

Daniel Miller

Getting THINGS Right: Mothers and Material Culture

Introduction

You might assume that an approach called material culture studies is intended to largely direct our attention to the study of things in themselves. This is not the case. Material culture studies, at least as it is taught under the auspices of anthropology, has as its premise that we can often gain a more profound understanding of people if, instead of confronting them directly, we take the vicarious route of paying attention to the way the rich and diverse world of objects expresses, frames and socialises relationships. Within anthropology, the emphasis is on cultural difference. Perhaps the single most influential book in this domain was called *Outline of a Theory of Practice* by the French anthropologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1977). This is central to anthropology because in essence it is a book about socialisation. How do we come to be typical of the Kabyle of North Africa, or the Ainu of Japan, or a Texan, given that biologically if we swapped babies around at birth, it wouldn't make an iota of difference to that process. The baby brought up in Texas would as likely end up just as characteristically Texan irrespective of the place they were first born, or their biological parentage.

Bourdieu argued that becoming culturally representative did not occur through direct pedagogic instruction since most societies had no schools or even much explicit parental instruction. Socialisation is the product of the inculcation of habit from our experience of the order of the world expressed mainly in the order of everyday things. It is the way the house is organised, agriculture is carried out and meals are taken that makes gender, age, class and ethnic distinctions seem natural to us. With an orientation towards socialisation, the implication seemed to be that this process is most significant in the habituating of young children. It may imply that objects are central to inculcating cultural habits in the very young but less important afterwards. In the same way, psychoanalysts pay attention to kids playing with toys when they are very young, but as soon as they can speak sufficiently well, they drop their observations of the children's interaction with things in favour of an emphasis upon language and listening. This, I suspect, is a big mistake. I tend to regard language as better for legitimation than understanding.

There is no reason to believe that objects become less important as we grow older. Indeed, because we are less aware of their significance in cultural framing they may do this

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work still more effectively. This is why, in my own researches, I do not study the impact of objects on young children. My emphasis is on the way objects impact upon the creation of a rather different social category - that of mothers - which, by definition, happens mainly in adulthood. In the three case studies presented here, I want to illustrate how the study of objects of various kinds can give us insights into becoming and being a mother, and the subsequent relationship between a mother and her children, or, in the case of au pairs, more generally of child care.

I want to start, however, by acknowledging a problem in that there exists a quite powerful alternative perspective on the relationship between objects and the formation of cultural orders amongst adults. Many of the most influential theoretical approaches and, in particular, those that claim radical foundations such as Marxism and Feminism contain, almost as a leitmotif, a generally deprecatory attitude to things as things. These approaches acknowledge the way objects influence adults and not just children, but generally not in a good way. In this they reflect much older, often largely religious and conservative ideologies that, in essence, try to assert a view that the highest mode of being human comes only with our repudiation of our relationship to things and to materiality more generally. Whether Christian ascetics or Hindu sadhus, it is in the repudiation of things that we see the potential transcendence promised by religious faith and realise our true potential as persons (Miller 2005). This antipathy to objects moved easily from earlier religious moorings to become central to radical critiques, partly because they retained similar moral overtones. So, within modern Marxism, we have terms such as fetishism, objectification and alienation that are used in ways that suggest that people can be reduced to mere object-like status through exploitation. Similarly in feminist critiques of pornography or patriarchy, amongst the worst thing that can happen to a person is to be thought of or treated as though they were merely a thing and not a proper human being. This is not to say that feminists fail to appreciate the positive side of objects themselves as part of our capacity to engage with the world. But the critique of being reduced to a more object-like status remains.

It is not my purpose to critique this critique. On the contrary I want to fully acknowledge its presence. Recognising that if the material culture perspective I have just introduced is to work as an approach to understanding what it means to be a mother, then we need to see how it plays out against this dominant perspective on the place of objects in controlling our social relations. We all seem to agree that objects can play a significant role in

determining who we are, often without our realising that this is the case. But while this critique tends to have an entirely negative sense of this role of objects, in my work, I take a more neutral stand, regarding socialisation through the order of objects as simply an intrinsic aspect of being cultural. What I do not accept is the general assumption that goes under the label of materialism. In fact most of my own studies as reported in the book *Stuff* (Miller 2010) and *The Comfort of Things* (Miller 2008), refute the idea that we are becoming more orientated towards things at the expense of care for persons. Rather people are usually either able to make many and deep relationships to both persons and things, or have problems in developing relationships to both persons and things.

