

Domestic Practices of Clutter and Hoarding:
Consumption, Values, and Materiality in Everyday Life

By

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Abstract

This dissertation engages with consumer culture through the approach of social practice theory to highlight how clutter and hoarding are the result of negotiated performances of intersecting domestic practices. Drawing on 17 in-home interviews, this research goes beyond stigmatizing notions of mental health and problematic individual accumulation and looks instead to domestic performances and social and cultural influences to explain the hoarded home by reframing clutter as the result of complex systems of domestic consumption and materiality. Using this approach, the cluttered home emerges as a complex system of negotiations of domestic practices layered with individual and social values that shape how a person relates to the items in their home. These complex processes of materiality affect how acquisition and discarding cycles occur in domestic spaces, emphasizing a further consideration of hoarding as a continuum of clutter accumulated through negotiated domestic practices.

Keywords: Clutter; hoarding; materiality; objects; consumer culture; practice theory; domestic space

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to a long line of stubborn Halls, without which, this would never have happened.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Dedication	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Chapter One: Introduction	1
The Collyer Brothers and the Emergence of Hoarding as Deviance	3
Culture’s Contribution to Hoarding	7
Overview of the Study	9
Contributions	9
Dissertation Outline	10
A Note on Terminology	13
Chapter Two: Literature Review	17
What is Hoarding?	18
The Medicalization of Hoarding.....	18
Hoarding in Other Academic Literature	22
Reframing the Study of Hoarding respectively	23
Representations of Hoarding in Popular Media	24
What is Consumer Culture?	27
Emergence, Nature, and Dimensions of Consumer Culture	28
The Phases of Consumption.....	33
The Home and Domestic Space	38
The Ideal Home.....	39
Homemaking and Unmaking	40
Routines and Practices	41
Technologies	41
Storage	42
Clutter	43
Summary	43
Justification and Contributions	44
Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework	46
Social Practice Theory	46
Emergence.....	47
Social Practice Theory in Consumer Culture.....	51
Limitations	53
A Practice Theory Approach to Hoarding and Clutter	55
Affect Theory	56
Affective Practice.....	58
Affect and Consumer Culture	59
Capturing Affect - Appraisal Theory	60
Discourse Theory	61
What is Discourse?	62

Discourse Theory and Consumer Culture.....	63
Combining Practice, Affect, and Discourse.....	64
Chapter Four: Methodology	66
Epistemological Framework	67
On Reflexivity and Positionality	71
Ethics.....	73
Methods.....	76
Guided Tour	76
In-home Tours.....	79
Semi-structured Interviews	79
Object Interview.....	80
Data Collection.....	81
The Interview Guide	82
Recruitment.....	82
Interview, Tour and Photographic Process	84
Participant Descriptions	85
Data Analysis.....	86
Project Challenges	88
COVID-19.....	88
Interviews.....	89
Photos.....	90
Professionalism	91
Conclusion	92
Chapter Five: Domestic Practices	93
Acquisition and Disposal.....	96
Acquisition.....	96
Disposing/Divesting.....	98
The Practice of Eating	99
Time and Space.....	100
Technology	101
Wardrobe Maintenance	102
Cleaning/Tidying.....	104
Dumping Grounds.....	106
Organizing.....	107
Storage Practices.....	109
Expressive Activities.....	111
Crafting	111
Collecting	113
Memorialization	114
Conclusion	116
Chapter Six: Constraints and Adaptations	117
Internal Constraints: Dis/ability.....	119
Internal Constraints: Mental Health.....	120
Internal Constraints: Life Course.....	126
Internal Constraints: Conclusion.....	134

External Environmental Constraints	134
Environment: Space	135
Affordances of Space	141
External Environment Conclusion	151
Constraints and Adaptations Conclusion	151
Chapter Seven: Values	153
Eco- or Climate Conscious Values	154
Anti-consumer Practices	155
Divestment and Disposal	157
Trash as Treasure	161
Eco-orientations and Conflicted Domestic Performances	163
Sentimentality: Affect, Objects, and Assemblages	165
What are Sentimental Objects?	165
Sentiment as Preservation	167
Sentiment as Memory	169
Sentiment as Tapestry	171
Bittersweet Sentimentality	174
Sentiment Conclusion	179
Social Relationships and Stuff	181
Family Ties	182
Gifts and Dumping.....	184
“Champion of the Stuff”	187
Conclusion: Relationship Maintenance and Gifting	190
Values Conclusion	192
Chapter Eight: Conclusion	195
Findings	195
Values	196
Performances.....	197
Assemblages	198
Further Findings.....	199
Contributions	201
Limitations	204
Future Research	206
Conclusion	207
References	209
Appendix A	231
Appendix B	232
Appendix C	233
Appendix D	234
Appendix E	236
Appendix F	237
Appendix G	238

Appendix H..... 239

Chapter One: Introduction

The era we live in is one of consumer culture, of persistent advertising promoting consumption of the latest trends, gadgets, and leisure items. While overproduction leads to environmental damage in both the creation and discarding of goods, there is also the issue of ever-increasing material items being kept in home spaces. This idea is captured in the pervasive image of the Hoarded home: dirty, dusty, and filled to the roof with boxes, bags, and the trophies of an object-obsessed culture.

While medical professionals attempt to diagnose such accumulative behaviour in hopes to curb the destructive and unhealthy results, the truth remains that the relationship between people and the goods within their home is complex, and with few, notable exceptions, has not been studied through a cultural lens.¹ There are legitimate concerns for the safety of people who amass large piles of goods, including unsafe domestic structures, access to running water, blocked doors and furnaces, and the presence of mold, dust, and rodents. In addition, such behaviours can cause distress and social isolation (Owen et al., 2022). However, the psychological approach to the issue positions the individual at the centre of the phenomenon. Considering how social and cultural processes impact clutter and hoarding activity, this project seeks to examine how various practices in domestic spaces contribute to accumulation and difficulty with discard. To explore the cultural aspects of such material interactions, my research questions are as follows:

- 1) How can clutter be understood as emerging from a range of integrative practices of consumption and the performance of routines in the home?

¹ See the works of Orvar Löfgren (2014; 2017), Daniel Miller (2001), and Sophie Woodward (2015; 2021), for instance.

- 2) How do social and cultural values and affective orientations present in homes limit or inhibit the discarding of particular material items?
- 3) How can a social practice theory approach provide new insight into processes of accumulation and clutter in the home, challenging current dominant and popular psychological perspectives on Hoarding Behaviour?

I focus on how individuals in hoarded homes interpret their relationships to goods and the routines in their homes, while questioning dominant discourses regarding clutter, dirt, and disorder. Within this focus, I frame my study within a consumer culture perspective that considers the affective power of objects and materiality.

While there remains a paucity of sociologically informed investigation into the presence of objects and clutter in the home, the phenomenon of hoarding has been medically established as a mental illness. Previously known as collector's mania, pathological collection, syllogomania, or more recently, chronic disorganization (Herring, 2011, p. 160), Hoarding Behaviour² has been defined by the medical profession as "the acquisition of, and failure to discard a large number of possessions that appear to be useless or of limited value" (Frost & Hartl, 1996, p. 341). While research on Hoarding was originally tied to obsessive compulsive disorder, it is now considered a separate disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual's fifth edition (DSM-5).

The medical approach to Hoarding Disorder has grown robust over the past three decades; while early research focused on the classification of the disease and differentiating it from obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), later research has looked at assessment and

² I am using specific terminology to refer to Hoarding, capitalized here to indicate a medicalized conceptualization that focuses on determining individual mental illness as the cause of increased objects in the home. This is in contrast to hoarding with a lower case h, which is connected to social structures and domestic practices. I discuss the terminology used throughout this paper in detail below.

diagnostic tools, treatment approaches and success rates, and comorbid conditions like depression and anxiety. However, it is one of a few mental health conditions that requires an assessment of factors *external* to the individual to form a diagnosis. This approach to the accumulation of objects can be considered a medicalization process (Conrad, 2007), which is prone to a narrow framing of complex situations and the stigmatization of individuals.

Indeed, this approach, popularized through media like reality television, has spread ideas regarding hoarding as a dirty, immoral illness that allows disorganized and cluttered homes to be shamed and to become a source of spectacle. This presentation of accumulated goods stands against newly marketed popular ideals of minimalist and pristinely organized homes, which bring forth a complementary judgement of distaste (Bourdieu, 1984/2010) of any home that is not clean and tidy.

Such media representations of clutter-hoarding³ are not new, however. To position my interest in, and approach to, domestic accumulation, I present the story of the Collyer brothers and their hoarded Harlem mansion. This legendary story from the 1940's is an interesting illustration of how the shift to material accumulation garnered exceptional media attention, and how hoarded homes continue to be the subject of the viewers gaze in the media.

The Collyer Brothers and the Emergence of Hoarding as Deviance

Homer and Langley Collyer, two Caucasian brothers in a transitioning Harlem neighbourhood, died in 1947 in their shared overcrowded home; Homer's cause of death was listed as mysterious, but Langley's demise was a direct result of the myriad objects crammed into the home (Herring, 2011a). Crushed under stacks of newspapers, Langley's body was found

³ I use the term "clutter-hoarding" to refer to the spectrum of clutter that can occur and the imprecise and debated threshold of when clutter becomes hoarding.

rotting beneath towers of paper that would later be estimated to weigh over one hundred tons. At first the story spread through the media out of curiosity for the mysterious objects that might be located in the property; however, the heaps of objects were disappointingly revealed to be trash and junk, often too damaged to be valuable. The brothers, rather than living a life of luxury, were shockingly living in layers of filth and squalor.

The story of the Collyer brothers illustrates an interesting cultural shift around this time in the definition of hoarding from organized wealth to disorganized objects. Prior to the Collyer situation, hoarding was considered a hyper-ordered personality trait as opposed to a *disordered* state of living (Herring, 2011a, p. 161). The discovery of the Collyer mansion contributed to a shift to the concept of hoarding that includes disorder as well as trash and squalor. Hoarding thus became a matter of shame and disgust rather than eccentricities and admiration.

The story is also significant in that it emphasizes the disorder of objects in a deviant way. The Collyer Brothers legend is shrouded by what Scott Herring terms “material deviance,” which refers to “the pathologization of disorderly oddities” (2011a, p. 177), a term that connects the disorganization of a home and material goods to an unwell or abnormal individual. This pathological shift redirects attention from dirt and disorder in the environment or location in which it exists towards the individual that created or resides in the dirt, and then problematizes not the materiality but the inner workings of the person. For Herring, the Collyer story shows how “deviant goods thus became cross-identified with deviant ownership” (2011a, p. 177), something that has persisted through the medical lens.

While the discovery of the Collyer brothers’ hoard began a pathologization of dirt and disorder in connection to personality and mental health, Herring also points to Mary Douglas’s abjection thesis which states “dirt is matter out of place” (Douglas, 1966/2002, p. 44) to highlight

the importance of *culture* in understanding materiality. The public's interest in the Collyer mansion was due to many other environmental factors, including the neighbourhood in which they were located. The Collyers were said to suffer from "Harlemitis", a derogatory, racist term developed to explain how white, wealthy families from the upper class could be debased and disgraced by remaining located in an increasingly Black community. The perceived rising disorganization of Harlem at the time of the Collyer's habitation and their insistence to remain in their mansion (unlike other wealthy white families who relocated) was framed to imply that the environment of the neighbourhood caused changes in the brothers' personalities that led to their own eventual decline. The Collyers became themselves "matter out of place" (Douglas, 1966/2002, p. 44); the two brothers were labelled deviant in the neighbourhood, which fuelled interest and wonder in their story even before the shocking reveal of their hoarded home.

Additionally, the portrayal of the Collyer brothers in the media was, at the time, a unique phenomenon that now reflects how present-day representations of hoarding are depicted. In the days leading up to the mansion clean out, media reports created a frenzy known as "Collyer Curiosa" (Herring, 2011a) wherein suspicion of what might be in the home prompted individuals in the neighbourhood to congregate outside and speculate on the treasures within. The sheer spectacle of the hoarded mansion provided plenty of news for months and there were talks of turning the building into a museum to house the legend of the Collyer brothers, illustrating how the deviance of material objects has for a long time been a source of entertainment for the masses. The shock and awe aspect of a hoarded home began with the Collyer mansion, but their legend continued well past their deaths. Different pieces of literature allude to the Collyer cluttered mansion, from *My Brother's Keeper* published initially in 1954 and reprinted through to 1982, to the setting of Stephen King's *Salem's Lot*, published in 1975. The story also began

slowly appearing in medical literature, in a Northern European journal article on “Irrational Hoarding” in the 1960s, as well as a Scandinavian article on “Collectors Mania” in 1963 (Herring, 2014, p. 48). The legend has dug its heels into culture in such a way that it appears without beckoning; the acclaimed Hoarding Disorder therapy workbook *Buried in Treasures* (2007) written by experts Dr. David Tolin, Dr. Randy Frost, and Gail Steketee, uses an unreferenced newspaper photo of the Collyer hoard on the cover of the first edition, signalling the deep rooted impact that the media portrayal of the Collyer’s has had on contemporary ideas of mass-scale hoarding and squalor.⁴

The story of the Collyer mansion in Harlem is considered legend in many circles, and its presence in popular culture can be seen through several pieces of writing loosely based on the home or the brothers; however, the elements surrounding the story — the changing definition of hoarding, the shift in understanding certain collections or amassments of objects as disorder, the pathologization of individuals, and the sensational media coverage — mark a specific development in perspectives on hoarding and clutter that has a direct connection to current predominant understandings of hoarding. Of course, one of the most interesting things about the Collyer story is that it was told after the fact; nobody had spoken to Homer or Langley about their stuff, whether they thought the items were rich treasures or important information worth keeping, how they managed to keep accumulating, or why they filled every room and corner of their massive mansion. It is with this spirit of inquiry that I developed this project.

While the medicalized understanding of hoarding has grown and influenced popular culture, the narrow focus on the individual overlooks other significant social and cultural factors, including material goods, environments, and practices of consumption. Studies neglect to inquire

⁴ One can think to the plethora of reality television shows that air visuals of extremely hoarded homes as entertainment, including A&E’s *Hoarders*, which Tolin and Frost have appeared on, which is discussed later.

into the homes that are considered hoarded, and what activities occur in them that contribute to clutter. This leads me to ask how an alternate approach to clutter-hoarding, rooted in a consumer culture frame, can examine the domestic spaces of excess accumulation and better understand clutter-hoarding behaviours through common domestic routines.

Culture's Contribution to Hoarding

The literatures on consumer culture provides a wide and encompassing range of perspectives on human-object interactions that may exist in hoarded homes. Megan Shaeffer (2017), and David Orr, Michael Preston-Shoot and Suzy Braye (2017) have pointed to consumer culture as a necessary and advantageous approach to understanding hoarding because it overcomes the medical perspective's focus on the individual by considering human-object interactions and materiality, as well as cultural aspects of the many forms of consumption, including acquisition and discarding. Additionally, Orvar Löfgren (2014) acknowledges the growth of the study of excess and consumerism, but highlights the gap in empirical studies of consumption and accumulation in domestic life (2014, p. 82).

An interest in household clutter specifically has only recently taken shape in cultural sociology (Woodward, 2021), but cultural studies has been interested in the material for quite some time. Previous large-scale critiques of capitalism and consumerism have existed for decades (from the works of Karl Marx and Herbert Marcuse, to Jean Baudrillard or Juliet Schor, for instance), and interest in object agency and material affect grew during the turn to affect (Wetherell, 2015). But while trends and taste were the previous target of object attachment and overconsumption, a shift towards domestic spaces and the intimacy of objects can provide richer insight into the pervasive issue of personal possessions and material goods.

A consumer culture framing of clutter and hoarding provides an insightful avenue for the

investigation of objects in the home, since the social and cultural sphere of material culture can be combined with human interaction and motivation. Consumer culture considers how increasing purchasing power and the proliferation of goods intersects with fads, trends, and branding influences via advertising and media, which result in higher levels of consumption. Objects have become part of style and the construction of meaning and identity, while also signifying group membership via symbols and taste.

This framework also provides a focus on materiality and how physical objects and environments shape our actions and abilities. These affective objects are treated in certain ways, consciously or unconsciously by their owners, leading to a home that has a lot of emotional pull over the inhabitant. Further to this is the concept of object assemblage, which happens when objects become more than the sum of their parts when left together for a certain amount of time (Woodward, 2018). These concepts work to explain how clutter is not simply the amassment of excess objects, but reflect a complex system of affect.

To capture how people and objects come together to create clutter in domestic space, I have chosen to consider consumption *practices* or routines in everyday life that involve the accumulation, display, and storage of goods (Warde, 2014). Social practice theory considers how the components of objects, meanings, and doings that are located in different routines or activities interact to create a nexus of understandings that are shared.⁵ A practice approach to consumption encourages looking beyond individual choices or biology towards societal structures that influence and uphold knowledge surrounding object-human interactions, and provides an account of the impact of materiality on human behaviours. I use social practice theory to examine the mundane, everyday processes of object maintenance in the home,

⁵ I further discuss social practice theory in chapter 3.

revealing how individuals and materiality co-exist according to different environments and ideologies. A practice approach to hoarding has also been suggested by Megan Shaeffer (2017), who posits that a focus on practices within the home can reveal how attitudes and orientations regarding consumption contribute to different hoarding tendencies.

Overview of the Study

This study uses in-home qualitative interviewing strategies to examine the presence of household goods in 17 living spaces in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The guided tour strategy provided sensory experience of being in a cluttered home and producing floor plans of domestic spaces, while semi-structured interviewing prompted questions regarding shopping, storage, and discarding habits in the home. Photos taken in the spaces allowed me to recollect the positioning of items in cluttered or uncluttered areas. The data was coded and analyzed in ways that reveal how household space and domestic environments are navigated with regards to the accumulation of items and objects in the performance of intersecting daily domestic practices. The ability to perform practices varies with regard to ability as well as desire and value. Overall, however, my research shows that domestic space is an affectively charged area, whose materiality is involved in the management of relationships and connections to others, while the power of matter demands to take up space and be acknowledged.

Contributions

This study fills several research gaps, first by examining Hoarding and clutter in a non-medicalized frame as called for by Shaeffer (2017), as well as providing an account of cluttering that focuses on materiality as opposed to the individual (Moghimi, 2013). It addresses a current empirical research gap on domestic spaces in Canada by providing in-home data, and it adds an empirical case to the practice theory approach in consumer culture as called for by Alan Warde

(2014).

This research contributes to social practice theory by highlighting how domestic practices can be understood as configurations of objects, meanings, and doings. It also extends the concept of adaptations and constraints as identified by Warde (2016) from gender, race, and class, to age and dis/ability. It also extends the consumer culture literature by focusing on the full consumption cycle, which includes devaluation, divestment, and disposal, as identified by Evans (2019).

Dissertation Outline

First, I present an overview of literature that informs my study of clutter-hoarding from within the field of consumer culture. I begin by establishing the medical field's approach to what is known as Hoarding Disorder. I draw a foundation for the way objects have traditionally been understood in academic literature, and make connections to how the larger medicalizing and stigmatizing mechanisms in work on Hoarding Disorder operate. I then provide a review of other approaches to objects in the academic literature stemming from the fields of consumer research, marketing, and cultural studies, which illustrate growing interest in alternative understandings of high levels of accumulation. I provide a brief overview of the presentation of Hoarding Disorder in popular media and culture, which has links to the medicalization process and exhibits how media as a means of popular culture ideas has contributed to broader stigmatizing narratives of hoarding. I then present a broad introduction to consumer culture and its developments to position my work within the consumption literature. I use this space to illustrate the development of consumption from economic commodity production to the cultural turn, noting concepts of lifestyle, taste, and value. I then draw attention to how the phases of consumption unfold, first with the material turn and concepts of affect, materiality, and object assemblage, and then to

practice theory and the concept of mundane or ordinary consumption. I do so to emphasize the importance of materiality in consumption studies as well as to highlight the sociology of consumption's new orientation toward ordinary or mundane consumption processes. Following this, I provide an overview of home studies scholarship to illustrate how the home as a space and place is understood in the literature. This involves contrasting ideas of the ideal home and homemaking against common conceptions of routines, domestic technologies, and the current position of storage and clutter in greater society. This literature is used as a backdrop for the many domestic practices illustrated further on in the research. Lastly, I provide a brief overview of the presentation of Hoarding Disorder in popular media and culture, which has links to the medicalization process and exhibits how media as a means of popular culture ideas has contributed to broader stigmatizing narratives of hoarding.

Following the literature review, I explain the theoretical approach I take with my research project. I first delve into practice theory and discuss its emergence as a part of the practice turn and its uptake by researchers in the area of consumer culture. I detail the limitations of the approach, and then position my research as a practice theory approach to clutter. Due to the nature of material goods and human interaction, I add affect theory to my theoretical foundation. I discuss how affect theory fits into the material turn as well as the practice turn in cultural studies, and consider how affect has been studied in consumer culture. I then discuss the criticisms of studying affect, and suggest an appraisal theory of emotions as a way to capture affect in my research. Lastly, I incorporate discourse theory to bridge some of the gaps that exist in combining practice and affect, which aids in emphasizing the importance of representations of hoarding and clutter in popular culture and ideology.

In chapter four I present my methodology and detail the constructivist approach to

qualitative data I take through my research questions. I explain my epistemological framework and reflexive approach, accounting for positionality. I then address the ethical aspects of my research project and the methods used to gather data, including recruitment and interview protocols. Lastly, I detail my approach to analysis and comment on the non-generalizability of the study.

Chapters five, six, and seven present my findings. Chapter five details some of the basic domestic practices that contribute to clutter, which are likely to be seen in all homes. These examples illustrate how everyday interactions with materials in the time and space of the home often create opportunities for clutter.

Chapter six considers how various constraints to performing domestic practices as normatively understood, including positional constraints, create challenges in specific homes I visited. I also delineate how those constraints were answered with specific adaptations by participants that worked for them but created clutter. This part of the analysis highlights what I term “internal constraints” of dis/ability, mental health, and life course position, as well as “external constraints” that consist of environmental factors, such as the layout of the home or the presence of storage spaces, as well as pet ownership, since animals impose interesting constraints on time and sometimes on space (in the case of destructive dogs, for instance).

Chapter seven presents the finding that the value orientations of individuals and households can create very large accumulations of objects. Having environmental consciousness, being overly sentimental, or wishing to maintain social relationships through objects are three value areas where participants struggled to manage objects in their home. Here, I illustrate how performing domestic practices while maintaining values is complex and leads to difficulties discarding and managing goods. This chapter also highlights the presence of affect and

assemblage in many domestic spaces that impede discarding desires. It concludes with a larger discussion of the impact of materiality on domesticity and routines and how objects are intertwined in the performance of our everyday life.

The conclusion summarizes the findings with regards to the research questions, emphasizing the importance of recognizing values and performances in the investigation of clutter in the home. It details several contributions, including the contributions the project makes to understanding hoarding and material items in domestic space. It overviews gaps in the research and also presents options for future exploration.

A Note on Terminology

Hoarding appeared in the academic literature with a 1993 article written by Randy Frost and Rachel Gross. Their definition, which states that hoarding is “the acquisition of, and failure to discard a large number of possessions which appear to be useless or of limited value” (1993, p. 367) became the standard for demarcating hoarding in the academic literature. This type of medicalized definition solidified when “Hoarding Disorder” was written into the DSM-5 in 2013. The requirements of diagnosing the disorder rely on three components:

...[A]cquisition of, and failure to discard, a large number of possessions that appear to be useless or of limited value; living spaces sufficiently cluttered so as to preclude activities for which those spaces were designed; and significant distress or impairment in functioning caused by the hoarding (Lin et al., 2023, p. 181).

Researchers continue to use the 1993 definition to describe hoarding behaviour, which is when items are acquired at a high rate and kept, as opposed to having excessive acquisition and significant distress. However, even when there is not significant distress, hoarding behaviour is

still understood to “reduce an individual’s level of functionality, leading to various psychosocial problems and reducing the quality of life of the individual, as well as their family and close circle of friends” (Akıncı et al., 2022, p. 1623).

Interestingly, clutter has also been incorporated into the DSM-5 as “a large group of usually unrelated or marginally related objects piled together in a disorganized fashion in spaces designed for other purposes (e.g., tabletops, floor, hallways)” (American Psychological Association, 2013). This distinction is used to support the difference between hoarding behaviour and Hoarding Disorder.

Due to its ties with medicalization, the cultural usage of the term ‘Hoarding’ is often a stigmatizing one. As noted above, the images of Hoarded homes in popular culture, including reality television and daytime talk shows, reflect dirty, unliveable spaces and often frame the individual as sick or immoral. Thus, when discussing Hoarding in everyday life, such stigmatizing and moralizing ideologies often arise. In setting up this project I was interested in speaking with people who were not yet engaging in the medicalized terminology of Hoarding to avoid the implicit shame that often comes through connection with a Hoarding practitioner or other services. I was also looking to avoid the internalized stigma that other family members or friends may have encouraged. In accessing people who did not yet identify as a Hoarder, or identify in a stigmatizing way, I believed I could better access the relationships that people had with their goods on neutral terms. This would also position me not as a medical professional but as a curious researcher. To recruit within these boundaries, I decided to change my recruitment poster wording from “Hoarding” to “clutter.” While this caused other shifts in the project (explained in the methodology below), it allowed me to approach homes and their inhabitants not yet burdened by stigma or worried about judgement, creating richer data.

This terminology change is carried forward in this document, and reflects an alternate perspective that considers clutter and hoarding to be on a continuum. The medical field has attempted to put boundaries around Hoarding to make it more easily diagnosable, but they also recognize “Hoarding Tendencies”, actions that may fall outside of their diagnostic of Hoarding Disorder. I embrace this position, and propose instead that hoarding practices are those that contribute to larger accumulation on a clutter-hoarding continuum and may be present in any home to various extents. The more clutter-hoarding practices one has, the higher the likelihood that they may require some kind of intervention. But holding on to items or experiencing difficulty discarding are more frequently occurring practices that require examination outside of a medicalized lens.

I am not a licensed professional in the field of Hoarding, and so cannot say whether or not the participants of this project were diagnosable as Hoarders. More fundamentally, framing the project using a medical understanding of Hoarding would overlook my purpose. However, the word Hoarding circulates in several forms. While there is a medical definition of “Hoarding Disorder” (capital H and D), there is also hoarding behaviour(s), and a popular culture understanding of hoarding (lower case h). All these concepts enter into my work, so I have decided to depict the medical version with upper case letters, and the others with lower case.

While the upper case word refers to medicalized notions of Hoarding and the diagnostics and treatments for the disorder within that literature, lower case hoarding refers to high levels of clutter and the social representations of excess accumulation and difficulty discarding. For instance, when a participant refers to themselves as a hoarder, they are not likely citing the medicalized diagnostic, but suggesting they have a higher amount of accumulation than the perceived average, or a more intense connection with their possessions. While one might ask

why the research project engages in Hoarding at all, the cultural understanding of over-accumulation is rooted in stigmatizing medicalized approaches to material goods due to the ways ideas are disseminated in popular culture, making an understanding of Hoarding important for context.

I challenge this view of Hoarding and the stigma it creates in part by viewing hoarding more in terms of a clutter-hoarding continuum in which the accumulation of stuff, while at times linked to individual mental health concerns, also occurs as an aspect of everyday practices and performances in the home. An investigation into the meaning and routines behind the clutter — the histories, the stories, the reasoning, and everyday management — combines in a way that highlights how a straightforward medicalized definition of Hoarding is not capable of capturing the complex materiality that creates what we understand as home.

Below, I detail how the medicalized definition of Hoarding Disorder is framed before considering how other academic literatures understand hoarding. I then present an overview of consumer culture, the material turn, the home, and popular culture representations of hoarding.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

To inform the research findings, I provide a literature review that presents the dominant discourses and research surrounding hoarding as a concept, which develops a foundation for understanding a consumer culture approach. The rise of the medicalization of Hoarding is followed by consideration for how other academics and researchers outside of the medical sphere are looking at hoarding and the accumulation of objects. This prompts further attention toward the study of hoarding, domestic space, and accumulation in a much broader context, highlighting the gaps that exist in this research field.

From here I draw attention to the way hoarding behaviour, as well as clutter and disorganization in general, have become popularized through reality television (RTV). The A&E Show *Hoarders* in particular illustrates how popular culture understandings of hoarding, clutter, mess, and dirt are disseminated by media and reinforce dominant discourses that convey negative stereotypes. The rebuke to such shows highlights how the entangling of the medical sphere and the concept of accumulation is controversial, leading to call for a reexamination of clutter.

Following this, I illustrate the development of consumer culture through phases as identified by Warde (2014). I highlight cultural concepts of lifestyle, value, and taste to capture the changing nature of commodities and self-expression via consumption, provide concepts such as affect and object assemblage that accompanied the material turn, and describe how current sociology of consumption research focuses on mundane everyday processes. I then discuss domestic consumption, space, and ideas of the home, including the process of homemaking and domestic routines, leading to an understanding of the home through practice theory. I link this work on domesticity and materiality to newly emerging concepts of clutter.

What is Hoarding?

The varied historical understandings of hoarding have influenced current academic scholarship and popular culture representations of the accumulation of objects in the home. The existence of the current concept of “Hoarding Disorder” has emerged through medical spheres and especially psychology; however, other scholarship has recently emerged in the fields of social work, business and marketing, sociology, anthropology, and media and literary studies, which focus to various degrees on the broader aspects of materiality, domestic living space, collecting practices, and emotional connections to objects, prompting a call to reframe research on accumulation and hoarding.

The Medicalization of Hoarding

Following the Collyer-era media storm, the pathologization of Hoarding remained of interest in some medical and psychological communities while news outlets continued to report on rare hoards. In the 1980s, the discovery of Andy Warhol’s four-story townhouse in New York caused an “object panic” (Herring, 2014, p. 51) and hoarding once again emerged into public interest, prompting inquiry into normal versus pathological practices of collection and accumulation. Aside from this cultural spike, much of the research on hoarding between the 1960s and 1990s was either theoretical in nature and relied on a psychological understanding of object relations (see Bollas, 1987), or was secondary to other case reports of mental illness such as obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and eating disorders. The first empirical studies to focus solely on hoarding behaviour were published in a 1993 article by Randy Frost and Rachel Gross, who presented three studies focusing on hoarding indicators, the relation of hoarding to OCD, and the nature of self-reported hoarding. This foundational paper opened the gates to Hoarding research, and the definition presented by the authors became standard usage among

medical researchers; hoarding became known as “the acquisition of, and failure to discard a large number of possessions which appear to be useless or of limited value” (1993, p. 367). The partnership of Frost and Gross led to the creation of a Hoarding community that includes researchers such as David Tolin, Gail Steketee, and Tamara Hartl, who have collectively published substantial amounts of research while offering recovery workshops, hoarding workbooks, and information for the general public.

A major milestone of the push to medicalize Hoarding came with the publication of the fifth edition of the DSM. The medical community encouraged the addition of “Hoarding Disorder”; extensive research had shown that hoarding and OCD are not concurrent disorders (Tolin & Villavicencio, 2011), prompting calls for the creation of a distinct disorder (Pertusa et al., 2010; Mataix-Cols et al., 2010). Hoarding Disorder (HD) now appears under Obsessive Compulsive and Related Disorders and has been given diagnostic criteria that includes difficulty parting with possessions, accumulation that prevents the use of areas of the home, and clinically significant distress or impairment in functioning (American Psychological Association, 2013). While advocacy for this change supports easier access to research funding, task force creation, and legitimization of services, it nonetheless reduces the individual to diagnostic criteria, erasing personal differences in hoarding situations and encouraging a “one-size-fits-all” treatment approach while also contributing mental health stigmatization (Orr et al., 2017).

Current medicalized literatures on HD focus primarily on a few areas of research for assessments, treatments, and comorbidity. Several assessment tools exist, such as the Structured Interview for Hoarding Disorder (Nordsletten et al., 2013), the Saving Inventory-revised (Frost, Steketee, & Grisham, 2004), and the use of photographs to determine the extent of a hoard, including the Clutter Image rating scale (de la Cruz et al., 2012; Frost et. al, 2008). Self-

assessment has been found to be especially poor at detecting HD, while behavioural focuses are more promising (Lin et al., 2023).

Much of the medicalized literature revolves around comorbid conditions and rates of risk such as anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive traits, and more recently, childhood attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Mathews, 2014; Ayers et al., 2013; Raines et al., 2015; Pertusa, Frost, & Mataix-Cols., 2010; Tolin et al., 2015). More recently, trauma has been looked at as a factor for object attachment (Chia et al., 2021).

There are also studies that have used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) imaging to find neurological differences in the brains of people who hoard; such findings are suggested to explain why cognitive impairments are often found with people with clutter, as they have problems categorizing objects and making decisions (Lin et al., 2023). These studies have been used to further the hypothesis that hoarding is hereditary, and while some studies find familial genetic links in hoarders and other genetic traits for schizophrenia and autism, there have been no direct genetic markers tied to traits of Hoarding Behaviour (Strom et al., 2022). Recent studies have shifted to focus on childhood Hoarding Behaviour and disorder to understand onset, prevalence, and comorbidity (Akıncı et al., 2022).

There are a few treatment options available for HD. Cognitive behaviour therapy is the recommended approach, and both clinician-applied and book-based workshop therapies such as the *Buried in Treasures* book have shown to have some success (Frost, Ruby, & Shuer, 2012; Williams & Viscusi, 2016; Lin et al., 2023). Other therapies exist, such as peer-led support groups. There are currently no approved medications for HD and trials for selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI's) have had mixed results (Lin et al., 2023). There is agreement that clean-outs that are sudden or not consented to are especially traumatic and should be avoided, as

they often make the situation worse.

The work to formally classify hoarding behaviour in the DSM is part of the process of medicalizing a behaviour. Medicalization has positioned Hoarding strictly within the medical field, encouraging clinical diagnosis as well as medical treatments such as pharmaceuticals, therapy, or lifestyle changes (Conrad, 1992). In the case of Hoarding, specific claims-makers (medical professionals) brought legitimacy to the definition while also advocating certain interventions and treatments. Medicalization frames human behaviour as a personal issue – problems are located within the individual themselves – rather than linked to public troubles such as social, cultural, or environmental influences.⁶ The framing of Hoarding Behaviour has thus existed narrowly in a medicalized, or personal, sphere, overlooking how domestic objects are related to larger social ideas of material culture.

The medicalized approach is dominant in both clinical and research psychology publications on Hoarding; however, social work, psychiatry, and gerontology research papers (Chapin et al., 2010; Raeburn et al., 2015), as well as community-based responses (Frost, Steketee, & Williams, 2000; Bratiotis, 2012) also follow this framework. This means that with few exceptions (such as Moghimi, 2013), the dominant way of understanding hoarding behaviour in academic and research circles, as well as in professional practice, is through a medicalized lens. This approach has been popularized through mainstream media due to a direct connection between the medical world and popular forms of entertainment such as reality television.

⁶ This is in the spirit of C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959).

Hoarding in Other Academic Literature

The possibility of understanding hoarding behaviour outside of a (stigmatizing) medical frame began to gain traction after 2010, though current accounts are still limited. Scholarship in the areas of consumer research, marketing, and cultural studies is beginning to examine different facets of the hoarded home and the processes taking place in human-object interactions. One strand of inquiry has started to query the conditions behind a difficulty with discarding goods. Catherine Roster (2014) has studied the impact of professional organizers on different types of attachment style that hoarders exhibit, and found that the temporality of the object – its link to past, present, or future, and the relation of the object to the individual self – both plays a large role in the reasons for the hoard, but is also key to understanding successful treatment strategies. Another study has focused on examining motivations to accumulate, reluctance to discard, and the role of attachment in Hoarding behaviours; Cherrier and Ponner (2010) reveal how individuals connect to past events or places through material objects. They found that Hoarders often exhibit problems when objects become intertwined with emotional connections to the past, orientations to the future, or daily adventure seeking.

There is also growing interest in the accumulation and discard aspects of hoarding behaviour, and how typical cycles of consumption are disrupted in varying ways by hoarding individuals. This perspective considers how different notions of risk and value affect the ability to participate normatively in the acquisition or disposal of goods, thus disrupting discarding practices that are found in typical acquire-consume-dispose cycles (Cross et al., 2018). There is also some interest in exploring the materiality of the hoarded home; a living space is not just occupied by the inhabitant but also their goods, and a consideration of non-human agency in the home may better account for the processes that are contributing to the hoard. Tracy Potts

specifically outlines how the current “house/mind” (2015, p. 104) approach of psychologists creates forced confessions in the hoarder, focusing on individual blame while overlooking the presence of materiality within the hoard. Potts highlights how a shift to object-oriented thinking can re-insert the materiality of the hoard into the investigation. Discussions of hoarding also appear frequently in accounts of collecting;⁷ many projects detail the specific differences between the two behaviours, usually defined by divergent approaches to the organization or care of goods and the desire to showcase grouped objects (Belk et al., 1991; Nordsletten & Mataix-Cols, 2012; Nordsletten et al., 2013). However, these discussions in popular culture and psychiatric circles have been criticized as morality projects regarding the ordering of personal possessions. In response, Katie Kilroy-Marac (2017) asks how accumulation can be better captured by focusing on individualized *practices* of curation and care, which often transform the value of objects in one’s possession. These types of research projects highlight the potential for different framings of hoarding behaviour that can answer questions that exist beyond the medical realm.

Reframing the Study of Hoarding respectively

Some of the above accounts are in line with recent calls to reject the medicalized frame of hoarding in favour of cultural or material lenses that focus less on the individual and more on social forces and ideologies, or physical environments and objects respectively. Megan Shaeffer, for example, has pointed to the problematic nature of medicalization in that it “shifts attention from the social context as we see behavioural problems and pathologies on an individual level” (2017, p. 3). Shaeffer argues that one of the biggest problems with the medical approach is that it overlooks materiality: “Through the medicalization of hoarding behaviours, we may lose some

⁷ This discussion occurs in both areas of medicalization (psychology) and consumer culture.

perspective on the way that broader social and cultural forces influence the way hoarders and non-hoarders alike perceive, use, and experience objects” (2017, p. 3). She calls instead for a hoarding approach that focuses on “practices of consumerism, interior design, collecting and waste disposal” (2017, p. 1) to better understand the different environments that lead to increased acquisition, decreased disposal, and cluttering practices. Likewise, social work researchers David Orr, Michael Preston-Shoot and Suzy Braye (2017) identify how pathologizations of the individual problematality lead to a reductionist view of the behaviour. They note how this way of understanding hoarding results in stigma and confers a lack of individual agency and uniqueness in each person’s acquisition and discarding habits. They suggest that a culturally informed analysis of hoarding can provide better insight into the differing landscape of values, emotions, and practical difficulties, paving way for a person-centred practice and analysis of hoarding (Orr et al., 2017, p. 2). This position has previously been advocated by Yavar Moghimi (2013) who suggests that focusing on the specific person-object relations present in hoarding cases provides a better understanding of individual hoarding situations.

