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ARTICLE

Material Culture and the Living Room
The appropriation and use of goods in everyday life
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Abstract
This article draws on findings of qualitative research that considers the importance and meanings people attach to domestic decoration and surroundings via an exploration of the material culture of living rooms. In attending to issues and debates concerning everyday consumption practices within the domestic sphere, the following discussion suggests an approach that firmly places an understanding on how ‘goods’ and ‘things’ are used, lived with and appropriated into everyday life. Drawing on in-depth interviews carried out in the homes of 50 respondents in Greater Manchester, UK, the article develops and complements existing ideas and research in cultural anthropology, consumer studies and, more recently, sociology of consumption, which focus on understanding aspects of the complex relationships that exist between subjects and objects, and how these operate within the boundaries of ordinary, mundane and routine consumption practices. It will be shown that one aspect of this relationship relates to the ways in which ‘things’ act as the embodiment of meaningful social relations and significant connections between family members, friends and even wider social networks, and offers one way of understanding material culture consumption within the home. This is explored via three observed processes of display, acquisition and appropriation within the home: gift objects as familial obligation; objects as markers of memory; and the commemorative potential of objects.

Key words
appropriation • consumption • display • home • social relationships
INTRODUCTION

The following discussion seeks to expand and bring together issues of everyday life, object appropriation and routine, mundane consumption practices in order to offer a more coherent theoretical discussion with which to take forward an exploration and understanding of domestic material culture display. Via detailed interview narratives put forward by 50 research respondents, the discussion focuses on an appreciation of how ‘things’ are used, lived with and appropriated into everyday domestic life, thus highlighting the ways in which individuals actively become producers of meaning rather than simply consumers of goods (Chevalier, 1999; De Certeau, 1988). Drawing on the growing literature in disciplines such as cultural anthropology, consumer studies and, more recently, the sociology of consumption, the discussion brings together existing debates in order to understand the embedded nature of material culture within the home, and the appropriation of things as social and emotive objects that maintain meaningful social relationships amongst family, friends and social networks (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; McCracken, 1988; Miller, 1998; Riggins, 1994).

As Gronow and Warde (2001) neatly summarize, over the past 25 years, the sub-disciplinary field of consumption studies within sociology has, as a result of the ascendancy of ideas put forward by scholars such as Bourdieu (1984), Bauman (1997) and Giddens (1991), tended to engage with conceptualizations that have a particular focus on a number of key issues based around notions of distinction, choice, identity, taste, lifestyle, freedom and so on (p. 2). This has led to some segments of everyday consumption practices and activities going largely unnoticed within sociology – ‘practices which required little reflection, which communicate few social messages, which play no role in distinction, and which do not excite much passion or emotion, were typically ignored’ (Gronow and Warde, 2001: 3). Rather, studies have tended to centre on highly visual and spectacular consumption practices based around clothing styles, musical tastes and participation in ‘high’ cultural activities, for example, the theatre and opera, at the expense of more ‘mundane’ activities such as food consumption, energy consumption, domestic interiors and so on. Studies that explore the more mundane, habitual and taken-for-granted consumption practices, in particular, the study of ‘objects’ and domestic material culture, ‘are thin on the ground’ within mainstream sociology (Woodward, 2001: 130). However, there are studies emerging within this discipline that, alongside those existing studies in cultural anthropology and consumer research, explore these aspects of ‘ordinary’ consumption, domestic appropriation.
and subject/object relationships, and are drawn upon in the discussion that follows (for example, Chapman, 1999; Cheal, 1988; Douglas and Isherwood, 1978; Godbout and Caille, 1998; McGrath et al., 1993; Marcoux, 2001; Miller, 1987, 1998, 2001; Shove, 2003; Southerton, 2001). This approach to understanding the relationship to, and display of, material culture will take into consideration the ‘interplay between individual subjectivity and context; which allow the question of the “meaningfulness” of variation to be addressed; and which are more flexible and sophisticated in their rendering of agency in consumption practice’ (Longhurst and Savage, 1996: 289).

