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Journal of Family Therapy

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

New Materialism and Its Implications for Research in Social Science

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Received: 4 November 2025 | **Revised:** 18 October 2026 | **Accepted:** 27 October 2026

ABSTRACT

New Materialism is a philosophical framework that has gained some popularity in social science research in recent years, including in the systemic field. Despite its growing popularity and, arguably, its strong relevance to systemic and other social science researchers, there is no targeted guidance on how to implement this framework in research, particularly for early-career researchers and students—a clear gap in the methodological literature. Therefore, we provide an overview of New Materialism as a philosophical tradition, offer a guide for researchers on using this approach, and present a case study that exemplifies its implementation in research. Students and early-career academics unfamiliar with this framework are invited to consult this paper and related resources to help them implement New Materialism in their scholarly activities. We argue that researching social phenomena through the lens of New Materialism can enable researchers to reflect on structural issues, the interdependency and mutual influence between humans and non-human aspects of modern life, and how multiple, complex narratives may co-occur despite the desire to construct simple, linear answers in social research, all of high relevance to systemic thinkers.

1 | Introduction

For several decades, social science research, particularly psychology, psychotherapy, and family therapy, has been influenced by constructionist, dialogical and narrative approaches (Flick 2013). These approaches have been invaluable in challenging essentialist views of identity and in emphasising the social production of meaning. They have enabled researchers and practitioners to question taken-for-granted categories, attend to power relations and take language seriously as a constitutive force. However, while context is acknowledged, the focus often remains mainly on human meaning-making and discourse, and material conditions can become backgrounded. Bodies may be discussed symbolically rather than materially, and technologies, infrastructures and environments are frequently described as *settings* rather than as active participants in social life (Duff 2014). As a result, research can reproduce an implicit, if unintentional, hierarchy in which human intention and language are foregrounded while non-human elements remain secondary.

In social science research, New Materialism (NM) emerged in the early 2000s (Coole and Frost 2007) and has been applied in various research contexts to understand social phenomena (Bertelsen et al. 2025; Braidotti 2013; Burr and Fox 2023; Cordoba 2022; Krause 2025; Latour 2005), reaching the field of psychology and systemic psychotherapy more recently (Albertini et al. 2025a, 2025b). It has been argued that this framework, rooted in relational/flat ontology, can provide an opening or 'something new' (Monforte 2018; Pierre 2012) that allows researchers to step outside traditional research habits.

This paper first discusses the origins of NM, its key concepts, and applications. Then, a toolkit for researchers interested in using this approach is offered. Finally, a research case study is presented.

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Practitioner Points

- Systemic theory and practice have much to contribute to research due to the focus on relationality, context and the construction of meaning.
- There is a fast-growing interest in the systemic field in New Materialism due to what is seen as its relevance for and alignment with systemic thinking. However, this is a new area for many systemic practitioners and researchers, and there is still limited literature available specifically for a systemic audience.
- The current paper offers a brief introduction to New Materialism, a guide for its possible application in research, and an example for its implementation.

2 | What Are NM's Basic Claims?

NM originates in the French philosophical tradition (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), who challenged dualist thinking (human vs. non-human/animal/machine, subject vs. object, self/me vs. other/them, individualistic vs. collective, etc.) as well as hierarchical thinking (Duff 2014) by acknowledging that they are *produced* through complex and dynamic processes of becoming—that is, they are not fixed, stable or immutable.

It is called *new* because it shifts away from the historical dualistic differences that exist in science (e.g., mind/matter, human/non-human) towards a post-human perspective on knowledge and reality. It is *materialist* because it is not only interested in the analysis of meaning, but also "objects, materials and processes by which entities are constructed and maintained" (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2017, 7). For example, a material assemblage can include the body, physical contexts, and structures, whereas a discursive assemblage (with discursive meaning: language, knowledge and assumptions) may include norms, gender roles and related elements (Duff 2014).

