

Charity Shops and the Imagined Futures of Objects: How Second-Hand Markets Influence Disposal Decisions when Emptying a Parent's House

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Abstract

This article explores the processes whereby things are donated, or not donated, to charity shops. I draw on in-depth interviews conducted with adults who have sorted through the houses of older family members who have moved into residential accommodation, and in some cases subsequently died. The affective qualities of objects and the informants' responsibilities to be 'good' family members by ensuring 'safe passage' for their parents' possessions worked to ensure that many objects did not enter the second hand market, but were preserved within the family or wider social networks. Competing instincts to be 'responsible consumers' by not keeping things unnecessarily, worked to 'move things along' into charity shops, where informants believed the objects could come to be valued and singularised by other people. By providing an imagined future where goods can continue to be useful and have the opportunity to extend their biographical life, I argue that charity shops and other second-hand markets can help people to dispose of objects which they do not want to keep, but which they find difficult to throw away.

Keywords: Affect, charity shops, consumption, disposition, family, material culture, obligation, older people

Introduction

This article explores the experiences of people who have found themselves in the situation of needing to deal with and sort through the houses and contents of older relatives after they have moved into residential accommodation, and in some cases subsequently died. By analysing the narratives told by the informants about the objects, I consider how decisions of what to keep and what not to keep are made, focusing in particular on the processes by which some things are donated to charity and other second hand shops, and others are not. I explore how sometimes conflicting factors such as the affective qualities of objects, responsibilities to be good family members, and desires to be responsible consumers influenced the informants' decisions. While previous research has highlighted the factors involved in people disposing of their own possessions, less is known about how people decide what to do with possessions belonging to other people, to which they feel a sense of responsibility, and how this influences people's disposition strategies. I argue that by providing an opportunity for things to 'live on' after a person decides they do not want to keep certain objects, charity shops and other second-hand sites can help people to part with things which they do not want to keep, but which they find difficult to let go.

Reappraising and Divesting of Possessions

Through the course of a lifetime people can accumulate a vast amount of objects, and a growing literature attests to the ways in which the lives of people and objects intersect. Objects become meaningful to people by their associations with events, places and people (Rubinstein 1987; Shenk et al. 2004; Cieraad 2010), both reflect and create aspects of people's identities (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981; Belk 1988; Miller 2010), and come to act as 'material companions', acquiring 'meaning and value by sheer dint of their constancy in a life' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989). While possessions can be accumulated, they can also be discarded, and in recent years researchers have called for disposal to be considered as a crucial component of consumption (Hetherington 2004). Rather than disposal representing an endpoint in a production process conceptualised as lineal, it has been argued that disposal or 'moving things along' (Gregson 2007 et al.) can lead to an extension of an object's life within circular trajectories, where things come to be revalorised and reappropriated in different contexts, by different people (Parsons & Maclaran 2009).

The (re)appraisal and sorting through of possessions can take place at any point during the life course and for a variety of reasons. These might include during house moves (Marcoux 2001a; Ekström 2013), as part of ongoing efforts to ensure coherence between self-identity and how it is communicated through material

culture (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera 2009; Cherrier 2009), and as part of the everyday process of being at home (Gregson 2007).

The importance of finding appropriate destinations for possessions is a key finding from research conducted on the divestment strategies of older adults who seek to dispose of objects, as a result of a specific need to downsize into smaller accommodation, or out of a desire to ensure 'safe passage' for their goods towards the end of their lives (Roster 2001). Where possible, great care is taken in deciding what should happen to particular objects, with preference often being given to family members, who are seen as the 'safest' and most appropriate recipients of possessions to ensure that valued items remain within the family (Marcoux 2001b; Roster 2001; Christian 2009; Ekerdt et al. 2012). Different disposal strategies can also reflect the morals and values of the owner. In interviews with older adults in New Zealand, Juliana Mansvelt found that through choosing different disposal strategies of gifting, ridding and passing on, older adults could perform ideals of being good parents and good consumers (Mansvelt 2012).

