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# ‘Old’ Materialisms vs. ‘New’ Materialisms in Ageing Research: A Comparison Based on Empirical Data on Grieving

Julia Hahmann · Grit Höppner

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**Abstract** The importance of materiality is increasingly being discussed in ageing research, particularly in approaches of cultural, environmental, and material gerontology. This growing interest in materiality has led to a critical examination of the relationship between approaches that are inspired by what are referred to as ‘old materialisms’—that is, historical–materialist and Marxist approaches—on the one hand and ‘new materialisms’—that is, newer feminist and poststructural approaches—on the other hand. In this article, approaches of ‘old’ and ‘new’ materialisms are discussed comparatively in terms of their potential benefits. For this purpose, we use the intersectional multilevel analysis according to Gabriele Winker and Nina Degele and core concepts of agential realism according to Karen Barad. Using material on widowhood and mourning taken from interviews with professional experts, we work out similarities and differences and the extent to which a combination of ‘old’ and ‘new’ materialisms offers specific analytical interpretations on an empirical level as well as the methodological consequences in ageing research in particular and sociological research in general.

**Keywords** Intersectional multilevel analysis · Agential realism · Boundary-drawing practices · Partner loss · Materialisms · Methodology

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## „Alte“ Materialismen vs. „neue“ Materialismen in der Alter(n)sforschung: eine Gegenüberstellung auf der Grundlage von empirischen Daten zu Trauer

**Zusammenfassung** Die Bedeutung von Materialität wird in der Altersforschung zunehmend diskutiert, insbesondere in Ansätzen der Kulturgerontologie, der Öko-gerontologie und der Materiellen Gerontologie. Das wachsende Interesse an Materialität zeigt sich im Theoriediskurs zudem in einer kritischen Auseinandersetzung des Verhältnisses von sogenannten alten Materialismen – also historisch-materialistischen und marxistischen Ansätzen – einerseits und sogenannten neuen Materialismen – also neueren feministischen und poststrukturellen Ansätzen – andererseits. In diesem Artikel werden Ansätze der „alten“ und „neuen“ Materialismen vergleichend hinsichtlich ihres Nutzens diskutiert. Dazu werden zwei ausgewählte materialistische Ansätze herangezogen; die intersektionale Mehrebenenanalyse nach Gabriele Winker und Nina Degele sowie Konzepte des agentiiellen Realismus nach Karen Barad. Anhand von Interviewmaterial mit professionellen Fachkräften zu Verwitwung und Trauer arbeiten wir Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede heraus und zeigen auf, inwiefern eine Kombination von „alten“ und „neuen“ Materialismen spezifische analytische Rekonstruktionen auf empirischer Ebene sowie methodologische Weiterentwicklungen für die Altersforschung im Besonderen und die soziologische Forschung im Allgemeinen ermöglicht.

**Schlüsselwörter** Intersektionale Mehrebenenanalyse · Agentieller Realismus · Grenzziehungspraktiken · Verlust des Partners oder der Partnerin · Materialismen · Methodologie

### 1 Introduction

The importance of materiality is increasingly being discussed in ageing research. Although the human body is an essential materiality of age and ageing, its role as an experiencing, materialising body was for a long time regarded as minor (Keller and Meuser 2016; Öberg 1996; Tulle 2008; for a critique, see Katz 2014). Compared to a mainly discursive understanding of age and ageing, current *cultural gerontological* approaches, however, focus more strongly on bodies. In addition, these approaches address the meanings and functions of nonhuman materiality, such as clothing, objects of memory, and technologies, as well as their impact on ageing processes (Kolland et al. 2021; Schroeter 2012; Twigg and Martin 2015). Psychological approaches, collectively referred to as *environmental gerontology*, in particular have since the 1970s focused on living environments and spaces as factors influencing age and ageing (Wahl and Weisman 2003; Wahl and Oswald 2010; for an overview, see Rowles and Bernard 2013). Approaches of *material gerontology* (Gallistl et al. 2024; Höppner and Urban 2018) ask how the materialities of age and ageing are to be analysed, as well as the relevance, effectiveness, and obstinacy of materiality in its constitutive role of the human body and the material environment in ageing processes. Drawing on ideas that have been developed in theories and approaches

in the social sciences and humanities since the 1990s as part of the so-called material turn and the increased interest in the role of different forms of materiality in the production of social phenomena (e.g. Barad 2003, 2007; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012; Haraway 2007; Latour 2005), scholars of material gerontology criticise existing social theories for focusing primarily on human actors, human actions, and human agency. They argue that this human-centered approach denies the power of different forms of materiality in the production of age and within ageing processes.

The material turn in the social sciences and humanities led to a critical examination of the relationship between approaches that are inspired by so-called old materialisms—that is, historical–materialist and Marxist approaches (Marx and Engels 1990a [1845]; 1990b [1845]; Eagleton 2016)—on the one hand and approaches that are inspired by so-called new materialisms—this is, newer feminist and poststructural approaches—on the other hand (e.g. Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012; Garske 2014; Lettow 2017). Like 'new' materialisms, 'old' materialisms have also been introduced to gerontology. In the structuralist perspective of the *political economy of ageing* (Phillipson 2025, this issue), gerontologists such as Estes (1979), Townsend (1981), and Walker (1981) drew on Karl Marx's findings on the interdependence of capital and modern society and have linked these to the idea of the construction of age in terms of a capitalist economy. In doing so, later life was made visible as a construction in the context of social and health systems or welfare state programmes that make it possible to regulate and control the older population (van Dyk 2015, p. 52). Today, this gerontologic understanding is used to explore the connections between age as a construction that is shaped by political–economic and sociocultural processes of change and the way of living in contemporary society that is characterised by structures of power and domination (e.g. Baars et al. 2006, p. 3; Denninger et al. 2014; Katz 2005; van Dyk 2015, pp. 57–60 2007).

A comparison of 'old' and 'new' materialisms offers a fruitful reflection of different perspectives on a research object and the role that materialities or material analyses play, as well as the methodological conclusions that are drawn (Eagleton 2016; Rockman 2021; Röhl 2024). Such a comparison has not yet been carried out in ageing research. The aim of this article is thus to undertake such a comparison in the field of ageing research and to work out similarities and differences and the extent to which a combination of 'old' and 'new' materialisms offers specific analytical interpretations on an empirical level, as well as the methodological consequences in ageing research in particular and sociological research in general.

To narrow down the field of 'old' and 'new' materialisms, we chose Winker and Degele's (2011) approach of intersectional, praxeological multilevel analysis as an example of 'old materialisms'. Winker and Degele's approach is based on *feminist–materialist* social theory in a Marxist tradition (Marx and Engels 1990a [1845], 1990b [1845]), which focuses on the fact that bourgeois-capitalist society systematically produces inequalities and exploitation that are organised through the spheres of both production and reproduction work. Winker and Degele argue that inequalities can occur in many forms and should therefore not be limited in terms of categories of race, class, and gender, the traditional triad based on the historical development of the concept of intersectionality, given that it initially considered specific life situations and discrimination experiences of Black women (Crenshaw 1991; Lutz and

Wenning 2001; Knapp and Wetterer 2003). As a result, age and ageing are less frequently discussed in intersectional concepts. Scholars of gerontology have worked out the significance of age and ageing for intersectional analyses and concepts (e.g. Calasanti 2003; Calasanti and King 2025, this issue, 2015; Denninger and Schütze 2017; Hahmann 2023a; Höppner and Wanka 2021; Krekula 2007; Richter 2018), highlighting the singularity of the ‘metric variable’ of age and ageing in comparison to other categories of difference (Barrett 2025, this issue). This means that age and ageing cannot be used in the same way as other variables of intersectionality research such as gender, class, and race. While these categories are difficult to change individually, age varies continuously over the life course (van Dyk 2015).

