Mess: on domestic overflows

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ABSTRACT
Many homes in affluent Western societies have an ongoing battle against domestic mess, because of the steady inflow of new acquisitions. This essay looks at the ways in which mess has travelled through modern history and has ended up as both a powerful metaphor and a constant everyday worry in consumer life. In this process, mess has often been defined as a problematic condition, often reflecting the moral shortcoming of messy individuals. It has also created new market opportunities, services and solutions for de-cluttering. Mess illustrates some of the tensions in contemporary patterns of consumption and highlights the understudied aspects of how commodities are transformed during their domestic life cycle. The focus is on the ways in which materiality and affect are linked in these processes. The paper draws on an ongoing research project, “Managing Overflow.”

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What a mess …

Please excuse the mess! The French anthropologist Jean Paul Filiod starts his discussion of domestic disorder with this standard greeting of guests when they enter the home. He points out that mess is often described as a temporary disarray of a home, which otherwise is in a state of perfect and lasting order. The truth is, of course, that mess is the constant state in most homes, and that perfect order is just a recurring utopian dream, sometimes realized after a weekend’s cleaning – a transitory situation (Filiod 2003, 9).

Domestic mess is often associated with an overflow of consumption. New commodities enter already overcrowded homes, and when people try to handle this steady inflow, mess is always lurking in the background. Questions of clutter and storage have become more central in consumer life (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003) and have paved the way for new services and storage systems – a fast growing market, full of promises of help in decluttering the home. By using a historical perspective, I explore some of the changing ways in which questions of mess and domestic order reflect tensions in modern consumption, with a focus on the transformative journeys commodities make in the home.

Mess is a word with a rich array of connotations and synonyms – from the relative docility of disorder, disarray, clutter and jumble to stronger moral charges such as mishmash, untidiness, eyesore, shamble, up to the utter confusion and disorganization of turmoil, wreckage or chaos. Messiness occurs in many settings: from messy kitchens to messy situations or messy minds. As a verb, to mess can signal several directions, as in messing up, with, or about. Antonyms of mess include words like order, system, harmony, neatness, beauty, calm and peace. Such antonyms underline that mess and its many siblings share a cultural and moral charge – strong or subdued. My order may be your mess. Differences of class, gender, ethnicity and generation are at work here. The production of disorder is
a cultural practice, mirroring changing ideas about order, value and taxonomies (Dion, Sabri, and Guillard 2014).

Issues related to messiness have turned out to be central in an ongoing interdisciplinary project “Managing Overflow,” a study of the ways in which people and organizations cope with “too much,” whether that is too much stuff or information, or too many choices and activities (see Czarniawska and Löfgren 2012, 2014). My own focus in this project was the crowded home, overflowing with stuff, feelings and activities. After all, questions of domestic mess tend to be strongly related to the recurring debates on over- or hyper-consumption, a territory with a strong moral charge. The same goes for definitions of overflow, which in some situations can be defined as the blessing of abundance, but which in the contemporary Western world is more often presented as a haunting problem. In our project, we have looked at when, where, how and for whom a situation is defined as overflow (in negative or positive ways), and what kinds of attitudes and coping strategies are being developed.

The overcrowded home

Mess is often seen as “too much,” as stuff out of control, overflowing, leaking, piling up …

There is a long history of heated discussions about domestic mess, often linked to nostalgia for earlier times of “simple living,” or to future utopias of minimalist lives, something to which I will return. For now, however, let me focus on the contemporary situation.

In an anthropological study of 32 middle-class Californian homes, a team of researchers made detailed descriptions of domestic life and stuff (Arnold et al. 2012). The first household assemblage they analysed had 2260 visible possessions in the first three rooms that were documented (two bedrooms and the living room), not counting all the stuff which was out of sight in lockers, closets or drawers. After that, they gave up counting.

The people interviewed often complained about their homes “being a mess.” There were places in which stuff piled up, or “dumping grounds” as someone called them. Storage spaces were created everywhere, often quite unplanned, such as a garage in which there was no longer room for a car, or bedroom corners and other such unused in-between spaces. In the interviews with these Californian families, the theme of messiness occurred frequently, mainly among the wives:

This is the office. It’s a total mess. We probably should, you know, organize it better … And here we have the garage, with everything. It is usually a total mess and it’s a total mess today again. This is where we have bikes and all the old furniture, sofas and things we don’t use. It is, how can I say it, it’s a mess. It’s not fun, it should be cleaned up and we should probably get rid of a whole bunch of stuff. (Arnold et al. 2012, 26)

In many ways, the home is a good example of what Doreen (2005) has called the throwntogetherness of everyday life. Affects, activities and materialities work together, reinforcing or transforming each other.

