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## **Distancing material effects to reconcile loss: Sorting memories and emotion in self-storage**

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### **Abstract**

This paper draws upon research undertaken to understand the role of self-storage in the lives and losses of those who use it. For many renting self-storage is a temporary solution at a time of stress and/or transformation in their lives, including family bereavement. This paper will demonstrate how self-storage affects practices of mourning and remembrance, in particular by distancing and delaying engagement with memories and emotions during the process of divesting the effects of the deceased. In a similar way to avoiding places because of their associations with lost loved ones (Maddrell 2016), self-storage acts as a space to safely store triggering possessions away from the place/moment/relations of bereavement. This paper shows how putting evocative objects in storage spaces out of sight and out of mind allows them to be re-encountered in a new context, often at a later date and under less desperate terms. Spatial, emotional and temporal distance acts to change the relationship felt towards objects and can make their sorting, passing on and disposal easier. By drawing on the experiences of six self-storage users, this paper argues that the self-storage unit is a place of reconciliation: a space to mourn, remember, and eventually move on.

**Keywords:** material culture; bereavement; storage; memories; emotion; divestment

## **Introduction**

Geographical scholarship on death and loss is a burgeoning field, with broad-ranging focus from memorials (Johnson 1995) and cemeteries (Yarwood et al. 2015), to hospitals (Morris and Thomas 2005) and homes (Hallam and Hockey 2001). In addition to these physical spaces, scholars have examined the ‘invisible landscape’ of grief across multiple time-spaces (Maddrell 2016); and altogether this literature relates the spatialities of bereavement, mourning and remembrance more widely to experiences and identities. Another vein in death studies examines the affective biographies of material culture, particularly gifts, keepsakes and family heirlooms (see Finch and Mason 2000; Curasi et al. 2004). This paper, by focusing on the new geographies of self-storage units, offers insights into “the complex arrangement between the living and the dead in changing modern societies” (Worpole 2003, p. 12), whereby families and individuals need to deal with the material effects of their loved ones’ following their death. Self-storage is described, constructed and imagined as a secure place for things, and a necessary ‘solution’ to the stress and grief of loss.

The paper is arranged as the following: firstly, the relevant literature is mapped out which pertains to the emotional resonance of the material effects of the deceased and practices of sorting, forgetting and disposal. Next, the research methodology is examined along with a discussion of the emotional impact on participants and researcher. Finally, the paper turns to a discussion of findings, focusing on the practices of displacing, sorting, divesting and keeping employed by the participants in dealing with loved ones’ material effects.

## **Theorising emotional objects and practices after death**

Material objects have a performative role in bereavement, grief and memorialisation by mediating an ongoing relationship between the deceased and those who knew them (Hockey et al. 2003, p. 138). This mediation of ongoing relationships – known as ‘continuing bonds’ - between the living and deceased is a familiar concept in key death studies which was originally discussed by Klass et al. (1996) and has since been applied specifically to material effects (see Gibson 2008; Wojtkowiak and Venbrux 2010). However, following Mathijssen (2018, p. 218), this paper does assume breaking or continuing bonds, but recognises ‘transforming bonds’ whereby with the deceased and their effects are gradually altered through practices of separation, sorting and keeping. Things that were once very mundane objects of everyday usage – perfume, wallets, old shopping lists, worn shoes – are “rendered use-less with the loss of their previous owner [but] their persistent materiality can obtrude into a present where they cannot easily be incorporated into a new scheme of things, nor can they be thrown away” (Hockey et al. 2003, p. 141). As such the entire contents of a house, once so ordinary they commanded no special attention, can be impacted by a recent death and may speak to years of accumulated memories (Hallam and Hockey 2001, p. 12). Horton and Kraftl (2012, p. 40) suggest that following the passing of a close family relative it can feel like we are ‘drowning’ in the objects left behind. They

question whether the practice of patiently sorting through these objects can help or hinder the grieving process and whether it might begin or undermine the processes of memorialisation. In a similar vein, Miller (2010) suggests that divestment may be a repair mechanism in dealing with trauma.

