can be improved by enriching the place of work and/or by increasing managerial control over the space (Knight and Haslam, 2010). Accordingly, allowing employees to manage their workspace promotes psychological well-being and positive identification with the organization, ultimately leading to an increase in productivity (Knight and Haslam, 2010). However, the workspace is not just a physical space, a container of organizational activities or the product of organizational (and architectural) manipulation. It is a social process and the wholeness of the performative practices of actors, discourses and materialities (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012). It is an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Nail, 2017) and a productive force serving the capitalist organization of work (Lefebvre, 1991) that comes to be reproduced in the home.

In the following sections we do not offer a description of our workspaces as a collection of objects to phenomenologically explain our subjective experiences of working from home, nor our subject positions or identities as academics through a human-centred approach. The aim is, instead, to generate a cartography (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), understood as the art of mapping the affective transformation of assemblages, the adjustment of relations and the continuous change of subjectivities (Hickey-Moody, 2013). Our approach to cartography is inspired by the ancient voyagers, who drew their maps by exploring the territory. The reliability of these maps depends on the relationship between the cartographer, the territory, the weather, the flora, the fauna and other entities. The final product is only an incomplete and ever-changing image of a territory, ready to be revised, expanded and improved. In developing these cartographies about the home workplace, we show how new materialist methodologies can challenge restrictive analytical/writing conventions to produce new knowledge.

As an ‘incomplete project’ (Buchanan, 2020, p. 6), the general logic of assemblages is open to different understandings, criticism and developments (Baker and McGuirk, 2017). The next sections offer three different perspectives on assemblage, as proposed by Kennedy *et al.* (2013), to expose its different methodological potentialities. Assemblage 1 draws on Bennett’s (2010) perspective, founded on material vitalism, according

to which assemblages are characterized by a ‘diffuse agency’ circulating between their human–non-human components acting together to produce a phenomenon. We use this to highlight the agentic power of matter in the workplace, an aspect that would have been ignored by conventional human-centred approaches. Assemblage 2 follows Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) theorization, according to which every assemblage is composed of two axes. The horizontal axis relates to the composition of the assemblages and the tension/connection between its material (non-discursive) and expressive (discursive) contents. The vertical axis refers to the field of relations produced by assemblages, and their tendency to compose and/or recompose it. This perspective shows how the workplace behaves as a sociomaterial network allowing practices to develop to resist precarity in academia. Assemblage 3 is based on Puar’s (2012) work, whose theorization posits identity categories such as gender, sexuality, race and so on, as ‘events, actions, and encounters between bodies [human and non-human], rather than simply entities and attributes of subjects’ (Puar, 2012, p. 58). By establishing a dialogue between assemblages and intersectionality, this perspective allows us to explore how more-than-human entities in the workplace affect the constitution of bodies, identities and subjectivities.

In working with these three approaches, where description and analysis coexist, we explore the potential for methodological engagement with assemblages. We also include photos of each workplace to invite the reader to become part of the assemblages, by adding a visual element to the discursive one. We deliberately kept the stylistic differences in the writings to highlight the uniqueness of each assemblage with the researcher/author as one of its many entities.

Assemblage 1

This section discusses the home office with reference to Bennett’s (2010) work who, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1987), developed the concept of *agentic assemblage* to refer to ‘diverse elements of vibrant materials of all sorts [...] that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within’ (Bennett, 2010, pp. 23–24). Indeed, Bennett is interested in emphasizing the material agency of assemblages which is embedded in the grouping of different elements. To grasp Bennett’s perspective on assemblage and its assumptions, it is necessary to use another relevant concept, which is the idea of things as *vibrant matter*. Vibrant matter restores centrality to things which are not conceived as passive, lifeless elements waiting to be found and used. Instead, things are ‘vital players in the world’ (Bennett, 2010, p. 4), possessing a force independent of the human beings who give them meaning



Figure 1. Workplace A. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

through words, symbols and images. Agentic assemblage and vibrant matter are useful theoretical concepts to understand the function performed by things, within/as the workplace, whether in an office or at home.