NM starts from the idea that reality is made through *relationships* rather than existing as a set of separate, independent things. Humans, bodies, objects, spaces, technologies, discourses and institutions are always entangled, and none of them acts alone or in isolation (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Instead of assuming stable categories such as 'individual,' 'context,' or 'environment,' NM focuses on how temporary arrangements of relations come together to make certain actions, feelings, identities and outcomes possible. From this perspective, research is not about discovering a single underlying truth but about attending carefully to how relations are assembled, how they hold together, and how they might change. Therefore, a NM onto-epistemological position also changes the research process more broadly, expanding the boundaries of *what* is being researched.

Furthermore, NM can be understood as a re-orientation of how social reality is approached. First, NM adopts a flat ontology, meaning that all entities (i.e., humans, objects, technologies, discourses, bodies, environments, etc.) are understood to exist on the same ontological plane, without privileging any one level (such as 'the social' or 'the human') as more significant than others; importantly, this is an *ontological* claim about what exists, not an *epistemological* claim about how many perspectives or knowledges we have (DeLanda 2019). Second, this ontology carries a politics of radical difference, in which difference is not something to be subsumed under shared categories or explained away, but is generative, *producing* new possibilities; change emerges from variation and divergence rather than consensus (Braidotti 2013). Third, NM decentres language, treating it not as the primary medium through which reality is constituted, but as one material practice among others, always entangled with bodies, objects, affects and infrastructures (Barad 2003). Fourth, this leads to an account of a non-human social world, where social processes are co-produced by non-human actors such as technologies, architectures, bureaucratic systems, chemicals and algorithms, which actively shape which actions and relations become possible (Fox and Alldred 2015b). Finally, NM offers a new take on relationality, shifting from relations as connections *between* pre-existing entities to relations as productive forces through which entities themselves come into being (or becoming), temporarily stabilised (territorialised) in assemblages that are always open to reconfiguration (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Locating NM within the history and context of the systemic and family therapy field, we argue that it offers both a re-engagement with the material foregrounding present in earlier family therapy traditions (though from a fundamentally different ontological position that attends more fully to power and resists framing the material as passive and given, and the human as superior), and a reorientation and expansion of more recent social constructionist and dialogical traditions. While social constructionist scholars and dialogical and narrative practise innovators have valued and attended to materiality (Gergen 2007, 2009; Gergen and Gergen 2018; Shotter 2003; White 2004), it can be argued that this can often be lost in the application of these ideas in much systemic practice and research, and that NM offers both a reorientation to this materiality and an expansion to fully engage with the more-than-human from a non-hierarchical perspective.

2.1 | NM Terminology

As you can see, NM includes a great deal of jargon, such as *becoming and territorialised*, used above. For the sake of simplicity and 'speaking the same language', some key concepts are defined in plain language below:

2.1.1 | Assemblages and Machines

In everyday terms, an *assemblage* is a temporary grouping of things that work together in a particular situation. In NM, the unstructured and dynamic arrangements of bodies (human and non-human) that are always in a relational becoming are called *machines* or *assemblages* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Thus, an *assemblage* can be defined as an always-in-flux/always-becoming, relational, non-hierarchical, unpredictable phenomenon composed of myriad existing elements. A therapy session, for example, includes people, a room, chairs, institutional rules, emotions, histories and professional discourses. Assemblages are also defined as "machines that link affects together to produce or do something" (Fox and Alldred 2015b). For instance, the research assemblage itself (Fox and Alldred 2015a).

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2.2 | The Research Assemblage

Scientific research is characterised by established practices (e.g., the hypothetico-deductive principle, academic writing, peer review process, etc.). These have historically formed and generally position the researcher as the primary active agent (e.g., a researcher conducts a study within a specific group). Conversely, through a NM framework, the researcher, the methods (e.g., statistical, qualitative), the human and non-human processes (e.g., supervision, thesis writing, journal publication), the technologies (e.g., questionnaires, interviews) and the physical realities (e.g., university buildings, online platforms, deadlines) are all considered elements of the research assemblage (Coleman 2013; Masny 2013). Thus, the researcher is shaping the research, as well as being part of it and shaped by it. For more details about the research assemblage, readers are invited to consult (Fox and Alldred 2015a, 2015b).

