Clutter in domestic spaces: Material vibrancy, and competing moralities

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Abstract
Decluttering discourses position clutter as meaningless things as well as, seemingly paradoxically, morally problematic – as signs of laziness or an individual failure to organise the house. This article addresses the lack of academic research on the topic and challenges the mischaracterisation of clutter as meaningless by drawing from ethnographically informed research into clutter in people’s homes in Manchester. The article is situated in, and contributes to, the sociology of ordinary consumption, the unmarked and unnoticed, and materiality. I draw from the theoretical work of Mary Douglas and Michael Thompson that outlines the vibrancy and potential of the unnoticed materials and matter of everyday life. I centre materiality in thinking about the material vibrancy of clutter and draw from Jane Bennett’s notion of assemblages to think through the capacity of clutter to become morally potent. The article makes four main arguments; first, I challenge ideas that clutter is trivial as it includes both meaningless and meaningful things. Second, I argue that clutter is a way people negotiate, reinforce and manage social relationships. Third, I argue moralising discourses around materialism and decluttering interact with existing everyday moralities around consumption, finances and family life which are brought to bear when people deal with their clutter. Fourth, through its materiality, clutter forces people to engage with moral discourse of wastefulness, usefulness, materialism, and everyday familial norms.

Keywords
consumption, domestic, home, material culture, materiality, everyday

When carrying out ethnographically informed fieldwork into unused things in people’s homes in Manchester I was struck by how often people would dismiss a pile of stuff as ‘just clutter’ yet also confide to me they knew they ‘ought’ to get rid of it. Clutter is trivial yet also seemingly paradoxically morally charged as a sign of untidiness, profligacy or a lack of control. The contradiction between clutter being meaningless yet also morally potent is mirrored in popular decluttering discourses which outline the problem of clutter and how to deal

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with it (Kondo, 2014). In part, it is its very triviality that renders it dangerous, as decluttering discourses suggest we should keep only useful or cherished objects. Despite the popular ubiquity of decluttering, clutter itself has received little explicit sociological attention (although see Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003). In contrast, there is a wealth of psychological accounts of hoarding (de Mattos et al., 2018) which pathologise clutter as an individual problem. This article argues that clutter is ripe for sociological attention, by drawing upon both a wider sociological shift away from the special and symbolic to interrogate the unmarked (Scott, 2018) areas of social life and also research which centres the everyday movements of things within the home (Evans, 2018; Gregson et al., 2007). In broadening accounts of consumption to include disposal (theoretically outlined in Hetherington, 2004), Gregson’s (2007) ethnographic attention to the ambiguous meanings of unused things paves the way for an explicit, ethnographic focus on how people live with and manage clutter, which I develop in this article. By drawing upon research on everyday moralities (Holmes, 2019; Wheeler, 2019), the article explores how the moral dilemmas clutter presents occur in the context of familial and domestic relations.

In contributing to sociological understanding of the unseen and neglected areas of social life, I draw from Mary Douglas and Michael Thompson on the creative and disruptive potential of dirt (Douglas, 1966) and rubbish (Thompson, 1979) as they are sites for revaluation and transformation of values. However, I argue that even these theories do not pay enough heed to the materiality of things in impacting upon the meanings and values objects have. Clutter is a set of diverse things: old batteries, bills to be organised, pictures drawn by children, plastic freebies, and things to be fixed. To understand these heterogeneous material relations, I use Jane Bennett’s notion of assemblages (2009) to develop a theory of the potency of clutter as it expands and persists and has the power to affect people. This potency is, I argue, central to how people experience the complex and contradictory moralities of clutter; clutter asserts itself through its materiality as people may experience it as a moral failing.

The article starts by deconstructing the dominant discourses of decluttering through popular sources and highlights how clutter has been constructed as problematic by associations with hoarding in the psychological literature. I bring together the literatures on the divestment and movements of objects in the home and on everyday moralities. I then outline the theoretical approach of the article by drawing on Douglas and Thompson and the unseen material potency of clutter in dialogue with more recent theories of materiality. I outline the methodological approach of using ethnographically informed methods that centre the relations between people and things. The data analysis develops three main themes: how people manage and reinforce social relationships through clutter, how clutter becomes potent, and the competing norms and dilemmas that clutter poses. Overall, I make the argument that through its materiality clutter forces people to engage with moral discourses of wastefulness, usefulness, materialism, and everyday familial norms.