All the above approaches usefully identify the need to move away from a stigmatizing framing of Hoarding Behaviour in the medical sphere and towards an understanding of hoarding and accumulation that is informed by broader socio-cultural aspects. Included in this is consideration for how popular culture discourses shape individuals’ understandings of norms of housekeeping, including ideas of cleanliness and dirt as disorder, as well as how influencing sources create stigma around cluttering behaviours and hoarding.

Representations of Hoarding in Popular Media

Television is rife with programs about decluttering, minimalism, design, and do-it-yourself home makeovers, while magazines about style and décor abound. But popular culture

also has something to say about hoarding; Hoarding behaviour became television spectacle in the early 2000s with special episodes of *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil* that showcased domestic spaces filled to the roof with objects (Lepselter, 2011). These episodes were successful enough to create offshoot shows, and the late 2000s saw an increase in hoarding-focused episodic series on networks such as A&E, TLC, Animal Planet, and The Style Network. One of the first shows, A&E's *Hoarders*, launched in 2009 and promoted a clear connection between reality television and the medicalized understanding of hoarding behaviour by using medical hoarding researchers as episode hosts (Kaplan, 2014). Personalities such as Dr. David Tolin and Dr. Michael Tompkins, prolific publishers on hoarding behaviour research, threw a legitimating veil on their medicalized perspective of hoarding. Each episode opens with a medicalized definition of hoarding behaviour signalling medical framing with the phrase: "Compulsive Hoarding is a mental disorder marked by an obsessive need to acquire and keep things, even if the items are worthless, hazardous, or unsanitary" (LeMarco et al., 2009-present).⁸ The popularity of the show,⁹ coupled with its longevity¹⁰ has influenced a popular discourse of hoarding (Falkoff, 2021) that is transmitted through the medical experts-turned-personalities and cultural intermediaries on the show (Bonner, 2011). While other hoarding reality television programs exist (for instance, TLC's *Buried Alive*), the documentary style of the A&E program and its personalities (many of whom are now popular de-cluttering or hoarding therapy celebrities) begs a critical look at the outcome of a reality television show that tries to bridge popular culture and spectacle with medical diagnosis.

⁸ This is an interesting definition when considering that in 2009 hoarding was not yet its own diagnosis but was categorized within OCD Spectrum disorders. The opening credit has remained the same throughout the series despite diagnostic criteria changing in 2013.

⁹ At the time of its premiere in 2009 it was the most watched premiere in A&E's history for adults 18-49, with 2.5 million viewers (A&E, 2009).

¹⁰ The show ran on A&E for six seasons from 2009 until its cancellation in 2013, after which Lifetime network picked up some 'update' episodes in 2014 and *Hoarders* was renewed for a seventh season with Lifetime in 2015. The show then returned to A&E in 2016 and aired its 16th season in 2024. In early 2022 it spurred a Canadian spinoff produced by Blue Ant Media.

Reality television as a genre is often composed of several different subgenres, in this case bridging genres of reality, “lifestyle”, and (post) documentary (Corner, 2002) television. While this form of television is not necessarily factually representative of reality, it is often evaluated by audiences in terms of its realism and authenticity in relation to reality (Montemurro, 2008, p. 86). This becomes important when considering that acts of viewing this form of television can be seen as “significant social practices” (Bell & Hollows, 2005) that shape collective identities, understandings, and tastes. Research suggests that reality television promotes middle-class social norms and lifestyles and encourages recognition of deviance and the formation of a moral stance by viewers (Wood & Skeggs, 2008). In this way, taste and values about material goods can be transmitted to reality television viewers, increasing the likelihood that normative messages regarding objects and domestic space are absorbed. This can not only impact judgement of another person’s care and display of goods in the domestic sphere, but also self-regulation and conformity in the name of socially accepted moral codes (Hunt, 1999).

A&E’s show has not gone without criticism; media researchers have pointed to the show’s framing of mental illness and disorder as problematic and have illustrated how the notion of cleanliness as a solution to individual problems is dangerous. Deborah Kaplan (2014), for instance, highlights the show’s attempts to humanize the participants through nostalgic objects, while at the same time sensationalizing the dirt and disorder in a way that pathologizes the individual. Susan Lepselter (2011) agrees, noting how the show’s focus on therapy and intervention in the private home creates a normalizing ideal of cleanliness and resocialization as a cure for individual problems. The show’s focus on unclean and disorganized spaces leads to the connection between chaos and disease, similar to the “dirt as disorder” (Douglas, 1966/2002) discourse that is replicated in several other lifestyle and reality television shows (West, 2011).

The offered solution is individual therapy combined with a “tidy home” to combat individual problems (Potts, 2015). The framing of objects or consumer practices as forms of deviance is another area of critique; the show provides a platform for a type of “material deviance” to emerge regarding the acquisition and placement of objects in the home (Herring, 2011b; Eddy, 2014). By setting normative standards regarding the acquisition and care of goods and connecting lack of adherence to pathological illness, the show contributes to a growing discussion of material non-conformity, creating opportunities for the publicization and correction of such deviance. Such critiques draw attention to the problematic nature of a reality television show that promotes one narrow (medical) frame of hoarding behaviour while trying to appeal to popular culture and television viewers, resulting in growing stigmatization of not just hoarders but dirt and disorganization in general.

Moving beyond dominant, medicalized framings of hoarding and clutter, I approach accumulation using a consumer culture lens to highlight how practices that exist in hoarded homes involve acquisition, consumption, and object maintenance routines, are influenced by specific discourses regarding consumption activity, care of goods, and domestic environments, and encourage and maintain specific relationships to objects.

What is Consumer Culture?

The concept of consumer culture posits that “the world of goods and their principles of structuration are central to the understanding of contemporary society” (Featherstone, 2007, p. 82) capturing how our daily lives are increasingly connected to consumption in a variety of ways via a diversity of things, processes, and practices. Consumer culture refers to “a culture of the use or appropriation of objects or things” (Lury, 2011, p. 9) that illustrates the significance of materiality to meanings, norms, and values. Consumer culture is characterized by the

aestheticization of objects, wherein use-value purchasing is surpassed by increasing desire and want of goods for aesthetic, cultural, and stylistic reasons, which often relate to identity and meaning creation. The idea of consumption in consumer culture goes beyond the use and possession of material goods within an economic production-consumption cycle; it is a cyclical process that includes a wide variety of actions including “buying, having, being, or doing” in everyday life (Lury, 2011), with attention to the acquisition, appropriation and appreciation of particular goods and services (Warde, 2017).

Emergence, Nature, and Dimensions of Consumer Culture

There is a general consensus in sociological accounts that 20th century industrialization and commodity production has produced a particular *consumer culture*, characterized by the intensification of design, marketing, and mediatization of goods. The onset of disposable income and the proliferation of (luxury) goods, combined with the growth of advertising and marketing, produced new “dream-worlds” (Featherstone, 2007, p. 67) of mass commodity consumption, reflecting the intertwining of goods and symbols, or the *stylization* of consumption. This process occurred when goods valued for their aesthetic nature (such as art, literature, music, and film) began to dominate the marketplace and shift the commodification of objects towards aesthetics and culture (Clifford, 1988).

Lury (1996) identifies several contributions to the stylization of consumption alongside the aesthetic shift, including the creation of the possessive self, a focus on signs and signification (Baudrillard, 1981/1995), and the aestheticization of everyday life (Featherstone, 2007). The stylization of objects extends into stylized *relations* between people and material goods; instead of values and morals, style becomes important to how individuals interact with each other, themselves, and with other objects. The meanings created in aesthetic interactions are often

negotiated and mediated in flexible and changing ways.

This also leads to the manipulation of style, whereby individuals and groups can change the meaning of goods or fads, using these to mark their identities or collective belongings. Aestheticization shifts the character of objects from strict matter to signs and signification; objects are understood not in terms of their use-value but of their sign-value, making the process of consumption a “systematic manipulation of signs” for the purpose of communicating meaning (Baudrillard, 1968/1996; see also Lury, 1996; 2011). While use-value is a fixed aspect of a material good, significations are variable and fluctuate, allowing for groups and individuals to shift the meanings of objects and employ them in different ways. It is through aestheticization that “goods — things or stuff — can act as *markers or performers of social identity*” (Lury, 2011, p. 16), allowing people to co-create and share meanings through consumer practices. Thus, the sociology of consumption addresses aspects of aesthetic self-identity, social life, and meaning through the use of commodity-signs and symbolism. As such, within the study of consumer culture, researchers employ several recurring concepts, including lifestyle, value/valorization, and taste, to describe the social world of consumption.

Lifestyle.

Style and the aestheticization of goods have extended to the stylization of life, or the creation and curation of *lifestyle*, which refers to “the ways in which people seek to display their individuality and their sense of style through the choice of a range of goods and their subsequent customizing or personalizing of these goods” (Lury, 2011, p. 53). Modern consumer culture has a concern with lifestyle wherein consumption is a partly reflexive expression that utilizes aesthetics and display (Featherstone, 2007, p. 84). Individuality and style can be conveyed “in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions”

(Featherstone, 2007, p. 84), as the meanings that are created between objects and subjects gain importance.

Media and advertising play a large role in cultivating the concept of lifestyle; the marketization of everyday life facilitates the appeal of advertising and branding to specific aesthetics and lifestyles, illustrating how individual freedom of choice and expression have become “central to identity” (Lury, 2011, p. 7) in a consumer society. Media messages are often paired with pressures of self-improvement and self-expression that are frequently tied to ideas of class and other social categories such as gender or ethnicity (Featherstone, 2007, p. 84; Skeggs & Wood, 2011). While traditional class distinctions via Bourdieu (1984/2010) rely on hierarchies and the ranking of classes, lifestyles in postmodern consumer culture reflect aesthetic knowledge and combine many areas of taste. This continues to speak, however, to Bourdieu’s concept of distinction as a process wherein individuals look to distinguish their social identities and values via the mediated meanings of consumer goods, practices, and experiences.¹¹

Value.

Value in consumer culture refers to a flexible notion of meaning, importance, and the significance of goods and services. Commodities during industrialization were understood by early scholars to have fixed economic values based on a typical use-value or intended value, often stemming from the labour theory of value (Marx, 1867/1967). In contemporary accounts, the value of goods is understood as something that is created and open to change, expansion, or decline depending on marketization processes of design, use, distribution, and branding.

Additionally, personal and social valuations can be based on other functions; items can be linked to expressions of individuality, group identification (such as class), or moral stance (Skeggs &

¹¹ For more on Bourdieu see “Taste” below.

Loveday, 2012; Arvidsson, 2006). Material goods can be desired for aesthetic reasons (Hanquinet, 2018), be signifiers of independence (Miller, 2006), or have sentimental connections that make them invaluable to their owner (DuFord, 2017).

Values have the ability to both describe and prescribe, making individuals both the creators and the subjects of value (Skeggs, 2004, p. 13). Most importantly, values are contested; the shifting nature of meaning in consumer society requires the constant re-evaluation of the application and use of signs, causing objects of consumption to not only come in and out of social fashion (Simmel, 1905/1971), but to have shifting values according to the individuals and agents who purchase, use, frame, or discard them (Campbell, 2005).

Taste.

While taste is commonly understood as a matter of individual choice, preference, or connoisseurship, in consumer culture the concept of taste involves social connections and separations, and is influenced by morality, individuality, and habits. Taste was first used in consumer studies to explain the demand of luxury goods in reference to the newly emerged leisure class and the maintenance of social hierarchies (Veblen, 1899/2003). However, recent accounts position taste as an individualistic aspect linked to notions of style and subcultural expression (Warde, 2014). The dominant sociological understanding of taste as a social rather than individual phenomenon is rooted in Bourdieu's 1979 study on class distinction, wherein he notes "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (Bourdieu, 1984/2010, p. xxix). For Bourdieu, taste is connected to habitus, a class-conditioned set of embodied attitudes, preferences, and habits that structure what appear to be individual preferences for particular goods and aesthetics (Arsel & Bean, 2013). In this way, habitus structures the tastes that shape and reflect social hierarchies, upholding distinction and difference between social classes.

Importantly, Bourdieu does not strictly believe the habitus controls or pre-determines all class-based tastes; the *practice* of taste, or how individuals can demonstrate their embodied knowledge, is an important but overlooked dimension of his theory of distinction (Lizardo, 2014). The practical capacities of a person afford the opportunity for different likes or dislikes, which can appear as choice but are actually based in nonconscious knowledge of the ability to appropriate (or not) a cultural good.

The idea of high-brow taste as a key element of distinction (identified by Bourdieu in the case of France's upper classes) has fallen out of popularity in favour of an expanded definition that emphasizes how taste works as much as a function of sameness as difference in various groupings apart from class structure, and is more widely seen as a variable system of classification (Lury, 2011). Taste can be seen as a collective association that bonds people together in postmodern "neo-tribes" (Maffesoli, 1996). Maffesoli suggests that group cohesion in postmodern society is characterized by the sharing of common tastes, and can be seen as a sort of tribal phenomenon because shared tastes allow us to co-exist in relatively harmonious groups (1996).

Further extending Bourdieu's class focus is the theorization of individuals as *cultural omnivores* who "consume a mix of products and services across categories of high, middle, and low [class]" (Arsel & Bean, 2013, p. 900), which places the focus more on individual agency and the ability to choose what is suitable or desirable from a category regardless of its association with the upper-class. Instead of the "highbrow snob", consumers are cultural omnivores who "assemble(s) choices from marketplace resources through a process of bricolage" (Arsel & Bean, 2013, p. 900). Tastes are no longer solely determined in relation to class yet are still selective, which allows them to act as distinctive taste (Hyde, 2014). Current research on taste has shifted

to focus more on the acquisition and practice of taste, or how the aesthetics of taste are created and disseminated to individuals and show up in personal practices via means such as cultural intermediaries (Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2012) or taste regimes (Arsel & Bean, 2013).

The Phases of Consumption

One way to understand the shifting nature of consumer culture and its components is through Alan Warde's conceptualization of 'phases of consumption'. Warde suggests "since the late 1960s, the social science of consumption has had three broad, partly overlapping, phases of development" (Warde, 2016, p. 281) that can be represented by an orientation toward acquisition, appreciation, or appropriation. These phases gradually propel towards the turn to practice and ordinary consumption.

The first phase of acquisition was focused on economic systems of production, mass production, and mass consumption. Economists such as Marx and Engels drew attention toward the inequality present in early capitalist systems. Literature at this time focused on differentiating wants and needs, the fetishism of commodities (via Marx), and the divisions between classes. In this phase consumption was tied to the development of city spaces and new imaginative dream spaces for consumption such as the Arcades (Benjamin, 1999b). Mass consumption was driven by capitalist systems and taken up in new luxurious domestic spaces.

The criticisms that came from the economic perspectives (generally that of determinism and rationalism) garnered a new move towards consumption as engagement with symbols and communication. This phase of consumption, which Warde connects with appreciation (2016), is where we see the cultural turn emerge. The focus on consumption shifts here to meaning in everyday life and the idea of consumption as self-development and expression rather than class division. The cultural turn in the 1970s shifted the focus of consumption scholars to symbols,

communication, and meaning in everyday life. Consumer research moved towards the individual and expression of meaning, with an emphasis on the semiotic and experiential, gradually contributing the majority of theoretical and empirical understandings of the sociology of consumption to date (Warde, 2014, p. 282).

The material turn can be understood as the appropriation phase in the development of consumer culture (Warde, 2016). Seen as a corrective to the cultural turn, which put too much emphasis on meaning and overlooked materiality, this phase developed to overcome several binaries, including nature/culture, man/technology, subject/object, and agency/structure. An emphasis on materiality forced questions surround the use of goods. Emerging in this materialist frame is a range of new theory, from vibrant materiality (Bennett, 2010), to post-humanism (Barad, 2008; Haraway, 1991), to Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005). For cultural studies, this meant redirecting attention away from a hyper-focus on symbolism, meaning, and individuality in the study of consumer culture (Warde, 2014), and instead promoting new inquiries into human-object relations, objects and material culture, consumer spaces, and routines. Alongside this development of consumption came new concepts that complement the study of materiality.

Affect and Emotion.

Interest in human-object relations stems from earlier psychological research by Winnicott (1953) and Bollas (1987), who developed concepts of transitional and transformational objects, respectively, to highlight the connection between individuals and particular objects. These concepts have expanded into consumer-commodity relations to explain motivations for consumption that go beyond individual psyche or social-structural forces (Woodward, 2011). This approach has prompted attention towards emotions as directly connected to objects and

environments while also being culturally located, making the study of consumer culture inherently tied to aspects of affect and emotion (Boden & Williams, 2002; Illouz, 2009). Researchers have turned to this perspective to explain a variety of material connections, including how technological goods become objects of “emotional containment” (Elliott & Urry, 2010), how relationships of gifting objects are laden with emotional expectations (Purbrick, 2014), and how emotions are aspects of intentional orientations towards goods and environments (Ahmed, 2010). These perspectives all question how emotions and affect are created, sustained, and navigated within a consumer culture context.

Materiality.

The interest in material aspects of consumer culture stems from attempts to move away from an overemphasis on signs and language frameworks and towards the materiality of consumption in everyday life. Tim Dant (1999), for instance, argues that “social forms are not only contingent on human activities” (1999, p. 12) but also on material environments, which are social products. Likewise, Bill Brown (2001) explains that objects and things are different entities; *objects* work in the backgrounds of our daily lives, but *things* are materialities that confront us. Similar to how Arjun Appadurai (1986/2010) encourages researchers “follow the thing” through biography, Brown suggests researchers consider “how inanimate objects constitute human subjects” (2001, p. 7) not only through the relationality of the thing but through its materiality. This area of research has grown substantially with robust theories that focus on assemblages and object agency (Latour, 2005; Bennett, 2010) producing a wide variety of research on objects, such as how inherited objects have agency in new owner environments (Lipman, 2018), how materiality shifts during the age of dematerialization with regard to digital music (Magaudda, 2011), or how a particular clothing item like old jeans hold vibrancy and agency (Woodward, 2015). This

scholarship reflects the importance of considering materiality and environments in and of themselves to get at how matter affects subjective interaction and everyday life.

Object Assemblage.

As mentioned, developing from the material turn is the notion of assemblage. Assemblages are “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements...vibrant materials of all sorts” that are “living, throbbing confederations” (Bennett, 2010, p. 23) in which power is distributed in uneven ways. In opposition to actor network theory (Latour, 2005), which sees entities in a network as stagnant, assemblages are dynamic groupings that have emergent properties that are greater than the sum of its parts (Bennett, 2010, p. 24). Object assemblages have a type of agency as a conglomerate that differs from each material’s individual power, but also that shifts according to the relation between things. Sophie Woodward (2018) uses Bennett’s notion of assemblage to “understand how collections of objects such as a CD collection, or a drawer of clutter, has a power over us and helps create the meanings of individual items” (p. 10). Incorporating the notion of object assemblage into domestic spaces aids us in understanding how objects are connected to their location and other materiality, including “diverse elements, such as dust” (2018, p. 10), in the home, and contribute to varied and varying meanings for their owners. Object assemblages help to reveal meaningful/meaningless things, highlighting the potency of materiality.

Sites and Routines of Consumption.

The sites and spaces of consumption have been of interest to researchers, in conjunction with the expansion of mass commodity production, as seen with Walter Benjamin’s work on the arcades in the 1930s (Benjamin, 1999a). The advent of luxury and shopping prompted interest in the growing spaces for new practices of consumption such as window shopping. Such work raises questions regarding how individuals navigate shopping spaces or how shopping routines are

integrated into everyday life (Miller, 2001; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979/2002; Littler, 2009).

Relatedly, there has been a growing scholarly interest in consumption routines, such as practices of collecting. The constitution of a collection, how an individual approaches objects in a collection, the materiality contained and displayed in a collection, the emotional attachment to goods, and the explanations and reasoning of a collection are all areas of interest for researchers (Belk et al., 1989; Belk, 1995; Benjamin, 1999b; Kilroy-Marac, 2017).

Scholars are continuing to encourage the study of consumption to include a broader range of appropriation practices such as practical and routine activity (Warde, 2014, p. 282).

Furthermore, scholars are pushing to consider the other side of the consumption cycle by looking into discarding (Hetherington, 2004). This has produced bodies of literature on the cycle of consumption, the classifications of trash, dirt, and waste (Hawkins & Muecke, 2003; Cohen & Johnson, 2005; Cox et al., 2011), and a new focus on sustainable, environmental, and ethical consumption (Kennedy et al., 2013; Smart, 2010; Evans, 2012; Carfagna et al., 2014; Cohen, 2012). Such scholarship considers consumption within a greater system, from acquisition to management to discard, giving a broader picture of the consumption cycle.

The Practice of Consumption.

The criticisms of the cultural turn that prompted a focus on materiality also identified other weaknesses, mainly surrounding the maintenance of particular binaries of subject/object and agency/structure. However, the biggest criticism of the cultural turn was a disregard for mundane, everyday processes of consumption (Warde, 2014). The practice turn shifted the study of consumption toward routine activity rather than eventful consumerism, positioning it as a necessary aspect of everyday life rather than a frivolous or wasteful expenditure.

Social practice theory, which I elaborate in the theory section of this dissertation, focuses

on the *organization* of consumption processes and overcomes many of the limitations of past approaches to consumption such as voluntaristic models or individualist orientations, instead attending to social practices, routines, and mundane consumption while considering materiality and the role of aestheticization (Warde, 2014). Instead of a focus on the individual, practice theory looks at collective modes of conduct in every life and the organization of consumption processes (Warde, 2005, p. 146) while also recognizing that consumption for communication and expression of individuality does not constitute the majority of consumer action. In general, practice theory gets at the acquisition and expression of taste and style, balancing meanings, competences, and materials to reveal previously overlooked aspects of the consumption cycle. It has informed research in areas such as taste dissemination (Arsel & Bean, 2013), routine household consumption (Hand & Shove, 2007), and consumer culture change (Shove & Pantzar, 2005) as well as the inclusion of materiality in the discussion of consumer habits (Halkier et al., 2011).

The Home and Domestic Space

In order to consider practices of consumption and clutter in the home, here I outline some key themes within the substantial scholarship on the home and domestic space. The conceptualization of the home morphs and adapts as it moves through different substantive areas, from architecture and design, to cultural geography, to anthropology and sociology (see Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020). The nature of the interdisciplinary approach, now known as “home studies,”¹² has contributed varying and contested definitions, debates on how to position the home as an object of research, and whether the “house” and the “home” are considered the

¹² This area is defined through the development of the journal *Home Cultures*, created in 2004, which “explores the relationship between body and building, consumption, material culture, the meaning of home, moving cultures and social consequences of planning and architecture” (Taylor & Francis Group, 2025).

same, adjacent, or separate to one another. The physical structure of the house and its furnishings as an object of research is favoured within some areas, and often appears in contemporary white Western concepts of the home and homemaking (Mallett, 2004, p. 65). Other areas consider “the home” as a set of relationships or affects, a “site in which we live” and also “an idea and an imaginary that is imbued with feeling” (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 2), one of comfort and retreat as well as power dynamics and labour, while also being open to mobility and change (Miller, 2001). The multidimensional nature of home as “(a) place(s), (a) space(s), feeling(s), practices” (Mallett, 2004, p. 65) gives it a “fantastic potential for multi-tasking, combining spaces, objects, affects and activities” (Löfgren, 2014, p. 91) that constellate or conflict to produce mundane yet interesting outcomes, making the home an interesting area for ethnographic research (see Pink et al., 2020). Several thematic areas of research have emerged; most relevant to my project are the themes of the ideal home, the concept of homemaking, and home routines.

The Ideal Home

How the home comes to be perceived involves social and personal conceptualizations of the *ideal home*. The ideal home in contemporary western ideology is conceived as a suburban home, “a detached or semi-detached house, situated on a large block of land on a city’s outskirts, built in the image of a family and individually owned” (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 101), but also often changing and adapting to current society. The ideal home concept is influenced by popular discourses in media and policy, but is also formed by personal experience and individual needs and desires (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 120; Mallett, 2004, p. 67). While these ‘ideals’ can be somewhat ‘nostalgic or romantic’ (Mallett, 2004, p. 69), they are tied up in normativity and morality and can reflect oppressive dominant ideologies with regards to gender, sexuality, and race that make such idealizations unattainable (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 120).

Homemaking and Unmaking

The “imagined future” (Liu, 2021) of the home is enacted through a process of homemaking. Homemaking can be understood as the “suturing of social relationships, identities, and materialities into a place called home” (Baxter & Brickell, 2014, p. 135), highlighting the active nature of building and constructing the home through routines and practices. Homemaking can be a “project of the self” (Owen, 2023, p. 75) through which people determine their approximation to objects according to their everyday life practices. This inherently involves differing levels of consumption and accumulation as people invest meaning into the materiality of their spaces (see Miller, 2008). While some still favour the ‘home as haven’ concept, sociologists and historians have pointed out how problematic the ideal is, noting (1) the tensions of gendered divisions of work which counteract the idea of ‘retreat’, and (2) the staunch division of public and private, especially when considering how public areas such as salons, parlours, or dining rooms were planned into homes (Mallett, 2004). This idea becomes more complex as we consider the shift to work at home and the blurring of public/private spaces (Wethal et al., 2022). The idealized suburban home also stands for a level of oppression with regards to gender, sexuality, and race, and many homes are less than ideal when considering disability needs that are not met, poverty, or home instability, which make home ideals exclusionary (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). In this way the antithesis to the ideal becomes the precarious home (Chambers, 2020); however, researchers are now examining different groups,¹³ including queer or non-heteronormative relations, migration, and transnational populations, to explain how the idea of home can adapt to differing ideological and physical situations (see Blunt & Dowling, 2020;

¹³ For instance, the concept of the positive monolithic home fails in the case of divorce for children who are bounced between houses (Cierrad, 2010, p. 91).

Chambers, 2020). Researchers have additionally developed the concept of home unmaking, which is “the precarious process by which material and/or imaginary components of home are unintentionally or deliberately, temporarily or permanently, divested, damaged or even destroyed” (Baxter & Brickell, 2014, p. 135). This process might involve external conflict and force, such as in the case of forced migration or war, but can also be a neutral counterpart to the act of making or remaking of a home.

Routines and Practices

Another area of home research is the study of mundane habits, routines, and practices that contribute to the concept of the home (Clapham, 2011). This requires giving attention to materiality and temporality, and addressing the individual and cultural meanings that are associated with household practices (Galčanová & Vacková, 2016). Indeed, routines can be seen as “tools for organizing the flow of time” (Löfgren, 2023, p. 28) as well as “manuals for what has to be done in everyday life” (2023, p. 28). Such routines may act as a “supportive corset” or a “straightjacket” that hide meanings and values, and are often “embodied, resting in the limbs rather than in the mind” (2023, p. 28), making everyday household practices a fruitful area of focus for understanding the home. While homemaking and other aspects of household management can be included in this category, routines incorporate a larger idea of the repetitive tasks that may be conscious or unconscious and, while often being grounded by definition, are subject to continual change at the hands of efficiency.

Technologies

The examination of practices of the home has led to a focus on how different technologies located in the home change the home and the routines in it. The coordination of domestic practices relies on specific spatial arrangements that include technologies (Hand et al.,

2007). Thus, household arrangements are often impacted by social norms of routines and technologies that result in the “choreography of things and people in time and space” (Hand et al., 2007, p. 680). For instance, including a freezer in a home greatly affects routines of shopping and meal preparation in a very minimal yet impactful way (Hand & Shove, 2007). The presence of a refrigerator door and its contents depict a specific moral economy of a home, coordinating scheduling and social relations, and emitting a social knowledge that is valued in the home (Watkins, 2006). Indeed, the everyday use of such technologies plays into domestic practices which shape “the patterns, routines, schedules, sequences, pace, speed and rhythms of the domestic space” (Liu, 2021, p. 347), emphasizing the importance of investigating the materiality of a home.

Storage

While storage space is often considered a physical spatial issue, further examination reveals that practices of storage are particular actions that require a “deliberate and explicit act of separating out” (Woodward, 2015, p. 223) objects to be placed out of view and use. Woodward (2015) advocates that this process is equally as important as other relational practices occurring in domestic spaces, as storage is often used as part of the consumption process, becoming a holding space for items that are somewhere between usage and discard, something she calls “dormant things” (Woodward, 2015). The boundaries of the physical home have been blurred in recent years with the proliferation of the self-storage industry (Owen, 2023, p. 80), and minimalist homes. Such homes are known for their reduction of unnecessary objects, but continue have spaces for storage that are hidden out of the traditional domestic space, such as an exterior shed (Owen, 2023, p. 79). Society as a whole is more obsessed with storage and organization as markets aim to sell organizing products, influencers try to promote organizing

methods, and the business of professional organizing keeps growing (Lane, 2024).

Clutter

Closely linked to practices of storage, is what happens when items linger between use, storage, and discard, and accumulate in the home. While some call this a “domestic overflow” (Löfgren, 2014), it can be seen as either a random assortment of goods or an in-tact assemblage of the passage of time. Woodward (2021) suggests that, beyond domestic mess or accumulation, clutter is “part of the process of organizing everyday life through the spaces and relationships within the home” (p. 1217), and is intricately connected with daily routines, habits, and usage that shift as time passes. Clutter can also cause anxiety when it is visible due to the imposing nature of its materiality and the moral weight that comes along with it. As Woodward notes, “clutter chides us for our apparent inability to tidy, sort, and our acquisition of too many things” (2022, p. 1227), making it an easy focus of materiality that is alive and active within the home. Tying together consumer culture, materiality, and domestic space, Woodward has dedicated a research program to uncovering objects located inside the home both in terms of storage and clutter.

Summary

The above listed domestic themes are not exhaustive; researchers are investigating the concept of home in terms of migration, homelessness, war and displacement, aging in the home, and domestic space post-illness. The themes presented here highlight the importance of routine, practice, and materiality in the home that can be conceptualized using ideas regarding the function of the house or home, domestic consumption practices, and concepts of morality surrounding mess and clutter and what a home should look like.

Justification and Contributions

The literatures on hoarding, consumer culture, and the home, provide a wide and encompassing range of perspectives on the human-object interactions that may occur in hoarded homes. Megan Shaeffer (2017), and David Orr, Michael Preston-Shoot and Suzy Braye (2017) have pointed to consumer culture as a necessary and advantageous approach to hoarding because it overcomes the medical perspective's focus on the individual by considering human-object interactions and materiality, as well as cultural aspects of the many forms of consumption including acquisition and discarding.

A practice-theory informed consumer culture framework draws attention away from the individual and toward the materiality that exists not just in homes but in society. It allows for attention to interactions between humans and materiality and how different aspects of society and culture, such as marketization processes and popular culture, influence ideologies in the domestic space. This position provides a unique contribution that makes inquiries into the home and the abundance of items inside, while attending to both the individual and materiality equally.

The literature also opens up consideration of object agency and assemblage, and invites a focus on materiality to draw objects back into the construction of cluttered domestic spaces. Additionally, a consumer culture approach supports an overall practice framework that considers objects, doings, and meanings in the form of domestic practices and routines, which are part and parcel of the practice of homemaking.

In doing so, I contribute to the literature by providing an empirical account of clutter and organization in Canadian domestic spaces. I turn attention toward devaluation, devaluation, and disposal, which highlight the importance of considering the full cycle of consumption. I build on the literature of ordinary consumption by highlighting how everyday domestic routines involve

mundane consumption. I also contribute to an empirical example to social practice theory as noted below.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

This thesis project is rooted in a practice theory framework that incorporates how discourse and affect intersect in the establishment and emergence of routine household practices that contribute to cluttered homes. I focus on how practices involve specific interactions between objects, doings, and meanings,¹⁴ and how particular combinations reflect routines likely to be present in cluttered homes. Additionally, I consider how affect contributes to meaning and movement of both individuals and goods in a home, and how discourses of consumption exist or subsist in the context of domestic space, including how popular and media discourses inform consumption ideas, knowledges, and activity.

These three frameworks intertwine at several points; however, for conceptualization purposes I treat each theoretical concept individually before providing an explanation of their intersections and suitability as an overall approach.

Social Practice Theory

The practice theory approach that emerged during the material turn saw diverse and varied theoretical developments, resulting in a fragmented understanding in the early years of its conception. Previous theoretical concepts incorporating practice can be seen in the work of scholars such as Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, and Charles Taylor. In 1996 Theodore Schatzki renewed interest in the approach and its definition and function in both sociology and cultural studies (Schatzki, 1996; Schatzki, 2001a; Reckwitz, 2002a), ushering in a turn to practice in the latter. Social practice theory has been identified by many as an important direction for research in consumption and the everyday life, including Alan Warde (Warde, 2005; 2014),

¹⁴ There are several ways to describe the components of practices, including materials, competencies, and meanings (Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012). I have chosen the Magaudda (2011) version as it closely follows Warde's (2017) suggestion of doings and sayings.

Elizabeth Shove (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson 2012; Shove 2014) and Bente Halkier (Halkier & Jensen, 2011; Halkier, et al., 2011). Although empirical translation has often been the foremost cited limitation of social practice theory, current studies illustrate the potential of understanding how objects, meanings, and doings combine in everyday life, for helping explain social and cultural change and contributing to policy making (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Shove et al, 2012).

Emergence

Early elements of practice theories can be seen in 1970s social and cultural theory; the practice approach emerged during the material turn, and while many authors believe it warrants its own status or identity as a 'turn', some suggest it is an extension of cultural theory due to its situation of knowledge as cultural (Reckwitz, 2002b). Early accounts are found in the works of Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1979) and the later writings of Foucault (see for instance *The History of Sexuality* Volumes 2 and 3, 1984/1988; 1984/1990), as well as in the philosophical writings of Wittgenstein and Taylor (Schatzki, 2001a). Each of these approaches comprise distinct attempts to deal with everyday life while challenging traditional notions of agency, structure, and action; however, agreement on necessary elements is varied or lacking. Later cultural writers such as Butler (1990) and Latour (1993) also experiment with practice approaches but instead focus on performative aspects of individual action or highlight how materiality connects within a field. While these authors are located in different substantive areas and are concerned with different content, each employs and develops practice theories to overcome a binary, whether science and technology's call for the joining of human and non-human entities, the disconnect between objects and subjects of culture, or the classic division of structure and agency in a theory of action, thus uniting them all around a central purpose.

Its multi-pronged development is identified as a key reason why social practice theories

have been criticized as a fragmented and inconsistent approach to social research. Early writers agree practices are “arrays of activity” (Schatzki, 2001a) that are embodied and enacted within a field of practice. However, what those activities are, how they are embodied, and how actions are mediated in various fields are contested areas of practice theory. The second wave of interest in practice theories, beginning with Schatzki in 1996, began a more intense process of defining an approach by emphasizing that practices consist of “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (2001a, p. 11). Reckwitz (2002b) extends this definition in his approach to practice theory as an ideal type, which places the social in practices and routines of individual behaviours that are inherently interconnected and pattern forming. This includes not only bodily movements but patterns of “understanding, knowing how and desiring” (2002b, p. 250), thus also accounting for emotion and affect. Reckwitz defines practice theory as “a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described, and the world is understood” (2002b, p. 250). He goes on to explain that practice theory “...encourages a shifted self-understanding. It invites us to regard agents as carriers of routinized, over subjective complexes of bodily movements, of forms of interpreting, knowing how and wanting and of the usage of things” (2002b, p. 259). This definition encompasses specific aspects of social practice theories that are important: the combining of agency and structure; the recognition of material things; the importance of the body; and the presence of discourse and affect in practice. Practice is thus something routinized, a coordinated activity performed “with varying degrees of regularity, competence and flair” (Postil 2010, p. 1) that includes both human and object activity. Shove and Pantzar (2005) continue in the tradition of both Schatzki and Reckwitz by highlighting the dual focus on materiality in practice; objects are implicated and inherent in practices, and thus social

practice theory is understood to focus on the configurations of objects, meanings, and doings, thus incorporating important aspects of materiality, cultural meaning, and embodied performances (Shove & Pantzar, 2005). Practices are varied such that they are not static or rule bound and “rarely, if ever, is there simply one way to carry out a practice” (Warde, 2016, p. 43), but they are standardized in such a way as to be recognizable by others.

While practices are routinized and habituated they are not automatic. When speaking of habits and habituation, the common understanding is that they reflect components of “deliberation, automaticity, and repetition” (Warde, 2016, p. 106). However, Dale Southerton draws attention to the cultural sociological understanding of habit (via Bourdieu) as culturally shared and reflexive, advocating for a definition that emphasizes “dispositions, procedures, and sequences” (Southerton, 2013, p. 338). Everyday activity emerges from “embodied and embedded activity” (Warde, 2014, p.292) that is an accumulation of many knowledges, understandings, and coordination’s between other activities, other people, and other environments, and temporal expectations. In this way, everyday practice can be seen as a type of habituated or routinized activity. Instead of focusing on habit and routine as nonconscious or stimulus response, practice theories understand everyday actions to be fashioned according to the various categories that make up what we understand as social life (Warde, 2014), as they draw attention toward “observable performances and patterning of stable practices” (Southerton, 2013, p. 342). This is an important distinction for social practice theory as it incorporates both recognition of the material environment and its affordances as well as individual disposition and agency.

One additional dimension of social practice theory via Schatzki (2002) is the distinction between dispersed and integrative practices. Dispersed practices describe a single action that

occurs in the same way in many areas of life across different contexts, such as questioning, ordering, or describing (Schatzki 2002, p. 88). Such practices encompass “knowing how to do something” (Warde 2005, p. 135) and are often rule free, which allows them to appear in various areas of social life. Alternatively, integrative practices are “complex entities joining multiple actions, projects, ends, and emotions” (Warde 2005, p. 135) that require both the “understanding of how to do something” as well as the knowledge that surrounds the context of the practice (Arsel & Bean, 2013, p. 901). Such practices are found in specific areas of social life, such as farming or cooking, and may include dispersed practices in a context specific form (Warde, 2005). Integrative practices are tied together within a context by something called a “teleoaffective structure”, which is “a set of acceptable ends, orders, uses, and emotions” (Arsel & Bean, 2013, p. 901) that position the practice within a set of particular values or meanings. The combination of teleology, an orientation towards a specific end, and affectivity, how things matter, encompasses how practices are goal oriented within a context of personal meaning (Schatzki, 2001b).

