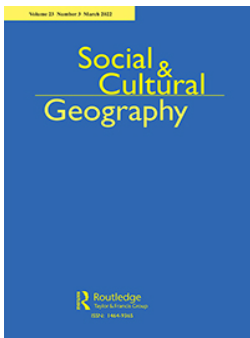


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# Ambivalent storage, multi-scalar generosity, and challenges of/for everyday consumption

Rebecca Collins <sup>a</sup> and Elyse Stanes<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Geography & International Development, University of Chester, Chester, UK; <sup>b</sup>School of Geography & Sustainable Communities, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

## ABSTRACT

Storage plays an important role in domestic practices as a banal yet essential means of practically accomplishing ‘living together’ and caring for people and material ‘stuff’. However, storage and stored things also occupy a provocative and paradoxical place in debates around the sustainability of household consumption. Driven by renewed popular and scholarly attention to ‘decluttering’ and eschewing anything that does not ‘spark joy’, this paper considers the emotional and practical implications of generosity – as both concept and practice – in articulating the sustainability potential in storage and stored things. In so doing we problematise assumptions about ‘clutter’ as unsustainable. Drawing on vignettes from two projects concerned with material consumption in young adulthood, and drawing on – but going beyond – extant framings of geographies of care, we illustrate how shifting spatial and temporal ambivalences of storage mediate opportunities to engage in and with different scales of generosity. We argue that spatialities of storage are often less about deferring acts of divestment than they are a space in which to situate materialisations of significant emotional, care-ful(l) connections. We reflect on the implications of storage for sustainable consumption in the home and suggest how future work drawing on geographies of generosity might enrich our understanding.

## Entreposage ambivalent, générosité multiscalaire et difficultés de/pour la consommation courante

### RÉSUMÉ

L’entreposage joue un rôle important dans les pratiques domestiques en tant que moyen banal, mais essentiel d’accomplir une « vie ensemble » et de prendre soin des personnes et des « possessions » matérielles. Cependant, l’entreposage et les choses entreposées occupent également une place provocante et paradoxale dans les discussions autour de la durabilité de la consommation courante. Inspiré par le renouvellement de l’intérêt du public et de la recherche envers le « désencombrement » et l’exclusion de tout ce qui n’apporte pas une « étincelle de bonheur », cet article examine les

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## MOTS-CLEFS

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## PALABRAS CLAVE

Almacenamiento; consumo; sustentabilidad del hogar; generosidad; cuidado; adultos jóvenes

**CONTACT** Rebecca Collins  [rebecca.collins@chester.ac.uk](mailto:rebecca.collins@chester.ac.uk)  Department of Geography & International Development, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester CH1 4BJ, UK

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implications émotionnelles et pratiques de la générosité, à la fois en tant que concept et pratique, en articulant le potentiel de durabilité dans l'entreposage et les choses entreposées. Ce faisant, nous posons une problématique autour des jugements qui estiment que tout « fouillis encombrant » n'est pas durable. En nous appuyant sur les vignettes issues de deux projets sur la consommation des jeunes adultes, et sur les cadrages existants de la géographie du care, nous illustrons la manière dont les ambivalences spatiales et temporelles de l'entreposage négocient les opportunités de s'engager dans les différentes échelles de la générosité, aussi bien qu'avec elles. Nous soutenons que les spatialités de l'entreposage sont souvent moins l'ajournement d'actes de cession, mais plutôt des espaces dans lesquels on situe la matérialisation d'importantes connexions émotionnelles, prudentes et remplies d'affection. Nous nous penchons sur les implications de l'entreposage pour la consommation durable du foyer et suggérons des façons dont la future recherche fondée sur la géographie de la générosité pourrait enrichir notre compréhension.

## **Almacenamiento ambivalente, generosidad multiescalar y desafíos de/para el consumo diario**

### **RESUMEN**

El almacenamiento juega un papel importante en las prácticas domésticas como un medio banal pero esencial para lograr prácticamente la 'convivencia' y el cuidado de las personas y las 'cosas' materiales. Sin embargo, el almacenamiento y las cosas almacenadas también ocupan un lugar provocador y paradójico en los debates sobre la sostenibilidad del consumo de los hogares. Impulsado por la renovada atención popular y académica a 'ordenar' y evitar cualquier cosa que no 'despierte alegría', este artículo considera las implicaciones emocionales y prácticas de la generosidad, como concepto y práctica, al articular el potencial de la sostenibilidad en el almacenamiento y las cosas almacenadas. Al hacerlo, problematizamos las suposiciones sobre el 'desorden' como insostenible. Basándonos en viñetas de dos proyectos relacionados con el consumo de materiales en la edad adulta joven, y basándonos en, pero yendo más allá, de los marcos existentes de las geografías del cuidado, ilustramos cómo las ambivalencias espaciales y temporales cambiantes del almacenamiento median oportunidades para participar de y con diferentes escalas de generosidad. Argumentamos que las espacialidades del almacenamiento a menudo tienen menos que ver con diferir actos de desinversión que con un espacio en el que situar materializaciones de conexiones emocionales significativas y cuidadosas/lenas de cuidado. Reflexionamos sobre las implicaciones del almacenamiento para el consumo sostenible en el hogar y sugerimos cómo el trabajo futuro basado en geografías de la generosidad podría enriquecer de manera útil nuestra comprensión.