The temporal and spatial positioning of objects changes and inflects upon meaning during mourning, since they may suffer a 'social death' as they are discarded, cast aside, or moved into storage, where they will lie dormant until reactivated (Hallam and Hockey 2001, p. 8). Hetherington (2004, p. 172) argues that how we negotiate the settlement of social relations involves tacit acknowledgement of the ways in which we make things absent in order to establish that settlement. Material practices are a means "to come to a settlement with how we manage our relations with others in terms of our memories, a sense of tradition, and through our relations not only with our contemporaries but also with our ancestors and future generations" (Clarke 2001, p. 172). Materiality and material practices have a significant role in the (re)production of social relations but, as Woodward (2015, p. 230) suggests, the enactment of these relationships is as much about that which accumulates in hidden spaces as it is what is displayed.

Forgetting can be a deliberate act of self-preservation following bereavement. The material world can be implicated in forgetting since memories, whilst formed mentally, can be transferred to objects which then act as their triggers (Forty 2004). Therefore "the removal, obliteration or evasion of these objects (at home or in one's surroundings) represents efforts to relegate disturbing materials of the past to oblivion" (Muzaini 2015, p. 104). Muzaini describes efforts by his participants to deliberately forget upsetting memories of war, and conceptualised their activities as conspiring silences, enacting absences and embodying avoidance. Embodying avoidance pertains to strategies that involve avoiding certain places, so to avoid unwanted recollections associated with it. Maddrell (2016) discusses this in some depth in her paper attempting to 'map' the spatial dimensions of bereavement, mourning and remembrance. She describes how individuals and communities navigate places as emotionally 'safe' and 'unsafe', developing a "highly refined sense of where it is (im)possible to go and what one might expect to confront emotionally in particular time-spaces" (Maddrell 2016, p. 177). The enactment of absences refers to the hiding, throwing away or rearranging of objects in space so that they are not lying around in visible spaces where they could spark memories of the past. In this way "the material world is thus manipulated to 'exorcise' or 'manage' troubling memories" (Muzaini 2015, p. 104). By storing 'biographical objects' out of sight one reduces the chance of 'memoire involontaire' (Makovicky 2007, p. 299).

Practices of discarding and hiding act to make objects invisible and their attached memories absented. So if objects can generate memory through "haptic, visual or other forms of contact [...] their disappearance thus serves to eclipse that memory" (Muzaini 2015, p. 106). Muzaini (2015, p. 106) found that many of his participants either discarded their material triggers entirely or kept them out of sight. Both methods served to reduce how often the

war years are remembered by eradicating traces from the materiality of the home. One participant shared how he had put away photographs of his family that were taken before the war which reminded him of a time when they were 'so happy', in order to forget how his father had died in the war. Whilst hidden to forget his loss, the photographs are too valuable to be discarded as they were a means for his children to know their grandfather. An appropriate space must be found to render these objects invisible but secure.

There are some durable objects which outlive people and inalienable things whose disposal is unthinkable and cast a feeling of responsibility to forbears (see Curasi et al. 2004). Keepsakes have a quasi-sacred status, not in any religious sense but due to their special status in not only symbolising the person that has died but also representing them. They are therefore acting as "the embodiment of a person who no longer has a physical body" (Finch and Mason 2000, p. 142), and in fact as 'one-ended tie signs' they "may last long after the relationship they signify has passed into a 'past stage'" (Goffman 1971, p. 195). McCracken (1988, p. 44) describes an instance of 'curatorial consumption' whereby one woman in his study memorialised her family by filling her house with inherited items. However, Hurdley (2013, p. 121) identifies that this "once taken-for-granted passage of goods through time has become incommensurable (in some respects) with expressions of taste" in terms of home decoration (Gullestad 1995). Instead, she suggests that there is a divergence between traditional inheritance rituals and ideas of taste and self-identity. Spaces such as cupboards and attics become archives of family history which aren't displayed but are too precious to be disposed.

Dealing with the material effects in the home of the deceased plays a significant role in how we deal with the practicalities and emotions relating to their death. At the best of times, deciding what to keep and what to discard can be an emotional task infused with care, concern and love (Gregson et al. 2007), and relationships with objects can be felt even more keenly following bereavement, because at this time sorting is a forced activity (Marcoux 2001). This paper argues that the storage of things out of sight for a period after the death of a loved one can play a significant role in 'cooling' attachment to objects (see McCracken 1988), which then allows for their divestment at a time when emotions are less raw and grief has been, at least partially, reconciled. Doing so can make immediate lived spaces 'safer' (Maddrell 2016) for individuals and family members whose relationships can be put under pressure whilst necessary practical arrangements, relating to material effects and otherwise, are negotiated and undertaken.