Practices cannot be considered individual static entities; they are dynamic processes that require continual *performance* to exist. Thus, actors are crucial to the existence of practices, as their repeated performance is how habituation and routinization are attained, and how the practice comes to be known and understood by others. However, the capacities of actors also affect their performance, creating variations in practices which sometimes lead, over time, to changes in practices. Sometimes this creates temporary adaptations; sometimes it gradually shifts the practice. Likewise, practices are only possible due to their environment. Warde suggests careful navigation so that not too much emphasis is put solely on objects (lest we become like actor network theory) and instead remember that there are other aspects of routine, habit, and

performance that contribute to practices. Instead, “practical procedures, improvised use of equipment, and the affordances and constraints of the wider environment and its social arrangements” (Warde, 2014, p. 294) should be considered when discussing the creation or maintenance of practices. The variations of a performance make it unclear how practices can be correctly recognized, but Warde suggests it has something to do with a template that the practice follows and a shared knowledge or understanding of certain concepts (Warde, 2016). Part of this knowledge comes not from an implicit understanding of the elements of a practice but from explicit commentary about the practice in various forms, which become knowledges that surround the practice.

Social Practice Theory in Consumer Culture

Social practice theory presents a suitable way forward for consumer culture studies in that it offers a way of accounting for mundane routine activity (Warde, 2014). Warde specifically points towards delineating between the *acquisition* of goods via economic models, the *appropriation* of goods into everyday life, and the *appreciation* of goods in terms of identity and pleasure through theories of taste, later known as the three A's. Warde proposes understanding consumption as “a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion” (Warde 2005, p. 137). The practice approach emphasizes “routine over actions, flow and sequence over discrete acts, dispositions over decisions, and practical consciousness over deliberation” (Warde 2014, p. 286), overcoming the tendency of the cultural turn to focus on the expressive individual and getting to the material and embodied practices of everyday consumption.

Writing in the context of sustainable consumption, David Evans (2019) suggests that Warde's conception of three A's of consumption are the focus of "front end" (Hetherington, 2004) consumption, which overlook the other part of the consumption cycle. He suggests three D's, *devaluation*, *divestment*, and *disposal*, which act as the cycle back end to Warde's front end. Devaluation suggests how economic value or cultural meaning can be lost, divestment refers to how items become depersonalized and attachments undone; and disposal refers to the many ways things can be disposed of that do not necessarily involve waste. Overall, these front and back end moments of consumption are useful to capture the objects, doings, and meanings that exist within processes of a larger conceptualization of consumption and how it is organized.

The study of domestic living spaces and household routines is an area where the practice approach has proven useful. For instance, Arsel and Bean (2013) use practice theory to understand how mass-marketing ideologies are part of *taste regimes* that operate as a teleoaffective structure to orchestrate practices of acquisition and display in domestic life. Modelled on Foucault's understanding of a regime as a discursive system that produces its own "regularities, prescriptions, reason and self-evidence" (Arsel & Bean, 2013, p. 899), they use taste regime as "a discursively constructed normative system that orchestrates the aesthetics of practice in a culture of consumption" (Arsel & Bean, 2013, p. 900). They argue that taste can be seen as a reflexive practice or performance rather than just individual choice or mindless selection, and taste regimes can explain how a platform such as a blog can help to coordinate objects, doings, and meanings via integrative practices of problematization, ritualization, and instrumentalization. This type of research illustrates how discourses of taste are found within consumption and use patterns that exist in the home, which can be explained by integrative practices. Likewise, Hand and Shove's (2007) study on UK households reveals how varying

freezing practices mediate other aspects of everyday life and domestic living. They find that using a freezer is “better seen as a continual negotiation and integrative performance rather than the end-point stabilization, closure or domestication” (2007, p. 80). A practice theory approach to this domestic object reveals how systems of provision change based on the environment in which they exist; management strategies of the home dictate practices of freezing, but the presence of the freezer as an object adds to different domestic strategies. Each of these practices involves a different set of materials, discourses, and skills that lead to freezer performances. Hand and Shove’s application is a particularly successful framing of the freezer as a mundane object that is mediated by household practices, highlighting how unassuming objects play important roles in everyday life, but also how parallel and opposing practices exist regarding the same object. These studies illustrate the applicative capability of social practice theory in consumer culture; however, the approach has certain limitations that have been criticized.

Limitations

An early critique of social practice theory focused on its nature as an *approach* rather than an explanatory mechanism. Many of the first studies suggested practice theory was never intended to explain or predict behaviours like many other theories do, and instead it is useful only for the purpose of organizing an inquiry (Schatzki, 2001a). Thus, social practice theory has previously been limited to a general or abstract account of different practices within a field (Schatzki, 2001a); however, as the theory has developed, it has shown an ability to connect practices and forms of social change. This early critique likely stemmed from the complex development of the theory, which resulted in a broad yet vague framework with regards to identifying practices, their boundaries, how they might overlap, or why some practices are similar yet separate (Warde, 2005, p. 146). Researchers are still undecided on whether practices

can be determined as entities or if practices are the sum of their performances, as well as how to identify a practice as something more than individual routinized behaviour (Warde, 2014). This leads to problems with identifying the emergence of new practices, leading some to suggest that social practice theory is incapable of identifying social change. However, this comment has been countered by Warde (2014) who suggests that studies such as Shove and Southerton's (2000) account of the changing nature of the freezer highlights the potential for social practice theory as a tool to explain change of both an object and the social world. I would extend this argument to include not only social practice theory's ability to explain change, but also to reveal possibilities to create change. For instance, Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) investigate the interconnection of practices to reveal shifts and changes in the social world that can be adapted to social policy. Using climate change as an example, they illustrate how a social practice theory approach in policy can go beyond behavioural change messages to facilitate transformations in social behaviour that are more likely to endure and satisfy policy goals. This has been the basis of Elizabeth Shove's famous 2011 talk "The Extraordinary Lecture".¹⁵

Much of the above critique rests atop the argument that the practice approach has a weak history of empirical translation. Warde (2005) notes that definitions of social practice theory include ideas of routines and understanding, which are not empirical objects or behaviours that can be researched with a typical observation methodology. However, the renewed interest in social practice theory as an approach to consumption has prompted authors to focus on the translation from theoretical to empirical application. Specifically, Halkier and Jenson (2011) have detailed an analytical translation of the practice approach in consumption research to a methodological framework. They highlight the importance of specific aspects of practice theory

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldEp3r1-8eo>

and then translate those aspects into approaches to qualitative methods such as interviewing. Thus, many practice theory critiques have been addressed through increased engagement and application; the second wave promoted by Schatzki drew attention to gaps in social practice theory, which prompted further empirical application in not just consumer culture studies but in other areas as well. This has created a more robust and promising set of guidelines for the application of practice theory, as well as a high level of engagement interest to further empirical studies.¹⁶

Additional criticisms of social practice theory have included its reduction of subjectivities of people (Rose, 2010) and a lack of consideration for relationalities between people. As Woodward suggests “what is lacking is a sense of how people’s significant relationships are constituted through things” (Woodward, 2015, p. 219). The study of practices thus benefits from interrogation into the complex social relationships surrounding the practices and how they are interwoven into the time, space, materiality, and affect¹⁷ of the practices performance.

A Practice Theory Approach to Hoarding and Clutter

Applied to hoarding, social practice theory illuminates the intersections of materiality and objects, meaning rooted in culture, and individual consumption routines. Using a practice theory approach to hoarding has been alluded to by Shaeffer (2017), who suggests that the “orientations of the hoarder towards their objects” (Shaeffer 2017, p. 10) is an important aspect in the study of hoarding from a cultural perspective. While medicalized perspectives focus on individual psychology, practice theory “shifts bodily movements, things, practical knowledge and routine to

¹⁶ See for instance the Practice Theory Consortium out of Lancaster University, which links practice theorists across the globe and has recently launched *The Journal of Practice Theory*.

<http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/socialpractice/welcome/consortium/>.

¹⁷ This is why I add affect to my framework.

the centre of its vocabulary” (Reckwitz, 2002b, p. 259), thus overcoming the narrow focus of previous approaches. Social practice theory also draws attention to the individual moments of the consumption process, including the three A’s and three D’s proposed by Warde (2005) and Evans (2019), to consider all facets of the consumption process, including valuation, identity, and mundane routine. Thus, social practice theory enables a more complex understanding of how consumption routines, discourses, performances, and objects come together to shape certain practices such as accumulation and clutter-hoarding activity.

Social practice theory introduces several benefits to the study of consumption; it overcomes binaries such as agency/structure and subject/object, it opens up inquiry into the body and embodied movement and affect, and it acknowledges all processes of consumption, thereby including disposal (a gap pointed to by Orr, Preston-Shoot, and Braye, 2017, but answered by Evans, 2019). Also, it addresses the materiality gap in the medical research on hoarding as identified by Shaeffer (2017) and answers the calls for a person-object relations focus (Moghimi, 2013) and a cultural analytic (Orr, Preston-Shoot, & Braye, 2017). Moreover, social practice theory has been promoted as a useful approach to the empirical study of consumer culture that does not privilege either individual consumer choices or other cultural structures, thus avoiding both excess voluntarism and structuralism (Halkier & Jenson, 2011, p. 102).

Affect Theory

Affect emerged alongside the material turn to move away from critical theory and common divisive binaries (such as nature/culture) and towards acknowledgement of the body and material environment, thus supporting “more vitalist, ‘post human’ and process-based perspectives” (Wetherell, 2012, p. 3). Across different disciplines, concepts like affect, emotion, feeling, and sentiment are often used in different ways, making the concept a highly contested

theoretical area of development (Frykman & Povrzanović Frykmann, 2016). Seigworth and Gregg (2010) list no fewer than eight approaches to affect, each highlighting a different concern; however, the dominant approaches are often defined according to if/how affect and cognition are linked. For some, affect is believed to come before cognition (Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2016), but for others affect and cognition are intertwined because meaning cannot exist without cognition (Ahmed, 2010; Wetherell, 2013). Additionally, approaches vary depending on whether non-human or inanimate objects can become affective or hold affect, as well as in regard to their positioning regarding the effect of culture. The connection or difference between affect and emotion also varies with approaches; some believe they are related concepts, with one occurring before or informing the other. Authors such as Massumi however separate affect and emotion, noting the former is a physiological reaction, while the latter involves personal meaning (2002).

In general, it can be said that “affect encompasses the various capacities of bodies to affect and be affected” by forces or intensities (Frykman & Povrzanović Frykmann, 2016, p. 12), highlighting “forces and energies which shape interactions between bodies” (Löfgren, 2014). Affect is also a form of “*embodied meaning making*” (Wetherell, 2012, p. 4). Embodiment is an important aspect of affect as it recognizes the “body’s *capacity* to affect and to be affected” (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 2) while also being integral to “a body’s perpetual *becoming*” (2010, p. 3), which is linked to the ability to change and adapt through the life course as opposed to maintaining the same identity.¹⁸ Affect can also be understood as an “*in-between-ness*” (2010, p. 2) that focuses on energies between entities.

At the crux of affect is its connection to human feeling and emotion:

The advantage of affect is that it brings the dramatic and the everyday back into social

¹⁸ The concepts of being and becoming derive from Nietzschean philosophy.

analysis. It draws attention to moments of resentment, kindness, grumpiness, ennui and feeling good, to the extremities of distress that can result from ill use, and to the intensities of ecstasy. (Wetherell, 2012, p. 2)

Affect can help reveal the hidden or unnamed bodily responses that come from interactions with other entities that are often encountered in routine ways.

Affective Practice

In order to connect the biological and cultural aspects of affect and ground the concept in empirical work, I turn to Wetherell's conceptualization of "affective practice," which refers to "a figuration where body possibilities and routines become recruited or entangled together with meaning-making and with other social and material figuration....in which all the parts relationally constitute each other" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 19). The notion of practice emphasizes the connection between the body and meaning making while also acknowledging the material objects, institutions, pasts, and futures that come together and form assemblages of affect (2012, p. 20). Affect can then be part of a performance; practices may have affective elements that are expressed in their routinization due to particular dispositions that have become stable over time.

To Wetherell's affective practice I add a stronger emphasis on materiality and environment; consumer culture is a particular type of *material culture* that requires attention to objects and environments, which play a role in the creation or experience of affective states. Human lives are always embedded in time and space and therefore in material culture (Frykman & Povrzanović Frykman, 2016). Objects and environments however do not inherently have affects. Sara Ahmed (2010) discusses how affects are created and influenced by environment and culture; affect cannot be contained in the self, but an object can be imbued with affect or be a temporary holder of affect. In a discussion of happiness, Ahmed (2010) illustrates how "objects

acquire value through contact with bodies” (p. 23) as well through associations in time and space. Once an object is named a “happy object” (Ahmed, 2010) it can be circulated culturally, causing an anticipated (valorized) affective interaction between human and object. This can be true for many types of affects and objects, which is why the “the biography of a person is intimately bound up with objects” (Ahmed 2010, p. 27) and their subsequently named cultural affects. The way in which objects are tied to individuals and their emotions is also illustrated by Elliott and Urry’s (2010) research on miniaturized mobilities. Handheld technologies such as cellphones and laptops can become “emotional containers” during times of low sociability or distance from loved ones, thus illustrating how affective states can be preserved in the object world. (2010, p. 39). This means technological objects can constitute and produce the lives of mobile people in different ways that involve stored affective states. Ahmed as well as Elliot and Urry deal with concepts of affect that include *practice*, in that the objects emerge from certain routines and regulate practices. Ahmed suggests that an object’s relation to affect is often established and maintained through habit, whereas Elliot and Urry emphasize that new practices or routines with objects have opened up opportunities for repetitive mood retrieval. Both cases fit well within Wetherell’s concept of affective practice.

Affect and Consumer Culture

Affect theory is a useful tool for looking at consumer culture because it draws attention to affective connections between individuals and material objects, adding complexity to actions and routines that occur in a consumer lifestyle. Research suggests that objects are available as containers or storage for emotions, which can then be used in routine ways to access or prompt affective states (Elliott & Urry, 2010; Ahmed, 2010). Affect also draws attention to the varied types of meaning-making that emerge during object interactions. Commodities can be considered

“cultural meanings that in turn provide access to emotional categories and experiences” (Illouz, 2009, p. 380), illustrating certain motivations and routines that are adopted in material environments. This is true for items that are heavily laden with sentimentality or imbued with memory as well as completely mundane objects (Woodward, 2021). Most importantly, the concept of affect encompasses “how consumption is anchored in cognition and culture on the one hand, and in the motivational structure of drives and of the body on the other” (Illouz, 2009, p. 382), bridging the gap between the individual and cultural environment, while acknowledging the interaction between the body and objects in the process of meaning making and experience. This shifts emotion from being subject centred to being part of an assemblage of objects and environments. In terms of examining the cluttered home, accounting for affect sheds light on how material items may be valued beyond their inherent use-value, or contribute to affective routines that interrupt the conventional acquisition-discard cycle. Embodied affect and the navigation of the home environment can also speak to the positioning and display of goods and the routinization of object storage that goes beyond typical home decor or collecting practices.

Capturing Affect - Appraisal Theory

One common criticism of the concept of affect involves how difficult it is to recognize, capture, or measure affect in empirical research. For my study I use the appraisal theory of emotions, which maintains that emotions are a result of the evaluation and interpretation of an environment or situation that has relevance to an individual’s well-being (Bagozzi et al., 1999). Emotional responses to situations are dependent on individuals having a personal stake in the matter at hand, as well as assessing whether that situation coincides or conflicts with personal goals. Appraisals can be conscious and deliberate, or unconscious and automatic (Bagozzi et al., 1999, p. 185). This approach can be useful to understand why people have different emotional

responses when faced with the same situations. This is because appraisal theory focuses on object interpretation, considering personal meaning in addition to the materiality of the thing. Thus, all things do not evoke the same emotions.

This project is interested in varying valuations of objects that are connected to practices within the home. For instance, the valuation of an empty container may align with a desire to reuse goods, producing a practice of saving excess vessels. Appraisal theory is also useful for detecting how media messages of consumption are received in the home, producing differing emotions and orientations based on independent conscious or unconscious goals.

The observation and understanding of affect and its relation to individual practices in the everyday life prompts the inclusion of discourse theory in this research. While affect and emotion are tied to meaning making, so too are language and the semiotic. Discourse can thus become an additional access point for the creation and understanding of embodied knowledges in practice.

Discourse Theory

Discourse theory emerged from the linguistic turn in the social sciences and humanities, which signaled a shift from *objects* of knowledge to *processes* of knowledge and attempted to capture how meaning creation is not fixed in material things but is created and circulated in society, contributing to the formation of culture (Carter, 2013, p. 583). The linguistic turn has roots in early 20th Century Saussurian structural linguistics, which focuses on the production of meaning through signs and symbols that circulate in society. The idea was that the relation between form and content of an object is not inherently given but is socially constructed and dependent on other relations, creating variable representations of the world (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). By the 1970s, structuralist positions were rejected due to the inability to regard

or explain change, which ushered in poststructuralism and critical theory. This shifted focus toward “the process of objectification rather than object as structure, subjectivization rather than subject, universalization rather than the universal, and so on” (Carter, 2013, p. 584) to examine meaning making in society. Alongside the development of the concept of performativity (See Butler, 1990) within this turn, the concept of discourse came to the fore.

What is Discourse?

Discourse, most simply, is language in use (Gee, 2011). Generally, there are two types of discourse: descriptive, which pertains to the lexicon of language and style such as sentence structure and word choice and is popular in linguistics; and analytical, the version I am interested in, which, in addition to the workings of language, examines communication in society and culture, often commenting on power and social problems. Discourse theory generally “emphasizes the role of language in the construction of social reality” (Talja, 1999, p. 460) and posits that language, beyond being a communication tool, shapes the representations we create and encounter, thus contributing to knowledge systems. The concept of discourse also highlights “the production of knowledge through language” (Hall 1992 via Hall 2013, p. 29, via), connecting social communication and know-how in everyday life. The *analysis* of discourse extends to the study of patterns of language that exist in society, their practices and contexts, and their changes and adaptations (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Furthermore, the analysis of discourse also seeks the perpetuation of ideologies and power structures that are reified in structure, institutions, and individuals (Fairclough, 2003).

Intertwined with discourse is the concept of representation, which illustrates how meaning and language are connected to culture (Hall, 2013). Representation is the idea that any sign — a physical good, image, or concept — can stand in for something else, real or imagined,

whether it be another object, concept, or ideology. Representation does not deny the existence of the real or material world, but instead suggests that meaning is created within a conceptual system that depends upon the relation and interpretation of concepts. This is most clearly seen in the production and reception of media; discourses via representation are created and distributed through media channels awaiting uptake by audiences. While this may seem to be a passive system, the cultural codes in the discourse require “decoding” (Hall, 1991) to produce meaning and be recirculated. The production and distribution of concepts contribute to the reception of culture and ideology; culture is bound up in the production and exchange of signs and symbols, which affects meaning creation in everyday life. Additionally, meaning can vary not just on situational knowledge but also the positioning of particular concepts; an intertextual approach to discourse acknowledges that the meaning derived from discourses, signs, and symbols are dependent on the varied meanings of other surrounding discourses and concepts (Rose, 2016).

Discourse Theory and Consumer Culture

When considering hoarding behaviour in the context of consumer culture, discourse analysis can be an informative tool of inquiry by linking social discourses regarding acquisition, display, and discard, to the practices that are present in a home. Discourses in society that deal with material goods and home decor are laden with meanings that often contain normative messages or ideologies regarding household maintenance and shopping practices, influencing the meaning of goods and impacting the home environment and the everyday practices of homemaking. Media and advertising in particular are mediums rife with moralizing discourses; cultural intermediaries such as reality television hosts or brand ambassadors have unique positions in their ability to transmit various discourses dealing with hoarding, organizing, minimalism, and housekeeping. General social messages regarding recycling are also at odds

against consumerism messaging and traditional “keeping up with the Joneses” marketing.

Interrogating the structure of these discourses, their valuations, and the ways in which they enter the home, allows for effective understanding of the knowledges that both create and interfere with practices of acquisition and discard.

Combining Practice, Affect, and Discourse

While I have chosen to situate my study dominantly in social practice theory, I recognized early the need for additional theories to thoroughly explain domestic spaces and clutter. Practice, affect, and discourse all have individual strengths in analysis, but individually each has certain gaps or a limited reach that do not fully satisfy my research questions. Adding affect and discourse theories to a foundation of practice theory provides richer context and dimension to my analysis, contributing to a comprehensive study of meaning, knowledge, practice, materiality and embodiment in cluttered homes.

Social practice theory has intrinsic connections to theories of affect and discourse in that both affect and discourse create and contribute to everyday practices. Interactions with material objects often include affective or emotional states or reactions, which can become routinized (Ahmed, 2010; Elliott & Urry, 2010). As well, emotions are part of everyday life situations and inform all practices, including those of acquisition and discard. Affect can also speak to how affective meaning making contributes to the *embodiment* of routines; especially in intimate environments such as the home, the ways bodies move and navigate across different spaces are related to routinized affective states. Wetherell suggests “affective activity is a form of social practice” (2015, p. 147) and combining the two can reveal how the development and routinization of practices is connected to knowledge and meaning in conjunction with emotion.

Additionally, discourses can be understood via practice theory as embodied forms of

circulated knowledges that are enacted by the individual. That discourses address knowledges that apply to material goods and affect normative consumption, has been an important contribution to the study of consumer culture (Arsel & Bean, 2013). The ability to question the representations available to an individual and the translation and presentation of those representations in their own home gives another layer of meaning to how one navigates the everyday life. The addition of practice theory to discourse also addresses the often-criticized materiality gap in discourse theory (Wetherell, 2013).

The cultural turn's reliance on language and culture and its inattention to materiality initially clashed with the study of affect; affect seeks meaning in sensuality and bodily perceptions rather than language and discourse (Wetherell, 2013, p. 352). However, Wetherell (2015) suggests the two are interlinked because meaning-making and communication are inherently tied. She argues "there are no neat and easy dividing lines between physical affect and discourse, or between discursive capture and affective capture, or between discursive enlistment and affective enlistment" (p. 152), because the two intertwine in reflexive feedback. This process contributes to activities and sense-making, identified by what Wetherell terms "affective-discursive practices" (Wetherell, 2015, p. 152), which are then relational and shared while being emotional as well as embodied. This characterization of the combination of practice, discourse, and affect, highlights why I have chosen to include affect and discourse with the social practice theory analysis; to untangle practice from affect or discourse from practice in the context of a consumer culture study that focuses on attachments to goods and meaning making would overlook how knowledge, discourse, bodies, movement, and emotions exist and intertwine in materiality and inside of the home.

Chapter Four: Methodology

Understanding the role of materiality in Hoarding and clutter is a growing interest in academic circles; while the earliest and most substantial literatures investigate Hoarding Disorder through a medical and psychological lens, researchers in areas of cultural studies, cultural geography, and media studies, for example, are becoming interested in investigating our connection with materiality and the ways it accumulates in our living spaces. While this has provided new and innovative frameworks for understanding objects and clutter, few undertake qualitative data collection with people who have clutter or Hoarding Disorder (Moghimi, 2013), and even fewer attempt ethnographic or in-home interviewing to gather exploratory data about cluttered homes. As Orvar Löfgren notes, “the growth of domestic overflow has been noted in consumer studies, often inspired by the material turn, but it seems to me that there is still too little blood, sweat, and tears in ethnographies of domestic lives” (2014, p. 82). Indeed, our connection to materiality is always augmented in personal and environmental ways that go beyond the typical use of any one object, making it “interesting to understand not just how many possessions households have (information that can be obtained with questionnaires and interviews), but also the kinds of objects, where the family members place them and how they use them” (Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo 2019, p. 16). It is with this research gap in mind that I embarked upon my project, a study which produced 17 in-home interviews, to gain insight into the domestic routines and lived experiences of people with high levels of material possessions.

This project seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) How can clutter be understood as emerging from a range of integrative practices of consumption and the performance of domestic routines that involve interactions of objects, doing, and meanings?

- 2) How do social and affective orientations present in homes limit or inhibit the discarding of material items?
- 3) How can a social practice theory approach provide new insight into processes of accumulation and clutter in the home, challenging current dominant and popular psychological perspectives on Hoarding Behaviour?

To answer these questions, I use a constructivist orientation employing qualitative methods to capture the unfolding of the everyday lives of individuals in situ; an important aspect of both qualitative research and practice theory (Thomson, 2018). I use a guided tour approach that includes a home tour, semi-structured interviews, and object interviews to explore the objects, doings, and meanings that are present in cluttered homes and that influence practices of acquisition and discarding. The purpose of my methodological framework is to inquire into domestic clutter while being positioned inside of the home to allow for a first-hand account of materiality in the home to understand how everyday routines of clutter are performed and negotiated.

This chapter will discuss my epistemological framework and detail my reflexive approach and positionality as a researcher. I then detail the ethical aspects of the research project. My methods section covers how I used guided in-home tours, semi-structured interviews, and object interviews in my research. I go on to discuss the interview data, including how I recruited participants and what the interview protocol involved. I then discuss the data; the sample characteristics, my approach to data analysis, and the challenges I faced during the research. I address the generalizability of the study before concluding the chapter.

Epistemological Framework

This project is rooted in a constructivist approach, as I seek to understand the subjective

meanings of practices and objects present in an individual's home (Creswell, 2013). Social constructivism, also known as interpretivism, is an epistemological approach in which the researcher "seeks understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). This understanding stems from individual experiences that are "varied and multiple" and leads the researcher to seek a wider interpretation of objects and experiences, rather than a narrowing of meaning, in the construction of knowledge. Research in this frame looks to examine how certain meanings are "negotiated socially and historically" and developed through interactions shaped by culture and society (Creswell, 2013, p. 25). Wide, open-ended questions are key so that participants have the opportunity to describe or detail the situation in their own way, while the researcher remains open to each individual experience. In this approach, the researcher understands that their own background, knowledge, and experience may shape the interpretation of the research, and thus reflexivity is required to acknowledge how their position in the research has led to a particular interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2013, p. 25).

Social constructivism pairs well with a social practice theory approach to consumer culture as it affords a new way of looking at individuals and consumption by overcoming prior perspectives, such as those that focused solely on consumer choice or gave too much power to larger structures that were not in the reach of the consumer. Instead, a constructivist approach can analyze how consumption is a part of social life as well as how consumption intersects multiple everyday life practice and routines (Halkier & Jensen, 2011).

It may be questioned how seemingly objective materiality, often studied with a positivist approach, can be examined within a constructivist framework. In this project I seek to understand how people navigate materiality within the home and how routines of accumulation, storage, and discard contribute to an amassment of objects in a domestic space. This means I consider not just

the social meanings of objects, but also how their placement plays a role in enacting everyday routines. This requires considering how materiality “plays an active, constitutive role, which has its own agency that does not have to be necessarily connected with a conscious mind” (Galčanová & Vacková, 2016, p. 230). Thus, the presence of affect that may be found both with object relations as well as with the creation and maintenance of routines that are structured by personal meanings, values, and goals become another area of everyday life that can be incorporated into a constructivist interpretation of the cluttered home, furthering the research of materiality from physical objects to interactive and interacting entities in the home.

Additionally, I am interested in how participants draw on circulating object and domestic discourses to inform their own knowledge and meaning creation, and how that contributes to accumulation and discarding activity in the home, including the navigation of living space and the routinization of the acquisition, care, and discard of goods. These activities, while found to be thematically patterned, were unique in each home, and contributed to particular knowledges of space and the home.

While the interpretation of cluttered homes is the focus of this project, there are also critical questions that inform this research. I am attuned to how individuals navigate popular culture messages regarding the possession and maintenance of things, including environmental ideals of reusing and recycling, minimalism, organizing, and notions of Hoarding Disorder. This involves a critical lens; while my project does not attempt to use a transformative process with regards to the treatment of Hoarding Disorder or the general medicalization of the accumulation of goods, I do question the presence of popular discourses of Hoarding and clutter in the normalizing and moralizing treatment of everyday objects and practices in the household. While my interview guide does not prompt questions on these topics, many individuals brought up

aspects of these discourses on their own, mentioning them as a part of their life or their management of things. Additionally, the medicalized literature is heavily intertwined with popular culture depictions of Hoarding Behaviour, which leads to stigmatizing ideas of clutter and the clutterer.¹⁹ While this project does not cover a full examination of the depths of these harms, it does acknowledge how and when critiques of such ideologies arose during interviews or were reflected in the comments of participants. These often appear as inflections while saying the word “Hoarding” or are made in general comments about organizing and minimalism. Additionally, the discussion and conclusion of this project reflect certain critiques of popular culture understandings of clutter and make recommendations that may be considered part of a critical frame.

The combination of these two paradigms (constructivist and critical) provides an inherent tension in that I seek to explore individual meaning making and validate lived experience while also being aware of the origins of stigmatizing messaging surrounding clutter. To overcome this dissonance, I engaged in reflexivity prior to interviews to keep an open mind to the ways participants sought out information and navigated object storage and discarding practices, and ensured any critical commentary on clutter or organization was already a part of the participants lived experience before commenting on it. This meant only asking questions about sorting or organizing methods in neutral, curiosity-driven ways, but including follow-up questions if participants expressed a feeling or emotion in their inflection or words. For instance, it sometimes involved asking where they heard of certain sorting methods (television or magazines, for instance), how they felt about media influences regarding organizing or minimalism, or why they thought certain methods did not work for them. I also listened carefully

¹⁹ The literature review chapter above details this.

for any time a participant brought up “Hoarding” and the context and inflection in which they discussed it; sometimes flippantly, sometimes with concern, sometimes with laughter.

On Reflexivity and Positionality

This research is the result of years of interest in consumer culture and exposure to working in the mental health field. It is informed by media studies and an interest in everyday mundane objects. For this constructivist project, reflexivity is important to situate my previous knowledge and personal experience with Hoarding and clutter, my knowledge of the medical system, and my research into the stigmatizing portrayals of Hoarding and clutter in popular media such as reality television.

A rigorous qualitative research project requires researcher reflexivity, which involves consideration for the production of knowledge, especially in terms of power, ethics, and reciprocity between research subjects and researchers (Pillow, 2003). Being reflexive can bring an understanding of how historical and/or power relations play a role in the researcher’s approach to the project, including all steps of research from proposal development, data gathering, analysis, and writing up of results (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Additionally, reflexivity can be part of developing validity in a qualitative research project that is situated in a constructivist epistemology, as it works to continually check that the researcher’s perspectives and experiences do not interfere with data collection or analysis, producing results that better reflect the data gathered.

The approach to my research project comes from a curious but critical understanding of hoarding that is the result of many years of engagement with the topic. I previously completed my Master of Arts degree in Sociology with a thesis that examined the presentation of individuals and households on the reality television show *Hoarders*. The topic stuck with me,

especially as I aided my family in cleaning out my grandmother's meticulously kept but very full home, but it was not until working at the Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Centre of Manitoba (OCD Centre)²⁰ that I began to uncover gaps in the understanding of people who had "too much stuff." The OCD Centre ran an ongoing support group for Hoarders, as well as an occasional book-based workgroup, and offered resources and support to family members of Hoarders. While OCD and Hoarding have been determined to be separate conditions (Tolin & Villavicencio, 2011) the focus on Hoarding had found a temporary home at the centre, and had attracted a talented social worker to run the Hoarding workshops. This social worker had worked with Hoarders in different scenarios and had several long-term clients whom she had aided to keep their homes free of clutter. I operated as her placement liaison while she completed her Masters of Social Work at the OCD Centre and worked alongside her during her support group for Hoarders. I mention this encounter because it was in these interactions with (self-proclaimed) Hoarders that I developed important questions about the nature of the definition of Hoarding, the stigmatizing aspects of Hoarding as a mental health concern, and the uniqueness of each individual and their habits, which many treatment plans do not acknowledge. I was additionally struck by some of the items the participants kept and their reasons for being unable to part with them. It was during this time that I decided to pursue these questions in a research project.

This unique positioning and history required the use of reflexivity as recognition of the self during this research project (Pillow, 2003, p. 181). While part of my interest in hoarding stems from object attachment as a child and later a curiosity about the abundance of objects in my home and my grandmother's home, my experience includes academic research on the medicalized understanding of Hoarding as well as consideration of the portrayal of objects and

²⁰ During COVID-19 the OCD Centre was absorbed into the Canadian Mental Health Association of Manitoba and Winnipeg.

consumption in media and popular culture. While I am generally curious about objects, my scrutiny of consumer culture affects how I approach cluttered spaces. A reflexive practice that included preparing for interviews with the idea of being an invited guest in someone's home, reminding myself to listen more than speak during interviews, and recording memos afterwards about the interactions that took place, helped me to position myself during interviews so as to develop a quick rapport with participants so they felt comfortable to open up and speak freely, benefitting the interviews and enriching the data.

Additionally, I had to recognize that “embedded within the research process are relationships of power that all researchers must face” (Pillow, 2003, p. 182). My position as a researcher quickly situated me as expert about the clutter in each home, and I was often asked to help in ways that were not a part of the project. Making sure the participants understood the purpose of the research and finding opportunities during interviews to ask questions helped to keep me positioned as a curious onlooker rather than an expert. While my positionality (as a non-medical expert) made me an ideal person to conduct this type of research, it was also important to be reflexive about my position and my knowledge in order to conduct this type of constructivist research. Keeping reflexivity at the core of my interviews produced long, rich interviews as participants were able to set my expertise aside and see me as a curious guest in their home.

Ethics

This project is approved by the University of Manitoba Ethics board.²¹ To ensure the safety and confidentiality of participants, all electronic data, including recordings and photos, are stored on a password protected university server, while all hard files, including signed confidentiality forms, gift card receipt forms, COVID-19 forms, and floor plan sketches, are kept

²¹ The ethics approval letter is attached as Appendix A.

in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office.

While the project approach does not focus on medicalized treatment methods for Hoarding behaviour, the safety and well-being of the participant is of utmost importance, and information on a range of services including decluttering services and mental health providers was included in the debriefing paperwork.²² If the participant indicated they were help-seeking, the resources were further discussed.

Confidentiality is important in the research process, and I was aware of the potential concern for the life and/or safety of others that may have required my intervention. Hoarded homes may be structurally dangerous, infested with bugs or vermin, or be in such decline that heat/gas/water services are unavailable or inaccessible. The possibility of the researcher needing to contact outside sources in the case of endangerment of self or others was included in the consent form.²³ While I was prepared with the appropriate strategies for these situations, none of the homes I visited required this intervention. Additionally, it has been noted that objects, due to their materiality and affective nature, can bring out sudden emotions that people are unaware of or unprepared for, and that ethically the interviewer should pause and offer withdrawal (Woodward, 2020). Indeed, this situation occurred several times during home visits but all participants wanted to continue the interview.

While my research was focused on the reduction of harm for participants, I was also aware of the dangers I put myself in as a researcher while entering potentially Hoarded homes. The sensitive nature of the topic, which includes the potential for the disclosing of mental illness, trauma, and grief, increases the potential for the conversation to evoke emotion in the participant, and indeed the personal nature of the home environment did bring up the requirement for

²² See Appendix B.

²³ See Appendix C.

supportive and compassionate disposition in several interviews. My previous experience working at the OCD Centre of Manitoba equipped me with the skills to compassionately listen to participants when they needed and to allow extra time to process any complicated feelings. This benefitted the research as acknowledging the participants' emotional response can make it feel "that it is safe to reveal further information", as many did (McCosker et al., 2001, p. 11). However, these types of interviews impacted me as a researcher and I needed to employ mitigating strategies. I abided by Silverio et al.'s (2022) suggestion that for "research studies involving a sensitive, challenging, or difficult subject matter, it may only be appropriate to schedule-in a single interview or focus group for one day with two to three days before the next data collection event takes place" (p. 8). Another strategy used was to conduct voice memos in my car after the interview had ended; Silverio et al. recommend the use of a "reflective diary" to keep aware of mood and behaviour after interviews, and taking time to verbalize my thoughts and feelings regarding particularly tough interviews helped me to process distressing points of the conversation so that I could detach my feelings from the data I collected (2002, p. 9). These types of voice recordings were kept separate from more formal research memos.

I was also aware that there might be a personal physical risk during these interviews; Hoarding exists on a scale of severity, and while the most severe cases are often in a hidden population unlikely to reach out for help (Frost, Steketee, & Williams, 2000), there was a chance I may enter an unsafe home. To ensure my own safety, a quick assessment of each home was done before I proceeded with the home tour to assess risk factors such as dangerously piled items, an inability to easily get access to the front or first room, a clear presence of dead animals or excrement, or an excess of open rotting food accompanied by a smell. I did not detect these risks in any of the homes I entered.

Methods

While embarking on a constructivist project, my approach to data collection included a home tour, semi-structured interviews, and object interviews. These methods are oriented around the overall approach of a guided tour.

Guided Tour

A growing framework for approaching qualitative research, the *guided tour* is an embodied research tool positioned in social constructivism that is a way to study “situated and embodied information” (Thomson, 2018). While popular in library science and museum studies, this method to study the everyday life draws on ethnography and aims to connect individuals and their social environments by allowing an interviewer to see “through the participants’ eyes” (Everett & Barrett, 2012, pp. 42-43). The method, similar to a “go-along” or “walk-along” (Thomson, 2018, p. 516), is a cross between observation and semi-structured interviews that allows the participants’ narrative to unfold with small probes or follow-up questions from the researcher. This method positions the researcher as an “embodied research instrument” (Thomson, p. 515) while incorporating a type of object where tours “rely upon the tangible parts of a physical setting as entry points for exploring the different dimensions of a given phenomenon” (Thomson, p. 516). While similar to participant observation, the method does not require a lengthy relationship with the participant and is instead bounded in time, thus lending itself well to shorter interactions (Thomson, p. 516). Overall “the technique looks more to material object and spatial walking probes... to spur participants’ stories” (Thomson, p. 517) and generate a broader understanding of the everyday life experience of the participant. Sometimes this contributes to a shared understanding of the participant’s life experience, and thus researcher reflexivity is important (Thompson, p.530).

The guided tour involves a researcher asking the participant to lead them through a personally significant location, such as the home, while describing it, which allows for a natural unfolding of information and creates space for any emotion or affect that emerges. In this way, the guided tour captures the embodied movements in the original environment, which differs from what would be witnessed in a regular interview, thus creating a data set that is “more than the sum of its parts” (Thomson, 2018, p. 515). Additionally, the embodied knowledge that is accessed and shared by participants is an opportunity for researcher reflexivity, as they can reflect on their own embodied knowledge. For this reason, the guided tour is useful for the present study, given that observation must take place in a specific environment familiar to the participant, and given the emphasis on better understanding the everyday interactions between the participant and a set or sets of objects.