[It's] ... a very, very large pile of old ... umm, old toys, games, puzzles and things ... on our landing. So ... what we've done is tactically, uh, covered up so it doesn't look so bad ... there are a few bin bags of old clothes. And there are ... puzzles, uh ... toys, games, sort of ... stuff we don't use anymore. Umm ... I think there's a mattress there. Pillows. A tool box ...

Rebecca: Why does covering it up make it look better?

Daniel: Umm, well, there are a lot of . . . scrappy corners on sides of boxes. It's obviously not . . . a cube or a . . . cuboid, uh . . . and that could provide sort of . . . you could trip over that. But also I don't think anyone really wants to look at it. [laughs]

## Introduction

'It was an accumulation with a kind of inertia – once its gravitational field was activated, the larger it got, the more powerful its attraction for roaming objects in its field of influence . . . ' (Newell, 2018, p. 37)

In this vignette Daniel points to a photo of childhood belongings, a material biography, of sorts, of a young life spent accumulating (Figure 1). His, and his family's ('we've covered it up . . . ') approach to maintaining the 'pile' suggests a shared desire to make invisible not just this pile of stuff, but also the responsibility that comes with sorting, passing on, or ridding. Resting conspicuously on the upstairs landing, its accumulation was akin to a 'gravitational field' attracting all sorts of 'roaming objects in its field of influence . . . ' (Newell, 2018, p. 37). But Daniel's 'pile' also describes various



**Figure 1.** A pile of 'stuff' under a throw on the landing in Daniel's house.

modes of careful(l), embodied and emotional knowledge that are involved in storing even the most banal possessions. This paper reveals how understanding these material, emotional, embodied, and careful(l) processes, and the ways they are implicated in spaces and practices of storing, are key to understanding the sustainability potential in everyday consumption.

Storage is a routine practice in the organisation of everyday life. It is fundamental to navigating processes of life transition – such as growing up and growing old(er) – not only because it presents a range of practical solutions to managing material accumulations, but because it offers a means of curating a sense of self (Cwerner, 2001). Storage is at once a physical site, a capsule of collections and a method of care towards self, others and material things. As a place of containment, domestic storage shares characteristics with other containers – such as refrigerators or freezers – as a ‘node for consumption and provision in households’ (Waitt & Phillips, 2016, p.362; Evans, 2014). It is constitutive of the patterning of everyday living, in individual moments and over time, and of a familiar coming together of wider networks of practices, materials, competencies and skills. Intrinsic to storage is a material intensity – a concentration of ‘stuff’ which hints at a notion of excess antithetical to discourses of sustainable consumption (cf. Collins, 2020), where items stored are for storing *or not* (c.f. Gregson and Beale (2004, p. 690) work on stored clothing ‘for wearing *or not*’; also Banim & Guy., 2001).

In recent years there has been increasing attention to how and why minority world households accumulate and store ‘stuff’ (Woodward, 2021). The combination of embedded monetary value and the known effects of clutter on anxiety, sleep, and ability to focus (e.g., Dozier et al., 2020; Saxbe & Repetti, 2009) has spurred a range of popular publications and television shows. Since 2014, de-cluttering evangelist Marie Kondo’s writings have urged readers to eschew anything that does not ‘spark joy’ (Kondo, 2014). Although scholarship on the spatial and social dimensions of everyday storage is emerging (e.g., Owen, 2020; Owen & Boyer, 2019), we argue there is more to uncover about what function(s) storage has beyond the immediately practical, such as those that concern the social and/or emotional. Here we ask how care for the self, for others and for things is produced through acts and spaces of storage situated within the home but also extending beyond it through a range of scales. In doing so we respond to recent calls to delve deeper into the complex material configurations of household consumption to move forward both debates on household sustainability and everyday material cultures (Evans, 2018).

We use young adults’ material worlds<sup>1</sup> as a focus to explore how people co-exist with storage and stored things, and in turn, how processes of storage are both driven by, and create opportunities for, different forms of care and – we suggest – generosity. We argue that drawing attention to notions of care and generosity (and their intersections) can tell us much about the ambivalent rationalities for keeping. This has the potential to enrich geographical and discard studies with evidence that storage as a process is not simply about the movement of items through homes (Gregson et al., 2007a,b; Owen & Boyer, 2019), or moments where things become ‘stuck’ (Hirschmann et al., 2012), but where these practices become bound up with various spatial and temporal arrangements of home and understandings of self as situated within multi-scalar networks of material impacts.

Our enquiry into the generous dimensions of household storage is informed by insights from intersecting literatures concerned with geographies of home, domestic consumption and household sustainabilities, and feminist critical geographies of care.

Whilst there is now a substantial literature that explores how household sustainabilities are, or might be, materialised, a tension remains: to what extent is *keeping* problematic for the sustainability of household consumption (see also Gibson et al., 2011)? Literature on feminist geographies of care informs our response to this quandary through its concern with the emotional dimensions of (materialised) domestic practices and the care-ful(l) nature of interactions between humans and non-humans in these meaning-layered environments. We elaborate on these conceptual arguments by presenting three paired vignettes, each drawn from two recent empirical studies concerned with everyday consumption in young adulthood. Each paired vignette – which includes one participant from each study – illustrates the intersecting spatial and temporal ambivalences that characterise storage and enable multiple forms of generosity to human and non-human others.