## **Methodology**

The data for this paper is drawn from two rounds of in-depth interviews with six participants, who were recruited as part of a larger study into the motivations and experiences of renting self-storage in the UK. Participants were recruited through self-storage mailing lists, social media and with the help of self-storage company staff members.

Three participants resided in the North West of England, two in South Wales and one in Southern England. All were working age and had occupations (civil servant, tennis coach, PhD student, psychotherapist, landlord, self-storage staff) which provided them with the disposable income or means required to afford monthly payments on self-storage units. Some participants were bereaved as recently as five months before the interviews, whilst others recounted their (still unfolding) experiences from losses which had occurred many months or even years previously. Given the sample size, and the inherent individuality of experiences of bereavement, this data is suggestive and exploratory and does not represent a complete picture of the spatial relations of grief, mourning and remembrance.

The interviews were completed between January – June 2016 and provided a way to understand participants' motivations to rent self-storage and feelings around these circumstances in relation to broader life events. The first interview most commonly took place in a café, and the second in participants' self-storage units. Here object elicitation could be used to go into more depth around the issues identified in the first interview through individual and collective object biographies. Coming across spatialised memories through stored material things can reignite intimate connections that bring us closer to what had been forgotten, but can also make obvious the distance that has grown between the objects and ourselves or the people and events they evoke (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003, p. 237). Breaking silences and recounting memories via object elicitation can get to what Hurdley (2013, p. 103) calls the 'other' stories of divorce, grief, hesitation, failure, arguments, negotiation and dust. Horton and Kraftl (2012, p. 38) describe this process of reflection as an "uncanny, unsettling and defamiliarising experience" based as much on the object biographies as the circumstances around their retrieval. This, in turn, produces new emotion-laden memories of the intensity of bereavement or moving on, and the ongoing need to deal with actual and emotional baggage. In this way encountering stored objects is a moment of exposure and vulnerability (Horton and Kraftl 2012, p. 41).

Due to their motivations for renting self-storage, and the objects stored within, it was possible that narratives being divulged during the interviews could be upsetting. Talking about sensory methods, Harris and Guillemin (2012, p. 696) suggest that research which explores participants' experiences can lead into areas that would otherwise remain concealed and tapping into this may unleash emotions for which participants are unprepared. I empathised with the participants as best I could, acknowledging the emotions and tensions brought to the fore in discussing intimate personal and family practices, and when similar life experiences had happened to me I found that sharing this established intimacy (Ng 2017). Harris and Guillemin (2012, p. 696) state that it is not unusual to experience a strong resonance with some interview narratives, and this may lead the researcher to reflect on their own life and personal situation. As a research project punctuated three times by the loss of loved ones in my own life, the narratives brought up by participants around experiences of bereavement were particularly difficult. Steve<sup>i</sup> asked, mid-flow while recounting his self-storage story following the death of his mother, if I had

ever experienced loss. He proceeded without me responding, but from that point I was lost in thought about the funeral that I would be attending the next day. With great difficulty I had to drag myself out of that reverie to be fully present in the interview. Various strategies have been suggested for 'emotion management' during fieldwork (see Hubbard et al. 2001), and my field diary became a particularly key tool to debrief and acknowledge how my own experiences and feelings of grief might be impacting upon the interviews.

An emotional response to a participant's narrative – felt as sympathy, empathy and a resonance with the researcher's own experiences – can also be productive because it can alert a researcher to the meanings and behaviours of those they are interviewing (Wilkins 1993). Emotion has an interpretative function because it enables the researcher to gain intuitive insight and subsequently allows inchoate knowledge to develop. Brannen (1988) suggests that awareness of the role of emotion in research should be extended beyond the interview process. When interpreting data we should acknowledge that the respondent's narrative is 'shrouded in emotionality' and because of this will be ambiguous and contradictory at times. Emotion is both data in its own right and a method of understanding. It is necessary to acknowledge that my emotional responses to participants' experiences were present in the interpretation of the interview transcripts.

