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Material as actor in the enactment of social norms: Engaging with a sociomaterial perspective in childhood studies to avoid the 'traps of closure'

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Abstract

This article employs a sociomaterial perspective and explores how material artefacts take part in the enactment of social norms by analysing empirical examples from two different childhood studies projects in Norway. Drawing on interview data with tweens, (children aged 8–12), and observational data from an early education and care institution (ECEC), we argue that material, in this case toys and makeup, make a difference in the enactment of social norms in children's everyday lives. Our aim is to demonstrate the malleability of a sociomaterial perspective and show how this can lead to new insights and open childhood studies as a field.

KEYWORDS

actor-network theory, assemblage, childhood studies, ECEC, tweens

INTRODUCTION

Within childhood studies there has been a call for more interdisciplinary and cross-border collaborations to deal with the complexity and multiplicity of childhood, as well as engage with wider social theory (Alanen et al., 2018; Spyrou et al., 2018). Spyrou urges a continuous introspection of ideas, frameworks and principles in an ongoing dialogue in the field of childhood studies in order to 'de-reify "the child" and avoid the traps of closure' (Spyrou, 2018, p. 420). To avoid these traps, Spyrou asserts that on one level, we need to look beyond the notion of 'the child' as a centralised subject and open our analyses to explore children's multiple relationships and the entanglements between human and non-humans, and on another level we need to connect childhood studies with 'social theory at

large' (Spyrou, 2018, p. 420). Here, we connect with a sociomaterial approach, namely, actor–network theory (ANT), from the academic field of science and technology studies (STS). We also look beyond 'the child' as the analytical starting point, to view non-humans, such as toys and makeup as actors that make a difference in how 'the child and 'childhood' is enacted. We argue that this theoretical framework can expand and inform our understandings of 'the child' and 'childhood'. Our aim is to exemplify the malleability of a sociomaterial approach and to illustrate how ANT can be a resource for childhood studies.

Sociomateriality implicitly conveys that it is not merely human interactions that impact how 'the child' or 'childhood' is enacted. Such a stance perceives human and non-humans as constituting each other in the meeting between them, and this entanglement can be understood as an assemblage (Spyrou, 2019). Assemblages refer to what happens when people and materials meet and form relations to one another in specific situations. Exploring different assemblages, we suggest that an open-ended, relational understanding of children and childhood, which includes decentring the child, and perceiving non-human entities as actors, can avoid the traps of closure by opening the field and re-fraining from essentialising 'the child'.

In this article, we analyse empirical examples from two different research projects on childhood in Norway and argue that material entities contribute to the enactment of social norms in children's everyday lives. The first research project is based on interviews with tweens, the age group considered to be between the categories of children and youth, 8–12 years old (Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Sørenssen, 2012), and the second is based on observations of toddlers, 2–3 years old, and staff in an early education and care institution (ECEC). We found that social norms of how to be a tween and the practice of sharing in the ECEC were not only discursively constructed but were also materially constructed depending on various artefacts such as makeup and toys. Drawing on Goffman (1967) we understand social norms as situated guidelines, possibilities, directives and correctives, in other words; the taken for granted informal rules that govern how people act and react. In analysing data from these two projects with ANT, we illustrate how sensitivity to non-human actors can bring forth alternative understandings of social norms in children's everyday lives. We also show how we can explore material entities as active in contributing to the enactment of social norms. Social norms are dynamic and shifting, depending on the assemblages within which they are enacted. By honing in on social norms specifically, we make a case for how a sociomaterial approach and ANT can be used in childhood studies as a tool to disrupt taken-for-granted understandings of makeup and tweens in the first example, and expectations around the practice of sharing in the second one.

In the next section we elaborate on what a sociomaterial perspective entails, before providing an account of how materiality has previously been dealt with in childhood studies. Thereafter we offer an overview of methods used in the two projects, before we explore our data with ANT.

A SOCIOMATERIAL PERSPECTIVE: ENGAGING WITH ANT

Sociomateriality is a post-humanist research perspective, foregrounding non-humans as actors that are inextricably entangled in relations with humans and the mutual enactment of both (Orlikowski, 2007). The term sociomaterial implies that it is not merely a socially constructed world we reside in, but that we must also consider the material and their doings. By this we mean that non-humans, be it, makeup, toys, books or chairs also take part in the construction of the social. Thus, the material and the social are understood as mutually enacted. This perspective aspires to pay attention, not only to discourse and how language and human action shapes our meanings and understandings of our world, but also how non-humans shape these meanings.