Rebecca's study was based in Cambridge, UK, between 2011 and 2012. The study comprised 32 young people, aged between 16 and 19, all of whom still lived in the family home. Data was collected via a series of semi-structured interviews (two with each participant), combined with a photo-documentary task which invited participants to document how their personal possessions were used, stored and discarded. Interview conversations focused on how participants made decisions about the keeping or ridding of their possessions, and how such practices were enacted or stymied. Elyse's research was based in greater Sydney, Australia, between 2013 and 2015. The research comprised 23 young adults aged between 18 and 32 who inhabited a diverse range of living configurations, from single and couple households to houses shared with peers. A collective trend across this dataset was the transience of housing across young adulthood. All 23 young adults either rented or lived rent-free with their parents. Data was collected via a mixed-method ethnography incorporating shopping go-alongs, solicited diaries and home tours, with a focus on 'following the clothing' (Cook et al., 2004) through moments of acquisition, use, care, storage and divestment. Both projects received clearance from institutional ethics committees.

The following section considers the intersections of framings of home (and) storage with feminist conceptualisations of care. Here we outline our argument for extending these intersections through the lens of generosity. Our analysis is then presented over three vignettes. The first, featuring Aidan and Felipe, builds on the theme of emotional and practical ambivalences from the preceding overview and considers the role played by aesthetic and affective responses to material accumulations around the home, acknowledging shifting (in)tolerance towards them. Through this we begin to unpick some of the hidden, implicit temporalities of storage that, we suggest, are revealing of an underlying generosity imperative. Vignette two draws on the experiences of Ella and Claudine to examine how practices of curation enable what Parsons (2008) has termed 'The Find' – rediscovering forgotten possessions in a way that invokes a sense of novelty, and thus newfound (re)enjoyment. We frame this analysis through consideration of generosity to self. Our final vignette, featuring Polly and Ruth, explores how storage might be framed as generosity to the material objects themselves. Here we examine the effort our participants willingly expended to ensure material integrity and object value over time. To conclude, we draw together the emergent themes to consider the implications for household sustainability of thinking about storage through the lens of generosity.

## Ambivalent storage: connectivities of care, geographies of generosity?

Part of 'being at home' is living with things, including ad-hoc accumulations and objects intentionally placed in storage. That some areas of the home become 'dumping grounds' for stuff has been argued to contribute to a sense of 'homeyness' (Dowling & Power, 2011, p. 82). At the same time, there is a mutual, recursive relationship between material things and material structures of the home, where available space shapes what can be kept and where; indeed, the placing of objects can 'demand' new forms of storage (Nansen et al., 2011). Storage spaces are commonly imagined to be the 'darkened corners and dusty hideaways' that characterise marginal areas of the home (Newell, 2018, p. 38) – attics, cellars, garages, sheds, under beds and at the deepest recesses of wardrobes where objects inhabit marginal spaces, having crossed over an invisible threshold into temporary non-use and thus being somehow neither here nor there (Moran, 2013). Yet persistent accumulations also occur in plain sight – as the 'clutter' on dining room tables and living room floors (Woodward, 2021), and as the opening vignette illustrates, even the 'places in-between' the primary sites of everyday life. These spaces, characterised by their everyday encounters, illustrate how the temporalities of static accumulation push those objects to the margins of our awareness. They exist in the here and now, yet are not significant enough to be brought into use. Cwerner (2001), for example, describes wardrobes as a 'liminal' space, both spatially and temporally, noting their potential to create a form of 'renewal' through a combination of 'hide and reveal' and object meaning reconstruction, which is dependent on the passing of time. Whilst the notion of liminality is employed in some material culture and disposal scholarship, commonly with reference to storage, we prefer to frame this 'between space' in terms of spatial and temporal ambivalence in order to engage with the practical and emotional conflicts that – as we show – characterise storage as a set of processes. We want our stored things to be simultaneously near and far, remembered and forgotten. Indeed, the temporal ambivalence of storage is fundamental to how storage 'acts' on our material things. Shryock and Smail (2018) describe the interplay between container and contained as mutually transformative, with Greenland (2018, p. 49) noting 'What comes out of the box is a different sort of thing than what entered the box.' What emerges may have changed in character – '... whether that be in allowing it to attain an attractive antique patina or in just allowing it to go moldy in a bag at the back of a cupboard' (Hetherington, 2004 p. 167). Each ultimately dictates its future biography.

Where an object's material form has remained unsullied, storage can act as a form of time-travel, bringing memories of the past and imaginaries of the future into the present. As Owen and Boyer (2019) describe in their work on the storage of children's toys and clothes, the unboxing of objects allowed their participants to recollect their children as babies and toddlers, whilst simultaneously imagining a future when these items would be passed on to future generations. For Gregson and Beale (2004, p. 699), the storage of baby clothes pre-disposal was never static or stable but 'temporary, transitory, spatial junctures, holding places in the lives of things.' The intra-familial movement of material things between generations is a now well-documented example of how the keeping, storing, and ultimately moving-along of things is fundamental to the materialisation of care (e.g., Corrigan, 1989; Gregson et al., 2007a,b; Ekerdt et al., 2011). Whilst much of this literature has used practices of divestment and disposal to explore how the transference of treasured or practical items can express feelings of love, trust, hope and respect – both

between humans, and between human and non-human things – a growing body of work applies established theorisations of human-to-human care to human-to-non-human relations.

