# FLUID HOUSEHOLDS AND OBJECT FLOWS

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Draft paper (not to be cited) for:
PI, OU and RRF conference: How to Break a Rubbish Habit
Winchester 29th June 2006

**Abstract**

This paper presents initial findings from a study of households on a dense, high- and low-rise housing estate in south east London. The main aim is to understand the flows of objects in, through and out of the household space: how, why and from where they enter; what happens inside the home; the reasons for which they leave that space and how they do so. Since kinship relations are the main conduit through which objects move, this aim in turn necessitates understanding household dynamics both in space and time: how kinship networks and the 'developmental cycle' of a family affect the accumulation and dispersal of things. Within the limits of this study it not possible to gain a longitudinal perspective, nor is it possible to follow exactly what happens in the home. However, we have highlighted where certain findings should be seen in the context of longer-term processes.

## 1. Introduction

Based on research concerning informal exchange networks, this paper presents some mid-term findings together with a brief reflection on methods for studying household behaviours with respect to the things that move in, through and out of the home. Strategy and policy documents (e.g. DEFRA 2006) tend to speak of 'the public', 'communities' and 'households' as though these were unproblematic entities to be investigated and acted on. Our research suggests they are a little more contentious. An appreciation is needed of just how diverse groups are with which people identify themselves since social relations are a key determinant in how objects are re-used and extend their lives beyond the initial point of consumption (see also Gregson and Crewe, 2003, Gregson et al. n.d.).

One underlying assumption of our research has been that, in order to maximise the operational and cost effectiveness of local waste management strategies, it is necessary to dovetail technological and organisational systems with existing patterns of behaviour as far as possible, rather than assume the need for wholesale, radical change on the part of the individual or household. The principle behind this research has therefore been first, to gain an understanding of how people live with objects and thus to be in a position to identify the most appropriate interventions on the part of collection agencies.

In this respect, two points spring immediately to mind. The first is that certain rigid and apparently commonsense definitions do not always stand up to scrutiny. For example, the lived practices of households suggest that a far more fuzzy, fluid understanding is needed than that offered by conventional statistical definitions. The objects with which people live often similarly resist straightforward dichotomies of 'clean' and 'dirty' (e.g. Douglas 2000) or 'useful' and 'rubbish', whatever the cultural context. The second point is that whereas family and familiar relations may be better described by the image of a network (see Roberts et al 1997) than the confines of a residence, administrations tend to address themselves to a block of territory for which they are responsible. There is thus something of a tension between data collected and modelled by postcode or output areas, or waste collection systems focused on contiguous areas and the geographies of daily living and relationality. For example, one person may live in Winchester but commute to central London for work. She takes her lunch with her, half of which is thrown away at the workplace; she reads a newspaper bought at the station which is left behind on the train or thrown away at Waterloo. Some shopping may be done at lunchtime and carried home. A present for a new baby may be bought and sent to a daughter living in the midlands, who, not particularly liking the gift, gives it to a friend she met through the National Childbirth Trust (see Clark, 2000, Corrigan 1989). Our own examples are often more extreme with families who are split across continents but who still act as redistributive economic units, regularly sending money to each other together with large packages of clothing and household goods (cf. Litwak 1996).

The remainder of this paper is split into three parts. The first summarises the research we have been carrying out. The second highlights ways in which the extension of the household in time and space beyond the residence affects flows of objects: a) in daily routines, b) in calendrical cycles and, c) at key transitional moments or ruptures in the developmental progress of families (see Fortes 1971). This section also considers the range of values, which are attached to objects that enter, stay and leave the home, and which disrupt the consumption paradigm that sees objects as being purchased, remaining in the home for the duration of their utility, and then leaving the domestic space as rubbish (see also Cooper 2005). The conclusion points to how such understandings might be incorporated with collections strategies so as to integrate collection methods with ‘normal’ behaviour, as far as possible, rather than seek to ‘normalise’ different behaviour patterns. Breaking rubbish habits thus becomes a joint endeavour between people and collection agencies.