As one example of ‘new materialisms’, we chose Barad’s (2003, 2007) approach of posthuman performativity and agential realism, which has been developed since the mid-1990s and in which Barad refers to ideas put forward by the physicist and quantum mechanics pioneer Niels Bohr as well as to poststructuralist and feminist concepts. Barad argues that the so-called linguistic turn and semiotic approaches are not capable of grasping the complex and dynamic interplay of meaning processes and material arrangements. Thus, Barad supports a shift in perspective from human-centered questions to considerations that focus on nonhuman animate and inanimate matter and their activities and interdependencies, and thus a transformation of inherited categorical distinctions between nature and culture, body and mind, matter and ideation. Scholars of gerontology have been taking up new materialist ideas under the umbrella term of ‘material gerontology’ for some years now in order to deepen our understanding of how, where, and when age and ageing actually take place (Irni 2010; Gallistl and Wanka 2023; Höppner 2023). Agential realist-informed approaches in gerontology are inspired by a relational ontology in which there are no given subjects and objects; instead, age and ageing are understood as being co-constituted in ongoing material-discursive practices (Barad 2003, p. 822). These processes are reconstructed, among others, as age assemblages in the context of sociotechnical practices (Endter et al. 2024; Gallistl and von Laufenberg 2025, this issue), as embodying age and ageing in interviews (Höppner 2015), and as silhouettes as a methodical tool for analysing the material world in later life (Höppner 2022).

Both approaches, that is, the intersectional multilevel analysis according to Winker and Degele (2011) and core concepts of agential realism according to Barad (2003, 2007, 2013), share the assumption that social phenomena are constituted in practices and thus take a process-oriented perspective. However, both approaches have a different understanding of what practices are. The intersectional multilevel approach of Winker and Degele (2011) follows Bourdieu’s practice theory and understands action as being shaped by both structure and individual agency and thus as tied to the human subject. This is evident, for example, when people mourn in milieu-specific ways while at the same time expressing discomfort and revising traditional routines on their own terms. Barad (2003, 2007) adopts a posthumanist performativity understanding to define material-discursive practices. In order to clarify the inseparability and simultaneity of discursive practices and materiality, Barad (2003, p. 822; 2007, p. 208) uses the term ‘intra-actions’ in contrast to interactions, in which, according to Barad, the prior existence of independent entities and

causalities is presupposed. By contrast, Barad understands intra-actions as ongoing boundaries in which a phenomenon—such as mourning—is produced. In such co-constitutional processes, people such as older mourners, objects such as mourning clothing, and discourses on grieving are differentiated and produced as seemingly stable entities.

We apply these theoretical considerations to empirical data on partner loss and mourning by older people. This topic is of interest to the sociological debate on ageing, as widowhood is a strongly gendered phenomenon in later life that is specifically structured by age norms (Arber 2004). We therefore undertake a secondary analysis in the mode of a supplementary analysis (Heaton 2008) using data from the Doing Widowhood project (Höppner and Claus 2023). The project focuses on age- and gender-specific constructions of partner loss from the perspective of professionals who work with widowed people at different points in the course of widowhood. Eight interviews were conducted with a pastor, a mortician, a stonemason, a grief counsellor, and four social workers doing community work with older people. These professionals had been working regularly with widowed people for at least three years. They were recruited using the gatekeeper method and asked in problem-centered interviews conducted in the summer of 2020 about their experience of widowed people (Witzel 2000). The interview data were transcribed following the guidelines of Kruse (2015), for example, the use of uppercase for words that were emphasised.

These interview data are well suited for an analysis of 'old' and 'new' materialisms for three reasons. First, nearly six million people were widowed in Germany and thus experienced the loss of their partner in 2022 (Federal Statistical Office of Germany 2023). But empirical data show that people are not equally affected by the loss of a partner. Their response varies according to age and gender: Older people are more frequently affected by the loss of a partner than younger people are (Federal Statistical Office of Germany 2023), and partner loss affects women more often than men due to gender-specific differences in life expectancy and partner behaviour (Höpflinger et al. 2013). Women are less likely to remarry after losing a partner; their widowhood lasts an average of 14 to 15 years, whereas that of men lasts around 9 years (Hollstein 2002; Engel 2012). Second, the interviews with professionals who support widowed individuals show how partner loss is seen and understood socially and how these constructions moderate the social practices of professionals and constitute age- and gender-specific inequalities. Third, as has already been illustrated in Chapman's work (2006), our interview analyses show that the loss of one's partner not only has something to do with human materiality but also is strongly connected to objects and material arrangements, for example the black clothes that mourners wear and the memorabilia that are placed around the home.

To facilitate this procedure, we carry out the respective analyses separately by inductively reconstructing the extent to which specific notions of age and ageing are produced and reproduced by professionals through their narratives and interpretations of grieving processes. We conclude by discussing the empirical results and methodological consequences in relation to the intersectional multilevel approach and agential realism and by drawing conclusions for a comparison of 'old' and 'new' materialisms in ageing research in particular and sociological research in general.

## 2 Intersectional, Praxeological Multilevel Analysis by Winker and Degele

### 2.1 Theoretical and Methodological Background of the Intersectional Praxeological Multilevel Analysis

Winker and Degele's (2011) work offers a feminist–materialist social theory. In this perspective, they understand capitalism as a political–economic system based on the principle of the exploitation of human labour for the purpose of surplus value production. Capitalist exploitation necessarily requires relations of domination in order to maintain itself. Winker and Degele (2011, pp. 54–56) refer to these relations of domination as classisms, racisms, heteronormativisms, and bodyisms. Winker and Degele elaborate the four power relations according to their location in and function for the social division of labour. Based on this, it becomes clear that their fundamental positioning relates to the Marxist analysis of capitalism. As regards classisms, for example, these are inequalities resulting from unequal access to economic and social resources, including social background, education, occupation, wealth, and social networks. Winker and Degele's understanding of racisms assumes that they do not simply consist of prejudices against other groups. Rather, on the one hand it creates a difference between groups of people who are understood as alien to each other, and on the other hand, this difference is constructed as superiority and inferiority and is naturalised on the basis of skin colour in order to secure white superiority and power. Empirically, this can be found, for example, in border and migration regimes and the associated rights in the labour market or in the structural discrimination of migrants, who are forced to work in the low-wage sector. Heteronormativisms describe the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler 1990) along with the consequences of this normalisation and naturalisation of gender differences in the understanding of gender hierarchies. These can be experienced in their function for capitalist exploitation, for example in the understanding of the gender-specific distribution of employment and care work, as well as in familial norms of 'good motherhood' or the family (Hahmann 2025; Hahmann and Hunner-Kreisel 2022, 2024; Weicht 2025, this issue). Bodyisms comprise relations of domination that refer to physical characteristics, for example performance, discipline, beauty, age, dis/ability, and others. Here, too, the focus is on the functionality of power relations for the continuation of social inequalities in capitalist production relations, for instance in the 'better' usability of a young body compared to an older body in highly physical work.