DOMESTIC MATERIAL CULTURE AND EVERYDAY LIFE

The decision to research ‘ordinary’ consumption practices within the setting of the home rests on a number of factors. As Chapman notes, ‘under headings such as social class, work, family and gender, sociology has examined the lives of society’s members. When it comes to the homes within which their domestic lives are lived out, the discipline has remained somewhat silent’ (1999: xi). Miller (2001) observes that in society at present, most of what matters to people takes place behind closed doors. It has long been argued that changes in family structure, changes in leisure pursuits and activities, the decline of community relations, and the impact of processes of industrialization and urbanization have resulted in a more insular society with people increasingly leading private lives centered on the home and the nuclear family (Allan, 1996; Fischer, 1982). The home, therefore, and the material culture contained and displayed within it increasingly becomes the site for both the appropriation of the outside, public world and the representation of the private, inside world (Miller, 2001: 1). Whilst there exists a great deal of literature concerning the consumption of public spaces – museums, theatres, shopping malls and so on (Duncan, 1995; Prior, 2002; Shields, 1992) – what actually transpires inside the home, the nature of those relationships between people and material culture, have seldom been considered (see Chapman, 1999; Cieraad, 1999; Miller, 2001). Yet as Woodward states, these relationships are significant and worthy of further investigation, for how factors such as family dynamics, class position, gender and age affect ways of living in the home and the ‘organization and selection of the system of objects . . . carry a freight of sociological meaning’ (2001: 121). Additionally, the living room was chosen as the focus of empirical investigation on the basis that it potentially operates on two important levels: it is a ‘transactional space’ for the household, imbued with creating meaning and identity for those who reside therein; but also, it is
the space for selective contacts with the outside world. It therefore acts as the interface between the private and the public world (Woodward, 2001) in which the material culture can be seen as a performance both for oneself and family relations, and for others. Although primarily commenting on households in the Renaissance period, Ajmar notes that the domestic space is pivotal for its role in studying relationships between people, objects and memory (1999: 75), and the household is often a ‘conflictual space’ in which ‘value discrepancies’ are negotiated, mediated and stabilized (Riggins, 1994: 139).

The importance in examining approaches to everyday life, in particular those put forward by De Certeau (1984), are that they draw attention to the often taken for granted, ordinary aspects of daily existence, in this instance, the decoration of the home and how this is ‘lived’ within daily life. De Certeau’s approach is helpful in that it attempts to ‘deconstruct’ the term ‘consumer’ in order to uncover the activity that rests within the act of ‘cultural consumption’ or what de Certeau has labelled ‘secondary production’ (Storey, 1999: 49). In this sense, then, consumers are seen as active rather than passive in their appropriation and use of consumer goods. They have the ability to resist the imposed meanings of cultural texts and goods, and instead often ‘re-appropriate’ goods into their everyday lives. As De Certeau states, in order to understand the practice of cultural consumption, we need to question the assumption that ‘assimilating’ necessarily means ‘becoming similar to’ what one absorbs, and not ‘making something similar’ to what one is, making it one’s own, appropriating or re-appropriating (De Certeau, 1998: 166).

There are many works, particularly within cultural anthropology, material culture studies and so on, that focus on the appropriation of goods and explore the ‘socialness’ (Appadurai, 1986; Riggins, 1994) and ‘cultural biographies’ of things and commodities (Kopytoff, 1986; Dant, 1999), with a particular focus on understanding how value becomes attached or embodied in things after processes of exchange have taken place (see also Chevalier, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981). In The World of Goods (1978), Douglas and Isherwood attest that material possessions, whilst providing such essentials as food and shelter, also perform another important function, that of constructing and maintaining social relationships (1978: 59). Douglas and Isherwood contend that this way of thinking about ‘goods’, that they transact a vital role in social relationships, is recognized within anthropology as the correct and ‘proper’ way in which to interpret the consumption of goods and to understand why, in fact, people ‘need’ goods (1978: 60). Yet this established way of thinking about
the consumption of goods encounters difficulties when attempts are made to transfer these ideas to ‘our own ethnography of ourselves’ (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978: 61). One of the reasons for this lack of transerral to our own ethnography, highlighted earlier in the introduction via the work of Gronow and Warde (2001), can be seen to be linked to the preoccupation that the sociology of consumption has had with spectacular, rather than mundane, forms of consumption.

The following discussion will explore how goods transact these social relationships via a detailed discussion of the narratives provided by the respondents in order to make sense of the material culture and goods on display in their homes. The material culture discussed refers to goods and objects that have been acquired and brought into the home in a variety of ways, and the main discussion rests on how these goods have been appropriated in order to maintain and nurture important social relationships and connections. However, it does not go unnoticed that many of these objects have been acquired and transacted as a result of gift-giving practices between family, friends and even wider social networks. Given that this form of exchange can be seen to encompass useful notions such as ritual, routine and obligation, it is perhaps worthwhile also to explore the potential relevance that this process of exchange may have on an understanding of how commodities affect value and meaning after they have been exchanged.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

The basis of the empirical work discussed in this article derives from research undertaken in 2000–1 which locates and understands the importance in people’s everyday lives of the material culture and objects displayed within the social setting of the home, specifically the living room. The aim of the research was to understand how individuals consume these items rather than as an exercise in merely cataloguing what items were on display. In this sense, the emphasis is firmly placed upon individuals and how they ‘make sense’ of these objects, and, in turn, how they narrate this to others.