Before describing which concepts and tools we draw from ANT, it is important to point out that ANT is not a theory to explain things; it is a sensibility for exploring relations and how these in turn are produced, or assembled (Latour, 2005; Law, 2009). There are three key aspects of ANT that we draw on: first, non-human objects are actors, meaning that non-humans have an impact on what is and can be done. For example, hitting a nail, with or without a hammer, makes a difference in the activity, for all actors involved (Latour, 2005). Secondly, these actors are in relational symmetry with other actors (humans and non-humans), discarding any presupposed a priori understandings of non-human, or human actors. This leads to the third aspect, which is that all actors, human and non-human, are relationally, and mutually enacted, that is, they are brought into being in the meeting between them, in what can be understood as assemblages.

ANT perceives both human and non-human entities as actors. An actor is 'any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference' (Latour, 2005 p.71). It is important to note that while this perspective perceives non-humans as actors, this does not imply that materials act with intentions, it merely helps elucidate that non-humans' presence makes a difference, and that we need to expand our analysis to include how non-humans impact the construction of meaning. Latour calls for examining human and non-human actors as symmetrical actors, however, not as equal contenders; 'To be symmetric, for us, simply means not to impose a priori some spurious asymmetry among human intentional action and a material world of causal relations' (Latour, 2005 p.76). This implies a relational, flat ontology, exploring how the actors make each other be.

Exploring actors in a symmetric fashion, a strength of ANT is its focus on understanding the social world without a priori notions of what that world is. Part of this means a focus on how human and non-human actors are enacted simultaneously; they are not separate entities but are constituted in the meetings between them. As Law and Mol state, 'an actor does not act alone. It acts in relation to other actors, linked up with them' (2008, p. 58). To address the meeting between humans and non-humans we employ, as mentioned, the concept of assemblage. Assemblages are composed of heterogeneous elements (humans and non-humans) that enter into relations with one another and that work together for a certain time (Müller, 2015). As situations change and different actors come and go, assemblages are both flexible and complex. Employing the notion of assemblage enables us to examine how human and non-human actors produce meaning and come into being.

In line with the symmetrical approach, in the ANT way of thinking, the material constructs the social just as much as the social constructs the material (Law & Mol, 2008). By acknowledging that both human and non-human entities take part in constructing how everyday practices come into being, we can talk about a coproduction of the social *and* the artefacts. By employing ANT, we can examine what actors and assemblages produce and *do*. The focus is on how humans and non-humans work together and how they make each other be: how they are mutually enacted (Law & Mol, 2008; Woolgar, 2012). As actors make each other be, and as assemblages are changing and flexible, ANT contributes with the possibility of actors changing according to where, and with whom, and what, they are enacted. To use Mol's concept; we can talk of an *object multiple* (2002), meaning that humans and non-humans can be enacted in different versions. For instance, what it means to be a child varies depending on the assemblage, and what makeup or a doll-stroller becomes depends both on the material and the practices in specific situations. According to Mol, there is not just many ways of *knowing* what an actor (human or non-human) is, but rather many ways of *practicing* it, and different ways of practicing enacts a different version of it (Mol, 2014). Thus, the core idea within multiplicity is that both non-humans and humans *are* different things in different assemblages.

ANT emphasises practice, mutual enactment, and multiplicity, and the results are often unexpected (Law & Mol, 2008). One of the core slogans within STS is 'it could have been otherwise' (Woolgar & Lezaun, 2013), urging us to avoid placing actors in ready-made categories and rather see how they

are enacted in the assemblages. The focus is on the meeting and we see this as a way of opening the field of childhood studies. Before exploring the two datasets, we will briefly look at how materiality has been dealt with within childhood studies.

