



Methods for Change

# Object-oriented Interviews

Dr Jennifer Owen, *Cardiff University*

Dr Amy Barron and Dr Laura Pottinger,  
*The University of Manchester*

*Corresponding author*

*Dr Jennifer Owen*

*owenj4@cardiff.ac.uk*

# Object-oriented Interviews

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*Object-oriented Interviews involve talking about and with objects to learn about the everyday lives of different people. The interview might happen around objects which have been deliberately selected by the participant or interviewer, or it might unfold in a more ad hoc way, talking around a loose collection of objects.* Either way encountering objects happens as a result of a participant-led tour of their space or when undertaking a task together, such as sorting or cleaning. Object-orientated interviews may take place in a participant's home, at their workplace, or even in a self-storage unit, in order to see the objects in-situ and allow for opportunities to handle them.

Rather than being determined by a list of questions, object-oriented-interviews are often concerned with the journey that more open discussions about objects might take us on. Participants are encouraged to reflect on their relationship with their objects, how this may have changed over time, and is revealed by where the object resides. Approaching the interview from a recollection of memories or feelings associated with an object(s) leads organically to narratives of an individual's personal or family biography, including discussion of responsibilities, challenges, hopes, and fears.



## How does this method create or contribute to change?

As with many social science research methods, a lot of change occurs in the process of undertaking Object-oriented Interviews. This can vary from a participant having a realisation or expressing emotion, to being a subtle thought or feeling that 'sticks around' with a participant for a while after the interview has finished. Often these moments of change occur because participants are engaging with objects that they had stored away or forgotten, which may signify an important person, place, or event in their life. Participants have described object-orientated interviews as being cathartic, as they have provided the opportunity to share and reflect in-depth on their experiences, such as bereavement, instability, or strains on relationships. Throughout the interview, the researcher takes on the role of a supportive listener and is equipped with information about advice and support services should the participant need them.

Object-oriented Interviews can also contribute to the creation of change in a broader sense, for businesses, charities, or organisations. The material collected from Object-oriented Interviews provides an in-depth insight into people's lived experiences of using particular services or ways in which their daily needs are being met or not. This information can be used when building the case for funding or investment in services, such as domestic support, highlight ways in which these services can be improved to better support clients, and also be used in the lobbying of councils and national governments.

## What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Object-orientated interviews are a form of object elicitation which became popular in the social sciences during the 'material turn' of the 1990s. This shift led researchers to focus on other parts of consumption, other than acquiring an item, to include using, keeping, and disposal. Research in this area worked to better understand the mundane and everyday interactions we have with our things, which are fundamental to our identities, homes, and relationships. A number of approaches were developed to understand objects as parts of networks or assemblages, or focusing on their 'affective' qualities, but object-orientated interviews take the approach that objects are 'biographical'. This means that they are enlivened by the memories and emotions endowed upon them, and therefore become an extension of the self.

The object-orientated interview combines the method of using objects to elicit responses from participants with home tours or 'go-alongs' and/or hands-on tasks such as sorting or cleaning. The tactility of picking up and viewing objects as part of a tour or task, means that objects can be examined, touched, and even smelt by the participant if they want. Unlike traditional object elicitation methods, object-orientated interviews also allow for instances when objects are not visible but can be talked about in a general or collective sense. For example, a participant could gesture to a box and talk about the contents belonging to their child and this would generate discussions around parenthood and care. The box could be opened during the interview to look at specific items, but it is not necessary for the method to work.



## Why might I want to use Object-oriented Interviews?

- Object-oriented Interviews are a great means to talk about the mundane things that make up our everyday lives, but we rarely pay much attention to. In particular they are well suited to research about people's homes, as this is where we keep most of our things.
- They can provide rich insights into an individual's life course. Talking about and with objects can be used to discuss significant life events such as divorce or bereavement, or transitions including becoming an adult or ageing.
- Object-oriented Interviews help participants to untangle complex processes that make up their lives. The tactile nature of this method helps participants to talk about emotions, feelings, and memories to a greater depth than in a more traditional interview.
- Participants have a large degree of autonomy in choosing the direction and content of the interview, so can decide what they would or would not like to talk about. As a researcher noting which objects are ignored or avoided can also be revealing.
- Object-orientated interviews provide large quantities of rich data as participant's recount their everyday experiences, as well as their reflections on how these relate or are significant to broader issues or concerns.
- Taking part in object-interviews can be cathartic for participants, as they have the opportunity to share and reflect in-depth on their experiences in a supportive environment, and with someone outside of their immediate networks.

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## Step by step guide to using Object-oriented Interviews:

**1. Recruit participants.** This can be done through gatekeepers, advertising on social media or specific community platforms, or word of mouth. Working with gatekeepers can help you get in touch with people who might not be reachable in other ways, such as service users or marginalised groups.

*If you are working with a gatekeeper, you might need to come up with a partnership agreement together. This would cover issues such as the sharing of data, which may be important for participants to know before they agree to take part.*

**2. Meet your participant.** Whilst this step isn't totally necessary, do consider meeting your participant in a public place, like a café, before the object-orientated interview. This allows you to build rapport in a safe environment before meeting in a private or more secluded place. During this meeting you could conduct a more traditional interview if that provides useful background information to the object-orientated interview.

**3. Conduct the object-oriented interview.** Keeping the tone conversational and begin the interview with broad questions to put the participant at ease. Then ask your participant to discuss the things in the room/cupboard/box. Some participants won't need much prompting, but if you need to you can direct their attention to different objects. Although you may have an idea of the type of things you hope to discuss, have the confidence to let the participant lead and observe their reactions to particular objects only asking follow-up questions to tease out their significance if needed.