### Decluttering and the pathologisation of clutter (and hoarding)

How people live with and feel about clutter occurs in the context of a proliferation of popular sources on decluttering; in this section I consider examples of popular...
decluttering discourses to think about how they frame clutter as a problem and place the onus on individuals to manage it. These popular sources are considered in the context of academic literature on hoarding which pathologises hoarding, and by extension clutter. One of the most popular forms of decluttering in the last decade has been the Marie Kondo approach. Her books and television programmes present clutter as a problem that both limits the possibilities of people’s lives and disrupts the ideal aesthetic of a minimal, tidy, clutter-free home. The promises of decluttering are dramatic – getting rid of clutter is ‘life-transforming’ (2014, p. 3), as you can change your home, self, relationships and life. Her books – and attendant programmes – present a series of techniques to achieve this, including tidying by ‘category’ of object (such as clothes) rather than by spaces (such as bedrooms). Suggested techniques include deciding to keep things if they ‘spark joy’, which speaks to the affective power of things (to be discussed later). As the goal is to have a clutter-free home – clutter by definition cannot spark joy; it is trivial and meaningless. This becomes morally problematic when there is an excess of meaningless stuff.

In the popular book Stuffocation (Wallman, 2013), clutter and possessions are emblems of people’s inability to stop buying things, dovetailing with broader moral discourses around the excesses of consumerism (see Wilk, 2001). Instead, people are exhorted to prioritise experiences rather than objects. The moral dangers of stuff take on a more extreme formulation in Wallman as ‘clutter kills’ (2013, p. 46); he tells the story of a hoarder’s house that catches on fire due to the excess of stuff, which is used as a warning: there is a ‘secret’ hoarder in all of us. These two examples – Kondo and Wallman – typify popular decluttering discourses: clutter is simultaneously ‘just stuff’ as well as morally charged. I argue here that by presenting techniques to solve this problem, responsibility is placed on individuals; having unneeded stuff is a moral failing and so too is the failure to deal with it. Clutter is presented as an individual’s responsibility and choice with no acknowledgement of the diverse financial situations people find themselves in. For example, Wallman praises rich people overwhelmed with expensive possessions who choose to live differently. As I will explore through my empirical data, people’s material and relational circumstances present more complex reasons for having clutter than just failing to make the right choices.

Even within academic literature, clutter still emerges as a problem; literature on hoarding is mostly from a psychological and psychiatric perspective, and positions clutter as a subset of hoarding and as a psychological disorder. Clutter and hoarding are presented as a continuum between ‘normal’ and problematic acts of keeping things (see Lauster et al., 2016). In definitions of hoarding as a psychological disorder, clutter is equated with hoarding, such as in the American Psychiatric Association’s definition of hoarding as a discrete psychological disorder in 2013. Hoarding as ‘the acquisition of and failure to discard possessions regardless of the value others may attribute to these possessions’ (Van Ameringen et al., 2014, p. 489) is applied in this definition to clutter, which contains many of the problematic connotations of hoarding. There is a well-developed literature on hoarding – and by implication clutter – as a pathological individual concern. For example, de Mattos et al. (2018) see clutter as one of four dimensions of hoarding; they define hoarding as a psychological need to keep stuff and argue for a correlation with other psychiatric conditions (compulsive buying and binge eating).
One notable exception is Bennett, who centres hoarders’ material and sensory relations to objects. Hoarders, she argues, are attuned to ‘thing power’ (2012, p. 241) and the sensory ‘call of things’ (2012, p. 244) as they notice the material properties of things. Rather than dismissing an old bottle as useless, they appreciate its colour, shape, texture. Although this is a disjunction from most understandings within decluttering discourses, it mirrors elements of Marie Kondo’s book and television programme where objects are kept that ‘spark joy’. Things have affective power over people which Bennett argues can be true for objects that are not only ‘special’ or have personal meanings but for items within a hoard such as a bottle, or newspaper.

**Revitalising clutter: Everyday life and moralities**

Both academic literature on hoarding and popular discourses of decluttering position clutter as a problem. This article instead develops an approach to clutter through a situated ethnographically informed approach which considers how people experience and manage it, and its materiality. I extend the literature on the unseen spaces and objects within the home (Owen & Boyer, 2019; Woodward, 2007, 2015) to clutter which is present in both hidden and (yet still unseen) spaces of the home such as chairs or floors. There is a lack of literature which explicitly centres clutter (although see Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003), which means there is not enough understanding of how people experience and manage it.

