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Holding on to childhood things: storage, emotion, and curation of children's material biographies

Jennifer Owen, Cardiff University

Kate Boyer, Cardiff University

Abstract

Young people in the UK, known as 'generation rent', rely on parents to hold on to their childhood things as they find themselves uprooted and 'space poor'. As such lofts, cupboards, and self-storage units are home to dormant objects that do not fit into everyday life but cannot be thrown away. This paper extends existing scholarship by considering the role of material things in how parents and children relate to one another, exploring how parents engage with and manage their children's material biographies as they move into adulthood and away, spatially and emotionally, from their parents and the family home. We ask what caring, curating, and storing children's possessions means in the context of parenting and care-work more generally. Based on two rounds of in-depth interviews with eight middle-class parents in the UK, we argue that caring for material things can serve as a way for both parents and children to manage feelings of nostalgia, or loss, through this transition. We further argue that these practices serve as a form of material-emotional grounding or effort to generate a sense of security, in the face of uncertainty about what the future may hold in the context of unaffordable housing markets.

Keywords: parenting; emotion-work; material culture; storage; curation

Introduction

Even before a child is born their material presence is felt at home. Within developed countries in the Global North, a cot, a pram, nappies, bottles, and bibs are typically bought to care for the new family member. As the child grows older so their material presence grows too. Toys, teddies, sports equipment, instruments, clothes, books, technology, and school projects can take up residence across various parts of the family home. Eventually, as the child grows up many of these items fall into disuse and are passed out of the household either as rubbish or to subsequent users in the second-hand economy. Or they are deliberately put away for safe-keeping in lofts, crammed into the backs of cupboards and closets, or perhaps relocated to self-storage units. This paper considers the role of material things in how middle-class parents and children in the UK understand each other's roles as their relationships shift, particularly focusing on how these material practices signify attempts to manage feelings of anxiety and stress around uncertain futures as well as rising costs of housing and education. It does so by exploring how parents engage with their children's material biographies as they become independent adults with a new set of demands on parents, and asks how parenting and care-work are materialised in the context of 'generation rent'.

Despite the very wide range in what parenthood means and involves across different cultural contexts and social milieu, some degree of material (as well as emotional and financial) parental support for children is widely considered to be a key yet unremarkable feature of daily family life (Finch and Mason 1993). Indeed, following calls over the last 20 years to re-materialise geography, attuning to material culture can provide significant insights into the specific and contextual forces which constitute everyday life (Jackson 2000; Anderson and Tolia-Kelly 2004)¹. In particular, we argue that studying the role of the material remnants of childhood has value as part of broader endeavours to understand parenting practices (see Baraitser 2008). Whether studying the production and portrayal of identity in the family home or the management of this same materiality when it accumulates and overflows, this research tends to foreground the role that parents play when families live under one roof. However, as Horton and Kraftl (2012, 25) state, 'small practices with/around material things and memories are central to doing, resolving and dealing with major life-course events and transitions'. Following this line of inquiry, we extend existing scholarship on the role of material things in parent-child relations by exploring the emotion-work involved in the way parents manage children's things as they gain greater independence and begin to leave home.

Based on two rounds of in-depth interviews with eight parents, undertaken in 2016 as part of a larger study on self-storage in the UK, we explore how the management of the enduring materiality of childhood (including the curation of items in which

emotional investments have been made) can serve as a means by which parents manage their feelings and come to terms with children growing up and becoming more independent. We argue that the storage and maintenance of young-adults' things on the part of their parents constitutes an important form of emotion-work for parents in negotiating relations with children who are beginning to move (developmentally) into adulthood and away, both spatially and often emotionally, from their parents and the family home. We suggest that this process can produce feelings of ambivalence, sadness and loss for parents, and that caring for children's things can, for some parents, serve as a means of managing some of these more difficult emotions. The paper is arranged as follows: after tracing out the relevant literature and discussing how we advance this field, we discuss our study and methodology. We then turn to a discussion of our findings, focusing on the role of stored materiality in the curation of child and parent biographies, conflicting pressures and emotions surrounding its storage, as well as the imagined futures and obligations at play.

Theorising materiality and family-work

This section outlines the key scholarship in the areas of children's geographies, material culture and consumption with which this paper engages. Scholarship on materiality and family-work has followed a number of veins. One such vein focusses on material culture in the work of parenting and care-work. As Miller (1997) and Clarke (2004) have argued, the work of family provisioning (sometimes called 'maternal consumption') – including the researching, deciding, and purchasing of items like prams and baby things before babies are born and when they are small, as well as items like clothes and food later on – can be viewed as an expression of care or love. Boyer and Spinney (2016) and Waight and Boyer (2018) have also considered the role of various kinds of material things (prams, public transport systems, baby things) within early parenting and baby care. This work highlights the way that different kinds of material culture participate in the work of parenting to create different kinds of affordances, as well as imposing different kinds of constraints. As this scholarship notes, contemporary parenting in the global North is inextricably bound up with the management of flows of material things in an out of the family home. Constructed as the work of the household/family 'manager' (and framed through discourses about the importance of managing risk, protecting the health of the whole family, and the feminisation of care-work), this work is typically 'the mother's job'. In a related vein, Cook (2008) describes motherly consumption as 'co-consuming', as mothers consume on behalf of their children and often prioritise their children's needs above their own.