All of this suggests that there are complex issues at stake in relating the very notions of subjects and objects. So, in this paper, I want to acknowledge this, and use the case of mothers' relationship to their children to consider further the articulation between my own perspectives—coming out of an anthropologically inflected material culture studies—and these dominant critiques coming out of religion, Marxism and Feminism. For this purpose, I have taken three instances from my own previous researches, all of which pertain to some aspect of mother child relationships. The first case comes closest to the Marxist and Feminist fear of a woman being reduced to a mere thing-like entity, while the second and third play more with my perspectives from material culture.

The three case studies are taken from three completely different bodies of research. The first on au pairs was carried out with Zuzana Búriková, the second, on shopping, was carried out with Alison Clarke and the third, on media and the Philippines, was carried out with Mirca Madianou.

Case Study 1: AU PAIR (Búriková and Miller 2010)

When it came to furnishing the au pair's room, Mr. and Mrs. Wakeford didn't have to think twice about it. Without any discussion, they simply needed to agree a time when they could set off for IKEA. Once there, they, again, simply assumed that it was not IKEA, the store in general, from which they needed to browse and select from, but one particular style of IKEA furniture. Item by item, they chose plain white melamine: first the bed fitting, then the desk, and then, to match both, the various accoutrements. Even the mirror was framed in white melamine. The only exception was the faux Henry Moore/Barbara Hepworth table light, with a hole in the middle, that IKEA usually has on sale for around £10. In advance of receiving

this furniture the Wakefords had prepared the room in a similar spirit of purity and neutrality. Every inch of the room, bar the window panes, was painted white; even the carpet was off-white. In the interests of efficient storage, the bed had drawers underneath for the au pair's 'things'. The desk was particularly plain; a rectangle of white melamine-faced chipboard resting on four white cylindrical legs, on which was placed the au pair's television and the au pair's CD system. The white melamine mirror was placed on the white four-drawer chest without handles, such that one could barely discern the drawers from the carcass.

In this the Wakefords were in no way unusual. Perhaps half the furnishing that is selected with au pairs in mind in the London area comes from IKEA, and that half is dominated by white melamine. It seems that IKEA represented the perfect source of au pair style, which is hardly surprising, given that IKEA, just like the au pair herself, is generally seen as inexpensive, generically European, in a young modern poise, and essentially characterized by cleanliness, functionality and efficiency. Like the au pair, it is hopefully going to be reasonably long lasting, and, in any case, it is quite easy to replace. When there is a change of au-pair, the slate is wiped clean and one can begin again with a blank white surface, the impression of the previous occupant removed more or less instantly.

When Iveta, the Wakeford's new au pair, arrived she was perfectly happy with the result: 'And the room furniture is great; it is all IKEA!', she wrote to her sister in an e-mail. No Slovak au pair is ever offended by an IKEA room, so their expectations dovetail quite neatly here with those of their hosts. Such rooms are clean, easy to tidy, functional, modern, and bright. Iveta considered IKEA upmarket. Somewhat bizarrely for a firm based in Sweden but whose furniture is actually produced in Eastern Europe, many of the same items in her room cost more in the Slovak IKEA than the one on the North Circular Road in London from which Iveta's room had been furnished. At this point, Iveta thought she understood the symbolic implication of this neutral aesthetic, which seemed to invite a degree of personalization through decorations. It was as though her hosts had thoughtfully presented her with an entirely blank canvas upon which she was invited to paint her own portrait.