Inheritance, Bereavement and Relationships

Most literature on disposal concerns owners divesting of their own possessions, rather than dealing with objects which were or remain owned by other people, although some previous research offers insights into the experiences of people tasked with sorting through other people's belongings. By entering and sorting through the contents of a home which had belonged to a deceased relative, the informants in Finch and Hayes' study on inheritance felt that they were transgressing norms concerning privacy and domestic boundaries, as the home was still felt to belong to the deceased person (Finch & Hayes 1994). Objects which have been inherited are inextricably connected to the relationship one had with the original owner, and might influence decisions as to whether or not to keep or dispose of inherited items (Finch & Mason 2000).

The close association between a deceased person and their possessions means that for the surviving partner and other family members, interaction with the belongings involves interacting with the deceased person, in such a way that bereavement becomes a sensory, embodied experience (Richardson 2014). Things which belong to somebody who has died may become 'transitional objects' to the bereaved by helping them to grieve. By providing a present, material representation of a person who is now absent, 'transitional objects are both a means of holding on and letting go' (Gibson 2004: 288). In her interviews with older widows and widowers, Therese Richardson found that as well as emergent objects of mourning (Hallam & Hockey 2001) such as clothing *reminding* the bereaved spouse of their deceased partner, they also effectively came to *constitute* them, or stand in for them metonymically. Hallam and Hockey write that, '[s]ocial interaction with and through material forms tends to destabilize subject/object bounda-

ries such that material objects can become extensions of the body and therefore of personhood' (Hallam & Hockey 2001: 43), echoing arguments that there is a 'blurring of the boundaries' between objects and people (Dant 1999; Miller 2010).

The Agency and Affective Qualities of Objects

In *The Social Life of Things*, Appadurai writes that objects exist and have trajectories of their own outside of the relationships they have with particular people (Appadurai 1986). Appadurai argues that while things have no meanings without those which are ascribed or attributed to them by humans, by focusing on the human, subjective meanings alone, we miss out on understanding how the circulation of things also influences the human response to them. While Appadurai discusses groups of objects, individual objects have their own trajectories or 'biographies', and Kopytoff uses the term 'singularisation' to explain the process by which certain objects, at certain points in their biographies, come to have an individual value which outweighs their commodity or exchange value. This singular, or individual value arises from the associations and meanings formed by an individual person in relation to a thing over time, and makes separation from the singularised object 'unthinkable' (Kopytoff 1986: 80).

For both Kopytoff and Appadurai then, to understand the meanings arising from human-object relationships, attention should be paid both to the person's subjective experiences of them, as well as the 'life' or trajectory of the object. The interaction of the agency of objects, and the subjective experience of them, is inherent in the concept of 'affect'. Unlike feelings or emotions, which originate in people, affects have been described by the anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin as 'sensual intensities' which are not created within people, but which may pass through them. She argues that orientation away from affect as a feeling or emotion generated and experienced internally by humans allows for consideration of the affective qualities of non-human agents, such as objects or landscapes, but emphasises that affect is a relational phenomenon which exists between humans and non-humans, without privileging one over the other. In this paper, I argue that affect is experienced as a result of the relationship between the agency of the objects and the informants' subjective responses to them, and influences the disposition strategies of the informants.

The Study

This article draws on interviews with nine men and women in Sheffield, England,¹ who found themselves in the situation of having to sort through the contents of a parent's house following their parent's move into a residential home for older people, and in some cases, subsequent death. All but one of the interviews were conducted at the author's place of work, with one taking place in the informant's

home. While not all informants could remember exactly when they had cleared their parent's house, the time between the experience of emptying the house and taking part in the interview varied from several years to it being an on-going process. For some informants, while they had cleared their parent's house, they still had many items in their own homes or in storage which they still needed to sort through. All informants have been given pseudonyms.

The Emotional Experience of Sorting through that which is Left Behind

The process of sorting through their parent's belongings was described by many of my informants as a very emotional experience. Despite having been a frequent visitor to their parent's homes, as a visitor they did not usually have access to the 'hidden' parts of the home – the cupboards, boxes and attics where things are stored. For two of my informants in particular, when sorting through the homes of their surviving parent, it was a shock to discover the belongings of a parent who had died some years previously. Sally's mother moved into a care home as a result of dementia, depression and a recent fall. Following the move, Sally spent several months sorting through the contents of her mother's house.