There are, however, a number of relevant approaches which open up useful routes into the study of clutter: literature on everyday consumption and divestment, and research on everyday moralities to explore how people experience clutter as morally charged. Research which centres ordinary practices of consumption (Warde, 2005) has paved the way for a shift from sociological attention on special consumption to focus on the routines of everyday life. Anthropologically informed work arising from Miller (1987) outlines how material culture frames our everyday lives: the less we notice objects (the more ‘ordinary’ they are) the more important they are in ‘framing’ our lives, relationships and experiences. Taken together, these two approaches allow a challenge to a dominant focus upon symbolic and meaningful consumption/objects and provide a framework for research into how everyday objects of material culture frame our lives in ways we are not always aware of—such as clutter. Dealing with clutter is part of the process of organising everyday life through the spaces and relationships within the home; it is both an explicit attempt to organise—a pile of things to be dealt with later—as well as the placing of things ‘around the paths of our daily routines, when things fall out of use’ (Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003, p. 231). Clutter is the unconsciously put down as the doorbell rings and we go to answer it, and part of the ad hoc organisation of life as a space quickly has to be cleared.

A particularly instructive approach to clutter can be found in research that broadens out the remit of consumption beyond purchase and use to look at processes of divestment, devaluation and disposal (outlined by Evans, 2019). Hetherington’s theoretical work (2004) on discarding suggests that not only is divestment neglected but it is also central to how social relations are constructed. Gregson has explored these potentials through empirical work which, although not explicitly focusing on clutter, has helped to develop the approach of this article. Focusing on divestment, Gregson et al. (2007) challenge the assumption that people are wasteful, by showing the efforts people make to hold on to or
pass on unwanted possessions. Through her ethnographic work in people’s houses into how people ‘accommodate’ things, Gregson (2007) highlighted the challenge that ‘surplus’ things pose. Surplus things have ambiguous meanings (they ‘may’ still be used) as opposed to excess things (which no longer have value) and are often stored under beds or in cupboards. This can be usefully extended to clutter: as both ‘excess’, which people haven’t got round to disposing of, and ‘surplus’, as things with potential use.

Hetherington (2004) and Gregson (2007) point towards the shifting meanings and categorisations of objects within the home – no item is always clutter, as things are reused, stored or disposed. A parallel approach is Kopytoff’s (1986) theorisation of commodities as a ‘situation’ that things move in and out of, of which Evans (2018) extends to objects within the home – through the example of how things become waste. Things move within the home, and from and to external spaces and economies, as items are purchased or await disposal (see Wheeler & Glucksman [2015] on domestic consumption as ‘work’ preparing things for external economies). So too, clutter emerges from the cyclical and shifting relations between acquisition, keeping and disposal. Valk’s critique (2020) of Kopytoff and Appadurai for failing to attend to materiality is instructive in thinking about how the materiality of things impacts upon the shifting meanings and categorisations of clutter.

Dealing with clutter entails decisions over how much space people have, what they can afford to buy or replace and moral ideas of what is wasteful. I therefore draw upon the literature on everyday moralities which complements literature on movements of things in the house. It allows me to situate clutter within a range of intersecting concerns: financial considerations, norms of wastefulness, and familial moralities. I have already discussed how popular discourses of decluttering generate moral anxieties around clutter; these anxieties intersect with other cultural norms and ‘everyday lay normativities’ (Wheeler, 2019, p. 1278). Wheeler (2019) critiques the individualisation of responsibility as consumers are seen to make bad choices, and instead suggests we need to take a more multi-layered approach to everyday moralities. This dovetails with Holmes’s (2019) discussion of thrift which she argues always occurs in the context of the family, emotional/gendered labour as well as financial necessity. I extend these debates to see the moral negotiations around clutter as externally generated through decluttering discourses and wider moralities around excessive consumerism as well as negotiated within existing financial, relational and other norms of what people can and should keep. Clutter may be equated with being out of control/messiness, but this is culturally and historically specific (see for example Makovicky on Slovakian homes, 2007) as clutter has also been linked to cosiness and homeliness. Shifts to open-plan houses and the popularity of decluttering has created a normative sense of what people ‘should’ do with their stuff – keeping what is useful or loved – and where it should be kept. Things being in the proper place creates social order (Edensor, 2005) – a perspective mirrored in discussions of dirt (Ablitt & Smith, 2019) to which I will now turn.