In the last 30 years, management research focusing on aesthetic aspects of the workplace explored objects as signs and symbols of organizational culture (Gagliardi, 1996) and identity (Shortt, Betts and Warren, 2013), of personal power to resist bureaucratic orders (Ng and Höpfl, 2011) or to display or hide a certain image. However, Bennett's approach invites scholars to move beyond these perspectives to claim that matter holds a degree of independence, that things have a vital force and the ability to produce effects and to make things happen.

How might agentic assemblage be a useful approach to understand working from home? A workplace can simply be conceived as a functional space where workers perform their tasks, either individually or in group. However, when the workspace is conceived as an agentic assemblage, many other things – that is, vibrant matter – become central to investigate working from home.

In Figure 1 the reader can see the workspace of one of the authors. In this space, numerous books related to management, organizations and methodology fill the bookshelves and contribute to producing ideas for research, teaching and writing. They mix with binders, boxes, papers, interview transcriptions, notepads and many other tools, and altogether can produce feelings of pleasure, indifference and boredom. On the wall opposite the entrance, two white desks and two chairs await two bodies which will be disciplined and conditioned in their movements by the shape of the furniture. The desks afford a surface for computers, printer, pencils, markers, paper clips, post-it notes, folders, paper, staplers and books waiting to be opened to give life to a narrative. Books next to books, paper on paper, words with words all have agency affecting the work of the re-

searcher. On the right wall, a wardrobe contains clothes and linen and is flooded with a lavender essence because of the recent presence of moths. The smell of lavender mixes with that of paper, data, books, ink and more, producing a weird atmosphere so that this space does not seem either an office or an ordinary room in the house. A large box on a shelf stores the transcripts of old research interviews, but the ink on the sheets of paper is changing. Some letters retain their liveliness, but others have faded or disappeared. These sheets are mixed with dust and pollution, with the decomposed matter of dead skin, hair, threads of fabric that rest on the table, on the floor or float in the air. Where are the decomposing things going? What are they becoming? They recall that the researcher has been doing this job for a while, that things change.

That is not all. Think about the smell of the air or the light filtering from the window, the artificial light turned on in the evening or the one that comes from the computer monitors (Katila, Kuismin and Valtonen, 2023). There are insects, bacteria, viruses, noises and smells. There are feelings, thoughts and other things that can be added by the reader. According to Bennett, all these things contribute to a throbbing confederation that can function, work and produce something. Now it becomes apparent that working from home is not only a human activity based on skills and competences; instead, it is about how 'ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts' generate the mood, the atmosphere and the affect which allow and condition the process of working from home. All these things and objects, with their qualities, possess a vibrational or affective force that makes working from home more than just an intellectual and cognitive experience. From a new materialist perspective, working from home is viewed as an agentic assemblage that influences, conditions and makes possible its materialization. Bennett (2010, p. 23)



Figure 2. Workplace B. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8551.12775)]

asserts that ‘bodies enhance their power in or as a *heterogeneous assemblage*’. For her, human intentionality is not removed but works together with things which possess vibrant vitality within an agentic assemblage, and this creates new possibilities for pondering the experiences of working from home and, also, a point of departure for studying management. If a management phenomenon is conceived as an agentic assemblage, then it becomes a product of vibrant matter as much as, and together with, the subject’s will. According to this view, managers’ intentionality is on the same level of things and matter that congregate to create an agentic assemblage. Thinking of the phenomenon as an agentic assemblage requires a new methodological starting space and new empirical sensibility to investigate how agency is distributed. Bennett gives some hints on methodology when she urges researchers to ‘linger in those moments during which [we find ourselves] fascinated by objects’ (Bennett, 2010, p. 17), so that the vibrant matter can be felt. Perhaps these moments are those when the space is empty of humans, when we are struck by the objects, both viscerally and rationally. In the end, for an appreciation of vibrant matter and agential assemblages, and to find a new impetus for empirical research, what Bennett suggests is a departure from anthropocentrism, intended as human-centred knowledge (Taylor, 2017).

Assemblage 2

I am sitting in what should be ‘my office’, facing my laptop to describe my workplace. I am letting myself be guided by the objects surrounding me, having an unexpected, yet prolific, conversation with them. The appearance of dust is the physical display of the passing of time, whose flow would otherwise be invisible. The houseplants on the windowsill are staring outside, growing slowly and moving imperceptibly in search of sunlight. I am writing with the materiality of this space, which is an office but also a small bedroom in a shared

house. This room has also been a cage during anxious times at the beginning of the first lockdown (Distinto and Priola, 2021).

