Disposal, devaluation and consumerism: or how and why things come not to matter

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Full Research Report

Background

As indicated in the original application, this research examines consumption through the activities and practices of disposal, as located in homes and enacted by households (cf. Hetherington, 2004, O'Brien, 1999; Scanlon, 2004). Although the research makes a very clear theoretical contribution (see outputs), this contribution rests on a strong body of primarily qualitative empirical research, and it is the collection and analysis of this data that comprised the core focus for the period of funded research.

Notwithstanding that a familiar mantra of the consumption literature through the 1990s was that consumption is more than the act of purchase, for all that, retailing, shopping and commercial cultures remain pervasive presences in the field (see for example, Clarke et al 2004; Dwyer and Jackson, 2003; Entwistle, 2002; Jackson, 2004). Albeit that attention has moved away from the objects of acquisition per se and from consumer behaviour to encompass shopping as practice (Gregson et al, 2002), as a means of enacting key social relations as well as identities (Miller et al, 1998) and even shopping as sacrifice (Miller, 1998), the fascination with retail sites and with acquisition via shopping remains. Indicative of the continued and pervasive power of the commodity chain as a conceptual framing device for much consumption research, and within that the producer-retailer-consumer nexus (see: Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994; Hartwick, 1998; Hughes, 2000; Hughes and Reimer, 2003; Leslie and Reimer, 1999; Raikes et al 2000), the effect has been to ensure that what consumers actually do with the things they acquire, how they appropriate things and, indeed, divest them, has remained by comparison relatively unconsidered.

One way of thinking about consumption as disposal is indeed, to locate it within the commodity chain; to see it as the neglected end-point of consumption. Notwithstanding the ways in which the accelerating commoditisation of waste and the marketisation of recyclables is positioning such consumption end-points as acts of exchange, we remain unconvinced as to the merits of a commodity chain approach to disposal, not least because of its emphasis on linear connections; its continued rootedness in political economic theorisations of production and markets;.and its implicit assumptions that value can be determined if only the veneer of the fetishised commodity can be peeled back and its essence revealed. In our research, in contrast, we take a rather different conceptual tack. For us disposal has been located firmly within the home and in the activities of households. In this respect it takes seriously Miller's recent urgings that, for consumption research to develop requires its "orientation to its primary site of practice", the home (Miller, 2002: 239, see too Pink, 2004). Thus far however, the small but growing literature on home consumption has emphasised acts of appropriation and keeping (Gullestad, 1984;

Miller, 1988; Layne 1999), and/or on how ordinary consumers seek to constitute the conditions for passing certain things on to key significant others (Marcoux, 2001). Such things are the things which we find difficult to throw away. They do the work of memorialising for us. Frequently passing between generations, they are used by families to constitute the inalienability of the family (Wiener, 1992) and they work to make present lost lives and past lives. What has received rather less attention is the matter of everyday life that never assumes this memorial state, which remains in everyday use and, as part of this, is cast out of homes by household members, for whatever reason/s (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2003), or abandoned (Buchli and Lucas, 2001; Lucas, 2002). It is precisely this type of everyday ordinary matter that is the focus of this research.

Inevitably, such concerns resonate strongly with questions of waste. Waste's capacity as a theoretical vehicle is immense; like food it is good to think with and through (see: Bataille, 1989; Hawkins, 2000; Hawkins and Muecke, 2003; Laporte, 2002; Scanlon, 2004). Empirically, however, the lines of connection between the matter that is cast out and abandoned by households and that which enters the waste stream remain woefully unexamined (although see Strasser, 2000). Much though is assumed. The prominence given to notions such as 'the throwaway society', combined with various implorings to 'de-junk' and 'de-clutter' your life, for example, work varyingly to moralise about and to normalise acts of getting rid of things (Cwerner and Metcalfe, 2003). Yet both depend on assumed past societal practices of keeping and holding on to things. Neither, however, has been subjected to serious interrogation, in terms of their purchase on what people actually do. Similarly, assumptions abound regarding the decline of economies of servicing consumer goods and their repair (Cooper et al, ongoing). They too depend on a contrast drawn with assumed past practices. And then there are the more tacit connections, mobilised as part of the drive to increase the market in recyclables and to reduce the weight of matter sent to landfill, in which images of overflowing landfill sites become the front-line shock tactics in a campaign to reduce the wasting of things. In all this, the understanding that prevails is one in which ordinary everyday consumption is about wasting, and in which things devalue in use until they become cast out as objects of rubbish value (Thompson, 1979).