Fifty semi-structured interviews took place in three separate areas of Greater Manchester, UK. The first area, Patricroft, is a ‘traditional’ working-class area made up of rows of Victorian terraced houses. At the time of research,2 house prices in Patricroft ranged in value from £25,000 to £55,000. The second area was Baguley, a middle-class area of young professionals comprising one- and two-bedroom apartments and three-storey town houses.3 House prices ranged in value from £85,000 to
Worsley, the third area, is an established middle-class area comprising mainly large semi-detached and detached properties. House prices in the Worsley area ranged from £110,000 to £400,000. Of these 50 respondents, 40 were interviewed alone and 10 as a couple, with a fairly even gender ratio, and also a variety of household compositions in line with the national UK averages at the time, for example, married/cohabiting/single/divorced. Interviews tended, on average, to last between 40 minutes and one hour, and all 50 interviews were fully transcribed and analysed with the assistance of NU*DIST software (manufacturer: QSR).

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the principal method of data collection. However, photographic evidence was also collected during fieldwork and is referred to in the discussion that follows. The interview strategy, therefore, employed two research tools by which to understand consumption practices from the respondents’ point of view, which are referred to as interview and object narratives. A small selection of object narratives will be interspersed throughout the following sections in order to illustrate and enrich the discussion of interview narratives. All illustrations, therefore, ‘are closely connected to the research findings and enhance the written material’ (Alexander, 2001: 351). Whilst not a novel research tool (see Riggins, 1994), it has been noted recently that future fieldwork exploring domestic material culture would benefit greatly from the combination of both visual and verbal narratives (Hurdley, 2006). This is the case in the following discussion. Hurdley notes that the use of these two forms of narratives would help to ‘frame the enquiry’ and highlight the ‘private/personal, and public/social modes of domestic space’ (2006: 730). I would suggest that the application of these two ways in which to present narratives about domestic consumption and everyday life enhances the discussion, because it allows the presentation of a visual validation of the importance and meaning attached to certain aspects of material culture, as well as the verbal accounts provided by the respondent at that particular time.

**MAKING SENSE OF MATERIAL CULTURE: ACQUISITION, DISPLAY AND APPROPRIATION**

This section employs both the interview and object narratives in order to begin to explore how people narrate the acquisition, appropriation and display of material culture within the domestic setting. The manner with which these goods come to be acquired is somewhat secondary to the analysis of how they become ‘used’ and meaningful in everyday life. It was observed, however, that a fairly large proportion of the goods and objects...
encountered in the 50 households were transacted via active systems of gift giving amongst family, friends and, to a lesser extent, wider social networks. Exploring the mechanics of gift giving via notions such as ritual, routine and obligation (notions widely dealt with in much anthropological and consumer studies literature), I would argue, offers much to this discussion of ordinary consumption practices within the home.

Gift giving practices are commonplace and are consistently participated in, on a number of different levels, within modern society. Yet gift giving practices have remained somewhat peripheral in ‘mainstream’ sociology and overlooked by many sociologists as ‘archaic customs’ whose impact on forms of social life has been in decline for a very long time and are, therefore, considered a ‘minor appendage’ to life in a capitalist society⁶ (Cheat, 1988: 2–9). This has not been the case in cultural anthropology and consumer research, where one can find rich ethnographies relating to the process of gift giving. These range from understandings of the importance and effort invested in purchasing the ‘right’ gift for loved ones (McGrath et al., 1993) to buying gifts for oneself and the role of self-reward in this process (Mick and Demoss, 1990); explorations of the ‘dark side’ of gifts and how processes of exchange can create and aggravate conflicts between people ‘trapped’ in gift giving rituals (McGrath et al., 2002); and also how gift giving operates to ‘institutionalize’ social ties in a ‘moral economy’ in order to balance and maintain important social relationships (Cheat, 1987, 1988).

What these studies successfully underscore is the idea that although gift giving in contemporary society may differ from those forms characteristic of traditional ‘simple’ societies, in which gift-giving exchange is often viewed as a source of power and control over others and increased social status (see Lévi-Strauss, 1969), it may still be relevant in understanding some aspects of modern consumption, because ‘gifts constitute the “stuff” that people use to produce consumption’ (McGrath et al., 1993: 189). Indeed, as Godbout and Caille (1998) observe, it may be important to ‘show that the gift is relevant not only to archaic societies but, though transformed in ways we have yet to analyse, to modern society as well’ (pp. 18–19, emphasis added).