She was wrong. Soon after she arrived she found that she was not given the autonomy of this private space to make a kind of home from home as she had assumed. Most au pairs find there are all sorts of regulations about the use of their room. Many of these are entirely reasonable from the host family's perspective, such as putting up posters with blue tack and not with sellotape. But the au pairs experience this lack of control as a significant

intrusion, which means there is simply no place within this alien world they can retreat to as unequivocally their own. So, for example, in other cases au pairs brought ornaments or even plants for their rooms which they never in the end, set out because of this lack of identification. This turned out to be symptomatic of some of the core problems au pairs had in their ambiguous relationship to their position.

This study took place over a year, based on a core of fifty Slovakian au pairs working in the London region. As an example of what has been recently called shadow mothering (Cameron 2011) au pairs find themselves caught within the more general mesh of maternal ambivalence (Parker 1995): mothers both want help in looking after their children, but are fearful of being substituted in their children's affections. So what the IKEA white melamine represents is quite profound. They really do want to make sure that in some ways the impressions made by the au pair can eventually be wiped clean. This is translated with remarkable fidelity to the au pair herself. Central to the au pairs' experience is what we call the embarrassment of co-presence, living in a house that was intended to be a private, family domain where, over time, host and au pair become wary and often resentful of each others presence.

One of the ways this is most clearly translated is in the efforts by au pairs not to make any indelible impression upon the house of the host. On several occasions the host mothers become concerned about the lack of evidence that the au pairs ate anything. Actually, what we found was that the au pairs did take food and drink from the fridge but could become somewhat obsessive about ensuring that this was not evident. In other words they could take cheese from a large block but never finish the cheese, or drink the last juice from the carton. Zuzana had a long story about trying to help an au pair who thought she had left a stain on the carpet and was desperate to remove this.

My aim here is not to provide a general analysis of au pair - mother relationships, which may be found in our book and covers many other domains. It is simply to make the point that at the heart of such relationships are many nuanced and ambivalent feelings, that neither the au pairs nor the mothers found easy to articulate in language and which did not emerge with any clarity from interviews. But, by paying careful attention to their relationship to everyday objects, who washes what, who eats what, where things are kept, how routines and habits develop and the very aesthetic of the objects themselves, these subtle elements of the relationship emerge as profound.

Case Study 2: How Infants Grow Mothers in North London (Miller 1997)

This second case study was part of a serious study of shopping, but was also intended as a gentle spoof composed for the benefit of several friends who work within psychoanalysis, a perspective, I must admit, I am generally not very sympathetic towards (for a sympathetic reading of material objects and psychoanalysis see Baraitser 2008). Based on a little reading, mainly papers by Melanie Klein, I suggested that perhaps psychoanalysis is really a huge act of projection. The stages of development described as pertaining to infants might equally have derived from and be applied to the experience of mothersⁱⁱ.

According to Klein (1975) the starting point for infant development is the Paranoid-Schizoid position during which the infant is profoundly incapable of reconciling its experience of the good and bad breast. As in most psychoanalysis in the general object-relations tradition, external objects, in this case including the breast, are recognised to be objectifications or projections of often internal feelings, rather than merely a particular experience. The good and the bad breast represent two entirely opposed senses of what subsequently becomes understood as the mother, at this point not understood in their integrity, but already the source of all positive and all negative feelings. I would argue that this is an entirely apt description of the perspectives, not of the infants, but of the newly born mothers. The goodness of the infant is intimately associated with its complete dependency upon the mother. It is regarded as helpless; the pure product of a natural birth, an extension of her own biology. But, at the same time, these women who had benefited from the second wave of Feminism in the 1970s had a strong sense of their personal potential and the importance of autonomous development as individuals and in terms of their own career. The rather obsessive nature of child care fashionable at that period of the 1990s with extended breast feeding, an assumption that baby never cried without good reason and often almost a prohibition on going out without the baby for the first year, meant that the experience of having a baby could not have been more negative in relation to those aspirations. I suggested that this meant that it was the mothers rather than their infants who had to contend with this utterly good and simultaneously utterly destructive other being.