MATERIALITY IN CHILDHOOD STUDIES

Materiality in children's lives has received little attention, or at least not diverse enough attention. Interactions between children and things have frequently been reduced to instrumental activity, often approached with a psychological or humanist framework (Rautio, 2014). In recent years, a different kind of sensitivity for the non-human has been proposed as part of an ontological 'shift' within childhood studies (Spyrou, 2019). Whether the ongoing dialogues and directions within childhood studies should be named a 'turn', 'shift' or a 'new wave' is debatable (see for instance Alanen, 2019; Holmberg, 2018). Nevertheless, these new directions include a more radical conceptualisation and seek to dispense 'the child' as primary object of analysis (Kraftl & Horton, 2018) and move them out of focus (Kraftl, 2020). Aspointed out by Prout, a place for childhood studies in the field of sociology was accomplished by reproducing oppositional dichotomies and a centring of the child as subject while; 'social theory was coming to terms with late modernity by decentering the subject' (Prout, 2011, p. 6). There is as such a need to rethink the field's basic principles and ideas. Kraftl and Horton (2018) assert that the field has previously determined 'the notion of "the child" as a sovereign, individuated agent' and propose a shift towards analytical focus upon 'nonhuman *materialities* and the *body*' (ibid, p. 108). Spyrou (2018), also argues for more relational understandings and approaches to avoid essentialising the child as a subject and open childhood studies to other academic fields.

In line with this, several childhood studies scholars have argued for drawing on sensibilities and concepts from STS and ANT (see Ansell, 2009; Hanson et al., 2016; Oswell, 2013; Prout, 2011; Ryan, 2012; Sørenssen, 2016; Sørenssen et al., 2019; Walkerdine, 2005). Walkerdine (2005) suggests that an ANT approach to childhood moves us beyond dualisms, such as the perceived dualism between humans and non-humans, while Ryan uses ANT to move beyond the bio-social dualism (2012). Prout (2011) sees ANT as a promising tool in childhood studies, suggesting 'that childhood could be seen as a collection of different, sometimes competing and sometimes conflicting, orderings' (p. 9). And Hanson et al. urge us to 'continue to question the a priori' (2016, p. 615). Thus, generally, childhood scholars who employ ANT argue that it expands and opens the field to steer clear of essentialised and reductionistic thinking concerning children and childhood. Attempting to avoid reduction, Sparrman et al. (2016) look to STS to discuss what they term 'child culture multiple' to open the field of childhood studies instead of striving for coherence. Sparrman continues this work, suggesting 'to recruit multiplicity as a core concept in Child Studies' (Sparrman, 2020, p. 22). In line with potential multiplicity, Leonard (2020) claims that ANT will 'enable space to be opened up for new structures to emerge that may coexist, incorporate, or transform existing structures producing constantly changing versions of childhood and adulthood'(p. 826). Scholars thus seem to agree that ANT and STS can be used to open the field of childhood studies and avoid the aforementioned 'traps of closure' (Spyrou, 2018b).

Previous research within childhood studies engages with a sociomaterial understanding on a wide range of topics, such as children, youth and consumption. Sørenssen illustrates how Disney media paratexts can 'take on different roles and have different forms of agency, depending on the assemblages in which they are embedded' (2016, p. 368). Aarsand and Aronsson (2009), drawing on Latour, show that agency is not only afforded to humans, but that game technology is also an actor in the negotiations of gaming in family life. Also using Latour, Ruckenstein (2010) argues that the materiality of

toys cannot be separated from the construction of childhood and goes on to show how toys can be harnessed by children for social reproduction and change. Focusing on children's engagements with Nintendo DS, Ruckenstein (2013) affirms that 'people are not isolated from objects' (2013, p. 355) and shows how talk of Nintendo DS as well as the materiality of the game console mutually enact each other. Brembeck (2008) demonstrates how the materiality of Happy Meals takes part in the enactment of childhood, as toys; 'suggest the array of possible doings, at the same time as they distribute and extend the human in unpredictable ways' (2008, p. 270). Sørenssen (2014) shows, with an ANT perspective, that the ways in which tweens do age differs, depending on the assemblages, of not only other humans, but also how media texts and paratexts are active in the enactment of age.