In sum, these studies of contemporary gift giving complement understandings of the everyday appropriation of commodities in that they draw attention to notions of ritual, routine and obligation, and how these may operate within and between households, families and social networks. I want to suggest in the following discussion that domestically situated objects, either purchased anonymously or acquired as gifts, are appropriated
in a ritualistic and routine fashion within the home and can be understood in terms of notions of familial obligation, love and the maintenance of important social connections between people. This has been previously explored in an empirical study on food shopping carried out by Miller (1998). Miller draws on data obtained from an ethnographic study of 76 households in North London during 1994–5 and suggests that concepts such as love, devotion, obligation and sacrificial ritual are important in understanding the often mundane, habitual and taken-for-granted process of shopping: ‘... shopping is not just approached as a thing in itself. It is found to be a means to uncover, through the close observation of people’s practices, something about their relationships’ (1998: 4). With regard to shopping, Miller views commodities as ‘the material culture of love’ used within modern societies to ‘constitute the complexity of contemporary social relations’ (1998: 8). Drawing on Bataille’s work on rituals of sacrifice (1988), Miller juxtaposes shopping and sacrifice as a way of understanding the practices identified via his ethnography, and asserts that the parallels between shopping and sacrifice are so strong that ‘shopping can be understood as a devotional rite’ highly bound with familial obligation and responsibility (1998: 9). What Miller successfully highlights with respect to those anthropological and consumer study versions of gift giving identified earlier (rather than, say, Levi-Strauss’s version), is ‘the ideal of agency within any given relationship. What is rejected is any language . . . that suggests we maintain relationships solely out of enforced behaviour’ (1998: 36). Miller hopes to show that comparing shopping practice to sacrifice and highlighting the role of love in such practices will ‘open up the possibility that shopping is a practice that might have ritual structure, that might be involved in the creation of value and relationships’ (1998: 112–13).

Drawing on these ideas and incorporating a selection of interview and object narratives, it is possible to identify three differing ways in which goods and commodities, whether gifts or not, become appropriated in a way that serves to maintain or reinforce important social ties and relationships. These three ways are identified as: familial obligation; objects as markers of memory; and commemorative appropriation.

Familial obligation
The following narrative examples explore different levels of familial obligation as expressed via domestic material culture acquisition and display. Feelings of obligation, Miller would suggest, are borne out of ‘love’ between family members and can be viewed as a ‘normative ideology manifested largely as a practice within long term relationships . . . love as a
practice is quite compatible with feelings of obligation and responsibility’ (1998: 19). The following narratives clearly highlight the idea that there is an element of obligation involved in the receiving of objects from family members, which may not be to one’s taste, and their display within the home. It may be true to say that if pressed on the subject, many people (myself included) may well recall and admit to receiving gifts from family and friends that they would rather hide away from public display, but that are nonetheless displayed prominently around the home. As Riggins proposes in his study on living rooms, there are very few people who are able to fully control the objects that are displayed in their homes. Quite often, compromises will be made for both economic and personal reasons, and ‘inconsistency is introduced by gifts which do not correspond exactly with [the recipient’s] taste but which must be displayed in recognition of the relationships they symbolise’ (1994: 139). As Caroline observes:

that little elephant, silver elephant is, that was a present from my brother and my sister-in-law at Christmas, not my style particularly but it was a present so it gets kept [laughs] and then the lady with the hand on her face, that was a present from my parents for my birthday . . . (Caroline, 32 years old, Baguley)

Robert perhaps provides the greatest indication of this sense of obligation operating within the domestic sphere:

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little about the photographs then, why you have them here and that?

Robert: One reason is when your children send you photographs, they come to see you, and say where are the photographs . . . So you put them up there . . .

(Robert, 70 years old, Worsley)

In addition, what Robert’s narrative draws attention to is the potential function of photographs as material objects, in particular, as objects of exchange (Edwards, 1999). Edwards observes that while the image contained in the photograph is key to the act of exchange, it is also worthwhile considering how photographs may be used as objects in a social space, and how and where they are displayed around the home (1999: 223). Whilst the photographic image may ‘express’ the value of that relationship between individuals, the manner of acquisition similarly plays a part. Therefore, the ‘implication of the gifting relationships are integral to the meaning of the photo-object in gestures that recapitulate or re-enact social articulations’
These two narratives appear to convey quite a clear sense of familial obligation to display the objects received as gifts from family members and friends. It could be argued that they express a fairly negative sense of obligation in that they appear to convey a reluctance to display, and could therefore be viewed as ‘enforced obligation’ (Miller, 1998: 36), or ‘demanded reciprocity’ (Edwards, 1999: 233). However, this is not the case for the majority of respondents involved in the research, as the following narratives would suggest. We learn that most of the objects on display on Simon’s mantelpiece (see Figure 1) are wedding gifts from family and friends.

