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Affective Clutter: Three Viewpoints on Lived Objects that Create Discomfort at Home

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AFFECTIVE CLUTTER: THREE VIEWPOINTS ON LIVED OBJECTS THAT CREATE DISCOMFORT AT HOME

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ABSTRACT Over-consumption and the domestic abundance of things have become a problem in affluent Western homes, which are full of new commodities and layers of lived things. At the same time, the encounter with mess and clutter generates a strong moral charge. We should not approach clutter as simply meaningless or lacking order, but rather as a form of trouble-making materiality that forces people to engage with materiality due to a sense of discomfort. In this article, we focus on specific objects that are considered as clutter, asking thirteen people to introduce the materiality of their homes. Overall, we find three different viewpoints on clutter: stuff materializing social relations and family connections;

stuff referring to personal memories; and stuff that constructs the feeling of home. We conclude that clutter is not a simple matter of disorder, but rather something affective that calls for attention and emotional work.

KEYWORDS: clutter, affect, materiality, domestic objects

INTRODUCTION



Well-to-do Western households often contain a vast number of material objects which play different roles in people's lives. Some objects are rather functional, such as things used for cooking, drinking, eating, sleeping, washing up and dressing up. Other objects play less practical roles but are still helpful in supporting identities and relationships, creating feelings of belonging, and connecting with personal memories and family histories. Studies concerning material culture have found that material artefacts can be and become affective objects, effectively connecting with emotions, moods, and atmospheres (Frykman and Povrzanović Frykman 2016). In this vein, sociologist Sherry Turkle (2011) has emphasized the evocativeness of things and the ways in which they affect our thinking. More recently, philosopher Richard Heersmink has emphasized how artifacts are "deeply integrated into our motor, perceptual, cognitive, and affective systems that they define our capabilities, mind, and identity in important ways" (2021: 2).

Our ecology of things at home reflects the identities, taste, wishes, and values of their owners, being part of particular systems of ever-changing interrelations that comprise humans, nonhuman actants, and spaces (Muñoz et al. 2022). In this ecology of things, there are varying orders related to numbers and qualities of objects, and places for them. The presence and placement of material things at home is not necessarily something we think about or are conscious of in our everyday lives, unless we need them for something, or if they break, become outdated, or start taking too much space (Martínez 2019). Objects can be used to create positive emotions and a sense of home and belonging (Koskinen-Koivisto et al., in press), to reinforce everyday rhythms and a sense of continuity (Dudley 2010), and to maintain affective bonds (Huhn 2018; Koskinen-Koivisto 2022). Some everyday objects, however, become troublesome and contradictory. They are also affective objects, but instead of the ideal, they reinforce negative feelings as they rupture the familiar sensory environment and spatial order that we do not need to reflect on (see Errázuriz, in press).

We are talking of practices that are spatially embedded and felt in situated ways (Bille and Simonsen 2021). Affective spatiality connects with materiality and the human body's attunement to atmospheres. The concept of atmosphere can be understood as something that combines material, intangible, and social aspects, generating different

feelings in turn. An atmosphere can also be “staged” (see Linnet 2011; Pink et al. 2014; Bille 2015). In the context of home, this can mean attempts to create a homelike space that generates feelings of safety and an atmosphere that is inviting and cozy. Objects can therefore affect atmospheres and our emotional states in both positive and negative ways, but they affect in daily (bodily) practices, together with immaterial aspects such as expectations, memories, and ideals.

In our fieldwork, we focus on troublesome objects that become considered as clutter, asking why and how this particular stuff has acquired such a negative connotation. We have examined relatively affluent Finnish households to understand the ways in which something becomes unwanted or eventually problematic. Earlier research on clutter has emphasized how this kind of materiality breaks social norms and compromises the “experiential quality of home” (Roster, Ferrari and Jurkat 2016: 32; Aro 2020). Overall, obsolescence and disorder can make certain objects out of place, generating a feeling of dirtiness and chaos, which challenge the moral orders related to home (e.g., Löfgren 2017). Clutter can even refer to hoarding in the sense of psychological disorder (Kilroy-Marac 2018). A good and tidy home should not be too cluttered, so clutter is moved, stored, recycled, or thrown away (Bohlin 2019; Woodward 2021). From the point of view of tidiness, clutter is stuff in the wrong place, but it can also be understood as “matter out of time” as is not currently useful but perhaps used to be or will be in the future (Newell 2023: 230). This temporal aspect of potential future use is interesting and important, and we will consider it more closely in the analysis.