The home is seen as an appropriate site for care to be observed due to the cultural, political and practical associations ‘between the house-as-home and practices of care’ (see Power, 2019, pp. 764, Smith, 2005). We note here some of the ways in which the non-human materialities of the home intersect with the human imperative to care for human and non-human others, and how expressions of care merge with meanings and expressions of responsibility. Power (2019) draws attention to the notion of ‘caring-with’ to acknowledge how care emerges at the intersection of different (socio-material) entities, the reciprocity and mutuality required for effective and holistic care, and how care is stretched across varying temporal frames. In centring her analysis on interactions between humans and non-humans, Power (2019) emphasises that, whilst care exists as an ongoing affective orientation, the performance of care (‘caring-with’) depends on the ad-hoc coming-together of a range of social and material agents, the sum total of which defines the specific nature of the resultant act of care. In the case of storage, we are concerned with how stored possessions embody not just care but also, via understandings of responsibility which activate specific forms of ‘caring-with’, generosity. We therefore seek to articulate how care-driven generosity expressed towards and through material things is a function of shifting spatial and temporal frames of reference. Following Hanrahan and Smith (2020, p. 230) observation that acts of care ‘ripple out into the world beyond immediate caring relationships and the immediate moment,’ we note these spatial and temporal frames of reference characterise both the moments in which storage-related activity occurs, and the broader, multi-scalar, socio-environmental knowledges that inform, direct and are impacted by that activity.

Fisher and Tronto (1990, p.40; as cited in Popke, 2006, p. 506) describe care as ‘a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.’ The spatial breadth of this conceptualisation prefigures connections often made between concepts and practices of care and responsibility at a range of scales, ‘where we make choices that matter and that connect us to the lives of others’ (Lawson, 2007, p.6; see also Popke, 2006; Massey, 2004; Jackson et al., 2009; McEwan & Goodman, 2010). This connection has been interrogated in the context of everyday material culture, not only with reference to emotionally (if not always spatially) proximate others (e.g., Gregson et al., 2007a,b), but in some instances with direct reference to more distant spatial and temporal frames. Cherrier and Ponnor (2010, p. 16), for instance, in their study of material attachment suggest that, ‘Objects are kept so as to escape the uncertainty of tomorrow and are an expression of informants’ responsibility for the future generations, for the objects and for the natural environment.’ This spatio-temporal elasticity helps to bridge notions of ‘caring for’ (proximate others) and ‘caring about’ (broader, often more distant, people, places or issues) (Atkinson, 2011; Milligan & Wiles, 2010). Indeed, Power’s (2019) articulation of ‘caring-with’ is a helpful linking mechanism, capable of situating ‘caring for’ within the context of ‘caring about’ via acknowledgement of the intrinsic embodied and materialised embeddedness of the former within the latter. In turn, this alludes to how broader sentiments of ‘caring about’ inform inclinations towards acts of responsibility.

Our analysis drives forward recent applications of concepts of care and responsibility to everyday material culture by bringing the concept of generosity into view. Here we respond to Barnett and Land (2007) discussion of 'geographies of generosity' to bridge the supposed disconnect between geographies of responsibility and geographies of care. They describe the former as being overly preoccupied with *justifying* courses of action, rather than acknowledging the forms of attentiveness that characterise the latter. Generosity, in contrast, can be seen as more concerned with practical action – by an awareness of needs and an imperative towards giving, accommodation, an expression of agency directed towards a specific intended outcome which responds to that need. Generosity is deeply subjective and need not be underpinned by an expectation of reciprocity. It can be characterised by kindness and willingness, but equally by contrasting values including ambivalence, equivocalness or reluctance (Davies, 2006). We suggest that generosity as an analytical lens offers three substantive contributions to analyses of everyday material culture and material(ised) care. First, it articulates the highly specific, situated, sensorial and socially-inflected instances where decisions about material(ised) care emerge. Second, it enhances practical understanding of 'caring-with' by foregrounding familiar affective values (ranging from altruism to in/convenience) in moments where 'caring for' and 'caring about' intersect. Third, it contributes to critical consideration of the extent to which professed care for distant others via consumption practices in the minority world constitutes problematic neo-colonial patronage (McEwan & Goodman, 2010; Raghuram et al., 2009) or whether there is, conversely, some value in '... refetishization of commodities [...] as a moral good if it fosters an expanded domain of responsibility' (Popke, 2006, pp. 510, citing Clarke et al., 2005).

There is a limited literature on geographies of generosity *per se*. Instead geographical work concerned with notions of generosity has been framed around the spatial concerns with responsibility and care discussed thus far. In our discussion we draw more fulsomely on these bodies of work to highlight where a sense of responsibility and/or acts of care shaped our participants' interactions with their stored possessions in ways which, by virtue of their distinct spatial and temporal configuration, embody generosity. In contrast to Barnett and Land (2007) suggestion that consumers are inhibited from taking practical action in relation to the acknowledged impacts of their consumption because of the scale and complexity of those impacts, we instead show that awareness of these impacts formed a backdrop to our participants' everyday storage decisions. Whilst such actions are necessarily modest in scale – and thus characteristic of the 'partial' generosity about which Barnett and Land (2007) seem ambivalent – the socio-spatial awareness our participants' revealed demonstrated what we understand as multi-scalar and embodied geographies of generosity. The complex nature of generosity is also reflected in its emergence at the intersection of self-interest and altruism, in such a way as to make its intentionality and its visibility shifting and partial. As the vignettes illustrate, our participants' actions were as much oriented towards their own benefit as benefits for others, yet this need not negate the framing of those actions as informed by a generosity imperative. Indeed, we see generosity as bi-directional, orientated both inwards (towards the self) and outwards (towards non-/human others). We advance our argument as to the salience of generosity as a useful analytical concept in the course of discussing our vignettes. In doing so we seek to put empirical 'flesh on the bones' of a somewhat underdeveloped and underapplied geographical concept.