The ornaments? On the mantelpiece, the carriage clock was a wedding present and . . . there’s two rabbits in bride and groom dress, another wedding present when we got married, and there’s a little cottage that a friend of mine bought . . . (Simon, 48 years old, Patricroft)

Similarly, Andrea’s narrative is engaging, for it offers, first and foremost, an account of where the objects came from and how they were acquired, rather than any discussion or description of the objects themselves (see Figure 2):

Andrea: That was a Christmas present from my sister-in-law . . . the owl was a present to me . . . I can’t remember if that was Christmas or something and that was the little, the tin I bought in Port Patrick, on holiday . . .

Interviewer: And what about these six here?

Andrea: Those six, right, the statuette and the plate were presents for our silver wedding, the camel was a present from Georgie’s mum and dad, they went to Dubai and brought the camel back, the geese was a silver wedding present and the bell and the jug were my husband’s mother’s from her house when she died.

Interviewer: So you’ve never bought something and thought it would go nice in the . . .

Andrea: No, no, I’m not that way inclined really, very rarely anyway, I mean like the candelabras they were a wedding present . . . the little fish was a present, I’ve had that about 40 years, little green fish thing . . .

(Andrea, 52 years old, Patricroft)
Figure 1: Mantelpiece, Patricroft

Figure 2: Wall unit, Patricroft
The objects featured in Figure 3 are again arranged on the mantelpiece, and as with the majority of such mantelpieces, there is a high level of symmetry evident in the display. Whilst the clock at the centre of the display goes unmentioned by Deborah, perhaps because it serves a function as a time-piece only, the figurines and vase are reported as cherished ‘thank you’ presents given by her mother-in-law:

Yeah so it’s a Royal Doulton vase and a Royal Doulton rose, so that means a lot to me, that was like a thank you present . . . my mother in law bought me that for one Christmas . . . (Deborah, 55 years old, Baguley)

Research carried out in the USA by McGrath et al. found that, in the main, respondents reported that the act of purchasing a gift for family, friends or loved ones did not function as the ‘discharging of an obligation’ (1993: 182). Yet with regards the display of gifts, these brief narratives reveal instances of familial obligation being played out within the homes of the respondents involved in this research. It is possible to detect both a degree of reluctance, and an implicit acceptance, that one displays objects that are acquired as gifts via family and friends. Research on mantelpiece display carried out by Hurdley (2006) observes similar instances of ‘moral’
obligation within the domestic sphere. To highlight this obligation, Hurdley offers an example of a narrative provided by a grandmother about a dough ball made by her grandson, which is displayed prominently on a mantelpiece. It is asserted that ‘although the dough ball was clearly an aesthetic monstrosity, the cultural norm is to display things in the home for moral reasons. It is also normal to leave things out on display months or years after their original moral role has ended’ (Hurdley, 2006: 725). Objects were also ‘made sense of’ in relation to their memorial potential and how they become appropriated to serve as potent markers of important social ties, bonds and connections between loved ones.

**Objects as markers of memory**

If it is possible to think of goods and commodities as the ‘material culture of love’ (Miller, 1998: 8), it is with respect to their memorial potential that the maintenance of cherished social relationships is most clearly conveyed by respondents. It is indicated in many of the narrative examples in this section that the objects themselves are quite often disliked by the owners, yet are coveted intensely precisely because they operate to maintain a connection between people, and on occasions, connections to places. As Riggins contends, it is through objects that we keep alive the memory of families and individuals that may otherwise be forgotten (1994: 2).

Marcoux (2001) finds a similar use of domestic objects in his work carried out in Canada into the ritual of *casser maison* (breaking the house), which occurs when elderly people find they have to leave the family home and move into a residential care environment. Marcoux’s work outlines the importance of objects to people in that a sense of self is quite often located in such possessions found within the home. Moreover, Marcoux argues that ‘people inhabit their things as much as their place’ (2001: 215). In participating in the often traumatic experience of having to leave the family home, people compensate by bestowing cherished possessions upon family members and close friends. For Marcoux, then, these possessions are ‘objects that leave traces. These are objects that bear memories and the presence of the person. These are objects that have the potential to stand for the person because they have a presence’ (2001: 228). In a manner similar to that first observed by Mauss (1954), the giving of such objects appears to involve the giving of part of oneself. The ritual of *casser maison* entails the reconstruction of self in other people’s homes and memories via those objects that are transacted (Marcoux, 2001: 231).