In ECEC settings, researchers have illustrated how toddlers' relationships with material objects influence their possibilities for participation in peer groups (Nome, 2017). Nordtømme (2015) shows how space and materiality are educational resources in kindergarten as well as theoretical tools in order to understand the possibilities of play. Focusing on the digital life in ECEC, Lafton (2015) shows how digital practices in ECEC institutions are a tangled net of actions, discourses, materiality and knowledge. Burnett (2017) examines how tablets are enacted in multiple ways, depending on the assemblages within which they are enacted. Burnet and Merchant (2018) also emphasise the fluid and emergent understanding of tablets in the ECEC. Watson et al. (2015) explore what non-human actors do in 'inclusive' classrooms and illustrate how non-human actors re/produce category boundaries between 'normal' and 'not normal' and how they regulate educators and children. Questioning the a priori presumed inherent agency of the child, Sørenssen et al. (2019) employ ANT in a methodological discussion of video ethnography in an ECEC setting to explore how agency is distributed among several actors, such as the video camera, the children and the researcher.

There are several scholars within the field who have drawn on sensibilities from ANT and sociomaterial perspectives to expand and explore childhood. What we are proposing, giving more attention to the doings of material objects, is thus not novel nor revolutionary. However, as emphasised within STS; 'it could have been otherwise' since interpretations and understandings of phenomena are unpredictable and shifting. Therefore, we need more empirical studies that illustrate the benefits of drawing on ANT as theoretical resources in childhood studies to open the field and avoid taken for granted understandings. In the following analysis, we explore how material entities make a difference in the enactment of social norms in two examples from children's everyday life. We demonstrate how dispensing 'the child' as primary object of analysis will not abandon the child per se but may rather offer new insights into and alternative understandings of how various aspects of childhood can be enacted and experienced by including non-humans as actors. We now turn to the two projects, first with a description of methods used before exploring our data with ANT.

ANT AS METHODOLOGY

The empirical analyses presented in this article aim to illustrate how sensitivity to non-human actors may bring forth alternative understandings of children's everyday lives and especially how social norms *may* be assembled. As mentioned, ANT is no grandiose theory to explain the social, rather it is a methodological framework, and 'a sensibility to the messy practices of relationality and materiality of the world' (Law, 2009, p. 142). While a slogan from ANT is to follow the actors, as there is an endless array of actors, we cannot account for all of them; 'The trick is to select the paths you wish to follow, and those you wish to ignore, and to do so according to the assemblage you wish to chart' (Miller, 1997, p. 363). The focal point of the analyses is the contribution of material entities in enacting social norms, and we do not intend to provide a full, in-depth account of the empirical topic at hand.

The first assemblage we explore is tween girls and norms concerning makeup. The data excerpts here are derived from a larger study that explored the construction of tweens in relation to Disney media content and merchandise and everyday life in a Norwegian city (Sørenssen, 2014). The data used in this article are based on 11 in-depth and semi-structured individual and paired interviews with girls aged eight to 12 years old. The aim of the interviews was to explore how the girls experienced what it was to be a 'tween' and how different human and non-human actors took part in the construction of the concept tween. The interview guide had no questions about makeup, however, makeup surfaced in all the interviews as having an impact on how to be a tween in different relational settings, or in different assemblages. To secure consent and confidentiality, the girls were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that what they said would be anonymous. As the girls were underaged, written consent was received from parents as well.

The second analysis is of staff members' expectations of sharing on toddlers during free play in ECEC institutions. The data were produced during a research project concerning constructions of normality and deviance in Norwegian ECEC institutions (Franck, 2014). During fieldwork in four ECEC units with children ages 1 to 6, Franck conducted participant observation for 3 months and held interviews with 16 staff members. The empirical extracts in this article are based on elaborate fieldnotes produced during participant observation. The aim of the project was to follow staff members and explore how they position some children as deviating and possibly having special needs. The field notes were rife with examples of sharing as an overarching valuable social norm, however, we found an inconsistency of when and how norms were enacted, and we also found that this often depended on non-human entities, such as the dollhouse and the doll-stroller. Written informed consent was attained from ECEC staff members and parents of the children were informed about the project. The focus of the project was staff members' conduct; we did not obtain information about individual children. During participant observation a sensitivity to the children's consent in the form of interpreting their expressions and cues was important on a moment to moment basis.

To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms are used in the excerpts in this article. Both research projects were done in Norway and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. For a more in-depth account of the methodological aspects for the two projects see Sørenssen (2014) and Franck (2014, 2018).