This scholarship further observes that the work of family provisioning can be one means by which women come to understand themselves as mothers, especially in the

transition to motherhood. As Hogg, Maclaran, and Curasi (2003, 258) have observed, 'transitional consumers represent a valuable "site" for exploring issues of identity creation'. To this end, Tina Miller (2013) emphasises how the purchase of clothes and other paraphernalia in anticipation of the arrival of a first-born child is a significant feature in identity-formation of 'becoming mothers'. Similarly, Curasi, Maclaran, and Hogg (2013) show how consumption is a means for 'empty-nesters' to maintain and re-configure familial relationships of care and provisioning with adult children. However, neither of these works consider the role that the material practices of sorting, curation and storing of children's things play during, and between, these significant life-course transitions. Our work extends scholarship across these varied fields by exploring the practices of parents in storing things for children who are in the process of leaving home, focusing on the emotional labour involved in the looking-after and curation of children's things at a time when parent-child relationships are changing.

A further vein of scholarship to which our work contributes is the narration of family through the display of possessions in the home. This includes Rose's (2010) work on the way familial relations are consolidated and represented through photographs (through the sometimes copious work of taking, curating, disseminating, and displaying photographic images), as well as Tolia-Kelly's (2004) work on the role of décor in calling forth familial relations, including through the display of items intended to materially and symbolically connect a given family to relatives and ancestors in other places and cultural contexts. Along similar lines, Hurdley (2006) has explored how mantle-piece display can function as a means to emotionally constitute family and memory through the display and arrangement of photographs and cards, as well as being a repository for everyday items such as appointment cards, keys, and invitations. Attending to the less visible, Woodward (2015) highlights how dormant things that accumulates in the hidden spaces of the home can also play a role in working out familial relationships just as much as that which is collected and displayed. What emerges from this scholarship is an attunement to the role of material culture in both the work of family- and home- making. Yet acknowledgement of parental identities, as different and apart from family identity, is somewhat obscured within discussion of these practices.

In addition to considering material culture in the context of purchasing, use and display, scholarship has also begun to explore the management of possessions at the end of the product life-cycle as an aspect of (again, typically feminised) parenting work. As Waight's (2015) research shows, the circulation of second-hand baby things between mothers at nearly-new sales involves the negotiation of risk (around hygiene and safety) and the rationalisation of an object's intimate material biography. Building on this, Waight and Boyer (2018) explore how these second-cycle baby things link

parenting assemblages through the 'caring capacity' of the material things themselves. This work builds on and takes forward scholarship on ridding, such as that of Gregson (2007), which has shown that decisions and practices of ridding and holding-on occur in the midst of, and as part of, a whole range of mundane activities such as tidying-up and doing the laundry, as well as in the course of more exceptional events such as moving house and home improvements. Issues surrounding the reuse of objects, including children's clothing and toys, has particular poignancy in times of austerity which place a strain on family finances (see Hall 2018).

Regarding the day-to-day life of material culture in family homes, Dowling (2008) identifies everyday contradictions between clutter and containment in open-plan family homes in Australia. As she notes, relations with children's toys during play and at rest are a part of broader ongoing negotiations between inhabitants and objects that are central to everyday processes of home-making. It often falls to mothers to continuously monitor and evaluate the place of children's things within the household and routinely get rid of things which have amassed out of control or are no longer needed. Therefore decisions based on the use, monetary, and sentimental value of objects are taking place on a regular basis (Gregson and Beale 2004). Gregson (2007, 121) found that whilst children live at home, attempts to get rid of objects (particularly toys) from a previous developmental stage is a difficult experience, for both parents and children, as the child identifies ownership of them. Additionally as Phillips and Sego (2011) note, a mother's ability to be self-disciplined and discard their children's things is in direct contradiction to the intimate connection they have with their children and therefore, by extension, the possessions those children use. Things come to matter more if they have survived episodes of sorting, as the material and/or symbolic essence of a person or relationship is condensed into fewer objects. Deciding what to keep and what to discard can be an emotional task often infused care, concern, and love (Gregson, Metcalfe, and Crewe 2007). Those objects which are thrown away before they should have been, or linger when they should be disposed of, can haunt parents and children, constituting an absent-presence that can be felt as an unacknowledged debt or sense of guilt (Hetherington 2004). The management of flows of material things in, out, and within the family home can function as a form of everyday emotion-work, which parents both bear the brunt of and control.