## The generosities of storage

In the vignettes that follow, we explore how characteristics of household storage shape and are shaped by re-encounters with material possessions. In each we use empirical material to articulate a range of generosities and the storage-induced ambivalences that enabled them. Each vignette reflects experiences evidenced more widely across our respective data sets. The participants featured here were selected on the basis of how evocatively their accounts illustrated the forms of generosity at play across our samples, and how they complemented generosities observed in the contrasting (UK/Australia) study context, in order to highlight alternative orientations to the same phenomenon.

### *The (In)Convenience of 'living-with': generosity to emotionally proximate others*

Our first vignette illuminates the practice of keeping clothes for emotionally proximate others, such as immediate family, extended relatives or friends. A now well-established literature has revealed how the transference of material things between close family and friends fulfils a range of social functions, including expressing love and care, materialising past and present identities, and communicating the social relationship between donor and recipient (e.g., Gregson & Beale, 2004; Hirschmann et al., 2012; Owen & Boyer, 2019). Here, Aidan (17, high school student, living as a dependent in the family home, Cambridge, UK) and Felipe (20, University student, living as an independent adult within the family home, Sydney, Australia), articulate a range of (emotionally, if not always geographically) close familial relationships through acts of storage. These narratives reveal responses that, because of their formation through familial negotiations and personal inconveniences, were as much ongoing acts of generosity as pragmatic hand-me-down-based care.

Aidan had two interests that shaped much of his material consumption: rock music, and sci-fi/fantasy genre entertainment. Objects associated with these interests peppered his conversation with Rebecca. In contrast to some of his other everyday possessions, Aidan took a much more active role in deciding on the future of these things. Specifically, his desire to keep and store things such as old band t-shirts and posters was explicitly shaped by his relationship with his younger brothers. He described his youngest brother, Rhys, as his 'protégé' – a younger self whose shared interests he sought to nurture. He made the following comment illustrative of his desire to materialise this relationship through his t-shirts:

'I got, like, this, um . . . when we were clearing out my . . . my room for t-shirts and stuff, like, any old clothes there were these . . . like band t-shirts that were sort of getting a bit small for me. But I thought, y'know, not only do I like them but, like, I thought, oh Rhys would probably like them when he's a bit older, so he can wear them, y'know? So I said, keep them. I'll keep them, and then maybe when I'm older I can give them to him.'

Retaining these items in order to shape the tastes of his 'protégé' in future did, however, demand careful storage to enable safekeeping. In practice this involved shared labour between Aidan and his mother – his mother tending to take on the practical work of packing the t-shirts into plastic storage crates,<sup>2</sup> and Aidan accepting an element of spatial sacrifice as the crates generally remained stored in his bedroom:

'Yeah, she [his mother] stores . . . lots of them go in my room somewhere, you know, and I find them and I'm, like [puzzled expression].'

For Felipe, the circulation of hand-me-down clothes within his extended family was tied to his cultural background as a first generation Australian-Filipino. He reflected on his parents 'living with less' as impacting on the ways that he understands material excess:

[my parents] came from the farm and stuff so they're used to, they're used to living without a lot of the luxuries that we had here, so they would always say when we were kids that they wish that me and my brother grew up in the country and then came to the city because it's easy to go from country to city than opposite and you learn a lot of stuff, you learn a lot about being resourceful, recycling, doing things out of necessity instead of just because.'

It was through the incantation of resourcefulness that Felipe had amassed a substantial collection of hand-me-down clothes from immediate and extended family members. During a home visit, Felipe toured Elyse around his large built-in wardrobe, pointing out various hand-me-down garments. Other clothes designated for Felipe and his brother were stored by his mother in a wardrobe in the spare bedroom, or in the laundry, awaiting the appropriate seasonal moment or event to unveil. In return, some of Felipe's own clothes, no longer worn but not worn out, were stored either in his own wardrobe or in boxes ready to be sent to extended family in the Philippines. As hand-me-downs accumulated in his wardrobe, Felipe spoke of a dilemma which challenged his thrifty and environmentally-minded stance:

Felipe: ... maybe like 70 percent was [hand-me-down], but nowadays maybe like 30, yeah, 25, 30 percent? Especially since growing up, I did my own clothes shopping. When I was a kid I wouldn't do that. So it's definitely getting smaller, but the percentage that I would use that are hand-me-downs are probably maybe 15 per cent?

Elyse: So why do you keep the rest?

Felipe: I haven't had the chance to go through them and pick and choose and take out and give them away and stuff. I've been meaning to do that, I probably should do that ... also because my mum wants to give them away to family in the Phils [Philippines] so, she'd get really angry if I just gave them [away] if I did it without her knowing about it.

For both Felipe and Aidan, the potential for passing along clothing within families – whether to siblings in the same home or extended family abroad – stalled the trajectories of their garments. Both needed to work and negotiate with their mothers, as the primary 'directors' of material flows in the home, in order to accommodate these gifts-in-waiting. The stasis of these items was a product of the spatial capacity of the home (which nevertheless constituted an imposition for Aidan) coupled with the appropriate gifting moments being located at an undefined point in the future. The sense of frustration engendered by the *proximity* of these lingering things (rather than their *ability* to linger, which was seen as positive) was mediated by Felipe and Aidan's desire to *care-with* by gifting their hand-me-downs (cf. Hirschmann et al., 2012). In other words, whilst Felipe and Aidan's expressions of familial care reflected a *material* generosity via the careful keeping of the clothing, and a *social* generosity characterised by the nurturing of relationships through gifting, both of these were enabled by the *spatio-temporal* generosity of open-ended 'living with' – the begrudging space-sharing with these gifts-in-waiting. This was generosity embodied via the inconveniences of 'caring-by', i.e. living alongside these garments that were no longer personally useful. Whilst the substantial literature on household sustainability has examined

how a range of everyday practices are experienced, particularly in the context of transition, how associated feelings of inconvenience are experienced, practically and emotionally, has not been explicitly addressed. We return to the implications of this later.