In such domestic entanglements, stuff, feelings and routines acquire new uses or functions. Just think about the ways in which waste, junk and dirt are, in cultural terms, produced by processes such as displacement and recategorization, as in Mary Douglas’s classic discussion of dirt as “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966; Thompson 1979).

Some collections of stuff survive by becoming invisible; domestic driftwood in plain sight on the top of the shelf or in the garage corner, no longer noticed. Such states of affairs may last for a long time. Some of these collections may be defined as “messes,” turning into a constant eyesore or provoking feelings of guilt.

The Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård (2012, 260) took a look around his overflowing kitchen and came to a stop at the two shelves on the wall next to the window:

… swelling coral reef-like over all the small things the kids had collected over the last years, from sweet dispensers formed like princesses or different Disney characters, boxes with glass beads, glue pens, toy cars, and water colours, to jigsaw pieces, Playmobil parts, letters and bills, dolls …
He reflects on the constant battle between chaos and order that goes on in Western homes and the ways that the material world always seems about to take over. What he describes is not a collection of discrete elements, but as he calls it: “a coral reef of stuff.”

As Maurizia Boscagli has pointed out in her discussions of abundance, contemporary Western homes are crowded not so much with objects but with stuff, non-descript heaps, bundles, piles, assemblages. She defined stuff as materiality out of bounds (Boscagli 2014, 3). It is things on the move, displaced, left or lost. Applying Boscagli’s perspective to different domestic contexts, it is possible to explore some of the forms that such production of stuff can take.

Decluttering life

The transformations of the word mess during the nineteenth century run from its original meanings of a place in which food was served, or a dish of (mixed) food, to more negatively charged meanings, as in “an unappealing concoction of foodstuffs,” then into the contemptuous use of the term for a “jumble, mixed mass” (1828), and in the figurative sense of a “state of confusion” (1834), as well as a “condition of untidiness” (1851). (See the discussion in the Oxford English Dictionary and on www.thesaurus.com.)

Later on in the nineteenth century, mess metaphorically colonized new arenas: messy persons, messy homes or lives. It is tempting to see the rise in this negative redefinition as a product of the Victorian middle classes’ obsession with cultural order, so well expressed in the motto “there is a time and place for everything.” Do not mix activities and stuff in improper ways! Food should only be consumed in the dining room; children and toys belong in the nursery. Words like tidy, neat and proper became more frequent.

The battle against improper mixes and combinations was carried out on many fronts: in rules of interior decoration, in everyday activities, and in advice about cooking (Frykman and Löfgren, 1987, 221 ff). Shapiro (1986) has described how American immigrants at the turn of the nineteenth century were taught to stop cooking their traditional mixed dishes, such as stews, and to arrange meals with ingredients neatly placed next to each other: meat, potatoes and vegetables. In this process, mess turned into a weapon, as some orders were redefined as messy disorders.

The battle against messiness grew and became part of the moral economy of the ideal home. Campaigns for decluttering were based on different ideological and moral grounds. As Herring (2014) pointed out, such campaigns came to be linked to the new ideas of scientific management in household life during the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1925 a scientific housekeeper called Caroline Bartlett Crane wrote: “Are our houses cluttered with disguised liabilities, rooms we don’t effectually use, pictures we don’t see (and like, are not worth seeing), useless furniture and bric-a-brac we haven’t the courage to get rid of?” (quoted in Herring 2014, 91).

For the new generation of functionalist architects of the 1920s and 1930s, the Victorian ideals of “a time and place for everything” were carried into plans for rational domestic living. “Messy kitchens” where working-class families gathered and mixed cooking with homework and socializing were to be eliminated. In the Sweden of the 1940s they were labelled “voluntary overcrowding”: a modern kitchen should be for cooking only. (What the modernist saw as a cluttered home, working-class families often experienced as a warming and informal “cosiness.”) In the marketing of modernity this message of rational and orderly housekeeping was also turned into a sales argument. The new and novel refrigerator came with advice on how to organize and store food.