**The potency of clutter: Potential and danger**

Applying the everyday moralities and consumption literature to clutter opens up the multiple, and often competing, moralities of clutter: financial, familial and notions of
wastefulness. I opened this article by introducing the puzzling contradiction between clutter’s triviality and moral burden. I argue here and throughout the article that this moral charge cannot be reduced to external discourses, but also emerges from the materiality of clutter. Here, I develop a theory of material potency, drawing on Douglas’s discussion of dirt (1966) and Thompson’s theory of rubbish, as there are clear synergies between dirt, rubbish and clutter. Dirt, Douglas notes, may be transient but continues to make itself present—so too clutter keeps appearing and making its presence known. All homes have some (albeit to different degrees) clutter: a pile on the end of a table, on the floor at the edge of a room, or spilling off chairs and shelves. Its persistence demands attention. Dirt is a threat to social and normative order as it is ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas, 1966, p. 44); in a liminal state between existing order and categories, dirt is powerful and has the potential to disrupt. Clutter, like dirt, can be potent, with potential for generating new classifications and disrupting existing orders. Thompson (1979) – inspired by Douglas – develops a theory of rubbish in terms of its creative potential. Objects move between three categories: transient, rubbish (an invisible and covert category) and durable. Transient possessions decrease in value until they are ‘rubbish’ and may be picked up again as durable/meaningful. I argue this can be extended to clutter, which is not just rubbish to be got rid of but can be a site for revaluation and transformation of value. Clutter can be potent in terms of the positive potential for revaluing forgotten objects and also negative, as people experience clutter as a moral failing.

However, I argue neither Douglas nor Thompson attend sufficiently to the materiality of things themselves – mirroring critiques of Kopytoff (see Valk, 2020) for centring movements, people and spaces rather than the materiality of stuff. Douglas theorises potency as an attribute of people, culture or social structure, although it may be ‘transmitted’ through things (1966, p. 139). For Thompson, valuation is a social and cultural categorisation and material properties are socially endowed (1979, p. 64); however, he fails to fully explore the potential ways in which objects impact upon or defy these categorisations. Throughout this article I develop an idea of potency that is inspired by Douglas and Thompson but departs from them by centring the materiality of things. Things have effects on how they are categorised—or fail to be as they are ambiguous and defy categorisation (see DeSilvey, 2006). We cannot just impose on things where they should go and what should be done with them. The affective power of things is usually discussed in terms of cherished items (see Christou & Janta, 2019); in this article I extend these possibilities to seemingly meaningless things. In Newell’s (2014) research into domestic storage in the US, she argues that the power of objects can be ‘felt but not quite perceived and certainly not always conceived’ (2014, p. 192). The power things have cannot always be articulated and may emerge from the ‘intimate entanglements’ (Latimer & López Gómez, 2019) between materials and people that generate often un-verbalised connections and intimacies. These approaches open up a way of thinking about things that is not just about the subjective meaning things have for people. I explore how objects can matter as they affect people by virtue of their thing-ness— their persistence, as they assert their presence in the home.

Clutter, by definition, consists of multiple objects; the materiality of clutter is therefore a relational materiality as the impact it has emerges from the pile of clutter, not just individual objects. A useful way of theorising the potency of clutter as relations
of materially diverse objects is Bennett’s version of assemblage theory (2009) as she explicitly outlines how the power things have shifts depending on the relation between things. Assemblages are materially heterogeneous (including multiple material elements) and dynamic as they change over time. A pile of clutter includes materially diverse elements (paper, plastic toys, old batteries), it changes as we add to it or sort it, and it has power over us – as the ever-growing pile of stuff calls us to feel we have to go through it, or makes people feel dejected as they don’t have space to put things. Seeing a pile of clutter as an assemblage allows insight into potency that pays heed to what people do (sorting, disposing) in relation to the whole collection of clutter. I develop this approach of the relations of things and people to understand the relations between clutter being unseen (and trivial) and experienced as a moral failing.

**Putting clutter in the spotlight**

This research centres things and places within the house that are not often the focus of attention – items stuffed to the corner of a room or placed on an unused chair – and uses methods that centre the relations between people and things. An ethnographic orientation is well suited to understanding what people do with things (see Woodward, 2019). The range of methods that ethnographers draw on (observations, visual methods and participation) allows a focus on the often unnoticed and background facets of everyday life. Whilst ethnography has traditionally involved living with people for a long period, recent developments draw upon the holistic, multi-methods approach through short-term, repeat and immersive visits (Pink & Morgan, 2013). In this research, I visited people’s homes in South Manchester on several proximate streets. As I was interested in the relations between things (and between things and people) in available spaces, the sampling strategy incorporated different types of living spaces: 15 old Victorian houses, 5 modern houses, 10 flats (modern and also old). These types of living spaces all have very different possibilities for storage; the sample included people in different living arrangements (living alone, with family, friends or partners) and ages ranged from late twenties to mid-seventies. The area included a mixture of homeowners, rented properties and council flats and participants were recruited by flyering several proximate streets.