SOCIOMATERIAL APPROACH TO EXPLORING NORMS OF AGE AND MAKEUP

Tween is a social category entailing 8–12 years old. Implicitly, the word 'tweens' conveys what this age group consists of; persons who are between being children and teenagers (Sørenssen & Mitchell, 2011). This social category is discursively constructed; however, we argue that it is also materially constructed. Specifically, we explore how different types of makeup in different assemblages come to mean and be different things and take part in the enactment of 'tweens'. Contrary to seeing tweens as residing in a liminal stage, as being between two age stages, we also argue that tweens engage in age shifting, meaning shifting between engaging in childhood and teenager repertoires, depending on the assemblages (Sørenssen, 2015).

There are social norms that govern how to 'do tween' in different assemblages, and when examining interviews with tween girls we found that makeup was an actor that *did* something for the persona 'tween girl'. By employing ANT and a sociomaterial perspective we explore the multiplicity of both

makeup and age, being and meaning different things when enacted in different assemblages. In the interviews, makeup surfaced as an ambivalent actor in the enactment of social norms, depending on when and where makeup was acceptable. The norms enacted concerning the 'rights' and 'wrongs' of makeup use, differed, depending on the materiality of the makeup and the type of assemblage it was enacted in. By dispensing 'the child' as primary object of analysis (Kraftl & Horton, 2018) we perceive makeup as an actor. When asked about what was typical for their age, the girls often identified makeup as an age denominator. Tone, aged 10, said in an interview that she might start wearing makeup soon when discussing teen magazines:

Tone: It's [the magazines] mostly about makeup, I don't really care about makeup, but just in case I'm going to start using makeup soon.
Ingvild: Oh, do you think that you'll start using makeup soon?
Tone: Yes, at birthdays and stuff, mom and dad said that I'm big enough to wear a little makeup at birthdays. Mom has to teach me first. Some of the girls in my class look horrible when they use makeup.
Ingvild: Girls in your class wear makeup?
Tone: Yeah, my friend Enid had so much mascara on at school, and a boy bumped into her, and she was really hurt and started to cry, and the mascara ran all over her face, it was not pretty.
Ingvild: What do you think about them using makeup?
Tone: It's stupid. I don't understand why their parents let them.
Ingvild: Why not?
Tone: Because we're not big enough that we can start wearing makeup

Tone communicated that makeup contributed to social norms of doing age, suggesting it was inappropriate for girls her age to use makeup. By telling us that her mother has to teach her how to use make up before using it, makeup became part of an assemblage where norms of age and maturity were central elements and where makeup can be seen as a rite of passage—when you are old enough. Several of the girls interviewed cited age as a limit for wearing makeup, telling stories of other girls performing age and girlhood 'wrong'. Tone also explained that 'we're not big enough that we can start wearing makeup', and Sandy, age 9, when talking of makeup stated, 'It's not fitting for nine-year olds'. Through talking about makeup, Tone and Sandy were describing social norms for doing tween and how makeup was part of this tween assemblage. They also partook in defining these norms of doing age. We can also, in the excerpt above, see how the aesthetic and the mere materiality of makeup, through the density of colour, takes part in the enactment of social norms for tween girls as Tone gives examples of girls looking 'horrible' when wearing too much, and when the mascara is runny it is 'not pretty'.

What is interesting is that even though the girls all seemed to agree that makeup was for older girls, there was also talk of makeup as being acceptable in some tween assemblages. Through an ANT lens, we can see that makeup *is* something different in a school assemblage than a birthday party assemblage, and that it is an actor that contributes to the enactment of social norms. Tone stated that her parents thought her old enough to wear makeup at birthday parties. As with previous research on for example Disney media paratexts (Sørenssen, 2016) makeup came to *mean*, *do* and *be* different things in different assemblages, depending how it was enacted by both in a school setting, a party setting, and the girls' voices. Thus, we can talk of makeup as an 'object multiple' (Mol, 2014); at school it is inappropriate, while at birthday parties, which several of the girls reported on, it was part of an accepted assemblage. The ontological status of either the makeup or the girls must not be taken for granted as ANT bears with it an anti-essentialist ontology, and we need to continuously question the a

priori. As Sparrman (2020) argues, multiplicity is an asset, and this perspective allows for a complex and dynamic understanding of social norms regarding tweens and makeup.