Winker and Degele's approach thus understands ageism on a structural theoretical level as a relationship of domination that is subsumed under bodyisms. This includes, for example, concepts such as age norms, age limits, generational order, and the institutionalised life course. On the other hand, the processual nature of ageing can be reconstructed at the level of practices, for example by subjects referring to biographical, age-relevant transitions (Hahmann 2023b). Nevertheless, we are aware that such a subsuming of both age under the social category of body and ageism under bodyism can run the risk of naturalising age (van Dyk 2015, p. 31). In this respect, we understand this article as a call to emphasise age as an independent

social category in the intersectionality debate along with class, race, and gender and to further develop Winker and Degele's multilevel analysis in this regard.

Contrary to their postulated position in feminist materialism, Winker and Degele do not (exclusively) examine intersectional inequality relations in the traditional Marxist understanding at the level of *social structures*. Rather, they emphasise the necessity of systematically linking the structural–theoretical epistemological position with poststructuralist perspectives in order to grasp the influence of hegemonic discourses, norms, and normalisms, which they subsume under the term '*symbolic representations*'. The third level on which Winker and Degele deal with intersectionality is that of *identity constructions*, that is, self-positioning in affiliation or demarcation to constructions of the self and the other. At the same time, the authors follow Bourdieu's (1977) understanding of praxeology as developed in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. The influences of structure and agency are expressed in Bourdieu's dialectical understanding of habitus (Amrhein 2025, this issue). Winker and Degele thus conceptualise a subject who is capable of action and is not only subordinate to the influences of structure and discourse and transfers them into their own identity but is also capable of working on or undermining prevailing conditions via their social practices.

In order to reconstruct the various epistemological perspectives as well as the categories of difference and structure in empirical data, Winker and Degele work in both a structured inductively and a deductively organised research process. First, the data are openly coded in order to reveal identity constructions, symbolic representations, and social structures in the social practices. Relevant themes in the material in which the interviewees primarily position themselves are then identified. This can be seen, for example, when a topic is repeatedly mentioned. The positionings in subject constructions on partner loss and grief are then analysed on the basis of interview excerpts on the three levels so that references between the three levels become clear. As an example: If an interviewee describes how strongly their grief occurs in everyday life, they can refer to discourses about partnership and marriage on the level of symbolic representation that express the close bond as that of a 'soulmate'. The level of social structures can be found in interview passages on marriage as a community of solidarity as set out in the German Civil Code, tax legislation, or nursing care legislation. The aim of this step is to extract all the subject constructions relevant to a research question from the empirical data. In subsequent steps, these subject constructions are categorised to allow for generalisation. By linking the results back to the current state of research, we can examine the overlaps in power relations.

## 2.2 Subject Constructions in the Context of Mourning

The results of the intersectional analysis of interviews with professionals who work with widowed people at different points in the course of widowhood are presented in the following (see the Doing Widowhood research project [Höppner and Claus 2023]). We reconstruct subject constructions that are grouped into two types on the basis of contrasting steps: (1) mourning and professional support and (2) traditional mourning processes and norms. First, these two types are presented in order to clarify how they are thematically composed. Second, each individual type is discussed in

terms of overlapping inequalities on the basis of the four power relations: classisms, heteronormativisms, racisms, and bodyisms.

### 2.2.1 *Mourning and Professional Support*

When respondents are asked about the support they give and see being given by other people during the grieving process, it becomes clear that there is a shared perception of the individualisation of grief. This means that forms of grief, phases of grief, and arrangements for grieving have become highly differentiated: ‘... changes in mourning can be reconstructed as a differentiation of different worlds of meaning in mourning’ (Schützeichel 2017, p. 116). Following Bourdieu’s habitus theory, Benkel and Meitzler (2024, p. 93) describe this as a pluralised ‘mourning habitus’. While there is a shared perception that mourning was highly ritualised in the past (Sect. 2.2.2), this practice also appears to have broken free from traditional structures. At the level of the grieving individual, this means that familiar normalisms (Sect. 2.2.2) are less effective nowadays. Mourners themselves determine who (and what; Sect. 3.2.2) is to be part of their mourning arrangement. For example, funerals in a small circle with the nuclear family or close friends are possible and are linked to a more individualised concept and are less community oriented. This means more freedom for the grieving person but also fewer points to refer to for professional help. For example, the methods the interviewed professionals primarily use are consulting and emotional support. They emphasise the importance of attentive listening that expresses empathy and understanding: ‘... having people around you who can just listen’ (Mrs. Meier<sup>1</sup>, pp. 7–8).

However, the grieving process is also highly institutionalised: The funeral and services provided by chaplains and social work professionals are central components of such ‘institutionalised’ grief work. The aim of these services and the specialists’ professional self-image is to accompany those who are grieving and to enable them to cope with their lives after the death of their partner, for instance by maintaining social contacts or establishing new ones to prevent loneliness. This particularly applies to the professionals who work with those who are grieving shortly after a death has occurred, such as the mortician or priest. Social workers, by contrast, tend to accompany the grieving process more indirectly. In our interview material there are no references to special services that provide long-term support for mourners. This is particularly striking because most of the interviewees reported that people who grieve for longer than is considered appropriate by those around them experience a lack of understanding (see also Müller et al. 2022). To some extent, the interviewees themselves also reproduce the understanding of what the ‘right’ mourning period is, in which they construct the figure of the ideal mourner. In neighbourhood management, these services are part of general social work with older people and are therefore not intended to support the grieving process. They include board or card game afternoons, dance events, and various classes, for example sports and cooking. The descriptions by the social workers who provide these services, as well as the statements by other interviewees, reveal very clear ideas about older people, their

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the interviewees have all been pseudonymised.

abilities, their needs, and everyday structures. They describe the following problems faced by widowed men:

Because they have completely different, perhaps fewer opportunities to really lead an independent life, because in many respects they are dependent on their wives. And then, when they are alone, especially when it comes to housework, when they are suddenly forced into this role of doing it alone, they don't KNOW the role and they can't learn it anymore, right. And that's why we have a remarkable number of older men at the moment who are in danger of deteriorating. And there are more and more of them, just look at the demographic development, there are more and more of them (Mr. Puls, p. 4)

They do not see the danger of this happening to widowed women, who 'always have such a little social club' (Mr. Schneider, p. 13), as one of the interviewees puts it. This shows very clear references to gendered images of age that, in the understanding of intersectional multilevel analysis, refer to interlocking power relations. In this case, heteronormativisms are evident when the interviewees assume that men are dependent on their wives (Carr et al. 2001; Streeter 2020). This applies in particular to housework—that is, practical activities. However, the interviewees go on to say that widowed men have to learn a new role. There is an overlapping of the idea of a gender-specific division of labour and gendered socialisation and social expectations. In addition, however, there are overlaps with age-specific abilities in particular because older men, as one interviewee puts it, 'can't learn it anymore' (Mr. Puls, p. 4). Older men are therefore denied the ability to learn due to their advanced age, which refers to ageist perceptions that are known to be expressed by professionals who work with older adults (Ben-Harush et al. 2017; Hahmann 2023a). The idea of age-specific skills is also evident elsewhere in the interviews because the interviewees assume that widowhood at a young age is very different from widowhood at an older age. Younger people, one interviewee says, are better able to cope with loss—even if the death of their partner was more tragic—because they have more time to live and are generally more adaptable (Mrs. Meier, p. 7). There are numerous references to stereotypes: The interviewees affirm hegemonic discourses that point to the weakness and lack of flexibility of older people. At the same time, there are also references to social structures, for instance when the interviewees emphasise that there is a need to develop special offers for older men because there will be more of them in the future due to demographic ageing. The focus on the frailty of older men makes the grieving women invisible. They are labeled as 'social', much more social than men, and as not needing support (Klaus 2021). This also applies to the time during which widowed women care for their husbands before widowhood. While the interviewees point out that caring men need more support because they are inexperienced in cooking and other housework, there is no mention of caring women. Even if the statistics indicate that the interviewees correctly regard older women generally as having more experience of care work than men, the fact that they are not addressed as burdened or overburdened caregivers points to the power of existing heteronormativisms. In the case of widowed women, heteronormativism therefore appears to mask the age attributions.