According to Klein, this initial 'Paranoid-Schizoid position' develops into the 'Depressive Position' when the infant learns to confront its realisation that what previously had been clearly separated into the good and the bad are actually the attributes of the same object. Regarding this as a stage of mother development, this represents the start of a process

of separation from an increasingly autonomous infant. At this point, objects start to play a role, for example, toys, or the transitional object (e.g. smelly blanket) that Winnicott (1971) saw as helping the infant separate from its identity with the external world.

If the infant's relationship to stuff emerges through play, the mother's prior skills with stuff will have developed partly through shopping. Many of these mothers noted that the pleasure they had developed in buying clothes and items for themselves was transferred directly onto buying clothes for their infant. While in other communities mothers are concerned to get back their figures and clothing styles lost in pregnancy, these mothers tended to channel their knowledge and ability as consumers into the task of shopping for the baby. In the initial phase, clothing the child became an act of pure projection. If the infant had had a say in how she was dressed, she might not have picked those faux peasant lace smocks. So, when she does develop some sense of agency, she immediately declares war.

The first battle relates to the substances which the infant is allowed to ingest. There is no problem at first since the infants are entirely breast-fed, and initial foods are usually home-made pulp from vegetables. Soon, however, a villain appears in the form of sugar against which the mother strives to protect her child. Sugar exemplifies a battle against all sorts of additives or substances that are seen as unnatural and therefore polluting to the pure nature of the infant. I saw mothers react to their toddlers reaching for a biscuit as one might respond if the infant were about to stick its fingers into the socket of an electric plug. Inevitably, the battle ends in defeat, as sooner or later the infant acquires considerable access to a wide range of biscuits, sweets, chocolates and the dreaded fizzy drinks. Gradually, the baby is seen to lose its organic status through the ingestion of artificial substances. The battle is repeated as home-made and healthy foods pushed by the mother are rejected in favour of a diet of fishfingers and baked beans or, if the infant is sufficiently victorious, burgers and pizzas. Parents do not give up without a struggle, within which their concept of biology plays a major role. It is very common for such parents to insist that their infants have an allergy to anything artificial. Infants are said to come out in spots as soon as they ingest any kind of additive or the wrong E-number. If the children do not oblige (with spots) then the parents may claim that these additives cause behavioural problems, such as hyper-activity which is a harder claim to contest.

During the Depressive Position mothers gradually come to terms with the simultaneously good and bad qualities of their infant. But while there is a growing

acknowledgment of the separation of the infant, there is still the desire to remain the primary source of all potential gratification for the infant. At first, the child remains a narcissistic projection of the better (or idealised) aspect of the mother. As one mother noted:- 'The difference is she has got a fantastic little figure and I have put on weight since having kids, and the honest thing is that I don't get so much pleasure, as I need to lose about two stone, that's the reason. Everything I look at, I don't like myself in any more, but everything on her looks fantastic, so it is such a pleasure. I enjoy having a little girl for that reason'. The peasant smock gives way to a more youthful version of the mother – leggings, perhaps.

If there was one object that seemed to comprehensively spell defeat it had to be the Barbie doll. The particular significance of Barbie was evident given what has already been said about Feminism and the passionate commitment to nature and the natural. The mothers do not object in principle to their infant dressing an anthropomorphic toy. This is seen as a learning and nurturing practice. But their preference would be for a figure that was both reasonably naturalistic and, in many cases, androgynous, such as to be suitable for both sons and daughters. Barbie, by contrast, is aggressively feminine and seems deliberately invented to anger such mothers. Not only does she represent the pre-Feminist image of woman as sexualized bimbo addicted to fashion –she can't even stand up. This is a crushing defeat for parents who swore that their children would never succumb to such sexual stereotyping. Barbie is the unmitigated negation to the narcissistic projection of the infant as purified mother.

Barbie's victory is accomplished through her leadership of the barbarian hoard of commodities. These pollute the minds with mindless consumerism. Many mothers claimed it was television advertising and similar external influences which turned their natural infant into a machine for absorbing endless quantities of garish goods. As a result the infant becomes entranced by a world whose values are diametrically opposed to those intended by the parent. This is a world where foods are bright colours and full of artificial ingredients and additives, and where toys are equally garish, non-educational and non-functional. The toy shop as 'Early Learning Centre' is soon replaced by Toys 'n Us a site of utter revulsion to many of these mothers. A shop where there is no escape from the sense of toys as mass commodities reeking of materialism.