Within the category of makeup there seemed to be a subcategory of what can be perceived as children's makeup, items specifically targeting the tween group. Some of the girls talked about items with the cartoon dog Snoopy on it, like pocket mirrors, strawberry perfume and lip-gloss. These items, unlike the lipstick and mascara, were described as part of an accepted assemblage. Lip-gloss, for example was one such item.

Elisabeth: I have some lipstick, well not lipstick but like…
Sandy: Chap stick.
Elisabeth: Yeah, chap stick, and those that glitter.
Sandy: Lip-gloss.
Ingvild: Lip-gloss, is that makeup?
Sandy: No, it's like lipstick only more for children, it's a mixture of lipstick and chap stick, a lot of nine-year olds have it.

In the excerpt we see a type of commodity made for tweens, where the makeup is inscribed differently to allow tweens to act like children while simultaneously trying out a youth repertoire. Lip-gloss is a hybrid, a blend of chap stick, against dry lips, and lipstick, which can be classified as a means of changing one's looks. Non-human actors like makeup and hybrid makeup (lip-gloss) allowed the girls to try, but not commit to the idea of makeup, as makeup is seen as something older girls do. This reflects the study by Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2005) who argue that tweens play youth in a safe and distant way.

The materiality of makeup as an actor both facilitated and restricted age shifting. It was one of several actors in the enactment of social norms where doing age was different, depending on the assemblage wherein it was enacted. Makeup served as an example of limits of age performances, as the girls explained what type of makeup was, or was not, appropriate. This had to do with the inherent qualities of the makeup, as lip-gloss is lightly coloured, while lipstick is colour dense, but it also depended on the relational context—lipstick could be used at parties and not school, while lip-gloss could be used at both. Lipstick came to mean something different than lip-gloss. Visually, lipstick is not as discrete as lip-gloss. However, lipstick was not always unacceptable; it was enacted as acceptable for these girls if used in a proper fashion, in the right contexts like parties, and when playing dress up.

Tweens as a concept is often used in media discussions about sexualisation of children (Bragg et al., 2011) and makeup and clothing are often seen as part of this (Cook & Kaiser, 2004). Research using discourse analysis such as that by Meyer (2007) sees makeup, through the eyes of parents, as products that 'possess sexual connotations' (Meyer, 2007, p. 93) or Kennedy (2018) who emphasises representations of tweens and suggests that tweens is a 'discursively constructed moment' (Kennedy, 2018, p. 16). However, as we have shown in this section, it is not solely discursively constructed, materiality also takes part in the enactment of childhood (Brembeck, 2008). By using ANT and a sociomaterial perspective, including non-humans as actors, we can open the field by exploring the possibility of both humans and non-humans to be different things in different assemblages, be it age shifting or the multiplicity of lipstick. A sociomaterial perspective allows for a different focus, allowing us to explore beyond the representations and discourses and explore how different actors enact each other and the social norms of when, where and with what/whom makeup are considered to be (un)acceptable.

We now turn to how ANT can open up an understanding of the enactment of social norms of sharing in an ECEC institution by including non-humans as actors.

SOCIOMATERIAL APPROACH TO NORMS OF SHARING IN ECEC INSTITUTIONS

The ECEC setting is entrenched with different norms and rules through which staff members regulate and evaluate children. Being able to share is one such norm. However, in observing everyday activities in ECEC units, there were seemingly a myriad of rules and norms for when and how to share (or not). The norms and adult expectations of sharing were particular visible when children did not live up to them. In the following, we focus on two incidents in which children fail to meet personnel's expectations and a norm of sharing (and not sharing) is verbalised. The children's perspective and their understanding of when and how to share is *not* explored here. The aim is to disrupt taken-for-granted understandings of sharing as a stable concept by introducing a focus on how material makes a difference to when, and how, adults' expectations of sharing becomes apparent, thus opening up for how norms of sharing are flexible and shifting depending on the assemblages.

The following analysis explores how material is an actor that makes a difference in how and which norms of sharing become imposed on children by ECEC personnel. Two incidents observed in a Norwegian ECEC unit for children age 1–3 years are explored with sensitivity directed towards non-human actors. The analysis focuses on the material to show that including the material may make a difference. Previous research on the topic of sharing often revolves around a focus on children's development and (in)abilities. Sharing has for the most part been studied as an ability children develop with age (Olson & Spelke, 2008) and something that is related to other individual qualities such as empathy, prosocial behaviour and caring for others (e.g. Alvestad, 2012; Brownell et al., 2009). As such, sharing is commonly evaluated and assessed as part of a child's age-appropriate development. With the use of ANT, however, attention can be shifted from sharing as a competence or ability located within the child, towards relational understandings of sharing as flexible norms dependent on the relations between children, material objects and ECEC personnel. As such, the following analysis represents an alternative to previous approaches on sharing.