The debate over cluttered homes took on a new shape in the 1950s and 1960s, when growing working-class affluence and expanding domestic consumption resulted in worried debates about overconsumption (see Czarniawska and Löfgren 2012, 9 ff) and pleas for consumer restraint. In the 1970s, the younger generation took the debate on overconsumption in new directions. Theirs was a consumer revolt also against the modernist emphasis on orderly consumption and strict domestic routines. Informality and creativity was the new credo. Mess is nothing to be ashamed of; do not
hide anything. Let stuff spill out, use open shelving and do not close doors to bedrooms and other backstage territories. In retrospect it is possible to see how this anti-consumerist approach actually created new opportunities for the market (Löfgren 2013). Let us experiment with new stuff and why not remake the home again!

In recent decades, decluttering campaigns have come and gone, often with the linking of material and mental cluttering: why not declutter your mind, home and life at the same time. Inspiration has come from new directions, from Feng-shui to ideas about sustainable and simple living. Indeed the early twenty-first century has seen an accelerated growth of decluttering advices and services in the market, with self-help books, counselling and coaching, TV shows, interior design and smart storage system developments (see the discussion in Belk, Seo, and Li 2007; and Abrahamson and Freedman 2007). “A less messy home? We’ll fix it.” is the promise in a Swedish ad for the cleaning firm Home Bliss in 2016. Sweden, over the last few years, has seen a proliferation of such small firms.

What is most striking in this history, however, is the way storage technologies have expanded over the past decades. Compare IKEA catalogues, for example. Storage was not a big theme in 1990, whereas in 2015 the pages were bursting with smart storage technologies: sophisticated wardrobe systems, as well as boxes, containers, and labelling systems, in all shapes and forms (often with inspiration from classic Scandinavian functionalist domestic architecture). As Cassinger (2010) has pointed out in her analysis of IKEA, the company not only sells storage systems, but also increasingly educates its customers in “smart storage solutions” and ways to declutter their homes.

Never good enough

The torrent of advice and admonitions furthers attempts at reorganizing the home. There is the constant dream of a simpler or even a minimalist home, and there are many (often half-hearted) attempts at reform, of consuming less and getting rid of more, of creating a better-organized household. There are fantasies about the perfect homes of others. An important domestic feeling and mood setter is guilt: guilt about not having a good enough home or family life perhaps, with a lack of control and order. Such questions of guilt and the gap between ideals and reality are closely tied to the constant presence of invisible guests, those imaginary judges or censors that tell people what a perfect or good home should look like. Among these visitors is the marketing world, which for more than a century has played on the feeling of guilt in brazen and, later, more subtle ways. Is your home keeping up with the Joneses?

Guilt about messy homes is easily attached to issues of class. Among middle-class Victorians there were recurring discussions of the messy life in working-class homes and campaigns were organized for moral rearmament. Intellectual bohemians, on the other hand, were granted a greater leeway. Their domestic disorder could be seen as problematic, but also as creative and thus excusable compared to working-class untidiness.

In such debates, gender, of course, played a major role. Who is to blame for a home that is not up to the standards of order, normality or cleanliness? The Swedish author Kristina Sandberg recently completed a trilogy she called “1500 pages of kitchen sink existentialism” (Sandberg 2015). It is a story based on her grandmother’s life as a housewife from the late 1930s to the 1970s. Sandberg wanted the so-called “small world of housekeeping” to take the leading part. The readers follow the heroine as she goes through all the routines of reproducing the everyday over and over again. She goes to bed tired but with a shining kitchen, which will get messy again the next day, an achievement that is rarely noticed – or only when it is not perfect enough. Maj constantly has to measure herself: is she up to standard as a housewife? There is a constant fight against the threat of disorder in a lower middle-class home such as hers, where domestic tidiness became an important social marker. To throw a last glance at the shiny kitchen sink and the tidy living room before going to bed were moments of temporary bliss. Then came another day when everything had to be cleaned again. It was never good enough!
Knausgård has a similar take, although his standards of messiness are rather different from Maj’s. The stuff piling up in their apartment could give his wife panic-like attacks and lead to expeditions to IKEA:

… it was the feeling of chaos it gave her, which she couldn’t handle. Often she came home with storage utensils, which should sort of organize everything; different boxes for different things, a tray for my post, one for hers, marked with our names, as she had seen at other people’s places who seemed to be orderly, but the systems collapsed after a few days, and everything flowed out again as before.