In addition to the analysis of day-to-day forms of workings-with material things, Marcoux (2001) describes how moving house constitutes a key moment to sort through things. It becomes a means to re-evaluate relationships and memories by bringing them back into consciousness when decisions have to be made about what is worth packing (Horton and Kraftl 2012). This experience may be repeated for young people who need to move more often, and because of this fact choose to live without all of their things in order to make the process of moving easier. Resultantly, as

Marcoux (2001, 80) has mentioned, young people's things may be 'consigned to their parents' care' in the eventuality that circumstances change and they are needed and can be collected at a later date. For parents, he intimates, providing their storage in this fashion serves as a way to cope with the child's departure, an alternative to preserving the child's bedroom as it was when they lived at home. Parents can also keep and index treasured objects that act as mementos of their child's identity, some of which are kept without plans for future transfer and others with the intention of passing them on as heirlooms in the future (Sego 2010). Alongside, and instead of, attempts to get rid of extraneous objects, parents undergo a process of memorialising their child(ren) by keeping favourite toys and garments (Gregson 2007, 121). Further along the life course Valentine (2003, 38) suggests that 'even as young people take on all the mantles of adulthood—a job, their own home and so on—they may still be treated as, or at least retain, the identity of 'children' in their own parents' eyes'. Through the safekeeping and storage of their children's things, parental relationships of care and provisioning (of space) may be prolonged, and we look at how parental obligation is enacted through things after children have flown the nest.

Together this scholarship illustrates the significant role material things can play in practices of parenting and care (Dowling 2000; Rose 2010; Boyer and Spinney 2016; Waitt and Harada 2016; Waight and Boyer 2018) and the identity- and emotion- work that the management of both actively-used and dormant things can play in and beyond the context of parenting (Clarke 2004; Rose 2010; Woodward 2015). Yet within this, with the exception of the work of Sego (2010), Waight (2015), and Waight and Boyer (2018), scholarship on the role of material things in parenting practice has tended to focus upon consumer decisions or actively-used/displayed objects, especially in the context of transitions to parenthood. Less is known about what happens to the stuff of childhood/child-rearing once it is no longer directly needed but not thrown away, or any differences to the practices and meanings of storing childhood things over the life course. We extend existing work by exploring the emotional investments these material things can have, together with the emotion-work (including comfort, as well as tensions and ambivalences) involved in managing it.

As a result of the preoccupation in extant scholarship with managing the 'stuff' of young childhood, there exists a significant gap in the literature regarding young adults' everyday storage – whether in parents' homes or their own. We suggest that the management of childhood stuff at the point that a child leaves home is bound up with both changing care relations and changing spatial relations. Leaving home marks a point when children tend to stop needing the same kind of, or as much, care as they once did, and parents have to 'let go' in the sense of sharing space with them and seeing them on a daily basis. At the same time as parents adapt to life without the

daily presence of a child, they may be faced with decisions about what to do with a certain amount of that child's things, their material biography. And while parents have to eventually let go of their children, often they can continue to care for their children's things by providing space for their belongings within the family home. We suggest that managing children's things can serve as a means of working through what, for some, is a difficult emotional transition that can elicit feelings of loss. Furthermore, in the current UK context of austerity budgeting, unaffordable house prices, and job markets for young people comprised of a growing number of low-wage and/or precarious jobs, an increasing number of UK young adults lack stable employment and sometimes stable dwelling. It is reasonable to imagine that in this context the number of young adults storing stuff at their parents' homes will grow.

Methodology

The data for this paper are drawn from two rounds of in-depth interviews with eight parents – four mothers, two fathers and one couple – recruited as part of a larger study into the motivations and experiences of using self-storage in the UK.

Participants were recruited through self-storage company mailing lists, social media and by staff members. Most of the parents resided in the North West of England (five), and the remainder in South Wales (two)ⁱⁱ. All were working-age, with children ranging from 5 to 28 years old. The majority had earned tertiary qualifications and worked in middle-class occupations (including shop assistant, pharmacy technician, games developer and doctor)ⁱⁱⁱ, thereby having the disposable income needed to afford monthly payments on self-storage units of various sizes^{iv}.

The interviews, completed between January and June of 2016, provided a way to understand participants' motivations to rent self-storage and feelings around these circumstances in relation to broader life events. Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of two parts. The first took place in the participants' home or a café, and the second in participants' self-storage units, relying on object elicitation to go into more depth around the issues identified in the first interview through individual object biographies. The interview transcripts were then analysed using a combination of content analysis – to deduce key themes and trends of mobility, life-course and memory – and discourse analysis – to elicit, contemplate and scrutinise the deeper meanings and implications behind these particular identity, and home-(un)making, practices.