The myriad of rules and norms regarding when and how children were expected to share, and when not to, ranged from requiring children to share the same play object at the same time, to taking turns, to norms of not sharing as the one who had it first was given temporary ownership. In informal conversation and interviews, ECEC personnel portrayed some children as 'not good at sharing' based on a child's ability to maneuver these norms. A child's ability or willingness to share with other children is often seen as part of a child's social competence, from which some children become constructed as incompetent and potentially in need of special educational support (Franck, 2014, 2018). Exploring how material actors contribute to the enactment of norms of sharing sheds a different light on the rules and regulations from which adults assess and position children.

The following sequence takes place inside a unit for toddlers during 'free-play'. Similar incidents were quite common in the ECEC everyday life. A girl expresses unwillingness to share a toy with another child, and a staff member intervenes with the directive that children must share. To share in this incident means playing with the same object at the same time. This incident may be analysed in several ways, from which some aspects may become disclosed at the expense of others. As an alternative to seeing sharing as a social norm established a priori or as a competence a child may possess (or not), we focus on how the material may make a difference in situations where ECEC personnel expresses norms of sharing.

> A dollhouse stands on top of a small table, against the wall, in the same height as the
> young children. Lisa (age 2,5) is standing in front of the dollhouse, holding it with both
> hands and pressing a signal bell. Peter (age 2,5) walks up next to Lisa and reaches for

the dollhouse. Lisa pulls the house towards herself, and away from Peter. An ECEC staff member tells Lisa they have to share the dollhouse and puts the dollhouse back in its original position in the middle of the table. Lisa starts to cry and yell while the staff member talks to her in what seems to be an attempt to calm her down and explain once more the necessity of sharing. Moments later, the staff member tells me that Lisa is not very good at sharing.

The dollhouse is relatively big in relation to the young children's physical bodies, as well as stable and heavy for toddlers to move. The dollhouse is wide, with room for two toddlers to stand side by side on one side of the house. From the perspective of an adult, the physical appearance of the dollhouse in meeting the children's bodies opens a possibility for children to share, in terms of playing with the same material at the same time. In addition, the design of the dollhouse (rooms, furniture, windows, figures) can be seen as entrenched in discourses of what is often considered a proper and highly valued way of playing together by ECEC personnel, namely role-play. As pointed out by Ruckenstein '...the materiality of toys intertwines with prominent ideologies and narratives' (Ruckenstein, 2010, p. 501). The qualities of the material are not set a priori the analyses, but rather explored in relation to other actors in the assemblage. In other words, the dollhouse's qualities are context dependent and relational qualities, for example, physical qualities (stability, weight and width) in relation to the toddler's bodies and the adults' gaze, and the design of the dollhouse is entangled with discourses of proper play in relation to the ECEC context and personnel. Focusing on the dollhouse's qualities (as they come into being when meeting children's bodies, ECEC personnel and discourses of play) brings attention to how the material plays a part in whether or not children are expected to share. In other words, the dollhouse makes a difference and does something to the other actors (cf. Latour, 2005). That is not to say the dollhouse *determines* what takes place. As part of a flexible assemblage the actors are mutually enacted (Law & Mol, 2008), however, it is in relation to the other actors (e.g. children's' bodies, staff, discourses) that the dollhouse comes into being as a stable, role-playing arena and play object that personnel expect children to share.

The force of the dollhouse as a material actor becomes even more visible when related to another somewhat similar incident at the same institution:

> A doll-stroller was used daily by the young children inside the ECEC unit. There was just enough room for the stroller to be pushed around the dining table and back and forth on the floor. The children seemed to enjoy putting various things into the stroller, such as Lego, pillows, and other toys. A boy named Martin (age 2) holds the stroller when Jonah (age 2) walks up to him and attempts to hold the handlebars. One of the ECEC personnel sees the situation and tells Jonah that Martin had the stroller first and Jonah must wait and find something else to play with until Martin is finished playing with the stroller.