## **Discussion**

### ***Displacing material effects***

Participants in this research described how their experiences of bereavement had necessitated the sorting through and disposal of things, but this was made more difficult by the circumstances they were under. The rationality of their decisions was interrupted both by the emotionally charged events, and the sentimental value of the objects. As a result, they had problems with both deciding what to keep and how to get rid of the things they didn't want. Therefore, storing these items allowed them to leave those decisions for another day, putting them 'on hold' to when they envisaged emotions would be less 'raw' and more rational choices could be made. This, according to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 21), frees sensations from the immediate environment so they can be dealt with in the abstract. This was evident in all the self-storage interviews that took place, but none more so than with Emma who tried to make light of the somewhat morbid embodiment of her deceased relatives in the furniture stored within her unit.

Everybody died and it's all in here! [She laughs]

– Emma (female, late 30s, grandmother's, auntie's and great-grandfather's possessions)

Having lost various relatives over the last decade, and her auntie most recently a couple of years earlier, Emma had kept her inherited items in storage along with the contents of her house whilst she was abroad for work. Returning to her storage unit for the first time after 3 year's away was a confronting experience for Emma which brought the objects and their associations sharply back into consciousness.

Frank's need for self-storage, like many, came about after his parents had passed away. His father had died a few years before, and whilst he knew his mother was getting frail her death had still been unexpected. Making the arrangements for her funeral fell to Frank, as did dealing with her estate in accordance with the terms of the will. This meant clearing everything out of her house within the space of a few weeks so it could be sold, and assets distributed to family members. However, whilst these processes needed to take place relatively quickly, divestment of possessions is, in fact, a gradual process that takes place over many years and can be mapped onto the process of grieving (Miller 2010, p. 147).

[We] haven't had a chance to suss it out. We sold the property... she passed away in January 27th and then we, uh, we sold the property by the middle of March. So we had to sort things out very quickly.

– Frank (male, late 50s, mother's possessions)

Talking to me less than 5 months after his bereavement, Frank suggested that focusing on the practicalities under this time pressure meant that he pushed his emotions to one side. Similarly, Graham described the situation immediately after his partner's mother had passed away as 'business-like', rationalising the sorting process into three initial categories.

[At the beginning] it had to be done quite business-like, and at the time we were making decisions about what came to [the] store and what didn't. It was, well, three decisions: throw out, charity [or] store.

– Graham (male, late 50s, partner's mother's possessions)

Those in the 'store' category could then be returned to, therefore displacing some of the emotional labour of sorting to a later date. Indeed, at the time of our interview, 18 months on from the bereavement, Graham described how the prospect of sorting through her mother's effects is still too difficult for his partner, as the emotions around her loss and the memories attached to many of her possessions are too raw to handle.

We've discussed getting rid of some of the stuff. It isn't the right time for my partner to do that because although her mother has now passed away, um about... a year and a half ago now, there is still some fairly strong memories and a certain sentimental value to some of the stuff in there. [...] She'll get there but it's just not right for her at the moment. I mean she was very close to her mum and um... although at the end it was all pretty predictable it was going to happen, it wasn't a shock, but it was still obviously very upsetting and um... You know the wounds are still slightly open I think on that one, so yeh.



– Graham (male, late 50s, partner's mother's possessions)

Steve described a quite different scenario in which he had been required to step in when emotions had run high immediately after the loss of his mother. Firstly, he needed to help his brother who had shared the house with his mother but for a number of reasons wasn't able to cope with the task which impacted directly on his daily living situation.

When she died it was kind of necessary for someone to take control of the situation, make the house habitable for my brother and allow it for it to become his space, you know. [...] He needed time to grieve because obviously, he'd lost somebody he lived with his whole life.

– Steve (male, early 60s, mother's possessions)

Secondly, rash decisions made by relatives had led to some items being sold or 'picked' from Steve's mother and brother's house without the consent of the rest of the family, and ultimately resulted in 'bad blood'. Therefore, Steve needed to find a quick solution to avoid further disputes and relocated the majority of his mother's possessions, which were surplus to those needed by his brother, to the safety of self-storage two months after she had passed away.