This research set out to interrogate these understandings by focusing explicitly on what households get rid of, where, how and why. Rather than presuming to know what gets wasted, we wanted to look at what gets wasted and why. And, rather than presuming that things in everyday consumption are wasted, we wanted to look at the full complexities of divestment, in which – as we will see – getting rid of things can be achieved as much through gifting as through wasting. Above all, then, the research sought to provide an empirically grounded investigation of the practices and activities of disposing of things in home consumption, as enacted by households.

Objectives

The aims and objectives of the research, as stated in the original application were:

a) *To examine empirically the practice of household disposal*: with this objective, rather than start from particular categories of goods, we want to begin with what households actually dispose of. We want to know the answers to some basic, but important, questions – what sorts of goods (excluding 'left-overs' such as food and packaging)[1] do households cast out, where and why and in

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[1] In formulating the project we explicitly excluded from consideration the matter that can be accommodated in kerbside collection bins (tins, jars, bottles and certain paper), as well as the detritus of consumption, such as packaging and left-over food. Our reasons for doing this were to do with the ready

what state/condition? Who is responsible for disposal, both as decision and in practice? Also, is disposal a clear practice of separation, involving the passage of goods from house to dustbin, skip or –as donation – to another household? Or are there stages here, for example, a progression from spaces of use to storage spaces such as sheds, lofts and garages? And what is this about?

b) *To explore how acts of disposal connect with acquisition and/or purchase*: our concern here is with examining empirically how disposal connects to the processes of replacement and substitution and, in turn, their connection to manufacturer/retailer product cycles. Specifically, we are interested here in how consumers negotiate the product cycle through related practices of disposal and purchase. We intend to explore this in relation to three specific categories of goods: white goods (specifically: fridges, freezers, washers, dishwashers, tumble dryers, kettles and cookers), consumer electronics (specifically: DVD players, PCs, tvs (widescreen, flat screen, digital, interactive), games consoles and digital cameras/camcorders); and adult's clothing

c) *To consider disposal's connection to the social relations and identities of consumers*: whilst the emphasis in much research on consumption has been on the making of social relations and identities through material culture, we anticipate that addressing disposal will enable us to see how people use disposal to 'un-make' relationships, to 'start anew', to 'wipe the slate', to (re)constitute identities – for example, from full time mother to part time employee, from employee to retired person; and to enact identities as part of normative practices. In the latter respect, our previous work (Gregson and Crewe, 2003) suggested that the disposal of clothing within households is a highly gendered practice, conducted largely by women as a form of 'good housekeeping'. But how generalisable are these practices? Do they extend to include all household goods or not? Where do men and children figure in practices of casting out? And how does this vary across different types of household?

In the initial proposal we highlighted that these aims would allow us to consider the more theoretical question of devaluation. We anticipated being able to address whether devaluation is an intentional effect of fashion, design, aesthetics and technology, as these conjoin in product cycles, speculating that things come not to matter because other things are constituted to matter more (by retailers, manufacturers and consumers). And we anticipated too that devaluation might actually say more about other things entirely, notably social relations and identities.