I do not have a proper ‘office’ because I do not have a ‘position’ in academia since I finished my PhD in October 2020. I am an early career researcher, a freelancer, a research assistant and a precarious worker; in and out of academia, depending on the projects on which I am working. I am clearly just one among thousands of people who do not have an office, just like those who, during the Covid-19 pandemic, had to work from home. But this is not an ‘office’ as such, it is many places at once, it overcomes boundaries and creates connections with ‘others’. Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) assemblage approach suggests that it cannot be intended as a ‘static space’ but a dynamic system, constantly transforming through flows of relations involving me, non-living matter and abstract entities not physically tangible but indeed ‘real’. Here, the main methodological challenge becomes understanding the process that holds these entities together and the purpose of their arrangement.

The room shown in Figure 2 exists along a semi-otic/material continuum (Feely, 2020), composed of objects/subjects that (re)produce discourses about (academic) precariousness as a social position and a mode of existence in a post-pandemic world. Instead of enclosing me in four walls of loneliness, self-blame, competition and overwork, this assemblage opened new territories for collaboration and solidarity. It allowed me to resist the neoliberal ideology permeating academic work (Nordbäck, Hakonen and Tineari, 2022), while securing my work–life balance (Adisa *et al.*, 2022). Thinking with Deleuze and Guattari (1987) allows me to grasp that this is not merely the outcome of my actions as a rational being. Conversely, it is the doing of the whole assemblage and its unique capacity to produce relations and recompose itself to become something different.

The assemblage converges and clashes with time. Objects compose and connect this place with other subjects and other momentary worlds, spaces that no longer

exist or that will exist in the future. Technological artefacts (PC, Microsoft Teams, ...) allow the writing and opening of exits to other workplaces, travelling to different universities to meet with colleagues in separate locations, to do research despite the lack of funding, to interview people. The very idea of fieldwork research is constantly (re)constructed by the more-than-human entities inhabiting this assemblage. The laptop is a tool and a vehicle to other places, but also 'an extension of my memory and self, it is a conduit to the people I care about, and in many ways, it retains more knowledge about me in one moment than I can muster' (Waugh, 2017, p. 238). The post-it notes and drawings on the wall expand the mind's boundaries. The papers and books allow conversations with scholars from past and present times. The tobacco calls for another unhealthy break. The small toys under the lamp build bridges to distant friends and colleagues, vibrant bonds with people and places, travelling back and forth to blurred worlds, pasts experienced with other people in other locations.

This place, as an assemblage of material-discursive entities, is professional and private at once, a place to work and a place to rest. It is 'now-here and nowhere' (Nail, 2018, p. 17), but also there and everywhere. This room is a gathering of nomadic selves whose precarious processes of becoming are mediated by close encounters and distant relations. We all connect through this room to creatively do research, while establishing deep bonds of solidarity despite physical distance.

I started this narration using 'I', but this assemblage requires 'we', to account for its more-than-human collective subjectivity, as 'we' are temporarily doing research and writing together, amplifying our senses and potentials. This workplace becomes a posthuman network materializing through an underground web of optic fibre cables. Within this assemblage, 'humans [are] embodied networks of energies, alliances, and filiations situated, and at the same time, beyond their spatio-temporal specificity, intra-connected to other forms of existence through an indefinite number of material synergies and possible dimensions' (Ferrando, 2019, p. 188). As Barad (2007) explains, humans share agency with other non-human components within the same posthuman network. We bond through 'intra-thinking' (Ferrando, 2019), the ability to think with things, to expand our capabilities and reconsider our existence as 'nodes of multiversal becoming[s] in material networks' (Ferrando, 2019, p. 188).

By overcoming human-centred approaches, we realize that our embodied subjectivities do not emerge only from discourses about society, ourselves and interactions with others, but also through the materiality of the assemblages in which we partake. Within this workspace assemblage, we materialize as precarious nodes in a vibrant network that constantly forms and transforms itself, producing new modes of being/doing (Deleuze and

Guattari, 1987). While the pandemic has transformed work within academia (and beyond), often reinforcing sociomaterial hierarchies of precariousness (Hadjisolomou, Mitsakis and Gary, 2022), such an approach offers new ways of thinking about management, even for those who cannot do 'traditional fieldwork research'. From this perspective, new materialist research overcomes the boundaries of conventional methodologies to sustain 'the non-dualistic study of the world within, beside and among us' and grasp 'the world that precedes, includes and exceeds us' (van der Tuin, 2018, p. 277).