It was very soul destroying and very emotional. Because you can't believe some of the things that people keep. I opened this battered old suitcase to find a pair of my dad's pyjamas, and my dad's been dead since 1986. So that were a bit of a shock to find my dad's pyjamas. And especially I was kind of closer to my dad than I was to my mum, so I did find it, kind of heart breaking.

Joanne's father had agreed to move into a residential home following a fall. While he was in hospital prior to the move, Joanne started to sort through his home.

So the other thing we found, rather movingly, I went through the kitchen cupboards thinking, well, you know, while he's in hospital I can clean up a bit and make sure that everything's ok. [Shows me photographs of ready-made packet sauces] All of these would have been ten or twelve years old. These would have been things that my mum would have bought, you know, when she was still alive...I looked at the dates, and I could see how old they were, but also he never would have bought these sorts of things. She was always the cook. He would never have bought them and he wouldn't have known how to use them really. Nor could he throw them away. So there were kitchen cupboards full of carefully, you know, all clean, all neat. You know, there was nothing problematic about it, except it was all about a decade old. So there was a bit of, for me I guess, coming to terms with, I hadn't perhaps realised, until I dug around, how little he'd thrown away since she died. And how much he'd sort of left it all as she left it, and sort of worked round it.

The pyjamas belonging to Sally's father and the cooking sauces used by Joanne's mother suggest that mundane objects, worn every night or closely associated with the everyday practices of a person can be just as valued by a bereaved spouse, as more obviously valuable or significant items such as photographs or jewellery (Richardson 2014).

Discovering items from their own childhood could also be very affecting, and brought the realisation that the process of sorting through their parent's homes entailed not only confronting their parent's life, but their own life as well.

It was kind of like quite emotional, sorting things out. I found little baby booties which were obviously mine, because I don't have any sisters or brothers, so they were mine, so they'd been kept for like, for ever and a day, hadn't they, 'cause I mean I'm 52 this year, so they'd been kept for a long time. And mother's day cards, and father's day cards [Sally].

It is a very soul-searching, very traumatic period of your life. You know, because not only are you sort of, like getting rid of things, not only are you getting rid of the person's possessions, we were also getting rid of things that had been part of *our* life [Kathy].

I think it's much more an emotional experience, I thought that, you know, sifting through somebody else's junk, you know, it wasn't going to be an emotional experience, but of course it's your junk as well, it's your life, you know you see things from your childhood, drawings you did as a child and your baby pictures and it's actually really emotional to see all those things, and I think I was a bit surprised at that [Sophie].

The ways in which family relationships and memories were embedded within the experience of sorting through the houses, and within the objects themselves, underpinned the informants' decisions over what to do with the contents. In some cases, the affective qualities of the objects and responsibilities to 'do right' by the family, competed with other influences on the informants, most notably in their desires to act responsibly by not holding onto things unnecessarily when they could be of more use to other people. In the next two sections I will draw on informants' narratives to explore the reasons by which some things ended up in charity and second hand shops, and others did not.

Processes by which Things did not end up in Charity and Second Hand Shops

Things which were not donated to charity shops were kept by the informants, retained within the family and associated networks of friends and acquaintances, or were thrown away. The affective qualities of objects were apparent when informants described their reasons for keeping certain things. Some objects were regarded as not just having *associative* connections with a person, but as actually helping to *constitute* a person. Kathy, whose mother had entered a residential home primarily as a result of epilepsy, explains this:

All the sort of trinkets and things, all personal stuff, you know. I mean, there was nothing. We got rid of everything other than the personal, that actually makes you the person you are. Do you know what I mean?

Small trinkets and photographs which exerted strong affective qualities on informants were relatively unproblematic to keep, either because they did not take

up much space, or could be displayed. More problematic were items such as clothes, or intimate, personal effects such as spectacles, which were often regarded as embodying an absent parent, making them difficult to discard, but which were seen as taking up space. In most cases, the informant *wanted* to discard the item, but found it incredibly difficult to do so. Joanne found that by taking photographs of some of her father's most personal effects, she was then able to discard them:

I think going through somebody's house and throwing away things that they've handled, you know, their pairs of glasses, their slippers, very, very personal things is actually quite hard to do. For some reason it's, perhaps it's the finality, you feel you're throwing the person away or disrespecting the person in some way, it feels very weird. And I think my compromise position was, you know, these things do have to go, but I'm not going to forget that they were there. And shoes and spectacles were probably the worst.