Methods

The research involves three sets of qualitative data[2]:

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identification of such matter with the practice of recycling. Not only is such matter the concern of the recycling literature, but we were also concerned that including these materials within the research would lead us inexorably into yet a(nother) study of recycling participation. Rather, we wanted to focus on the different issue of the consumer objects in ordinary, everyday home consumption. In not looking at recyclables we also wished to separate ourselves as a research team from the moral rhetoric and frequently unchallenged normativity of recycling as 'a good thing' (Hawkins, 2000). Indeed, we wanted to assume a non-judgemental position with respect to recycling and to acknowledge that certain households, for various reasons, do not participate in these schemes (O'Brien, 1999). For those households who did invest in recycling in major ways, this was a problem: some indeed participated in the research precisely because they recycled. However, in focusing on what households did with ordinary everyday consumer objects we (and they) got to see that such things frequently work to disrupt such 'green' self-narratives.

[2] It is important to add here that the postal questionnaire survey detailed in the original proposal was excluded from the research as one of the conditions of the award. Instead, we were specifically

1: An in-depth 12 month ethnographic investigation with 16 households in the North east of England.
2: An in-depth repeat interview study with 59 households over 12 months in Nottingham.
3: 25 focus group interviews conducted in Nottingham and the East Midlands.

The ethnography
(January 2003 – December 2003: NG)
In shifting from the proposed depth work with 15 households to an ethnographic investigation, this phase of the work became located primarily in one place in North east England. This is 'South HIghtown', a former coal mining 'village' in County Durham. [3]

South Hightown has well over 1000 dwelling structures and, like many former pit villages in the county, expanded considerably in the latter part of the C20th. In its key characteristics, it could indeed be any one of a number of these villages. Its selection as a study site however is indicative of an explicit attempt to address the difficulties of ethnographic fieldwork in English homes. As many have remarked, homes – and particularly English homes – are far from easy sites for ethnographic fieldwork. Long constituted through phrases such as "the Englishman's home is his (sic) castle", often surrounded by structures such as walls, fences, gates, and by the type of plant growth that has the capacity to grow tall and thick – typically privet, leylandii and beech hedges, English dwelling structures, particularly houses, attest to the cultural importance of privacy. Whilst they appear to look outwards, they do so in ways which forge clear boundaries between public and private, the familiar and the strange, self and other. Moreover, at the same time as the walls of many English homes are becoming increasingly porous – particularly to an array of ICTs including digital and satellite TV, mobile phones, broadband, cable and wireless – other tendencies reassert these boundaries with greater vigour. The growing phenomenon of stranger danger for example, particularly in relation to children and the recent expansion in home-based entertainment both reinforce notions of the safety, comfort, convenience and familiarity of the home and of household members, by counterposing a potentially dangerous outside world of unknown others. Such a culture poses significant barriers to ethnographic working, constituting this as an intrusion into privacy. Moreover, even assuming that we can cross the threshold and are invited into the home, there are a whole host of other cultural conventions that get in the way of ethnographic working, notably the formalities of visiting and being positioned as the visitor and the spatial limits this places on movement round, in and through English dwelling structures. Normally visitors to English homes will be offered a tea or a coffee (Miller, 1997); they may well be given something light to eat such as a biscuit or a cake, and they will be allowed to use a toilet or bathroom (though not en-suite ones); but they would not expect to be shown round or look in all the rooms in the house, particularly the bedrooms and back-zone storage spaces such as garages

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requested to increase the qualitative component of the research. This we have done. However, it is important to note that this had effects on the research design outlined in the proposal, and on its enactment. One of the purposes of the survey work had been to identify and recruit particular sorts of households for further intensive work. Another was to allow for a degree of measurable comparability between different cities (we mentioned Nottingham, Sheffield and Newcastle). Without the survey as a means of recruitment we had to revise the research design. Consequently, the in depth household interviews with 15 households outlined in the initial proposal became an intensive ethnography with 16 households located primarily in one place in North east England, and the household disposal diaries became much more intensive repeat depth interview work with 59 households living in four distinct areas of Nottingham. The focus group adjustment was primarily one of numbers, from a proposed 20 to 25.