Given the sample size, we position the claims we make based on this data as suggestive and exploratory. We further note that these findings speak largely to the parenting experiences of white, heterosexual, UK-born, middle-class Britons. As such they represent quite privileged experiences of parenting, conducted in family homes with storage spaces (like lofts) within them and expectations that most children would

leave home after secondary school for University or other equivalent (professional) training. We do not claim that these data represent other kinds of experiences, and would particularly stress that they likely do not represent the experiences of parents raising children in conditions of insecure housing, which may include the economically excluded, new immigrants, travellers, refugees, asylum seekers and homeless people (though we would note that more work is needed on the parenting experiences of all the above-noted groups). We further note that these findings may not be extendable to cultural contexts outside the UK.

This project was undertaken by two researchers. Owen is in her late-20s with no children undertaking a broader research programme on self-storage in the UK. Boyer is a parent with a school-age child undertaking research on parenting and care-work in the UK. Owen undertook the study design and data collection and contributed to the data analysis and writing; while Boyer contributed to the secondary analysis and writing. We would note that our own subject positions as white, heterosexual, Anglophone middle-class women with experience of parenting shaped the kinds of questions we asked and the kinds of data we were able to gather.

Discussion

Materialising biographies

Our first point of analysis concerns the materialisation of children's and parents' biographies through shared historicising of objects. Parent-child curation initially emerges as children and parents (co)produce meaning and experience the world in ways that result in durable items including significant 'firsts' – things made, school work done, mementos of achievements etc. – as well as collections of 'souvenirs' to remember significant events, experiences, and life-stages. These items can become treasured as mementos of child's identity (Sego 2010) and survive multiple rounds of decluttering and ridding despite mounting pressure on space. Divestment also plays a part in management and curation practices. Some things are deemed less valuable than others and divested as part of the sorting process prior to and after being placed in storage. Parents play a large role in this, suggesting that broken toys need to go or that clothes have been grown out of, but still acknowledging feelings of attachment and value in forming emergent identities as reasons to keep and store things (Gregson 2007, 121).

In this research we found that parents drew from their own experiences of knowing what they appreciated having kept later in life, and as a result, sometimes felt they could make judgments about their children's things on their behalf. Stuart could see the value in some of his daughter's discarded things, his reasoning based upon not having these items from his own childhood to look back at to chart 'lines of connection' across his life (Philo 2003). Curated personal objects theoretically and

practically concretise memories and past identities, allowing the transitions, trajectories and events of a life course to be mapped and recollected. Stuart's own material biography, or rather lack of, thereby influenced the deliberate curation of his daughter's.

Stuart: Meg just soldiered through it and was quite severe; she got rid of tons of stuff. [...] She got rid of all her school stuff and I was just like 'Oh I'll just hang onto this report.' [He laughs] 'I'll just hang onto this thing you made.'

Researcher: Did you do that for quite a few things then?

Stuart: I did [keep] quite a few things, not a huge amount, but then most of it was actual rubbish. But some of it was what you would think was sentimental stuff that you'd think she'd keep, or that her mum would keep. [...So] I kept a small pile; I just thought 'I'll keep those because she might want them in the future'. [...] It's mostly for her benefit but some of the things... like reports, reports are interesting to read. I've not got any of my school reports but it's something that I've thought in the past 'Oh it'd be quite nice to see what I was actually like' because I don't really remember!

When probed about the value of the items she had saved from being thrown away Dawn referred to the simplicity and happiness of childhood in comparison to adulthood (and the role of material culture in this transition) as: "a reminder of your childhood and a reminder of nice times and pleasant times. And even things from your teenage years that remind you of events and things that happened, you don't want to get rid of those either." The parent's interviewed suggested that having childhood things – from significant firsts to life-stage souvenirs – to look back upon is important. Childhood things recall and embody earlier times, selves and relations that can hold happy memories. Hanging on to such things serves as a means of memorialising or commemorating past times, and makes a place for these past-selves in the present, even when the future is cast as complex or uncertain. Keeping childhood things provides a sense of continuity and is crucial to charting the development of identities over the life course (Philo 2003; Valentine 2003). By curating their children's things through material practices of sorting, saving, and storing parents can continue to enact their role as carers, protecting and curating their child's material biography so it can be a part of the identity work of nostalgia and remembering in the future.