I started the research with house tours and audits of the spaces people keep things, such as clutter. I drew upon a number of different methods suited to understanding clutter: getting people to show me the spaces they kept things (drawers, the tops of shelves, piles on the floor), I took photographs, and they talked me through the things they had. I did repeat visits where they showed me one space in detail. The interviews included how they used the space and things, histories of the objects (where they came from, how they ended up there as well as potential futures) to allow a tracing of how things become clutter (see Evans, 2018). What people had to say about their clutter was important, but so too were observations of what they did, what they showed me and my understanding of the objects themselves. Therefore, the data include observations, photos (and maps of houses and where things are) as well as quotes from interviews. I centred households in my analysis (rather than looking at, for example, all images together). This was not to elide the differences between the forms of data but instead to use it to think critically about what insights were afforded by the different data forms in relation to each other.
The material on clutter is part of a larger project on unused objects in domestic spaces; when I asked people about items they keep but are not currently using, they showed me discrete clutter piles, as well as how other spaces were ‘cluttered’. Clutter emerged as an important topic in its own right as I was struck by how much people apologised to me about it, as well as asked me how bad it was compared to other houses. I became interested in the way people dismissed it as ‘just clutter’ but also it was laden with anxiety and negative moralities. I looked at clutter as a theme within my data analysis, including its relation to other spaces and objects (such as items in ‘junk drawers’), which allowed me to explore connections and contradictions between objects, spaces and people.

Managing and reinforcing everyday relationships

Clutter emerges from my fieldwork as part of a dynamic process of valuation (Thompson, 1979) as things may move between different categories – clutter, waste, items to keep. Far from being trivial, clutter is a way people negotiate their everyday relations and living with others. Anna talks about her husband liking different things to her, such as:

. . . technology, which I’m not particularly interested in, but he clutters up our house with all that stuff. He’s got an obsession with bloomin’ Lego which he likes to clutter the house up with as well [laughs]. (Anna, 30s, lives in a modern house with husband)

She typifies many of my interviews where clutter was a source of tension in the house. Negotiations over how things are valued and categorised, and where they are situated in the house is part of how people navigate shared living spaces and relationships. These contestations extend in many houses to disagreements over how much clutter is too much and the source of disagreements between people co-habiting.

Clutter emerges through the relations of the home, as well as being a medium through which people negotiate and manage these relations. Penny lives with her husband and five children in a small terrace house and puts things ‘somewhere for now’, where they stay until a space feels ‘too cluttered’ and she has a sort out. Spaces get cluttered up as her five children and partner put things down as well and clutter emerges from a large family co-habiting in a small space. Items cease to be clutter when they are recategorised and moved (Penny puts things by the front door to be taken to a charity shop or the tip) or placed with other things (such as in a box of kids’ drawings to keep). Categorisation of what is and isn’t clutter is part of the organisation of the spaces of the house as well as defining which relations matter.

Managing clutter is also a way in which people incorporate new and changing social relations. For example, Eric and Jackie are a co-habiting couple who have inherited furniture from both their parents over the last 10 years. This includes a wardrobe on the landing (not used for clothes) and a table that ‘just needs to be fixed up’ on its side in the hall that ‘will go eventually but right now it’s just cluttering up the space’. These items are not currently needed, nor fully functional, and so become clutter as examples of what Gregson (2007) terms ‘surplus’ things – items with potential value and use. Becoming clutter does not signify a loss of value, but a recognition of the relationships these items materialise – to their parents – that Eric and Jackie wish to reinforce. Eric and Jackie
experience the material effects of the furniture as they move about their house. The wardrobe on the landing means that it is a squeeze to get into the bedroom; the first moment of putting the furniture down long since forgotten. Eric and Jackie’s daughter, partner and two children had moved in with them in the months prior to my first visit; and they brought all their stuff including furniture and smaller objects that fill spaces up – piled on the top of a sofa, in front of a cupboard. The more stuff there is – as well as it being ‘out of place’ – means that clutter is not the ‘background’ or forgotten about but habitually experienced and negotiated as it constantly asserts its material presence. The clutter is not just negatively experienced as decluttering discourses would presume, but also manifests the multiple social relations Eric and Jackie are situated in: their parents (gone but materially present), daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren.