In some cases, the affective qualities of objects led to some things being kept by an informant, however 'irrational' they felt this was. Sally considered giving her mother's wedding dress to a charity shop, but found herself unable to do so:

Mum's wedding dress is in a box, so I mean, no point, because, you know, but somehow I just can't get me head round throwing that out, or even sending it to a charity shop or anything, so at the minute it's just in a box, taking up a bit of space.

I've also got a dress [laughs] - as well as the wedding dress that is just in this box, just sitting there, taking up space at my house, that I'm never going to do anything with, but I just can't bring myself to throw it away, or, like I say, give it to a charity shop - is a dress, that again, I'd never squeeze into it if I tried. I used to dress up in it, it was one of mum's dresses that she had, that, because there's some photos of her wearing it, when they used to go dancing, 'cause dancing was all the thing, back then, weren't it? Proper dancing, kind of thing. And it was a beautiful lilac-coloured dress, and got kind of whalebones in it and everything, and I used to dress up in it. And for some reason, I can't bring myself to throw that one out either. That's still cluttering my house up.

When describing the items which she does not *want* to keep, such as her mother's dresses, Sally uses words like 'taking up space' and 'cluttering the house up'. This contrasts with the way she says, 'I've got lots of photos that I, I mean to keep them, so that's not that they're cluttering it up, I just put them in a tin.' When items are *meant* to be kept, they do not take up space – it is only when the owner does not want them, and yet is unable to dispose of them, that they 'clutter the place up'.

While in nearly all cases affective qualities acted as a force to persuade people to keep things, rather than give them away, in one example the opposite was true. When deciding what to do with items which had belonged to her aunt, Joanne describes coming across a painting which had been painted by her aunt's mother – Joanne's grandmother. She explains why she offered to donate it to the residential home in which her aunt had lived:

The picture, none of us got on with my granny, she was a really, bloody difficult woman [laughs], and this was quite a nice picture, but there was no way that any of us wanted to live with it! [Both laugh]. And so actually, it did feel good to say, for it to be somewhere that it would be useful and enjoyed. I didn't, I would never have been able to bring myself to throw it away, that would have felt like a piece of vandalism, but nor did I want to live with it in any way. She was quite, she was cold and made my dad's life hell, I think, though in some ways he was very fond of her. But there are some things you don't want around to trigger memories off, I think, you really do, but at the same time you'd probably prefer them to be recycled than thrown away, so, yeah.

While the negative affect of the painting is such that Joanne does not want to keep it, her values as a responsible consumer mean that she would much rather the painting be recycled in another context where it can be enjoyed by others, happily unaffected by memories of the 'difficult', 'cold' woman who painted it, than it be discarded altogether. In this case, Joanne felt that the residential home would be an appropriate destination as a place where the picture could be 'useful and enjoyed'.

Informants also spoke of items which they did not necessarily want to keep themselves, but which they did not want to throw away or donate, because they felt obligated as a trusted family member to ensure that items which had been valued by their parents were looked after appropriately. For most of my informants, it was preferable to keep things within the family, or if this was not possible, identify a known person who could be trusted to look after the object. After her mother's death, Fiona and her sister went through her mother's effects and filled boxes for her siblings and all the grandchildren, based on what they thought each person would most appreciate. Other disposition strategies were more opportunistic. Joanne was able to avoid a potentially problematic decision of what to do with her father's table after his death when her father's cleaner expressed an interest in it:

We were having a chat at some point, and she did ask about the dining room table as it happens, and chairs. And I said, 'Well, we don't really have room for them, and we haven't decided what to do'. And she found a tactful way to say, 'Well, if you really don't want them, I would happily give them a home.' And these were not valuable antiques, they, nice things, but not, you know. Her making that comment wouldn't have seemed like trying to grab something that was immensely valuable. And I was actually quite grateful she did that, 'cause I wouldn't have known off the cuff, I would have wanted to give her something and not known what the best thing was. And I hadn't quite reached the point of being able to formulate the question, really. And so she did, she took this big, oval table, nice table and it was really nice for us to think that it had gone somewhere that it would be enjoyed, and that we'd done the right thing as far as she was concerned.