[3] For a full discussion of this setting see Chapter One of the draft manuscript from the ethnography – see outputs.

and lofts. Moreover, they would be treated politely but with reserve. Yet their presence would exert its effects, by bringing about a 'stilling' in the activities of the household itself; for visiting and being visited suspend the day-to-day activities of the household, as a mark of respect for the visitor. Getting beyond being the visitor is one of the key transitions for ethnographic fieldwork in an English setting; indeed, unless we can do this with at least some of our research participants we have to acknowledge that what purports to be ethnographic research practice is little different to the social relations of other qualitative methodologies, notably depth interviewing.

South Hightown's selection as a study site owes much to its capacity to appear to enable getting beyond being the visitor. In late 2002 NG took up the offer of a friend's house as a research base for the ethnography. For six months this provided a base from which to be (temporarily at least) amongst others, for 'Janet's' house is situated on a long street of terraced 'miner's cottages'. This street ('Alternative Terrace') in South Hightown comprised one of the core areas for ethnographic working. Another was 'The Rivers' estate, an area of local authority built housing, in which another street 'Wear Road' became a key focus. 5 households from Alternative Terrace participated in the research, and another 6 came from The Rivers (four of them from Wear Road). Together with two other households, living in stone built detached and semi-detached properties in the old core of South Hightown, these comprised the focus of the ethnographic work.

All these 13 households opted in to the research, having come to know about it either through face-to-face meetings or through the range of additonal recruitment strategies adopted ((for example, a research presentation at a village community event; a sequence of meetings with local councillors and a residents group; participation in a local environmental group, observing Parish Council meetings, attending local sales and fayres, hanging out at the hairdressers and post office and through 100% leafleting of the private-sector estate housing areas). Notwithstanding deploying a wide range of 'recruiting strategies' however, the areas of private sector estate housing in South Hightown consistently defeated all recruitment efforts. Reasoning that these areas were too important to exclude from intensive working, existing social networks were mobilised in order to recruit a further three households, all of them living in suburban estate housing on the edge of the Newcastle conurbation.

These 16 households and their 44 members comprise the focus of the ethnography. Using the house on Alternative Terrace as a base it became possible to be amongst the participating households, to observe and hear the various goings-on of their everyday lives. As time went on participants knew that they could shout over the fences and hedges, bang on the door, or just pop round to chat about what they were up to. They understood too that this was a research project that required a high level of nosiness and interest in them and their lives, that became almost obsessive during periods of room decoration, upgrading or conversion. But equally the participants acknowledged that the presentness of another offered benefits as well as intrusions. Over the course of the fieldwork these benefits included sawing up and dismantling a garden table; clearing out some outbuildings; heaving wood up the street; cutting hedges as well as minding and playing with children; walking dogs and doing the occasional bit of shopping It probably says a lot about this street that such instances of reciprocal practice appeared not only routine and taken-for-granted by the residents but understood through the normative.

On the Rivers estate things evolved rather differently. Given the lack of residence here, the early ethnography was framed through the social conventions of visiting, usually once a fortnight. In three of the six households these visits involved no more

than tea and a biscuit in the living room (or, in the case of one household, in the kitchen as the living room there is always kept spotlessly clean, reserved only for family visitors and evening TV viewing). With the other three households although we began like this, things changed as the fieldwork progressed. That they did owes much to the enactment of a modernisation programme. This was a huge upheaval for all the households, providing a massive disruption to the routines of everyday life, including the norms of conventional visiting. But what modernisation provided was a means of transcending the subject position of the visitor by helping to rip wall paper off walls, assisting in redecorating and acting as a general sounding board for tenants frustrated at the mess, delays and general uncertainties of modernisation itself. So again, through participating in and helping out in moments of households' everyday life, the ethnography was able to move from being purely talk about things and people (gossip) to encompass doings with people and their things. In so doing, and in contrast to the in-depth interview work, the ethnographic work became, at least with certain households, an ethnography of practice.

As will be clear from the draft manuscript from the ethnography (see outputs), this distinction has had clear effects on the analytical development of the research. Indeed, the ethnography's emphasis on practice and the sheer depth to the key ethnographic 'stories' has resulted in an account which argues for the importance of a dwelling-oriented account of home consumption.