[It's] this sort of autonomous space where you know you're not borrowing anybody's space, you're not borrowing anybody's time, you're not being any inconvenience. [...] So] it's not invading anybody else in the family, it's not encroaching on anyone else's goodwill. All those petty potential disputes that arise over people's belongings and things. And basically, it's given people time to think. [...] It means we can take time, no one has to sort of go sorting through belongings straight away, no one's in there grabbing stuff. You know 'I need that, I need that'.

– Steve (male, early 60s, mother's possessions)

Putting his mother's belonging behind lock and key meant his imagined worst-case scenario of a '*really aggressive, really emotional*' situation with '*people sort of tugging over something*' did not happen, and competing claims over things were less likely to occur upon reengagement after some time and distance to mourn because feelings of grief would no longer have such a strong hold over decisions. Displacing his mothers' effects into self-storage was the best possible way Steve could accommodate the '*different layers and levels of grief*' felt by family members, which over time had loosened its grip allowing him and his siblings to move forwards with the process of sorting through and distributing or selling his mother's items.

It's kind of getting to the point where the group is diminishing. So at the start somebody dies [and] everyone's got a look in. Everyone wants the funeral to behave a certain way, preacher to say certain things, buffet to have certain items on it. You know, things like that. Slowly now there's only the four immediate siblings.

– Steve (male, early 60s, mother's possessions)

Following a bereavement, the ability to reconcile with loss can be made harder by needing to work out what should be done with the deceased's effects. By virtue of being a liminal, temporary space, self-storage can provide relief when sorting is too difficult to do at that particular moment, putting it (temporarily) emotionally on hold as other mourning practices take precedence. In storage, things are maintained physically, kept in stasis until the right time comes to re-engage with them and make divestment decisions. In addition, self-storage emerges as a helpful space which doesn't impinge on the space or goodwill of family members, thereby avoiding rash decisions and potentially aggressive family confrontations.

### ***Sorting through meaning and memory***

Bereavement is a key moment in many people's lives when they are faced with the size of their relatives' 'material convoy' which they have accumulated over the life course (Smith and Ekerdt 2011) and the enormity of the task of sorting through it. Family members who may be simultaneously grateful and burdened by the convoy being passed on (Hallam and Hockey 2001; Horton and Kraftl 2012) often experience this task as a "collective and trans-generational matter" (Smith and Ekerdt 2011, p. 389). The material effects of the deceased carry with them a desire and obligation to remember, which may be felt more keenly immediately following the bereavement.

Frank described the importance of having sufficient time to undertake the emotional task of going through his late parents' things in enough detail to ascertain what needed to be kept and what could be thrown away. Sifting through their household effects required him to continually reengage with his loss and make rational decisions about emotionally-charged items.

What you find is that you think 'I need to get rid of [this and that]', and you're going through stuff and you can't really 'I need to look at that a bit more detail'. So it's this procrastination, time element, availability of time.

– Frank (male, late 50s, mother's possessions)

Time is important, as Frank points out, not only in terms of having the time to do things properly but also what he calls 'procrastination'. Describing it in this way Frank is underplaying the necessity for time and space to grieve before re-engaging with things, equating his deliberate inaction with a character fault rather than his emotional need to temporarily withdraw.

Much earlier in the sorting process than Frank, despite more time having passed since her bereavement, Graham's partner had a considerable task ahead of her to sort through her late mother's possessions. As one of two siblings, it was important for her to share this task with her sister, so they arranged a time for her to visit from the other side of the country to look through the stuff together. To facilitate this, Graham temporarily hired another unit

next to the one already they already rented, so that there was room for the sisters to unbox and view the things properly.

We created a time point in October/ November where Hillary's sister could come and have a look at and sort out stuff. We extracted quite a lot of photograph albums that they could go through. And they spent quite a... I'd say an emotional weekend doing that. [...] with a view to either keeping some of the photographs or throwing them out. [They were able to] sit down and reflect back over their parent's life again. And I left them to that, you know. Those were very personal things for her, and she and her sister just sat there and you could hear them chatting and having a laugh or having a cry or whatever.