**The material potency of clutter**

The previous examples open up how clutter through its material presence forces people to think about their relations to others. In other instances, clutter is unnoticed; I explore here how clutter makes the transition from unnoticed to being, in Douglas’s terms, potent. Clutter in most houses has a place (such as always ending up on the end of a kitchen table) as well as being ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas, 1966). Being ‘out of place’ may be unproblematic – one participant has an old sound system in the bottom of her wardrobe as she decides where it can go; in other instances, the clutter is not just out of place, but takes over these spaces, as one participant bemoans a kitchen surface piled high with things-to-be-sorted so that there is little space to prepare food. The most extreme example in my fieldwork was Jodie, a woman in her thirties who moved out of her room in a shared house and temporarily back in with her mother as her room was too cluttered – old bin liners of stuff cover the floor. An attempt to get on top of the clutter meant her bed is covered with boxes and bags of stuff, as well as loose objects that spill over the bed. Thompson’s theory of rubbish (1979) is instructive here as he sees it as an unseen and latent phase for objects – so too when clutter first amasses it is unseen and unnoticed as it gradually acquires potency.

Clutter is things on the way elsewhere – to-be-dealt-with-later – when people don’t have time to sort things out or that items seem to defy categorisation (DeSilvey, 2006). For example, Jo does not have a shed or garage for storage and has a pile of things at the end of her kitchen, which includes:

> . . . tools, DIY stuff, recycling, gardening, bits and bobs, a cat flap. Actually, that’s the box with the new cat flap and the old cat flap’s still in there, but some of the parts are okay so I haven’t managed to bin the whole thing yet. (Jo, 40s, lives with husband and 2 boys in small terrace house)

Some of Jo’s things defy categorisation as she isn’t sure where they might go, her house is small with little storage and so clutter increasingly asserts its presence as problematic. The intended transience of clutter is undermined as it remains where it is; this is not just because of how people categorise and value the things but also due to the stuff itself. Clutter is, in Douglas’s sense, matter ‘out of place’, and yet when this is transient the
clutter remains unnoticed and does not disrupt the normative order of the home. However, when clutter accumulates and expands, it asserts its presence, as people talk of things ‘cluttering up’ a space.

Penny’s hoover-box is a case in point: when she got a new hoover, she placed the cardboard box it came in on the floor to get rid of when she had time. The box’s flat surface presented itself as a space to put things on and ‘we started putting things on it, so it became a sort of coffee table’. Once items were on it, it attracted more things as the temporary box became – like Bennett’s assemblages (2009) – a box-table; the box-table became covered with things, and the room felt more cluttered, and so Penny sorted the objects, and the box was taken outside the house to be recycled. The clutter here becomes ‘potent’ in Douglas’s sense as it disrupts the social order of the home with rubbish having become a seemingly permanent fixture. The box starts its passage out of the house and in Appadurai’s sense, it is simultaneously recategorised and revalued; however, I argue, this process of revaluation comes from its materiality – it accumulated more stuff on it which made it ‘potent’ and forced Penny to re-evaluate it.

Penny had a big clear-out a year prior to my first visit to her house and tells me ‘we thought we’d got rid of everything and we thought, you know, it was all going to be clutter-free, but there’s still a lot of stuff. It keeps appearing! I just wonder where it comes from sometimes.’ This sense that things just ‘appear’ runs across my interviews and pays heed to the unconscious ways in which things are put down and how particular spaces and things attract other items. When framed as an assemblage of things, the things-in-relation exert a power (see Bennett, 2009) as people, for example, feel overwhelmed by the clutter. They also exert a power over other things, as the pile of clutter attracts more things – like Penny’s hoover-box. What was once just a box on the floor becomes a box that has amassed a pile of too much stuff on it as it in turn makes a room feel cluttered.

Many of my participants articulated feeling overwhelmed by clutter, which clearly resonates with the discourses of decluttering. Jo, already introduced, has used a decluttering website as ‘I get fed up of everything being there, but I have to be in the mood to do it’. She uses the website’s ‘top tips’, which she finds helpful sometimes but is disappointed that she still has a lot of clutter in the house. Decluttering sites present her with an apparent solution but fail to understand the potency of clutter or the limitations and challenges she faces. Jo has some old brass objects inherited from her grandfather in the pile of clutter in her kitchen; she feels unable to get rid of them but has no space to put them. Things are potent for personal, relational reasons, as well as in other cases through their materiality as an object speaks of potential futures and uses; Jo keeps ‘random screws . . . you never know when you might need them!’ Things that are unused or may not have any personal value may remain as clutter due to an item still being usable.