The in-depth interview work
(April 2003 – January 2005: AM)
The research in Nottingham comprised four interviews with each of the 59 participating households, conducted over a period of approximately 12 months, at regular three-monthly intervals.[4] The households were living in four distinct neighbourhoods: 'Castle View', 'Player Fields', 'Raleigh Heights' and 'Trent View', and are split roughly equally between these. The research began in the Castle View and Player Fields areas before moving on to Raleigh Heights and then Trent View. As such, it has taken the full period of funding to complete the interview cycles (and their analysis).

Households were recruited to this phase of the research through a variety of strategies and tactics. We began with residents' groups and community organisations, but very quickly realised that this ended up recruiting particular sorts of people only. Later on we supplemented this with notices in various outlets, from Newsletters to Post Offices, Libraries, churches, swimming pools, mosques, youth clubs, email groups etc. As with the ethnography in South Hightown, areas of suburban estate housing proved remarkably resistant to these strategies of recruitment. Eventually, with a degree of desperation, we shifted to concentrate on one area of suburban housing (Trent View) and – in a rare departure from our research protocol – went round 'knocking on doors' (in practice talking to people out in their front gardens) in the early evening of summer 2003.

The interview work with households, as with the three households in the Newcastle conurbation, was organised around a 'disposal diary'. This we deposited with participating households, for them to use as a memory/recording device. We deliberately kept this diary as simple as possible, listing in it major categories of everyday household consumer objects and encouraging household members to record things in this as they left the house. We also supplied them with a (superior)

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[4] The 'drop out' rate here was remarkably low – and a testimony to the skills of our researcher. We started off with 65 households, and lost only 6 of these in the course of the research – either through their explicit withdrawal or through moving-on.

fridge magnet in the hopes that this would keep the diary in their line of sight. Teenage children were also given their own copies of diaries and households were given a new diary at each visit, so that things did not becoming confused from one visit to the next.

Predictably, such order was disordered by participants. Whilst some kept to the diary assiduously, noting the date and exact stories attached to each of the objects leaving the house and even telling us mistakes in its design, others either lost the diaries or worse used the diaries to precipitate getting rid of things. This proved to be particularly the case with older female participants, for whom our presence – at least initially – was mobilised to make them do something about their accumulations in things. Fortunately, few could keep up such appearances over the course of an entire year, so what began by looking as if we were actually going to precipitate the 'throwaway society' mutated to business as usual, as things just kept lingering around in homes.

Each household interview was recorded on a digital recording device and also accompanied by digital photography. As with the ethnography, it became increasingly apparent that photography had been a missing dimension in the initial proposal. To talk about things seemed to require more than their description in words – although we would note that the photograph cannot capture fully the physical qualities of these objects. As in South Hightown then, we started to photograph the key things that were talked about by the Nottingham households, some of which actually left the home in the course of the research. However, with three months between visits, it was impossible to record things visually in the passage of their leaving. Rather, what we have here is retrospective stories about things leaving.

At the time of the writing of the research proposal we had envisaged recording interviews in analogue mode. However, we decided to switch to digital right at the start of the work, initially because this allowed for ease of listening to interview materials. In retrospect this has proved a critical decision. Transcribing this amount of qualitative data (240 interviews of frequently 2-3 hours duration each and 25 focus group interviews) has proved difficult in the extreme. Notwithstanding that we have employed part time transcription support for the duration of the project, the output here has been 1-2 interviews transcribed per week. This means that only roughly 50% of the interviews have actually been transcribed in full. As a consequence, and relatively early on in the project history, we began conducting a parallel analysis based on listening to talk, rather than analysing talk-as-transcription text. A full talk analysis (running to some 360pp) for the Nottingham households was produced Working with a critical discourse analysis of textual documents, this highlights the key patterns, phrases and ways of talking disclosed by participants, but since it is talk (and not just text), the full meanings of utterances are very clearly discernible. We would recommend this way of working to others who may be as concerned as we are by the potential effects of analysing conversational talk as text. This analysis was conducted in Word and then analysed using key word searches, before being built-up into core analytic themes.