While the approach is different, what Marcoux’s work and my research reveal is the fairly widespread use of objects to act as markers or bearers of
other people, to preserve the memory of that person and also to maintain the cherished connection that once existed in a physical sense. Although extrapolating specifically about gift giving and the act of purchasing a gift for a loved one, McGrath et al. pick up on this function and note from their research findings that people often invest objects with ‘metaphysical properties’ (1993: 171). As Caroline reports:

that’s my box of precious things which is just an old wooden writing box; it was my grandmother’s and it had, it’s all been ripped out inside . . . it has soaps and things like that from hotels that my dad used to visit when I was I girl and I used to collect them from him and just put them in my little box . . . (Caroline, 32 years old, Baguley)

Caroline’s ‘box of precious things’ (Figure 4) sits on the third shelf of the sparsely filled wooden cabinet. On first entering the room, it could well appear that this box was purchased solely for the purpose of fitting in with the interior décor as it matches the colour of the rest of the wooden furniture in the room. Yet Caroline’s narrative reveals that, in fact, the box houses precious things relating to, and collected from, her childhood; in particular, things associated with time spent with her father.
Correspondingly, Derek’s narrative on the subject of his favourite painting informs little about the genre, content or artistic background to the piece. Rather, Derek addresses the fact that the painting serves as a reminder of days spent fishing in the Lake District with his father and two brothers:

it happens to be of the river Derwent in Cumbria, and it’s a spot that I know particularly well from when I was a kid camping in the Lake District . . . take that one, again that’s sentimentality, that’s the southern end of Hawkeshead in the Lake District, that’s where I actually spent my first fishing holiday with my father and two younger brothers when I was, I think I was 8, I might have been 9, but we went camping right on the side of the lake on Atkinson’s farm at the top end of the lake and as soon as I saw that I recognized that as being the southern end of Wast Water. (Derek, 60 years old, Worsley)

Similarly, the picture that Davina mentions was purchased purely as a marker of memory, because the content related to Davina’s father’s occupation and reminded her of days spent at the farm sales:

. . . I’ve got another painting in the back room which is um, bought it for sentimental reasons really, it’s a farm’s tale, and there’s a group of farmers looking over a pig sty, by the pigs and I bought that because my dad was a pig farmer and we used to go to the farm sales, so . . . (Davina, 43 years old, Patricroft)

Even aesthetically displeasing objects become potent markers of memory for some of the respondents. In the following narrative, Deborah, a Baguley respondent, explains how she has come to own a stuffed tortoise that she considers ‘gross’, yet because it possesses strong memories of her deceased mother, it is cherished deeply:

Deborah: He was my mother’s and it’s all stuffed and everything and I don’t quite like it but it means a lot to me . . .

Interviewer: Is it real?

Deborah: Oh it’s real, it is real, I think it comes from Nigeria but it, I think its gross but [laughs] it, I never thought of it as gross in my childhood because she had it like before I was born, my mother died last year you see so it’s one of her possessions and so, here he is.

(Deborah, 55 years old, Baguley)
Michelle comments that it is only recently in her life cycle, as the children have grown up and left home, that family photographs of them as young children have been put on display in the living room; these photographs have come to symbolize important reminders of ‘happy times’ for Michelle (see Figure 5):

I think probably this last few years, now my children have grown up and I think, I do miss the years when they were growing up, I’m always reminiscing, I have a couple of friends who are older than me and I now realize what it’s like when your children, you can’t, you think about when they’re all young again, and I think that’s probably why because there’s very few of the, you see none of those you’re looking at are of them at their age now . . . I think for me, its certainly reminiscing of when the children were younger, happy times . . . (Michelle, 44 years old, Worsley)

Additionally, Michelle’s narrative suggests, by drawing attention to two other objects found in the living room, that regardless of aesthetic qualities, some objects are more important in their role as memory markers and the connection to a loved one. The first section of this narrative parallels
a further finding by McGrath et al. that gifts occupy an increasing scale of importance, with those most esteemed having been received from children (1993: 181). The latter part of the narrative clearly evokes the memorial potential of objects:

I’ve never really been into ornaments, and years and years ago, my eldest son bought me that (small crystal figure), it was like the first present he’d bought me . . . and I knew he’d paid for you know . . . I never get bought any other ornaments, I’m not an ornament person, that’s really only there because it came from Pete’s mum’s, I don’t particularly like it, um, but she always had it on her table I think and it you know, reminds Pete of home so that just stays there, um . . . that does remind me of me nana, I wouldn’t go out and buy one but because it’s like of me Nan, it will be there forever, sentimental, definitely . . . (Michelle, 44 years old, Worsley)

These interview and object narratives have drawn attention to the variety of objects that are kept in the home as markers of memories. It appears that in many instances, as Marcoux similarly observes, objects are perceived to be imbued with some trace of a person, and there appears to be a strong belief that the preservation of such an object will ensure that this important connection between loved ones will be maintained. Objects then begin to signify more than their original commodity value (Godbout and Caille, 1998) and take on alternative meanings for people. Goods appear to go through processes of appropriation by their owners so that they come to embody a combination of meanings.