Like Bennett’s hoarders (2012), Jo remains attuned to uses the screws have had and could have again and sees the material potentials of things. Similarly, Daniel shows me an item he is not sure what it is:

I might be able to use that in the garden or tease the cat with it. I don’t know. If I exhaust all possibilities, I will then reluctantly concede that I might – in fact, I’m going to throw it out now. I can do that. (Daniel, late 60s, retired, lives alone in Victorian terrace)
This serves as another example of the affective power things can have over people (Christou & Janta, 2019); as Bennett’s work on hoarders suggests (2012) this is not just for objects which are laden with personal and relational meanings but also seemingly meaningless things. Things have a power through their thingness – they take up space, have had a life and potential future uses. This is even true for unwanted things; Marcus lives with his partner and baby in a house – having lived in a camper van for years with very little stuff. He frustratedly tells me about things that have appeared, unwanted, in the house: a pair of free slippers from a hotel; a free pen from an event; items from a party bag his baby went to. Things are hard to dispose of due to their material endurance as well as the moral and normative ideas of what trajectory things should have, people not wanting to feel wasteful. Their value or use long gone (they no longer ‘matter’ in Cwerner & Metcalfe’s sense) but they still last as objects.

Moral dilemmas and intersecting everyday norms

The previous examples open up the importance of everyday norms in why things are kept – potential usefulness and not being wasteful. These norms are not just brought to bear on objects but instead, I argue here, are an effect of their materiality: the object presents itself as useful – even an unwanted pair of free slippers speak of potential use and rebuke the owner for their lack of use. This is true for both meaningful and meaningless objects – which challenges the dismissal of clutter as being ‘trivial’ within decluttering discourses. Multiple intersecting everyday norms (Wheeler, 2019) come to bear on how long things remain as clutter. Evelyn shows me her son’s school drawings brought back from school:

You’re praising them, ‘Oh, this is lovely,’ so you don’t throw it away, you keep hold of it. And it just seems he’s put a lot of effort into it and he thinks it’s really great. I don’t know what to do with it but I won’t throw it away because I don’t want him to think that it’s not valued in some way. . . . He made it. And brought it home for us. (Evelyn, 40s lives with partner and son in modern 2 bed flat)

She keeps the drawings as there is a normative sense that children’s pictures should be kept, not just as it is valued because her son drew it. As already discussed, objects are seen to externalise relations to others and so judgements over keeping things are also decisions over what relations matter.

Clutter also includes seemingly meaningless things which are still kept. Rosa complains about:

. . . plastic rubbish that they come home with in party bags that they play with for a while and then it ends up in the bottom of a box. (Rosa, 20s, lives with husband and 3 kids in terrace house)

A free plastic toy – rarely if ever played with – would seem to be a perfect example of meaningless, trivial clutter and yet it cannot be disposed of instantly. It may have arrived unwanted, but it is not broken, and things are supposed to have a life before being disposed of as people do not want to be wasteful (see also Gregson, 2007). People have to
negotiate a range of norms – familial obligations, wastefulness and usefulness – by virtue of the materiality of the clutter: the unwanted plastic free toy has a temporary purpose (the party bag and social expectation) yet materially it lives on and outlasts Rosa’s desire to keep it. Stuff can be, in Bennett’s terms (2012) ‘slow’, which speaks to the different material temporality things have. This is particularly pertinent for clutter which is meant to be transient. The excitement of the party bag is long gone, and Rosa has to deal with their material endurances. Clutter is meant to be temporary, but it is still a necessary phase in the life of things; the material endurance of items of clutter reinforces a normative sense that even unwanted things should not go straight from acquisition to rubbish.

These multiple everyday moralities that people manage through the stuff they keep or get rid of are in some instances seemingly completely contradictory. The previous examples show things can become clutter through a moral obligation people feel to not be wasteful, as well as to keep children’s things. However, there is also a parallel – and contradictory – moral discourse in play: that clutter is a sign of excess materialism or being out of control (Wilk, 2001), which was mirrored in participants telling me they were ‘embarrassed’ by how cluttered their houses are. These contradictory moral dilemmas lead to people keeping stuff as well as feeling that they have too much stuff. There are multiple tensions and contradictions people negotiate through clutter; one of which is the dilemmas of wanting to keep their things but disliking the aesthetics of messiness. This tension is evident for Anna:

I don’t like too much clutter but I’m a right one for shoving things all higgledy-piggledy into a cupboard. If you look into our cupboard under the stairs it’s an absolute shameful mess [laughs], so anything you can’t see is fine! But on the surface, I quite like things to be fairly neat and tidy . . . I get comfort in having things. I just don’t want to see them. (Anna, 30s, lives in modern house with husband)