Running parallel with the household analysis were two further analyses of the Nottingham data. One of these centred on the objects households got rid of: we therefore have abstracted and amalgamated all the key stories surrounding key category objects e.g. sofas, fridge-freezers, computer monitors etc. The second has been a quantitative analysis gleaned from merging the object stories and the talk analysis. Although based on only 59 households, we would argue that this does at least provide an indication of the complexities of the routes that are followed by the things that exit English households, and their relative importance.

Finally, and this is something that we have yet to start working on fully, we have amassed a huge volume of digital imagery from both the ethnography and the in-depth work with households. These require ordering, sorting and cataloguing, and analysis. AM has subsequently been employed by Sheffield University, and one of the tasks during this time is indeed to do this.

The focus groups
(April 2003 – January 2005: AM, LC)

The focus group research was used explicitly to tease out the connections between consumers, their things and their knowledges of and investments in brands. We did this in relation to the three particular sets of commodities identified in the proposal (white goods, consumer electronics and clothing). A *priori* these categories suggest different meshings of fashion, technology and the brand, which might be anticipated to impinge differentially on practices of replacement and substitution, and therefore disposal. Furthermore, whilst two of these categories (white goods and clothing) reveal primarily women's acquisition, choice and disposal work, the other (consumer electronics) is one where men and children (particularly boys) exert greater consumer agency. These categories of goods thus suggest different gender and generational associations and admit issues of household composition and family structure (Gray, 1992; Livingstone, 1992, Pink 2004), both of which we would expect to influence practices of disposal.
In view of this we specifically set out to recruit focus groups that might capture different orientations towards specific categories of goods. In addition we recruited some groupings that had not emerged from the depth work. In particular, we wanted to counter the tendency within the interview work for children's presence to be 'chaperoned' by their parents (particularly their mothers). Evidently, this had effects on what was said about certain things. So, and in a deliberate attempt to obviate this, we devoted a large proportion of the focus group research to school-located discussions with particular year groups of children. In addition children as consumers are seen to be uniquely positioned historically in relation to commodities (Cook 2004), and might be imagined to be particularly brand-astute. Other groups cohered around anticipated orientations towards technology and consumer electronics (a group of male academics working in the field of GIS), towards fashion (a group of public sector female administrative staff), and towards interior design (two groups of affluent women with particular sets of investments around their homes and 'status' branded commodities). Finally, we captured the effects of stage-in-lifecycle and accelerated mobility via discussions with home and overseas postgraduate students whose talk is inflected with narratives of parental versus student 'home', movement and the difficulties that this poses for personal strategies of commodity accumulation and disposal.

In the interviews themselves we talked through key categories of goods, asking what had most recently been got rid of and why, and then establishing how different groups of people (and indeed individuals within groups) interact with different categories of goods in different ways. The discussions revealed the very central role that group composition and structure play in governing what is talked about by whom, and how. For example, there was an identifiable element of boasting talk amongst the younger school children, whilst there emerged some significant status and positionality distinctions within some of the Asian women's focus groups. These different ways of doing groups reveal some interesting insights into the ways in which group composition is itself a highly significant shaper of consumption talk. Although 'tried-and-tested' as a social science method, for us the focus group research seemed very much a 'talk show', particularly with children. Here what appeared to

matter is the talk amongst peers rather than doings and practice. And whilst such group-mediated narrations of disposal practice are fascinating in shedding light on the performative and public nature of the focus group, we are aware too that the often spectacular and certainly media-influenced discussions about commodities, brands and value that emerged from the focus groups just don't really tally well with what we know about the nitty-gritty of the goings-on in households: it is suspiciously what people say they do, rather than what they actually do.