The poignancy of this decline derives from the fact that the corruption of the child by materialism directly invokes what the mothers see as their own major defeat in life. They

recall their student life brimming with ideals and a certain purity forged out of their rejection of their own parents' values. This was followed by their decline into more materialistic concerns of home-making and self-styling prior to their re-birthing as mothers. Mothering had been intended to replace consumption as a superior form of self-construction through a new social relationship.

If it is the mother herself who buys the fifteen Barbies and the multitude of other toys that she had previously forsworn. This may be evidence that she has not changed her goal so much as developed a new strategy. Up to this time, the mother had been seen as the major and the natural source of all that goes into the making of the infant. It may be that when faced with an opponent that threatens to overwhelm her, her response is to attempt to introject this enemy and make herself once again the primary source of pleasure for her child. Since she has had plenty of experience at constructing herself through commodities, it is not difficult for her to re-instate her role as the accomplished consumer, the means through which the desires of the child may be gratified, this time through the supply of commodities.

This development in mother-child relations is likely to be redolent with contradictions. This was suggested when observing one mother shopping at the local Woolworths. She had just complained to me that her daughter wanted a Barbie for her birthday, but that her daughter already had about 50 Barbies (a large exaggeration). After looking around for some time, she chose a Barbie using a dustbuster. Two minutes later, she remarked that she doesn't have a dustbuster herself but wants one. Just after paying she noted that she regrets buying this, since it would have been better if the child's grandmother (her own mother) had bought it.

Parenting becomes a form of tragic practice, experienced as a series of inevitable defeats. Parents obsessively attempt to build dams and repair breaches through which pour the growing agency and autonomy of their infants. This sequence often continues into a much more explicit series of conflicts as the child grows into teenage life. The battleground moves to areas such as computer games, sexuality, drugs, parties and other genres of teenage life. In many of these, there will be a similar tension between direct opposition or the attempt to buy back children through becoming the primary source of commodity purchase. But just as the Kleinian tradition is prepared to regard these stages as necessary steps towards the development of the mature infant. They can also be viewed as the foundation for a mature parenthood that has learnt to deal with problems of separation that are intrinsic to

relationships that start with intensive identity and are supposed to end in autonomy. I may be having fun with them, but my intention is not to oppose or denigrate these stages which probably result in mature relationships as long as the constant defeats are accepted. While I have largely referred to mothers, this was my story as a parent too.

**Cast Study 3: How the Media Mediate Filipina Mother Child Relationships.
(Madianou and Miller in Press)**

The final case study comes from a project carried out together with Mirca Madianou. The intention was to look simultaneously at the issue of what it means to be a mother, and to research ethnographically the impact of new media technologies. The reasoning was that migrant Filipinas working as domestics or in the health service often had left-behind children who they saw only intermittently for the entirety of childhood. Which meant that, to a large degree, one's ability to both be a mother, and to conceive of oneself as a mother, depended upon the technology of communication available which could connect one with the Philippines. The fieldwork included research with the mothers in the UK and then some time spent in the Philippines also meeting the children of these mothers so we could gain some sense of both sides to this communication. The main focus was on the impact of the radical transformation in media from the days when there were only intermittent opportunities for connection via letters and cassettes, to the plethora of new media which allows mothers to communicate many times in a single day. Overall, we found that mothers felt these new media allowed them to reconstitute themselves as proper mothers (though sometimes then using this to justify their continued absence). The children were much more equivocal about the advantages, but also disadvantages, of this massive increase in communication. Rather than detailing these conclusions, however, I merely want to extract one of the most extreme examples that arose from our fieldwork to reflect on what the very term mother comes to mean.