### **Enabling 'The Find': generosity to self**

Ella and Claudine's narrations of their storage practices were linked primarily by the thrill of (re)discovery. By storing already-valued possessions with the intention of recalling them to use in future, both expressed generosity-to-self through providing themselves with practical, desirable objects of consumption, and through the emotional self-care that such decisions enabled.

Ella (18, secondary school student, living in family home, Cambridge, UK) was an anxious 'keeper'. She explained that she found getting rid of things difficult because she was anxious about parting with something she then found she wants or needs in the future (see also Cherrier & Ponnor, 2010). As a result, she preferred keeping things in order to avoid the emotional labour of these difficult decisions. It was also important to her that her bedroom was neat, tidy and visually attractive. Her solution was to use conspicuous, but attractive, storage:

I quite, I like pretty, tidy things. So, I've got, my room is always really tidy. [...] Like, I've got, my mum always buys ... boxes with, like, flowers or something on them. So, like, big A4 ones. And you can put things in them and they look quite nice on the shelf.

The visual aesthetic of these boxes was used by Ella to justify her retention of a wide range of possessions, as the desire to create an attractive personal space provided a secondary rationale for 'decorative' containers. Aside from using attractive storage to avoid the emotional labour of divestment, Ella's storage boxes were also key to her rediscovery practices. She described how she used these to maintain her enjoyment of already-owned bags:

Bags, I'm ... I kind of group bags of clothing, like, I like having, I think I've got five, like, fairly new ones then in a couple of years I'll kind of like change it over again. Umm ... but, most things ... I quite like keeping, and if I don't ... if I don't particularly have a use for it then, then I normally hide it away somewhere so that in a few years I find it and I'm like 'ooh!' [laughs]

Rebecca: When you say, 'hide things away' do you actually hide things so you can rediscover them or is it just a case of 'I'll put it away'?

Umm ... well I've got like, a storage thing in my room. Umm, I put boxes in it, boxes that don't fit on top of it. So, normally I put one in the bottom of there and every few months I go through them.

Claudine (30, employed part-time, renting with partner and young children, Sydney, Australia) described a similar process to Elyse, driven in her case by the seasonality of her clothing. Whereas Ella's practical response to her accumulated possessions was underpinned by her anxiety about divestment, for Claudine an equally potent emotional driver was her frustration with the capacity of her wardrobe:

I like to keep my wardrobe for the seasons. I hate when things are so squashed that you can't get to your clothes and see what's there. Yeah, I just took a whole lot of the summer stuff and chucked it in the other cupboard so I had more room for the actual stuff I'll wear.

Waving her hands in between clothes in her wardrobe Claudine took pleasure in describing the ease with which she could find the clothes she was searching for. When it was time to switch from her summer to winter wardrobe, she described being excited by the possibilities rediscovering those clothes brought with them.

In these examples, Claudine and Ella embody what Parsons (2008) has termed 'The Find' – intentionally 'hiding' possessions in order to rediscover them later. In so doing they actively produce a form of novelty – it is almost as if Ella's bags and Claudine's seasonal clothes are acquired afresh each time they are released from storage. Grossman (2015, p. 306) describes this usage of household storage as enabling of, 'remembering and forgetting [which] need not be viewed as separate processes, but rather as overlapping facets of a single, broader phenomenon' such that, 'disregarding or overlooking something may also serve, paradoxically, as an inadvertent act of preservation.'

Whilst research acknowledges the potential for material transformation in this context (Greenland, 2018; Hetherington, 2004; Maycroft, 2009), Ella and Claudine's possessions simultaneously transform and remain the same – they have been taken care of through careful storage, which has retained their material integrity, but they have also shifted from 'unsuitable' (for reasons of season or style) to 'suitable'. As a result, these young women enjoy the thrill of novelty more commonly associated with a new purchase or acquisition but constructed through their storage efforts. A parallel exists here with work on clothes swaps, which have been found to achieve similar ends and which share a concern with balancing self-interest and altruism (Albinsson & Perera, 2012). Whilst care for the material objects (a theme explored in section 3.3) is evident here, the emotions – anxiety and frustration – that drive this form of storage-as-salve suggest that enabling 'the find' is also a mechanism for generosity-to-self. Ella and Claudine imagine future selves wanting to (re-)enjoy their bags and clothes, and they engage in an ongoing process of curation to enable this. We are keen here to emphasise the labour involved in this curation. It demands remembering, planning, sorting, storing, unpacking, reappraising – iterative, labour-intensive processes of ordering (Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003) – all to prevent these objects from falling into deep storage spaces where the risk of material deterioration or stylistic obsolescence becomes greater (Maycroft, 2009). In this sense, we understand this generosity-to-self to be twofold, comprised of the joy of rediscovery and the quelling of anxiety and frustration, both nevertheless underpinned by willingness to perform the labour of curation. It should equally be noted that such self-directed forms of generosity need not be viewed as devoid of care for what lies beyond the personal sphere. Generosity-to-self, whilst characterised by self-oriented benefits, achieves forms of material stewardship and waste avoidance with larger-scale repercussions, just as in cases where generosity is driven by care for known others. We return to this interlinkage of scales in our conclusion.