Curation of a child's material biographies, at any age, is illustrative of the evolution of family relationships and parental expressions of care over time and space. In the below quote Leanne describes how she could 'just tell' which of her son's school books were worth keeping. This demonstrates that Leanne had (continued) confidence in her knowledge of her son's needs and wants, and recalls a mode of parenting when her son was younger and decisions about his material life were largely hers. When

Harry was school-aged it was important to keep hold of these mementos so to allow him the option over them in the future, to give him the opportunity to curate his own past. However, now that he has left home Leanne no longer enacts care through the collection of childhood mementos but in their continued storage and safekeeping, which was brought to the forefront when she moved into a smaller house. With this new spatial constraint present, and Harry permanently absent from the family home, Leanne had to compromise and slim-line his things, keeping just the best bits.

Leanne: Harry is in Sweden so he didn't have any involvement but I did call him with 'Do you need this?', 'I think I might, so just keep it until I'm next home'. But I was ruthless, some of the things I didn't even ask. I was just... School textbooks, school exercise books... he's never going to look at them.

Researcher: How did you choose what was worth keeping?

Leanne: It got to the point where I just... could tell. [She laughs]

This quote from Leanne also brings up issues of power in the curation and disposal of children's things. Ultimately, who gets to choose what to keep and what to throw away? Whether decluttering or packing for a move, parents often persuaded their children to get involved in sorting through their own things and in doing so slim down their material convoy to more manageable dimensions. Yet, as the above quote illustrates, decluttering can also serve as a way of parents expressing ongoing care for a (physically absent) child via their stuff. This is based upon their deep understanding of that child (or at least their perceived understanding), and a (supposedly) superior grasp of which items a child will or won't want down the line, contingent on the items' perceived value or utility (or lack of).

It was noted on a number of occasions, however that the desire to hold on to things came not from children but from parents. As Dawn admitted, her boys did not feel particularly attached to their things in storage since: 'All of the things they need are out of there, [...] we've been through the whole lot and they are not at all interested. Memorabilia is just for me. [...] The things they had from when they were younger they, being boys, aren't particularly bothered, you know. It's mainly me that can't consider getting rid of them'. Likewise, Kathryn encountered a similar reaction from her son when she told him she was keeping some of his old things: '[He] wasn't interested, "Fair enough, if you want to". Disinterest'. So why did Dawn, Kathryn and others keep their kids' things despite their children not expressing any emotional attachment towards them or intention to 'collect' them in the future? We suggest that whilst these items, which were bought for, used, and now discarded by their children, don't just relate to childhood. These objects hold memories that have as much to do with parenthood as they do childhood; and letting go of these things could feel like letting go of that identity and part of life, and perhaps even the children themselves.

Caitlin: Old rocking horse, I wondered where he went. My daughter had that, she's 22 now, but when she was very little I used to drag her all-round the streets on it.

Peter: That's from my son. [Shows me some old postcards]

Researcher: Aww! [Reading from the postcard] "We had a ride through the..."

Peter: And that's from the other one.

Researcher: Oh they're lovely, really sweet. [Reading from the postcard] "We had a good time at school". Good to hear.

Peter: It's nice to keep things like that. They don't call me Daddy anymore

These two quotes from Caitlin and Peter show that the items they held onto (a rocking horse and postcards) remind them of an earlier time, when their identity as a parent meant different things to what it does now. Examining parenthood through material remnants of childhood brings to light how this period in the life course results in the collection and curation of mementos for the child. In fact, these same items bear considerable weight in remembering and nostalgia for parenthood which had been co-produced through parental practices of care for a child through material things. Of course, the identity as a parent continues when a child moves out, but the identities encapsulated by these (shared) objects may have evolved almost beyond recognition.

Conflicting pressures, emotional responses

The tensions between the divestment of childhood items to make room for other kinds of material things, and decisions to keep things which capture and preserve elements of a child's (and parent's) past identity and character is problematic in terms of space. Storage (in lofts or self-storage units) in many ways provides a solution to this problem, but conflicting pressures remain which can result in emotional responses from parents. Dawn kept both of her boys' first shoes, in spite of feeling the material pressures of moving into a smaller house after divorce and her new partner Ian's wishes to slim-line their things.

Ian: I've had a big debate with Dawn about throwing in the bin all her boys' first shoes.

Dawn: Yeh something I didn't tell you, I've got all my boys first shoes and they're...

Ian: All the little Clarks sandals...

Dawn: Yeh from when they were 1 and 2 [years old] and all that sort of stuff.

Ian: And anyway. So Dawn's refuses to get rid of them, even though they are growing mould at the moment.

Dawn: Yeah. Guilty, guilty.

Dawn's admission of guilt at holding on to her boys' baby shoes but steadfast refusal to dispose of them is an interesting contradiction which can be understood in a

number of ways. Popular culture has for several decades been involved in a project of making the well-ordered, clutter-free home the aspirational ideal. This can be traced from magazines such as 'Real Simple' which feature sparse, finely-curated storage spaces, and the rise of tidiness guru Marie Kondo with her message about the redemptive power of a well-ordered home. In this context the failure or inability to part with extraneous stuff can produce feelings of guilt (Hetherington 2004). For parents these tasks are magnified by needing to manage the materiality of their children as well as their own, and the fear that failure to do so reflects badly on their parenting skills (Dion et al. 2014).