In her review of information and library science (ILS) studies, Leslie Thomson (2018) identifies several steps that encompass the method of guided tour. In preparation for the guided tour, researchers should “generate a clear statement of their aims” for the project (Thomson, 2018, p. 523) so that the researcher understands when probing questions might arise. Next, the researcher should secure any required equipment: because of the nature of the visual environment as well as of the interview format, researchers may wish to have an audio or video recorder to aid with data capture so they can pay more attention to “small contextual details and embodied cues” (Thomson, 2018, p. 523). Additionally, a camera for photos or home sketches may be desired to capture images. These choices depend on the study purpose and location sensitivity (Thomson, 2018, p. 523). For instance, video recordings may be too invasive for some participants, while sketching can be time consuming. Third, participants should be prepared ahead of time for the nature of the tour, the purpose of the study, and any other expectations.

Fourth, the researcher should begin the tour with “direct but open-ended requests” (Thompson 2018, p. 523) such as “please show me where you cook” or “let’s start in the kitchen”. Fifth, researchers should be sure to “actively foreground participants’ voices during the guided tour” (Thompson 2018, p. 524), whether that means allowing them to hold the voice recorder, or allowing household members to come and go as normal. Lastly, researchers must act on any object or verbal probes that arise to encourage participants, for instance asking “What is this?” or “Tell me how this works”. In this way the guided tour will develop iteratively according to the objects and research purpose. Thomson also encourages writing memos as soon as possible after every interview; the “multisensory” nature of the interview requires the recording of additional data, such as smells, as soon as possible to capture the richness of the data (Thomson, 2018, p. 525).

Strengths of guided tours identified by Everett & Barrett (2012) include mitigating power imbalances associated with interviews by allowing participants to serve as expert and creator of meaning, and by fostering an environment that produces casual and relaxed interactions. They further highlight the benefits of using objects to elicit or probe for more information, and they highlight the potential of guided tours for prompting researcher reflexivity (Everett & Barrett, 2012, p. 43). Identified weaknesses of guided tours requiring mitigation include: “practical, legal and ethical constraints” when tours are conducted in private homes (Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020, p. 601); challenges of building trust in a short time span; reliance on participants to reveal all areas of the touring space; and the intensive attention demands on the part of the researcher “especially when minute embodied movements are of interest” (Thomson, 2018, p. 528).

In sum, the focus on the everyday life experience and knowledge of the participant and the requirement to be in the research setting (the home) made using a guided tour approach an

ideal method. As part of this framework, I employed in-home tours, semi-structured interviews and object interviews, which I outline in further detail below.

In-home Tours

When researching material culture and specific environments, in-home tours allow the participant to move freely in their own home and share spaces or objects with the researcher, which can help to build rapport and open up narrative (Orr et al., 2017). Being toured through the home by the owner allows a researcher to experience the space according to how it is understood by the people living in it, giving clues into routines and practices. First-hand experience among people's possessions also helps the researcher understand how people construct their domestic spaces: with which items and in what positions. Presence among these items allows for further inquiry into people's engagement with objects, and leads to further object interviews (Woodward, 2015).

Semi-structured Interviews

Because this project is an exploratory study of processes of accumulation and clutter, interviewing in-home as part of the guided tour provides the opportunity to inquire about the practices that contribute to accumulation, while also getting at the construction of different knowledges and emotional orientations regarding objects and domestic materiality. Interviewing is common in qualitative research; knowledge is co-produced through dialogue (Kvale, 1996). Semi-structured interviews provide the participant flexibility to discuss what is important to them, while also allowing the researcher the ability to further explore certain topics or comments that are revealed to be important to the project (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 286). As an addition to the home tour, sit-down semi-structured interviews were included at the end of each tour to provide an opportunity to expand on any previous topics as well as to touch on anything that was of

interest but not discussed. For this purpose, an interview guide was created with sets of themes and topics (see Appendix D) to ensure important information was covered.

Object Interview²⁴

The object interview is a method to investigate materiality in situ or in context of where an object is located (Woodward, 2020). An object interview allows a researcher to “critically engag[e] with the materiality of particular things as well as how people and objects interact in material, sensorial and embodied ways” (Woodward, 2020, p. 34). Object interviews can generate points of focus to create prompts for interviews, encouraging discussion on the use of an object, where it came from, how long it has been kept, or to whom it might be connected. While similar to an object elicitation, the object interview looks more to the larger environment of objects in their original locations and as a feature for knowledge creation, while elicitation focuses more on the stories of individual objects, explained to a researcher in or out of context (Woodward, 2020).

Object interviews are useful for the study of everyday life because they aid in producing knowledge through the “interchange(s) between interviewers, interviewees and objects” (Woodward, 2020, p. 36), helping mitigate interviewer-interviewee power dynamics by positioning the participant as a leader during the interview. During this process, the materiality (the physical nature) of the object, the setting, and the environment, come together and are connected to the participant as they move through spaces and touch objects, recounting their connections and histories to the things that surround them. Thus, an object interview can “be a space of encounter (of seeing the object differently as you step back and reflect upon it) as well

²⁴ While Thomson (2018) notes object elicitation as a method for the guided tour, clarification from Woodward (2020) suggests object interviews as the correct term.

as a point of connection (to the thing, the contexts and people it connects with)” (Woodward, 2020, p. 38). In the context of a guided home tour, objects become part of the knowledge collection that is conveyed by the participant but also experienced by the interviewer, uncovering a vivid exposure of the individual’s own lived experience and knowledge.

Object interviews pair well with guided tours as materiality is a given aspect of any toured environment. They work especially well in the home environment, since, due to the nature of the home and personal possessions, objects are likely to be imbued with meaning, stories, and affect that can enhance the data collection. A home tour allows for exposure to a wide variety of objects and environments, allowing for encounters with the most important, interesting, mundane, or forgotten objects, as well as the locations in which they are kept or stored, creating a rich dataset for understanding clutter.

Data Collection

The data set for this project involves data collected from in-home guided tours: semi-structured interview recordings; object interviews; photos taken by the participants; as well as researcher memos and field notes including sketched floor plans. The guided tours were conducted with 17²⁵ participants living in Winnipeg, Manitoba, between November, 2022 and August, 2023.

During interviews, special attention was paid to inquiring into routines and the lived experience of the participant and their possessions. I was focused on eliciting discussions of certain items and the stories behind them, how objects were used in the home, and how objects came in and out of the home. In general participants seemed trusting; interview recordings revealed the point of each interview in which I had gained the trust of the participant, which was

²⁵ I conducted 18 interviews in total. One interview did not yield relevant data, so it was omitted from the analysis.

indicated by an increase in dialogue by the participant and fewer guiding questions by me. This building of rapport was important in order to witness first-hand how individuals navigated the whole home. This enabled me to ask follow-up questions that were specific to each setting, evoking each participants' experiences with matter and physical environment. There was also time for a sit down interview wherein set questions were answered from an interview guide.

The Interview Guide²⁶

Interview questions were structured to prompt conversation on consumption practices involving the three A's of *acquisition, appropriation, and accumulation*, and the three D's of *devaluation, divestment, and disposal* (Warde, 2014; Evans, 2019). This includes acts such as purchasing or acquiring goods, practices of use and display, emotional orientations towards objects, and the valuation of goods. In many cases some of these topics were covered in the home tour or prompted other interesting and relevant conversations. After the first five interviews, I added more questions about routines and acquisition, based on reflection.

Recruitment

Hoarders are a hidden population in society; they are hard to locate and often reluctant to ask for help or identify with what are viewed as problematic Hoarding behaviours (Frost, Steketee, & Williams, 2000). Participant recruitment was initially done through posters in community spaces such as community centres and convenience stores; however, due to COVID-19 many of these places were closed or poorly attended. A recruitment strategy revision required pivoting to online recruitment via community group postings on social media platforms, including Facebook and Reddit. These platforms generated the majority of my participants.

²⁶ See Appendix D.

Additionally, a few participants joined as a result of snowball sampling. I offered a \$25 gift card to a grocery store as a recognition of participants' time and energy.

Recruitment posters (See Appendix E) purposely did not mention the word "Hoarding"; using alternate, less stigmatizing language was important to encourage participation, including among both those who did and did not identify as Hoarders or who had or had not been formally diagnosed. This wider call for a project on "clutter, objects, and the home" meant a screening tool was necessary to ensure only homes with higher levels of clutter were included in the study, and in the end no extremely hoarded homes were part of the sample.²⁷

Once participants contacted me via email or phone, I replied with some basic information about the project, the screening tool questionnaire, and eligibility, which included: being 18 and older; able to do an in-person in-home interview;²⁸ being the primary dweller of their home; and living within the city limits of Winnipeg. If the person responded and met the additional screening criteria,²⁹ I sent the project consent form and photo guide, and we arranged an interview. At first participants were required, if possible, to send ten photos ahead of the tour, along with the signed consent form; since this proved cumbersome due to differing technical knowledges, I began offering to bring a device (an offline iPhone) to take photos during the tour.

Interviews were conducted in participants' homes. While the majority of interviews were done while no one else was home, four homes had their spouses around at some point during the interview. In all cases, the other person did not interfere with the interview and would move rooms as necessary during the home tour. Additionally, a young child was present in one home,

²⁷ It is difficult to say if any or all the homes I visited were Hoarded or not. I am not a practitioner so I do not have the ability to diagnose a hoarder or identify a Hoarded home. In the end, despite my project shifting to focus on clutter, the data collected satisfied my research questions.

²⁸ COVID-19 complicated recruitment for in-home research as many people were not yet comfortable with strangers into their homes.

²⁹ See Appendix F.

but it did not affect the interview.

Interview, Tour and Photographic Process

Participants were given a photo guide³⁰ (Glaw et al., 2017) that contained prompts for taking photos. These included not just areas of the home that were cluttered or dirty but also sentimental items, heirlooms, or possessions that were comforting. I then provided them with an iPhone that was not connected to a cellular service and asked them to take ten photos of their home without me (Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo, 2019, p. 6). Occasionally, the participant prompted me about what I wanted pictures of, or they preferred to take the photos with me during the home tour.³¹ If they were completed before the home tour, I took a moment to familiarize myself with the photos so that I could note their location and ask questions about them during the home tour.

The proposed research originally involved a home tour followed by a recorded sit-down semi-structured interview that used an interview guide; however, by the third interview I realized the potential for much richer data if I followed the participant with the recorder during the home tour so we could spend more time discussing the objects in each area. Indeed, this resulted in the majority of each interview taking place on foot as we discussed items room by room.³² I believe this also extended the length of each interview as there was time to pause and question items and spaces and let the participant explain them at length. Despite the sit-down portion of the interview being shorter, this change resulted in richer data.

During the tour, I walked with a clipboard and blank sheet of paper to sketch out the participant's home. While it occasionally required pauses in the interview, it became an

³⁰ See Appendix G.

³¹ For this reason, a systematic photo analysis was not attempted. See Challenges below.

³² This resulted in the Guided Tour method discussed above.

important tool to understand how routines played out in the space. I was also able to mark down what each participant called each room, and where photos were taken. Occasionally I also wrote on the floor plans observations I made regarding body language or object affect. Throughout the interview I kept track of additional questions I wanted to ask during the sit-down portion of the interview on the question guide.

Once the home tour was completed, we sat down for a follow up interview to explore questions unaddressed in the tour conversation. After the recorder was off, I debriefed with participants further (Kvale, 1996) and provided a list of resources, highlighting any that connected to conversations we had or that were requested (such as professional organizers, donation places, or mental health organizations). After leaving the interview, I recorded a voice memo with my initial thoughts and anything that stood out or was particularly interesting. I also used this opportunity to debrief as an interviewer if the interview was particularly difficult or distressing (Silverio et al., 2022).

Most of these interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours, the shortest being 45 minutes and the longest being two hours. Overall, the combined home tour and interview, or later the guided tour, lasted between one to two hours, and provided a rich data set with many interesting conversations.

Participant Descriptions

Participants ranged in age from 30 to over 70 years old with the majority (n=09) falling somewhere between 30 and 50. Ten people lived alone, four lived with their spouse, two lived with a child, and two lived with their spouse and children. Many of the participants had one or more pets; dogs, cats, and even birds. The sample included mostly women (n=13). Thirteen lived in a home versus four in an apartment, but two of the homes were rentals (one full home and one

a partial home). One participant was co-living with others in a home; they inhabited the main floor and the others lived in the basement, but they shared access to the kitchen and the garage. Of the houses, 10 included access to a basement, but they varied from finished to unfinished³³.

As mentioned, people who have Hoarded homes are often reluctant to let others in and tend to be reclusive (Frost, Steketee, & Williams, 2000). Thus, the responses I received were from a variety of cluttered homes that may or may not have been medically defined as “Hoarded”.³⁴ Some homes had certain spaces or closets that were full of objects while other living areas were neat and tidy; some houses had medium levels of clutter in most places; and a few homes had higher levels of clutter and boxes that required walking along small pathways to get from room to room. As such, I shifted my study to focus more on clutter and less on Hoarding as medically defined.

Perhaps given the intimacy of the home, (Blunt & Dowling, 2006) the trust-building process of the interview, or even the affective pull of objects being discussed, four of the interviews recounted traumatic situations and/or evoked intense emotions. An additional three interviews dealt with heavy subject matter at times. I kept space for those participants to talk through their emotions, and many thanked me later or expressed appreciation that I was doing this kind of research; for instance, one asked for a hug at the end and said the interview was helpful for her to process her own past. This reflects the intimate nature of the home and the importance of care when doing home interviews.

Data Analysis

To remain open to discovering how individuals construct their knowledge of goods and

³³ A full listing of participant data is provided as Appendix H.

³⁴ According to the previously detailed definitions described on page 13.

domestic spaces, I used an abductive approach to understanding the interview data. Abductive analysis describes an approach that is rooted in a certain theory or position but that encourages an iterative process in discovering knowledge in and through the data (van Hulst & Visser, 2024). This approach encourages creativity in the embrace of “surprises, tensions, and doubts” in the journey towards richer theoretical ideas (van Hulst & Visser, 2024, p. 568). The first step I took was to personally transcribe three of the interview recordings; after that, an external professional transcription service was used. The transcripts were checked for errors. Overall, I found that movement through rooms and spaces during the home tour provided ample sensory experience, such that I remembered all the interviews quite vividly when reading the transcripts, ensuring a connection to the data despite using an external transcription service. All interviews were assigned a number and each participant was given a pseudonym, chosen from a list of names popular during their era of birth.

The gradual accumulation of data allowed for significant reflection on each interview as indicated by memos (Pillow, 2003). Once all the transcripts were completed I began reading the printed transcripts as a set to create familiarity with the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From there I applied an open coding process across all transcripts to see which words, phrases, or ways of thinking were common (and divergent) among participants (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) specifically noting instances involving objects, meanings, and doings, or the elements of practice. As I was recording these codes in the margins I realized it resulted in a very large set of codes, so I started again looking only at practices and how they were operating in each space. This involved mapping, categorizing, and re-categorizing different practices to see how the codes connected or overlapped. At this point I began to detect larger themes of shopping and acquisition, practices around kitchens and cooking, practices of cleaning and organizing, as well

as themes of sentimentality, crafting, the importance of pets, the management of space, and the status of health. Once these themes were developed I then saw further connections to the management of social relations and environmental concern. These value systems led me to then consider how materiality operates as an assemblage in different spaces. From there I was able to develop a list of specific codes that were reflected verbatim or as an idea in the interviews. I did not use computer software to code the data, but instead highlighted sections of the text and created comments in Microsoft Word, which I then extracted into Microsoft Excel. From there I could sort and merge codes while keeping the original quotations and participant pseudonyms. This resulted in the larger thematic groupings that represent the analysis.

During the transcription and coding process I also referred to floor plans, notes, and memos contained in my field notes to remember key areas encountered during the home tour. While I had 10 participant photos from each home, I did not formally analyze them,³⁵ but I did use them to remember the appearance of the home and specific locations or objects that were or were not discussed.

Project Challenges

COVID-19

This project was hindered substantially by COVID-19. When I began the ethics application for this project in 2022, the University of Manitoba had halted all in-person interviews, so the research project was re-designed to be online via ZOOM interviews. A few months after the ethics application was approved and I had begun recruitment, the University changed its policy to include in-person interviews with COVID-19 precautions. Since I had not

³⁵ See Challenges below for more information on photos.

yet recruited any participants, I paused my recruitment to reapply to ethics for a shift back to in-person in-home interviews, as I knew this type of research would benefit substantially from in situ data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005.) Additionally, COVID-19 caused a great deal of hesitation on the part of individuals to allow visitors to enter the home. My requirement for in-home interviews disqualified many participants who were interested in the study but not yet comfortable with home visits.

My original proposal included indirect recruitment (Abrams, 2010) via postering in two public mental health organizations in Winnipeg, Manitoba that assist people with Hoarding behaviours: The OCD Centre of Manitoba, and Age & Opportunity. Such methods are often recommended for hard to reach populations (Shaghghi et al., 2011), and may aid in recruitment (Abrams, 2010; Ayers et al., 2015). However, due to COVID-19, these locations were closed to in-person traffic and instead of posters I had to rely on emails distributed by the OCD Centre.³⁶ This unforeseen limitation reduced access to the targeted group, and as a result, the final number of participants was limited and the length of time to conduct the research was extended. Nonetheless, the research material yielded very rich data, as revealed in the analysis.

Interviews

I adjusted my interview questions slightly after the first few interviews as the in-home tours were transpiring somewhat differently than anticipated. I had imagined certain probing questions ahead of the interviews (see Thomson, 2018) and had imagined more time spent on individual objects; having participants hold objects, and having more stories told about different items. This turned out not to be the case; individual objects were rarely held or touched, and many participants were unlikely to go into stories about certain objects. Instead, the participant

³⁶ The other organization, Age & Opportunity, was not running any hoarding programming at the time.

was more likely to reference *groups* of objects or particular areas of the home that were cluttered, as well as larger problems with items entering and exiting the home. In the end, this contributed to a different yet interesting understanding of material assemblages and organization in the home.

Photos

Early on during recruitment I realized the requirement for photos to be taken ahead of time and sent to me for analysis was not a reasonable request; many participants did not have a smartphone or were unable to hook up a camera to a computer to send the images. Having the photos ahead of time also meant requiring the participant sign a consent form, which also proved cumbersome due to technology. One of the participants sent only six of ten photos, so we had to take time to sort out which of the photos had yet to be sent. This confusion led to me change the requirement for sending photos prior to the interview. This meant that I did not have time to analyze the photos and develop questions prior to the interview; however, I do not believe this affected the data gathered.

Asking participants to take photos while I was present did change the way the photos were taken. Sometimes participants wanted me to take the photos, or would ask what I wanted to see a picture of. One of the participants was very unfamiliar with using a smartphone, so I had to assist in a lot of the photo-taking. This meant that using an autophotography approach was not possible; in autophotography, photos are intended to capture a specific aspect of the participant's world as directed ahead of time, as a way to understand more about the everyday life of the participant (Glaw et al., 2017). This allows for the participant to think about what part of themselves or their lives they want to express, or how they want to capture it. Since many of the photo sets were taken in my presence or while prompts were being asked or given, a photo

analysis that seeks an understanding of the participant's things as they see them was not possible. In the end, the data set was large enough that this did not make a difference in the analysis; instead, the photos were used as a tool for me to remember the placement of objects in the home as a recall method.

Professionalism

One challenge to conducting the interviews was balancing the need to be professional while also being compassionate. I wanted to share in the frustrations and tears of some of the participants, while also being enthusiastic about creative storage solutions, and showing sympathy for complicated family situations. I developed listening skills and an understanding of mental health from working at the OCD Centre, and I believe my ability to create a safe space for discussion was useful when participants were describing difficult things. I was able to keep the conversation going with empathy, which then made them “feel that it is safe to reveal further information” (McCosker et al, 2001, p. 11). While I was able to balance this for the benefit of the participant and the interview, it was difficult to get through some interviews, and despite always leaving on a positive note, I was deeply affected by the stories shared with me.

I spent a lot of time wishing I could better assist the people I was interviewing. While I knew of avenues of help that may be useful for them, I also understood the barriers each individual was facing (money being one of them). Additionally, I often had to reiterate that I was not there to help them with their clutter, but only there as a researcher. This inability to help was difficult for me to bear, and I used voice memos several times to talk through my frustrations. It became incredibly important for me to keep reminding myself of the reason why I embarked on this research in the first place, which was to better understand the practices at play in cluttered homes, and to see how larger social mechanisms in consumer culture were impacting household

objects. While I might be able to personally assist three or four people in tidying their home, the research I was doing had a chance of impacting a lot more people by informing other researchers through knowledge mobilization activity and in practice.

Conclusion

This dissertation contributes to emerging interest in materiality and clutter by exploring the homes of 17 individuals and inquiring about objects, meanings, and doings in each specific context. This study is informed by a constructivist epistemology that also seeks to understand each individual's unique approach to and lived experience of objects and clutter. It is a reflexively informed project that I was well positioned to undertake.

In the analysis chapters, I first outline common domestic practices in the data to illustrate how everyday routines are intermingled with objects and some of the ways in which they may contribute to clutter. I then explore the environmental and positional elements that can contribute to increased everyday household clutter. In chapter seven, I develop three value orientations (eco-consciousness, sentimentality, and prioritization of social relations) that contributed to problematic levels or amassments of clutter in the homes I visited. I then connect these values to the way materiality and assemblages work to influence practices and performances in domestic spaces.

Chapter Five: Domestic Practices

Before presenting my findings I first address how my findings highlight the importance of understanding practices in the context of domestic space, how materiality encompasses assemblage and affect, and how the social is part of the home.

In the home visits I encountered many *domestic practices* that were discussed and demonstrated. Practices, Warde (2005, p. 135) maintains, are “complex entities joining multiple actions, projects, ends, and emotions.” The domestic practices I saw involved many working parts: individual goals and valuations, feelings and affects, materials and environments, and performances and abilities. While domestic practices fall under the many categories presented in this chapter, their performances were context dependent, and many factors mediate the activity of the performance of a practice, making each repetition a slightly varied performance of a generally understood practice. This is why Warde describes performances as “continual improvisations within more or less precise or fuzzy parameters” (2016, p. 46), requiring knowledge of the practice to both perform and to recognize its performance. Thus, the performances I observed varied in considerable ways as different knowledges, abilities, objects, and environments connected, all of which could be influenced by social norms or standards as well as variations in values or personal beliefs. Although many practices have inherent clutter tendencies, many also contribute to clutter or accumulation by way of their performance and environment. Thus while some practices have inherent accumulation involved, such as eating (which requires food provision), and crafting (where acquisition is often part of the enjoyment of the craft) (Stalp, 2006), others such as tidying or storing items do not inherently include a propensity to clutter but are often mediated by elements such as space or time in ways that contribute to items out of place.

Additionally, the homes I visited were rife with object assemblages, encompassing both object materiality and physical space. Domestic homes are subject to assemblages; it is not just about the parts that make up a whole, but about the larger sets of processes and relations that are connected to materiality. Woodward gives the example of how a mattress is more than its stuffing; it is full of dust and the imprints of old bodies, might be hidden away or used only on special occasion, but is large enough to cause imposition (2015). I witnessed this type of connection in other goods, where intentions for items or prior social relations added to their potency. Additionally however, I also saw how objects had powers of assemblage that called other objects toward them, inviting them into a space alongside other goods that all became potent with the same meaning regardless of their particularity. These object assemblages created powerful groups of accumulation where the untangling of individual items was difficult. Of course, this highlights the overall presence of affect in the home, which is often expressed and felt through objects and environments (Woodward, 2021).

In addition, underlying domestic practices involves an understanding that *homemaking* requires the “active work of doing and making” (Liu, 2021, p. 344) to be a site of individual expression and future aspiration (Clarke, 2001, p. 25). The home is what we make it, encompassing our values through possessions and routines. But it is also a place where social norms come to be expressed, identities enacted, and morals asserted. The home cannot be understood as only its matter; the outside social world influences the daily life inside; thus, how the social exists within the home is an underlying aspect of domestic routines and is evident in everyday practices.

As a reminder, I draw attention once again to the language of *clutter*. Each combination of practices, located in their specific environments, and conducted by particular individuals,

contributed to different types and levels of clutter in homes' spaces, illustrating how labelling a space as "Hoarded" is quite difficult. Instead, it is easier, and perhaps more beneficial, to propose that clutter exists on a spectrum and looks different in every context. This supports my argument that discussions of clutter and the understanding of Hoarding Behaviour should include consideration for the objects, meanings, and doings of a domestic space as opposed to a diagnosis of an individual illness, as it is conceptualized in the medical literature.

In what immediately follows, I first overview interesting moments in the cycle of consumption to draw attention to the various everyday domestic practices and routines observed in the home that contribute to clutter and the accumulation of goods. These examples are not ideal types; as practices they exist in various ways depending on environments and performances, but they have the same domestic goals in mind, such as being fed or clothed, or having a clean or clear living space. Many of these categories overlap in everyday life, but I separate them here for analytic purposes.

This necessarily more descriptive section will be followed with a more analytical section that considers how these daily domestic performances face constraints, whether due to environmental issues such as space layout or the existence of pets (which impacts both space and time), or due to one's position within a practice, including limitations due to health, disability, mental health, or position in the life course, creating tensions in performances that can lead to higher levels of clutter. In chapter six, I draw attention to the *adaptations* that individuals perform to problem solve or accommodate different aspects of their selves and the objects in the home, revealing how the altered performance of practices is linked to increased levels of clutter, and overall, illustrating how everyday domestic practices, depending on how they are performed, can become the source of accumulation, disorganization, and clutter. This will be followed by a

chapter that considers how households navigate practices that conflict with values and meanings (for instance, if someone was environmentally conscious). It contributes an analysis of how the objects, doings, and meanings involved in domestic practices contribute to varying levels of accumulation according to how practices are performed.

Acquisition and Disposal

Acquisition and disposal are present in every home. Reinforcing the idea that “consumption is not itself a practice but is, rather, a moment in almost every practice” (Warde 2005, p. 137), all domestic practices I observed engaged with both the front and back ends of the consumption cycle (acquisition, appropriation, and appreciation; and devaluation, divestment, and disposal), which impacted clutter daily. I first offer a brief look at the varying forms of acquisition and discard here to broaden the typical understanding of the acquisition and disposal of objects.

Acquisition

Acquisition occurs during many domestic practices, such as food provisioning, wardrobe maintenance, and crafting. Objects involved in these practices are often considered part of a shopping routine, which usually invokes retail environments, such as the aisles of a grocery store, the bright lights of a shopping mall or department store, or the website storefront of a popular online shopping platform. Sometimes, however, acquisition appears in forms that diverge from the typical or common idea of shopping: non-traditional store settings such as thrift or second-hand stores, garage sales, informal online swaps like Kijiji and Facebook Marketplace, or no-buy groups. Additionally, acquisition can be unintentional or unwanted; some homes were acting as a temporary storage space for objects, while other homes were the recipient of unwanted gifts or other’s discarding practices.

Acquisition shows up in interesting and unanticipated ways in many homes, illustrating how everyday domestic practices can produce household clutter. Only two of my participants (Carol and Ashley) seemed to bring a lot of items into their homes from retail outlets; others like Ryn or Kristin purchased many items second-hand or in ways that avoided commercial retail outlets, while others like Al and Dawn sought out specific items second-hand, such as books or ritual items. Often these common forms of alternative acquisition line up with individual values, such as only shopping second-hand, and can contribute to clutter.³⁷

Ryn, who recently moved to a two bedroom apartment, admitted to occasionally ‘dumpster diving’ or picking things up off the street, especially when it came to discarded stuffed animals. She had a wagon full of stuffed animals who all had names, and the ones she acquired used were just as important as those she got new because they had a story or a memory attached to them:

Bumper here was found, like, in the trash. We had gone to Toronto and I was like, “I really hope we find a stuffed animal on the street in Toronto. That’s the best souvenir!” And then we didn’t, and we were walking down our street after the trip was over, we were lugging our suitcases, and Bumper was there on the garbage.

This unique form of acquisition became part of the importance of the object for Ryn, adding to its story and increasing its significance or value. Because Ryn had found several items in this or other unique ways, their stories of acquisition became part of their meaning, which made them difficult to get rid of. But additionally, Ryn enjoyed the process of different acquisition styles she used, such as thrifting, which contributed to an increase of objects in her home.

³⁷ See chapter seven.

Alternately, Judith's acquisition was unique in that she was obtaining items through varied channels for redistribution. Judith, who was a widowed, retired, empty nester, was involved in many charities that aligned with her moral values, one of which collected discarded or redundant medical supplies for other countries who could still use them (thus reducing waste). She was a designated person who could pick up supplies like sterile wraps and gloves and keep them until she got the call to deliver them to a shipping container. This meant storing items around her home as she accumulated more and more of them. Additionally, some items she received like open glove boxes, would be declined by the organization, so she took it upon herself to find other places for those items to go, keeping them in a separate pile in the kitchen. She also kept any items that might be used for children's crafts, like carbon paper, unwrapped plastic straws, and tracing paper, and was always seeking out daycares to give them to. Her house and storage spaces acted as an in-between space for a lot of things, but it meant her home was a designated perpetual holding place that was constantly accumulating more and more items.

Thus while over-purchasing clothing items created clutter problems for some participants like Ashley (see below), we can see how in the cases of Ryn and Judith, accumulation is not necessarily linked to traditional forms of shopping, and clutter is more complex than an overconsumption problem. Thus although certain domestic practices require higher or more frequent levels of accumulation of goods, accumulation exists beyond the capitalist retail format.

Disposing/Divesting

All homes participate in the divesting process of the consumption cycle to some extent, and the homes I visited highlighted how those divestments play out. I found many instances of items that had been set aside due to their devaluation, whether being put in a closet or basement, and owners spoke of their intentions to divest with the goods. In many cases, parting with certain

things in the home was desired and/or accomplished, but in many cases disposal was unsuccessful for different reasons, based on the types of objects and the way they needed to exit the home.

Successful practices of discard were described by Beth, a busy wife and mom of two, who was often able to donate to thrift stores, and Carol, who recently had a successful garage sale. Some discarding practices were complicated by the size of object; Donna, a retired nurse, was unable to take large furniture to the donation centre without help, and Andrea needed to coordinate the city pickup of a mattress that was garbage. Sometimes discarding relied on other people, such as when Al tried to get his family to take extra kitchen items, or for Laura, who told family members who borrowed items not to return them.

Practices of divesting were present and to some extent successful in all homes; however, items often spent time awaiting the final discard which contributed to everyday clutter. The seemingly simple act of getting rid of an item was tied to other household practices, including organizing and storage, and required extra coordination and knowledge, which meant time and effort dedicated to the practice.

In sum, acquisition and divestment are domestic household practices that occur in all homes due to the nature of consumption, and can contribute to a certain level of clutter as items come into and leave a home.

The Practice of Eating

A second general conceptual form of domestic practice is that of eating. While eating food might be considered a small action of taking in nutrition, in reality it is a complex practice that connects to morals, norms of meals, tastes, as well as issues of time and scheduling throughout the day. The practice of eating has been studied extensively by Alan Warde (2016),

who illustrates how, despite social regulation and institutionalization of food and meals, these practices are weakly coordinated and regulated. Nonetheless, eating becomes somewhat routinized and orderly in everyday life through individual and family routines, suggesting that the performance of practices finds stability and repetition without strict structure (2016, p. 99).

While Warde focuses more on the event of the meal and culinary traditions, which link to social groupings, and the coordination of food in relation to other people and other meals, I extend this to illuminate the provision, preparation, and storage of food. Each of the practices I encountered reflected some common forms of acquisition and accumulation, but as I outline below, their performances were adapted according to many things such as time, space, and technology.

Time and Space

Eating practices are heavily shaped by daily routines such as school and work schedules, with time required for food acquisition, preparation, eating, and cleaning, all of which are also affected by availability of space for preparation and storage. For instance, grocery shopping involves the logistics of transportation (sharing one car with a partner, or avoiding rush hour traffic), and a certain amount of planning or preparation for what is needed and where to go. These complex, intersecting activities with many moving parts are subject to constraints, disruptions, and adaptations that cause the accumulation of food and cooking related items in many homes.

For example, shopping routines, food storage, and preparation contributed to daily clutter in the case of Laura, a work-from-home mom who was also looking after her young son during the day. Laura's³⁸ cooking schedule was very flexible during the day but very strict in the

³⁸ As you can see, many things are impacting Laura's clutter including a lack of childcare during the day, extra

evening. Her son ate breakfast and lunch in the living room while she worked, but since her husband wanted a big dinner the moment he got home at 4:30/5:00pm, Laura often took her last work break to put something in the crockpot or oven. The kitchen table was piled with clutter and only used at Christmas, so her husband and son ate supper in the basement while Laura ran errands. By the time Laura got home from picking up her daughter from retail work, it was time to put her co-sleeping son to bed. When I asked when she ate supper she mentioned, “sometimes I just eat at three o’clock in the morning, because I haven’t eaten”. While cooking dinner for her husband is strictly routinized, Laura had no eating routine of her own. Additionally, with no designated eating place for the family, dishes were often taken to other areas of the home and left there. With no other members aiding with the cleaning, the dirty dishes often piled up in the kitchen until Laura emptied the dishwasher.³⁹ The time constraints experienced by Laura in food provisioning and storage, the lack of dedicated eating times and space, and the unwillingness for family members to pitch in created a lot of clutter in the kitchen as well as around the house. As eating is a daily practice, much of Laura’s household clutter was related to eating practices. These sorts of eating practices, however, exist in all homes, and thus have the potential to contribute to disorganization and clutter.

Technology

Advancements in domestic technology has contributed to the growth of kitchen gadgets. While homes often have freezers, microwaves, and coffeemakers, newer gadgets include the air fryer, Instant Pot, dehydrator, and waffle iron. The technology of the kitchen has been a focus of many practice theory studies because of the ways that a piece of technology can provide

family caring responsibilities, and a husband with an injury. These aspects are discussed elsewhere in the analysis.
³⁹ This case also demonstrates a gender dynamic, which is detailed below.

opportunity for food provision but also create limitations of space (see Shove & Southerton, 2000; Hand & Shove, 2007; Shove et al., 2007). During my interviews I experienced several cases of kitchen technologies that impacted on eating practices and clutter.

For example, for Ashley, the technology of the kitchen played a role in meal making as well as in her use of space. Ashley lived alone with her pets and rented a small bungalow that had a small kitchen with little counter space and no room for extra gadgets. For this reason, she often stored her appliances in the basement, which she disliked because it caused them to be forgotten about. Moreover, when she did use these items, they quickly cluttered the kitchen, often staying beyond their welcome as they awaited being packed up and taken downstairs again. As such, while sometimes technologies can aid in routine or simplify practices of cooking, they can also become problematic material objects that contribute to clutter. The recent increase of technology in the kitchen (Hand et al., 2007) strains preexisting counter and cabinet space, making the kitchen a ripe place for clutter. While many homes, like Ashley's, have basement storage, the act and effort of remembering and retrieving appliances (some of which are heavy or bulky) is an inconvenience that can cancel out the promise of easier food preparation. Many gadgets instead become dusty while awaiting their eventual use, taking up storage space as well as weighing heavily on the minds of their owners, who are often stuck debating the limitations of their kitchen space.

Wardrobe Maintenance

Clothing and wardrobes are often targeted as areas of overconsumption; popular culture ideas of shopping sprees and shopping addictions are paired with the reality of the fast fashion industry and increased retail access online. While the acquisition of new clothing occurs through retail outlets both in-store and via e-commerce, a large amount of goods are also purchased

second-hand through thrift stores, via online platforms like Kijiji or Facebook Marketplace, and obtained through clothing swaps. However, my interview findings suggest that clothing acquisition is only one aspect of increasing clutter. Domestic practices surrounding wardrobe and clothing maintenance include closet management, laundering, and storage requirements for seasonal items. The accumulation of clothing is also dependent on practices of divestment and discard; while clothing may no longer reflect a style or a trend, or may cease to represent an identity, it has various discarding options such as donation, reselling, and even recycling, adding several factors to the performance of wardrobe maintenance. Thus, due to its everyday at-hand nature, clothing in any home can become clutter due to its ongoing maintenance requirement and often low spatial containment.

For example, Ashley admitted that clothing was an issue for her with regards to clutter in terms of both its acquisition and maintenance. She occasionally shopped in-store but had developed a new online shopping practice during the pandemic that grew her wardrobe significantly. Though she tried to keep costs down by using points systems and sales, she estimated that 20% of the items she received were undesirable as to fit or fabric, for example. Ashley found returning items through the mail too cumbersome, so instead she decided to give items to friends or try to recoup the costs by selling them second-hand. This nonetheless resulted in a closet full of clothing that she was not currently wearing. Ashley's wardrobe clutter can be seen as the result of over accumulation from shopping but also an inability to discard easily and conveniently. Such wardrobe practices are located in many homes, as clothing is an item frequently rotating through the domestic consumption cycle.

While wardrobe accumulation and maintenance caused clutter in many households, some clutter was also created by laundering and wardrobe storage practices. Both Laura and Omar

identified problems with laundry and closet space. Most of the clothing (clean or dirty) in Laura's home, for all family members, was in laundry baskets. Laura mentioned she found it a waste of time to fold and put away toddler clothing in particular, so she instead used open bins to keep her son's clothes. Clothing in her own room was piled in several spots because a poorly built hanging rack in the closet had broken, and due to its unique size, she had not yet figured out a replacement. In the basement, her daughter's clothing was hanging on a freestanding rack because her bedroom had no closet. Instead of being behind closed doors, clothing was visible in every room, contributing to the feeling of being cluttered.

The maintenance of clothing in the home requires many practices that involve space, routine, and knowledge, which come together in different ways for different households and may contribute to clutter. While popular discourses point to consumption and the accumulation of clothing via compulsive shopping as the main concern, other aspects of the performance of wardrobing come into play, especially when it comes to knowledges regarding selling, discarding, or storing clothes. The complexity of wardrobe maintenance made it a practice that commonly contributed to clutter in many homes.

Cleaning/Tidying

The practice of cleaning or tidying a home involves making organizing, divesting, and discarding decisions regarding objects. Cleaning routines can help maintain tidiness in certain spaces if they are adhered to, but this depends on time and energy. Additionally, home tours revealed the existence of 'dumping grounds' in moments of transition between practices (such as getting home with bags of acquisitions), as well as of "DOOM boxes"⁴⁰ (similar to junk drawers)

⁴⁰ DOOM stands for Didn't Organize Only Moved. The concept originated on TikTok alongside posts on ADHD (Sims, 2023).

as a quick fix to tidying spaces. The concepts of dumping grounds and DOOM boxes illustrate how the desire for clean or tidy spaces can expose items that either do not have permanent storage places or that frequently do not make it to their storage space, instead becoming heaps of miscellaneous goods that may take on the properties of an assemblage, making it more difficult to separate individual items. These sorts of areas (ranging from drawers or boxes to entire closets) exist in most homes but are created and maintained differently, and can be a site for clutter.