### ***The effort of care: generosity to things***

Our final vignette contrasts the experiences of one participant, Polly, confronted with the quantity of her possessions with another, Ruth, for whom the very modest economic circumstances of her upbringing meant possessions were retained and repurposed as far as was materially possible. Here we highlight the ways in which generosity to things –

by which we mean willingness to spend time maintaining, repairing or repurposing them – was engendered through very different socio-spatial prompts and storage contexts.

During a household visit, Polly (21, University student, living independently within an extended family home, Wollongong, Australia) talked Elyse through the ‘migration’ of much of her clothing to a ‘spare’ wardrobe in the bedroom recently vacated by her sister who was studying abroad. Polly described how the ‘spreading out’ of her wardrobe, and the impending return of her sister, forced her to confront material excess:

I didn't really have a lot of space so I used my sister's room, but I sort of looked at it and thought 'that's a problem' ... I'll need to manage [that] when she comes back. To work out a solution it meant cutting down more stuff, which is not necessarily a bad thing [laughs].

Polly described new methods of storage and clothing care she was employing that allowed her to relieve anxieties around the amount of clothes she owned. Polly regretfully described items that represented unworn excess: a dress purchased for a party but never worn, or second-hand clothes that inspired alteration, but required changes beyond her level of skill. In an effort to mitigate these anxieties – and align herself with new personal interests in environmentally sustainable ideals of minimalism – Polly had recently purchased a copy of the best-selling book, ‘The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying’ by Marie Kondo (2014). The KonMari method asks followers to get back in touch – quite literally – with objects (clothes, in this case) by handling, trying and wearing them, promoting a form of object-love. Polly explained how she ‘KonMari’ed’ her room, taking everything out of wardrobes, drawers and plastic bags to reassess its value based on how she felt about each item.

It's so much easier to get dressed now. Everything that I look at I like, so I look through and say 'which one do I like the most today' and pull it out, but yeah. Everything I like.

Not only did this process make it easier for Polly to get dressed by reducing the number of options she had to consider, it precipitated a major change in the way her stored things were managed. In an illustration of Cwerner's (2001) description of storage as a means of showing care for the material, rather than trying to fit clothes into already crammed storage spaces, Polly spent time, thought and care putting her clothes away: ‘I'm always unfolding my socks now, 'cause I roll them together not inside out on top of each other.’ T-shirts, pants (trousers) and jumpers were also stored in wardrobes and drawers in a way that made them visible, rather than hidden (Figure 2). Being prompted by the KonMari method to engage mindfully with the sensory qualities of her clothing thus encouraged Polly to both take greater care of the possessions she had identified as treasured, and discouraged acquisition of new clothing about which she felt ambivalent:

I've cut down my wardrobe and I'm trying not to buy. But in order to do that the first step I had to make was to cull so much of my clothes, which is wastage. But I mean, I guess had I not done that I wouldn't have at all. That was a big thing, that was, um, a reminder, a big lifestyle change, I guess? Every time I come back here, I just think I've, I've gone to the effort to use only the clothes that I need. I don't need to grow my wardrobe again.



**Figure 2.** Polly's 'KonMari-ed' clothing.

Like Polly, Ruth (17, high school student, living in single-parent family home, Cambridge, UK) treasured a great many of her possessions. However, whereas Polly had been prompted to do so by confrontation with her material 'overflow', Ruth's care for her things was long-standing. Unlike Polly's material accumulations which were hidden behind wardrobe doors – and in more than one room of the home – Ruth's clothes hung on a single open-fronted clothing rail in her bedroom. As a result of difficult economic circumstances growing up, Ruth was acutely aware of the monetary value of all her possessions. She was also a keen crafter, having learnt to sew to a high standard from her mum. Not only did she enjoy sewing as a hobby, she was also aware of the value of such practical skills in extending the usable lives of a range of material things – something she had seen in practice growing up in a low-income single parent household. The combination of this sensitisation to the economic and material value of things, combined with the limited storage space in the small family home, motivated Ruth to pursue her hobbyist sewing practice by repurposing old clothing and household textiles into new ones, including cushions, hair accessories, bag customisations, or other items of clothing. Some of these she kept, some were given away. She said:

I've got so many [clothes] that I want to keep, I've sorted through them and I've started using them to sew instead, 'cause then I've still got them but they're not just clothes, they're not just sat there, I can use them.

By spending time and effort on this act of transformation, Ruth demonstrated generosity to the material itself. She did not know, when she started a project, where it might end up; her concern was with doing what she could to ensure the material endured. Although the nature of her generosity to the material is very different – both in motivation and practice – from Polly's mindful storage, both young women confront the innate materiality of their clothes in ways that sensitise them to those items' pleasurable sensory qualities, their durability, their potential future use, and the threat of waste should they fail to care for them. They each work to keep their clothing conspicuously present and accessible, choreographing regular usage, minimising the chance for garments to

become 'lost' in 'deep' storage (such as second wardrobes). These orientations towards material care can be seen as a further example of micro-scale generosity with much wider scale impacts, specifically through waste avoidance.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have sought to interrogate the sustainability potential of everyday household storage in order to challenge the assumption that clutter equals waste. By taking as our point of departure growing interest in spatially interconnected, multi-scalar 'landscapes of care' (Milligan & Wiles, 2010), in which the relations between human and non-human intersect in moments of 'caring-with' (Power, 2019), we have shown how mundane acts of storage are used to choreograph significant emotional and care-ful(l) connections which keep a range of material things in use and prevent a 'slide into waste' (Collins, 2020).