As fieldworkers, as well as collecting our own data, we needed to understand some of the older cosmological traditions of the region recorded and analysed in more traditional anthropological studies. One of the most important of these, which pertain to the Northern part of the Philippines where most of our informants came from, was expressed in certain phrases within the local language of Tagalog. These phrases formed the basis for a debate in the 1950s (e.g. Lynch and Guzman 1974) which were reprised in an influential historical study

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by Rafael (1988). The two phrases are *walang hiya* and *utang na loob*. *Walang hiya* translates roughly as, 'to be without shame', and is pretty much the worst possible thing a Filipino should be seen as exhibiting. *Utang na loob* by contrast is generally regarded as a positive trait, and refers to a particular kind of debt (*utang*) that is felt to be deep and interiorised. It may be the debt that it is incurred when someone goes well beyond the norms of kinship or friendship in the help they have given you. It also corresponds to a sense of debt that all children are expected to have deep within themselves, to their parents, that accrues simply by virtue of the fact that your life was given to you by them. As a result *utang na loob* is that debt which can never be fully repaid.

In the case of Andre, his mother had done just about every wrong thing that a mother could. She had more or less abandoned her children in his case when he was very young; she had only intermittently kept in touch and only occasionally sent any kind of financial support. She was working in the Middle East and she only once ever returned to see them, for a month, with hardly any notice that she was returning. After the shock of this sudden encounter and immediate presence, she then went back to a state of near disappearance, within which communication and money returned to being intermittent and unpredictable. Her son knew, for example, that at one point she received quite a large legacy that could have gone to her children, but she insisted that the entire sum went to her abroad and nothing to them.

So since she had left when he was an infant, her son's sole face to face experience of his mother was this single month's return visit. He was well aware that there were mitigating circumstances. His mother had originally suffered considerable abuse which precipitated her leaving. Nevertheless none of these things seem to have marked her son as much as his subsequent encounter with his mother through what was then the dominant social networking site in the Philippines called Friendster. Several years after effectively losing contact he received, out of the blue a Friends invitation request to his Friendster account from his mother. It is hard to convey the way he then spoke about what followed. Starved of knowledge about his mother, he immediately went to look at the pictures of his mother and her friends on her account. What he found there was much like the social network sites of many people today; scenes in which they were often clearly drunk and disorderly. He also noted that some of them dressed in a way – and he could hardly bring himself to utter these words - 'likeprostitutes'. The way he says this, the difficulty he has in saying this; we had

the impression that this is something he has still not recovered from. Within a month he had closed down his Friendster account. No other point in our fieldwork so clearly enunciated the sense of a woman who was revealed to be *walang biya*, without shame. And of all the people who really shouldn't be *waying biya*, the very worst would be one's own mother.

But against *walang biya* stands *utang na loob* - the debt due to one's mother simply by virtue of her giving birth to you. At the time we encountered him, the son was again in communication with his mother. The circumstances were that his mother had maxed out her credit cards and was begging her children for the money to help pay off her debts and avoid being thrown into prison. Despite everything that had happened, the son had absolutely no doubt that his priority in life at this moment is to save his mother from going to jail by somehow earning that money and sending it to her. He would leave college and get a job in order to achieve this, Why would he do such a thing? In her behaviour this mother has pretty much repudiated the role of mother as a given category. But the son still desperately feels the need for a mother. So he employs an aspect of debt we have come to appreciate from the writings of Mauss (1954), but rarely encountered with this degree of nakedness, free of encumbering factors. Here debt, in and of itself, has the power to reconstitute his mother as a mother. Notwithstanding everything that she has done to him and not done for him, she remains his mother to the extent that he acknowledges a state of debt to her. Since the debt is founded in his own birth it can possess resilience such that mere behaviour cannot deflect his construction. Despite *walang biya*, neither she nor her son can escape from the fate imposed by *utang na loob*.