In this incident, a social norm of *not* sharing, or temporary ownership, is enacted and expressed by personnel. Continuing a focus on the material actor in the assemblage, one could on the one hand claim that the doll-stroller has similar properties to the dollhouse; being quite large in relation to the children's bodies with possible associations with role-play. However, the doll-stroller was commonly used as a mode of transport and not role-play, as well as equipped with wheels and handlebars, making it easy to move while also being stable enough for young children to lean on while moving. As such, the doll-stroller could be said to enable and even encourage children's movement across the room. It is not just the child 'using' the doll-stroller, the stroller actually does something with the child. It enables a toddler to move fast and with stability and as such does something with the child-actors movement and latitude (cf. Nome, 2017). However, more than one toddler attempting to steer and move at a relative high speed within the confined

space of an ECEC unit can be challenging for personnel. The materiality of the stroller, the limited space of the unit, and toddlers' physical bodies are as such intertwined with the social norm of *not* sharing enacted in this incident.

As mentioned, in the ECEC institutions there was a myriad of rules and norms for when and how to share (or not), involving various play objects, food and other materials (for more details see Franck, 2018). While sharing always involved material objects, ECEC personnel's reflections would seldom include the material at hand, and instead solely focus on the child. With a sociomaterial perspective on the other hand, attention may be given to how material actors contribute to the enactment of norms through which personnel regulate and categorise children (cf. Watson et al., 2015). Including the material as an actor in analyses may as such provide alternative understandings, shedding light on how norms of sharing, children, staff members and materiality become mutually enacted in specific situations.

ENGAGING WITH ANT TO EXPLORE THE MATERIAL IN SOCIAL NORMS

In this article we have demonstrated how a sociomaterial perspective and ANT may be a resource for childhood studies. Specifically, we have explored how material entities contribute, as actors, to the enactment of social norms in two different research projects in Norway, with different age groups and using different methods. In the case of makeup and tweens, ANT opens a multiplicity of age shifting by not essentialising age, and a sociomaterial perspective opens for the potential multiplicity of makeup. By dispensing 'the child' as primary object of analysis and exploring the girls in relation to other actors in different assemblages, we can see the flexibility of doing age as the girls engage in age shifting depending on the actors in the assemblages. In the case of ECEC we show how play objects in relation to the toddlers' bodies, discourses and ECEC personnel contribute to a sociomaterial arrangement that makes the enactment of norms of (not) sharing possible. With attention directed to non-human actors, the analysis opens alternative understandings that no longer position sharing solely as an ability located within a child and developed at a certain age, and instead reveals that sharing is a social norm enacted in assemblages of both human and non-human actors.

We argue that a sociomaterial approach, and ANT specifically, can contribute to childhood studies to help avoid the 'traps of closure'. By decentring 'the child' through a sociomaterial perspective childhood, scholars and practitioners can explore and widen their understanding of how 'the child' is enacted in different assemblages. Adhering to Kraftl (2020) we have demonstrated that one can understand children and childhood by moving the child out of focus to instead concentrate on the assemblages in order to understand children's positions within the given situation. Shifting focus brings forth new aspects and generates alternative understandings, such as the shifting qualities of age and social norms among tweens, and how sharing, as a social norm, depends on several actors and not only a child's abilities. Whereas essentialising children runs the risk of problematising the individual child, a more relational sociomaterial perspective can help us avoid the trap of essentialising children by exploring how non-human actors take part in the enactment of norms and regulations through which children are understood. This implies a sensitivity to non-human actors, for how and what children *are* does not solely depend on the child or other human relations; it also depends on human and non-human entanglements. In other words, a sociomaterial perspective may provide new understandings when interpreting different kinds of data from the everyday life of children of all ages.

The aforementioned slogan of STS is that 'it could have been otherwise', and as such our analyses are not the only or the best interpretation of events. However, what this perspective enables is an

open-ended relational understanding of children's everyday lives. As suggested by Sparrman (2020) and Hanson et al. (2016) we should avoid a priori ideas and reductionist and essentialised thinking. In exploring social norms as entangled in relations between human and non-human actors and by focusing on how material entities are active in enacting social norms, we open our analysis for a more relational understanding of children and childhood and avoid the reductionist and essentialist 'traps of closure'.

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