For example, Andrea, who owns a bungalow and lives with her many dogs, tries to clean her house on her day off, but finds she is better motivated to clean when she knows company is coming. She had used this strategy in the past to get her house clean and finish up some basement renovations:

So [my sister and I] were like, “Oh, once [the renovation is] done I’m going to have this party,” but then that gave me a deadline. Like a hard deadline because I invited people over for like a specific date and then that meant we had to get this shit done because people were going to be in the house. So that seems to help me too if I’m accountable to someone else other than myself because if it’s just me then I’m just like “whatever.” Yes, so it took a lot in me not to clean more around here with you coming over because I am honestly embarrassed about the state of the house. I don’t really like having people over just because there’s a lot of unfinished stuff and – yes.

Since her sister moved out, Andrea found that it was harder to prioritize a clean, tidy house for just herself and the dogs. She still vacuumed and tidied before her boyfriend came over on the weekend; knowing someone would see her unkept home was a motivator to try to deal with the clutter, but sometimes that meant simply moving it to a closet. Company as a motivation to clean

was common in several homes and could contribute to disorganization, as a quick solution to unhoused objects, often resulting in hidden boxes or spaces filled with clutter.

Dumping Grounds

For many, part of the cleaning process meant confronting the items that ended up in the dumping ground. Every household I observed had a space, often near the main entry, where items could be put before going to their permanent place. For many, this space was in the kitchen, since this was where groceries landed. For others, there was a space by the door, or on a table in the living room. Dumping grounds also existed in other places, such as at the foot of the stairs in the basement or on a bed in a bedroom. Dumping spaces could be small or large depending on how often the participant chose to put items there or how often they were cleaned. They often held things that went to specific places in the home, but sometimes they held items that were hard to categorize and resisted being “put away”. Thus, these spaces often became clutter.

For some, the items in these spaces were known to look untidy and thus became the focus of a quick clean, which usually meant dumping the items in a box or drawer and putting them out of the sight of others. Often, cluttered objects are most easily dealt with by concealing them in other places (Newell, 2024). For instance, Judith’s kitchen counter was her dumping ground, and she admitted that if somebody was coming over, all the clutter from the kitchen would go into a box and into the walk-in closet behind the kitchen, instead of being properly “put away”:

What comes into this room? Everything I want to hide. I pretty much like, see if I – if you hadn’t have said ‘don’t clean up’ everything that’s on the cupboard in there would have been in here [laughs].

For Judith, the large closet was an easy way to quickly tidy her house of clutter, but in doing so it was full of different types of things, from clothing to photos and old books to craft supplies. Like many, Judith wanted to have the appearance of a clutter-free home, and a quick clean meant addressing the dumping ground, often by hiding the contents in another space.

Judith had photographed one of her several junk drawers filled with assorted items. She mentioned that since the drawer hid the items in the kitchen, it did not cause her as much distress as the walk-in closet. Junk drawers, a common practice in many homes, highlight how many homes have miscellaneous or hard-to-put-away items, but depending on space and cleaning routines these areas (drawers, closets, or basements) can be more or less attractors of permanent, growing clutter.

Organizing

Interviews findings revealed great variation in the methods used for categorizing and organizing objects, between homes. Dominant discourses of organization reflect ideal home compositions, such that categories of stuff are clearly sorted into groups of “like with like” and placed in the rooms that correspond (such as cooking items in the kitchen and seasonal goods in a storage space). These categories are also thought to be easily recognizable by others. In reality, the methods for determining categories were at times unique, and groupings of objects sometimes required explanation. Nonetheless, striving for organization, whatever that meant individually, was a focus of many.

Edith is a homemaker who lives with her husband in a one-storey home with an attic. Over ten years ago her home was robbed twice; the first time they took some valuables, but the second time they destroyed the home, dumping bookshelves and boxes everywhere. Edith constantly lamented that “it [her home] was organized!”, and she wanted to get back to that state.

This fixation on organization was clear, but Edith's methods for sorting and storing items were less clear due to the overwhelming amount of stuff.

Indeed, many particular organizing methods were not clear at first, and what appeared to me as clutter was often revealed to be part of a careful system of organization by the owner. For instance, Ryn's unique method of organizing resulted in what looked like piles of clutter; in her two-bedroom apartment the living room had items placed on several different types of shelving, carts, crates, and stacks on the floor. There were jars, books and magazines, kitchen items, and baskets of linens. To anyone else, the items would seem random and thoughtlessly strewn. But as Ryn discussed her items, it was revealed that they were purposefully and thoughtfully placed in distinct areas, sometimes on particular types of shelves, and according to specific groups. For instance, the labelled mason jars were filled with herbs and teas for tinctures, and she explained how the wooden shelf they were on was carefully researched and sought out second-hand. Ryn described the "puzzle of the home"; having previously lived in smaller one-bedroom apartments, she was excited to finally have the space she needed to do her hobbies while also meticulously creating a space that reflected her personality (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). Although her home seemed cluttered and disorganized, every pile had a purpose and every item had a reason for being where it was.

The time and effort participants put into ordering space highlights the importance of organizing practices for all homes. These individual performances illustrate to how the methods of organization are often very personal and may not follow conventional standards, which may cause the home to appear as cluttered to others. Additionally, the variations of organization are many, with some individuals having larger categories of stuff and others, like Edith, having very small categories. This directly impacts the amount of time required to "get organized", leading to

spaces that appear cluttered.

Storage Practices

Following the ability or desire to organize items is the ability or space to store them, and the practices involved therein. A large part of organizing, or the ability to *appear* organized, involves the care of goods into spaces for storage. Closets, shelving, and the often-romanticized basement storage area all become places for storing items that are not being used, since “a good bit of what finds its way into storage is clutter that has to be moved out of the way” (Newell, 2024, p. 80). Storage as a practice involves a knowledge of organizing and placement of objects as well as an understanding of the use of an object in time and space so that it is accessible when needed. Performances of this practice varied depending on the environment and ability of each individual, often leading to the accumulation of objects in storage areas or in areas where storage was lacking. This accumulation in some cases became piles of clutter.

For instance, although the main downstairs living area of Laura’s large bungalow was a “man cave”⁴¹ for her husband to relax in, it still had a designated space for storage. Beyond this living area there was a door to her daughter’s makeshift bedroom and more storage. Laura explained what was housed in these spaces, including her daughter’s overflow of stuff (mostly yarn she kept being given), miscellaneous crafting items that she wanted to get rid of, old photography props that she wanted to sell, seasonal storage items including a Christmas tree, her own keepsakes, pantry items and food storage, alongside the extra fridge and freezer. The piles reached the ceiling in some places and appeared disheveled; however, they were categorized enough so that Laura knew where things were. Laura had a significant amount of stuff in her

⁴¹ Laura later showed me her “Lady Shelf”, a space on a shelving unit in the storage area she thought was the equivalent space to her husband’s man cave.

storage area, and she lamented about wanting to get rid of it. For her, it was a divestment problem: “it’s a matter of finding the time to stop and find it all, sell it, get rid of it, whatever it is, it’s just the time to do it”. Since Laura was busy juggling two jobs, childcare, and other caring responsibilities, she had no extra time for disposing of items, so the items stayed as clutter in her storage area.

In contrast, many other cases involved a lack of storage in the home for extra goods. For instance, the main room of Dawn’s one bedroom apartment was filled with piles of objects that appeared to be randomly strewn clutter. Dawn was renting a converted home apartment for her and her dog, and as I spoke with her it was revealed that the flow of objects in the home matched their frequency of use, with things like laundry near the front and supplies for crafting towards the rear of the room. The reason the items appeared disheveled was that Dawn’s home had no built-in shelving or closets in the main living area, relegating most items to the floor. Dawn was also mobility limited; her positionality⁴² with regards to physical ability affected how she approached domestic practices and the placement of objects. In this instance, items were located primarily for convenience and accessibility. After touring the apartment, it was clear there were not many other places for Dawn to store temporary items like laundry and art supplies, so the piles on the floor made sense. Her environment and capacity affected her ability to enact more traditional storage practices, so she improvised the placement of objects in terms of her needs.⁴³ While her home appeared cluttered, the observation of limited storage brought forth the necessity of items being stacked on the floor.

Every home had the need for storage of some sort, and whether the space allowed for it or

⁴² Positionality, which includes health and disability, mental health, and life course position, affects the ability of people to manage objects and thus impacts levels of clutter. This is discussed in the next chapter.

⁴³ Improvisation of performances is a common feature in all practices, and is discussed in the next chapter.

not, certain areas were more likely to become cluttered based on the particular performances, systems of organization, and affordances of space. Whether an item is in frequent use or not, it still requires space in a home. Thus, the practice and performance of storage was present in all homes and often led to the accumulation of clutter.

Expressive Activities

While the home is a “site in which we live” (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 2), it is also is a space of individual expression and identity (Mallett, 2004) that is “overflowing with affects and emotions” (Löfgren, 2014, p. 10). Objects in the home as well as their placement in the space (Kilroy-Marac, 2017) contribute to meaning such that domestic practices become an “active meaning-making process” (Hurdley, 2006, p. 719) that can help us express our subjectivities and build relationships. Practices of *engaging in hobbies, collecting, and curating sentiments and memorials* contribute to these processes with material goods in the home. These practices involve objects, meanings, and doings that are supported by particular knowledges such as crafting/making, acquisition, care of goods/supplies, and display. Integrative practices of doing hobbies, including crafting and collecting, rely on the acquisition and storage of material goods, as well as spaces to perform practices related to the hobby (such as knitting chairs or music rooms). The act of memorializing a person, pet or event also requires the management of objects in a particular space, with routines built around the curation of an area. While these activities are not present in every home, I include them here because these practices were observed in many homes in ways that directly impacted clutter on a regular basis.

Crafting

The act of crafting has been researched as a site of identity development and expression as well as a method of stress relief and well-being (Ahlers & Thomas, 2019). Crafts encompass

various creative endeavours and often come with a large amount of material goods such as supplies including raw materials, tools, and knowledge instruments like magazines or patterns. An area of discussion in many crafts involves the crafters “stash”, or accumulation of supplies, that the individual has acquired, often beyond what is needed or could be used (Stalp & Winge, 2008). Thus, crafting is a particular practice that often leads to the accumulation of materiality in the home.

For instance, Ryn’s home is defined by her crafting and creating. She has jars for teas and tinctures and wants to one day make medicines, but the practice that takes up most of her space is her sewing. When we met, she had recently acquired her apartment because it had a second bedroom, which finally allowed her to set up a space that was dedicated to sewing. This room holds two sewing machines, two ironing boards, a table with a large cutting mat, and several carefully chosen Sterilite storage drawer containers that she had painstakingly hunted down second-hand. The drawers are filled with fabric, some from previous projects and some purchased new (“always get three yards” she said, because that makes a pair of pants), as well as patterns that are tucked away in sentimental envelopes (a way to reuse an emotional item without just keeping it in a box). Ryn is extremely proud of this room, which had only recently come to fruition after months of planning, and her delight at filling a whole room with her sewing goods in a functional and accessible way brings her a lot of joy, and enables her to enter her home after work with a joyful “Hello House!”. Explaining the happiness the sewing space brings her prompted Ryn to remember that she also wanted to find solutions to the teas and tinctures storage so that she can enjoy that part of her life too. For Ryn, managing her home and crafts is an important process of identity expression; her home is full of carefully curated items that express who she is and was carefully designed to encourage her favourite hobbies, since those are what

bring her joy.

Collecting

Another expressive activity, collecting can be thought of as the purposeful and active pursuit of the accumulation of objects that may or may not have an immediate function (Belk, 1995; Herbst, 2021). Collecting involves a certain grouping of practices that are “grounded in personal means and memories, whereby the process allows and enriches one’s personal sense of identity in the world.” (Dillon, 2019, p. 270). Thus, collecting often becomes part of an individual’s sense of self; a part of how they spend their leisure time and connect to others. The active process of collecting involves four stages, including developing knowledge around a collection, targeting where to acquire additional items, acquiring these, and tending to their manipulation, care, and display (Dillon, 2019). This process involves varying commitments of time and space depending on the collection, and thus often produces a domestic routine. While collections can be digital, many are physical objects that take up space in the home, requiring spatial management. Thus, the process of collecting requires objects, doings, and meanings within parameters of time and space, which can produce large accumulations of objects that contribute to clutter. This was the case for Darryl.

Darryl lives in an apartment with his cats, and he has a trading card collection that spans across all sports, including basketball, baseball, and (his largest collection) hockey. He collected cards from as young as five or six years old, but when he left home he entrusted the collection to his mom. When his mother died, she left the cards to him — about fifteen binders worth — and to honour her memory he has decided to find the rest of the cards needed to complete the sets. He has sorted the cards, grouping them into sets, putting them into binders, and researching online and identifying which cards are needed to complete the series. He now scours trading card stores

and hobby shops both in person and online find the missing cards.

Managing these sets takes up a lot of time and space for Darryl; while the cards by themselves are small and compact, they number in the thousands, and the binders are bulky. He has several neat stacks of binders around the apartment as he is only able to keep nine or ten in a stack before they tip over. Most of the binders are organized into groups on the kitchen floor, using a significant amount of floor space; as Darryl does not have a kitchen table, this does not bother him. There are also boxes and shelves of partially complete card sets around his apartment, which creates a sense of clutter and disorganization. While Darryl admitted that he actively tries to reduce his acquisition of cards to avoid “hoarding... because that’s what would’ve happened”, the collection takes up most of his space, and he mentioned wishing to move to a larger place to have a better storage system for his binders. The card collection is a big part of Darryl’s life, as it takes up time, space, and money, but also keeps him close to his late mother. Still, the collection takes a toll on his living space.

Memorialization

While the home is a holding place for a great many consumed things, it is also “imbued with cultural, social and affective meanings that hold a special place in the individual and popular imagination, memory and everyday life” (Hurdley, 2013, p. 13). This includes the process of making memories, which materialize “through embodied practice and via lived, material environments” (Hallam & Hockey, 2020, p. 102) as well as memorializing, which may include preserving memories or people, which “facilitates relationships between the living and the dead” (Hallam & Hockey, 2020, p. 90). While areas of the home may be set up to contain or display sentimental or important objects, the spaces in which these items exist are rarely static, but instead dynamic sites of identity performance (Hurdley, 2013). In many homes I encountered

spaces of memorialization and/or sentimentality, often seen in different iterations of untouchable shrines to loved ones or cabinets of sentimental items. These areas often had rules about what objects were allowed, or if/when objects could be used, but in many cases they took up significant space or looked disordered, contributing to negative feelings about the space by their owners.

For instance, Donna and Keith each have spaces reserved for special items. Donna, a widowed homeowner, has an area by the door for sentimental items; a credenza that holds recent birthday cards and photos, including framed photos of loved ones past and present. She explained how she would put flowers on her parents' gravesite annually and take a picture so that she can have it at home. She also has several duck ornaments; she mentioned they were her late husband's favourite animal, and she wanted those types of sentimental items to be out where she can see them. For Donna, this form of memorializing objects facilitates a continuing relationship between her and the people in her life who had died (Hallam & Hockey, 2020).

Keith, a single dad to a teenage son, calls his special items "memorabilia", and keeps them on top of two armoires in the dining room. They contain, among other things, the ashes of family pets, sets of sand crafts his three children made in the third grade, "mugs that have sentimental but no practical value", and a special bell that is taken out when the kids are sick to ring for help. Keith has a lot of sentimental items throughout the home due to his interest in movie paraphernalia and his work in theatre, and while he admitted it is "definitely a case of pure sentimentality", he also countered that at least it is all in one place. This comment and his focus on keeping them contained seems to be an attempt to categorize these items as distinctively more important than as clutter. The armoires thus act like a sacred space to hold special items of many different types.

Both Keith and Donna's memorialized areas are permanent, designated areas for special items, sometimes being added to but largely untouched for a long period of time. While the item displays are crowded due to the sheer number of items, the spaces are free from other objects, signifying the importance of the items. Regardless of the appearance of the spaces, both Keith and Donna recognize that those areas are important to them, highlighting that materiality is a way to connect to social relationships.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Domestic practices can be understood as the necessary routines of living that occur in the particular space we call our home. Specific knowledges and abilities, spaces, and time are all required to carry out the tasks that keep us fed, clothed, and living in clean spaces. The above examples from the research data illustrate how a breakdown of everyday routines in the home might be understood, and how accumulation, care, and discarding of goods are inherent parts of domestic practices. For example, organization and storage are specific tasks that require skills to conduct, while maintaining a wardrobe can become problematic with changes in seasons or sizes. Domestic practices have the potential to contribute to clutter. In the following section I illustrate how the basic practices described above are impacted by the ability to perform them, and how adaptations to constraints can impact clutter levels in the home.

⁴⁴ The maintenance of social relationships is mentioned more in chapter seven.

Chapter Six: Constraints and Adaptations

While domestic practices can be seen as normative or ideal, in reality they are subjected to and shaped by shifting environments and social situations (Warde, 2014). The *affordances* and *constraints*⁴⁵ of the environment and the performer affect whether, how, and to what extent practices can be conducted. While larger or better equipped spaces afford a wider variety of practices, constraining spaces may restrict the practices that occur within. This is also true of social situations and general health and ability; the better your health, the more that is afforded to you in terms of practices, while the opposite is true for constraints. Whereas the above section discussed domestic practices as they play out in the usual circumstances with small variations, the next section pays more attention to how specific and common types of constraints limit or alter domestic practices. During home interviews, constraints prevailed in two dominant areas: internal constraints, which focus on the position of the performer, and external environmental constraints, which highlight the setting in which they are operating. These categories were chosen for analytical purposes and often overlap, but are intended to highlight how the position of a person affects particular practices.

Internal constraints highlight how particular attributes and life context of an individual affect how they can perform practices. As Warde mentions, “agents vary in their understandings, skills and goals and [the] relationship between these three components also varies” (Warde, 2005, p. 139). Home interviews illustrated how performances were limited by aspects such as poor health or disability, mental health, and life course position; typically, practices must change to accommodate these somewhat intractable positions or circumstances.

External environmental constraints focus on the setting and situations in which practices

⁴⁵ Here I am following Warde’s (2014) conceptualization of affordances and constraints as they apply within the context of practices.

are performed, and includes the physical space and objects within it, as well as constraints on time. This section also includes limitations generated from pet ownership, as it was commonly found to structure domestic routines in specific ways. These external constraints may be changed, for instance, by moving or going pet free, but realistically, individuals also adapt to constraints as ideal spaces, for example, are either very costly or simply do not exist.

The interviews illustrate, in the case of clutter, how constraints of position and environment prompt individuals to experiment, improvise, or adapt a domestic practice to better suit their needs (Warde, 2017). Many home tours revealed how people understood the limitations of a particular space and the solutions they developed to overcome the problem or create an adaptation. This reveals the flexibility and adaptability of some people's performances to the physical and structural constraints that confront them, while also highlighting difficulties related to these constraints. Additionally, many individuals recognized how limitations to their positioning created tensions in the performance of certain domestic tasks. Understanding these limitations caused improvisation, which often contributed to clutter.

Warde's (2016) research on eating practices has identified some of these positional limitations on performances, such as class and status. Similarly, in my research the types of spaces people can afford and the solutions to the constraints they experience, as well as learned practices and social supports for overcoming constraints, are all impacted by class. However, I choose to also highlight and draw awareness to additional intersections, including disability, age, mental health, and gender. These positionalities can constrain and afford people with different tools or barriers to perform their domestic practices, which impact acquisition, discard, and storage and organization, in ways that can lead to clutter.

While these constraints and adaptations are presented here separately, many issues often

collide together as I detail the examples of different homes. One constraint is never the cause of all clutter; it is the intersections of internal and external constraints that combine to alter and inhibit the performance of domestic practices that lead to clutter. Thus, throughout the next sections, overlapping constraints exist in every story.

Internal Constraints: Dis/ability

Domestic routines often involve many physical movements, from walking the hallways and rooms of a home, to reaching to put away dishes, carrying bags of purchases or groceries, or removing dirty laundry from rooms to be washed. These home routines involve bending, reaching, carrying, and walking throughout the living space, and require a certain level of physical ability. Thus, the inability to move in a full capacity can hinder the performance of domestic practices as normatively configured, requiring adaptations to the routines to better fit the physical ability of the performer. During home tours I saw how such adaptations often presented opportunities for clutter.

Physical limitations of performances were observed in several cases, including Dawn's situation. Dawn has health problems that contribute to her limited mobility and require her to use a cane. Her mobility directly affects her ability to perform routines and often leads to cluttered spaces. For instance, Dawn cannot access the laundry facilities in her apartment due to the rickety basement stairs, so instead she uses a laundromat down the street. To reduce in-home physical movement, Dawn keeps her pile of laundry items, including a large box, basket, and detergent, in the living room close to the door of her apartment. Although they contribute to clutter in the main living area, keeping laundry items near the front door meant less frequent hauling of items from the back bedroom to the front door, avoiding possible injury. This means laundry contributes to clutter near the door of her apartment, but it is a necessary adaptation to

help keep Dawn safe. Much of Dawn's apartment is set up like this; the small walkway in her living room created by stacks of boxes appears as clutter but was revealed to be necessary for easy access. Keeping often used items within reach of her desk and only chair is also important for managing her mobility and energy levels.

Such adaptations to home organization and the use of physical space were apparent in several homes, as people navigated limiting physical mobilities. Household maintenance still needed to be completed, so individuals would find ways to make practices easier or objects more accessible to complete a task. This often created an aspect of clutter that was tolerated in favour of managing physical ability.

Internal Constraints: Mental Health

In my study, several participants disclosed diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health conditions⁴⁶ such as attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), depression, and trauma. Whether or not this is the cause of Hoarding or clutter is not the focus of my research; instead, I am curious to how living with a mental health disorder can interrupt or change household routines. It was clear in several cases that ADHD, depression, and trauma impacted how objects were handled and practices carried out in the home, varying sometimes due to excess fatigue or a lack of energy, other times due to problems making decisions regarding organization and moving forward in spaces that held prior trauma.

⁴⁶ As mentioned, the presence of other mental health conditions in hoarding situations is often noted; as many as 75% of people with diagnosed Hoarding Disorder have a concurrent mental health disorder (Kress et al., 2016), 50% of whom have major depression (Kancherla et al., 2022). Recent studies also suggest that ADHD and Hoarding may be linked, with 20% of ADHD patients scoring high for significant levels of Hoarding (Morein-Zamir et al., 2022). This study suggests that inattention, but not hyperactivity, is a risk factor for Hoarding. This has led others to study the role of executive functioning in Hoarding Disorder with varying results (Ayers et al., 2013) (Woody et al., 2021).

Neurodiversity

ADHD is a mental health condition characterized by inattention, including difficulty organizing tasks and maintaining focus (American Psychological Association, 2013). Both Kristin and Ryn disclosed their ADHD diagnoses, while Beth suspected she had neurodiversity traits that contributed to her struggle to organize.

Kristin, a married musician who lives on one floor of a shared multi-floor home, assumes that her inability to keep focused on one task at a time is the reason many of her house projects do not get finished. She often rearranges rooms as a way to cope with stress and procrastinate completing her university homework, but her ADHD makes it difficult to complete any one project, leaving an unfinished mess of partly moved furniture and random piles to be sorted. She struggles with decision making surrounding objects and has trouble with grouping “like with like” items, causing her to stop organizing or cleaning whenever she meets an item whose category is not obvious.

Likewise, Ryn also mentioned that her ADHD often made her day job more taxing than it needed to be, and she usually returns home with no energy. Because her job demands a lot of her focus and self-control, her emotional regulation is often depleted for the rest of the day, despite her good intentions:

The whole day I’ll say to myself, “Okay, I’m gonna go home, I wanna do this, and this and this, and have a very productive evening.” And it just doesn’t happen. So... I’ll get on the internet and I’ll go looking on Kijiji.

Ryn spoke a lot about her plans for her stuff and her life, from organization, to being more creative, to finding better routines. She considers it unfair that, due to her paid work role, she has no time or energy for the things that really matter to her. She seemed to be constantly searching

for answers to the problem of ADHD to simplify her life:

It's a sad feeling and also there's an element of ADHD here. Which is a big thing. Um, this past weekend I've just been... working on learning a new, you know, like, the project management software, and there's all the different brands. And I've picked one of them to try to get my life in order. And that's actually giving a crack of some, like to that state of mind. Because I'm hoping that maybe I'll be able to have some control over my life and then get to, like, access the things. There's the meta-work of, like, planning one's life, and the personal admin, and then there's the actual life.

This constant feeling of life management is draining for Ryn, and it prevents her from using her space and deriving joy from it, which in turn causes her stress and makes it seem impossible to tackle the clutter in her home.

Beth also deals with clutter due to indecision, but was hesitant to say she had ADHD since "you know you can diagnose yourself with anything right?" However, she expressed how connected she feels to other adult females posting on ADHD organizing websites and social media. Beth realized her random boxes around the house that are filled with items that she cannot figure out where to put could be considered DOOM boxes: containers filled with random items that are used to quickly tidy spaces but rarely emptied. DOOM boxes appear often for people with ADHD, so Beth thinks it might be part of her inability to group "like with like" or make quick decisions. She explained her preoccupation for organizing books and blogs, her temporary fixation with minimalism, and her attempts at organization strategies like container

theory⁴⁷ and Marie Kondo's method of "does it spark joy".⁴⁸ While some of the strategies were interesting and had some traction, she cannot make any of them work long term, so the DOOM boxes keep growing.

These cases illustrate how living with neurodiversity adds to and complicates object management tasks and takes time away from performing domestic practices. Smaller tasks like putting away objects that accumulate from daily living can also be difficult to manage, both due to attentional and decisional challenges, including making decisions about categories and placement of goods. This can create piles of unfinished projects throughout the home and clutter that is difficult to reduce.

Depression

Fatigue and an inability to perform basic domestic practices that lead to clutter, can also be a problem for people experiencing depression. Andrea disclosed that she suffers from depression and that, like Ryn, it affects her energy levels. Her job, physical in nature, often depletes her energy, so when she gets home she only wants to sit on the couch. She said she often feels drained and making decisions is really difficult, so she resorts to relaxing by using social media or binge watching TV. Andrea has a lot of plans regarding her home and the objects in it; she identified many items that she no longer wants, but struggles with deciding how to get them out of the house as well as harnessing enough energy to physically remove them. Her temporary solution is to keep putting items that are supposed to leave the house in her front closet, which has become so messy that she purchased a privacy screen to hide it from visitors. She is

⁴⁷ Container theory is the idea that a set amount of containers or space must hold all goods of that category ex. one bookshelf must hold all the books, the rest must leave the house. This concept is sometimes contributed to Dana K. White of aslobcomesclean.com and *Decluttering at the Speed of Life* (2018).

⁴⁸ The KonMari method has been popularized by Kondo's books *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (2010), *Spark Joy* (2011), as well as the Netflix Special *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019).

frustrated with the mess, but feels unable to fully deal with it due to the fatigue caused by the depression.

Trauma

Trauma experienced in the home can directly affect how a person moves through the space, and this was evident with both Edith and Marilyn. For Edith, previous home robberies over a decade ago remain at the forefront of her mind, and she referred to this many times during my home visit. She talks about being incredibly frustrated that her home was tidy and organized, and that she is being forced to organize the objects again. It seemed that the number of disorganized items was difficult to deal with since it keeps reminding her of what happened to their home and the unfairness of the labour it created to undo what was done. With the weight of the robbery always on her mind (the thieves were never found) it is very difficult for Edith to approach items with neutral emotions. The persistence of negative feelings and trauma associated with items in her home means her organizing efforts stall quickly.

Marilyn's traumatic childhood remains vivid as she continues to live in the same house she was abused in by her father. While she admitted moving might be better, her home is the only place she can feel close to her deceased mother, whom she loved. She discussed how her mother would take her on shopping trips every Saturday, as a way of making up for the abuse endured at home, and her comfort in new clothing was visible in the many bursting closets. Her current shopping practice is directly connected to her way of dealing with the past, but it is contributing to new problems with clutter. Marilyn is aware that the bursting closets and dressers full of clothing needed to be reduced, and she has adapted her shopping trips primarily towards window shopping instead of purchasing, Marilyn is also aware that her clothing is heavily tied to the positive essence of her mom, which makes parting with clothing items more difficult.

Marilyn's kitchen and basement are also overflowing with food and alcohol. In the past, her parents had thrown extravagant parties, which were remembered as a time involving the presentation of a wonderful loving family free of abuse. Marilyn tries to replicate these feelings of safety by throwing her own parties where her guests will want for nothing. Additionally, Marilyn often seems to be preparing for the worst-case scenario; she spoke of having consulted "well-educated people" to prepare for Y2K, and she often inadvertently acquires duplicate items during shopping trips because she forgets if she already has the item or not. Her desire to please people and be prepared for anything leads to overspending and an overflowing pantry, putting a strain on the relationship with her spouse, and on her wallet. Marilyn knows that her habits of stocking her home are directly related to the trauma she endured, but her shopping habits are well ingrained and difficult to change at this point in her life. This leads to an abundance of items in her home.

It is not my intention here to connect hoarding and mental health; instead, I point to these cases as examples of how one's ability to perform practices can contribute to clutter. Physical fatigue can stall tidying and cleaning processes, mental fatigue can cause overwhelm and contribute to an inability to sort and make decisions, and trauma can add to the affective potency of materiality, whether it conjures negative or positive emotions. Individuals dealing with mental health issues often find adaptations that work for them, such as window shopping as discussed by Marilyn, or designating one space only as the clutter closet. Others spend a lot of time trying to find solutions to their problems that may or may not be helpful. Mental health can create barriers to performing domestic practices, but can also add to the labour of daily practices in ways that affect clutter in the home.

Internal Constraints: Life Course

Knowledges, abilities, priorities, and resources change as people age and grow, and so the performance of domestic practices is altered and adapted. How people are positioned in the life course is one way to frame such shifts.⁴⁹ The life course is cumulation of many intersections of age, gender, caring responsibilities, and physical abilities, all of which shift, ebb, and flow over time. Shifts in life demand various amounts of energy, abilities, and time, while also altering responsibilities and interests. These affect the enactment of different domestic practices.

While conducting interviews, three common life course positions were found to have an interesting impact on clutter vis a vis structures of time and space; caring for children or older adults, having children who have “left the nest” and/or having been widowed, and aging. These experiences are sometimes inevitable, and require changes to how domestic practices are performed in everyday life.

Caring Responsibilities

Living alongside as well as caring for one or more family members who have reduced capacity to care for themselves, such as children or aging parents, impacts household routines and clutter. Caring can require a significant amount of time and energy, and affects how and when domestic practices are performed. Spaces are affected when other household member’s possessions accumulate (toys or otherwise), and shopping practices are altered to include provisions for other family members. Care responsibilities for other household and family members multiply laundry and cooking demands, and extra errands must be completed. This means less time and energy for smaller cleaning and organizing tasks, and clutter piles up. The increased amount of objects that come into a home with multiple household members, particularly children, typically means more

⁴⁹ For more on life course and the design of the home see Michelle Janning (2017).

must go out, which creates a bottleneck of objects taking up space as they wait for the time or means to exit the home.

The complex intersection of caring and clutter is highlighted in Laura's home. When I met Laura, she was struggling to balance working full-time from home while also caring for her three-year-old son, whom she keeps home from daycare since the pandemic. Laura's husband was also recently injured, and while he is now able to continue work outside of the home, his contributions to the household are limited as a result. This leaves Laura to tend to the home and a wide variety of caring responsibilities for the two kids while continuing to work in paid employment. Laura needs her son to entertain himself during the day as much as possible, so his toys have taken over the living room, part of the kitchen, and the front room, which includes Laura's workspace. The busy nature of simultaneously working and caring for a child, including cooking and laundry, leaves no time for cleaning up, organizing or purging toys or outgrown clothing on a regular basis, so the mess of toys is constant. In this regard, the childcare arrangement puts several constraints on space and time for Laura, her husband, and their two children (including a university-aged daughter).

Compounding things further, Laura is also a member of the "sandwich generation" who are caring for their own children while also caring for aging parents (Mitchell, 2014). In Laura's case, this includes caring for her mother, mother-in-law, and stepdad, who all require extra help either in their homes or in care homes. She often runs errands for them, picking up and delivery groceries or prescriptions, and helping them to tidy and clean their homes. She mentioned that her after work schedule, she is often hurrying to help an elderly family member or two, spending time in their homes, and then rushing to pick up her daughter after she had finished working at the mall. Laura often gets home after 10:00 p.m., exhausted and having to do it all over again the

next day. With limited hours in the day, and limited energy due to caring responsibilities, keeping up with the basic practices of housekeeping seemed impossible in Laura's home.

Laura's mother-in-law had long ago decided Laura is a better person to care for her than her son (Laura's husband). Indeed, many of Laura's daily domestic and caring practices are highly gendered. She is the provider of meals, rides, and childcare for both children, and does all of the bedtime duties for her young son. She supports older family members (in part because she was also the oldest of her siblings), and cared full-time for her husband when he was injured. She continues to take care of her husband after work, completing all of the household tasks including shopping, meals, and cleaning. In their family networks, Laura is also named "champion of the stuff" and required to keep anything the family is not ready to get rid of. This gendered role means she acquired and assumed responsibility for items from her dad's home before he moved into residential care; she also manages items that her extended family wants to keep⁵⁰ such as party supplies and decorations.

All these responsibilities for Laura mean more items coming into the home and less time to manage them, as well as a lack of time for regular household maintenance. Her connections to others and gendered responsibilities alter her performance of domestic practices, with direct result on the levels of clutter in her home. Caught within and between immense caring responsibilities, she lacks ability to maintain domestic practices. Instead, Laura is often adapting her practices along the way, trying to find ways of keeping the household running (the food provisioned, the meals cooked, the dishwasher empty) that do not require more than minimal effort or time. Though Laura wants to dispose of a lot of the items, the physical work and time required is beyond her reach, leaving her feeling defeated.

⁵⁰ Taking care of items for others also falls into the maintenance of social relationships, detailed below.

Empty Nester

Living in the same house for a long time can create a clutter problem due to the many years of accumulation. Moreover, the loss of household members who have moved out or died creates empty spaces that are unused and available to fill. The result can actually create piles of objects that are in a sort of limbo; they might be designated for another family member who has yet to take them, or they may have belonged to a recently passed family member. Both Judith and Donna are empty nesters whose children have moved into their own homes and whose husbands died some time ago. They both want to start getting rid of items but are at different stages and require different types of help to perform decluttering practices.

Judith, for example, lives in the same two-story home she grew up in, and now that it is empty she finds it too big. She only uses the top floor when she has company, as she is fortunate to be able to live on the main floor alone, but she has started considering a move to a smaller place. The house belonged to her parents, and at one point had been a home to seven people (Judith was one of five children). Later on, the space housed Judith, her husband, and their two kids comfortably. More recently however, only Judith remains, since her husband died 13 years ago. When we spoke, she was aware that the stuff in the house would be a burden for her children if she did not clean out the house, and having experienced this burden personally, she was trying to part with things:

Tiffany: Okay but you said you've been doing a lot of decluttering?

Judith: Actually I have. [laughs] I always – and people laugh and I'll say 'you know, when I die, this will be good I'll be dead because my kids will want to kill me' because they'll have to deal with this right? And I don't think it's fair, so I'm *trying* to — I mean they'll probably just like, box it all up and out the door right? Like I did, when my mom

— you know my dad passed my mom was in here, she insisted we buy this house, my husband could see all the potential, so we bought the house and everything she didn't want couldn't fit in her new apartment she left here.

Tiffany: So then you had to deal with it.

Judith: I had to deal with all that. And so I know what it's like, yeah.

Judith is making progress. Most of the items originally belonging to her kids are gone, like the old report cards and crafts. Some items remain, such as a collection of old prom dresses. Judith's daughter is also storing many of her own children's baby items in the house - items that are no longer needed, but have sentimental attachment and do not fit in her own small home. Judith wants to get rid of these items, but does not feel she has the power to do so, so she holds on to them. Gradually Judith has been getting rid of her late husband's stuff, including the mountains of paperwork, tools, and parts from their business.

Judith has already processed most items she acquired when her parents sold the house to her, but she pointed out that those few items that remain remind her of her parents. She also struggles because the empty spaces seem to keep filling up with items. The many closets are half-empty and contain only mismatched or unknown items that need to be "dealt with". The abundance of space and closed closet doors make her home seem tidy, however, which makes it hard to find the motivation to proceed with the clean out.

In a similar example, Donna's husband passed away several years ago and her children have long left the home, leaving her in a spacious four-bedroom bungalow. Donna said her husband had been very minimalist and used to keep the house tidy and free from excess items they did not need. Since then, the large space has become a dumping ground for many things. The piles downstairs have also recently grown with the passing of Donna's parents, and despite

being ready to part with large furniture, she has no one she can call to move it out of the basement and out the door. Donna uses very few spaces in her home; she has her favourite spot on the couch, and she still cooks in the kitchen, but the rest of the house is unused and available to store all kinds of objects that *could* leave the house but just have not yet due to the effort involved in doing so.

When I asked Donna if she had ever considered downsizing into something smaller, she responded:

I could downsize but do I sell this house and then I have to move to whatever. Where am I going to move to? A smaller house, to – if I have to start all over again I – just it's easier, yes. It's just easier to stay here, yes.

She joked about wishing there was a fire to make the move easier, but at the same time enjoys having the extra space for her grandson or granddaughter to stay for longer periods of time. While she knows the extra stuff will cause her more trouble down the line, the lack of urgency and the extra space makes it easier for Donna to leave things as they are.

Being an empty nester and/or widow creates an interesting space problem in that the living area required for a large household differs significantly from that of a single person. Many participants were open to downsizing but it did not make fiscal sense, so they continue to live in the larger space. Empty spaces often get filled however, especially when some spaces are not used as often. Additionally, while many people move on from their childhood homes, they do not or cannot always take their items with them. Many empty nesters were managing the items of their grown children still, often because they had the extra space. Eventually, however, the items need to leave the home, creating a burden of decluttering for the person left behind.

Age-Related Health Challenges

Growing older can come with changes or declines in physical mobility and cognition that can create constraints. This is the case with Edith, an older woman who describes herself as a homemaker⁵¹ for her and her husband. Her house has many piles of boxes due to the prior robbery that left Edith's possessions in a jumbled mess (as mentioned in an earlier section). Since the robbery, Edith has aged, however, and is also starting to experience issues with mobility and memory, which is making it more difficult to tidy up her home.