### 2.2.2 Mourning as a Traditional Process

In their description of current mourning arrangements, the interviewees refer to traditional routines and norms of mourning. These include specific dress codes, temporal routines of mourning, and the distribution of tasks in the direct and extended mourning process. Interviewees consider these rituals to be out of date and irritating:

Not like it used to be. It used to be the case that this year was taken, this year of mourning. But I always thought that was totally stupid. Why am I only allowed to wear normal clothes again after 365 days and not after, I don't know, 2 months? Right? (Mr. Schneider, p. 6)

This negative perception is reinforced when the people in a grieving person's environment criticise the *lack of* use of signs; that is, they ask why the grieving person is not wearing mourning clothes. Not wearing such clothing and thus not adhering to the traditional and milieu-specific social norms is linked to further forms of social control by the grieving person's neighbours or social environment. For example, a mortician criticises the fact that certain behaviour is perceived and discussed as inappropriate, such as laughing and/or laughing too much, going on vacation, or repartnering too early:

By those around them in any case. Then it certainly means, I'll put it this way, why are you going out partying? Why isn't she wearing black? Why is she laughing, why is she going on holiday? (Mr. Schneider, p. 6)

Another interviewee emphasises the fact that the year of mourning is valuable for the bereaved in that it enables them to be treated more leniently during this period. The year of mourning allows for widowed individuals to 'live through everything for a year' (Mr. Lüders, p. 3).

One central space for traditional mourning is the cemetery as a 'memorial space' (Meitzler 2022, p. 102) and a space for the routines of 'loss organisation' (Benkel and Meitzler 2024, p. 81). As a traditional place of Christian mourning (Benkel 2013), the cemetery is a relevant point of reference for remembrance from the funeral and for many years afterward. This makes it a long-standing part of the mourning arrangement that can be accessed by anyone (see also Schützeichel's [2017] typology of the meaningful worlds of mourning). The cemetery is a meeting place for mourners, where they can experience solidarity and support: 'The cemetery should also be a meeting place' (Mr. Schneider, p. 8). In the isolation of grief (Sect 2.2.1), which those who are grieving must overcome quickly and independently, the cemetery thus offers a space of community among mourners.

The traditional forms of mourning mentioned in the interviews are interesting insofar as the interviewees refer to the year of mourning and mourning clothes as an issue for women, as their examples exclusively relate to women; for example, 'Why isn't she wearing black?' (Mr. Schneider, p. 6). This gender-specific framing of mourning clothes illustrates perceived normalisms about widowhood. However, it also shows the extent to which age stereotypes and heteronormativisms are united in the figure of the ideal mourner.

The decline in traditional mourning routines is understood to be a sign of societal change that references symbolic representations in the form of hegemonic discourses on fast-moving society: 'The year of mourning has long since ceased to be an issue; instead, things have to be sorted out relatively quickly—that the wardrobe is emptied; that the clothes are thrown away; that the room is rearranged. ... taking your time is no longer so prevalent socially, but that is logical in our fast-moving times' (Mr. Lüders, p. 3).

The above quote indicates that the grieving individual is not given enough time to mourn and is supposed to quickly reintegrate into 'normal life'; that is, he or she ought to function (see also Jakoby and Thönnies 2013; Müller et al. 2022). A comparable pattern emerges when interviewees say that mourners are also supposed to transform their home so that it becomes clear that the deceased person is really dead. This means, for example, that everyday objects belonging to the deceased person are no longer supposed to be visible or that their wardrobe should be cleared out. As in the work of Schützeichel (2017), these references can be understood as appealing to the 'responsibilised individual' (Rose 1998) in the grieving process, an individual who works on self-improvement in the logic of the 'entrepreneurial self' (Bröckling 2007). In a gerontological perspective, the references address ideas of active and successful ageing (Denninger et al. 2014). This reveals the interweaving of various power relations, for example in the performance requirements or technologies of the self that can be summarised as classisms. Winker and Degele (2011) understand neoliberal interpellations of the capable, working subject as symbolic representations of classisms because access to economic resources is regulated through the naturalisation of discipline and diligence in working relationships. Classisms are interwoven with bodyisms of the age structure and the concept of active ageing and heteronormativisms, as adapted mourning also seems to apply more to women. As previously mentioned, men, by contrast, need special support systems.

It is true that cemeteries, for example, are now organised by many different religious and nonreligious groups and have thus clearly become pluralised. However, our analysis illustrates how strongly the interviewees normalise Christian routines of mourning. Overall, the diversity of milieu-specific, post-traditional scope for design found in the literature on cemeteries cannot be identified in the information provided by the interviewees. In continuation of the aforementioned normative image of the older widow, interviewees also seem to have the Christian older person or, more precisely, the devout widowed woman in mind when they design and accompany mourning processes in the cemetery. This is how Mrs. Meier puts it:

Exactly, ... if you're lucky and you might be a believer, a good connection to the community. If you're lucky, you still have a good pastor, but even that can no longer be taken for granted. (Mrs. Meier, p. 15)

A fundamental dilemma becomes apparent in two of the subject constructions: Professional support for grieving people is not adequately diversified in order to do justice to the different living arrangements of those who are grieving, as well as the range of the temporal rhythm of grief. The interviewees themselves reproduce a very specific image of mourners and their needs, which can be summarised in the aforementioned religious older woman. In doing so, they implicitly create the

ideal mourner, which gives rise to two issues. First, there are numerous references to heterosexual couples but no references to homosexual couples, people in family-of-choice arrangements, or friendships in general. There is also a lack of information on people of color, non-Christian religions, or alternative burial and mourning rites. It can, therefore, be assumed that these groups of people might not receive appropriate offers of professional support. Second, the focus on the figure of the ideal mourner means that any deviation from the associated expectations leads to social work intervening in a normalising way, despite assurances to the contrary.

### 3 Agential Realism: Core Concepts and Methodological Application Using the Example of Mourning Processes

#### 3.1 Shifts in Perspective: An Introduction to Agential Realism

In the following we introduce core concepts of agential realism (Barad 2003, 2007, 2013) to better understand mourning processes from the perspective of ‘new’ materialisms. Considering Barad’s ideas means a consistent analytical shift in perspective, namely from individuals as the central actors of mourning to the practices in which mourning takes place as a doing. Mourning, which is usually described as a human phenomenon, is understood from an analytical perspective that does not only assume individuals to be ‘places’ of mourning (e.g. the person mourning). Instead, mourning is consistently located in a practice in which different forms of materiality—person, object, place—are involved and are only constituted as such in doing, and in which meanings—for example, ascriptions of age and gender, the meaning of an object of memory, the cemetery—are linked to these materialities. Thus, the concrete form and meaning of these materialities are mutually constituted in practices.