## 2. Research projects

Our research projects are part of an EPSRC-funded programme of work on strategies for sustainable waste management in an urban context. There are two related aims of our work. The first is to analyse exchange networks ranging from the ad hoc and informal to those that intersect with public and commercial sectors in order to assess both operational effectiveness and social, economic and environmental benefits. In practice, other than with more formal recycling schemes, this is easier said than done: informal tends to equate with invisible. When asked if they ever passed on or exchanged items through recycling networks, most of our informants looked blank and shook their heads. It was not until they had been quizzed at length, and in some detail about daily practices more broadly, that a pattern began to emerge of the importance of friends and kin for extending the lives of objects. The second aim of these projects is to consider the interfaces between public or commercial collections and the home: what happens to household waste at the doorstep in other words. These two parts of the work have been run together in order to contextualise both and provide a picture of:

a) what objects enter the home, from where or from whom they have come and how or why they are crossing the domestic threshold,
b) what happens to these objects inside the home, and
c) what objects leave the home, how and why.

This then embraced daily and weekly shopping for food, for example, but also covered food being bought for someone else, as was frequently the case. This could be either food that was purchased, brought home but then passed straight on, or food that was bought and frozen or kept for a while before being handed on, or food that was brought home, cooked and variously given to co-residential members or to other family members who lived nearby – either to take home or to eat together.

Larger items and clothes that were bought less frequently were also logged, it is worth noting the importance of catalogue shopping here as well. Nearly all our informants bought (and returned) clothes via heaps of catalogues scattered about flats. But alongside such straightforward commodity purchases we also recorded items that came into the home such as finds from charity shops or boot sales; items that were loaned, gifted or bequested. In the same way, we tried to track not just items leaving the home into black bin bags, bring banks or via bulky waste collections, but those that were given to children, saved for charity shops or boot sales, or passed on to close colleagues or friends. In sum, the intention was to restore the idea of consumption and disposal as a continuing practice – not just the moment of buying things in shops.

We selected our informants in two ways, by regularly visiting some households to locate and follow the networks to which they were connected and by taking a few groups that were more visibly on the radar so to speak, and followed members of those groups back to their households. Although we tried to ensure a reasonable acknowledgement of long- and short-term residents, different ages, ethnic groups, and genders, the type of data collection undertaken necessitates a relatively small sample size which in turn cannot claim rigorous demographic coverage. On the other hand, extensive and intensive contact with our informants enabled us to query some of the basic assumptions and classifications that drive larger-scale surveys and helped us to gain a more detailed picture of what was actually happening behind the original reported practices of the initial interview.

The work was carried out though several long, open-ended interviews with people in their flats, walking around their neighbourhood with them, talking to other household members if possible, sometimes joining in on shopping expeditions. These interviews started with a range of topics we wanted to cover in each case – but got to the point when informants started ringing up for a chat about things in which they thought we were interested. So far we have collected 140 of these interviews for about forty five individuals. In addition, twenty three people (out of the forty five) kept detailed, annotated diaries of every single item that came into and left their house. These items ranged from furniture, photographs and clothes through old toys and went to the level of old teabags, cans and potato peelings, but also how they were disposed of: black bin bags, foxes, bring banks, gifts, donations to temples and churches and so on. These interviews were based in a high- and low-rise dense housing estate in south London. We have started to collect comparative data from a study elsewhere in the same borough and in a small town in South England. These additional studies are significantly different in terms of demography and the rate at which people move where they live.

In line with Gregson's (in press) findings for similar estates in County Durham and Northampton, we found, on the south London estate, that there was a sharp distinction between long-term residents, who had been there since the slum clearances of the 1960s and 1970s whose children often also lived nearby, or were trying to move closer to their parents, and more recent incomers, often first generation migrants to Britain, whose rate of movement was markedly higher than the approximate urban average of once very ten years. In many instances, reasons for moving followed changes in family structures as more children appeared, partners separated and new relationships formed. One group we spoke to had two adults and three children from previous relationships in a small one-bedroom flat, the parents were continually scanning the Council's website in the hope of securing a larger dwelling.

Cutting across these populations of long-term, stable residents and highly mobile groups were the separations between owner occupiers who had bought their flat under the 1980 Housing Act or right-to-buy scheme, those who had bought their flats then promptly moved out and used the flat as a source of rental income, and council tenants. Those who had moved into the area or estate as private or council tenants said that they had not had any information about how and where to dispose of rubbish, nor had known how to go about asking for instructions, thus highlighting the importance of on-going, regular communication strategies together with infrastructural systems that are as evident and framed as possible. Chappells and Shove (1999), for example, talk of 'scripted technologies' of disposal. The variety of schemes and codings between Local Authorities also caused some confusion for people moving between areas.