While we were touring her home, Edith frequently stopped to sit down; she has created a maze through her items that leads to a chair or a spot on her couch where she can sit and do her organizing. Her decluttering strategy is to group together like items and put them in a separate box. Since every seating space has an organization "station" of boxes nearby, Edith's house was full of boxes of boxes of seemingly random items. It appeared Edith did not want to put anything away until all the alike items were found and put together:

But I don't wanna be running to the filing cabinet every time I find one paper. I want to put them all together so that I know they're organized *before* I put them in.

Edith's declining mobility means she has to find a sorting practice that is within her capacity. But since she has no empty spaces to bring together the items she has already sorted, her cleaning process is contributing to the clutter. Her general pace of sorting is also limited due to her physical ability, and it seemed as though the clutter was growing faster than she was sorting through it.

Additionally, Edith voiced concern for her declining memory, and had developed a

⁵¹ Edith was also performing gender roles; she did not speak much of her husband helping with the cleaning process at all.

practice of writing things down to aid her daily memory:

Uh, I have one friend that every time she phones me, she says, “Oh yeah, you’re forgetful, aren’t you?” So I write things down.

As she sorted through the piles of stuff in her living room, different objects often jogged her memory about things she wanted to document, so small paper notes were frequently found tucked amongst her things. Her memory loss is also contributing to holding onto items she does not necessarily need because they help to prompt a memory for her. Edith is a great storyteller, and could tell me where many of the items in her home came from or the occasion surrounding them,⁵² but having a story with every item also potentially stalls her discarding abilities.

While Edith has constraints of physical limitations and memory, she adapts to keep sorting through the items in her home. The unburying of resting places and her method of organization boxes are ways that she adapts to her limited mobility to continue cleaning. The amount of objects that need sorting, however, are far beyond what Edith’s physical health will allow, putting her at a disadvantage with regards to the growing clutter.

The analysis above illustrates how the life course position of a person contributes to clutter with regards to both the amount of stuff they have and the barriers they face in managing it. There is an ongoing process of accumulating goods throughout the life course that demands constant management; from the purging of childhood toys, to wardrobe maintenance as bodies or jobs change, to the items we come across as souvenirs, and then to those that are left behind when children leave the home or loved ones die. This management of goods is located in shifting responsibilities and priorities of caring and changing norms and expectations. At the same time,

⁵² Occasionally we came upon an item or family heirloom that she did not remember the story of, and always suggested we ask her husband. This highlighted some of the developing gaps in her memory.

our abilities to perform domestic practices are impacted by changes in the amount of time we have as well as our physical abilities. Of course, adaptations are continual as these processes are unending and general household management continues.

Internal Constraints: Conclusion

Life course position, as well as health, disability, and mental health issues all factor into how domestic practices are performed. The analysis above reveals the various constraints people experience and how they in turn adapt to accomplish their domestic tasks. Internal constraints are positional and often difficult to avoid, impacting things like energy, physical ability, and time. In most cases, people continue to perform required routines but with adaptations that satisfy both their internal constraint and the demands of a practice. These adaptations are not perfect however, and often lead to cluttered homes, whether because making physical access easier means everything is positioned on the floor in a cluttered way, or because acknowledging a need for rest requires postponing moving items out of your home.

External Environmental Constraints

Following the recognition of constraints that stem from internal positionality is the awareness of constraints and affordances that are external to one's being. The physical nature of space and the materiality within our homes impacts how we perform domestic practices and engage in everyday routines. For instance, kitchen spaces are the location of many different domestic routines, but their layout and affordances determine how (and where) materials are arranged and tasks are performed. Pets can also be understood to impact daily living in the home, for while they afford love and affection they also demand particular spaces and routines of their owners, who become limited in other home performances (as seen with Andrea, below).

In discussing these types of constraints, it is important to keep in mind how intersections

of age, class, and household composition play a role in access to different home spaces. Larger, more expensive homes often afford more spaces for storage and dedicate extra rooms for particular activities, while smaller, affordable homes or apartments have less square footage and fewer places to put things. There are also constraints for renters that are not present for homeowners; landlords often take advantage of renters and are less likely to do repairs or upgrades to improve spaces.⁵³ Additionally, it should not be overlooked that housing affordability often relies on two incomes, and single dwellers have fewer choices than dual-income groups. Additional people in the home such as children also impact the affordances of space. These intersections weave throughout many of the external constraints analyzed below.

Environment: Space

Practices are conducted in environments with particular materialities, which afford or constrain performances in particular ways. The spatial and physical environment of every interview home played a role in how individuals conducted their daily routines, and these environments often contributed to clutter. Many participants noted how certain aspects of their spaces were not ideal, whether for the practices they conducted or for the idealized versions promoted in popular culture. Others noted the overwhelming impacts of materiality and the clutter that occurs when storage spaces like closets or basements were missing. Of course, each person continued to live and conduct daily routines in the home, but were aware of the limitations of their space. While some had ideas for or actively tried to alter the spaces to better fit their routines and practices, some were unsure about what changes would help reduce the clutter.

⁵³ Dawn was dealing with a hole in her kitchen ceiling that had been there for many months, and requests to the landlord were not being answered.

Low-income groups, especially renters, are more likely to encounter space constraints. Detached houses generally provide the most square footage and more versatile layouts, with predetermined spaces for storage and organization. Apartments might likewise afford this, but are often smaller with fewer options for adaptations. Houses have experienced renovations or remodels; houses that have been turned into apartments are particularly challenging with regards to space, since cost-conscious renovation choices create confusing layouts (e.g., kitchens and bathrooms shoved into preexisting spaces). Additionally, renting an apartment is temporary, making many reluctant to make substantial changes, due to lost cost and the effort and time to assemble and disassemble if they move. Renovation is more feasible for those who own their home and assume the space for a longer time. Modifications take time and energy however, and the longevity of homeownership means that a space created for one stage of the life course may not be ideal for the entirety of the stay in the home. Spaces can become inappropriate or provide barriers at any stage or any size, providing the opportunity for clutter.

During the interviews, various constraints and adaptations within each home emerged. Though they are often overlapping and intertwining, I present four categories of space below that contribute to the accumulation of clutter. These spaces can be described as constraining, affording, idealized, and adaptive. This overview is intended to draw attention to how physical environments shape our ability to perform practices, how popular domestic discourses create tensions when faced with physical reality, and how people adapt (to) their space.

Constraining Spaces

The physical layout of a home can limit the performance of practices in ways that contribute to clutter. Room sizes in older homes may not accommodate modern furniture or may not be equipped to store the greater amount of material goods we now tend to keep in our homes.

Apartments are often built with less storage, prioritizing living space. Practices in these homes are often interrupted by limited spaces, leading to clutter.

Despite popular culture notions of modern design that promote sleek tidy homes with adequate storage and large living spaces, few homes are physically capable of functioning in this way; many homes experience space constraints that require additional problem solving to practice daily routines like cooking, relaxing, sleeping, or storing seasonal items. Adaptations to space are sought out to continue performing desired routines, but such adaptations may be difficult to achieve, whether due to the ability for the space to change, the money required, or the energy, both mental and physical, that it takes to change the space. In these cases, clutter is a common result of the constant desire to adapt a space.

For example, Omar rents the first floor of a home that has been converted into apartments. The space is divided poorly; a small galley kitchen leads from the entrance past a bathroom to a living room, with one smaller bedroom/office to one side and the primary bedroom off the other side. The layout causes the small living room to have only one solid wall, which makes it difficult to place a couch and television. Indeed, the couch, too long for the wall, blocks a closet beside a bedroom. The little floor space that remains is taken up by a play table for his son. The primary bedroom is larger than the living room with an oversized closet that does not have doors that fit, which limits the room with regards to the positioning of the furniture. The dysfunctional layout of the space, which Omar called “dynamic”, requires improvements to storage and furniture beyond Omar’s limited budget. He does have access to the unfinished basement; it is dirty and damp, and he shares it with his landlord, but he is only able to store some of his landscaping business tools down there. Any positioning of furniture or use of closet space is always an experiment for Omar; he keeps trying to make the space

uncluttered and safe for his son, but with restricted access to closet space, and structural barriers in the living areas, adaptations are limited. The physical environment is a barrier to everyday practices of storage or organization for Omar, which contributes to clutter in his home.

Living in a detached home, Laura is also experiencing a space that is incompatible with some of her practices. The previous owners had modified the house to suit their needs, including installing some permanent furniture. Her son's room has a large built-in shelving unit around where the bed should go, but with a young son the higher shelves remain empty. That bedroom also has a built-in desk that is not suited for a small child. Her inability to remove the desk resulted in it becoming a dumping ground for clutter. Her bedroom also suffers from prior renovation choices; a small walk-through closet had been poorly built and the rods have all broken, leaving her without any hanging space for clothes. While she dreams of solutions, the items in that closet end up piled in a heap on the floor. Laura realizes that the modifications required to suit her family are piling up, and with her husband having been recently injured and her working two jobs and doing daytime childcare,⁵⁴ that these projects might never be finished. The clutter in these areas keep growing without a solution, and Laura becomes more and more frustrated with the physical aspects of her environment.

In another case, damage to a home can mean a shuffle of clutter. Keith's primary bedroom has been shuttered for some time due to water damage that caused mold. All unsalvageable items had been discarded, and anything salvageable "now lives in the hallway". The remediation is going to cost a lot and require a lot of time, so Keith has adapted to living in one of his kids' old bedrooms. The loss of the space is felt by everyone; Keith moved into his son's small room, and his son into his daughter's old room. Both of those rooms were already

⁵⁴ For more on Laura, see chapter seven.

full of possessions, so a quick declutter was done to find everyone a space. Keith said he and his son are accustomed to doing “the little dance” in the hallway to get around the dressers of Keith’s clothing. His home has no basement and no attic, so closet space for storage is already limited, and it is not uncommon for the hallways to become a dumping ground for items that are difficult to store anywhere else. While there were preexisting problems with clutter in different rooms, part of which stem from Keith’s wife’s ADHD and system of sorting,⁵⁵ the sudden loss of a bedroom space created an upheaval in the home that is not easily resolved and contributes to sustained clutter.

Constraining Space: The Kitchen

The area most often pointed to by participants as problematic in the home was the kitchen. The kitchen is the centre of the home, traditionally oriented towards practices of preparing and eating food, however kitchens are becoming “multifunctional spaces” (Hand, Shove, & Southerton, 2007, p. 668), experiencing “a variety of substantial changes in terms of layout, design, use, purpose, and the materials and technologies contained within them” (Hand & Shove, 2004, p. 328). This means that people use their kitchens differently than in the past; they have increasing access to and reliance on technologies, and different aims within their food practices. The physical spaces people experience significantly affect their ability to perform practices such as provisioning, cooking, cleaning, and eating. In addition, kitchens have become spaces for work, play, or entertaining family, activities that are limited by the square footage and layout of kitchens, cupboard placement and size, and how technologies are incorporated into the area. These constraints mean fewer spaces for storage, or storage that is limiting in certain ways,

⁵⁵ Keith spoke about his ex-wife’s ADHD led to many sorting and storage practices that were not Keith’s preference and were often at odds with his preferred way to sort and organize items. Once they separated, Keith kept finding more and more items that had been hidden away in her sorting style, forcing him to go through the boxes and start sorting from scratch. This process also involved confronting her doom boxes.

which can contribute to a constantly cluttered kitchen.

For instance, older homes often experience greater levels of friction in the kitchen due to changes in the amount of technology, counter space, and the size of cupboard space in relation to the size and number of dishes. This is the case for Ashley, whose bungalow has an older kitchen that is difficult to use. She has very limited counter space, most of which is taken up by a newer double sink with drain tray. She has a dishwasher, which is convenient but takes up some of the cupboard space. Her upper cabinets are too shallow for dinner plates, so she often stores them in the dishwasher. The lack of countertop means putting a board over a sink for some prep area. Overall, she finds it really difficult to manage the practices of cooking, organizing, and cleaning in the space, which creates perpetual clutter.

Additionally, Ashley noted that there were too few plugs for the appliances she uses, partly because the cupboards to the rear of the galley kitchen are also supporting other charging devices, due to a lack of plugs in her living room. Ashley's space problem is perfectly captured by a photo she took of her Instant Pot sitting on a table in the living room; she mentioned how there is no room for appliances in the kitchen, due to lack of cupboard space and the size of the appliances. While some of her appliances are stored downstairs, she knows this makes her less likely to use them, and the Instant Pot was a recent gift that she wants to use more, so she opted to keep it where she can see it. While the placement of a kitchen appliance in the living room is a normative mismatch of object and place, this adaptation is the best option for Ashley. This example highlights the mismatch of an older kitchen with new technologies and changing purposes such as device charging.

While Ashley's small kitchen is particularly problematic, the complex nature of kitchen space is a common clutter theme. Carol, recently retired, keeps several sets of China and serving

dishes in her living room in a buffet and hutch with some other small appliances because she has limited storage space in her kitchen. But she keeps her large turkey roasters in a linen closet down the hall “because that’s the only place to put them.” While linens and cooking items are not ideally in the same category, this space adaptation is required due to the constraints in the kitchen, and Carol thinks it works well as a solution, since the roasters are only needed on occasion.

These examples highlight how far ideal kitchens are from the current, available kitchens that many people use. The physical nature of a kitchen with its growing reliance on new technologies means less opportunity for adaptations or renovations to make the space more functional. As dishes (clean and dirty) and appliances pile up, the resulting clutter can cause frustration for individuals who feel they have run out of solutions to adapt the space. This is true of course for all spaces; while adaptations are constantly required to manage home spaces, the limitations that exist in terms of cost, energy, ability, and even imagination for change are often out of reach for many people, making the resulting clutter feel permanent. Surprisingly however, as discussed in the next section, an abundance of space can also cause difficulties that lead to clutter.

Affordances of Space

A single detached home is often the idealized living space, and Canadians have doubled the size of their homes since 1975 (Point2Homes, 2017).⁵⁶ Larger homes come with an increase in domestic maintenance; while larger spaces can afford flexibility with growing family size or

⁵⁶ Canadian respondents enjoy the second largest average living area per person out of the surveyed countries – 618 sq. ft. In a survey done by Point2Homes (2017) Canada has third largest homes size, and are second only to Americans when calculating individual living space, with 618 square feet of living space per person (36% more than United Kingdom respondents).

adopting in-home entertainment (like crafting or office space), they also require additional domestic work to keep them clean and tidy. While seemingly counter-intuitive, too much space can contribute to clutter; this appears to happen when people use only part of the space (rendering the rest as storage), or are unable to find the time and energy to adapt large spaces to personal activities, leaving spaces in a sort of limbo. Andrea and Al are each living in spaces that are larger than their needs require, which contributes to more items coming into and staying in the home, while Carol is having difficulty reworking her extra space into ideal living area. The more space that is available, the easier it is for all of them to keep items that are not necessarily needed, contributing to increasing clutter.

Andrea, for instance, lives in a small bungalow with a full basement whose renovations have been stalled; the plan was to finish putting in a bathroom to make the basement a full suite. But when Andrea's co-residing sister moved out, the motivation to finish the renovations stalled. The proposed den downstairs has since become a dumping ground for renovation items, cardboard, and tons of Styrofoam that Andrea and her sister were saving for Halloween projects. The bedroom still has many clothing items from her sister, as well as other items that are ready to leave the house. During the pandemic Andrea did some sorting but with donation centres closed, there was nowhere to take the items. She has dreams of making that room a "nice open space," but first has to dispose of the excess items; since she never goes to the basement (other than for laundry) it is not visible as a priority. The basement space acts as a stopping point for items that Andrea needs to get rid of but that require extra decisions or steps that she often avoids. Since she lives primarily on the main floor, the extra space contributes to her keeping more clutter.

Likewise, Al, a retiree who spends most of his time playing golf, lives alone in a three-

bedroom bungalow with a full finished basement. Two of the upstairs bedrooms are available for flexible purposes, so Al turned one into a book and music room to house his large collections. The other bedroom acts as a spare room in case family visit, but I observed the bed was covered with random kitchen items he was hoping his kids would take. Al's basement also has a pool table room that he sometimes uses with his grandson, but the rest of the space stores several sets of golf clubs (Al is not sure why he keeps these), boxes that contain his adult daughter's stuff, as well as his growing stockpile of golf balls. Al mentioned that some of the items could and should probably go so he can eventually downsize, but he was not in a rush to clear anything out. In part, this was because staying in a paid-off home is much cheaper than getting a new place. Al uses very few spaces of his home; he has a favourite chair with his reading and a tv nearby, and eats at a small table in the kitchen. Yet without an urgent need to dispose of items, his "stuff" can stay, and the large space affords him the ability to keep accumulating books, collections, CDs, and knick-knacks comfortably, i.e., without it impeding on the space he is using daily.

Carol is also dealing with a home whose extra spaces contribute to clutter. Her kids are grown and out of the house, leaving two empty bedrooms upstairs. When I visited, the extra space was particularly welcome, as her ailing spouse was sick and needed his own room. The former basement kid hang-out, however, has now become unused and burdensome; the furniture and television are pushed to the edge of the space to provide for a storage dumping ground. Carol has high hopes for this space, and dreams of an opened, organized crafting area. There is a bedroom in the back that she wishes could function as a sleepover room for the grandkids, but right now it is operating as an office bursting with papers, old photos, a collection of Christmas gifts that are bought throughout the year, and seasonal clothing items.

Carol wants desperately to be organized; she purchased clear bins to pack things up and a

filing cabinet for loose papers, but knowing where to start is difficult. She finds managing the upper floor of her home on her own to be too much, so the basement is an afterthought. The reality of clutter keeps the crafting space looming like a dream in Carol's mind, and her frustrations with the amount of space and objects within, as well as the little time and energy between multiple caring responsibilities, keep her unable to start decluttering. This type of frustration was echoed in several participant interviews; while larger spaces can sometimes afford individuals the ability to be more versatile with their space and participate in more activities at home, for many it becomes a magnet for unwanted or disorganized objects that become difficult to discard, especially when these take up space that is otherwise infrequently used. This was especially true for people who lived alone or who were predominantly responsible for the tidiness of the house; space demands time in terms of domestic maintenance, and if a tipping point is reached, clutter starts to assemble.

Idealized Spaces: The Basement

Sometimes constraining spaces are not spaces at all, but the idealized versions of space that people bring into their homes from other sources. When an imagined home space diverges from with the reality of what exists, this can be very difficult for some people, leaving them stuck trying to decide where items should go. This seemed particularly true about basement space. Basements are common in Canadian homes, but especially so in cities like Winnipeg that experience cold winters and where homes have requirements pertaining to the frost line (Chung, 2014). While idealized as additional or expanded living space, basements in family homes are generally also or alternatively used for storage (Chung, 2014). In this sense, basements have come to be thought of as a dumping space for lesser-used items like seasonal decorations or sporting equipment, as well as items that are too dirty or unsafe to keep with other daily

household items, like tools or paint. Indeed, participants who did not have a basement were unable to discern where ‘basement-like’ items should go. The gap between ideal and reality complicated decision-making in ways that contributed to clutter in several homes; participants sought to find alternative but appropriate spaces for items normally stored down below. This was true for both Beth and Kristin, who lived in homes with no access to a basement.

Beth iterated many times she does not want a bigger house; she likes her home and thinks it should be more than enough space for her, her husband, and her two kids. However, the space is not ideal for their lifestyle practices, as it lacks closets and storage as well as a basement. Her husband and children play a lot of sports, and no basement means dealing with the constant mess of all seasons of sports equipment at the back door. Additionally, she wishes other seasonal items like Christmas decorations could be stored somewhere other than in one of the only closets available on the main floor. While a basement would help, Beth was also adamant that there is just too much stuff in the house:

I don’t think that like a basement or an extra closet or shelves is like, or a storage unit or whatever like is the solution? ‘Cuz, I’ll just fill that too.

However, Beth also repeated frustrations over her inability to find a place for every item when there is limited storage space. She accepts that the dumping ground for sports equipment will always be at the back entrance, since the practice of coming in the door and dropping equipment is habituated through their routine. This means living with a cluttered entrance. And since they are committed to living in the house with the existing storage — for instance, she emphasized that more bookcases or shelves would only create more clutter — Beth decided getting rid of items is the only way forward. Beth seemed defeated when she spoke about the lack of storage in her home; a basement would easily solve many of the problems, but knowing it was not a

possibility means constantly trying to find alternatives to the cluttered spaces in her home. The pressure to make different choices when few options are available is clearly hindering Beth, in much the same way it stalls Kristin.

Kristin and her partner share a home with another couple; she and her husband live on the top floor while the other two live in the basement. She is accustomed to not having basement space, usually finding another closet or bedroom to hold storage items. We toured the bedroom that was designated or acting, so to speak, as a basement, because it is “kind of a place where things go and then just stay.” Kristin intends to formally purpose a large and deep closet as basement storage space, but her search for a shelving unit to fit inside of the closet has been unsuccessful; she mentioned going so far as to pry off the baseboards inside of the closet to see if another inch would create enough space, but the ideal unit would not fit, and the project was abandoned. The bedroom mess got worse when the hide-a-bed was opened for a guest six months prior and left open, creating a dumping ground. While Kristin identified a few things that would go to the shared garage if it ever got cleaned, she said most of the other stuff will never really leave. This causes her distress because she has taken care and energy to hang a wide variety of meaningful artwork on that bedroom wall, and instead of bringing her joy it brings her frustration and sadness because it is buried among the mess. She still holds hope that the closet will become organized storage while leaving a functional spare bedroom, but her inability to find shelving for the closet creates a barrier for her reimagining the space. For Kristin and others, a lack of storage, especially when contrasted against idealized spaces like basements, was experienced as problematic, requiring them to reimagine storage and organization solutions. This extra labour requires time and imagination, as well as follow-through, creating a barrier in dealing with storage clutter around the home. The extra attention required to manage objects in

unideal spaces is often difficult to summon, creating opportunities for increasing clutter.

Adaptations and Multi-purpose Spaces

Some people adapt homes where space is in short supply pragmatically, by designating multipurpose areas that facilitate the activities and needs of the household (Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo, 2019). For both individuals and families, multi-purpose spaces provide good use of space in an apartment or a home, accommodating extra pastimes like crafting or collecting, while also opening up opportunities for work from home, a popular adaptation since COVID-19 (Wethal et al., 2022). Yet such spaces can contribute to clutter, since items are constantly being moved to accommodate different activities, and storage in the space for multiple activities is often lacking. This is true for both Laura and Beth.

Laura adapted her busy front living area to accommodate two jobs. There is no office space in her home, so when she started working from home during the pandemic the sitting room became the site for her day job. This space was already functioning as a place for her side job as a photographer. This means two computers, two desks, and a larger television are tucked into the space, since she cannot use her work computer for her side job. On the weekend she uses a wagon to haul in different photography items like props and lighting, and then hauls them back in the wagon when Monday comes. The pandemic also brought her son home to her care, so during the rare time that the space is empty her son likes to play in it. This space is a necessity for Laura's paid job and care responsibilities, but it is also an area of havoc with so many things going on and with the boundaries of office and playroom constantly in opposition.

Beth is also dealing with a melding of spaces. Her small home lacks space, so she uses one room for many purposes:

Beth: This is our dining room/office/craft room/currently drying clothing room...

like the dining room, office, craft room, playroom game room everything room,
we've got clothes in here. Everything.

Tiffany: Okay. And I'm just, you've got storage here...

Beth: Yeah, craft cupboard in there.

Tiffany: Craft cupboard, okay. Uh, book shelf of...?

Beth: Ssstuff.

This room is a catch-all for Beth; it contains a curious amalgamation of crafting items (papers, pencils, yarn, glue), schoolwork, a computer, games (and game pieces), and the remnants of birthday party decorations. Many activities in the home occur here, since this is where the table is located. The multi-functioning of the room contributes to a huge amount of clutter due to the shifting of activities that required a flat surface. Every time there is a meal, the things on the table are shooed off so that the family can eat together. These items end up on every surface in the space, including on the keyboard of the computer and on the bookshelf of miscellaneous "stuff". When the meal is over, items are moved again to accommodate the next activity, such as homework, playing a computer game, or making a puzzle. The constant rotation of activities in this room means no dedicated time to clean up between projects, leaving a perpetual residue of items.

The multipurpose room is where time and space collide in interesting ways. The spaces of our home are permanent but adaptable to the tasks executed within them, and are subject to our routines and time management. In homes that include crafting or creating, multipurpose spaces are particularly important (unless you are able to outfit a full room for sewing like Ryn). But when the routines in a space increase, the demands of object management go up while the space to manage them stays the same. This makes these adaptable spaces more likely to be the

location of clutter, as the physical limits of storage collide with limited time between task switching.

Adaptations for Pets

Pet ownership may not seem like a barrier to domestic tasks; however, daily routines and practices are supported and shaped by material environments that include pets (Galčanová & Vacková, 2016). Adaptations created for pets often remain for the duration of the pets' life within a household, altering certain domestic practices and introducing others. The time and effort required to keep a pet demands adjustments for a household, which in turn impacts the spatial environment of a home. Owning pets factored into clutter accumulation with regards to the household management of space.

For instance, Andrea's home setup is curated for her current dogs, as well as for dogs that she has previously fostered. The carpet is ripped up in her living room because it this was easier when she had puppies that were not house broken; some door trim is missing because another dog had chewed it off. Her new dog is overly anxious and often becomes destructive, so all the ornaments and books on shelves have been removed from the living room. Since the removal was done rather haphazardly, the items are left strewn in corners and on the floor of her bedroom, which became a problem when one day the dogs managed to break through the locked bedroom door and destroy many of the items. Since tending to this destruction has to wait until she can get a substantial vacation break from work, the damage remains. The adaptations Andrea made to her home, like ripping up the carpet, might seem like a big sacrifice, but Andrea is concerned for her pets first and her comfort second, so for now the uncovered floor is acceptable to her. Although Andrea welcomes making these concessions for the animals — she loves her dogs — it is clearly impacting her home and ability to keep things clean and tidy. Losing the

storage in her living room limits space for her possessions, and the constant repairs needing to be done contribute to construction clutter.

Similarly, Laura's cat creates some unique situations for her spaces because her cat can open certain doors and likes to climb in the ceiling. For that reason, the closet in her son's room is completely barricaded so the cat cannot climb up and get stuck, rendering that closet unusable. This means other storage spaces are needed to compensate for the space that is lost. Likewise, Laura uses boxes to barricade the couch in the basement that has an electric recline because the cat often hides in there and could get squished. This adds to the clutter blocking the storage room door. She also keeps the basement storage areas closed off to the cat, which makes going back and forth between the freezer and pantry an inconvenience (she has to watch where the cat is at all times). Again, Laura understood she had to make these concessions for her pet, but was aware that they caused problems in the space of her home, including removing access to places and requiring extra clutter to keep the cat safe.

While these adaptations yield inconveniences and limitations for conducting daily practices in the home, and contributes to clutter, peoples' love and affection for their pets means they are generally accepting or comfortable with the concessions needed to keep their animals safe and happy. Eleven of the 17 participants in my study had pets in their home, and the space required to keep a pet, as well as the routines surrounding them, contributed to clutter in every home, whether it involved concessions to the spaces to accommodate destructive dogs (as above), or in the case of many, shifts in daily routines to walk or feed animals. For instance, Ashley spoke a lot about how her routines changed to adapt to her pets, and while some were positive (rushing home to walk the dogs meant no window shopping), others impacted clutter in the home (being too tired after rushing home and walking the dogs to manage a cluttered

kitchen). In this regard, adaptations can have both positive and negative consequences for space and thus for clutter.

External Environment Conclusion

While clutter and excess objects tend to be studied in a reductionist fashion targeting the individual things themselves, observation of the physical home environment and questioning of domestic practices can reveal how the external environment generates constraints on the performance of everyday life and contribute to clutter. While a lack of storage is a common complaint, a limiting home layout or small cupboards can also necessitate adaptations to daily routines.

Constraints and Adaptations Conclusion

In sum, the analysis of the interviews revealed patterned limitations faced by individuals around performing domestic practices. Different health issues, caring responsibilities, and life course circumstances inhibited certain participants from performing practices according to social normative standards as well as their own ideals. Such limitations can be seen as part of the individuals positionality. External environment including the spatial aspects of the home, or pet ownership, also place limitations on domestic practices. In some of these instances, experimentation and improvisation lead to permanent adaptations, especially around pet ownership, which for many was a long-term constraint. These adaptations sometimes involved permanent clutter spaces that were managed or had intended management. For others, adaptations to circumstances around which they had less control, such as when household members died or participants aged, were much less consistent or effective, creating more clutter.

Overall, both constraints and adaptations are common in homes, and people seem willing or desire to completely overhaul their homes, either to make their lives easier, or to force a

change in their external surroundings. However, materiality has its own type of potency. While individual will is often at the centre of popular discussions about clutter, in many of the above cases the assemblages of matter themselves created particular barriers to change. Imperfect adaptations can thus illustrate a 'making-do' with the circumstances. And certain adaptations falter not due to the individual but due to the circumstance, or one's position within their life, their relations, or physical abode. An inability to access laundry services can thus lead to clothing clutter; a small kitchen with limited counterspace will require messy adaptations for meal provisions; a decision fatigued individual will understandably opt for rest rather than decluttering. The cases highlight how adaptations to internal and external constraints are woven into domestic practices such that they create clutter or increase the presence of materiality in the home.

Chapter Seven: Values

This final chapter considers how a third category — values — further interrupts, alters or even dissolves domestic practices, leading to clutter. The values involved are often connected to deep moral sentiment, highlighting how social messaging and mores are intertwined with how people keep objects. In turn, these values meant that some homes dealt with a larger level of clutter, usually because these values created barriers to discarding items. The processes involved also highlight the underlying significance of affect, object assemblage, materiality, and discourse in clutter. A home filled with affectively charged objects impacts how an individual moves in a space; how often they pause at memory or ingrained moral reasoning, slowing their routines. Assemblages emerge from connected objects that makes them more than the sum of their parts, making it difficult to consider any one object alone. The potency of materiality, its ever-present existence in everyday life, becomes more problematic as it accumulates, both in size and in meaning, straining practices. Additionally, popular discourses of the environment and family reinforce particular habits that may not serve the purpose of decluttering.

In what follows, I detail how three specific value orientations located in participants' homes altered their domestic practices of accumulation and discarding, resulting in higher levels of distressing clutter. The first section looks at participants' goal negotiations arising from a "Green" or eco-conscious value orientation, highlighting how moral responsibility regarding the environment, recycling, and landfills can impact object clutter. I then highlight how increased sentimentality and sentimental objects can play a large role in the acquisition and storing of objects, but in particular can complicate discarding efforts. The third section covers how objects can enact the importance of social relationship as express moral social value orientations concerning care for others. When familial bonds and solidarity are expressed through objects, the

maintenance of such bonds through the objects becomes a priority layered onto domestic practice, that often conflicts with normative practices of organization or discard.

Through these sections I illustrate the larger picture of how objects and materiality come to create clutter, but also how clutter and objects are never neutral, often negotiated, and are always entangled in practices and routines in the home. Objects that are imbued with affect, assemblages that become difficult to disassemble, and cultural discourses dealing with morality, are all threads that wind themselves through these stories.

Participants' narratives were often layered with complex values, but I have chosen here to isolate particular orientations for illustrative purposes. The various domestic practices, negotiations, and valuations that take place in a home and contribute to clutter are numerous and intertwined; what follows is an attempt to bring forward specific instances where values and domestic practices combine to create clutter. Overall this chapter highlights the problematic nature of designating objects as "wanted" or "needed", as often they are neither, but remain in the home due to particular value orientations. These orientations also contribute to object affect in the home and guide further movement and practices.

Eco- or Climate Conscious Values

One theme that emerged through the data encapsulated care and concern for the environment. This theme, which I refer to as being eco- or climate conscious, incorporates thoughts, intentions, and actions centred on reducing waste, recycling or reusing items, or lessening purchases. While bolstered by popular discourses of "save the planet" or "reduce, reuse recycle", the internalized moral imperative to be eco or climate conscious has a direct impact on the amount of clutter in the home, as it interrupts practices related to acquisition and discard. Sometimes this is due to participants' uncertainty regarding disposal, or friction between goals of

creating less waste and still needing to conduct daily living (such as cooking, feeding pets, or buying items sold in plastic).

While each participant expresses their environmental concerns differently, some through staunch anti-consumerism (such as Ryn) or landfill awareness (such as Kristin and Andrea), they all experience excess objects due to their interest in repurposing objects in the home, insisting on second-hand purchasing, or negotiating eco-friendly disposal. For, Ryn, Kristin, and Andrea, their eco-stance contribute to an excess of objects in their homes that are in various stages due to limitations or blockages pertaining to making climate-conscious moves.

Anti-consumer Practices

Ryn's concern for the climate is not expressed directly but through her acquisition practices, such as buying second hand or appropriating items destined for the landfill. Ryn expresses an anti-consumerism stance that a capitalist system of spending and gig work is causing harm. Her belief that society has created more than enough goods (so she should be able to find whatever she needed "out there") motivates her highly selective acquisition practices:

Almost everything that I own is second-hand in some manner. And if it's not second-hand, it's because it's, like, highly specific. Or too valuable to ever end up in a thrift store.

For Ryn, acquiring used items is part of a regular and highly complex and laborious practice that she spoke of frequently. She often researches and scours the social media and thrifting websites for second-hand items she knows she can use long-term, waiting until she finds the exact piece she needs, making contact with sellers, and arranging to pick up the item. Her favourite thing to do in a new city is visit a thrift shop. Her interest in crafting and creating also requires a lot of

items. Ryn's shopping practices are well aligned with her eco-conscious values yet contribute to clutter. For instance, certain objects remain in disarray while she waits to acquire the right used storage units to house them. While several problems may have been solved immediately by a trip to a commercial store, Ryn chose to wait so that her practice kept in line with her goals.

Ryn has several items she pointed out, that she is proud of finding or reusing, such as a fan from her work that her boss wanted to throw away:

No regrets! But [my boss] couldn't understand it. There was a fan in the back that he thought he wanted to throw out. I kept it, I cleaned it, I used it you know. And I, I'm very good at finding use value.

By emphasising other people's surprised reactions about such practices of thrifting and dumpster diving, Ryn presents herself as countering dominant expectations; moreover, she emphasizes her personal enjoyment of the things she took home off the street, for instance. She laments having to explain herself to others or being stigmatized as a hoarder. For Ryn, it is just a way of life:

That's why I like thrifting. Because I feel like we've made enough stuff. If I want it, it's out there. I'm sure of it. And so... And I actually try not to... like, excuse it? Excuse the thrifting as, like, [high-pitched voice] "Well, it's recycling! I'm helping! Otherwise it's gonna go on the landfill!"

Despite her confidence with buying used items, Ryn admits that waiting to acquire the perfect item holds up certain practices and leads to cluttered areas in her home; it often means keeping a lot more than what was needed in the short term. This stress weighs on her as she had just moved into a larger space that she thought would take care of the clutter. Despite the larger apartment enabling more practices of crafting and creating, this larger space prompts her self-consciousness

as it conflicts with her eco-conscious value orientation:

[My method of acquiring] takes up a lot of room. It takes up a lot of room and space and in a city [space] is a premium and intensification is important for environmental reasons, versus, like.... I dunno it's, it's – I'm sorry if this is, like, kind of just stream of consciousness, but... There's – Yeah there is, like, an environmental angst about the materiality, but I would feel worse about it if I was buying a bunch of stuff new for no reason.

Ryn appears to try to reassure herself that her moral practices of buying second hand counterweigh her use of “too much space”; she verbalizes this idea frequently in the interview. That Ryn derives pleasure from her possessions and her space also helps to push out her potential doubts about clutter in some areas of her home. For Ryn, living with some amount of object clutter signifies that she is staying true to her morals.

Divestment and Disposal

While Ryn's eco-conscious concerns focus on acquisition, Kristin is aware that her ideas of waste and being wasteful are affecting her ability to dispose. While we toured her home, she identified several piles of items that she wishes would leave the house, but the act of physically making a trip to the thrift store or recycling depot is an additional, undeveloped practice.

Additionally, Kristin lacks knowledge around eco-conscious disposal:

It's partly that like the waste side of things, I'm like, I don't want to throw these things out but not because I, want to keep them. It's not that I actually feel sentimental attachment [laughs] it's like, I don't want to add stuff to the landfill but like, my house is becoming the landfill.

Kristin emphasizes how complicated it seems to find information on where to responsibly dispose of old items like plastic bags, and also questions whether they would actually be recycled or just end up in the landfill:

So, it's like I'm concerned about the environment but now I have all these plastic bags, what am I doing with them? And how am I actually disposing of them and am I disposing of them? Because it would be super easy to just be like, 'I'm just putting all of you in the trash, all you plastic bags'. So they're out of my house but then I have this weird guilt about, all these plastic bags are ending up in the landfill but, they're not really doing anything in my house either.

This landfill guilt stalls Kristin's disposal practice. She mentioned a pair of pants that she no longer wants but that need to be mended before donation. She knows they could go to fabric recycling but cannot remember where this is, and she will not make a trip for just one pair of pants. Instead, the pants remain tucked in a corner like a lot of other items in her home, such as old muffin tins that she also does not know how to dispose of:

Kristin: [...] that box in the corner has a bunch of very old muffin tin pans in it but they've been like — they're not good for making muffins anymore. How do you get rid of that, where do you take it to except for the landfill but there's part of me that's like —

Tiffany: — the metal, don't they take metal at the...

Kristin: Exactly. Is it a metal...

Tiffany: Is it a metal that they take?

Kristin: Yeah, so these are the thoughts that go through my head.

The process of discarding while adhering to her eco-conscious morals makes decluttering

exhausting. Kristin pivots between wanting to get rid of everything and then remembering her moral values regarding contributing to the landfill. This tension often stalls her progress:

Kristin: It's like, I don't want to get rid of it because it's you know – so yeah, I would love to be able to be like, everything goes! My brain is like, 'no, we gotta be concerned about these things' so then it's, yeah again it's like knowing how to dispose of things and where to dispose of them and those sorts of things which can be time consuming.

Tiffany: Yeah, time consuming and knowledge consuming, you have to do all that knowledge work to figure out and have those questions answered and Google and,

Kristin: It's exhausting.