In this case, 'safe passage' (Roster 2001) was ensured through identifying a new owner who was known to the family, and who would enjoy the table. However, in other situations, safe passage could not be guaranteed. Sophie, who together with her siblings was responsible for the disposal of her mother's possessions after her death, recounted a situation which left her feeling uncertain about an object's future, even though the new owner had been identified through a family connection:

There was one piece of furniture that we couldn't get any family member to take, that was a very nice, it was a chest from her bedroom and it was a very nice piece. It had been in their room since, I can't remember a time it wasn't. One of the women who cared for her, her sister, she'd asked her sister and said, 'Oh yes I'll have that'. So we took it to her house and the sister didn't answer the door, we actually had to leave it outside on the sort of veranda, and I remember thinking 'If [my mother] could see that, she would just *hate* that', that, you know, one of her prized possessions sitting out on someone's veranda, that was quite upsetting for everybody.

In some cases, informants and their parents disagreed over what to do with objects. Sophie, an American woman living in the United Kingdom, travelled to America to help her mother downsize and move into a residential home. While Sophie wanted to take a lot of things to charity shops, her mother was adamant that things remain in the family:

S - For her, and I don't know if this is just in the States or her generation, giving things away was sometimes acceptable if it was to family members, but not to charity. Even if you said, you know, 'There might be a family', this was just when America was really struggling with the economic downturn, 2009/10, there were a lot of families who were desperate, and even saying to her, you know, 'There are families who would really benefit from these things', although she was a charitable person, she wasn't interested in giving anybody but family her things.

M - Why was that, do you think?

S - I think because they were special to her, and she wanted to make sure they were looked after properly, and she thought she could trust family to do that.

This reflects the importance for some people of preserving a linear continuity of possessions within the family, at the expense of practicing what could be regarded as responsible consumption by 'releasing' items back into circulation where they could perhaps be of more use and value to other people. The insistence of Sophie's mother on keeping things within the family placed obligations on her children, who found themselves in the situation of feeling obliged to keep things which they would otherwise give away. While Sophie's mother wanted things to stay within the family, her family members did not necessarily want to keep them. When I asked Sophie about how she and her siblings reacted to her mother's desires to keep everything in the family, she replied,

Some things were more difficult than others. Some things we did out of guilt. It was harder for me being here [in the UK], I couldn't take the furniture but I did take some other things and did pay a lot of money to have some things shipped. Mostly it was ok, there was always somebody, we're a pretty big family so there was always somebody who would take it. Also I'm guessing some people took some things and then, she doesn't know what happened to them, so, they maybe didn't keep them but it made her happy that they took it.

Sophie's suspicion that some family members might have discarded some things after taking them indicates that 'safe passage' might not always be as 'safe' as intended.

While some items were kept primarily out of a sense of obligation to their parents, other items were valued and kept – if space allowed it – out of a sense of

responsibility to the object itself, as an item valued for its being an antique, rather than purely out of an association with family history. Joanne stated that, '[t]here were some things that we, I had a sense of almost rescuing,' and goes on to say,

[w]e found this box, it was a little bit the worse for wear by the time we found it, it had been somewhere in the sun and it had begun to get faded. For some reason it felt important to take it to a restorer and get it restored. I don't know quite really why, but... there was some sense of, 'oh, this is a bit special, we don't just want it to decay'. And there was something for some reason quite therapeutic about salvaging one or two things like that, and bringing them back into use. I don't know whether that's about continuity within the family or what it is, but. So I guess there was a mixture.

The above example shows how influences of affect and obligation interact in ways that result in certain items not re-entering circulation through second-hand markets. Interestingly, there was some evidence to suggest that knowledge of current trends in second-hand markets – for instance vintage and 'shabby-chic' meant that some of my informants held onto things where perhaps they would otherwise have given them away. Mark referred to some drawers that his wife had 'shabby-chic'ed up', and Joanne described some old canvas suitcases of her parents, which she thinks they acquired in the 1940s.