Assemblage 3

My home study has been my only place of work since the Covid-19 pandemic. It is a refuge, a place of anxiety and obligation. Since the pandemic, I spend longer hours at this desk. During lockdowns, as many of my social activities and family commitments ceased to occur, I worked longer, sometimes late into the night, trying to complete work that has no end. As lockdowns eased off and colleagues at other universities went back to their workplaces, working for a distance learning university, I continued to work from my home study in encounters that reproduce the managerial university of our time – with long working hours and a strong emphasis on 'productivity' (of papers, grant applications, innovative teaching materials, etc.). The reproductive capitalist force of the office is reproduced in the/my home office/study with an even stronger power.

I have always refused to refer to my home study as an office – for me, it is a study as a matter of principle. It contributes to my overall professional identity, I am a scholar and I study and research, particularly when at home. However, while the study with its objects represents an aspect of 'me/my life', it is the pattern within which my body and the objects that make up my study are arranged that gives a capacity to these relations (Puar, 2012) to uphold the capitalist system of productivity and self-control embedded in our society and work organizations (including the university). My study is not a separate entity from me, I am a part of the assemblage as much as the other elements of this workplace.

My study is a place to do research, to complete administration, prepare teaching materials, interact with colleagues, disseminate my work. Through the materiality of my study, with its decorated walls, desk, chair, papers, books, computer and other objects, the boundaries of my existence are extended (Braidotti, 2011), as they intra-act¹ with my identity as an academic,

¹Barad (2007, p. 33) uses the neologism intra-action to signify 'The mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the "usual interaction" which assumes that there are

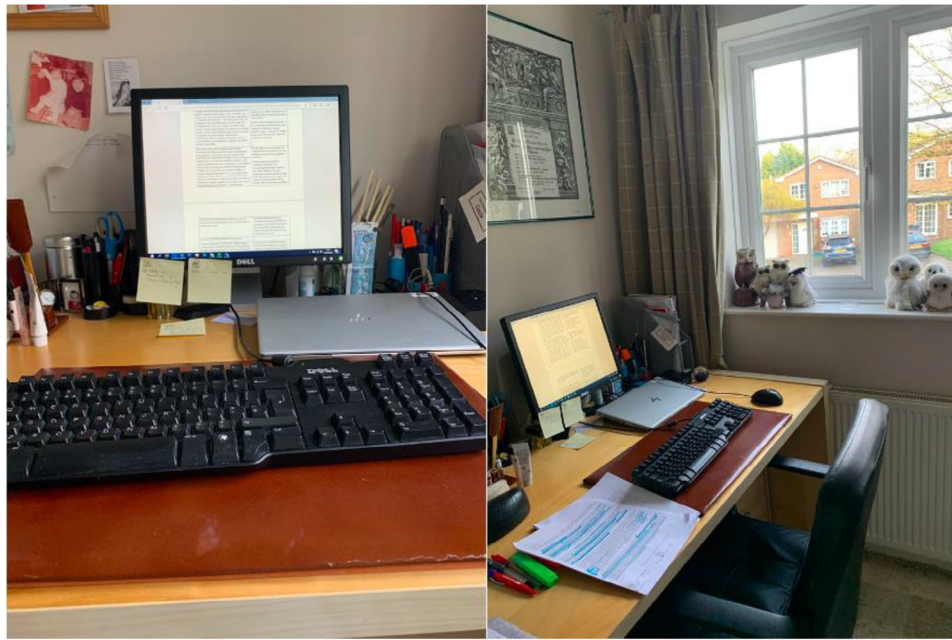


Figure 3. Workplace C. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

reminding me of the stress and anxieties, but also of the satisfactions that my job gives me. In exploring this assemblage, however, the structural ‘effects’ of my professional identity (including performance expectations) get reconciled, while remaining in tension with the unstable ‘affects’ that are part of the complexity (Kennedy *et al.*, 2013) of working from home. One can look at my study and ‘my’ working from home in different ways: as an expansion of things, feelings, ideas, bodies, events. It is not a static thing or event or a representation of my work, but rather a contingent process in becoming (Kennedy *et al.*, 2013) that shifts as things become more or less important, bodies enter or leave (including in the virtual space), feelings change. Equally, analysing it means that infinite different possibilities occur at each moment. My ‘study’ intra-acts with my children, my husband and others who visit my home, ‘acting’ with these bodies when I am in there working, as well as when I am not there, doing non-work activities within the house or elsewhere.