The weight of decluttering for Kristin has recently become more intense; she just read “Living more with Less”,⁵⁷ a Mennonite manifesto on living simply, and has become more conscious of her acquisition practices; however, past acquisition has already created too much clutter. In this regard Kristin explains her tendency against disposal - to retain items that might be reused in the future – as tied to a long standing family habit of reusing and repurposing. For instance, she had seen the stockpile of items her grandmother, who was born in the 1930s, had kept throughout the years. For Kristin, this practice sometimes leads to her retaining more items than she could ever possibly use (e.g., an extensive empty container collection). Kristin cites her family value orientation again in the following excerpt:

I guess my parents have always been sort of do-it-yourselfers so also some of that again reusing things or repurposing things, which may explain why I have a stash of whole random nails that have previously been in walls. Because I'm like, 'it's still a perfectly

⁵⁷ *Living More with Less* by Doris Janzen Longacre, 1980.

good nail [laughs] so why would I get rid of this', right? So those sorts of things.

Kristin mentions that these learned behaviours combined with currently living in a more amplified eco-crisis often causes a sort of decision paralysis she experiences with regards to disposal.

Though challenges related to the practice of keeping items for reuse are encountered in many homes, Kristin's practice extends beyond the usual plastic bag pile and into many other areas of the house. She keeps reusable carrying cartons for beer runs, extra egg cartons to divide bulk egg purchases, and cardboard drink holders for trips to Dairy Queen. Though the value and practice of reuse manifests deeply into the lifestyle Kristin and her housemates had created, items are often forgotten about, leading to acquiring yet another container or cardboard drink holder that could be kept 'for next time.' The large amounts of reusables are problematic for her, in that there is no designated or available place for their storage, and Kristin is aware that they would be more likely forgotten if they were not visible in their current area, on top of the refrigerator and in the entryway. In essence, her reusing practice is missing a cue to take items when leaving, or space in the home to store all the reusable parts.

In sum, Kristin's learned habits and climate conscious motivations sits in tension with her inability to connect the values of reusable items with the habit of putting the reuse into practice; alongside the lack of material storage space, this meant the retention causes a lot of clutter in her home. Moreover, items have no ingrained practice for disposal whether due to lack of time or knowledge. Kristin states many times she has no emotional connection to these objects, but rather does not want to be wasteful or contribute to growing landfills that were fuelling climate change. This stalls her decluttering, contributing to stress. Her household practices involve confronting the unwanted items awaiting departure, for instance in the kitchen where she moves

around reusable containers and cup holders.

Trash as Treasure

Similarly, Andrea's awareness of overflowing landfills and a "wasteful society" played a big role in the clutter in her home. Like Kristin, she was concerned with reusing items as much as possible to reduce collective waste:

So, a lot of stuff too why I don't just throw stuff away, I seem to have this really odd – I don't like throwing stuff in the landfill. Because like I try and reuse everything as many times as I can because I just feel like we're a very kind of wasteful society, me included. So, I don't like just throwing stuff out if I think it can get another use. I have a lot of crap like that in the house [laughs].

For instance, Andrea had stopped buying garbage bags and instead was using large empty dog food bags, which cut her spending and prevented waste. Andrea had many other ideas for reuse or repair of items, however, yet lacked either the skills, a person to help with a project, or the time or energy. For instance, one of her ideas was to recover old couch cushions for beds for her foster dogs. She had yet to find the time, so the cushions became clutter. But for her, keeping the clutter felt better than throwing the cushions in the garbage.

Additionally, Andrea's conviction against throwing things into the garbage takes time and energy as she has to research alternatives to landfills. Andrea has many piles of items that needed disposal: lightbulbs, batteries, even a large TV. For instance, she spent a long time looking up alternatives to unopened yet expired caulking she would not use, a result of an excess purchase by her ex-boyfriend. Her aversion to landfill disposal keeps it in a box in her basement:

It's annoying, but again it's more of like part of me is just – I was like I don't like just

throwing this stuff out. But that, there's nothing I can do with it. Like I tried even looking up is there something else I can use this for, and it was pretty much a no. So I do really just have to go down through here and just take a big giant garbage bag and throw out stuff.

While Andrea is aware that some of the items might be better off in the garbage, she has a hard time disposing them because the thought of contributing to a landfill was so morally wrong for her. When moments arise where her clutter comes in handy, however, Andrea is satisfied:

..for the most part, I should be getting rid of most of that but there are some pieces in there that are actually still useable with the vent stuff. And then oddly enough again my sister needed some new ducting vents and she's like, "We still have all that ducting, right," and I laughed, and I was like, "Yeah, of course we do." And she took some pieces because she needed it and I was like, "Hey, look like that. The hoarding paid off"
[laughs]

The gratification from this type of social exchange might in part explain why certain construction items are retained. Andrea's father, a former tradesman, keeps many parts and pieces from work projects in his home and garage, even having Andrea store some of his extra items. Though Andrea expresses annoyance, she feels helpless since she has similar habits. Unfortunately for Andrea her open, excess basement space helps her keep certain items, allowing her to keep the possibility of reuse gratification available.

In sum, Andrea's practices of reuse aligns with her eco-conscious values but along with her inability to complete disposal in an eco-conscious way and other challenges, contribute significantly to the excess amount of items in her home. Her habit of keeping items for later use

is sometimes rewarded, which she uses to justify their retention. Her ability to transform items and her do-it-yourself upbringing also contribute to her proclivity to hold on to items. The practices of crafting or creating she imagined were not being executed, while other habits of holding on to goods for later use dominated.

Eco-orientations and Conflicted Domestic Performances

The above analysis illustrates the importance of accounting for moral values in discussions of clutter. Interestingly, the individuals above recognized many items that they wished would exit their home, but their moral imperative to reduce waste interfered with that goal. Indeed, Woodward (2021) has accurately pinpointed that to examine clutter and household practices requires an understanding of the “moral ideas of what is wasteful” (1218) for the individual. For Ryn, any item that is acquired brand new is considered wasteful, so every acquisition step she takes is attached to a practice of obtaining second-hand goods. Kristin would consider items going to the garbage instead of a recycling platform to be wasteful. For Andrea, wastefulness is not using an item to its full use, which includes refashioning that item for another purpose, thus extending its life. These cases illustrate how objects are viewed in various ways according to ideas of what is wasteful, which then impacts how long they are kept in the home.

In avoiding being wasteful, items can become clutter, halting practices of decluttering or organizing while awaiting an acceptable mode of disposal. This sort of interruption to the object cycle has been commented on by Woodward:

Things are hard to dispose of due to their material endurance as well as the moral and normative ideas of what trajectory things should have, people not wanting to feel wasteful. Their value or use long gone...but they still last as objects. (Woodward, 2021, p. 1224)

These examples also highlight how discourses on waste, climate change, and recycling play a role in household practices and the ability of some to discard items. Many discourses that promote recycling or reducing waste serve an end goal or desired endpoint (such as smaller landfills or cleaner air), but few provide practical steps. When the individual is left to shift their routines on their own, those goals can become at odds with pre-existing everyday practices and their performances. Additionally, the goals might not be compatible with the resources available to an individual or household, whether those resources are space for object collection, strength to move the objects, a vehicle to transport, or simply the time or energy required to organize and enact multiple discard practices.

For instance, Winnipeg (where the study was conducted) has access to the Manitoba Recyclepedia app that aims to make it easier to determine what can be placed in blue bins and recycled at city facilities. This app also includes some items that can be dropped off in other locations or at other businesses or suggestions for reuse. But disposing of certain items like fabric or electronics might mean additional trips to inconvenient locations, and some items, like reusable fabric bags, have no recycling alternative. This means these types of items are left for the individual to make decisions about, which, depending on value orientations and goals can create a frustrating type of clutter in the home: excess stuff that is not wanted but cannot be discarded.

A (perhaps more poetic) way of looking at this goal incongruence is to consider such clutterers as “custodians of rubbish” (Falkoff, 2021, p. 168). Writing as a daughter of a hoarder, Falkoff explores hoarding and materiality with regards to unstable notions of value and the meaning of things through the ages, finding that the culture of the hoard ebbs and flows depending on social values and concepts of the economy. In terms of saving for reuse, what was

once thrifty and economically smart may end up being regarded in a negative light. Dirt can be described as “matter out of place” (Douglas, 1966/2002, p. 44), but what is considered in “place” shifts with the values and attitudes of the current culture, often disseminated through advertising and the broader consumer culture.

In sum, when ecological values influence particular domestic practices, the goal incongruence can result in a paralysis that leaves items in a limbo, unwanted but without a path out of the house. This highlights the necessity of examining the presence of specific values in the home and how they shape domestic practices with regard to clutter.

Sentimentality: Affect, Objects, and Assemblages

What are Sentimental Objects?

Objects can be described as sentimental when they conjure emotions regarding former relationships or experiences. This can include “having belonged to, having been given to or by, or having been used by, people or animals, within a relationship of family, friendship, or romantic love, or having been used or acquired during a significant experience” (Fletcher 2009, p. 56). Such objects can be clothing, souvenirs, paper items, or household items. They are usually old, sometimes broken, often gifted, and used frequently, occasionally, or never. Popular culture sometimes frames sentimental items as cheap or worthless signs of excessive emotions (Kieran, 2016) or as mawkish or schmaltzy; however, sentimental objects can also be seen in a positive light. They can improve well-being and help to “renew or revolutionize our affective attachments [to love, family, causes, or the oppressed] for the good” (Kieran, 2016, p.1). Often, objects that have been with owners for a long time have developed a strong affective pull, making them difficult to discard. This longevity gives them more importance in a sentimental context.

Most of the homes I visited had sentimental items, such as possessions of a deceased spouse or parent, mementos from travelling, or items from childhood. Some individuals, however, kept larger areas and numbers of sentimental items or described many objects with connections to family members or memories that they were unable to part with. These items caused a friction between the amount of objects in a home and the living needs or decluttering desires of the individual. Often these types of objects created a pause for their owners; regardless of whether or not the object was used, it could not be discarded due to its sentimental value.

In my interviews, sentiment showed up in objects as nostalgia for the past (lived or un-lived), stories of events, pieces of identity, meaningful relationships, or unique traits. Participants' understanding of their own sentimentality was either explicit, implicit, or non-existent. For many, sentimental objects were relegated to storage or set aside in a particular place, but for some, sentimental items were mixed in with everyday stuff, blurring the edges of what was special enough to preserve or idle enough to discard. Since "the biography of a person is intimately bound up with objects" (Ahmed 2010, p. 27), affective objects pulled their owners in various ways, sometimes evoking memories and emotions but also holding a particular strength among various other, less important, objects, creating discarding problems (Wetherell, 2012; Bagozzi et al., 1999).

Object sentimentality plays a large role for Beth, Edith, and Ryn. Each participant feels differently about their sentimental objects and gleaned different levels of well-being from them. They each experience conflicts with their sentimental items, or around their general actions of keeping sentimental items, that were not easily resolved. Sentimental items in these homes was visible, engaged with often, and had strong emotive aspects. Their presence in the home in open spaces causes pauses in routines, whether due to overwhelming memories, or conflicting

motivations for decluttering, and became a key contributor to clutter.

Sentiment as Preservation

Beth identifies as someone who is more of a sentimental, “hold on to everything” person, which she expresses is the reason for a lot of the extra objects in her home. Her sentimentality pertains to two types of items: those that brought back memories of events or people, and those that captured a piece of history. One item we discussed a lot was her DVD collection, which was a thorn in her side with regards to discarding:

Do you know how many times I’ve gone through those DVDs? We never touch the DVDs, never use them! And yet, every time I’m like “Okay! ...I’m gonna keep this one I’m gonna keep that one” and I’ll get rid of *one*.

I asked more about the process of getting rid of DVDs, how she approached it, and what problems she encountered; this is when the depth of the sentiment attached to the DVDs was explained:

... I’m like “Okay so let’s go through this one at a time.” Like, kinda like the Marie Kondo thing like, “is this really special?” and I’ll be like “okay well this is Lord of the Rings. Well I have so many great memories of Lord of the Rings. Well these are NASA documentaries so I really like that. Oh and that’s that comedian that I have such great memories of seeing with my best friend, okay.” And then they just all go back! To never be watched...Like honestly it’s like, you could almost like, I could ask my husband to pack all those up, put them in a box and donate them while I was gone, and it probably wouldn’t bother me all that much, cuz I know we don’t touch them and — if *I’m* doing it they’re all very special.

Beth understands that her attachment to the DVDs stems from their connection to a specific time or event in her life. She enjoys the memories they represent, but the DVDs are never watched. She shows frustration at her own attachment to these objects getting in the way of decluttering, which is a priority for her. But the memories connected to the items, representing their affective pull, are really important to her, making discarding them seem like throwing away part of her life.

Beth is also intensely interested in history and genealogy, which leads her to place great importance on saving items that might have significant histories. She seems concerned with the idea of losing the past to the landfill:

...there's just all these little things of like people's lives that are gone now, and it's like if...you can't keep things forever but I can hold on to it and keep it alive for just a little bit longer...It just feels kind of sad that like things would be — things and people and moments would just be lost to history.

This fear means Beth holds on to things that are old, which is problematic because she often ends up with items that had once belonged to her grandparents and their farm. Whenever other family members want get rid of items (furniture, but also small pieces and documents), Beth takes them because “somebody has to take it, so it will be me.” She carries a sort of burden to preserve the items that she describes as “this kind of this aspect of like living memory that I uh, have trouble with the idea of it just disappearing...cuz I feel like once they're gone, they're gone. And that's, kind of a weird scary idea.” Beth finds herself getting attached to these items:

In the last few years, I've collected more little things of theirs like the salt and pepper shakers that like still had salt in them and I was like “Oh that's my grandmothers salt!”

Like, “It’s so special”. It’s not.

Again, Beth feels conflicted around attributing what she believes is ‘too much’ sentiment to these items; at the same time, the thought of having any of her grandparent’s items end up in the landfill is unbearable, so she takes them not because necessarily special *to her* but because she believes they should be kept by somebody. When Beth looks around her house she sees unwanted piles of clutter, but every object individually holds a history that prevents it from being thrown out. This friction between wanting to declutter her home and feeling the obligation to save history from the landfill was one of the problems Beth struggled with the most. This incongruence of goals and the affective pull of the objects altered her ability to part with them, limiting her daily practices due to clutter and causing Beth distress and agitation.

Sentiment as Memory

I also encountered homes where the clutter included a lot of sentimental items that were not recognized as such by their owner. Edith attributes the clutter in her home to the disorganization caused by robbery. However, Edith is a storyteller, and while I was in her home many of the items we passed by prompted short stories or additional personal details. Many of these stories are of happy memories, often involving her daughter (her only child) or things that evoked childhood memories. For instance, she picked up an old stuffed dog and, caressed it lovingly, mentioning she sewed it in high school from a self-made pattern over 55 years ago. As we toured her home, I became aware of the intensity of the affective objects by observing the way her motions or stream of thought were continually interrupted by them, and how her stories intensified when she made contact with various items.

One item with particularly strong affect was a homemade toy car she picked up in the attic. The small mousetrap car was made by her daughter, likely over thirty years ago, and was

old, dusty, and missing several parts and pieces. However, Edith recalled many aspects about the car and held it dearly, handling it carefully:

This is a... something my daughter did. She had – she made a car that runs by... You set it... [pause] And when you want to go, you pull... [nothing happens] Oh, well. It used to run a lot better than that! It used to vroom, it would –it would run about ten feet! ...But that was so cute and it worked so well for so long.

Her enthusiasm and joviality with the memory seemed to contrast against the visual of the limp broken piece of wood in Edith's hand. While the material itself is a bunch of broken wood and wire, its affective pull is strong for Edith, causing her to stop where she was in the attic to recount the memory and joy of her daughter's toy.

Throughout the interview, it was revealed that Edith's current relationship with her daughter is strained, and objects such as the old car, or a hand-sewn jean purse in the basement became important gateways to a past when their relationship was easier and more positive. I got the feeling Edith's daughter had not visited the home in a while; it was mentioned several times that items were being saved for grandchildren that her daughter said she did not want. Family conflict is often high in cases of hoarding and clutter (Bratiotis & Woody, 2020), which can intensify the affect invested in objects. For Edith, certain older objects embody a positive relationship to her daughter, while newer ones hold promise of reconciliation.

As mentioned in the section on Life Course, Edith is aware that her memory was declining, so many objects are standing in as a memory prompt, increasing their importance and permanence in her home. As more and more items are required to recall slipping memories, Edith seems increasingly reluctant to part with any items from her past, no matter how old, broken, or unused they are, in fear that the associated memory will slip away. This reinforces the

idea of the home as an institution of memory, a place where objects are both rooted in the past but also work to create the present (Hurdley, 2013). The affective intensity of many of the objects, and the high number of objects in the home, makes for a difficult situation for Edith, who has a hard time finding the physical and emotional energy to “get organized” like she used to be.

Sentiment as Tapestry

In contrast to Edith, Ryn is very aware of her sentimental attachment to objects and the role they play in the accumulation of objects in her home. She suspects that her method of obtaining items (second-hand shopping, thrifting, or finding free items) makes them more significant to her because of the work she does to acquire them. She expresses that she is attracted to unique items, as opposed to those that can be found in dozens on a store shelf: “...it makes it— me less likely to want to throw them away. Because they’re so unique. ‘Cause there was only the one.” These aspects give her possessions what she calls a “stickiness”,⁵⁸ making them difficult to discard:

Ryn: Like, my, my habit of the way I acquire things, like, also gives them greater, like, stickiness...

Tiffany: Stickiness!

Ryn: Yeah. Be— like, I don’t wanna throw them out. They, they have much more than just like ‘I didn’t just buy this at Kohl’s’. You know?

Indeed, Ryn’s apartment contains a large amount of very specific, very meaningful items that

⁵⁸ While “stickiness” is a marketing term used to describe how a brand creates a lasting impression and retains customers, here it connects more to an object’s affective qualities, linking to memories of how it was obtained or other indescribable characteristics that make the object difficult to discard. This is akin to how Sara Ahmed describes it as “*an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs*” (2004, p. 90).

create a tapestry of her personality. Instead of clutter, Ryn considers the abundance of objects a growing physical and emotional representation of her own developing identity. She has a high level of sentimentality towards her objects, but she happily engages with those thoughts and feelings daily. I asked her how she feels when she opens her front door and is greeted by the piles of her possessions:

I feel great. I, I often will say, like, “Hello house!”...When I come home. Um, ‘cause I – Maybe, maybe I have absorbed some of my mother’s sort of — she wouldn't call it animism, but animism where things have energy and things have memories, and things have been through... ‘Cause that's another thing if — the longer you keep stuff you feel like you have more history? And it’s more, like, well, we've been through so much together... And then you feel, like, more, like, well we have to stay together, you know?

For Ryn, the affectivity of her objects appears to grow over time as she imbues them with more power of longevity, morphing them into a material assemblage which is more difficult to untangle.

While Ryn’s attachment to objects seems to strengthen their affective power, over time making them immovable objects in a collage of her identity, Ryn is also aware of space and the usability (or lack) of certain objects, and is often critical of herself for keeping things. Sometimes she can repurpose sentimental items; she developed a system to keep any important sentimental envelopes for sewing patterns, often keeping two happy memories (the envelope and the event of sewing a pattern) together. But other times she becomes frustrated with her high level of sentimental attachment and insistence on keeping things:

Like... You dig up a t-shirt that you haven't seen in twenty years and you could get rid of

it 'cause you haven't thought about it in twenty years, but then there's a rush of memories. And the memories are nice, but it's also nice to have, like, the actual item? But not everybody's like that. And this amazes me a little bit. It mystifies me that people can be, like, "Yes I had a love – I loved this shirt, but I can let it go." I don't know! I don't know why that is not easy for me.

Ryn often expresses how difficult it was every time she moved to have to confront her amassment of stuff. Gradually the shame would wear her down, and she told me about a time that she confronted these feelings and threw something sentimental away:

And it was all the pressure and the misery of that experience [having to move several times], and feeling bad about myself. And I was, like, "Why are you keeping this box of theatre programs? How childish! How petty!". "It's just your sentimentality." And I was, like, kind of slapping myself on the wrist and made myself throw it out in a moment of austerity, and trying to be, like, grown up. And, uh... Every, every de-junk– Every bad de-junking decision I've ever made has been under those circumstances. And it's, like, bothered me ever since.

The trauma from parting with something special to her is a big reason Ryn is more reluctant to let go of anything else. But interestingly, Ryn is still critical about her own sentimentality, as well as sentimentality in society. She commented about the "strange relationship with sentimentality in our culture" which she understands and subscribes to, while also weighing if object attachments are healthy:

And also to wonder what it would be like to live in a space with less of the sentimentality. And the less, and, and to, like... not derive so much of my identity from

stuff. And it could be read a couple of ways, because, you know, I think people in North America and capitalist societies do derive a lot of their identity from their stuff. But... [pause] Like these are my books! These are my herbs! You know? It's not... But I also don't wanna suggest that somebody's hobbies are different. I, I don't have, like, a wall of Funko Pops...But they — They bring people joy! You know?

While Ryn generally views sentimentality as a useful or positive thing for well-being, she says that in some ways it can become more akin to conventional ideas of hoarding, which she positions as “sentimentality maybe gone too far”. Her critique of her own attachment to goods highlights her awareness of her tendency to keep items only for their sentimental properties, which she believes contributes to the accumulation of many goods in her home; however, she also understands the benefits (e.g., positive feedback mechanism) of sentimentality as outweighing negative aspects. It is only when outside parties are involved — friends helping her move, bosses commenting on her taking things they were going to throw away — that she seems to reflect negatively on her attachments to goods. This keeps her second guessing the amount of her possessions while also feeling intensely connected to them.

Bittersweet Sentimentality

Sentimental objects have value in their ability to conjure relational properties, a sense of identity, or memories that contribute to well-being. However, Rochelle DuFord seeks to expand the notion of sentimentality by proposing the concept of “bitter-sweet sentiment”, which highlights how certain objects can also have negative or sad feelings attached to them, which over time can affect the well-being of an individual (DuFord, 2017). DuFord uses the example of the gift from a loved one who has passed as an example; while the gift may evoke thoughts of a happy relationship, it also brings forward the grief of the person's passing. These types of

sentimental items can still remain immensely valuable to their owners. The concept of bitter-sweet sentiment highlights the complexity of emotions that can be tied up in objects and how such affective investments shape our relationships to things-in-practice.

For instance, many of the objects in Edith's home reflect a "bittersweet" sentiment. The trauma from the burglaries contained in the disheveled objects interfered with the more positive aspects of her sentimental items. She was very concerned in the interview about finding a newspaper article about her daughter when she was young that was somewhere in the home, displaced by the thieves, but looking for the article in and among all the tossed boxes required continually confronting the burglary. She brought up the robbery often as we moved through the space, going back and forth between telling a story about an item and being angry that the house had been ransacked. The heavy sentimentality of her home is evident from the length of the interview (over two hours) and the stories she tells, highlighting her difficulties in sorting through the mess left by the intruders.

A particularly poignant example of bittersweet sentimentality can be found in the home of Marilyn. Marilyn's possessions bridge a complex overlap between sentimentality and social relationship maintenance; her home is a balancing act between overcoming a traumatic childhood and abusive father, and embracing the space her beloved mother frequented prior to her death. The sentiment in her spaces and objects can be interpreted as positive or negative depending on which aspects she is trying to preserve or how the item confronts her in the space.

Marilyn's home and its contents invoked oscillating emotions that she navigated daily. I asked her if she had considered moving due to the past trauma she experienced in her home:

And so yeah, it would probably be great to move to a different area but you know what, it just also gives me comfort because it's like I'm close to my mom, even though she's here

but – she sits on the fireplace in her urn...But yeah, but it's like also comfort of being here but also memory of, memories that always are on the surface.

While her home is riddled with traumatic memories, the materiality of the space also holds comforting memories that Marilyn wants to preserve.

While the home held some of her parents' objects from decades ago, Marilyn also ties some of her acquisition practices related to her mom and her childhood and the happier times when she could forget about her abusive situation:

My only joy really was taking the bus Downtown and we'd go shopping every Saturday. And she'd buy me something every Saturday — clothes, lunches — just to make up for what was happening in my house. So, that has a lot to do with my buying is just, it kind of fills a need for me or reminds me of something that it just fills me.

The connection between objects acquired during the shopping trips and the happy memories of her mother are intensely intertwined. While Marilyn has started to part with some of the smaller trinkets she used to buy, she still has a large wardrobe that she was reluctant to get rid of, partly because clothing is a type of living memory of her mom:

...Because there was always, always buy something, happiness and joy. And my mom liked to buy things too and look nice. And whenever it was a party, it was always a new dress, and it was new this and new that, you know. And that's how it is like for me. And then even though a lot of the stuff that I keep I can't fit anymore, it's this – it's tied into a memory of a happy time.

While Marilyn admits that her current job requires none of her nicer clothes, she also reflects

fondly on the memories of being a fashionable person, the “one to watch” at parties. Her previous attention to wardrobe was directly linked to her mother’s own presentation of self, which Marilyn holds on to through her clothing. Many of Marilyn’s mother’s possessions were still linked to the happy memories that she was trying to hold on to, but they were bittersweet due to the passing of her mother and the circumstances in which the items were acquired — often as a type of apology for the traumatic situation at home.

Marilyn had recently done a large basement clean out, but items belonging to both her parents still remain in the home. She is keeping some old dishes and glassware from a long time ago that she finds hard to get rid of, as well as the old photos and albums that are hidden away in boxes due to their heavy emotional attributes:

So, every photo of my father and I is me trying to get away from him or, the saddest little girl ever, are those pictures in my basement. So, – and obviously it’s – I keep – I always keep things in a box. I see my emotions and like my memories in a box because it’s very hard for me to bring this up.

But even with the abusive relationship with her long-deceased father, Marilyn is still attempting a relationship or understanding of him by keeping his art and art supplies and holding on to the aspect of her father that she acknowledged as good:

And so, his last painting that he painted is that painting in my office, that I have my only memory of my father, which is a good memory because I do love the ocean, and I love stormy oceans. But I think it has everything to do with a stormy life, you know. And so, when I look at that I always think of my dad. Yeah, but in a good way because he was talented as an artist and I appreciated that part of him...The other parts I didn’t obviously.

Throughout the interview, Marilyn seems to be realistic and somewhat apologetic about her father's behaviour, trying to acknowledge the injustices he experienced in youth and to see the good in him:

And my dad was – it's funny when people saw my dad was this charming, humorous man who – he did love animals, that's where my love of animals. So, he was kind to animals, he was kind to other people, but not to family. He was very artistic. He was very smart. He spoke five languages. He was a good-looking man.

Despite her concessions for his behaviour, Marilyn's home is a physical testament to the abuse she endured. While this might be drastically reduced by discarding her parents' items and/or moving to a new space, Marilyn's discussion of the objects and practices in her home illustrates how she is trying to navigate her past through objects — trying to feel close and hold on to the memory of her mother, while also seeking some sort of positive perspective on her abusive father.

The analysis of Marilyn's case highlights the complex and contradictory emotions contained within materiality, via objects and environments. The affective nature of such items seems to grow when it is bittersweet; the more Marilyn strays from an object, the tighter it pulls her in, highlighting the complex ways trauma and memory works through objects. It is almost as though the objects *owned* the home, their pasts intertwining in unique ways that reflect their previous owners, with Marilyn as simply a guest, trying to distance herself from her past while honouring the physical space she inhabits. Marilyn's case illustrates the potency of materiality that, without an in-home interview, would not be revealed.

Sentiment Conclusion

Sentimental practices can involve keeping items for emotional or other reasons (such as historical importance, identity expression, or memory) that make their presence in the home more intensely felt and thus more difficult to discard. Sentimental items can be stored away in boxes that are untouched, or (as in the case of Judith) put on permanent display in a limited area of the home. But for others like Beth, Edith, Ryn, and Marilyn, sentimental items constitute a substantial amount of possessions in the home due to irresolvable goals, feelings, or beliefs, impacting clutter levels.

While to outsiders, these items can seem worthless for their lack of direct instrumental use value, to their owners these types of possessions are valuable in other ways and often become “sticky”, making them difficult to part with. While sentimental items that reflect personality or individuality often contribute to well-being and happiness, so can complex items that invoke “bittersweet sentiment”. The high levels of sentimentality expressed in the above interviews highlight the complexity of the objects that contribute to clutter, and the immense emotional and mental process involved in discarding even one item of sentiment.

The above cases are also apt illustrations of how affective objects contribute to clutter. When affective objects take up greater spaces or have more presence in routines, their affects effect the body and habitual movement in the home. This may cause pause or avoidance of the area (e.g. for Marilyn) or become an engagement that brings immense joy (like with Ryn). Interruptions to organizing and/or decluttering practices creates distress that is difficult to resolve, which leads to a large gathering of sentimental items and in turn to a great deal of frustration at an inability to discard. However, the longer affective objects are given time and space in the home, the more likely they are to become assemblages, which are harder to

dismantle when decluttering is the goal.

The materiality present in a domestic sphere is in fact inherently an object assemblage; spaces are defined by the objects contained within them. This is not simply the addition of matter that creates an assemblage; instead, it is a particular combination of the things that exist in the presence of an interplay between human and non-human things, that solidifies a relation between the two (Bennett, 2010).

An assemblage is one way to consider the pervasiveness of matter in the cluttered home. As objects come into each space and are met with other matter and people, they become more than the sum of their parts, influenced also by the dimensions of the space, as well as their care and investments of affect on the part of their owner. Woodward (2021) suggests that assemblages of clutter are pervasive due to their potency, their unwillingness to break down, and their attractiveness to more and more objects. But while she suggests this potency eventually comes with a moral weight, the cases above highlight the complicated nature of clutter in terms of positive and bittersweet sentiment.

For example, Ryn's case in particular elucidates an intense material assemblage that I have referred to as a tapestry of personality: Ryn's home was more than a sum of its parts. Each object in her home was imbued with particular memories and meanings until the matter combined into one expression of intense self-reflection that, for Ryn, created immense personal pleasure and security. But the problematic nature of clutter as assemblage, as Woodward notes, can also produce an overwhelm that freezes any type of discarding, since dealing with one item entails dealing with the entire assemblage (see for instance Beth's DVD collection). This in turn reflects the potency of clutter; its materialistic endurance prevents any possible detangling of objects in domestic spaces for discard, making decluttering difficult (Woodward, 2021).

While sentimental objects highlight the presence of affect and assemblage, underlying some of this difficulty to discard is the felt desire or moral obligation to maintain social relationships. As illustrated below, bonds between family and friends create difficult to discard items as cultural and moral discourses on friendship and family also complicate decluttering desires.

Social Relationships and Stuff

An unanticipated theme that emerged from the interviews was people frequently keeping objects they did not necessarily want or need due to feelings of social moral obligation. Gifting has been established as a social contract that involves reciprocity and is an “expression of connection between people” (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry, 1989, p. 17). However, while some gifts become sacred, cherished objects, others are unwelcomed and unwanted. Sometimes participants received small trinkets others thought they would like, or even items that family members wanted out of their own homes but still kept in the family. This action felt a lot less like gifting and a lot more like “dumping” or taking advantage of a person with a larger home.

For such objects, the use of the item or its aesthetic quality is irrelevant; the item is kept out of a moral imperative to maintain the relationship to the individual or larger family (Purbrick, 2014). Sometimes these items develop a sentimentality⁵⁹ due to their connection to the giver, but often they are an item begrudgingly kept in fear of damaging a friendship or family bond, creating an accumulation of items that are not treasured and sometimes detested by their new owner. For Andrea, Donna, and Laura, social relationship maintenance contributes substantially to their accumulation; they often wish items could leave the house without causing offence and

⁵⁹ Sentimentality and social relationships are similar reasons for keeping objects, but I have separated them here because of their affective natures; sentimental objects hold reverence for people or times past, while objects kept out of social relationship obligation hold affects of disgust or disappointment.

hope that family and friends would stop gifting and dumping items at their homes.

Family Ties

While Andrea had a few issues affecting accumulation in her home, one contributing factor was her ongoing management of family relationships and her excess space. Andrea's sister had previously lived with her, staying in a room in the unfinished basement. When she left three years ago, Andrea told her she did not mind keeping some of her stuff since the house was big and she lived alone. Now, however, Andrea realizes a lot of the items left behind need to be dealt with, and while some are things like clothing that her sister said could go to the thrift store, other things are shared items that Andrea is unsure of how to manage. An example of this is a large pile of Styrofoam that I asked about; Andrea laughed and said it was a Halloween project for herself and her sister that they *were* very excited about, but now it was clear the project would never be completed. Her sister had said to get rid of it, but Andrea is hesitant; the previous decision they made together prevailed, preventing her from throwing it all away.

Additionally, Andrea's relationship with her dad creates lots of clutter. She mentioned her dad liked to buy funny gifts that had no practical use, but that the items were often well thought out or reflected some kind of inside joke that bonded them together. She pointed out some unusual items, saying "these are cow print stuff my dad gave me as a joke gift and I'm like, what am I supposed to do with this?" Getting rid of the items she does not want feels insensitive. Ultimately, the items left behind by her sister leaves Andrea feeling the burden of making decisions about formerly important items.

Additionally, Andrea knows her dad has a clutter problem of his own, and will sometimes use her double garage as a dumping ground to store items. Valuing their bond and not wishing to damage the relationship, she always takes the items, which clutter her garage.

Andrea's desire to maintain a good relationship with her father has also resulted in a basement renovation in limbo and a lot of clutter. The walls are up for a new bathroom that was supposed to be done while her sister lived there, but the project stalled, leaving construction items strewn around the basement:

Ugh — So my dad said he would do the bathroom because he's a handyman, but, he doesn't want to get paid for it. ...So this bathroom has been like this for quite a few years to the point that me and my sister are probably just going to have to pay someone else. Because I didn't want to do it initially at first so I didn't hurt my dad's feelings because every time I brought it up with him he would be like, "That's OK — No, I'll get around to it!" but now he's got like kind of some health issues that he's dealing with. So most of the stuff that's actually in here right now is stuff for the bathroom.

Andrea is trying to keep the relationship with her dad on good terms despite the nuisance caused by his inability to finish the bathroom. He had, moreover, purchased things for her that she did not need or want for the project:

Andrea: My dad bought me a sink that I didn't need because we bought a sink already for the bathroom.

Tiffany: But then it didn't go back out of the house right away?

Andrea: No because he'll buy stuff either on clearance or like things that just can't be returned. So he got this sink, and it couldn't be returned so we just said, "OK, thanks."

Andrea keeps the sink because she is not sure how to manage her dad's expectation that she use it. This means that the sink, and the rest of the renovation items stay in the basement. Parting with them would cause an undue burden on their relationship, so instead of prioritizing her need

for decluttering, she keeps the items, uncertain of how to ever use them.

Andrea's goal is to start using the basement again, which means cleaning out her sister's old room and finishing the bathroom renovations. In both areas this entails managing goods that have connections to family relationships. The whole basement has become an assemblage of familial relationships that are difficult to manage and cause Andrea a lot of stress. This means the basement is rarely visited, and has increasingly become a dumping site. Andrea's accumulation of clutter is an complicated web of relationship expectations that makes item disposal part of a larger moral conversation about the importance of items to other people in her life who live outside of her household.

Gifts and Dumping

While maintaining familial relationships involves careful decision making around object maintenance, the transfer of objects in the form of well-intended gifts can also be problematic, especially when spaces become dumping grounds for other's unwanted items. Donna lives in a larger bungalow on her own since her husband passed, which means she had a lot of space, especially in her basement, for excess goods. During the interview, she pointed out several items in her home that she was keeping solely because they were gifts:

I don't collect things, I get — but like I said, this comes from my girlfriend. She gives — those cups are all gifts. What do I do with them, you know?

Donna says her family loves getting her gifts, but that they often miss the mark with regard to her tastes or needs, for instance buying her more of something she already has in plenty, such as photo frames. She is stuck on what to do with the frames she does not want or need, but getting rid of them might damage their relationship.

Donna recognized that her home might have simply become a dumping ground for unwanted items disguised as gifts:

Donna: And I sometimes wonder, you know, “are you giving me gifts because you don’t want them?” [laughs].

Tiffany: Where are the gifts originating, right?

Donna: That’s right, yes. Yes, yes, “Oh mom, I thought you’d like this,” blah-blah-blah, no, but ...

She also identified a set of unneeded dishes in her basement that her daughter and son-in-law had passed to her when they replaced their own dishes. In fact, Donna’s extra space seemed to attract a lot of unwanted items from her adult children. It seemed though many things stopped at her house before being discarded when no longer needed:

Because sometimes yes, they do say, “Do you want this, mom, or are we just going to throw it away” or, you know, “I’ll leave it here. Give to Salvation Army.”

Donna has asked her kids to take away some items, yet these persist on her property:

I’ve got three kids bikes out there that I don’t really want. My granddaughter got a new bed, so the frame is out there and, “One day somebody is going to pick it up.” I said, “Please do because I’ve got enough junk of my own.” You know?

Donna is clearly frustrated that her home is a dumping ground for things that people no longer want but seem to have a hard time throwing away. She admits their perception of her larger space likely contributes:

Donna: I keep getting – well this, this my daughter gave me, “Oh mom, would you like

these because when you're entertaining..."... And so of course they can't get [rid of it] – so they haul it on me because they know [laughs] –

Tiffany: Right, you have the space.

Donna: That's right.

Donna is at a loss for how to “put my foot down” on other people bringing things into her home, especially since she has difficulty getting thrift or donation items out of the house on her own. She talks about getting a truck to take everything away, but emphasizes that every time she tries her children stop her, promising help that never comes:

...you know, “Don't, don't. Wait. Wait, mom, we've got a truck” or, “We can do that” or blah-blah-blah and then so it just goes on. Again, you know what, I need some – yes, I need something, you know, and maybe one day I'll just phone up or whatever and just say like – you know. But then again too I'll talk to the kids, and they'll say, “Oh, we can get rid of that for you,” but they never seem to do it.

Donna has grappled with downsizing her home to reduce the space and the dumping problem, but with the mortgage paid off it makes no fiscal sense to move. While some of her clutter upstairs is a bother, the basement is rarely used, so Donna has accepted the basement as a clutter zone.

Donna's home has become a divided space where the basement is an assemblage of past lives and decisions put on hold. She does not live in this space at all; it houses other stuff that she does not really want or need, but that is tied to complex familial relationships. She allows the basement to be a dumping ground, knowing that her upstairs living space is more than enough for her. But these items may have to be dealt with at some point, whether by her when she finally

downsizes, or by her children, which she does not want to happen. This understanding weighs heavily on Donna.