And they're that kind of classic, canvas suitcase, leather corners - you see them in shabby-chic shop displays and things. And I've kept those, thinking, well, rather than store things in plastic boxes, I'd actually rather store things in here, because they're really nice. They're a bit battered, but they've still got British rail stickers on from decades and decades ago. And things like that I guess felt very personal. And usable actually, maybe, you know, you wouldn't take them on a journey, they're too battered, but actually quite nice to still have.

The suitcases feel 'very personal' to Joanne, are 'really nice' and would not be out of place in fashionable 'shabby chic' displays. All factors which contribute to Joanne's retention of the suitcases.

The Processes by which Things came to be Donated to Charity and Second-Hand Shops

For many of the informants, charity shops were obvious destinations of disposal for items which were not kept within the family or wider social networks. There were two main factors which influenced the donation of items to charity shops: out of convenience, and out of a sense of wanting things which were no longer wanted or needed by themselves to be of use to, or valued by, other people.² For Mark, a charity shop was seen as one of the most convenient options for disposing of a lot of items:

But we took an awful lot of stuff to the charity shop. I remember taking, my brother, he brought his trailer, and we must have taken thirty to forty bin liners full of stuff, absolutely tons of stuff....Took it to the Cats Protection League I think. That was the one that was most convenient for us to get a trailer and take that much stuff to.

When discarding items, emphasis was placed on the re-use value of objects and environmental considerations, so that things were disposed of in 'appropriate' ways. Informants also emphasised that they were discerning in their judgments of what was deemed to be good enough quality to donate to a charity shop, and what was 'junk' that needed to be thrown away. For instance, Sally stated that, 'most of the stuff, like the books and records went off to a charity shop, didn't throw 'em away kind of thing,' and, 'a lot of stuff went to charity shops rather than, you know, if they were in good condition and that. Glasses and cups and things like that'. Similarly, Fiona said that 'an awful lot of it went to the dump. Because an awful lot of it, a charity shop would not have thanked us for'.

While most informants emphasised the potential re-use value of the objects as being an incentive to donate items to charity shops, the case of Anne offers interesting insights into how different categories of objects, in different circumstances, could enter second-hand markets in different ways. When her husband's parents first moved into residential accommodation, Anne said that,

I think we sold the table and chairs because it was fairly new, it was in good condition. I think we sold some of it to like, you know, some of these shops and things like that.

M - like second hand shops, you mean?

A - yes, and obviously we looked after the money and the money went in their account.

By selling the furniture to a second-hand shop, rather than donating it to a charity shop, Anne was able to give her parents-in-law the financial benefit from the sale. This contrasts with the disposal decisions Anne made after her father-in-law had died:

And I can remember when his father died, we had to go through his clothes, and I was upset... I didn't, like some people go to car boot sales, I couldn't sell the clothes on a car boot sale and we gave it all to charity, or if somebody we knew could use them. You know I didn't want to make money out of things, I let the charities make money out of them.

Here Anne explicitly states that she didn't want to make money out of her father-in-law's clothes, but wanted the charities to benefit. It is not clear why some things ended up being sold to second-hand shops while others were donated to charity shops, but it may have something to do with the personal and intimate nature of clothing, which perhaps Anne did not want to financially profit from.

For Joanne, the donation of her parents' dancing clothes to the charity shop Oxfam, was helped by imagining the clothes being worn by a future owner.

J - So, in their youth, my mum and dad had obviously gone out dancing some times, and this was the...ball dress, that again he had kept and, there were some things like that which I just thought, 'We can't keep these, we've got nowhere to put them, they're not in great condition, nobody else could use them, but I don't want to forget them'. And I suppose it's reminders of younger times, isn't it, and good times.

M - So what happened to those, then?

J - They went to Oxfam... 'Cause they weren't totally unusable, but we never would have, this was a dress with that kind of stiffening, you know, big skirt that flares out. I can imagine that someone would have, perhaps got it at Oxfam for some dressing up purposes probably, and if I'd, if I'd had grandchildren at this stage, I would have perhaps kept something like that for them, but I was thinking, 'Oh, you know, this is, we're going to be swamped'. [Laughs] So, yeah, I don't know, I just, it reminded me of being a small child and seeing them get dressed up to go out, which they didn't do all that often, so when they did it was a really big deal.