There is, however, another factor producing Dawn's feeling of guilt relating to the materiality of the shoes themselves. In contradiction to the observation Rose (2010) makes in relation to family photos, these shoes do not show signs of domestic labour or care (in fact they are actually deteriorating) but for Dawn they are an important part of past and ongoing integrative practices with (and a sign of love for) her children, and therefore cannot be disposed of. Her keeping of the baby shoes can be understood as a way of putting off saying goodbye to a particular phase of childhood (and parenthood). In spite, or perhaps because, of this reticence Dawn has managed the objects which materialise her family relationships by passively keeping, rather than actively storing, them and this has resulted in their deterioration. Unable to come to terms with complex emotions about her and her children's changing identities, she now feels guilty for not caring for and treasuring these objects properly.

It was noted that there could be a risk for the parent-child relationship if a parent 'gets it wrong' and disposes of something without their child's knowledge or agreement, that the child later wishes had been kept. Aware of this risk some parents made sure children participated in these decisions, even if they had the final say. Dawn described how she planned to reduce the number of large black plastic bags full of soft toys she had in storage, belonging to her two 'grown-up' boys, with their help:

Dawn: ...some of them were quite expensive soft toys originally, they were Hamleys and all sorts of things, and we're going to line them up in the lounge and it'll be [...] who's going to be in our team and who's not, you know. [She laughs] And they are going to base that decision on, you know, who was favourite bear when they were little. Or one of my sons had these, quite expensive, furry animals: whales and giraffes and all sorts of things. I mean he might say 'Oh bin the whole lot' and I'll be going 'But, but we've got to keep some of them!' [We laugh] But yes, we've got to get five bags perhaps down to one bag, so there is going to be pecking order of which furry bear stays.

This quote also highlights the internal conflict parents face between getting rid of excess and saving things (Gregson 2007; Phillips and Segó 2011). Likewise Kathryn,

who often stressed her 'if in doubt, chuck it out' mentality during the interviews, admitted that wasn't always the case when it came to her boys' stuff as she described a time when she had needed to step-in to stop particular objects being thrown away during the sorting process:

Kathryn: Lewis is ruthless like me; he's thrown most of his childhood memorabilia out. You know, things like clay masks he made in primary school, he went through and was just chucking too much out. So I went [and] picked out a few and made a small box, like that, of the oddments he made when he was at primary school: like knitting and embroidery aged seven. I stored those for him because I don't really think you want to be without those when you're much older, and they are quite cute.

In the context of 'generation rent', feelings of care towards a child can be enacted once more through the supply of storage space and safe-keeping of objects which are yet to fit into an independent 'adult' life. Reclaiming childhood mementos or things kept 'in the meantime' during the periods of instability of early adulthood signifies a child 'growing up' to the extent that they are no longer reliant on parental resources. Dealing with the conflicting pressures presented by their child(ren)'s uncertain circumstances and their own spatial capabilities can be an emotional task for parents as they negotiate this new form of parenting for adult children.

Imagined futures

As well as keeping things 'in the meantime', storage spaces are often home to children's toys and books which have been kept for their potential future use, for children who may become parents themselves (and parents who, in their turn, may become grandparents). Stuart explained how his second wife had kept a lot of her daughter's toys and books from when she was younger because she believed that they would have value in the future, if her daughter was to have children of her own. In this way, some children's items are (re)imagined as potentially returning to use or coming back into different forms of use, even after a potentially long period of dormancy in storage.

Stuart: In the loft, we've got this... a wicker basket and it's about that size and it's got like a hundred books all stacked in it. All types of books, but kiddy books from when she was a little baby. So she says Erin will want them when she has a kid. So she'll get those books, and they will be the books that she remembers from when she was little, she's now reading to her kids.

The couple had similarly kept toys in the hope that they might be played with again by their potential grandchildren-to-be. Since these toys and books had been treasured by

their children, they believed that passing them on would allow that joy to be sparked again and therefore even more value would be obtained from them.

Stuart: That is my son's from when he was sort of 10 to 15 sort of age. He loved Bionicles [...] so that's all his Lego stuff just put in there, and I'm thinking he might want that. Cos he's... He's probably grown out of it, but at some point he might get married. [...] He might, or his sister might... His sister is pregnant at the moment so she might have a little boy, who might then grow into that. He did get a lot of entertainment from it when he was little.