It is worth noting that although house moves usually generated a considerable excess of objects and anxiety how to deal with them (as discussed below), moves between council properties created yet another layer of surplus that was not perceived as rubbish by tenants. Roughly eighty percent of our informants who were council tenants had replaced the flooring they found on arrival, usually carpeting, with laminate flooring. The reasons cited were that this was easier to keep clean, which was of particular concern when there were small children in the family group. Since it is standard policy for vacated flats to be returned to the condition in which they were on arrival, the laminate flooring had to be ripped up and removed. It is difficult to re-use. One extreme example of the effect of this regulation was George, an Eritrean, who had been moved three times in five years. On each occasion, he had removed the original carpet and laid laminate covering. By the time we spoke to him in 2005, he had one shed belonging to a distant relation which was full of torn-up laminate floor. He had tried to shred some of the remainder and crush it into black bin bags, some he had taken to the local HWRC and some he had "scattered in various bins and out of the way places" to use his words.

## 3. Definitions: households and rubbish

As discussed elsewhere (Alexander 2002, Amit and Rapport 2002), 'community', which has become such a rallying cry of late, can variously mean neighbourhood, family relations or the networks to which we belong by choice or affiliation such as groups based on faith, hobbies, interests, or common background (Hart 1988). However, bounded neighbourhoods, which are territorially contiguous, are not necessarily the same as the more open-ended networks of kin, friends and affiliative groups, especially in the kind of inner city housing estate where we have been working. It is worth highlighting the difference therefore between the kind of 'community' addressed by such operations as New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood Renewal Schemes and so forth and the communities that are 'lived'. By the same token, households and families are also lived and practised in very different ways from official definitions.

The US Census for example, suggests a household is 'all the persons who occupy a housing unit'. British definitions have changed over time in line with changing perceptions of households. In 1971 the definition of a household used in the GHS and in most other surveys carried out by OPCS Social Survey Division was:

> a group of people who all live regularly at the address ... and who are all catered for, for at least one meal a day, by the same person. (Atkinson, 1971)

By 1981 a new definition adopted for the Census was:

> a single person or a group of people who have the address as their only or main residence and who either share one meal a day or share the living accommodation. (McCrossan, 1991)

Broadly speaking, this is the common understanding that still dominates. Thus census and statistical definitions place a heavy emphasis on the household as people who eat together, which would certainly have gained the approval of Kant who cites commensality as one of the key characteristics of social cohesion. But the key defining factor is also an emphasis on people living under the same roof, within the same four walls. Anthropologists have argued that it is important to distinguish between the family and the household but also that a common cross-cultural characteristic is the difference between the 'ideal' family and a wide variety of family forms in practice (Morris 1990). In Britain, most people will identify themselves with several different family groups according to context: immediate natal family, children and partners, relations via partners or grandparents. One way of identifying different classifications is whether descent or alliance is emphasised. Households frequently overlap with family relations, but also carry with them a much older sense of a self-sufficient economic unit that may include non-kin relations. Indeed the origin of 'economy' is to be found in Aristotle's discussion of household management, *oikos nomos*, the rules of the house; even though he is referring here to the a house on the scale of a self-contained estate.

These shades of meaning are borne out in a report just out from the ESRC: 'Changing household and Family Structures'. The author, Professor Murphy points out that, 'traditionally, data collections have used the household as the unit of analysis and have tended to be relatively unconcerned with what happens beyond its borders.' It was precisely such overflowing of built and definitional borders that our study revealed. Along these lines, our findings tie in very closely with a classic study of family and kinship in East London from 1957 (Wilmott and Young), suggesting that what is commonly referred to as the extended family is still alive and well. At the very least, there is a sense of a group of people acting as an economic unit with adult children and grandchildren regularly eating with parents and childcare being shared across generations. It is also common for incomes to be partly shared in joint weekly shopping expeditions, the food, as described above, sometimes being shared out, sometimes going to one person who will then cook for the others during the week.