The possibility of a future life for the dress existed alongside competing influences of the dress's affective qualities, desires to be a responsible consumer by not keeping things for which she had no use, and awareness of the dress's relationship to her family, not only in terms of it having belonged to her parents, but also in terms of not yet having grandchildren who might be appropriate recipients of it.

Discussion

The experience of sorting through their parents' homes and encountering objects which were intimately tied not only to their parents, but also to themselves, was an emotional one for the informants in this study. As the family members who had found themselves tasked with clearing their parent's home, the informants had to negotiate between often competing influences on the decision making process of what to do with the objects left in the house. The affective qualities of the objects – which resulted from the interaction between the objects themselves and the informants' subjective experiences of them, obligations as a family member to find appropriate homes for possessions, and the desires to act responsibly by not holding onto things when they could be used by other people, acted as 'push and pull' factors on the informants' divestment strategies. Things were, or were not, donated into charity and other second hand markets, depending on the informants' negotiation of competing emotions, obligations and responsibilities.

For the informants in this study, the sorting through of things entailed not only sorting through memories (Marcoux 2001a), but also dealing with family roles and relationships (Ekström 2013). For some of the informants, the association between the objects and their parent was so connected, that the distinction between the two became blurred, such that by discarding the thing, they felt they were discarding the person or their relationship with them (Finch & Hayes 1994; Hallam & Hockey 2001). Such accounts inform claims made by Daniel Miller (2010) and Tim Dant (1999) that the distinction between people and things can be more ambiguous than 'commonsense' might suggest.

While the associations between objects and parents influenced the informants' disposition strategies, so too did the informants' awareness of their positioning as a family member who had responsibility for the items. Informants often preferred

to keep things within the family, or at least wider social networks, thus attempting to ensure 'safe passage' (Roster 2001) and 'good homes' (Christian 2009) for objects which were valued by the family, though this could not be guaranteed. In cases where their parent had died, decisions about what to do with the remaining objects largely fell to the informants. In some cases however, the sorting process was made more complicated by the parents still being alive. Informants could receive explicit instructions from their parents as to what to do with items, which were sometimes in opposition to the informants' preferences. Changes in family relationships (for example the death of parents) could also result in a change of destination for objects.

The affective qualities of certain objects, engendered by the encounters between the objects themselves and the informants' subjective experiences of them (Navaro-Yashin 2009), usually worked as 'pull' factors, keeping objects out of charity and other second-hand shops. Decisions to keep certain items for these reasons were not always easily made, and in some cases informants held on to things reluctantly, even though they felt that it might be better to donate them to charity shops to stop them taking up unnecessary space in the house. Other items such as slippers and spectacles were judged to be too intimate and bound up with the person who had owned them, to be owned or worn by other people, and so were disposed of.

Factors which influenced the donation of items to charity shops included the convenience of being able to take large amounts of objects to one accessible place (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perrera 2009), and the satisfaction derived from knowing that the things could continue to be of value to new owners. In describing items which they donated, informants emphasised how they didn't donate 'just anything', but were careful to select things which were still in good condition which would enable them to be used by other people. Donation to charity shops allowed informants to practice being 'responsible consumers' in two main ways. Firstly, by 'moving things along' (Gregson et al. 2007), they prevented an overflow of things in their home (Brembeck 2013), which might otherwise have taken up unnecessary space and been considered wasteful. Secondly, by donating objects to charity shops, they were enabling the objects to continue to be used and valued, perhaps by people who needed them more than they did themselves (Gregson & Crewe 2003). Alternatively, decisions to sell items to second-hand shops rather than donate them to charity shops could be justified by giving their parents the proceeds of the sale.