2.2.1 | Affects

With this shift from entities to relationships, elements/things/entities are in constant relation and have the capacity to *affect* or *be affected* in non-hierarchical, unpredictable ways. *Affect* refers to what happens when things influence one another. Rather than meaning emotion alone, affect describes changes in capacity, the ability of an assemblage to act, feel or become otherwise (Fox and Alldred, 2015a, 2015b).

2.2.2 | Becoming

Becoming indicates that things are always in the process of changing rather than being fixed or finished. Instead of asking what something *is*, becoming asks what something is *turning into*. Identity, experience and situations are understood as ongoing movements, shaped moment by moment by what they connect with. A *becoming* is the capacity or state of an element/thing/entity to transform into another. Becoming emphasises that identities and phenomena are never finished. They are continuously produced through relations over time (Braidotti 2013).

A new materialist understanding of reality is relational, constantly evolving, and non-hierarchical. Thus, the observable world is merely a representation of one of the many processes of *becoming*. NM does not posit separate worlds or parallel realities. References to 'multiple realities' describe coexisting relational configurations within a single flat ontology (DeLanda 2019).

2.2.3 | De/Re-Territorialisation and Flows

Territorialisation refers to processes that stabilise or regulate relations. Deterritorialisation refers to processes that loosen or disrupt them. Reterritorialisation involves the formation of new patterns (Flick 2013). In other words, territorialisations entail constraining and imposing rules/norms; de-territorialising entails opening up and offering opportunities; and re-territorialising entails establishing new rules/norms.

It is worth noting that these are not stages, but instead *flows* that are continuously changing. For example, research (as an *assemblage*) has many *territorialising* practices (e.g., research methodologies with prescribed steps, research ethics, academic writing and journal publication). However, this research *assemblage* also has flows of potential *de-territorialisation* (e.g., participatory research, art-based methods, feminist and decolonising approaches to challenge power in research; see, e.g., recent research on so-called 'street drugs', such as ketamine, for mental health challenges) and *re-territorialisation* (new assemblages become the hegemonic force). Interestingly, de-territorialisation might also involve re-territorialisation (e.g., the ways in which qualitative research practices became established in the social sciences), thus highlighting the always-evolving nature of flows.

To summarise, through NM lenses, there is no distinction between human and non-human aspects (i.e., post-humanist approach). Relational interactions between human and non-human aspects are called *machines* or *assemblages* that are in a constant process of *becoming*. Post-humanism rejects human exceptionalism without rejecting the significance of human experience (Braidotti 2013). The observable reality is one expression of a *flow* of reality. These *flows* can be *territorialising* and/or *de/re-territorialising* depending on their *affects*.

2.2.4 | Common NM Misunderstandings

A frequent misunderstanding is that NM dismisses meaning or subjectivity. In fact, meaning is treated as one relation among many. Another misconception is that NM implies that 'anything goes'. On the contrary, relations have material consequences and constraints. A third misunderstanding is that NM is anti-method. NM does not reject methodologies and does not favour one way of conducting research over another. Instead, it supports careful, reflexive use of methodological decisions that are sensitive to the non-hierarchical and relational nature of reality, rather than methodological rigidity.

3 | Applying New Materialism in Research

Shifting the focus of research from human-focused to include all elements and adopting a flat ontology invites significant changes at most (if not all) stages of research. For instance, the research question might be framed to capture more-than-human elements as well. Furthermore, using an NM framework shapes the methods one might use for data collection. More specifically, as research through an NM framework enables the appreciation of a flow of reality, various data collection strategies might be implemented to capture multiple flows within an assemblage (e.g., walking interviews, creative methods, mixed methods). Below are some reflective questions offered to the reader, covering key aspects of research.