Conclusion-Subjects and Objects in Mother Child Relationships

In my own theoretical engagement with material culture studies I start from a concept of objectification (Miller 1987) which I regard as almost entirely positive. It is derived from Hegel and refers to the necessary process that we otherwise call culture. As illustrated by the introductory discussion of Bourdieu anthropologists cannot conceive of a pre-cultural or indeed post-cultural human being. We are assumed to become ourselves in the reflection of and through interaction with culture, as amongst other qualities, the mundane order of everyday things within which we are socialised. Objectification is not opposed to humanity but its very premise. My positive notion of objectification began life very much as a minority position because at the time people were much more familiar with a very different concept of

objectification found in Marxist and Feminist writings where, commonly, objectification is viewed more as a process by which subjects are being turned into objects as an expression of inequalities in power. So somehow my three case studies need to speak to these two very different concepts of objectification. I recognise that, today, Feminism has become a much more diverse engagement, certainly with motherhood. Others associated with this journal may well have followed a parallel path based on the positive aspects of objectification found in art work, media and, indeed, everyday life. In many cases, this is manifested in their practice while having no abilities of that kind, my own contribution is here limited to observation and analysis.

The first case study, that of au pairs, seems largely to confirm the critical discourse found in Marxism and Feminism. The ideal of the au pair is a series of positive social relationships. The institution is legitimated by the European convention that presumes a pseudo-family-like arrangement where a foreign woman wanting to learn English and who is prepared to help look after children and keep the home does not need to be paid a full wage since they will be included within the family itself, with regard to meals and other activities. Actually, we found that the au pairs most often came to London in order to get away from problematic relationships, sometimes with their own family or boyfriends, and often didn't really want to be part of some foreign family. While the host family chose an au pair because they couldn't afford a nanny and were suspicious of child minding and saw this as the least bad and most affordable option. Neither actually wants the pseudo-family relationship which is the supposed basis for the institution.

As a result much of the relationship is cast not in person to person terms but vicariously through their respective relationship to things. Au pairs are of course introduced to the children they are to look after in very personal terms. But actually most of the discussion between mothers and au pairs is about routines, what they were expected to do, at what time, how often, with what implements and what consequences. So whether looking after the house or the child the idiom is largely one of technology and time management. When exactly children need to be dressed to go out, what needs dusting and with what. Indeed, curiously given how much one expects mothers to care about their children in a rather different way, the interaction with the au pair seems to equate looking after children with that of keeping the house clean. As a result, the au pair herself is seen as something of a domestic appliance with often very little interest in her as a person, especially if she is the fifth

or ninth au pair who has been employed. Which is why the white melamine is so expressive of how au pairs can be present, and, yet, as individuals with distinct personalities, hardly present at all within the home. It was noticeable that male au pairs, who are becoming more common, and who are not seen as a comparable threat to the relationship between mothers and their children, are treated much more as individuals with their own personality. So this seems to be largely a story of objectification in the sense given to that word by critical analysis.

In the second case study, the situation is very different. If an au pair is a subject that you come to treat more like an object, then a new-born baby is, in some ways, initially, rather more of an object. Though this is not a notion that we are comfortable with, so that we try and treat them as much as possible as subjects. Actually the initial relationship with a baby is also largely one of routines, changing nappies, feeding and bathing. But obviously parents want as quickly as possible to see personality traits in their infants and assert their specificity as subjects. The problem is that since a new born baby has very limited capacities in that regard the initial subjectification is generally a projection by the parent. The child is largely seen as having some combination of the personal characteristics of the parents on analogy with their physical inheritance – the mother's nose and the father's eyes become also the mother's sense of fun and the father's obstinacy. In my earlier study what was even more apparent was the extent to which the baby was viewed as a narcissistic reproduction of its mother, but in an idealised form, more innocent and perfect and representing a renewed promise to be all that the mother hoped for herself.

Over time, however, the projected personality of the baby is confronted by the growing evidence of their actual personality expressed in the increasing agency they possess. As we have seen, mothers go through a series of quite complex strategies and reversals to try and retain control over at least the material expression of that growing personality, in relation to issues such as gender, e.g. banning toy guns, or nature e.g. banning food additives. But later when banning Barbie fails, they resort to becoming the supplier of Barbies to their child. In this instance we see the constant dialectic between objects and persons in a more realistic light. Neither is reduced to the other, rather objects become an important media in the gradual emergence of subjects. But they don't just express the person, they are constantly used as instruments of power to retain control over one's own child or to resist that control by the child.