“Champion of the Stuff”

Laura’s clutter is partly a problem of a large, tight knit, and overly generous extended family; her husband has twenty-five cousins that meet frequently. She appreciates their generosity towards their son at birthdays and Christmas time, but says this also contributes to a lot of stress, as the mountains of toys that have piled up around the home over the years:

...Our families are very generous, which is wonderful, but instead of — five Christmas presents and five toys, it’s 50. And then it’s two years of 50 and 50 and 50, so I have not had any time to purge, which I do do, but no.

While Laura wants some items out of the house, she lacks proper time to go through everything due to the current household situation,⁶⁰ so the toys keep multiplying and spilling from the family room into her workspace and son’s bedroom. Importantly, her family expects gifts to be kept and displayed, causing her stress. When she had pared back some holiday decorations they were replaced by family members who expect to see them yearly. Laura also showed me a large stack of bins full of yarn that kept replenishing despite her efforts to dispose of it, because family members keep donating or gifting her daughter yarn even though she no longer wants it or crochets. Laura now has twice as much as before she first tried to purge, and her daughter has no room for it.

A bigger problem for Laura is the expectation from her family to be, in her words, the

⁶⁰ See above where I discuss how a lack of daycare during Covid-19, work from home, and taking care of a spouse created a chaotic home for Laura.

“champion of the stuff”. A shelf and a half in her storage room is dedicated to her father’s possessions; he had been put in a care home and deemed medically incompetent seven years ago when she and her husband first purchased their home. Having some extra space, she was put in charge of her father’s stuff by the rest of her family. She feels burdened by his things and sees no purpose in keeping them, but her family insists:

So, I’m the oldest child, I had, at the time, the biggest house, I still do, and so I was deemed “champion of stuff”.

Laura knows her father will never leave the care home, but her family believes otherwise, so she has to keep his things. Laura’s identity as “champion of the stuff” also extends beyond temporary storage. A big family means lots of celebrations, so whenever a get-together or party is being planned, the committee approaches Laura for the supplies. Gradually this turned into an expectation that she keep extra stuff for all sorts of reasons:

“[Family member] Well, I [need something], and this happened in ‘92.” “Yes, I got it. I graduated in ‘95 and I still own it”, here’s the cutter, here is this, I got them. If somebody picks up a new hobby or wants to do a thing for somebody’s 50th birthday, I already own it.... So, how many 50th birthdays does everybody have, how many wedding anniversaries do you have, how many summer events?...

Knowing her storage is getting out of control, Laura has attempted to keep any new items from coming in, and prevent old items from returning:

So, then somebody will come up with a game. “Hey, who has this, this, this, and this, and this?” And there’s, “I got it, I got it, I got it, I got it, I got it, please don’t give it

back”. Done, out it goes, sweet. The next round, “I got it, I got it, I got it, sweet, keep it, I’m not taking it back”. And then great, but that’s only such a *small* amount of things....And then I think my favourite is, and I don’t — I used to feel guilt over it, but it’s like, “Well, what do you mean you don’t have it?” “I don’t fucking have it. I don’t fucking have it, why are you angry with me, because I don’t own two things, of something from the 80s, I was kid?” So, I stopped being — worrying so much about it, but it’s still *so* much time to go through it all.

Dealing with these unfair requests while trying and wanting to declutter her home makes for a difficult situation for Laura; she is constantly worrying about pushback from family members. Her prioritization of maintaining social relationships to make family life easier is making her home a mess.

Laura’s mom in particular strongly emphasises keeping items for family memories. Laura spoke about dealing with her mom’s strong memory of objects and people and how she will get upset if Laura does not remember the person or the object they were associated with:

Laura: “...And then my mom is quite a bit worse than I am, where it’s, ‘Well, this person had this and this...’ I was like, ‘I don’t even know who you’re talking about. I know everybody, but I don’t know who you’re talking about’ — I can’t. And then she’s like, ‘Well why? Don’t you love them, don’t you love all their...’”

In this case, Laura’s mom’s prioritization of maintaining social relationships became her expectation of Laura, regardless of whether Laura cared for the relationship or not.

In sum, Laura is stuck in the middle of storage expectations from many complex family relationships. To dispose would cause family rifts particularly with her husband’s family. But as

her home grows full of clutter impeding their lifestyle and her ability to work and parent, limited solutions fuel Laura's frustrations. While maintaining some family relationships can entail a positive affective pull toward items, Laura is surrounded by items that create an overall negative affect in her home. The emotional weight of managing unwanted items creates tension in her home she feels every day, through work, childcare, second jobs, and caring for her husband.

Conclusion: Relationship Maintenance and Gifting

Social relationship maintenance through clutter can be described as *unintentional acquisition*; being gifted, given, or asked/told to store items. Close relations, family dynamics, and perceptions of excess space all play a role and block disposal. Thus, the negotiation of items in the home is not always as simple as needing or wanting items, but of managing social relationships in the process of homemaking (Lipman, 2018).

For Andrea, Donna, and Laura, the amount of unwanted items in their homes that they could not dispose for this reason is high and causes significant stress. Donna and Andrea were fortunate in that their excess items are mostly relegated to a specific space where they only had to encounter them occasionally, like when doing laundry. For Laura however, because her child's toys are implicated, these items cause stress that is felt all over the house. Additionally, since retrieving items from her extra fridge/freezer requires going past the piles of storage in the basement, confronting that clutter is an almost daily occurrence.

Intertwined with social relationship maintenance is the broader discourse of familial bonds and expectations placed on gifting or receiving gifts. Komter and Vollebergh (1997) suggests that objects act as a tangible expression of the connection to another person, but that these ties are fraught with different levels of intimacy as the intent of the gift (whether obligatory or affectionate) varies. This creates a problem when, for Laura, obligatory gifts begin to

overwhelm and create clutter.

A useful concept to understand how affective items are connected to social relationships is Sophie Woodward's "Dormant Things". Originally used to describe items "stored for later use maybe" (Woodward, 2007), the concept has been expanded to include items accidentally kept, or those used for unknown purposes or sentimentality. These items are put out of view, under beds or high in closets, but people keep them for years before doing anything with them (if anything). What Woodward highlights is how unused/hidden objects are still just as reflective of social relationships as those out in the open and used every day. Woodward's term is useful to highlight the complicated ways social relations are managed through hidden, unused, or unwanted objects, and how the affectivity of clutter comes to dominate spaces, interfere with routines, and become part of the embodied practices of the owner.

This also highlights the importance of object maintenance as a way of "doing' family" (Holmes, 2019). The *practice* of gift giving or receiving may be ingrained as a way of showing affection and illustrating the importance of a relationship in a way that has very little to do with the physical nature of the object. This is why, for the cases above, many unwanted objects tended to remain in the house as a symbol of the relationship. Clutter in this case is not simply a sum of objects, but a curious entanglement reflecting the maintenance of social relationships, as "far from being trivial, clutter is a way people negotiate their everyday relations and living with others." (Woodward, 2021, p. 1221). The analysis above demonstrates how objects that are strongly tied to social relationships can be complex and distressing to navigate, contributing to clutter that goes beyond the useful aspects of an object and into affective territories that make discarding difficult.

Values Conclusion

In sum, individually held moral, social, or cultural values related to eco-consciousness, sentimentality, or maintaining social relationships can contribute to clutter through issues related to both acquisition and disposal. Individuals who work to reduce their waste to help the earth often find themselves in positions where unnecessary items are difficult to discard and cannot or do not leave the home. The valorization of memories or moments in the past is often expressed through objects; the physical nature of things makes intangible memories easier to access; however, such sentimental objects can start to invade a space. The way we manage our connections to others also often becomes the job of objects; the act of receiving and keeping gifts or other objects becomes a reflection of the value of a relationship, and may signal to others whether or not we embrace or reject their presence in our lives. This type of relationship maintenance often occurs through unwanted things, which become clutter in the domestic space.

Underlying all of these values is the power of affect and affective performances. Emotions and emotional states can be imbued as affect into objects, becoming containers for emotions that can be accessed during domestic performances (Elliott & Urry, 2010). The environment of the home then becomes personalized with object affects for the individual inside of it, directing their practices and influencing their acquisition or discarding practices. This aligns with an appraisal theory of emotions; each home I visited had a personal goal in the shape of values orienting their domestic practices and performances, which embedded particular affects in certain items around the home (Bagozzi et al., 1999). The affect storage often aligned with personal goals and values in ways that were both beneficial and detrimental to the household maintenance and existence of clutter.

Personal values and popular discourses entwine to underpin our moral thinking and choices. Environmental discourses reinforce our individualization of personal responsibility to prevent waste and climate change. Long-standing family-unit ideology reinforces deference to parental figures, gendered notions of care for people and things, and the importance of familial connectivity. These discourses weave their way into home spaces by driving practices therein; when combined with affectivity, they can cause problematic object negotiations that contribute to clutter.

Cultural discourses not only shape values but can also create fears of stigmatization around clutter, by way of media shows on Hoarding, or can motivate desires for decluttering through popular systems (like the KonMari method). More fundamental social discourses on what “dirt” is, how to enact practices like cooking within a home, what different rooms or areas “should” look like, or the performance of object maintenance all underlie how people manage their homes. To understand clutter, the values and discourse to which they are tied become part of the investigation, and in these interviews illustrate how certain objects come to remain well past their welcome in a home.

Overall, these cases illustrate the multifaceted nature of material objects and their environments and how the interactions between humans and non-humans in domestic activity combine in particular ways to create excess objects and clutter. Without investigating both the space and the individual, practices contributing to accumulation of things are unquestioned and lead to a misunderstanding of the reasons for clutter. As Sophie Woodward (2021) highlights:

Dealing with clutter is part of the process of organising everyday life through the spaces and relationships within the home; it is both an explicit attempt to organise – a pile of things to be dealt with later – as well as the placing of things “around the paths of our

daily routines, when things fall out of use” (Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003, p. 231, in Woodward, 2021, p. 1217)

To dismiss clutter as simply excess is to overlook how materiality produces and reproduces meaning in daily life, whether connected to morals and values, or the position of a person in their particular stage of life. Materiality is also a performance, a way to enact particular roles like motherhood⁶¹ or a partnership while also enacting personality traits like artisan. These values and identities are expressed through the practices and performances of everyday domestic life, in shopping for and storing items, in the designation and placement of items of personal value or sentiment, and in the decisions of parting with material items (both when and how). This all occurs within boundaries of physical space and physical health, and both momentary and long-term interruptions to routines. And so, to designate a particular object or grouping of items as clutter is to overlook the relational value of, and affective investment in, materiality, for “far from being trivial, clutter is a way people negotiate their everyday relations and living with others.” (Woodward, 2021, p. 1221). People’s value orientations and enactments are tied closely to the clutter they accumulate, because objects are always more than the sum of their physical parts. They are tied to meaning, affect, and discourse in a way that creates the home environment and inspires the practices around them.

⁶¹ See Owen and Boyer (2019).

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

The attention to Hoarding and clutter, both in the medical field as well as in popular culture, is growing as people become fascinated with extreme accumulation. Psychological studies of comorbidities in Hoarding Disorder as well as research into treatment and success rates lead the academic literature on Hoarding, while society is treated to media representations of both extreme hoards associated with dirt and danger, and prescriptions for minimalism and environmental living. What is missing from these representations of accumulation in the home is a questioning of objects, people, discourses, and spaces, and how they interact in daily domestic practices. Using a social practice theory approach to domestic consumption, this study invites a different understanding of the accumulation of clutter as encompassing both individual practices and performances and the affective nature of materiality in the home. Using this lens, Hoarding is revealed not as an individual medical disorder but instead as the intersection of common domestic practices that inherently involve accumulation and can, when performed in particular ways, create clutter on a clutter-hoarding continuum.

This chapter summarizes my dissertation research by recounting the three major findings and illustrating how they connect to the research questions. It then outlines the project's contributions and limitations and suggests areas of further research.

Findings

This research forwards three major findings regarding domestic practices and objects in the home that create and contribute to clutter:

- 1) Individual values, including being morally green-oriented, sentimentality, and feeling compelled to manage social relationships through things, may conflict with normative domestic practices and contribute to higher levels of clutter.

- 2) Performances of domestic practices, and indeed all moments of the consumption cycle, and their intersections, are particular to and vary for every individual according to positionality and environmental influences, and the ability to perform practices in certain ways impact levels of clutter in the home.
- 3) Assemblages formed and existing in the home are specific sites of materiality that become harder to disassemble and process. The amalgamation of material objects considered as one unit makes the entirety of the unit difficult to disassemble for individual consideration of storage, organization, or discard.

These three core findings are further elaborated upon below.

Values

Individual values influence the management of goods in the home. While consumer culture has previously focused on individual taste and aesthetics in terms of acquisition and styling of the home, additional moral, social, and cultural values such as environmental concern, nostalgia or sentimentality, and the maintenance of social relationships, also contribute to the maintenance and discarding of objects involved in homemaking. This means homes are laden with object affects that influence moral decision making, whether due to emotions or messages from social discourses.

For instance, green moral orientations are intertwined with consumer culture and consumption practices. Discourses of “buy local” or “reduce, reuse, recycle” to “save the planet” enter into domestic spaces via media and popular culture and through the advertising and packaging of items we use. In some ways, it can serve as a moralizing discourse that impedes the disposal of objects, particularly when there is a lack of infrastructure for or knowledge about environmentally conscious disposal routes such as recycling.

Likewise, values of the importance of history and social relationships are expressed through sentimentality that encourages the maintenance of goods over long periods of time. Sentimental objects are valued for aspects beyond their physicality, such as nostalgia. But interviews highlighted that such nostalgia is not always experienced as fully positive; obligations regarding preserving physical items or representations of moments of history often felt imposed on or burdensome to participants, leaving them with conflicting feelings about excess objects.

Relatedly, kinship ties of family and friends shape practices of social relationship maintenance through items. Objects are always more than their materiality; they mediate our connectivity to people but also our future bonds. Keeping unwanted items that have been gifted by other people becomes a necessary action in homemaking; the display of another's affection through objects may be a moral requirement of "doing family" (Holmes, 2019) with implications for increasing clutter in homes that value maintaining positive social ties.

Overall, decisions to keep or discard items are bound up with personal values. Such values complicate a clear or straightforward definition of clutter. For instance, dealing with materiality requires understanding objects as more than the sum of their physical parts, and as tied to wider connections between people, households and the social world. Consumer culture and social mores are expressed through objects in a way that cannot be reduced to a sweeping generalization of what is or is not clutter.

Performances

The performance of a domestic practice is related to clutter accumulation. Domestic practices are often presented in idealized ways through popular culture and media, whether in representations of shopping methods/frequency, housekeeping practices, or popular concepts like minimalism or the KonMari Method that favour clean spaces and an absence of objects. But the

reality is that the performance of domestic practices vary according to the constraints and affordances available to the performer. Individuals perform practices in unique environments and positions, whether navigating a kitchen with inadequate storage or living with and caring for family members. While constraints exist, individuals are often capable of adapting their performances to satisfy a practice in their own way. While results do not conform to an idealized version of the practice, the outcomes are sufficient to continue the management of the home and the objects within. However, this negotiation often leads to accumulation and clutter that is difficult to manage with the chosen adaptations.

Additionally, the intersections of such practices reveal competing values and goals such that each person must navigate different interests or priorities to keep performing various overlapping domestic practices. These conflicting orientations mean practices are never performed in the most idealized ways, which can lead to the accumulation of objects and clutter in different areas. This finding highlights how the root of clutter lies not in one area, space, or practice but at the intersections of multiple domestic practices that are performed in particular ways according to the constraints and abilities of individuals in specific socio-spatial settings.

Assemblages

An interesting and important part of domestic spaces and clutter results from objects melding into larger material assemblages. While Jane Bennett (2010) talks about the potency of matter, this potency or strength is amplified when objects become intertwined or entangled into an assemblage over time due to similar characteristics, symbolism, or longevity in a particular space. As such, separating out any one object for alternate storage or discard becomes increasingly difficult; paralysis due to decision fatigue can overwhelm individuals, leading to clutter. Additionally, assemblages' potency attracts other objects; miscellaneous piles of stuff are

likely to become dumping grounds for other miscellaneous items, growing the mass and increasing its continuous presence as unwanted clutter.

Further Findings

In addition to the major findings discussed above, this project highlights the problematic usage of the term Hoarding and Hoarding Disorder and its tendency to stigmatize individuals. Rooted in a medicalized and individualized lens, the term has also become a slang term for dirt and disorder that is used to stigmatize individuals with hoarding or clutter tendencies. Treatment programs and mental health practitioners working from these understandings can stigmatize Hoarders and cluttered spaces (Larkin et al., 2025). Moreover, the medicalized framing of Hoarding leaves a treatment gap: not only do these programs have a high rate of dropout (Ayers et al., 2018), they can be costly or difficult to access, or invoke feelings of shame in clients (Bratiotis & Woody, 2020). Moreover, medicalized interpretations of “Hoarding” have limited use for examining or evaluating homes, finding and implementing treatment options, or understanding *why* people hoard.

Countering medicalized understandings, this project illustrates how accumulation and clutter show up in everyday routine domestic practices, and how the performances of these practices can differ considerably depending on space, storage, physical ability, time and energy. Certainly, many individuals experience extreme levels of clutter, and some have mental health challenges that exacerbate cluttered situations; however, clutter is also part of a larger system of consumer culture and domestic practices that manifest in all homes.

A sociological and qualitative approach to hoarding can contribute much to the field of clutter studies, in part through in-depth descriptions home practices and detecting where accumulation occurs. Likewise, connecting cluttered spaces with discourses of consumer culture

can reveal value-oriented goals that go beyond the physical nature and conventional use-value of objects and things in a way that may be more helpful for decluttering strategies.

Additionally, while hoarded homes can be dangerous spaces in need of remediation for the safety of inhabitants, not all experiences of clutter-hoarding are negative. Many participants highlighted the happy role objects played in a home or space and the personal importance of many items. Many of these spaces were safe and the objects well cared for. This finding problematizes the popular culture notion that too many goods or an attachment to goods can be equated to hoarding, highlighting the need for further inquiry in Hoarding Behaviour.

These findings suggest that, while some aspects of mental health can contribute to increasingly cluttered areas, hoarding may be better understood as a combination of intersecting domestic practices that are experienced in time and space and performed according to individual positionality. Certain values can create performance problems that cause higher levels of accumulation or more difficulty discarding within certain practices. Additionally, groups of objects left for periods of time in particular home spaces often take on a strength as an assemblage, which makes the encompassing materials more difficult to disassemble and discard. As domestic practices are found in all homes and are often prone to creating clutter due to the nature of accumulation and discard, constraints and adaptations as well as valuations are a major part of how people understand and manage objects in the home. This suggests that hoarding may be better understood as a spectrum of clutter; domestic practices and the constraints people encounter may be more or less likely to create clutter, and the performance of practices may impact how objects are managed in the home in such a way that increases clutter. This finding highlights that aspects of accumulation and problems discarding exist in many homes to many different degrees beyond the popular culture notion of Hoarding that is more akin to extreme

accumulation and squalor on a clutter-hoarding continuum.

Contributions

This study contributes to theoretical and empirical scholarly research on social practice theory and clutter. It answers a call by Shaeffer (2017) and others for alternative, non-medicalized research explorations of hoarding (see also Orr et al., 2017; Kilroy-Marac, 2017), and that engages sociological, cultural, and material perspectives that combine exploration of the real and lived experiences of people with cluttered homes with more analytic consideration of objects and materiality (Shaeffer, 2017, p. 3; Moghimi, 2013). By responding to this call, this research thus contributes to growing cultural and consumption literature on clutter and hoarding.

Additionally, this research contributes empirically to literature on domestic households in Canada. While scholars in the United Kingdom and parts of Europe are investigating domestic space, the Canadian landscape has recently been left out of the larger conversation of what consumption in the domestic space looks like in the 21st century.⁶² Yet in contrast to the UK and Europe, Canadian households tend to have larger overall living space and more varied weather patterns (both colder and warmer) that can create storage needs for wardrobes and sporting goods. The present research illustrates some of the complexities involved in maintaining a Canadian home within a particular consumer culture. The reliance on basements and storage systems, access to online shopping, and a generation of empty-nesters, has generated domestic practices in Canada that have different vulnerabilities to clutter.

Theoretically, this research contributes significantly to the development of empirical studies in the vein of social practice theory, and particularly in approaches to the study of

⁶² While researchers are focusing on technology and electricity consumption and sustainable homes, as well as cooking and food, there is a gap of literature regarding household consumption practices.

consumption as called for by Warde (2014). This project uses a social practice theory approach, supported by consumer culture perspectives, to empirically investigate practices in domestic spaces using data from in-home guided tours. This combination provides dimensionality to accumulation and discarding practices that accounts for capacities, knowledges, popular culture, and habituation. It reveals how accumulation is often not the result of over-acquisition, but a series of intersecting practices performed in particular environments with differing capacities and values. This draws attention away from typical over-consumption discourses about shopping and spending and toward domestic spaces and the management of objects in the home.

This project offers several contributions to the development of social practice theory in studies of consumption. It extends current interest in understanding *performances* of practice by highlighting the variations of domestic practices in cluttered homes, as well as how constraints and adaptations alter consumption practices and the use of objects in the home (Warde, 2014). Social practice theory holds the risk of elevating materiality over “the affordances and constraints of the wider environment and its social arrangements” (Warde, 2014, 294). While Warde highlights the positionality of performances with regard to capacities of gender, race, and class in his book on eating (2016), I bring in dimensions of dis/ability and age that show how affordances and constraints work to enable or inhibit certain performances. Additionally, by investigating spaces of consumption, I highlight the importance of environmental constraints that affect performances as well as habituation, emphasizing the presence of materiality in the performance of everyday practices. The richness of in-situ data and interviews to provide these landscapes of constraints and adaptations should not be overlooked in the pursuit of practice theory approaches.

This relates to the benefits of adding an affect dimension to social practice theory

research. One of the criticisms of practice theory is its tendency to put forward a focus on materiality in that it loses the inclusion of agency, which deviates from the original desire to balance structure and agency.⁶³ Gillian Rose (2010), for instance, has argued that practice theory approaches are likely to tend towards materiality as tools for use, suggesting that every tool user approaches materiality the same way. Rose instead argues that subjectivities of practice are involved in how we approach materiality, which must be considered when inquiring into how and why practices are performed. My addition of affect to a social practice theory approach allows for a consideration of balance for structural and agentic aspects by interrogating the affective elements that exist in domestic practices and ensuring individual biographies and values are recognized alongside material environments.

This project also contributes to literature on the cycle of consumption, including the “back end” of consumption, including devaluation, divestment and disposal, which are of growing interest in consumer culture research spaces (Hetherington, 2004; Evans, 2019). By considering how individuals navigate the many steps that lead to discarding objects, I highlight how the problem of accumulation is not just tied to over-consumption (or in fact, not tied to that at all in some cases), but how barriers to discarding, such as recycling rules or requiring help to move large items, play a role in the management of goods in the home and can lead to overly cluttered areas. Drawing attention to the management of objects via values of family responsibilities, sentimentality, and eco-consciousness, illustrates how cycles of consumption are interrupted in the home, leading to clutter. This draws attention to the benefits of considering the back end of consumption when discussing problems of over-consumption.

Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) illustrate how practice theory approaches in areas of

⁶³ See Warde (2014).

sustainable consumption can be helpful in changing and implementing new routines. These same techniques might be successfully applied to inform policy makers about alternative and non-medicalized treatment methods for Hoarding and clutter that have the potential to produce better outcomes for targeted groups. While in-home assessment is recommended for clinicians (Steketee & Frost, 2006), many assessment tools are done by interview or self-reports, which have found to be lacking (Lin et al., 2023). Assessments involving domestic practices may help identify individual issues with the accumulation and discarding of objects and thus aid in the establishment of a personalized, more successful program for people with clutter and hoarding tendencies. Additionally, the practice approach to hoarding may be applied to different stages of the clutter spectrum, creating accessible assistance (if desired) for decluttering at different stages of the life course.

Additionally, better public education and access regarding recycling and environmental disposal practices may aid individuals in making decisions about their clutter. Public funding into clear instructions for disposing difficult-to-classify items may help individuals dispose of items. Additionally, easier access to sites of recycling or pick-up services can assist with limited transportation resources or physical limitations, which were identified in the above cases.

Limitations

Research recruitment for this project was hindered substantially by COVID-19, as at the time of recruitment many individuals were not yet ready to allow people into their private spaces. Many individuals contacted me to see if video tours were an option, but since I decided the project required an in-home experience of data collection, I had to turn away several people. This slowed recruitment and impacted the number of available participants.⁶⁴ In addition, recruitment

⁶⁴ As mentioned, while the number of participants was only 17, the data showed signs of saturation and I was able to

plans had included using prior established connections at mental health organizations that offer Hoarding programming. During and following the pandemic these organizations were closed to foot traffic and all operations were done online only. Contact was made with the organizers of the Hoarding and decluttering groups, and a call for participants was sent out in their email newsletter, but this did not yield any participants.

Many participants noted that their spaces were also impacted by COVID-19, whether due to more people being home, daycare availability, caring for more people in or out of the home, or a breakdown in the usual movement of material goods in the home. This shift may have affected the findings, which reflected those homes in a particularly unique time and space; however, considering the impacts of COVID-19 in many homes and the prior focus on decluttering and maximizing smaller spaces (see Sandlin & Wallin, 2022; Khamis, 2019), this research is still valuable in the context of post-pandemic literature and as a part of the larger conversation on popular culture decluttering trends.

An additional limitation of the research relates to the recruitment of cluttered homes instead of Hoarded homes. This choice of recruitment was justified in the context of stigma and access to vulnerable participants for research, but resulted in homes that were not severely hoarded. Thus, the results may not have encompassed particular nuances of the lived experiences who have been formally diagnosed with Hoarding Disorder. Further research is needed to confirm how domestic practices work in Hoarded homes. Still, since hoarding is part of a clutter-hoarding continuum, my study provides insight into daily domestic practices that interact to create situations of over-accumulation.

While the study looked to object affect in the domestic space, empirically ‘capturing’

address my research questions.

affect was more complex and difficult than anticipated. Guidelines from appraisal theory (Bagozzi, 1999) were consulted, yet ultimately the multi-sensory environment of a guided tour, requiring note taking and mapping, while listening to the participant discuss the setting, limited time/space for proper observation of bodily movement within the space. In the future, a video camera or second interviewer may aid in recording affect in this type of setting. Furthermore, direct engagement with affective objects was less frequent than anticipated, as many individuals opted to quickly pass sentimental items that caused complex feelings. Developing focused questions for sentimental objects may have overcome this limitation.

Future Research

This research project revealed many areas for further inquiry into domestic practices and research in domestic spaces. Several individuals were interested in getting rid of much of the clutter in their home, but spoke of barriers. It is unknown whether offering support for removing items would facilitate removal, or would reveal other or different motivations or barriers (Maguire & Fahy, 2022); a social practice theory approach could be helpful in further interrogation of the *doings* of the practices as they play out. Likewise, more focused analytic attention to gender could highlight the gendered nature of domestic consumption and the expectations of care. In homes with heterosexual couples, it was the woman who requested the interview. This likely reflects persistent gender disparities on domestic household maintenance (Lyonette & Crompton, 2015).

Additionally, this project highlights the potential for further understanding household domestic practices of accumulation and discard through consumer culture discourses. Consumption studies may also benefit from supplementing social practice theory approaches with other frameworks (Warde, 2014; Evans, 2020). An in-depth consideration of the popular

culture and other public or advocacy-related discourses surrounding accumulation and, more importantly, divestment and discard, may reveal a bridge between certain practices of over accumulation. Linking in-home micro-processes (and people's narrations of these) to larger macro social construction processes, can help analytically tie production to consumer culture while keeping with postmodern theories of individuality, taste, and the reflexive consumer. This may help to further Mary Douglas's suggestion that dirt is "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966/2002, p. 44) by considering the systems that surround the classification of clutter, but also asking who makes the boundaries and how they are created, shaped, encouraged, and judged. This would allow for further understanding of how specific objects come in and out of normative popularity and how those that do not fit are vilified and considered clutter (See Löfgren 2014, p.84).

Another opportunity would be to consider further visual investigation of clutter and meaning through photos. A project that discussed photos taken by the participant may reveal rich description of domestic spaces and objects. Additionally, photos taken by the researcher may visually capture organization logics in different homes. In general, an extended project using visual research methods would benefit the understanding of domestic spaces and the relationships maintained in and through material objects (see Rose, 2016; Woodward, 2019).

Conclusion

How and why domestic practices are performed is central to understanding the manifestation of clutter in homes. This dissertation engages with consumer culture using a social practice theory approach to highlight how clutter and hoarding emerge from complex systems of negotiated performances of intersecting domestic practices within people's local conditions and a broader socio-cultural context. The analysis challenges the predominantly medicalized and often

stigmatizing conceptualization of Hoarding as an individual mental illness by examining how everyday domestic practices come to create different levels of manageable and unmanageable clutter.

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Appendix A



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Research Ethics and Compliance

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PROTOCOL APPROVAL

Effective: April 6, 2022

Expiry: April 5, 2023

Principal Investigator: Tiffany Rachel Anne Hall
Advisor: Sonia Bookman
Protocol Number: HE2022-0028
Protocol Title: *Hoarding Practices: Domestic consumption patterns, discourses, and embodied performances in everyday life*

Jonathan Marotta, Chair, REB1

Research Ethics Board 1 has reviewed and approved the above research. The Human Ethics Office (HEO) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans- TCPS 2 (2018)*.

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

- i. Approval is granted for the research and purposes described in the protocol only.
- ii. Any changes to the protocol or research materials must be approved by the HEO before implementation.
- iii. Any deviations to the research or adverse events must be reported to the HEO immediately through an REB Event.
- iv. This approval is valid for one year only. A Renewal Request must be submitted and approved prior to the above expiry date.
- v. A Protocol Closure must be submitted to the HEO when the research is complete or if the research is terminated.
- vi. The University of Manitoba may request to audit your research documentation to confirm compliance with this approved protocol, and with the UM *Ethics of Research Involving Humans* [Ethics of Research Involving Humans](#) policies and procedures.

Appendix B



Sociology and Criminology
318 Isbister Building
183 Dafoe Road
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2
T: 204 474 9260
F: 204 261 1216
Sociology@umanitoba.ca

Hoarding Practices: Domestic consumption patterns, discourses, and embodied performances in everyday life

Thank you for your participation in my study! Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Purpose of the Study:

I previously informed you that the purpose of the study was to examine consumption practices in cluttered homes, especially as they relate to daily routines, the care of goods, and social discourses of buying, recycling, and discarding.

I realize that some of the questions asked may have provoked strong emotional reactions. As a researcher, I do not provide mental health services as I am not a trained clinician; however, I want to provide every participant in this study with a comprehensive and accurate list of clinical resources that are available, should you decide you need assistance at any time. Please note that any mental health decisions should be discussed with your family doctor. Additionally, during this process you may have decided that some items in your home are not serving their purpose anymore, so I have included resources for decluttering services. Please read over the information at the end of this form, and feel free to follow up with me any time for guidance in this area.

Confidentiality:

You may decide that you do not want your data used in this research. If you would like your data removed from the study and permanently deleted, please contact me (Tiffany Hall) as soon as possible. Note that due to the nature of analysis, I may not be able to remove all your data after August 2023.

Useful Contact Information:

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, its purpose, or procedures, or if you have a research-related problem, please feel free to contact the researcher(s), Tiffany Hall at [REDACTED] or call [REDACTED]. You may also reach out to the supervisor of this project, Sonia Bookman, at [REDACTED].

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Manitoba Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122 or humanethics@umanitoba.ca.

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Appendix C



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Hoarding Practices: Domestic consumption patterns, discourses, and embodied performances in everyday life

Principal Investigator: Tiffany Hall, Ph.D. Candidate [REDACTED]
Advisor: Sonia Bookman, Associate Professor [REDACTED]
Department of Sociology and Criminology, University of Manitoba

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The Research: This research project investigates material objects in the home and how higher levels of items, or ‘clutter’, are involved in the daily routines of the individuals who have acquired them. While this is often referred to as ‘hoarding’ in popular culture, in my study I am examining it as a particular consumption practice – how people acquire and relate to their material possessions. Specifically, I consider how social discourses of buying, recycling, and discarding are reflected in items in the home, and how they influence routines of acquiring, caring for, and parting with items. Additionally, I ask questions about the meanings of particular items in the home and their placement, usage, and contribution to the life of the owner.

Your Participation: This project involves photo and interview data. The researcher will request ten (10) photographs of items or areas in your home you wish to discuss. If you have a device you wish to use to record, you may complete the photo collection ahead of time and upload the documents to a secure online server. Alternately a device (iPhone) will be provided on the day of the interview for you to take the photos.

Once the consent form has been acquired the researcher will schedule an in-home interview with you. This interview will last 1-2 hours. Before the interview starts I will ask for a home tour so that I can better understand your space. If you have not taken any photos I will provide you with a device to do so. Then the interview will begin. During the interview we will discuss the photos taken, as well as other aspects of the home and objects in it, including how objects got there and what their meaning or significance is. The interview will be audio recorded only (no video) so that it can be transcribed. You can refuse to answer any questions asked during the interview, and you can leave (and therefore, terminate) the interview at any time. Any data collected up to that point will be destroyed. Being involved in this research project is completely up to you. This means that you are under no obligation to participate.

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Appendix D

Interview Guide In-Home

During Tour

Can you show me around your living areas?
Where is most of your time spent?
Typical day

SPACE

Tell me about this space – how much time do you spend here?
Do you spend time in here every day?
What do you do here?

Acquisition

How do things come into this space?
Do they come directly here or do they stop along the way?

Routines

Where do you shop? How often? When – which part of your day, errand day, during a daily walk?
Do you always buy something when you go shopping, or do you window shop?
Do you thrift shop? How often?
Do you online shop?

OBJECTS

Can you tell me about what is in this corner?
Do you remember where you got it? Is there a story that goes with it?
How does it make you feel?
What do you like/dislike about it?

Can you show me (pick out, tell me about) one item in this room/space that you are having trouble parting with?

CHANGE

Is there anything about this space you would like to change?
- Why do you want to change it?
- Why do you say that? Where does that idea come from?
Does this space meet your needs?
Are there objects in this space that do not meet your needs?

TIMELINE

Has it always been this way?
What was your home like growing up? Were your parents organized, frugal, cluttered?

Significant people

Changes in practices due to covid

Discourse?

Any other questions or things you want to talk about?

/end recording, Ask if they have questions about the project or anything about me they wish to know

Discarding activity

Appendix E



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CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS FOR RESEARCH STUDY ON CLUTTER,
OBJECTS, AND THE HOME:
“Domestic consumption patterns, discourses, and embodied performances”

Do you have clutter in your home?
Do you find it difficult to part with objects?
Do you find yourself bringing items home but never putting them ‘away’?

I am currently conducting research on increasing objects in the home and how material items impact daily life.

Eligibility:

This study is open to adults **18 and over** who live in **Winnipeg** and who are the primary residents of their home, be it a detached single dwelling, a multi-family unit, or a condo or apartment. If you believe you have large amounts of clutter, are unable to use all rooms/spaces in your home, and have difficulty throwing things away, I am very interested in hearing about the items in your home, how they got there, and the ways they influence your daily routines.

This research involves an interview in your home which will include a home tour.

This is anticipated to take 1-2 hours.

Additionally, the interviewer will require you to take ten (10) photographs of your home. You may share these ahead of time with the researcher using your own device, or wait until the day of the interview to take them with the researchers device.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and measures will be taken to protect the confidentiality of your personal information. Eligibility will be determined by completion of a pre-screening tool via email. Participants will be provided with a \$25 gift card for a grocery store in appreciation of their time.

To participate, contact **Tiffany Hall** (PI, Ph.D. Candidate) by email [REDACTED] or by phone [REDACTED]

This research is supervised by Dr Sonia Bookman, University of Manitoba
[REDACTED] **This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba Fort Garry Campus HE2022-0028. If you have concerns or complains about this project, you may contact the above named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) at 204-474-7122.**

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Appendix F

Interview Pre-screen questions for the study “Domestic consumption patterns, discourses, and embodied performances”

Are there rooms or areas of your home you are unable to use due to clutter?

Do you encounter or interact with clutter on a daily basis?

Do you have unopened online purchase (Amazon) boxes or unpacked shopping bags in your home?

Do you have difficulty discarding items?

Do you consider yourself a collector?

Do you often buy things for which you have no immediate use?

Do you have groups of items inherited from loved ones? (Ex. Parents who have passed or downsized)

Appendix G

Domestic consumption patterns, discourses, and embodied performances in everyday life

Photo Guidelines

In order to participate in this research project you will be required to take photos of your home. This is so that the researcher has some photographs of items that can be discussed during the interview.

Taking photos ahead of time is optional; otherwise, photos will be taken when the interviewer is in your home.

Photo Instructions

Please don't 'tidy up' first! I hope to see your home exactly as it is when you are using it, including the shoe pile at the door, the clothes on the floor, and the kibble the dog hid around the house.

Photographs

Please take **ten (10)** photos of items or areas around your home. These photos may be of single item(s) or of a pile or grouping of objects.

This may include:

- Items you are proud of or like to show off to company (or wish you could if it finally got a frame or had a display shelf)
- Heirlooms or antiques
- Objects that remind you of happy or sad memories or specific people
- Areas of the home where you feel comforted by your possessions (a cozy nook or chair) or spend a lot of time (the TV chair).
- Any items that have particular meaning, significance, or sentimentality to them
- Areas you wish were cleaner or more tidy
- Boxes or piles of items that do not have a 'home'

Please refrain from taking photos of other people's possessions or spaces (e.g. children's rooms).

NOTE: Photographs may be used in publications, but only if you have consented to their use on the study consent form. Only photos without identifying features will be used.

Appendix H

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age range	Living alone	House or apartment	Presence of basement	Widowed/divorced/empty nest	Disability or mental health in home	Male or female	Pets in the home	Kids in home
Dawn	40-50	X	A			X	F	X	
Ashley	30-40	X	H	X			F	X	
Ryn	30-40	X	A			X	F		
Edith	70+		H			X	F		
Carol	60-70		H	X	X	X	F	X	
Beth	30-40		H			X	F		X
Judith	60-70	X	H	X	X		F	X	
Joyce	60-70	X	H	X	X		F		
Kristin	30-40		H/shared			X	F		
Darryl	30-40	X	A				M	X	
Andrea	30-40	X	H	X		X	F	X	
Keith	40-50		H		X		M	X	X
Donna	60-70	X	H	X	X		F	X	
Laura	40-50		H	X		X	F	X	X
Marilyn	50-60		H	X		X	F	X	
Al	70+	X	H	X	X		M		
Omar	40-50		A	X	X	X	M		X
SUMS		n=9	13H/4A	10		n=10	13F/4M	n=10	n=4