Barad (2003, p. 822) uses the concept of ‘material-discursive practices’ to describe such ongoing processes of constitution. Instead of understanding discursive practices as ontologically given and epistemologically predefined—that is, as linguistic expressions with fixed properties—Barad understands discursive practices as processual, performative, and situational; that is, meanings, insights, and conditions are differentiated into processes of constitution (Barad 2003, pp. 818–819). Barad (2003, p. 822) also understands materiality not as an a priori existing entity but as an ongoing process of materialisation: ‘... not a thing, but a doing’ (Barad 2003, p. 822), in which agency is produced and expressed.<sup>2</sup> By adopting the concept of material-discursive practices, Barad emphasises the inseparability of discursivity and materiality. Materiality is to be understood as just as discursive as discursive practices are material. Barad uses this concept to emphasise the simultaneity of discursive prac-

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<sup>2</sup> Barad asks how materiality and agency can be conceived and rejects an understanding of individual agency or agency that is attributed to a single subject or object. Instead, Barad (2003, p. 818) suggests that ‘the universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming’ and that agency emerges in ongoing reconfigurations—that is, material-discursive practices. Relational understandings of agency in posthuman approaches such as the actor–network theory have long been the subject of critical debate (e.g. Bloor 1999; Kneer 2009). Some scholars have recently expressed concerns that agential realism bears the risk of a new scientism (Keller 2019) or positivism (Hoppe and Lemke 2021).

tices and materiality. This means that discursive practices can no more be reduced to materiality than materiality can be reduced to discursive practices. Seemingly given entities such as the mourning person, the support person, mourning clothes, or a mourning ritual are seen as the result of boundary-drawing practices (Barad 2003, pp. 819, 824). The question is, therefore, which material-discursive practices constitute these seeming entities. Barad (2003) frames this process as entification, that is, making messy, diverse, and ever-changing arrangements look like preexisting or even natural entities such as an individual with clearly demarcated (body) boundaries with a stable, consistent identity, for example a person who is mourning sitting on a bench in a cemetery, as discussed above.

Boundary-drawing practices illustrate presuppositions and assumptions that influence the respective understanding of mourning and differentiate between what is understood as a characteristic of a mourning process and what is not. When a social worker speaks about a mourning woman and her deceased husband during an interview, this also expresses her presuppositions and assumptions. The social worker constructs the woman and the man as self-contained, clearly defined entities; ascribes human and unchangeable characteristics to them (always mourning, deceased); establishes relationships and causalities between the deceased man (cause of mourning) and the mourning woman (mourning as an effect of loss); and thus frames mourning in a heteronormative understanding of partnership. By also mentioning an adult daughter in this context and pointing out the long duration of the mourning process, the social worker encodes this process as age-specific. This understanding of mourning and the boundaries drawn to define mourning are widespread and considered normal.

What is special about agential realism is that it is not automatically based on the distinction between forms of human and nonhuman that the human-centered orientation of Winker and Degele's intersectional multilevel analysis draws on. Instead, principles of differentiation are used that arise either deductively from the theoretical approach on which an analysis is based or inductively from the empirical material. Drawing boundaries has already been problematised by postmodern and poststructuralist approaches. Dualisms such as mind vs. body, agency vs. structure, and culture vs. nature have been critically scrutinised because they can create the appearance of objectivity and thereby reinforce power relations. 'New' materialism approaches go one step further. What they have in common is that they also extend this criticism to dualisms such as discursivity vs. materiality and human vs. nonhuman (Höppner et al. 2024a). The aim of an agential realist analysis is, therefore, to focus on those practices in which differentiations such as the distinction between successful and unsuccessful mourning are made.

Since boundary-drawing processes can produce exclusions and reinforce power relations, it is one of Barad's central aims (Barad 2003, pp. 819, 824) to make researchers aware of differentiation processes. Since there is no 'absolute externality to the natural worlds being investigated' (Barad 2003, p. 828), Barad sensitises researchers to ask why these and not other boundaries are drawn in certain research fields in order to generate knowledge. Barad proposes the concept of the 'agential cut' (Barad 2003, p. 815) for a reflection of the presuppositions and assumptions that researchers base their analysis on and the presuppositions and assumptions that re-

search participants use to clarify their experiences, assessments, and positions. Barad defines an agential cut as an inherent distinction between subject and object. Agential cuts enact ‘a local resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy’ and thus effect a form of relata that was produced only through ‘agential separability—the local condition of exteriority-within-phenomena’ (Barad 2003). Barad uses the term ‘agential cut’ in contrast to the ‘Cartesian cut’ (Barad 2003). While Cartesian cuts merely reproduce preexisting and causally determined relationships (because they refer back to classical dualisms such as human vs. non-human), agential cuts make it possible to draw boundaries that produce temporary, material-discursive structures of relationships—so-called matterings (Barad 2003, p. 817). Agential cuts are also based on a principle of differentiation, for example that of young vs. old, successful vs. unsuccessful mourning process, mourning ritual vs. partner ritual, or the principle of presence vs. absence. Without reflecting on it, however, ageing research is often based on the principle of differentiation of human vs. nonhuman. Because other principles are used less frequently in empirical ageing research, their application promises a gain in knowledge.

### 3.2 Agential Cuts: Differentiations in the Context of Mourning Processes as the Results of Boundary-Drawing Practices

In the following, we reconstruct three boundary-drawing practices that constitute the phenomenon of widowhood and mourning in later life. Three boundaries were drawn by the professionals interviewed in the context of the Doing Widowhood research project (Höppner and Claus 2023): (1) the differentiation between young and old, (2) the differentiation between successful and unsuccessful mourning, and (3) differentiation according to temporalities.<sup>3</sup>

#### 3.2.1 *Agential Cut: Young vs. Old*

The value of applying agential cuts becomes clear when one takes the linking age perspective (Wanka et al. 2024), which represents a fruitful development in ageing research. Here, the differentiation between young and old is used to analyse phenomena. By contrasting and comparing different life phases and transitions, implicit and explicit norms as well as knowledge systems can be reconstructed as chrononormativities (Freeman 2010), such as ideas of the ‘right’ time to go to school, get married, start a family, retire, or lose a partner. These ideas are manifested and stabilised through legal regulations and the institutions implementing them. Examples include the obligation to attend school, which is linked to age and the corresponding school system; the right to marry and the institution of the family; and the institutional and social procedures when a person dies. Thus, the degree to which a person is emotionally affected by the loss of a partner also depends on the

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<sup>3</sup> A further example refers to the method of silhouette analysis (Höppner 2022), in which Barad’s concept of agential cuts is used to convert images into black-and-white formations and to analyse them as silhouettes based on the principle of movement vs. nonmovement in order to reconstruct mobility patterns.

circumstances of their death, as well as on the deceased person's age. In one of the interviews, a grief counselor says,

If someone dies in their mid-50s then you are still YOUNG, so then you have died ... young ... From mid-60s I think that is dramatic or sad but it is SO, it is given ..., but I say young adults from 20, take young adults from 20, that is totally unfair. ... The fact that an older person dies is just the course of life, it's natural, it's a NATURAL process. It's not natural for a young person to die; in our expectation it's not natural. (Mrs. Brogge, p. 8)

This shows how the 'metric variable' of age determines an age-specific chronology of mourning. Older adulthood is associated with death and is interpreted biologically, which leads to the loss of a partner in old age being constructed as 'natural' and the norm. The loss of one's partner in younger adulthood, on the other hand, is seen as an injustice that is experienced as all the greater the younger the deceased person is (Wanka and Höppner 2021). Age-specific constructions also become clear when it comes to initiating and entering into new partnerships. In one interview, a mortician talks about two people aged around 30:

I ... buried a young man and a young woman and afterwards I just brought ... [the bereaved woman and man] together. I said: 'If you two don't know what to do, then just go for a bike ride on a Sunday'. And they actually got married. (Mr. Schneider, p. 3)

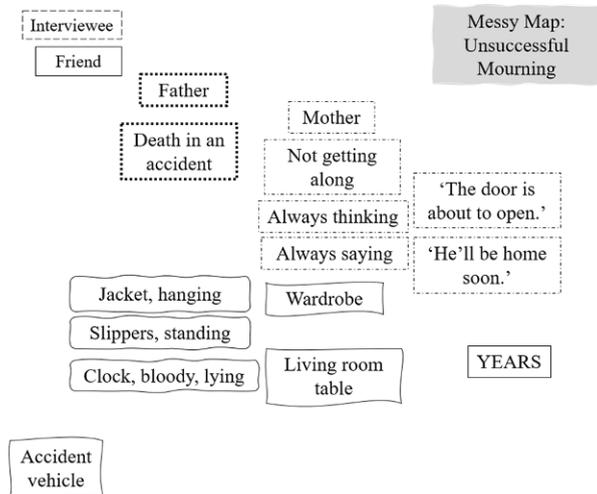
The social worker Mrs. Schulz stated that her friend, who was widowed last year at the age of 50, could 'imagine a new relationship at some point', but the friend said she would not remarry (Mrs. Schulz, p. 4). Mrs. Schulz also said that 'very old people don't start a new partnership' (Mrs. Schulz, p. 4). This shows an age-specific chronology with regard to the support provided by a person's social environment in getting to know potential new partners. While young widowed people are actively supported in getting into a new relationship, and a new partnership would be acceptable for people in middle adulthood, the social worker stated that very old people are not interested in a new partnership at all.

### 3.2.2 *Agential Cut: Successful vs. Unsuccessful Mourning*

Since the interviewees often refer to the differentiation between successful and unsuccessful mourning, we illustrate the material-discursive practices that constitute these ideas using the following passage from an interview with a social worker as an example:

The father of a friend of mine, for example, died in an accident and her mother could NOT cope, not at all, NOT AT ALL. She always thought and often said 'the door's about to open' and 'he'll be home soon'. And there were YEARS of the jacket still hanging on the coat rack, the slippers were still there, his watch was, also YEARS of, the bloody watch from the accident vehicle, lying BLOODY on the, uh, living room table for years. She did NOT cope, not at all. (Mrs. Schulz, p. 8)

**Fig. 1** Messy map of ‘unsuccessful mourning’. The different boundaries refer to the elements involved (clockwise: mother and practices of mourning, temporal elements, objects of mother’s current lifeworld, objects from accident, objects belonging to deceased father, deceased father, interviewee’s friend, interviewee)

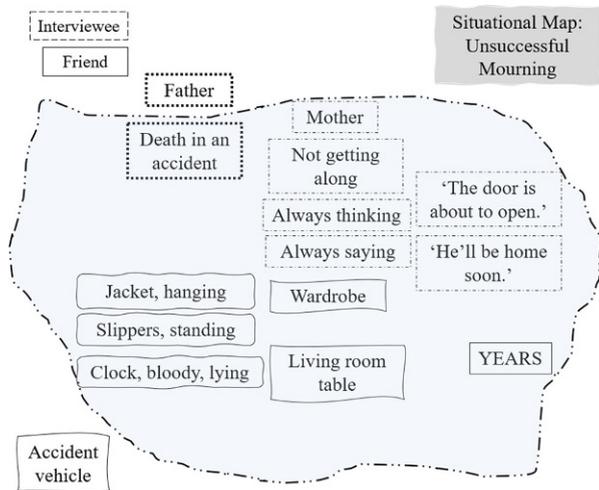


We use boundary mapping analysis (Höppner et al. 2024b) to better understand the differentiation between successful and unsuccessful mourning. This analytical method is a further development of situational analysis. Situational analysis was developed by Clarke (2005) as a poststructuralist method for grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In a first step, we create a ‘messy map’ (Clarke et al. 2018, p. 235) of the situation described in the interview passage. A messy map is used to first clarify the elements involved. To that end, we collected all the material-discursive practices that are mentioned in the interview passage. Figure 1 shows the messy map of the ‘unsuccessful mourning process’ that the social worker describes.

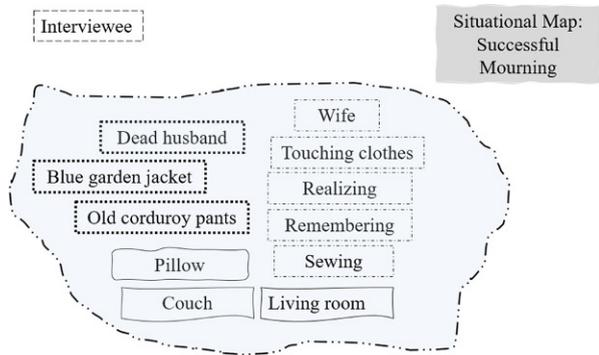
In a second step, the material-discursive practices of the messy map are subsumed under various categories. Contrary to what Clarke et al. (2018) suggest, however, the elements in an agential–realist analysis are not categorised by human actors (e.g. ‘father’, ‘mother’) or nonhuman actors (e.g. ‘jacket’, ‘slippers’) because otherwise they would reproduce the dualisms that Barad criticises. Instead, Fig. 2 shows a situational map that illustrates the agential cut that the social worker makes in the interview. It follows the principle of presence vs. absence and thus brings together those material-discursive practices that the interviewee regards as unsuccessful mourning.

The situational map makes it clear that mourning is not solely a human process that can be reduced to the death of a partner and the consequences of this loss for the ‘mother’, as is discussed in the literature with regard to state of health, well-being, and social network after the loss (e.g. Adena 2016; Ahmadi 2013; Drefke 2010; Hollstein 2002; Schaan 2009). Instead, the situational map shows that, in the interview passage, numerous material-discursive practices produce the circled mattering as an arrangement of mourning and as a relationship of different human and non-human materiality (Chapman 2006). The material-discursive practices articulated in the interview influence each other (e.g. co-constitution of the hanging jacket and mother always saying that ‘the door is about to open’); causalities in the current life situation are derived by the interviewee. The terms ‘father’ (and not ‘husband’

**Fig. 2** Situational map of 'unsuccessful mourning'. The agential cut differentiates between present and absent elements



**Fig. 3** Situational map of 'successful mourning'. The different boundaries refer to the elements involved (clockwise: wife and practices of mourning, objects of wife's current lifeworld, objects belonging to deceased husband, interviewee). The agential cut differentiates between present and absent elements



or 'man') and 'mother' (and not 'wife' or 'woman') suggest a heteronormatively structured family context; the mourning process is defined in the interview passage as the loss of the 'mother's' partner and not that of a family member.

While the social worker frames this sequence as an example of an unsuccessful mourning process, other interviewees give best-practice examples of a successful mourning process. For example, the pastor talks of a woman who 'took her deceased husband's clothes and looked at them again', reproducing her thoughts: 'his garden jacket that he always wore, the blue one' (Mr. Lüders, p. 11). He talks of the woman who cut a piece out of the jacket and also out of his 'old corduroy pants that he liked to wear so much' (Mr. Lüders, p. 11). The woman took something from 'each of his items of clothing and then made a memory pillow out of them', which is now on the sofa (Mr. Lüders, p. 11). Figure 3 illustrates the situational map of an example of successful mourning that also follows the differentiation principle of presence and absence.