The third case study takes us still further from the implications of the first case to lead us to the other end of the equation between objects and subjects. In this case instead of the person gradually moving from more object-like to more subject-like, circumstances lead to a growing reliance on the object like nature of the other person upon which can be projected certain desired attributes. That sounds rather complex so let me unpack the idea. We could say that all relationships comprise three parts. The first is the normative, that which we believe in general a given category of person is supposed to be like. What mothers, husbands, sisters or friends in general are expected to be and how they are expected to behave. The second component is the actual person that inhabits that category, our particular mother, particular husband, sister or friend and what we observe they are actually like. The third component is the discrepancy between these two and how we deal with that divergence. In my study of shopping I suggested many of our purchases are made in the hope of making the actual person we are buying this for, a bit more like the category they are supposed to express. So all relationships have a more object-like and more subject-like aspect, and the issue of resolving that tension pertains not just to academic analysis but the substance the relationships that we study.

This is particularly clear in the third case, because there is so little evidence available to this son about his actual mother. In effect he has only seen her for a month of his life, that he is aware of. Furthermore, when his actual mother does intrude through sending a link to her social networking site she entirely disrupts the normative expectations he has of what mothers in general are supposed to be like. His response is to retreat to a more powerful normative projection of proper mothers. In this case the foundational cultural model of the mother created by the expression *utang na loob*. A mother is the person to whom a child owes the debt of life itself that can never be fulfilled. But by attempting to fulfil this debt he is able in some ways to recover the mother that he needs. He uses this debt as a method for having a mother.

This was an extreme case but was consistent with the more general conclusion of our book (Madianou and Miller, in press). We resisted the idea that changes in technology are simply treated as casual to changes in social relationships. Rather we tended to reverse this logic. The best way of understanding why and how a new media technology was used, was to understand how that usage was mediated by a powerful cultural category, in this case what Filipinos mean by the term mother. It is this final case that most fully expresses our

fundamental reliance upon a concept of objectification. There is no natural relationship of mother to child that becomes mediated by communication technology. The child is trying to develop a relationship to this complex object we call a mother than includes projections, normative ideology and experience. It's an extreme case, but true for all child mother relationships, because all mothers are created through objectification.

Putting these three case studies together we have something that conforms neither to my more positive Hegelian concept of objectification where the subject is realised through objects, nor the more negative model of objectification found in Marxism and Feminism where the subject is turned into mere object. Instead, we see that subject object relationships come in many different guises and are subject to many different processes by which people become what we colloquially would think of as more or less object-like depending upon a whole range of circumstances.

What the three examples show is how material culture studies can be used to understand what we mean by a mother. The answer is not as you might have expected by looking at the way mothers use objects or the way objects express what we mean by mothers. It is actually much more fundamental. We start by recognising that the category of mother is itself a kind of object and that things are most often used to help us deal with the discrepancies between that idealised object we refer to using the term mother and the person who happens to correspond to that position in our lives. Objects are most important in the process of objectification, for both better and worse.

The final point though is merely to confirm the initial intention of this paper, which was to demonstrate the advantages of paying direct attention to material culture in trying to understand what we mean by mothers and their relationship to their children. Studies that rely only upon language through interviews and focus groups and such like, and then try and use these to comprehend what it means to be a mother and a child are missing out on a good deal of depth that is there in the material world around them. Generally, we recognise that objects such as toys are vital to the socialisation of children, but once language appears we seem to forget to pay regard to things. Yet objects are not just important in socialising children. They are just as important in finding out how a subject is transformed into the category of mother and the subsequent contradictions, nuances and subtleties in their relationship to their children

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ⁱⁱ I apologise for the rhetorical use of over-generalisation. There is little that would be true for all psychoanalysis, and there are of course others such as Rozika Parker (1995) who have done excellent work on mothers and in particular the importance of maternal ambivalence, which had a major influence upon the paper that this extract is taken from.