– Graham (male, late 50s, partner's mother's possessions)

Sorting through their parent's possessions was an emotional task for Graham's partner and her sister, who laboriously went through every item. Whilst choosing what to keep and what to dispose of they also had the chance to recount memories of their parents and their own lives growing up. As Horton and Kraftl (2012, p. 35) suggest, having the time and space to sort through things allowed memories, identities and relationships to be materialised in a way that supported the sisters through their bereavement, and this was made possible through placing the things in self-storage.

Steve and his family, who had initially struggled with conflicts over his mother's effects immediately after his death, had a new perspective on the items after a period where they were distanced from their everyday lives by being in self-storage for nearly half a year.

People have come back and said initially things and then refined it. And you can see how this process is quite good because it's coming back and realising that the mirror doesn't really fit in their house or whatever. So instead of saying 'I've always loved that mirror' because it evoked some emotional memory of being at gran's, you know the cold light of day sets in and you start to think 'If I did have that mirror where would it go?'

...

My daughter changed from wanting so many items and she's ended up taking an oil painting. [...] By taking [things] off view does really allow them to think about what they truly remember.

– Steve (male, early 60s, mother's possessions)

As Marcoux (2001, p. 83) attests in relation to moving house, sorting, whilst it potentially can be stressful, is also "a means to reshuffle relationships and memories by bringing them back into consciousness". Sorting through effects belonging to deceased loved ones, whether with the luxury of storage to create distance or not, requires that each memory and feeling be resurfaced in turn and judged for its place in future memorialisation practices. Following a period distanced from things, Steve's family had a newly refined idea

of what they wanted to keep to remember their loved one, which was born, not just from meaning and memory, but ideas of taste, self-identity and practicalities (Hurdley 2013, pp. 122-123).

### ***Divesting and moving on***

Several participants described how as well as making decisions on what to keep and what to dispose of, they came up against additional difficulty in finding an appropriate owner for things they wished to pass on. In Graham's partner's unit, there were four large plastic boxes containing piano and vocal music. Her mother had been a music teacher and this was a passion they had shared, both performing in choirs. This meant that she was equally concerned with finding the sheet music a good home where it would be appreciated (Belk 1995) and conscious of losing tangible signifiers of her mother's life (Korosec-Serfaty 1984, p. 313).

There are some bits in there that are long forgotten, which may have value to people who collect that sort of stuff. So, it's not monetary value but it seems a shame to lose them, it's scores for GNS and 60-year-old variety songs of something. [...] We think there is an Oxfam music shop which we can leave that [sheet music], and we would hope they would find good homes. And I think that is part of it really, just some of the stuff isn't the money it's making sure that the heritage, if you like, around it isn't lost.

...

I think there are certain things in there that are... things like some of the wonderful hats her mother used to wear. But they are too good to chuck away, and putting them into charity isn't the right thing either.

– Graham (male, late 50s, partner's mother's possessions)

This sentiment of finding the 'right' disposal channel was also why Graham's partner was reticent to dispose of her mother's hat collection without appropriate care and thought. Gregson et al. (2007, p. 685) describe this feeling of anxiety "as a sense that someone, somewhere else could be a more appropriate keeper or custodian of such things". Donating the sheet music to a charity shop, was seen by Graham's partner to be a positive form of disposal that met their approval, and became an opportunity to reinscribe their meaning from being inalienable and indisposible by virtue of their close association to her mother, to alienable and disposable as they could find a new 'social life' through the right avenue (Appadurai, 1986; Horne & Maddrell, 2002, p. 68).

We took a couple of boxes out, collectables, with a view to photograph them to sell them online. Um, we've also made contact with interest groups who collect thimbles and that sort of thing. We're always very busy doing something else so we never really get round to doing it in a fairly organised way. So um... it's a slow chip at the moment. [He laughs]

– Graham (male, late 50s, partner's mother's possessions)

Taking this level of care is a time-consuming process, so having the time to undergo the sorting and divestment objects, was just as important for Graham's partner as having the time to grieve prior to these practices.

Steve, who had recently retrained as a psychotherapist, happily self-analysed his emotional response and actions, and those of his family, following the death of his elderly mother in great detail.

It's really been waiting to reach this lull when, you know, when the sadness has become slightly less desperate. [...] So we're starting to get to the stage now where most people have stopped hurting and the grieving process has eased, largely. There are no anniversaries or anything like that coming up in a window now until November, so that's kind of the ideal time now to come in and start sorting through it, decide whether to dispose of it, or decide whether we want to keep it you know, or sell things.