As with the in-depth interview work, we analysed the focus group digital recordings through a critical discourse analysis, identifying particular sets of dispositions towards goods and their acquisition/disposal, looking, for example, at whether people spoke of themselves as 'hoarders' or 'chuckers' and how they talked about such practices. We also addressed the 'hows', 'whys' and 'wheres' of their acquisition and disposal practices, as disclosed in talk, and identified the key commodities and brands that figure as significant markers in talk. These include, for example, vacuum cleaners (the Dyson story emerges as a recurrent motif here, counterposed to Vax, Henry, Sebo, Hoover and the Ewbank). Similarly there was frequent and insightful reference to kitchen appliances (Smeg, Dualit, Bosch, Neff versus Hotpoint, Whirlpool and Candy). The distinctions between particular retailers was also identified as an important talking point within and across many of the focus groups, with the distinctions between Ikea, John Lewis, Argos and Asda being particularly prominent

Comment [NG1]: Not the Boxer!

Results

As a staggered research project, the 'analysis' and 'results' from the ethnography have developed ahead of those from the in-depth repeat interviews. It is also worth highlighting here the considerable benefits of the research buy-out for the PI: not only did this allow the ethnography to be conducted but it also provided the space for simultaneous analysis and interpretative development. As a result, the draft book manuscript from the ethnography (see outputs) has been produced by the end-of-award date. This would have been impossible without research leave. We therefore recommend this as a model where appropriate, and particularly for research such as this involving intensive ethnographic working on the part of the PI.

As indicated above, analysis of the in-depth interview material has proceeded on several fronts simultaneously. All bar the visual analysis is now completed. We can report that the 'triangulation' between the 'findings' from the two primary sets of qualitative data is very close: as we hoped, the interviews have both 'anchored' and confirmed the core disclosures of the ethnography. We are therefore confident that our findings are as rigorous and robust as is feasibly possible.

To attempt to summarise the welter of material that we have here would take far more than 5000 words. As a consequence, the points listed below are six 'edited highlights'. There are several others (see planned publication outputs).

1: From the outset of the ethnography it became clear that to think in terms of 'disposal' was far too narrow and finite. Instead, people and households get rid of things in multifarious ways, in which the waste stream is just one route amongst many. The full range of routes is given in Table One.

2: Rather than think in terms of disposal, a better terminology is *ridding*. This encompasses the various meanings implicit in 'getting rid' (ejecting, destroying, abandoning, holding, forgetting about, passing on), without presuming that such acts are intrinsically ones of waste making, or necessarily about rubbish value.

3: The diversity in ridding routes disclosed in the research casts considerable doubt on the purchase of the ‘throwaway society’ as a motif for contemporary relations with ordinary household objects. Instead, as implied by Table One, households go to considerable lengths to save things from wasting and to pass things on to others, both known and unknown to them. We can see this when we look at some of our key categories of objects in their ridding (Tables Two and Three). Of course, this is not to say that these things are not wasted by those who might receive them (for e.g. charity shops often send for ragging the donations that they regard as unacceptable). But what matters more is that households clearly try to save things from wasting, not waste without care. The exception to this caring occurs when things mutate to excess – a shift which in this research is strongly connected to moving home and/or periods of major home refurbishment. On such occasions, ridding most definitely connects with wasting.

Table One: The routes of ridding

Waste Stream 1	Positioned as waste and closed off to revaluation by others	Bin; bulky waste collection service; destroyed (e.g. burnt)
Waste Stream 2	Positioned as waste but open to revaluation	Tip, skip, placed in recycling bins; carried away by 'workmen'
Liminal 1	Placed in position that allows for reclamation and revaluation by others	Left outside; left behind; abandoned
Liminal 2	Pending; held over, usually in back stage storage zone	Garage, shed, outbuildings, attic, loft, cellar
Liminal 3	Placed in trust of others – 'lent out'	On long loan; placed in second home/ property
Re-use 1	Cannibalised/salvaged	Parts of object are re-used; object re-used for something other than original design
Re-use 2	Passed-on via intermediaries that enable revaluation	Charity shops; jumble sales; community and school fairs
Re-use 3	Passed-on to family (immediate and extended)	Object is imagined in re-use
Re-use 4	Passed-on to known others	Ditto
Sold/bartered	Exchanged	Car boot; eBay; small ads