3.1 | 'Starting' Point

The journey typically 'starts' with developing an idea for research. However, this is not actually a start, as many

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pre-contemplative human and non-human processes have contributed to 'finding' a research project (e.g., previous life experiences, exposure to specific digital webpages/news). The reader is invited to consider what this process entails for them and how the various assemblages will be shaping their 'starting point'. A NM stance also invites a widening of the conceptualisation of the project, shifting from phenomenon to assemblage. In addition to important questions, systemic researchers might already ask themselves at the start of a research project questions around the relationship with the audience (e.g., how might what I wish to research be useful to the intended audience?) and the impact of such research to other humans and non-human matter, NM also invites considerations that might include:

a. How can I frame the research question to include more-than-human aspects, and acknowledge the multiplicity of realities (and flows)? How do I maintain a focus on the interconnectedness and relationality of everything, even while settling on a question or direction (Simon 2014)?

b. What are the potentially territorialising physical, relational and environmental context for this research (e.g., university systems, programme guidance, a charity's priorities and needs; funding bodies' requirements; etc.), and which are the more-than-human elements affecting this research (e.g., deadlines, required forms and processes, evaluation). What are their *effects within the research assemblage* (e.g., where is my energy and attention directed; what role(s) am I invited into)? What deterritorialising actions can I take at these early stages (e.g., the theoretical frameworks and lenses I introduce; the perspective or standpoint from where I plan to research, e.g., by 'returning the normalising gaze' (e.g., Hutton 2008); adopting a deeply relational ethic (Simon 2014) beyond 'obtaining ethical approval' from an organisation)?

c. How can I extend what I can be open to in relation to the material aspects related to the project? Towards this, is co-production possible (Arnstein 1969)? If yes, would the medium of communication (e.g., email, online meeting, meeting in a physical space) shape the way we interact with and relate to one another?

d. What spaces and contexts facilitate my thinking and creativity (e.g., going for a run, sitting in the garden, conversations with others)? How best do I capture my evolving ideas (e.g., writing in a reflexive diary, creating a spreadsheet, recording voice memos)? How do the ideas developed through relating with the phenomena shape me?

3.2 | Aims and Audience

Some points for reflection inspired by NM might include:

a. Who is my intended audience(s)? Where do they gather and how do they communicate (online or in person; in a church, a club, a school, a hospital, a Facebook group, a protest march, etc.)? What information might be meaningful and relatable (a Substack, a leaflet, a podcast, a poem, a training event, a conference presentation, etc.)?

b. Considering that writing is a way of communicating within a relationship (either self-to-self or self-to-others), and writing itself is relational (Gergen 2007), what is the language and tone I wish to use when writing to my expected audience(s)?

3.3 | Methodology

Methodology (e.g., including data collection strategy, expected data analysis procedures, etc.) often include many territorialising research practices (e.g., what ethical approval is received for, what those who describe methodologies set out as measurements of rigour, etc.). From a NM perspective, some reflective questions at this stage can include:

a. What are the current (territorialising) methods used to understand/observe the flow of an assemblage (and its machines) and what deterritorialising possibilities might be available (e.g., if these are primarily qualitative interviews, can something else build on or add to open up other flows of that reality, for instance, through letter writing, using photos or journal entries?)?

b. Can research show another flow of reality? Here, it might be helpful to think of scientific knowledge not as colonial accumulation (e.g., collecting, remembering, cataloguing), but as attending to (i.e., directing our attention to a phenomenon). Thus, thinking of knowledge in this way, can we *unveil* or *attend to* aspects from the past (e.g., archives, internet), the present (e.g., integrating YouTube, Reddit, Social Media production) or an imaginative future (e.g., through speculative design); Does the process of research change the initial focus of the research and/or where attention was directed (or not) and how might I be responsive to these changes, allowing method and process to evolve?

c. Can the research capture relationality and the ever-evolving interaction and interconnection between everything, human and more-than-human (e.g., by drawing on methodologies that attend) to 'what is happening here' (Clarke et al. 2017)?

d. How can I make the methodology speak to more-than-human aspects (the literature mentioned at the start of this sub-section can be usefully consulted here)?