The pastor rates the mourning process as positive because the woman had transformed the deceased's clothes into a 'wonderful little art project' in the form of

the pillow; this rearrangement made it clear, in relation to the mourning and current life situation, ‘that these things mean something and at the same time have to be reassembled ...’, (so) the past has to be reassembled like a PATCHWORK’ (Mr. Lüders).

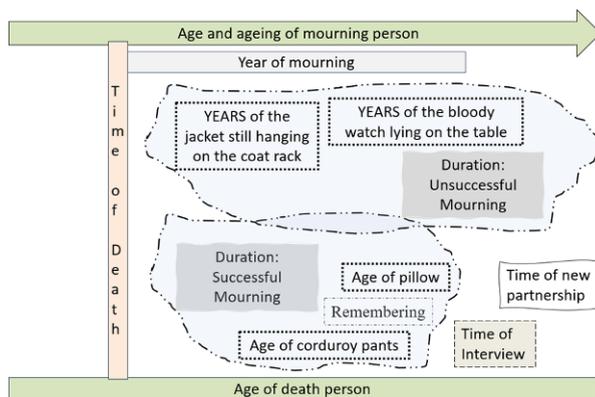
In these examples of successful and unsuccessful mourning, both arrangements involve a person who is at home looking at their dead husband’s clothes and dealing with his loss. The two situational maps illustrate material-discursive practices in which these materialities are linked to meanings and thus constitute entities of mourning, such as the mourning wife and objects of memory. The entity of the mourning wife illustrates the empirical data on partner loss mentioned in the previous section, which statistically mainly affects older women. Both interviewees ascribe gender-specific attributions to the mourning arrangements. First, they refer to heteronormative notions of partnership as referred to in Sect. 2.1. Second, and indirectly by referring to traditional role allocations, both interviewees mention the dead husband’s jacket, which might stand for activity, productivity, and the public sphere—features that are commonly linked to masculinity. On the other hand, the interviewees refer to the woman as grieving in the private sphere—that is, a place that is associated with caregiving and reproductive activities commonly linked to femininity (e.g. Aulenbacher et al. 2014). At the same time, this ascription illustrates the current understanding of individualised mourning; that is, mourning today is carried out in private rather than in public (Höppner and Claus 2023; see also Sect. 2.2.2).

### 3.2.3 *Agential Cut: Differentiation According to Temporalities*

These examples show that mourning processes are not exclusively human processes but are constituted in material-discursive practices. The seemingly static entities of the mourning wife, object of memory, or mourning ritual emerge in the course of these practices. Evaluations of mourning processes as successful or unsuccessful are first determined by the materialities involved. Whereas the deceased man’s bloody watch lying on the living room table is interpreted as a materiality that indicates unsuccessful mourning, a pillow sewn from cut-up pieces of the deceased person’s clothing is interpreted as a sign of successful mourning. The material-discourse practices in which these entities are constituted are closely connected. While the first wife sits in the unchanged home and waits for her husband to come back through the door again, the second wife actively changed the home by touching clothes, realising her loss, consciously remembering her husband, and sewing a pillow out of his clothes. Here, the interviewees refer to the idea of active ageing (Denninger et al. 2014) when they link inactivity with unsuccessful mourning and activity with successful mourning. Moreover, different forms of temporality play an important role in assessing a mourning process as successful or unsuccessful. Therefore, we place the agential cut along the temporalities that the professionals referred to in the interviews while expressing their ideas about successful and unsuccessful mourning (Fig. 4).

Figure 4 illustrates the fact that we are dealing with multiple temporalities here: (1) the age of the deceased person and the age of the person who is mourning, their

**Fig. 4** Temporalities of mourning processes. The different boundaries refer to the different temporal elements involved in the two interview passages



positions in the life course (Kohli 1985), and the ageing process of the mourning person; (2) the temporality of things (e.g. the watch lying on the living room table, showing the time); (3) the ageing processes of things such as corduroy trousers, seen in relation to the ageing processes of the people wearing them (Endter and Kienitz 2017); and (4) temporal guidelines as to when the end of mourning or the beginning of a new partnership and thus the transition from one phase of life to another is appropriate (Freeman 2010).

It becomes clear that mourning processes are linked to multiple temporalities and that the right timing is constitutive for the evaluation of mourning as having been successful or not. Scholars of material gerontology take the idea of multiple temporalities of later life as a starting point (e.g. Gallistl and Wanka 2023; Höppner 2023). They investigate how age and ageing are co-constituted in relation to different forms of human and nonhuman materiality and how multiple temporalities are produced as a result. Figure 4 also shows that age and ageing cannot be reduced to a person's (chronological) age but that people and things, as well as their material arrangements, are equally involved in these processes.

Barad (2013) explores these entanglements between materiality and temporality as 'spacetime matters', conceptualising that time can never be separated from material-discursive practices and is thus seen as contingent and nonlinear. That is, temporalities and materialities are not separate but are relationally connected as a becoming of time and materiality. As a result, mourning can be understood as a ritualised process that is structured temporally in material-discursive practices and whose temporalities are simultaneously produced in material-discursive practices. On the other hand, the interviewees understand any deviation from the usual temporal structuring of mourning (e.g. not mourning for long enough or for too long) as a break in the performance of this ritual and regard it as negative—and not as an act of self-empowerment or an expression of creativity.

#### 4 Material Intersectionality? Intersectional Materiality? A Discussion of the Empirical Results and Methodological Consequences

In our article we introduced Winker and Degele's intersectional multilevel analysis as an example of 'old' materialisms and core concepts of Barad's agential realism as an example of 'new' materialisms and applied them to empirical data on widowhood and grieving in order to illustrate how both approaches analyse age and ageing. The aim was to further investigate how the focus on practices, which is central to both approaches, produces similarities as well as differences in an analysis. We believe it is possible to use both the similarities and the differences fruitfully for ageing research. The results of the two analyses illustrate the complexity of widowhood and mourning and the ever-specific understandings of age and ageing. While the intersectional multilevel analysis focuses on interwoven inequalities of ageing, mourning, and widowhood, the agential realist analysis and its focus on boundary-drawing practices show how, where, and when age and ageing in regard to the phenomenon of widowhood and mourning are constituted.

In the following, we explain in more detail how the two materialist perspectives can be combined to make use of their specific advantages. We begin by detailing the main results and highlighting the extent to which intersectional multilevel analysis benefits from Barad's concepts of agential cuts.

The intersectional multilevel analysis in particular allows us to access conditions of domination that are concealed in social practices. The aim is to work out how individuals position themselves in relation to structures of power. In the present material, the interviewees have an image of individualised and pluralised mourning processes and thus express themselves as liberalised from traditional routines of mourning in their self-perception. This becomes clear, for example, when the interviewees distance themselves from prevailing notions of quick mourning or critically discuss traditional mourning. At the same time, our analysis shows that the interviewees reproduce stereotypical assumptions made of mourners. They are subject to assumptions of normality about the typical grieving person as Christian, old, and female. The interviewees perceive and reproduce the significance of the couple relationship, resilience in coping with widowhood, and the concrete practices of coping in a strongly gendered way, and they make strong assumptions about what an ideal mourner is. In the case of individual deviation, professionals take on the task of normalisation and try to ensure that those concerned conform to this image.