My study, as shown in Figure 3, is the smallest room in the house; it has a large window extending across the whole wall opposite the entrance door. There are two bookshelves alongside the right wall, one is full of books reminding me of the lacunas in my knowledge, the other is covered by fabric and on its inside shelves are work folders bringing back memories (with smells, sounds and feelings) of studies and people. On the lower shelf, there are several handbags, a few are old, some

separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action’.

expensive or presents from family members. They are more than handbags, they held some of my possessions, they ‘walked’ with me to places, at different times of my life. Bennett (2010, p. viii) reminds us that objects ‘act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own’, they ‘make things happen, to produce effects’ (p. 5) and their force and intensity are evoked by their entanglements with other things, humans and bodies. My study is, thus, a force, a spatial and temporal contingent entity (Puar, 2012) that renders even more artificial the separation between the public (identity) and the private (identity). It is an assemblage of professional-related objects and personal things (handbags but also clothes in a wardrobe, clothes that need ironing piled up on a chair, etc.) that evoke feelings and reminiscences and create tensions between my public and private selves.

When sitting at my desk during the morning I get the sun warming my body and sometimes I hear kids from the nearby school having their break. My desk is generally messy, with lots of papers, articles, pens, various types of stationary and other things scattered on top, in addition to the monitor, keyboard, mouse and laptop (connected to a docking station next to the monitor). On the left side of the desk, a pile of articles changes size and content, depending on the project I am working on at that time. In addition to the usual work-related objects, a variety of other things may be left on my desk by me or my family members, situating my gender (make-up, nail polish), age (reading glasses) and other intersecting (public and private) identities (bills, letters). On the walls hang more items that merge my work with my non-work lives: my two degree certificates; a frame

exhibiting a compilation of old photos, each bringing with it a memory of my life in my country of origin; a print of a watercolour I received as a present several years ago, the person who gave it to me no longer on this earth. In addition, there are drawings done by my kids when they were little, a world map and a photo of me and my sister as toddlers. This assemblage of vital materials of all sorts acts to produce different moods, feelings, actions that affect my work differently, at different times, as human and non-human things change, and their intra-actions also change.

The furniture in my study is often dusty and I generally do a deep clean after I submit the final version of an article, to clear out notes and material before moving on to the next project. The workplace is, therefore, a human and non-human dynamic entanglement punctuated by transitional space and time that follow the cycles of my work, while always evolving (Braidotti, 2013). While the ritual of cleaning to let go of a project and start a new one may be viewed as a repetitive constant, it is never the same, as I am more experienced each time, more or less emotionally invested or enthusiastic; each event a new assemblage.

A key object in my study is the desk chair. I had a different chair until 2020 when my back and shoulders became so painful that I could no longer sit or work comfortably. I had a virtual workstation assessment, and I was sent a new chair from work. A physiotherapist who visited me weekly gave me daily exercises and miraculously managed to bring my back and arms to full mobility. The tangible effects of these material objects on my body contributed to creating a body that is ageing and aching in/with the chair at the desk. When I spend long hours at my desk, my body is loudly reminded of the materiality of these objects; the intra-actions between my body and the keyboard and mouse affect what my body can do, producing muscle tension and injury. My changing body, which suffers from working at the desk for long hours, is affected by the 'study' but also affects the material objects and the other bodies that reach through the media of the PC and the Internet. The energetic intra-actions of this human–non-human assemblage determine my ability to work, affect my relationships with colleagues, close and distant, and with my loved ones.