This evidence of multiple uses and kinds of value through the generations shows that the lifecycle of things, if they stand the test of time, can be significant in the construction of familial relationships. As Gregson (2007, 126) suggests, efforts to pass on children's toys and clothing that are no longer wanted can be viewed as an attempt to avoid wasting things by 'projecting them into imagined social futures'. Building on this, we suggest that holding onto children's things after they have served their initial purpose can act to prolong a certain phase of parental identity, as well as giving material expression to a hoped-for identity as a grandparent.

Parental obligations

Despite children having 'flown the nest', archives of childhood and potentially useful items can remain in their parent's custody for indefinite periods of time. Valentine (2003, 38) has argued that even as young people leave home they retain the identity of 'children' in their parent's eyes, and are treated as such, continuing to receive parental care, albeit in a different way. Building on this, our research shows some of the ways material culture is used to express forms of on-going parental care and obligations linked to the changing spatialities and temporalities of young adulthood. The phenomena of 'boomerang' children, 'generation rent', and more general housing and employment precarity has brought with them a rise in parents storing their children's stuff until they have adequate or permanent enough domestic space of their own to house it. This arrangement between children and parents acts to prolong dependence and care between the generations.

In some instances, the material bonds were produced and maintained by the parent, having curated items in the belief that they will be valued by their child in the future. Custodians their children's things, parents are therefore waiting for the right time to pass the treasures on (Sego 2010). For example, Leanne kept a collection of artwork and things her two boys had made when they were younger, as well as bereavement cards she had received when their father had passed away. Whilst her sons are aware of these collections they are yet to take them off her hands which, for her older son, she blames upon his housing situation. This leaves Leanne as safe-keeper of her curated treasures, obliged to hold onto them until ownership has been negotiated.

Leanne: ... some little things done by little people. You know handprints, pictures from nursery, cards that they gave to me you know that they made in nursery... yeah they were in a box of little mementos I've kept. Some birthday candles... yeah I've kept all of them. I've kept some mementos. They are theirs really, they were given to them when they were about 12. So... I dunno, maybe if Harry lived in this country and had his own home they would be the sort of thing you'd pass onto him so he can make his own decision on... but because he's in Sweden that hasn't happened, I'll just have to keep them.

Leanne: I was widowed when my boys were little, and I had the sympathy cards for their dad. A lot. But we sort of... I've kept them because they are for the boys if ever they want to read them. I didn't get rid of them. Yeh, did sort of... contemplate it a bit but I couldn't quite do it with them. [...] So... if they ever sort of want to read what people said... but they probably won't but they are there aren't they then. [...]... I dunno there is no reason not to keep them really.

When the collections (and emotional connections) 'belong' more to the child than parent, relationships to the objects are altered and the practice of keeping is constructed differently as a result. In cases like this, there can be a feeling of obligation to store things, whether in the family home or in self-storage, until the child chooses to part with the objects or the parent makes a push for them to go. We also found in this research cases of what functioned as unspoken contracts regarding things that children had simply left behind. For example, Leanne described how despite her eldest son having moved to Sweden, settling down there and about to have a child of his own, some of his things had remained in her care.

Leanne: He's an artist so a lot of his paintings and stuff like that are there as well. And well I can't get rid of them, I wouldn't be allowed to.

Here we see the poignancy of children not being able to afford the space for their things, even as they are becoming parents themselves. This is set within a broader cultural context in the UK (and beyond) of many young people not knowing if they will ever be able to afford to buy a home of their own. Similarly, Vicky explained that despite trying to persuade her grown-up daughter to part with her cuddly toys (which took up a lot of space and were never taken out) they remained in her self-storage unit.

Vicky: You will see in there, there are probably five bin liners in there full of cuddly toys which are my daughters. Right from when she was a baby, right up to her being whatever age and she will not let me get rid of any of them.

Researcher: And she's...

Vicky: ...22 yep.

Researcher: When was the last time you tried to push the teddies out?

Vicky: Not that long ago because we had a lady [at work] was doing a cuddly toy thing... she's a scout leader and one of their other scout leaders had just been told she'd got cancer and they were doing a fundraiser thing with cuddly toys. So I said to Ellie 'Can I please give...', 'No they're all my favourites, you're not giving any away'. Okay.

After trying and failing to motivate her daughter to sort through her cuddly toys Vicky resigned herself to storing them for a while longer. She felt that since she had the space for them (for now at least) it would be unfair to evict them and give her daughter an ultimatum. As well as the large bag of cuddly toys, Vicky was storing a horse blanket for her daughter:

Vicky: My daughter's horse, Bracken, had to be put to sleep and that were [sic] Bracken's blanket. That will never be thrown, she will never allow... she won't even allow... I asked her could I wash it... cos it's a horse blanket and she said no. Cos it's still got Bracken's hair on it and things like that. So you know, they're her sentiment...