We consider homes as made of ordinary temporal, spatio-material and immaterial layers, and clutter as being part of that kind affective construction (Koskinen-Koivisto et al. *in press*). In its various forms, clutter calls for both action and assessment: Cleaning, organizing, sorting, discarding and eventually deciding on what to keep and what to throw away. Accordingly, we introduce three viewpoints on what can be considered as clutter and discuss their connections to affective practices of everyday life. First, we discuss *family clutter* and items which can be annoying for certain family members but be treasures for others. Second, we scrutinize *inherited clutter* that emerges in the context of dealing with the estate of a deceased person. Third, we focus on *cherished clutter*, items which are imbued with positive meanings, memories, or life stories but that take up too much space. These viewpoints are not strictly separated categories, as the meanings and practices connected with them may overlap. For instance, a cherished memento may be inherited and connected with family life; it may also be a treasure for one member of a family and clutter for another. Further, the three aspects demonstrate how what we see as clutter is contingent and contextual, depending on situations, expectations, and emotions.

RESEARCH MATERIAL AND ANALYSIS

This chapter is based on thirteen interviews with Finnish people from different age groups and areas of Finland.¹ The respondents were found via a call that we published on Facebook and Twitter in 2021. In the call we invited people to participate in the research and tell us about material items at home that they found especially important and cherished, such as mementos or keepsakes. We also asked them to think about objects that belong to or are used for creating a feeling of home. We got several responses to our call and contacted eight women and five men. The youngest respondent was a student born in 1996, living alone for the first time, and the oldest was born in 1948, also living alone, and did not have children. Two of the other women were born in the 1980s, two in the 1960s, and two in the 1950s. Two of the younger women were married and had young children, the other four women lived with a spouse and their children had grown up and moved away from home. One of the men was born in 1968, the other four men in the 1970s. All of them were married and had children living at home. Four of the respondents lived in the Helsinki area; the rest of them were from different parts of Finland.

What all these people had in common was an interest in our research project. Many of them expressed an interest in the idea of scrutinizing material items as elements of identity and well-being. Another similarity was that all the respondents had the opportunity to influence the material aspects of home, for instance by making choices concerning items and home decoration, and seemed to be rather happy with their current homes. The respondents were also asked why they had replied to our call, and about objects that they cherished or found otherwise special. We talked about the negative aspects of clutter, the overflow of stuff, and questions related to sustainable consumption. We encouraged the respondents to share thoughts about the sensory aspects of materiality; for instance, there were questions about the feel of surfaces and textiles, colors, lights, even smells and sounds of home. In this vein, we pay special attention to the affective expressions the interviewees used when talking about their homes, as well to the embodied dimension of communication, gestures, and touching objects.

FAMILY CLUTTER

The ordinary objects of home include furniture, textiles, dishes, tools, electrical and technological devices, cosmetics, clothes, toys, pens, papers, and many other things that may start causing a mess and make us feel uncomfortable, unless *someone* proactively organizes, sorts out, and takes control of them, even if temporarily. Clutter thus calls for action, time, effort, and storage space.

The current overabundance of stuff has created phenomena such as KonMari and minimalist homes (Sandlin and Wallin 2021; Derwanz in this issue), the emergence of professional organizers (Belk et al.

2007), as well as numerous TV programs, social media content (see #declutter on Instagram), and articles in women's magazines about how to keep one's home organized. The decluttering experts approach questions concerning material objects and mess from different viewpoints, but the basic standpoint is the same: Less stuff is good, too much stuff creates problems. The aim is to keep things in order, which is easier to do when there are fewer items to order. The paradox is that despite decluttering being recognized as beneficial to quality of life, the action of decluttering seems to be rather problematic. This paradox inspired us to analyze the respondents' experiences of troublesome objects and see if they name particular problems concerning clutter.

As examples of annoying clutter in everyday life, the respondents mentioned stuff such as bills and old tax or insurance papers, plastic objects such as small toys or kitchen items, electric wires, old smartphones, and computers which were not in use anymore. This stuff tended to pile up in certain places and seemingly take over homes. These things lay beyond any possible notion of usefulness, but could not be considered as trash. They remained in a transitional stage, calling for sorting, organizing, and decision-making. The uncertainty was considered problematic; the respondents were not always sure if some of the things were still needed later. Uncertainty about what to do with certain things also connected with thoughts about unecological and unsustainable ways of living. The respondents felt it was wrong to just throw the stuff away, so they aimed at recycling and donating things that they thought could be still useful for somebody else. Of course, these actions also took time and effort. These responses showed how as a liminal state between existing order and categories, clutter (like dirt) is powerful and has the potential to disrupt (cf. Douglas 1966: 44). The temporal aspect of the future was present in the answers, as the papers or toys might be needed later.

