

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

Non-technical Project Summary

Investigators

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Aims and Objectives

1: This project examines what households get rid of by way of ordinary, everyday consumer objects over the course of a 12 month period. It explicitly excludes from consideration the types of things that can be placed in kerbside recycling bins (glass jars, paper, plastic bottles and tins for example) and the detritus of consumption, notably packaging. Instead, its focus is on the other sorts of things that are found in English homes – consumer electrical products, clothing, furniture, furnishings, toys, books, CDs, videos for example.

2: The project is based on three sets of qualitative data: a twelve month phase of intensive work living amongst 16 households in North east England; a parallel twelve month period of repeat depth interview work with 59 households living in different areas of Nottingham; and 25 focus group interviews, many of them conducted with children in schools.

3: The core focus of the project has been to examine the various ways in which households get rid of things, and why. Rather than assume that things are automatically thrown away into the waste stream, we wanted to look at when and in what sorts of circumstances things do in fact get placed in the waste stream by households, and at what other routes they use for getting rid of their things.

Main research results

1: From the outset of the research it became clear that to think about getting rid of things in terms of 'disposal' (the original title of the research) is 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 of the full report (1.6) and encompasses ones that connect with the waste stream as well as gifting, selling and quietly forgetting.

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'. Instead, 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 key categories of objects in their ridding such as kitchen white goods, consumer electricals and clothing. 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.

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 has been critical to disclosing how even acts of wasting can be about the social relations of love and devotion in cohabitation.

5: Thinking about ridding requires that we take seriously 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. 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. 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.

Significant academic achievements

The primary achievements here are:

- To provide the first intensive investigation of what happens to the ordinary consumer objects that never achieve the 'memorial state'. Most research on consumption emphasises the things that we keep, because of their value to us. This research looks at what we don't keep.
- To provide a thorough critique of the purchase of the 'throwaway society' as an understanding of how we relate to ordinary, everyday things.
- To provide a thorough investigation of how, when and why households make waste of their things. What work there is on waste in social science is either heavily theoretical (using waste as something to think through) or oriented to waste management – i.e. once things have actually entered the waste stream. This research takes a step back from this, to examine just what is going on when things are wasted by consumers.

The research also makes a major contribution to the literature on home consumption and material culture, and to the growing concern with debates about materiality and practice in these fields.