The reason Vicky concedes to her daughter's wishes, both with the cuddly toys and the horse blanket, is that the decisions to keep or rid are not hers to make, since the emotional connection to the items is her daughter's and she does not have ownership over that. As these passages suggest, the work of parents in curating and storing things for their children crosses between care and obligation. Curating objects on their child's behalf, parents risk them not being appreciated and never being collected. However, the thought of disposing of potentially important identity objects can seem a far bigger risk. Therefore, if sufficient space can be found at home (or in self-storage) to hold on to and store things then this will be done, with no ultimatums or timeframes implemented to motivate otherwise.

Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the ways parents and children co-curate children's material biographies as they grow older and gain more spatial and emotional independence. As noted, existing scholarship focuses on the role material culture plays in parenting in terms of purchasing and use (Curasi, Maclaran, and Hogg 2013; Boyer and Spinney 2016), and to a lesser extent ridding (Gregson 2007; Phillips and Segó 2011). We extend this scholarship by examining the points at which these flows slow down and certain items get 'stuck': neither used nor discarded. We build on existing scholarship on the role of material culture in parenting practice by arguing that such engagements can serve an important function for parents undertaking emotion-work and managing (sometimes difficult) emotions. These engagements become most apparent during sorting prior to moving (Marcoux 2001), and re-engaging with them provides opportunities to re-evaluate the question of their value,

identity, and ownership, and the role they play in evolving parent-child dynamics.

We have argued that holding on to children's things on the part of parents serves a number of inter-related purposes. On the one hand, it serves a practical function by providing much-needed storage for space-poor offspring who lack stable accommodation of their own. As we have suggested, this function is especially salient in the context of 'generation rent', in which many young people find themselves in precarious or unstable rental properties for long periods before they are financially able to settle down in a dwelling of their own. In this light providing storage for one's children's things can be seen as a form of care-work in the context of evolving parent-child relationships. In turn, we have also suggested that this holding-on-to can serve an important role in broader projects of emotion-work and identity-work, by providing a means through which parents and children work out new ways of relating to one other in a new, less (inter-) dependent phase. For parents, looking after a child's things when that child is no longer there on a daily basis can provide a way to maintain a link to that child and to an earlier kind of relationship with that child and identity as a parent, as well as providing a means of dealing with more difficult emotions such as sadness and loss. Here, parents also tread a difficult line between enacting their power over their child(ren)'s materiality when choosing what is of value to keep, and acknowledging a certain distance from the (now adult) identities these objects signify. Finally, we have argued that material culture can serve as a means of memory-work (for parents, children or both) through which earlier times and previous versions of themselves are embodied and recalled (such as by preserving 'little things made by little people'). It can serve as a means by which unresolved feelings are allowed to lay dormant for a given a period of time (such as through the preservation of letters of condolence); or as a material manifestation of hoped-for future events, relations and identities (such as by holding on to treasured books or toys in anticipation of those items giving joy to future generations of children).

In sum, through this work we extend understanding of the myriad and complex relations between material culture, emotion and identity in the context of parenting and family life over the life course. We have argued that those objects which have been put to one side are memorialised, treasured and reconstituted as memory devices (Gregson 2007). As this research shows, a clear instance of this in action is the tendency on the part of parents to hold on to items that narrate episodes of their child's life (as well as their lives). These objects 'could not' be thrown away, and were kept because of their value in being able to tell stories about shared lives as a family (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Hoskins 1998). In turn, it is often these very same (life-affirming) items which go on to be passed between generations, and are used by subsequent generations to constitute the inalienability of the family

(Weiner 1992). As such we see material culture (even its dormant phase) as playing a productive role in the work of doing family.

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ⁱ This revitalised material geography draws from earlier anthropological work that considers the capacity of possessions to narrate life (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Hoskins 1998).

ⁱⁱ These locations were selected based on feasibility and cost, in terms of doing research where authors were residing at the time of the research.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Appendix for more information about the dataset.

^{iv} Motivations to rent self-storage include moving house, renovation and making space at home.

Appendix

Table 1. Characteristics of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Marital status	Occupation	Location	Motivation for renting	# of children	# of children moved out
Vicky	Married	Self-storage Shop Assistant	North West England	Making space at home	2	1
Leanne	Divorced	Pharmacy Technician	North West England	Downsizing	2	1
Stuart	Second marriage	Computer Games Programmer	North West England	Renovating house	4	2
Caitlin	Married	Foster Mother	South Wales	Moving house	8	2
Peter	Divorced	Product Manager	North West England	Moving following divorce	2	1
Kathryn	Married	Finance Director	North West England	Moving house	2	1
Dawn and Ian	Both divorced from previous partners. Co-habiting	Dawn- Doctor, Ian - retired	South Wales	Downsizing	2	1