Our respondents' thoughts about clutter seemed to some extent connect with their age and family situation. Two of the women – the youngest and oldest respondents – lived alone. They did not feel that clutter was a problem. They felt that they were able to organize their homes as they wished, and this did not create any problems. Both were very keen on many of their items and clearly used material objects to create a feeling of home. For example, the youngest respondent talked about creating a nice atmosphere with textiles and lamps, and the oldest respondent had many decorative objects, paintings, and pieces of art glass from different stages of her life. Yet, they did not seem to have items that they found useless. Interestingly, the only thing the youngest respondent mentioned were shot glasses which she had received as gifts. She did not need them, as she did not drink shots, but felt it was difficult to throw away gifts. The responsibilities related to gifts relate to symbolic social bonds, which gift-giving creates: Giving a gift away would break these bonds (see Mauss 1990).

The respondents with children had different viewpoints on clutter. Three of the respondents, who had young children, talked about balancing the wishes and needs of different family members, and about maintaining the feeling of a tidy and organized home. Especially toys were considered as items that called for negotiations and choices.

Sometimes I feel a bit desperate, at the moment mostly because of the toys [laughs]. They spread around, they come in as others give them to us. And then the children find it hard to let go of them. (W1983)

The children's toys [...] We have PlayStation 2, 3, 4, and now they want the 5. They are all there, and the Lego. (M1968)

The kids have a surprising amount of stuff that remains lying here and there. Both [kids] have had this funny thing of collecting cardboard boxes. I thought the boxes were garbage, but no, they are important for them. (W1982)

Although the children's toys were mentioned in the same context as clutter, the tone of talking about them was warm. The respondents accepted the toys and the possible mess as a part of the stage of life when the children were still young. They seemed to negotiate the amounts and the right places for the toys with their children but allowed them to have many toys and various “treasures” such as the cardboard boxes that adults may find useless but for which children can find creative use. Some respondents also often gave their children toys that they had played with in their own childhood and saved as mementos. These toys were often connected with memories and seemed to create a feeling of continuity (see Huhn 2018).

Another aspect of family clutter we found interesting was that our respondents connected clutter with particular spaces and ways of organizing things. Three male respondents said they had the habit of collecting more stuff than they should. Some had collected mechanical or electrical things, which they used for building new and repairing old things (M1968, M1976). Some had kept their old computers or videogames as mementos (M1977, M1976, M1975). All of them mentioned that their wives had asked them to reduce the number of objects. One woman also mentioned that her husband had a shed full of things as he likes to hoard “all kinds of stuff” (W1982). One of the women (W1968) was careful not to collect any art glass pieces or dishes, as her husband tended to get annoyed with them. These families negotiated the right amounts of and places for things. Interestingly, some things that were important for one member of the family seemed like clutter for the other. Some elderly respondents who live with a spouse appeared a bit surprised about the question of clutter (W1951, W1958). It seemed that either there was something about clutter that

they did not want to talk about, or there simply was not much clutter in their homes that would have been problematic.

It can be argued that too much clutter can feel disturbing and socially unacceptable aspects of an untidy house, but small amounts of clutter can even feel cozy (see Newell 2023: 231). In households of two or more members, these “right” amounts of stuff need to be negotiated. People who live together need to decide who makes the rules, who’s wishes count, and who is responsible for the things. The frustration connected with the temporal aspect of clutter is both practical and emotional; not knowing if the objects (such as the old PlayStation) are still valuable for someone or already useless. Not knowing can make the object become clutter, because it is difficult to find a place and a purpose for it. In other words, the uncertainty about the role of the object can make it displaced clutter.

INHERITED CLUTTER

In the interviews, some respondents talked about clutter in the contexts of inheriting material objects, emptying their deceased parents’ homes or carrying out death cleaning (going through one’s own belongings before it is too late) in their own homes.² They talked about the differences between generations and the different ways of understanding the value of objects. They discussed the tendency of their grandparents or parents, who had experienced the Second World War or material scarcity and poverty following the war, to save and keep or even hoard things which the respondents did not find particularly valuable (W1968, W1964, W1958). Some emphasized that their most cherished items were inherited. For example, a houseplant planted by one respondent’s late father (W1968), a nineteenth-century piano (W1982), or pieces of furniture which had belonged to grandparents (W1983) were mentioned as important objects that played an essential role in furnishing the home. These items were in daily use and at the same time served as objects of family history and the respondent’s own identity.