*Think about how you record the interview. Object-oriented interviews often involve moving around a space or undertaking a hands-on task, so holding your recorder or setting it up in one place might not be convenient. Instead wear the recorder around your neck or wrist.*

*It is worth paying attention to how the participant is interacting with the objects. Are they picking it up and inspecting it? Are they holding it close? Where do they put it afterwards?*

*Remember that object-oriented interviews may unexpectedly unearth sensitive topics and memories. Check-in with participants regularly to see if they are comfortable, would like to change topic, take a break, or stop.*

**4. Take photographs.** Having a photographic record of the objects discussed can be really helpful in the analysis process, to remember or contextualise what is being discussed in the transcripts. If you have permission from participants, you can also use the photographs in outputs.

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**5. Tidy and finish up.** If you have got things out or made a bit of mess during the interview, help your participant tidy up or put things away before wrapping up and ending the interview.

*If you have been undertaking a task as part of the interview, such as decluttering, you might need to do things afterwards – like take the bins out or make arrangements for objects to be taken to a charity shop – which have been agreed in advance but go beyond the scope of the interview itself.*

**6. Write down fieldnotes.** Since you'll have been busy during the object-orientated interview you will need to find a time as soon as possible afterwards to write down any reflections or immediate thoughts. These notes may form the basis of your analysis or future writing.

**7. Back at your computer.** Be sure to back-up recordings, photographs, and fieldnotes securely, and transcribe interview recordings. Analyse your collected data by identifying reoccurring or significant themes; an analysis software such as NVivo can be helpful here.

## Examples of using Object-oriented Interviews in social science research

**Getting your stuff together: The role of decluttering services in the management of domestic materiality over the life course**

**Researcher: Dr Jennifer Owen, Cardiff University**

[The Attic Project](#), between Care & Repair Cymru, Safer Wales, Care & Repair Cardiff and the Vale, and Newport Care & Repair, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. The project supported older people to sort through accumulated things in their homes which were preventing adaptations, repairs or downsizing, and therefore impacting on their quality of life in several ways.

The researcher worked as a volunteer on the project to assist older people to declutter, and in the process reminisce about the objects in their home. This decluttering took different forms, depending on what the older people needed and on their physical capabilities.

This project adopted a more participatory approach to object-orientated interviews where decluttering was the primary task and the ethnographic conversations came about organically from undertaking the process. Topics which emerged from conversations included support needs, family disputes, fears about health and growing older, independence, and loneliness.

[The report](#) generated from this research is now being used as a means to promote the importance of decluttering as a service that sits between housing, social care and health provision.



## Examples of using Object-oriented Interviews in social science research

'Out of sight, out of mind' - The place of self-storage in securing pasts, ordering the present and enabling futures

Researcher: Dr Jennifer Owen, Cardiff University

The researcher worked with self-storage companies to recruit participants who rent storage units of various sizes, for different durations, and for a range of different reasons including moving to a new house, [following a bereavement](#), [hiding an activity from a partner](#), and making space at home.

After an initial interview at a nearby café, the researcher went with the participant to their storage unit. Here participants were confronted with things they had not seen for a long time, and talked through their memories, feelings, and attachments to their things and how this had changed as a result of them being distanced from their homes for a period of time.

Conversations often unfolded around collections of sealed boxes which participants were reluctant to open, because they were difficult to access in the tight and not completely private space of the self-storage facility or because they did not feel ready to see their contents. The object-orientated interviews nevertheless provided interesting insights because participants could talk about the process of moving their things to self-storage when reminded of how they had placed things into the unit for example, and discuss what they remembered or had forgotten about what was stored within.



*Emma's rejected things from her self-storage unit, visiting it for the first time in 3 years on return from working abroad*



*Myles's storage unit, keeping things out of harm's way during major home renovations*



## Where else could Object-orientated Interviews be used?

The diversity of ways Object-oriented Interviews can be used makes them suitable for researching a range of topics. For example:

- This method could be usefully applied to business, charity and other organisational contexts where domestic possessions are foregrounded, either temporarily or permanently, in people's lives and are linked to wider issues or challenges they are encountering.
- For example, object-orientated interviews could be used by homeless or refugee charities, or elderly care facilities, to understand how to support people moving between different home environments, by identifying what is important to them in their daily lives.
- Housing Associations may come across residents who need help with dealing with accumulations of things. Using object-orientated interviews could help them to better understanding of why things have been held on to or are meaningful and then make personalised recommendations.

## Top tips

1. Go with the flow and don't not expect a linear timeline from interviews. Allow the participant to take the lead, open boxes, and the conversation to meander around different objects, topics, and times. The way the interview unfolds will match how the participant makes sense of their things and circumstances.
2. Don't worry if you can't see or touch any objects. Objects can be talked about in a collective sense and seeing things boxed up and put away can be just as emotive as engaging with single objects.



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## Further reading

- Object interviews: getting participants to encounter and/or connect with things
- Object interviews, material imaginings and ‘unsettling’ methods: interdisciplinary approaches to understanding materials and material culture
- Sensory Methods
- The Hidden History of the Mantlepiece
- Enhancing Meaning-Making in Research through Sensory Engagement with Material Objects

**To reference:** Owen, J., Barron, A. and Pottinger, L. (2021). ‘Object-oriented Interviews’ in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester



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