Assembling theory with method: Implications for management research

The three assemblages presented show how the understanding of a management research topic, such as the home workspace, can be enhanced by a more-than-human perspective. The study of materiality and workplace objects is not new in management. Among some of the examples are studies on organizational culture

and aesthetics that have investigated the symbolic and tangible meanings of objects and artefacts (Gagliardi, 1996; Strati, 1999); furthermore, studies based on actor-network theory have introduced objects' agency to the study of work and organization. Although rooted in the tradition of scientific and technological studies, Latour's (2005) actor-network theory has influenced management by offering a framework to explore the connections that lead to the constitution of new collective, hybrid, human–non-human entities. These approaches that explore materiality in organizations (see the studies by Bruni, 2005; Carlile *et al.*, 2013; Czarniawska, 2004; Dameron, Lê and LeBaron, 2015; Jones, 2013) are based on the ontological assumption that the components of the human and non-human entities pre-exist their collective association (Parmiggiani and Mikalsen, 2013). They explore materiality from a position based on the ontological separation between humans and matter, where matter is 'something tangible or visible', dissociated from the world of thoughts and discourse pertinent to humans (Cooren, 2020, p. 2).

Conversely, we argue that single entities do not exist outside of their entanglement, but emerge from and within it. Materiality is a set of forces actively producing knowledge, influencing social relations and constituting realities (Barad, 2007). As Barad (2007) postulates, it is impossible to separate objects, events, beings, doings and becomings from their intra-actions with each other across space and time. It is only through the dynamic intra-actions with the material that human beings can create new processes, phenomena, realities, social expressions and forms of organization (Barad, 2007; Fox and Alldred, 2022).

Such ontology poses several provocations for management research practices and methodology, while opening up new problems, possibilities and questions about doing and writing research. What does management research become if we are to explore organizations and work-related phenomena as assemblages? If reality is an entanglement of human and non-human entities that affect the performance of time and space, objects, practices and identities? How can research practice develop if we view everything (human–non-human) as connected with everything?

In attempting to answer these questions we read our workplaces as assemblages, to investigate how human and non-human entities can produce knowledge challenging established ways of being, doing and knowing (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Within each assemblage, every human–non-human component intra-acts, exchanging, transforming and (re)creating knowledge, producing new understandings of the home office. The three assemblages presented show how it is possible to explore a phenomenon such as the home workspace in a manner that encompasses the material, the discursive, the living and the non-living, and the effect of this

entanglement on our knowing. By attuning to the dynamic relations within the assemblages, we produced surprising new realities out of different aspects of the office event. The first assemblage introduced the possibilities offered to researchers when they intra-act with material entities; the second exposed how a workspace constitutes a more-than-human network to resist socio-material conditions of precarity; the third explored how matter constitutes the body(ies)/identity(ies) of the academic subject.

We have deliberately used different theoretical and stylistic approaches to emphasize the richness and different possibilities of such methodology. Reading Bennett, in the first assemblage, we emphasized the agentic force of the space and its objects as a confederation of non-humans with an affective capacity. In this assemblage, the human remains in the background and the impersonal writing style also reveals this. The second assemblage uses Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy to map the material and discursive forces constituting precarious subjectivities. In the narrative, the transition from the first-person singular to the first-person plural exposes the dynamic transformation of the workspace as entanglements, unlocking new ways of 'doing' the (academic) work and 'being' a precarious (academic) subject. In the final assemblage, the understanding of the intersection of bodies, identities and objects follows Puar's perspectives and shows how events, actions and things are not attributes of the subject but constitute an emergent process of interconnected heterogeneous human and non-human things. Here, the process of documenting the phenomenon as a research methodology remains visible, with the researcher lingering on.

These three exemplars show how fieldwork and research writing are an affective assemblage, where the materiality of the field physically imposes itself on us, caresses us or rubs against us. In addition to the traditional and familiar fieldwork material (e.g. policies, practices, conversations and theories), sociomateriality pushes the researcher to include buildings, walls, technological devices, furniture, inanimate and animate objects. Such inclusion affects how a research object can be conceptualized, studied and written about.

A traditional ethnographic approach would still account for the materiality of the research environment whilst exploring the meanings of the relationships between people and things, but the focus remains on the meanings that material objects are imbued with. A sociomaterial analysis, on the other hand, does recognize an independent agency to matter, thus the focus shifts from the meanings of things to the doing of things. Of course, what our assemblages have attempted is not an easy task, because the advocated methodology values the multiplicity and the indeterminacy of the research setting/phenomena. Mapping assemblages poses a real challenge for management researchers as it re-

quires methodological flexibility, a deep and embodied engagement with theories and philosophies, and emancipation from the secure harbour of conventional qualitative research (St. Pierre, 2013).