3.4 | Findings and Discussions

From a NM perspective, at this stage, it is helpful to keep engaging with more-than-human and non-hierarchical ways of thinking and knowing (or attending to), in the process of 'doing' analysis, in what is attended to in the analysis, and in considering (re)-presentation. Some suggestions to consider include:

a. How can more-than-human aspects help me think through the data (e.g., data analysis technologies); post-it notes,

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mind-mapping, situational, social arena or positional maps? How are different strategies shaping my thinking?

b. Would engagement with more-than-human aspects help (e.g., digital technologies, objects)?

c. Would engagement with artistic endeavour offer new insights (e.g., painting one's project, visiting an exhibition about a topic adjacent to one's research)? What emerges from the interaction between human and more-than-human elements?

d. Would alteration of space help (e.g., change of environment, going for a walk and talking about one's project to a friend or alone out loud; alternatively, presenting results at a conference or a team meeting offers opportunities for further reflection)?

e. How do I continually invite myself to attend to the more-than-human?

f. How do I avoid representing the human and non-human as 'finished', complete, or fixed-in-time through my telling of my findings? How do I maintain the sense of flow, becoming, 'messiness', contradiction and complexity that is part of the telling of all stories, the participants' and my re-telling of their tellings (Simon 2014; White 1995)?

3.5 | Dissemination

Here, the researcher is invited to engage with their initial reflections. Some reflective questions a NM stance might invite can include:

a. What might be the device(s) my target audience (s) use to consume information (e.g., computers, mobiles, radio, social media)?

b. What are the resources available (e.g., financial, time)?

c. How can I take into account different ways of knowing and learning (e.g., walking tours with dissemination, leaflets, videos, podcasts)?

d. How do I remain open to continuing (de-territorialising) mutual influences and evolving ideas, understandings, awarenesses, embodied experiences, as others engage with and respond to the research narratives?

3.6 | Methodological and Analytical Practice

Adopting a NM onto-epistemological position entails more than expanding the range of phenomena included within the research process; it fundamentally reconfigures the assumptions underpinning knowledge production. Rather than positioning meaning as residing primarily within human subjects and their accounts, NM conceptualises knowledge as produced through the dynamic and ongoing relations between human and more-than-human actors. Methodologically, this shifts attention from discrete individuals to assemblages, from fixed entities to processes of becoming, and from representation to the productive capacities of relational encounters. As a result, methodological choices are oriented towards tracing how bodies, objects, spaces, technologies, affects, discourses and institutional arrangements intra-act to produce possibilities, experiences and forms of subjectivity. Analytically, the aim is not solely to interpret participants' narratives but to examine how phenomena are produced through these complex relational configurations. In this way, NM offers a distinctive methodological orientation that seeks to illuminate the material-discursive conditions through which realities are continuously constituted, stabilised and transformed.

4 | A Case Study: A Doctoral Thesis on Trans and Non-Binary Sexualities Alongside Gender

The example below is extracted from Sandro's doctoral dissertation.

4.1 | 'Starting' Point

The doctorate in Clinical Psychology (DClinPsy) in the UK is a three-year, NHS-funded course in which students attend lectures, work clinically with various populations across the lifespan, and conduct a doctoral-level research project. Being in a post-graduate university setting and different NHS contexts (through different placements) including engagement with many territorialising discourses, relationships, systems and environments. For example, the hegemonic systems at the university, such as cisheteronormativity, meant that the Sandro's experiences as a non-binary person were often invalidated. Sandro was often read as a man and misgendered. Therefore, they felt a pull and a desire to engage more with technology and to find gender-affirming spaces (e.g., trans and non-binary social meet-ups, sex-positive parties). The focus of the research, their identities (e.g., queer, non-binary), and exposure to binary and these territorialising environments evoked in them a desire to connect with people like them and to see what exists beyond the academic world.

Considering the time pressures and limits in the DClinPsy, it was challenging to fully engage in meaningful co-production. Nevertheless, the researcher widely consulted writers, researchers, clinicians and members of their community (e.g., experts by experience recruited via social media) to help shape the project. Using NM lenses, the researcher was aware that each choice in their methods (e.g., data collection, data analysis) and the people they consulted with would have presented one flow of the research assemblage. All these contributed to the generation of ideas, the literature review, data analysis, findings and dissemination.

The topic of sexualities was identified after meetings, discussions, reading and consultations with the key stakeholders mentioned above. The term *sexualities* (in the plural form) was specifically chosen as the literature on this topic has historically been fragmenting (e.g., sexual orientation, sexual attraction, sexual behaviours, sexual health) of bodies and practices and often lacking in acknowledging the ephemeral and nuanced aspects of sexualities. Hence, sexualities referred to a broad range of feelings, behaviours and relationship(s). This moving away from the existing narratives on sexualities was a re-territorialising effect,

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producing a more affirming way of discussing the sexualities-assemblage in this research.