By offering the opportunity to extend the life of objects, charity shops provided informants with a convenient and 'moral' outlet for unwanted items such as books, CDs and unwanted kitchen ware. However, they did not provide a straightforward solution for informants who struggled to give away particularly affecting items. Both Sally and Joanne were aware of the option of donating their parent's clothes to a charity shop. However, while for Joanne the charity shop offered an

imagined future life for her mother's dress which ultimately enabled her to donate it, Sally found herself unable to let her mother's dresses go. Catherine Roster has written of the association between the 'alienable and inalienable' properties of possessions, and people's disposition practices. She writes that objects attain inalienable properties through our use of, and interaction with them, and that '[m]eanings and social mores associated with inalienable objects specify disposition practices that are appropriate as well as those that are not; for instance, inalienable objects should be retained by individuals or family units and not sold as marketable commodities' (Roster 2014: 10). In her study of an art project which invited people to donate cherished possessions which would then be re-used and re-interpreted by an artist, Roster found that for owners who had previously tried and failed to dispose of the meaningful possession, dispossession was made easier by the knowledge that the object would continue to be valued in a new context, thus extending its social life (Roster 2014). The findings in this study suggest that while the existence of certain disposition paths – such as charity shops – can facilitate the 'letting go' of things, it cannot guarantee it, as the contrasting examples of Sally and Joanne indicate. I suggest that what was also required for the item to be donated, was the successful imagining of a future narrative for the object, which allowed the informant to 'release it back into circulation'.

The narratives which people tell about their possessions portray different aspects of their identities (Hurdley 2006). The narratives which informants related in this study revealed them to be responsible family members who wanted to find appropriate homes for possessions in order to 'do right' by their parents and other family members, but also indicated that they were 'responsible consumers' who did not want to waste or keep anything which could be of more value to others. The narratives told about things in this study also underlined the ways in which the objects were inextricably linked to the informants' personal lives. While such narratives helped to explain why informants were reluctant to let go of certain items, there is some evidence that by imagining future narratives for the objects, it became possible to donate certain things into second-hand markets. Such insights complement previous research which suggests that the use of provenance narratives as a marketing device can increase sales in charity shops (de Jode et al. 2012). The findings from this study suggest that while narratives can encourage people to buy items, they can also encourage people to donate them.

There was some evidence in this study to suggest that knowledge of emerging forms of valorisation, such as shabby-chic trends, might have led some informants to keep certain items, rather than donate them to second-hand or charity shops. The value which her parents' old suitcases had for Joanne, resulted both from the personal connection which they had for her, and also from their shabby-chic aesthetic. This valorisation could be interpreted within the context of Appadurai and Kopytoff's concepts of the circulation and trajectory of things. As items which had belonged to her parents and bore the stickers of their journeys, these particular

suitcases had become singularised and personal to Joanne (Kopytoff 1986). However, Joanne was also aware of how her parents' suitcases fitted into broader vintage and shabby-chic trends, which have emerged out of a growing appreciation and revalorisation of similar objects which now circulate through second-hand markets. By paying attention to the trajectory or *social life* of objects, we become aware of the existence of 'vintage' as a phenomenon that values the acquisition, re-use and heritage of things such as clothes, furniture or indeed suitcases. This in turn *illuminates*, as Appadurai has it, human social life, and how our values, and the things that we value, change according to different historical, geographical and social contexts.

Conclusion

The processes by which some things come to be in charity and other second hand shops, while others do not, can be complex and inter-related. In this study, the informants who sorted the contents of their parent's homes were influenced by different responsibilities, motivations and desires, which in some cases made it very difficult for them to decide what to do with the items. The affective qualities of objects, and the desires to be both responsible family members and responsible consumers sometimes acted in opposition to each other. While narratives which draw on the singularisation of objects help to explain why giving them away might be difficult, there is evidence in this study to suggest that imagined narratives of how the lives of objects might be extended in second-hand markets can act as an incentive for people to donate things to charity shops. By contrast, this study also offers insights into how people's awareness of emerging forms of valorisation, such as vintage and shabby-chic trends, might cause potential donors to reappraise their possessions in ways that *discourage* them to donate items into second-hand markets. Further research into second-hand markets would be useful in examining the impacts which new forms of valorisation have had on people's disposition and donation practices.

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¹ While all nine of my informants were based in Sheffield, England, the houses they had cleared were not necessarily in this area. Indeed, one of my informants was American and had travelled back to America to sort through her mother's belongings.

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