Younger respondents anticipated that in the future their parents would leave them with a great number of objects, which they considered clutter. One of the women in her 30s was worried about her parents who had the tendency to hoard things. They had collected different items for their home and summer cottage for decades, and according to the respondent, the situation was “wild”. Her parents had agreed to start sorting out and recycling some of the things, but there was a lot of work to be done. This family was able to talk about the situations where the material items, that had once been considered as valuable and worth buying and saving had changed their meaning to be seen as problematic. Death cleaning was, however, a sensitive subject to raise.

In cases where the respondents had administered a deceased loved one's estate and cleared their home, they emphasized how going through, choosing, sorting, selling, recycling, and throwing away the items was hard emotional and bodily work:

My mother is 81 and has dementia, [she has ...] a small apartment and so much stuff. We should start clearing it out, but how do we deal with this? I so understand this death cleaning thing. One does not need to quarrel about those things. [...] I think it is about the items you leave behind, what is meaningful stuff. (W1964)

I am talking about death cleaning. Some people say: "let the heirs sort out the mess", but I have gone through the deaths of two loved ones. There is enough to sort out, the sorrow, the paperwork, and all that. I hope the biggest mess after me are photograph albums and such things. (W1968)

I am in my 60s, anything can happen. I don't want to leave the burden behind [for my daughters]. They would sort out things here in the middle of chaos and sorrow, we have seen so many of these stories. They will have to make some choices anyway, of what to keep and what not. (W1958)

These women wanted to make sure that their own children would not have to go through a similar process as they had done (see also Bohlin 2019: 6). When in a state of mourning, the task of going through clothes, dishes, photographs, papers, furniture, books, pieces of art and so many other things felt both exhausting and unnecessary. This meant touching, lifting, moving, and ascribing meaning to hundreds of material items. The respondents called for discussions about the matter and the ways of controlling the number of objects in a home. The ways of sorting out and getting rid of things that they described mostly focused on recycling and selling. Questions concerning sustainability and waste seemed important for all of these respondents. They did not want to just throw usable things to waste, so many tried to sell, recycle, or donate the things they did not keep, often through online marketplaces or social media such as the local recycling pages on Facebook. The objects called for both practical and emotional work.

This kind of practice of care refers to "the traces of personhood, or sociality, remaining in the object" (Bohlin 2019: 4). The objects are evocative, but the evocativeness is not always understood very well, as the respondents pointed out. Sorting out and disposing of material things that connect with childhood and other stages of lived life is an affective practice, which can include strong emotions and autobiographical aspects. Touching, seeing, and even smelling things which used to belong to a loved one can set off "affective fireworks" (Povrzanović Frykman, in press). Sensory engagements with objects from one's

childhood home can raise memories of everyday situations, happy moments, and various emotions, which otherwise would not be remembered. These experiences can be positive, but in a time of mourning, they can be extremely difficult.

CHERISHED CLUTTER

We have so far discussed troublesome objects of family life that may have different meanings to other family members, and inherited objects that connect with affective relations. In addition to these, personal and emotional objects with special meanings can become clutter. Again, this is a question of abundance and of finding time for organizing and a right place for things. In the interviews, the respondents were asked to introduce a material object that was special to them and that they cherished. Most of them chose an item connected with their childhood, parents, or grandparents. They had soft toys which had been used as bedtime toys (W1996, W1982, W1964, M1976), an old game console (M1977), a pair of mittens knitted by the respondent's mother (W1958), a wooden toy made by the respondent's father (W1948), a houseplant planted by their late father (W1968), and photographs (W1951, W1958). All the items were carriers of memories or family history, and a way to keep the past closer to the present (Alonso Rey 2016; Grossman 2015). In some cases, cherished objects are things close to our bodies too. By feeling, touching, listening to, or smelling them, in other words engaging with them through our senses, we can reach autobiographical memories.

In addition to the autobiographically meaningful things, many respondents mentioned that they cherish objects of interior design that reflect their taste and personality, or in other words "look like them". Decorative items, paintings and postcards, carefully selected wallpapers, lamps, and furniture such as sofas and armchairs were important pieces of home because they created relaxing, aesthetic, and cozy spaces, and a feeling of home. Cherished objects can enable material engagements to offer sources of comfort, joy, and pleasure. However, the qualities of objects that once made us feel at home may change and become outdated, for example in a new home. One of our respondents who had moved to a smaller apartment noted how some friends and relatives had commented on the amount of small decorative things she had kept. She admitted that there is not enough space for all of them, but how difficult it is to let her cherished things go, because each one reminded her of something or someone important. Two of the male respondents discussed similar connections between their objects and lived life, which made it difficult to decide on what to keep and what to throw away:

They [material objects] support my memory. [...] When I look at certain objects, or hold them in my hand, I remember that it was

bought from here and there, or that was a nice trip where this one is from. Even though they are not souvenirs, but objects of daily use, for me it can be a bit like a souvenir, maybe. (M1968)

I am, could I say, a sort of a memory addict. [...] I keep a lot of items, which bring different things to mind. [...] There is a lot of stuff, which is annoying for my spouse, and I have to admit, for me too. When I try to go through them, something will go, but the overall amount is not much reduced. (M1976)

These respondents used material objects as reminders of different situations and stages in life. Both mentioned that their wives had encouraged them to let some of their things go, but for them, getting rid of the objects felt like getting rid their own past. They did not characterize the objects as clutter. However, the objects did connect with the ways in which clutter may start to form. With too many of them, the objects started to become troublesome objects out of place.

These objects were autobiographical and evocative (see Turkle 2011), triggering thoughts with special memories. Evocativeness of objects can make us get creative or emotional, remember things, tell stories, calm down, and do different things. Material items are typically recognized as useful, necessary, indulgent, or aesthetic, but less as thought provoking and emotional objects. Turkle connects the difficulty to understand objects as “centerpieces of knowing” with the Western tradition to understand knowing as propositional and abstract reasoning. The affective realm such as moods and emotions, experiences that are difficult to verbalize, have been largely omitted from Western understandings of social relations and the human condition (Gilje 2016). This has led to a cognitive bias of neglecting the realms of emotions and subjectivity in social science research (see also Ehn, Löfgren and Wilk 2016). However, when analyzing objects of memory, it is crucial to note how objects and materiality work in the context of remembering; they stand as testimonies to past experiences (Koskinen-Koivisto 2022; Sonnleitner in this issue). These objects from the past seem to lend to our stories a sort of fidelity and obligation that our words alone cannot, because material form endures through times and can be seen and touched (Huhn 2018; Martínez in this issue).

In this vein, our relationship with lived objects is connected to sensory engagement with the materiality of the past. Two of the respondents had realized that connecting memories with material objects can be at the same time valuable and problematic. They had solved the problem by collecting chosen mementos and putting them in special boxes, stored out of sight, that they could reach if they wanted to (W1968, W1958). Another respondent had two daughters, and she had collected boxes of childhood items such as toys, baby clothes, first shoes, and books. Another respondent had also collected toys and baby clothes, photograph albums and some inherited pieces of art for her two sons. Both respondents thought about how to leave meaningful

things to their children without leaving them troublesome clutter. Both also mentioned that their children were free to decide what to do with the boxes eventually. Thus, they had accepted that things that they have lived with and cherished may not be valuable for others.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have analyzed experiences with lived objects that call for attention and future action. In our research material, clutter was something that needed attention but also affective, connected with social bonds, childhood memories, atmospheres, and spatio-temporal domestic practices, especially regarding spatial order and future orientation. Our interviews showed how certain troublesome items comprised the categories of family clutter and inherited clutter, which underline the sociality of domestic objects: We are not alone responsible for handling material belonging, but our actions affect the following generations. Clutter is troublesome as it brings to the fore the ethics of caring for things: It encourages us to reflect on the ethically correct and sustainable ways of disposing of objects. Personally meaningful objects can also become cherished clutter, which resists simple categorization. These reflections underline how things are not just things, but evocative and lived objects that we feel with.

In the rhythms and space of everyday life, clutter creates affective baggage. The respondents aimed at maintaining some order at home, which meant balancing between keeping and disposing, order and mess, ideals and realities of everyday life. Decisions about lived objects were difficult to make if their function and place was unclear, if family members had different opinions about the objects, or if they generated strong emotions. Respondents seemed to aim for a limited number and clear order of things at home, which meant controlling their place and amount. Thus, categorizing objects and handling them requires time and effort, knowledge, skills, and emotional work.

NOTES

1. The interviews were conducted in Finnish via Zoom (instead of face-to-face due to Covid-19 restrictions) during spring and summer 2021. The interviews were conducted by Anna Kajander in a thematic and dialogical manner, instead of a strictly structural manner. We cannot determine the socio-economic status of the respondents. We have not, for instance, asked about their income. All our respondents were (or had been before retiring) salaried or entrepreneurs, except for one student. Excerpts from the interviews cited here were translated by the authors. This article is rooted in our current research project SENSOMEMO: Material and Sensory Memories: Explorations on Autobiographical Materiality (Research Council of Finland 2020–2024, grant no. 334247), in which we study affective and autobiographical materiality in the context of home.

2. Death cleaning is our translation of an originally Swedish term, *dödstädning*, coined by Margareta Magnusson in her autobiographical book (2017).

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