The empirical conclusion also shows how the intersectional multilevel analysis benefits from concepts of agential realism. First, from the perspective of the professionals who work with widowed people at different points in the course of widowhood and due to the research question and theoretical foundations of the secondary analysis we present in this article, the ideal mourner is a figure who must be considered as being constituted in material-discursive practices. While intersectional multilevel analysis takes social discourses as a given and refers to and uses them to sharpen own analytical results or develop them into new questions, Barad's concept of material-discursive practices provides a different way of understanding discourses. By using this concept, Barad problematises the boundaries many theories draw between materiality and discourse and moves beyond this dualism by

understanding materiality as always inherently entangled in discourse and discourse as always materially enacted. This understanding enables a more essential way of asking what seemingly given entities, such as the ideal mourner and the nonideal mourner, are and in which material-discursive practices they and their relationships with each other are constituted. Barad's understanding thus facilitates a precise in-depth analysis of the doings that are expressed and articulated during an interview.

Furthermore, the analysis shows the mutual effects between life course positions and transitions, ageing processes of people and things, and situational processes, such as mourning. Thus, it highlights the need to consider the material-discursive practices that co-constitute ideas of temporality that are interrelated with historical and sociocultural contexts of mourning:

- the idea of linearity (e.g. the sequence of mourning rituals, effects of losing a partner for a person's biography and ageing process)
- the idea of circularity (e.g. the recall loop through which remembered situations are relived in the present and are thus updated; the past and present can become blurred during a recall loop and create a new form of past–present temporality)
- the idea of temporal overlapping (e.g. a person's age, her or his ageing process and position in the life course that overlaps with the age and ageing process of a piece of clothing)

By considering these multiple temporalities of age and ageing, scholars highlight the complexity and dynamics that intersectional research and theorising have to be able to deal with (Höppner and Wanka 2021). In terms of an intersectional multilevel analysis, this means not only that categories of difference such as class, gender, and race are intersected but that they always have a temporal dimension of inequality. Applying the idea of multiple temporalities to the concept of subject construction means considering multiple temporalities and asking both *how* and *when*—in terms of linearity, circularity, and temporal overlapping—these subject constructions are actually co-constituted. Thus, by using core concepts of agential realism, we can think differently and more precisely in an intersectional analysis about the processes of age differentiation and how age and ageing contribute to power relations over the course of time. An additional benefit is the consistent inclusion of nonhuman actors as actors with the power to act together with others. Decentering the human gaze of intersectional multilevel analysis provides an innovative perspective on supposedly certain knowledge about age and ageing and a deconstruction of dualisms that researchers bring to the process of analysis.

However, the agential realist approach also benefits from the methodological assumptions made in the context of intersectional multilevel analysis. Agential realism is accused of investigating the situational co-constitutions of phenomena too strongly. Focusing on processes of entangled agencies 'make[s] it difficult to name and so hold in view the continuities, durabilities and often monotonous predictabilities that characterise systems of power asymmetry (such as capitalism, patriarchy, racism)', as Washick et al. (2015, p. 66) put it. This criticism can be reproduced on the micro level: A posthumanist perspective that is equally interested in 'persons, worms, leaves, bacteria, metals and hurricanes' (Bennett 2010, p. 107) has no analytical power to name differences between human beings that result from

systems of power and oppression (Garske 2014). The boundaries that have become visible in the empirical data in the messy maps, however, do not arise outside of prevailing conditions. Rather, they are themselves expressions of structures of power because interviewees' interpretations are informed by hegemonic or counter-hegemonic discourses and objectified conditions. We therefore suggest that intersectional multilevel analysis helps an agential realist analysis to achieve an expanded reading and critical interpretation of the material in retrospect. To this end, we propose using the boundaries developed from the messy maps to systematically examine them for overlapping power relations in identities, discourses, and structures in keeping with a multilevel analysis.

The two materialist approaches of intersectional multilevel analysis and agential realism work very differently in terms of epistemology, as we set out above. However, we see enormous potential in using the two approaches together, particularly for methodological conceptions of ageing research. The social theoretical foundations show that the approaches are based on different basic assumptions. While intersectional multilevel analysis takes structural categories as a given and as the deductive starting point for an analysis of the production, reproduction, affirmation, or deconstruction of these structural categories and other categories of difference, an agential realist analysis begins inductively with the material and reconstructs the boundary-drawing material-discursive practices on the basis of which categories as seemingly given entities are developed.

We argue in favor of linking the two approaches for empirical analysis and, depending on the research question, starting (a) with the intersectional multilevel analysis in the sense of material intersectionality or (b) with the agential realist analysis in the sense of intersectional materiality. Depending on the research question, researchers can focus on (a) age as a structural category, for instance insofar as age in superimposition with gender or heteronormativisms produces specific assumptions about those who are grieving or about necessary offers of support, or on (b) age as a principle of differentiation and thus as a result of boundary-drawing practices and age codings as seen in messy maps.

Both approaches situate their analyses politically and with the aim of changing social conditions, taking humans, animals, nature, etc., into account to varying degrees (Winker 2021; Górska 2016). Thus, both approaches have the same aim in common: to contribute to a critical and self-reflective attitude and to better understand the ways in which and conditions through which social inequality and power relations are reproduced. In ageing research, such a combination of perspectives can help to show the relevance of concepts such as age as a category of difference and to unpack the different meanings and forms of materiality that are linked to it. Such a combination contributes to a critical gerontology that questions the preconditions and processes of gerontological knowledge production (Baars 1991).

## 5 'Old' Materialisms vs. 'New' Materialisms in Ageing Research: A Conclusion

A materialist analysis of the world around us has long been a relevant perspective in philosophy and a relevant component of the sociological and social science analytical toolkit. A materialist approach thus seems highly relevant when it comes to studying age and ageing, as a large number of questions in ageing research deal with the material constitution of the consequences of ageing or, in sociological terms, with its social consequences, patterns of interpretation, and societal modes of processing. After biological, medical, and psychological ways of thinking dominated for a long time, social constructivist approaches, such as the concept of doing age (e.g. Schroeter 2012), were at the center of the debate. The establishment of material gerontology (Gallistl et al. 2024; Höppner and Urban 2018) makes it possible to develop a more-than-human perspective on age and ageing. In addition, the critical to skeptical examination of 'new' materialisms indicates that Marxist materialisms in ageing studies are also in need of further refinement (Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Hahmann 2020). Compared to discussions of inequality theory, approaches that are decidedly critical of domination can only be found sporadically—not only in relation to ageing research in particular but also in relation to sociological research in general. Thus, 'old' materialisms do also benefit from the debates around the material turn.

In this article we argue that we should make fruitful use of the similarities and differences between 'old' and 'new' materialisms by not treating them as a case of 'either–or' but rather of 'both–and'. The debates in the field show very clearly that epistemological and ontological assumptions are made within the theoretical concepts that are, at first glance, mutually exclusive. This particularly applies to the question of how the world is structured through both power relations and the situational nature of the material world. However, it seems sensible to us to link the analyses in temporal dependencies, that is, to speak either of a material intersectionality or of an intersectional materiality (Sect. 4). Depending on the research question, researchers can thus place an epistemological focus that emphasises the advantages of the respective approach without having to ignore those of the other.

It should be noted that there is a great deal of heterogeneity in the field of 'new' materialisms, but this is certainly duplicated in the understanding of the very different ways of reading Marx. This article can, therefore, be seen as an example of how 'old' and 'new' materialisms can both be combined and used empirically. At the same time, it makes reference to the fact that the wide variety of materialist approaches can be used in very different ways to examine age and ageing in structural and processual terms.

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