As one example here, Mary lives on her own in a three bedroom flat, occasionally fostering one to two small children. She has three adult children of her own who all have their own flats within a five mile radius. Her son eats at her house twice a week. One daughter spends most of her time with her mother, eating and often sleeping there. The children of her other daughter, Linda, also tend to eat and often sleep in their grandmother's house. Linda spends most of her time either at the flat of her current partner or with her mother. Occasional joint shopping expeditions are held, although it is more typical that the children contribute money or food that they have bought, they also use their own flats on occasion to store food that is then brought over as needed. The amount of food waste generated by Mary's apparently tiny household is therefore out of proportion to what an official definition of her household and pension might suggest.

On a less regular basis, these manifestations of the extended household through object flows, were demonstrated in more durable gifts or subsidies of various sorts. Thus, both new and second-hand clothes also passed through the channels opened up by these relations. Although on occasion clothes were given to charity shops, there was a distinct antipathy to purchasing from charity shops or indeed obtaining second-hand clothes, particularly for children. Two reasons were given for this. First was the strong sense of unwanted connection with a stranger reinforced by a sense of a dirty: clean opposition: 'I wouldn't have second-hand for my family. You don't know where it's been.' On the other hand, longer discussion showed that items of clothing passed between family members or close friends was rarely classed as 'second-hand':

'I gave one of my skirts to Sue the other day; couldn't get into it no more. I work with her. She's a friend. She's given me things in the past too. That's OK though, I mean, I know her, she's clean.'

The second reason for avoiding re-used clothing was wanting children to enjoy benefits that parents or grandparents had not had themselves, where 'new' indicated a quite different lifestyle: 'I grew up in hand-me-downs. I'm not having that for my kids. I might wear something second-hand occasionally, but not for my kids, they get the best I can afford.' Shifting value structures based on aspiration played a strong part in determining expenditure: economic rationality has to take into account questions of taste and the symbolic load they carry (Bourdieu 1990). Similarly, as Thompson (1979) notes in his tracking of certain objects from unwanted household surplus to dusty second-hand junk shop items to antiques, classifications of rubbish and not-rubbish shift over time and in different contexts, although Thompson tends to pursue a structural, oppositional approach.

This involvement of other family members extended to larger purchases either as objects or gifts of money clearly tagged as a means to buy a particular thing. Thus adult children setting up home, or those who suddenly found themselves having to start again, often found their flats furnished with the choices of other family members. One young woman who had taken three small children and left an abusive relationship ended up in a bare flat. 'I had to buy the kids Kentucky Fried Chicken every night for weeks,' she said, 'there was nothing to cook on or eat on at home'. They had one bed. At considerable expense, her mother bought her a carpet; six months later, she still had no means of cooking food. This perhaps casts some doubt on the identification of a 'household reference member', which has come to replace 'household head' as the person who makes consumption and indeed disposal decisions within one residence. In addition to this lateral spread of the household and its objects, changes in the family configuration also affect the flows of objects.

The three most traumatic events to undergo are usually cited as the death of someone close, divorce and moving house. Equally, these ruptures of kin relations served to foreground the items in 'limbo' described below, or indeed generated new influxes of things to a point of unmanageable excess. On several occasions we saw or were told about the anxiety and distress caused not just by the death of a close family member but by the inability either to accommodate or shed the objects that had belonged to whoever had recently died: 'if I had to get rid of this, it would feel like a betrayal. It would feel my mum was dying all over again,' one woman said, explaining why her tiny two-bedroom flat was crammed with cardboard boxes of her mother's belongings. Again, adult children moving out to set up their own sub households would similarly prompt a flow of crockery, furniture, curtains and so forth between generations. Rooms would often be reconfigured to reflect the changed form of the group living in the residence and this too might result in ejecting material associated with a phase of the family that was now over.

These were often the junctures when relatively large-scale clearouts would occur, but often with huge difficulty in deciding what items should go where, especially where relations of affection were unable to take on more things. As Nicky Gregson has described, these actions are not seen as throwing out rubbish; rather she classes them as 'divesting' or 'ridding', actions often accompanied by regret. Never the less, these are the points at which large amounts of material left the domestic space and were often closely tied to changes of or ruptures in kin relations of some sort; indeed moving itself was often prompted by the break-up of a relationship, or changes in the developmental cycle of families as they expand, contract and often expand again. The presence of small children in a flat made a considerable difference to the willingness of older family members to keep glass, cans or organic waste for recycling: all were seen as potentially dangerous or unclean.