Like many others, things give her comfort and make her feel at home; Newell’s idea (2014) that things are co-inhabitants in our lives has purchase here as objects within the home we see, touch, sit on every day form the unnoticed background of our lives and therein constitute our sense of being at home. For most participants, however, clutter disrupts the aesthetics of homeliness. The tension Anna notes between getting comfort from things but not wanting visible clutter is common; if clutter is hidden in a ‘junk drawer’ (which most houses have) it is unproblematic, but when it is visible it can be a source of anxiety. This is considerably harder for those who have little or no storage. Evelyn lost her job and house in the recession and has had to downsize to a small rented flat with her partner and son. The flat is small and has no storage spaces; books sit in piles on the floor at the sides of the room and behind the sofa. She wants the books to be seen but has no space for any more bookcases in the small living room. Books are not items that would usually be seen as clutter and are clearly cherished items for this participant, yet the lack of space makes them clutter. There is a tension between the ideals of homeliness and finding comfort in things, a tension that is experienced keenly by Evelyn as she has such limited space. In large houses, people put things they don’t want (like old paint) in cellars, so clutter is out of sight and they have space to display the objects they want to. For Evelyn, things like her son’s Halloween and dressing up outfits ‘clutter up’
his room, and in a larger house, these things would be in perhaps a dressing up drawer, and not considered to be clutter. Non-trivial objects can become clutter and can still be a source of anxiety and tension as they assert themselves by poking out from behind the sofa. Clutter disrupts the social order of the home, in Douglas’s sense, but this cannot always be resolved as it continues to materialise tensions and disruptions to the moral and social orders of the home.

**Conclusions**

This article has drawn upon ethnographically informed research in people’s homes to explore clutter and makes four key arguments; first, putting clutter, which is usually unnoticed, under the spotlight allows me to challenge popular decluttering discourses which position clutter as trivial or materialistic. This obfuscates the complexity of clutter as it includes meaningless things as well as cherished items that have no place to be put. As well as challenging these popular understandings, I argue that popular interest in decluttering seeps into how people understand and worry about their own clutter. Programmes such as Marie Kondo’s generate anxieties around having too much clutter, only keeping things that are cherished as people come to experience the burden of clutter in their lives. Moral discourses around excess intersect with Kondo-type ideals of the tidy home and individualise the responsibility for having a cluttered messy house.

Second, I argue this individualising discourse fails to attend to the ways in which clutter is the nexus of social relations in the home. Clutter materialises relations to others, as well as being the medium through which people live their everyday relations. Clutter is a medium for people to negotiate social relations which may be conflictual, as well as reinforce and strengthen relations to others and incorporate new relations. Clutter is not a passive medium for people to manage relations, but it also materialises relations to others and in turn may present its own dilemmas and moral obligations. Third, I argue that these broader moralising discourses exacerbate and interact with existing everyday moralities around consumption, finances and family life which are brought to bear when people deal with their clutter. These norms are in some cases explicitly contradictory such as not being wasteful and thrifty (and so keeping stuff with potential use, mirroring Gregson’s notion of surplus) and being anti-materialistic (having too much stuff is seen negatively) or only keeping things you love (Kondo, 2014).

Fourth, I argue that through its materiality clutter becomes potent and presents people with moral dilemmas and guilt. Theories such as Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986) which emphasise the movements of things in terms of shifting categorisations and values are instructive; however, as a clutter pile takes over a space, or a supposedly transient object still lasts and works, I argue we need to centre the materiality of clutter. I extend this critique to Douglas’s dirt thesis (1966), which is insightful in showing how clutter can disrupt social order. However, I argue that clutter becomes potent through its materiality. As a pile of clutter accumulates, or a free plastic toy refuses to break, the power of clutter is evident as people feel overwhelmed by it; Bennett’s (2009) theory of assemblages offers a useful corrective to Douglas in the case of clutter, as things in a clutter pile attract other things. Clutter is not just one item but an accumulation of things and, as it expands, this is how people experience it as overwhelming. It forces its attention on us
as we cannot ignore the excesses and transience of the consumer society and its wastefulness when there is a pile of free things on their kitchen table that we do not want. Clutter can be invisible, forgotten about and ‘in order’ but when it overspills or has been there for years its moral weight is felt more profoundly. Clutter chides us for our apparent inability to tidy, sort, and our acquisition of too many things. It is not just that this is when it is potent, as it is through what Thompson sees as the ‘latent phase’ (1979) of rubbish that clutter develops its potency. More empirical work is needed in these unseen and unnoticed spaces, practices and objects of everyday life.

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