– Steve (male, early 60s, mother's possessions)

Steve identified that a suitable time had passed and the family's loss was being felt less intensely, which allowed them to start sorting through his mother's household belongings. This further justified his decision (and the cost) to rent large self-storage containers for an extended period. He envisaged this would take another 6 months, bringing the total storage time to a year.

Myles remarked that after leaving his mother's things in self-storage, he and his siblings were able to make considered judgements un-clouded by grief and time pressure, and ultimately they ended up keeping very little.

We just put everything into the unit basically and left it there for a while until it was, like, less painful to go through the whole experience. And then we just kind of did it over a couple of weekends, went through everything when we felt we could do that. Uh, you know, make a sensible decision about what to keep and what not to keep, rather than being, you know, being really raw and it being harder not to keep everything, you know what I mean. [...] So as it happens we didn't really keep much of the stuff at all, but we just felt better about having taken a longer time to decide that I guess.

– Myles (male, late 40s, mother's possessions)

The findings of this research echo Miller's study in South London (2009), in which he found participants describing the process of disposing of objects "as a kind of repair mechanism that made them feel whole again in dealing with rupture and trauma" (2010, p. 147). The often stressful events that surround bereavement, and motivate the use of self-storage, create opportunities to sort through and re-evaluate things and the relationships they

embody. But also, having sufficient time and space to grieve before sorting through and divesting things must be an important part of this 'repair' following bereavement.

### ***Final resting place***

Whilst some stored possessions occupy a liminal state in limbo until decisions are made about their fate and others enter storage on their way to disposal there remain some objects for which storage is their final resting place. As Vicky states: "*There are things that are there and will always be there*". Epp and Price (2010, p. 833) describe this as a puzzling phenomenon as often these displaced possessions are deemed by their owners to be central to their identities and yet do not reside in visible spaces of the home. However, we can understand their storage as important in more regenerative, than performative, identity practices. These things embody 'continuing bonds' between the living and deceased (Klass et al. 1996), and they resonate with personal and relational meaning. They may be brought out and re-engaged with periodically during a move or when an external trigger brings them to the forefront of the person's mind, but they will always go back.

Kept and stored things narrate memories of people, places and events that have shaped their owner's biography, and as Cwerner and Metcalfe (2003, p. 236) affirm their dispersal is not from apathy towards the objects but because they are particular things that people want to keep. Indeed Bye and McKinney (2007, p. 495) argue that sentimental items which are held onto as important pieces of personal history 'deserve' storage space.

Yeh, so basically its only stuff I've inherited. I haven't gone out and bought these things, it's just stuff that's been passed down I suppose, so in that respect those items mean more to me. Um, even though the person has gone I guess in some way...

– Emma (female, late 30s, grandmother's, auntie's and great-grandfather's possessions)

Returning to her things after a period living abroad Emma had the opportunity to re-evaluate their (continuing) place in her life. She expressed how the embodiment of her relatives in her inherited furniture meant they had a more special status than things she could buy, and this attachment exempt them from any attempts to sort through and slim down her possessions.

Vicky described how a collection of small ornaments sparked very vivid memories of caring for her grandma, particularly performing household tasks for her. So, despite having a personal dislike for ornaments and not having any on display in her home, she had kept these in storage as a reminder of the love felt for and by her late grandma and the embodiment of their relationship, as well as a distinct time in her life.

Down at the side in that box, down there, the plastic box is erm, things of sentiment from my grandma, crappy little ornaments that you would have had in the 70s and things like that. [...] Erm, my sister wasn't interested in

having anything like that. Neither were either of my brothers. And erm, it was just a case of I didn't want them throwing away. Just because... I think because they represented my childhood so much cos I spent a lot of time with my gran. And they sort of represented, it was her house and I used to go help her because she had very bad legs, she had ulcerated legs. So I would go and I would dust for her and things like that, see. [...] Yeh so they reminded me of her in that way and I just didn't want to let go of them.