By exploring material accumulations through the lens of generosity we have highlighted three facets of everyday consumption which, to date, have remained under-researched, or at least under-articulated. First, the mundane inconveniences of living alongside the objects of storage have been shown to be begrudgingly yet willingly borne, as the desire to care-for (loved ones) by caring-with (gifting t-shirts, for example) supersedes the desire for more space or a sense of closure on past identities. The notion of inconvenience has tended to lurk unarticulated in the background of much recent research into household sustainability and domestic practices, as indicated by Hagbert's (2016, p. 4) observation that approaches to enhancing sustainability 'that require[s] little to no lifestyle changes' are seen as most desirable. Yet, as Aidan and Felipe illustrated here, acknowledging and articulating inconvenience can help to make visible the emotional and practical labour – and thus the generosity – implicit in negotiating intentional or inadvertent household sustainabilities. We suggest a more explicit interrogation and articulation of everyday inconveniences in the pursuit of more sustainable living might usefully normalise both an *ethic* and an *aesthetic* of compromise. This may build directly on recent research concerned with gendered dimensions of the work of sustainability (Cox, 2013; Organo et al., 2013).

Secondly, self-care and self-interest are not antithetical to sustainable consumption. As Ella and Claudine demonstrated, some forms of self-care through the care of material things are conducive to forms of consumption that actively prevent those things becoming waste. We consider this a welcome antidote to discourses in which increased commitment to sustainable living can be underpinned by a sense of self-sacrifice. As all our participants demonstrated, the generosity they expressed all required physical and emotional labour in varying amounts. It was also apparent that this labour often resulted in generosity that were bi-directional, reflecting benefits inwards to the participant (e.g., feeling good) as well as outwards to beneficiaries – a simultaneous self-indulgence and altruism which Arnould and Rose (2015) suggest might be framed as 'mutuality'. We wonder, in response to this, where there might be potential to reframe other domains of everyday consumption as acts of self-care, self-interest, or self-indulgence, in ways that make the inevitable labour involved worthwhile.

Thirdly, we note the value in choreographing confrontation with the material accumulations of everyday life. Polly and Ruth, in contrasting ways, confronted themselves with the materiality of their possessions in ways that encouraged them to constantly

appraise and maximise their use value. Whilst much literature concerned with material divestment and obsolescence has highlighted the risks of objects falling into deep storage spaces and losing material integrity or functionality (Hetherington, 2004; Maycroft, 2009), these young women reveal the pleasure to be gained from keeping stored things close. Their generosity to their possessions is both a function of this choreographed confrontation and a driver of it. We suggest that forms of everyday storage that demand such confrontations might have a role to play in inducing more reflective relationships with everyday material stuff.

Generosity, then, has valuable contributions to make to analyses of how everyday consumption is materialised within the home, and the ways in which it stretches beyond it. We have suggested that it builds upon increasingly well-developed conceptualisations and applications of care as a means of understanding a range of human/non-human relations, specifically by acknowledging complex emotional and practical tensions in the execution of that care. We see generosity as an analytical frame capable of adding detail and nuance to Power's (2019) notion of 'caring-with', at the same time as acknowledging frames of 'caring-about' (or what Barnett and Land (2007) might consider 'responsibility') in the background. Exploring the moral economies of food and geographies of responsibility, Jackson et al. (2009, p. 20) cite Young (2003, p. 40) and state that we 'all share a responsibility for the collective outcome of our everyday acts as consumers. In other words, we are responsible for injustice by virtue of our structural connection to it (however indirectly and mediated that connection may be), even though we may not be individually to blame for it.' Whilst Jackson et al. (2009) observed in their project that the forms of care embodied at the local level were often at odds with the best means of expressing care for the distant other, our findings suggest the opposite was true for our participants. Their embodied generosity towards their loved ones, themselves and their possessions simultaneously characterised a form of generosity towards distant others through the reduction of both waste, and new consumption. This underscores the idea that keeping is not (necessarily) problematic for the sustainability of household consumption. In that sense, we concur with Cherrier and Ponnor (2010, p. 18) claim that care-taking of (or generosity towards, or through) material objects can be a 'humanitarian' act, and Hanrahan and Smith (2020, p. 230) suggestion that micro-level acts of care can, 'ripple out into the world beyond immediate caring relationships and the immediate moment.' We contend that this multi-scalar care is comprised of networks of nodes of generosity, embodied at the micro-scale, and – in the context of household sustainability – a field which possesses considerable practical and analytical potential.

## Notes

1. For each researcher, a focus on young adults in the Global North was driven by broader social, political and scholarly concerns around age, lifecourse and environmental sustainability. Young adults are often lauded for their positive influence on environmental change – particularly within family, peer and broader community networks (Breunig et al., 2014; Collins, 2015; Hadfield-Hill, 2013). At the same time, they are critiqued for their purported carelessness, hedonism and thoughtless disposition towards resource use and consumption (Griffin et al., 2005; Hume, 2010).

2. We acknowledge that there are inevitably questions about *who* enacts forms of care, responsibility and generosity within households in relation to the material organisations of everyday life (see, for example, Cox, 2013; Organo et al., 2013). Although a fulsome consideration of this issue is outside the scope of our focus in this paper, we note that our participants' acts of generosity were often enacted in tandem with the (care-oriented) actions of other members of their households, particularly mothers.

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## ORCID

Rebecca Collins  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5168-8429>

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