Knausgård also embarked on projects of decluttering, but had to give up. It was as if the things “were alive, as if they lay there and pulled stuff towards them in order to grow and be powerful.” He kept reassuring himself that this was not a moral issue:

We were not bad people, even if we were messy. It was not a sign of bad morals. This I tried to say to myself, but it didn’t help, the feelings were too strong; when I walked around in the mess, it was as if it accused me, accused us, we were bad parents and bad people. (Knausgård 2012, 262)

Guilt may transform the home, or present it in a special light, demanding certain activities or blocking others. The power of guilt also becomes visible in attempts to fight it. In 2009, the Swedish artist Lotta Sjöberg started a Facebook project *Family living – the true story* by posting pictures of her untidy home, a project that would have shocked Maj deeply. The aim of the project was to create a contrast to “the ideal of the perfect home that is drowning us through newspapers, TV-shows and real estate advertisements” (Sjöberg 2014, 3). In 2014, the project had 23,000 followers who contributed photos of their messy and at times chaotic homes, as well as supportive comments. One called the site “a refuge from perfection,” others sent in specimens of their hand-embroidered wall hangings with texts like “life is too short to be dust-free” or “a clean kitchen is a sign of a wasted life.” To stay true to the ambition of non-perfection, some of the embroideries were only half-completed.

**Materializing moralities**

In its travels between different epochs and social settings, *mess* has been both a label and a mundane experience. It is a word with a strong transformative, but also framing potential. “Mess” can be something that is growing slowly, spilling over. All of a sudden a situation may be defined as a mess. It can be a collection of things turning into “stuff.” It can be a material disorder colonizing different arenas of life. It can be a descriptive but also a metaphorical concept, often with strong moral charges, as when “mess” becomes an accusation, a weapon turned towards the lives of others. A cluttered home may signal a cluttered life, a messy kitchen a messy person. In this process, mess becomes a sign of personal shortcomings or lack of control.

What kind of marketing icon is “mess?” The market plays a double role here. On the one hand, there is the accelerating flow of commodities into the home, for example, toys, kitchen gadgets and clothes, and the shortened lifespan of many of these objects. On the other, the market is ready to assist in the coping strategies resulting from this overflow: displacement, divestment, forgetting, disposal, hiding and de-cluttering. A wide range of solutions and services has emerged to deal with this.

The power of domestic mess is disorder and incompetence materialized in very concrete and visible ways. This explains why questions of mess and cluttering are easily turned into battle arenas over normality, control and morals – not only for family members but between social groups, or between the state and its messy citizens, as well as the market. Mess is easily linked to hierarchies of gender, class and ethnicity. When something is defined as mess it can be seen as a very personal reaction – this mess is threatening or outright disgusting – but mess also mirrors cultural standards of order and categorization.

The power of the concept also lies in its ways of defining a certain order as a negative phenomenon. Is a mixture (of objects, ideas, activities) seen as “messy” or “creative,” and are there competing
aesthetics at play here? In a positive view, mess is not disorder but an alternative order. It may stand for a freedom from rigid order or control, for opening up new (sometimes surprising) combinations and confrontations or relations between objects and affects (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003). “The coral reef of stuff” on the kitchen shelf was for Knausgård’s children a treasure trove, in which objects were mingled in interesting and surprising ways. Mess had potential. There is the same ambiguity in discussions of overflow; when is it a problem, and when is it a blessing of abundance?

As commodities travel into households they are transformed from commodities to possessions, as McCracken (1986) has pointed out, but as I have discussed there are further transitions in the life of things. Cherished possessions may turn into non-descript stuff, gathering like domestic driftwood and turning into a problematic mess.

For many people defining and handling mess is seen as an endless battle for a balanced everyday life. The rules for this ongoing fight change over time and between contexts. At times, domestic disorder has been pathologized into “hoarding” or personal loss of control (see Herring 2014). Other times the focus has been on how the preoccupation with tidiness and order can become a dangerous and irrational obsession, taking over life. Abrahamson and Freedman (2007) have discussed such changes and balancing acts in their book A Perfect Mess. For individuals, questions of mess can turn into soul-searching reflections. A male university lecturer put it like this:

I cannot understand what the idea of mess does to me. When I have folded the children’s clothes neatly in the cupboard, there is a feeling of blissful order, but as soon as they start wearing those clothes disorder is back again. Shouldn’t I just keep the cupboard closed?

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