– Vicky (female, late 40s, grandmother's possessions)

The ornaments carry the memory of the person who had owned them but has now passed away. Their monetary worth is unimportant as, having functionally evolved into keepsakes, their value does not rest so much with the physical objects but rather in their origin and associations (Finch and Mason 2000, p. 142). The keepsakes' special status means they not only symbolise Vicky's grandmother but also represent her, standing in as a means of embodiment where a physical body and person are no longer existing. As 'one-ended tie signs' these things are capable of lasting longer than the relationship they signify (Goffman 1971, p. 195).

During the wider research project, when referring to things kept as memories of their own life events participants often seemed embarrassed that they might be perceived as materialistic. However, when talking about the objects that they had kept because they signified relationships with (often deceased) loved ones this was not the case. In fact, a number of participants, including Vicky, openly stated the importance and irreplaceable nature of their memorialising things.

Everything else can be replaced. The sentimental goods can't because there's things that you obviously can't get back. [...] I've got a couple of things from, erm, when my dad was alive, gifts that... There is a teddy in there in one of the bags that he bought my daughter when she was a baby. And this one he bought my son and it's got Beni on it and my son's called Ben and he bought my son that when he was born. Erm, my dad died, god, 18 years ago this year. Once again there's things you can't replace so you wouldn't throw them away.

– Vicky (female, late 40s, grandmother's possessions)

In the same way as keepsakes, gifted objects either given directly or indirectly as heirlooms (Finch and Mason 2000) enable mediation between the 'gifter' and the 'giftee' even when they aren't present (Dant 1999). The teddy bear gifted to Vicky's son by her father is very important in several ways: the embodiment of their relationships and memorialising her deceased father, as well as the event of her son's birth. For these reasons, and probably more, Vicky will never throw the teddy away, choosing to store it as protection from physical and, perhaps, emotional deterioration. By placing objects in self-storage their affective qualities lie dormant. So it is only when they are brought back out that they come into consciousness and prompt reflection, temporarily bringing together the 'there and

then' with the 'here and now' in productive new ways (Peters 2014). Storage spaces, within and beyond the home, are de facto museums of family history which aren't desired in the home but cannot be thrown away (Hirschman et al. 2012).

## **Conclusion**

Much of this paper builds upon existing research which foregrounds the inalienable value of objects and the heightening of emotions through encounters with objects both in the immediate aftermath and further period following bereavement. The examples in this paper show that many cope with negatively emotion-laden consumer decisions with avoidance, by storing objects out of sight and out of mind for temporary or more permanent periods. The practice of storing objects belonging to a deceased loved one, and putting decisions regarding their fate 'on hold', emerges as a strategy for coping with memories and associations that are still too raw (Muzaini 2015). Through their explicit efforts to distance the objects, participants in this research could be seen to be attempting to make everyday lived spaces more 'safe'. Choosing to spatialise at least some material triggers of their bereavement and mourning into a space which can be locked away and re-engaged with when they decide they are more ready to deal with it (Maddrell 2016). Therefore, self-storage acts as a solution at a time of bereavement or distressing life events; provides distance from things, enabling potentially easier sorting later down the line; and alters or delays the severity of the attempts to slim down objects.

Wider death studies are yet to study more calculated, as opposed to compassionate, responses to grief within families and the lived reality of negotiating family disputes over possessions following the loss of a family member. As was seen from Steve's experience, relationships which may already be strained following the death of a family member can be further tested whilst sorting through and distributing their material effects. Therefore, focus should acknowledge if and how the affective condition of austerity (see Hall 2019; Hitchin 2019) can impact on family relations through the process of dealing with material effects of the deceased. Perhaps through a more cynical lens, the allocation or giving and taking of objects may be seen to play out based on the opportunity to redistribute family 'wealth' to the most 'deserving' or 'in need' in a way which does not obviously highlight inequalities between family members.

The immediate period following the death of a loved one is fraught with difficult decisions and tensions which must be negotiated amongst family members. Sorting through material effects is an arduous and time-consuming task, which participants in this research agreed was made easier by displacing and returning to the objects after a period to grieve. It is worth noting that for the participants in this study, choosing to rent self-storage space, the cost of their pausing or indecision equates to a real financial cost. Importantly, the act of displacing emotionally triggering objects from the moment or space of distress is likely to not be unique to bereavement, so better understanding of storage practices has the potential to provide insights into other losses and events across the life course.



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<sup>i</sup> All names used are pseudonyms.