4.2 | Aims and Audience

The aim in writing this research was to understand how trans and non-binary people (TNB) engage with their sexualities, and if/how this is affected—and was affected—by their gender (e.g., identity, expression). The hope was to move away from a problem-focused narrative for TNB people and introduce narratives on trans joy. The writing style in the project attempted to be nuanced and non-deterministic, capturing flow and becoming.

Additionally, introducing the topic of sexualities in the field of Clinical Psychology, which traditionally pathologises such identities (Prunas 2019), hoped to re-territorialise bodies otherwise territorialised. The intended audience included researchers, psychologists and other mental health practitioners.

Finally, the research question was framed in a way to welcome more-than-human aspects from participants: 'Have the sexualities of TNB people changed alongside their gender?'

4.3 | Methodology

The quantitative literature on sexualities mainly focused on sexual function and sexual health, rather than wider aspects of sexuality (Sahmoud et al. 2024; Zhang et al. 2024), whilst the qualitative research included participants' perspectives and navigating their sexual orientation and social spaces (Reisner et al. 2023; Thurston and Allan 2018).

To bring a sensibility to more-than-human aspects and to welcome a different flow of sexualities, for the research project, Sandro an art-based data-collection strategy, in which participants were invited to bring something along to the interview that spoke to the research question (Groenewald and Essack 2023). Participants responded in wide-ranging, unique ways to this invitation (e.g., someone writing two poems to read in the interview, someone playing a piece of music on the piano over the online interview call, or someone holding up their sparkly top to the camera, while someone else did not bring anything, preferring to just use their words to respond to questions). This approach brought into view a specific flow of reality, presenting unique becomings of the sexualities-assemblage.

4.4 | Findings and Discussion

For the data analysis, transcripts were printed and analysed both on paper with marker pens and digitally. The researcher was born in the 1990s, so using paper was a familiar means to them—this was the main material they utilised during their education. Possibly, they have reflected on how this allowed them to feel 'closer' to the data and to the participants' voices. Additionally, the site of data analysis was in constant movement (i.e., friends' houses, libraries, local cafes, the student's abode, foreign countries). Furthermore, during data analysis, they paid attention to 'tuning in' to more-than-human aspects mentioned in the interviews (i.e., objects, elements, clothing, buildings, geographies). These aspects were included in the final write-up. For example, one participant (Peter; White British; 25; Binary-ish trans man) talked about the use of kink-wear being representative of his explorative approach to sexualities. An analytical reflection of integrating NM lens for this participant is offered below.

Other participants discussed how growing up in small towns left them unaware of various ways to express and embody different genders. More specifically, Louise (White European; 24; Female (trans)) said that growing up, she did not know about the existence of transness, and this left her feeling isolated and not understood. She said how she was born in the kind of place where 'it's like you're gay, you're straight or you're lesbian. If those are the only options, and I thought, okay, what am I then?' Having a focus on assemblages allows us to understand the interaction of Louise and the space as mutually interacting and constantly evolving (i.e., at the time of the interview, Louise experienced some spaces as territorialising, whilst others as de/re-territorialising).

During their studies, they also engaged with the arts (e.g., visited the Wellcome Collection exhibition on 'The Cult of Beauty'), which allowed them to appreciate how binary views of gendered bodies have been reproduced over time. They also attended talks and workshops on sexualities (e.g., She Bop workshop 'Deep Dive into Muffing'), which have expanded their ways of seeing what a re-territorialising way of considering sexuality and bodies can be.

Aware of the potential social isolation that can result from a neoliberal focus on career (i.e., completing doctoral research) and the divide often experienced between researchers and participants (i.e., those 'being researched'), the researcher visited exhibitions and joined social spaces for trans and non-binary people. These 'interruptions' were a conscious effort to resist (de-territorialise) social power structures and to *be with* rather than talk/write about a population. Thus, attending to more-than-human aspects and movement (i.e., of geographies and activities) was a conscious, ongoing aspect of the project.