The commemorative quality of objects
De Certeau (1988) points out that within the realm of understanding everyday life, it is important to recognize consumers as active rather than passive in their appropriation and use of goods and commodities. In the case of both the artwork and ornaments on display in the living rooms in this study, it was observed that objects often performed a combination of roles and were narrated as representing a combination of meanings for the consumer/owner. As Painter (1998) notes, quite often, images and, I would argue, objects, are not just there to be looked at. Rather, the varied ways in which images are acquired, inherited, received and used within the home, their ‘interpersonal roles’, are often crucial to an understanding of their significance (see also Appadurai, 1986):
they are inseparable from births, anniversaries, holidays, birthdays, retirements, deaths – and, most importantly, people . . . while these meanings can be connected to characteristics of a picture as an image, they are also frequently related to it as an object . . . (Painter, 1998: 35)

As the following brief selection of narratives emphasizes, domestically situated objects tend to bear important commemorative qualities, so much so that it appears at times that the objects themselves almost lose their assigned identities as clocks or paintings or trinkets, and instead become signifiers for special occasions such as a birthday, wedding or anniversary. As Deborah’s narrative suggests, there are many objects in the living room that perform this function. From the first pair of baby shoes, to awards for sporting achievements, to recent wedding photographs, these objects all mark special moments in the life of that particular family:

Deborah: These little, they should have been his first pair of shoes but they weren’t, those are ah, we sent those over to Holland and had them brassed over, you clean them up with brass, they used to be blue I think but, so that’s unusual, it’s a Dutch habit . . . one of my little pride and joys, my son got the um player of the year award for his rugby at school.

Interviewer: What about the photographs that you have?

Deborah: . . . I’ve got all these really nice photographs so I thought right I’ll start, and then my youngest daughter has just had a baby so I just thought right I’ll, my mother died last year so that’s my mum, that’s my son, that’s the family um, portrait that um, and that’s another wedding photograph, that’s the son who plays rugby and then that’s just my son holding the new baby.

(Deborah, 55 years old, Baguley)

Dianne reveals a similar trend in that pride of place on her sideboard is the photograph commemorating her granddaughter’s graduation from university. It is also possible from the following narrative to observe how objects possess a combination of meanings for the owners. The painting referred to, therefore, is not only commemorative of the recent golden wedding anniversary, but also conveys a clear attachment to place:

Oh, well starting there, our Julie did that, I used to bowl, um, my grand daughter she did that for me, its just the old fashioned
lady bowler, and she did it for me, it was all, she had it all framed and everything for me . . . oh that’s our Julie anyway when she graduated from university. And then that one was a golden wedding present off our Pat, we got that just this weekend, it’s Venice where we used to go. (Dianne, 77 years old, Patricroft)

There were many instances of objects as commemorative and what they tend to reveal is the multiplicity of objects. They are not only objects in their own right, but more importantly, they also assume a variety of meanings for the owners. As Painter observes, ‘when combined with the distinctive events of particular lives their potential meanings are infinite’ (1998: 35).

CONCLUDING REMARKS
This article has presented one way of understanding material culture within the home based around the narratives formulated by research respondents in their attempts to ‘make sense’ of what is on display in their living rooms. The discussion suggests three key ways in which this takes place: as familial obligation; as markers of memory; and as commemorative objects. By drawing attention to the importance and meaning assigned to ‘things’ within the living room, the discussion hints at some instances of the complex relationship that exists between subjects and objects. This, in turn, highlights the ways in which individuals become active producers of meaning via everyday appropriation, rather than merely passive consumers (Chevalier, 1999; De Certeau, 1988; Storey, 1999).