In focusing on the home office, we offered an unconventional way of inquiry that allows the grasping of something different and new (e.g. the affective power of an object) regarding the home workspace. If our aim had been purely empirical, the three exemplars could have addressed research questions such as: How do employees perform their work within their house? How is work/employment materialized within the home? A sociomaterial perspective to these questions would open up new problems and new solutions. Research on remote working, whether in the condition of employment precarity or not, rarely accounts for the interdependencies between the place of work and, for example, the difficulties that precarious workers may face in socializing within their organization. Nor in general does it study how the workspace, as a source of agency, affects the worker's sense of precarity and/or sense of belonging.

The task of mapping the workplace assemblages allowed us to dive into a turbulent process of knowledge production, letting ourselves be dragged by the whirlwind of 'the felt impressions of life-in-motion' (Carlson, 2021, p. 2). This recalls Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) differentiation between the 'royal' and the 'nomad' sciences. The former measures and stabilizes the entities and processes that characterize the world, aiming to reproduce phenomena. Reproduction, induction and deduction are the typical tools of the royal sciences, which see matter and the nature of being as essential, immobile and unchangeable (Malatino, 2014). In antithesis to the royal sciences, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 409) introduce the 'nomad or minor' sciences, which 'emphasises the malleable, fluid, and metamorphic nature of being [and matter]' (Malatino, 2014, p. 138). In distinguishing between the royal and nomadic sciences, they suggest that while the first use iteration and reiteration, the latter involves 'following' and 'itineration', a dynamic process that does not lend itself to the application of constraining techniques or methods.

Such transgressive experimental research cannot be standardized as it escapes any 'pre-existing process or procedure, nor use[s] any pre-existing process or procedure, nor use[s] any pre-existing research methodology or methods of data collection and analysis' (Kuntz and St. Pierre, 2021, p. 2). We therefore advocate for a methodology that renounces standardized methods (*clichés*) to cling to security and find sanctuary from the unpredictable flow of data/existence within assemblages. Such a methodology cannot win against chaos but, finding affinity with it, embraces transgression to create new knowledge that disturbs conventional management assumptions 'while fostering more expansive understandings' (Calás and Smircich, 2023, p. 2). We are

aware that in management research this way of producing knowledge can meet strong resistance, as it does not follow induction (conceptual categories emerge from the data), deduction (theory testing) or abduction (iterative) (Plakoyiannaki and Budhwar, 2021). However, it can lead researchers to alternative research paths. As Deleuze and Guattari (1994) claim about the work of poets and artists, novelty and innovation pass through the violent destruction of conventions (methods) and the acceptance of disorder to imagine new worlds-in-becoming (and new research approaches).

Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 1994), we posulated a research approach that resists consolidated and stratified methodological *clichés* and the ‘illusion of the human in control’ (Calás *et al.*, 2023, p.177), leaving space for generative chaos (Benozzo, 2021). We stress the need to imagine, think and put into practice a creative management research process that exceeds repetitions of methods and procedures to liberate innovative practices that recognize humans’ and matter’s connection and shared agency. This does not imply the total absence of a method (or methodology), instead, the method emerges at the encounters between theory, concepts, affects, things and all human and non-human entities involved. We recognize that all these elements are mediated by cultural, symbolic, socioeconomic and historical conditions.

More-than-human perspectives and the nomadic approach allow researchers to craft new ideas and perspectives on social phenomena by abandoning a rational, analytic approach and following the movements of a mysterious world-in-becoming. Such methodologies do not lead to the production of totalizing and omni-comprehensive knowledge. Instead, by embracing non-representational approaches (Vannini, 2015), they steer researchers towards alternative ways of knowing and producing knowledge that offer ‘open-ended conclusions, which would generate even more ...’ (Calás and Smircich, 2023, p. 23). Researchers are entangled with their research; there is no distant and pure observation by an independent observer; no instruments and techniques to classify and code data; but instead, a set of emergent and recursive events generating thoughts and processual affects. ‘Knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing but rather from a direct material engagement with the world’ (Barad, 2007, p. 49).

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