4.5 | Dissemination

As part of the dissemination strategy, Sandro collaborated with a trans illustrator, who has produced prints of each participant's account. This aimed to incorporate more-than-human aspects and de-territorialise the practice of dissemination within the scientific community by reaching the general audience. Thus, alongside submitting to scientific journals and presenting to conferences, the results of the study will be shared through an open studio at Sandro's private home, showcasing the illustrations and extracts from the interview.

4.6 | Reflection on Using a NM Analytical Lens: Reflecting on Peter's Interview

A conventional interpretative analysis might have understood clothing (in Peter's discussion about his engagement with

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kink as part of his exploration of sexuality and gender) primarily as a symbolic expression of identity, agency or community affiliation. Using a NM analysis, however, allowed us to explore the relational connections between the participant, the materiality of the clothing, embodied sensations, histories of kink communities, normative understandings of gender and sexuality, and the spaces in which these encounters take place. This example illustrates the usefulness of a NM analytical process; namely, the clothing was understood not as a passive symbol but as an active component within an assemblage that participates in shaping possibilities for becoming. Drawing on the concepts of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, the analysis highlighted how engagement with kink practices could disrupt established norms of gender and sexualities while simultaneously producing new forms of embodied subjectivity and belonging. The analytical process therefore moves from participant account, to assemblage, to theoretical concept, and finally to interpretation, demonstrating how NM analysis attends to the productive capacities of material-discursive relations rather than focusing exclusively on individual meaning-making.

5 | Conclusion

New Materialism offers social science, and specifically, systemic researchers' further ways to think beyond individual minds, neoliberal strivings and positivist research approaches without abandoning their commitments to relationality, context, discourse, complexity or ethical reflexivity. Rather, we argue that NM has the potential to stretch, enrich and deepen these commitments. By foregrounding relations, processes and material conditions, NM supports research that is attentive to power, embodiment and change. This paper has aimed to introduce NM in an accessible and staged way, supporting understanding rather than the performance of specialised vocabulary. Developing a facility with NM, like any practice, involves ongoing engagement, reflection and dialogue.

A NM analysis, therefore, has the productive capacity to generate forms of knowledge that may be less accessible through approaches centred primarily on discourse, cognition or subjective experience. Within the case study we presented, participants' experiences of gender and sexualities were understood not solely through their narratives but through the relational effects of bodies, spaces, technologies, objects, communities and institutional structures. For example, experiences of growing up in rural or geographically isolated locations were not interpreted simply as individual accounts of exclusion or marginalisation; rather, they were analysed as assemblages in which geography, cultural norms, material resources, social infrastructures and embodied histories interacted to shape what forms of identity, belonging and becoming were produced. This analytical orientation made visible the material and relational conditions through which possibilities were enabled, constrained, territorialised and deterritorialised. As such, NM extended analysis beyond questions of what participants think, feel or mean to an examination of how particular realities are produced through complex networks of human and more-than-human relations, offering a potentially more nuanced account of power, constraint, transformation and possibility.

This 'toolkit' aims to be a companion for researchers new to this framework. The research presented aimed to provide a tangible example of NM thinking processes in a single research study. Like other human qualities (e.g., wood carving, painting), developing one's skill in applying a new way of thinking is an ongoing process that involves both human and more-than-human aspects (e.g., tools, technologies). The dexterity and creativity of a researcher develop through practice, self-reflection, writing, and discussion with others (e.g., colleagues, supervisors). It is hoped that readers early in their research journey will find these reflective invitations useful as they implement aspects of NM in their research. We invite and look forward to your responses to these invitations, and to future practical applications of new materialism in the social sciences as they are shared across different fields.

Author Contributions

This article was led and drafted by the first author, who developed the conceptual framing, and the methodological guide. The second and third authors contributed to the paper's design and provided substantial conceptual and editorial revisions. All authors approved the final manuscript and agreed to be accountable for its content.

Funding

The authors have nothing to report.

Ethics Statement

Some of the data used comes from the first author's doctoral study. Ethical approval for this was granted by the University of Hertfordshire ethics committee (Protocol number: cLMS/PGR/UH/053200). This is a theoretical article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

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