Table Two: Kitchen white goods

Objects	WS 1+2	L 1 – 3	RU 1 - 4	S/B	Totals
Cookers, ovens, hobs	3	4	1	2	10
Microwaves	3	3	4	-	10
Fridges/freezers	4	3	4	3	14
Washing machines	4	2	3	1	10
Kettles	9	3	8	1	21
Toasters	10	1	7	-	18
Irons	4	2	4	-	10
Vacuums	5	8	4	-	17
Totals	42	26	36	7	110
% totals	38.2	23.6	32.7	6.4	

Table Three: Consumer electricals

	WS1 - 2	L 1 - 3	RU 1 - 4	S/B	Totals
TVs	9	6	8	7	30
Video/DVD players	9	2	2	1	14
Video/DVD media	1		25	45	71
Stereo systems	11	10	5	4	30
Cameras	5	2	4	2	13
Photographic equipment	-	2	1	3	6
Computers	4	5	10	4	23
Landline Phones	10	4	7	1	22
Mobiles	2	1	4	-	7
Totals	51	32	66	67	216
% totals	23.6	14.8	30.6	31.0	

4: Ridding emerges as one of the primary ways in which we make our social identities. Throughout the research getting rid of things emerged as a key way in which identity is narrated. For example, 'children' (of various ages) force mothers to get rid of things that they see as embarrassing and/or shameful, such as 'odd', 'old, and 'unfashionable' items of furniture; new partners (mostly women) insist that their 'new men' get rid of things as means to narrate the identity of 'the couple'; and people continually disclose the effects of the normative, as they get rid of the things that are 'not me', 'no longer me' and – perhaps – 'never were me'. In this respect, the research provides a key counter to the existing literature on consumption and identity in which it is the identity work of acquisition that has been emphasised. This research, like Miller's work (1998) has been critical to disclosing how even acts of wasting can be about the social relations of love and devotion in cohabitation (see Chapter Eight of draft manuscript).

5: Thinking about ridding requires that we take seriously the materiality of things, specifically the surfaces and depths in things, their capacities and their temporalities. As this research shows, we do get rid of things because they 'wear' in their social lives with us, for e.g. by getting 'pitted', chipped, discoloured and washed-out. But equally, other things are far more resistant to traces of our lives in their surfaces. They endure. And enduring-ness, or durability, is just as much a problem for many households as is the frustrations of the chuck-replace product cycle now widespread with goods such as kettles, irons and toasters. Durability makes 'getting rid' harder, more guilt-ridden. So, things tend to stay around, because their physical state seems to insist that they stay around, and because we cannot think of good enough reasons to eject them.

6: In the initial proposal we emphasised the potential connections between devaluation and the product cycle (Objective b above). But, this has not been confirmed by this research. Indeed, existing versions of the product lifecycle within the literature offer little by way of critical purchase on the issues that emerged here. So, for example, whilst we imagined that the 'business school' approach to product lifecycle based on cycles or waves of product innovation, early adoption, diffusion, normalisation and disillusionment might be a significant means by which consumers

understand discourses of technology and design, we found this to be rarely the case. Similarly, we had imagined at the outset that consumers would be astutely brand-aware, even if positioning themselves as critical of the saturation of the commodity world by corporately managed brand stories (Holt, 2002; Malefyt and Moeran, 2003; Molotch 2003, Salzer-Morling and Strannegard 2004). For sure, we did encounter a few individuals – notably in the focus groups – who were high investors in fashion and technology (notably some women living in extremely high income households and some teenage children), but these were the exception rather than the norm in our data. For the majority of our participants however, if the product cycle figures anywhere it is in the practice of shopping. For some then, 'the new' gets bought precisely because of its instant visual allure and appeal, and because shopping as a practice is something which just has to result in physical acquisitions. Such practices may work to push out other things, but they do not necessarily result in their wasting. For others, 'the new' arrives because of how it is sold, with the bargain in particular being an appeal that cannot be lost or missed. Whilst for others it is what key retailers – notably John Lewis and Argos – do that works to shape the purchase of the replacement.