The third instance where object flows intensify is connected to regular calendrical cycles. Christmas is perhaps the most obvious example, but the onset of Spring is equally celebrated (at the very least by Turkic and many European groups) by a comprehensive cleaning of the house accompanied by buying new clothes and ridding the dwelling of old, broken items.

The association of objects with their provenance has a considerable impact on what happens to them in the home, determining when and how they leave the home. As anthropologists say (Appadurai 1986), many things have social lives; objects come with biographies attached. The meshing of human and object lives creates a very different sense of the objects with which people live and pass on; things are not just either useful or rubbish. Depending on the amount of storage space, houses and flats are stuffed with items that have been backgrounded from daily or regular use but which owners are reluctant to part from because they embody memories and social relations. Such things have a sentimental value that far exceeds an appreciation of aesthetics or utility.

There is inadequate space here to record all the instances but a few examples illustrate the point. There are the 'special' items, such as Christmas decorations, that come into use once a year and other such items such as formal clothes bought for particular occasions, even if the moment of fashion has long passed. Men, in particular, squirreled away old trophies, sports equipment, camping paraphernalia, oddments of wood, string, wheels. These last might seem unconnected from a social life, but were usually carefully explained in terms of where they had been taken from, how the dismantling operation had taken place and often, finally, that they had been stored 'in case' as a functional explanation tagged on the end. The other most common reason for saving items 'in case' were children's clothes and toys for grandchildren that might appear one day.

Cupboards, cellars and attics, where they existed, sheds, communal storage cupboards that had been 'privatised', whether officially or de facto, were all full of such items that were neither goods in the sense of present utility, nor rubbish in the sense of dirty, unwanted objects. Moreover, storage was not just limited to the available physical space of a given residence: spare capacity in friends' or relations' dwellings was sometimes called into operation. Many of these things caused considerable tension between co-resident household members where the sentimental value was not shared.

Anthropologists often describe how the non-commodity exchange of objects is a key mechanism for imagining, making and maintaining social relations; gift exchange typifies enduring relations between people. In the anthropological literature this moves beyond presents given at key junctures such as Christmas and birthdays to encompass gifts given, received and reciprocated as ritual markers of social relationships. These are not relationships of equality, but a constant shifting of relation from giver to donor so that at each time, one is in the other's debt; it is this sense of moving obligation that binds and is sometimes underscored by power—there is such a thing as aggressive giving too.

One of the key tenets of anthropology is that consumption is therefore an active, on-going practice, past the moment of acquiring a good. Moreover, relations enabled by such exchanges of things are maintained over time, often across generations. More recent theorising of 'the gift' also suggests the possibility of more abstract relationships 'underwritten' by such entities such as the state, or wider groups of people. Although contemporary Britain is typified by commodity exchange and a market economy, many of the features of gift exchange also hold true at different social levels and certainly within the domestic domain. The reluctance of many of our informants to carry out exchanges outside familiar networks of kin and family reinforce the usefulness of such a paradigm.

## Conclusion

This indicates that familial and familiar relations are the 'normal' direction and means for objects to move along, whether in terms of frequent, regular shopping and eating together or helping out kin with more substantial donations. Where family relations are blocked or broken, the flow of objects is similarly impeded and it is at such moments that objects are likely to appear in the public domain as rubbish, even if this does not reflect the spirit in which they were placed outside the household space. One thing worth emphasising is the frequent confusion expressed as to how objects should be 'got rid of' when these normal channels failed. Where collection mechanisms were seen to be reliable, they were used but trust in the normality of collections was easily and rapidly lost when there were changes to the system or failures. Thus Fred a pensioner told how he had walked down twelve flights of stairs, in the absence of a working lift, with his bottles and papers for a local Bring Bank, only to find it blocked and closed off. Not only did he swear not to repeat the experiment, but encouraged his neighbours and family to boycott the scheme for some time.

In other words, the reliability and normality of familial exchanges has to be extended to collection schemes, something best achieved, from our research so far, via continued face-to-face communication, co-opting members of community groups and simple, reliable collection mechanisms.

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