It is possible to uncover the ways in which consumers ‘enter into creative strategies of consumption to appropriate that which they have not themselves created’ (Miller, 1987: 370). People appear to ‘use’ goods in a way that transforms them into meaningful objects with which to maintain important social relationships (De Certeau, 1998). Exploring the ‘socialness’ of objects reveals how they become integrated in the ‘social fabric of everyday life’ (Riggins, 1994: 1), and how people actively embrace the emotive and social properties of their ‘things’ (McCracken, 1988). The use and widespread appropriation within everyday life of objects can be viewed as a manifestation of, and catalyst to, maintaining important social relationships and bonds among family and friends via an understanding of notions such as love, obligation and ritual (McGrath et al., 1993; Miller, 1998; Marcoux, 2001). The monetary value, or use value, of the objects is clearly replaced by the value of the social connection that is actualized in the receiving, display and possession of such objects. This value Godbout and
Caille refer to as the ‘bonding value’ of objects (1998: 173): ‘beyond their exchange and use value, and relatively independent of either, things take on different values according to their capacity to express, to facilitate, to foster social ties’ (1998: 174).

The aim of this article was to bring together and complement existing debates within the sociology of consumption that aspire to augment research that pursues an understanding of consumption as routine, ordinary, mundane and taken-for-granted (Gronow and Warde, 2001). In so doing, this particular discussion focused on domestic material culture as everyday practice. The interview and object narratives demonstrated the role of material culture in the maintenance of meaningful social connections via notions such as ritual, routine, obligation and love. Methodologically, I would argue that the combined use of these verbal and visual narratives contributes to the field of narrative studies within social research, particularly within the domestic setting (Hurdley, 2006). The interview narratives not only provide access to ideas about the everyday lives of the respondents (Lieblich et al., 1998) but their use in conjunction with object narratives helps to capture a greater sense of these ideas as manifested within the material culture of the home. As May highlights, ‘interviews rely on people’s account of their actions as representing something beyond the interview situation . . . a full understanding can be achieved only by witnessing the context of the event or circumstances to which people refer’ (May, 2001: 144). Capturing the visual representations of the context in which the interviews took place might help to overcome some of the problems related to ensuring accuracy and validity of interview data.

In addition to a methodological contribution, the article also champions the continued importance of attempts to conceptualize aspects of ‘ordinary’ consumption and understandings of material culture as everyday practice. The focus on objects and how respondents make sense of them reveals the significance of material culture in arbitrating social relationships. Whilst the ways in which goods were appropriated and made use of by the respondents was the main application of the discussion, it was also significant to note that the form of acquisition for many of the objects was via active gift-giving systems among family, friends and social networks, a process of exchange that is heavily based around ritual, love and obligation. Whilst the importance of the gift within cultural anthropology and consumer studies research has long been established, I would argue for greater acknowledgement of the potential role of gift giving within the sociology of ‘ordinary’ consumption within the home. An awareness of active gift-giving cultures may illuminate important dynamics in the
material culture displayed within the home, perhaps adding to an understanding of the emotive and social qualities of objects.

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Notes
1. An analysis based around certain socioeconomic and demographic characteristics – social class, gender and age – in relation to work put forward by theorists such as Bourdieu (1984), Halle (1993) and Holt (1997, 1998) has been undertaken in the unpublished thesis from which the research presented here derives.
2. Conducted in two waves between October 2000 and November 2001
3. Only a very specific area in Baguley was included in the sample, a newly built housing estate popular with young middle-class professionals who, for either financial or other reasons, did not live in Manchester city centre itself, but because of the close proximity to Baguley, commuted there for work and social activities.
4. Male: 46 percent, female: 54 percent.
5. The sense in which I am using the term ‘narrative’ does require further clarification at this point, for although the manner in which they are used bears some parallels to ‘narrative research’ (as an epistemological and methodological tool that has flourished within the social sciences in the last 15 years), this research was not undertaken as a specific exercise in narrative research. Lieblich et al. (1998) highlight several ways in which narrative research can be used as a methodological tool. This research relates most heavily to the idea of ‘narrative functions’ (1998: 7) and the idea that the stories concerning domestic material culture can provide access to ideas of lifestyles, culture and everyday life. Although the research utilized in-depth interviews rather than life-story data collection, the narratives obtained ‘construct and transmit individual and cultural meaning . . . stories imitate life and present an inner reality to the outside world . . . this is because people are meaning-generating organisms’ (1998: 8).
6. Whilst sociological attention to the importance of gift giving has been minimal, there are a number of works that address the issue, in particular, the work of Lévi-Strauss (1969) and Bourdieu (discussed in Cheal, 1988). McCracken (1988) also offers a helpful overview of the role of gifts in exchange. There are also sociological accounts of spectacular forms of gift giving, for example, at Christmas (Caplow, 1982; Werbner, 1996), but these tend to ignore the everydayness of gift giving and its function within the home.
7. The literature is too vast to comment on here; see Edwards (1999) for a fuller discussion.
8. All photographs are reproduced with the kind permission of the respondents involved in the study.
References


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