

'Makers, make do and mend': a newly thrifty consumer?

Helen Holmes

Sociology/Sustainable Consumption Institute, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester.

Introduction

Thrift, austerity and frugality are terms often used interchangeably, permeating contemporary society, economics and politics. Operating in a liminal zone between the frugality of 'making ends meet' and romanticised recollections of war time austerity, and a resurgence in self-provisioning activities, thrift in its various forms has unprecedented currency in both contemporary media and political discourse. Yet, everyday thrift practice remains neglected by research both from a material culture and temporality approach. This is in spite of the continued pressure upon households both temporally and financially, as wages still fail to keep pace with the cost of living and consumers remain concerned about their financial futures (Mintel, 2014).

This research project will use a mixed methods approach, engaging with households, and service users and providers, to understand how thrift is materialised and temporalized by consumers. By focusing on the practices, objects and trajectories of thrift, it will offer significant insight into the political economies of households during, and potentially following, a period of financial instability and hardship in the UK. Such research has huge implications for future policy decisions regarding the economy, family support services, waste and sustainability.



Background

To date the majority of research on thrift has focused on the rise of austerity discourse within politics and also consumerism, exploring how thrift and austerity are often positioned as the antithesis to over-consumption (Bramall, 2013; Podkalicka and Potts, 2014). Often such work has a focus on food, for instance investigating the rapid rise in food banks (Alkon et al., 2013), or alternatively, thrift's deployment in the fashionable and affluent foodscapes of contemporary Britain (Potter and Westall, 2013). Other work has sought to address how the future is imagined and materialised in an age of austerity; whilst a small body of work has begun to address how austerity impacts upon family relations and households (Flaherty & Banks, 2013). Fragments of these studies touch upon practice; a sliver on food waste (Evans, 2012) also addresses temporality.

This project will investigate contemporary thrifty consumption and the temporalities, practices and materialities which underpin it. Thrift requires the deployment of practices and habits of consumption, including, but also extending, far beyond purchasing decisions. It often requires time in seeking out cheaper options, and changes to rhythms, frequencies and tempos of practices to take advantage of the 'best' deals. Time may be devoted to the mending and repairing of objects. Similarly, lending and sharing practices require temporal flexibility and an acceptance of the rhythms of other households and their practices.

Moreover, enduring austerity means temporary coping strategies (such as using up stocks) need to be replaced by long term habits and skills. Being flexible, organised, able to make and to mend, and possibly to lend, may be an issue for those who cannot trade time for money. In contrast, there may be those who undertake thrift as part of a lifestyle choice, pursuing particular values such as sustainable consumption, eco-austerity or 'Slow Food'.

For objects there are issues of durability and value, alongside technologies that enable and constrain thrift (smart meters, freezers, slow cookers). The lives of objects may be extended and prolonged beyond their conventional consumer lifecycles. Alternative uses may be deployed for those rendered obsolete and outdated. Therefore, decay and waste become central as decisions must be made as to when objects are beyond any valuable use and their thrift exhausted. Similarly, there are risks with thrift practices – for example, reheating leftover food increases exposure to bacteria and illness.

Aims

1. To develop an enduring, critical understanding of contemporary thrift through a sustained focus on lived everyday experience, temporality, materiality and practice, which will enhance and develop contemporary conceptualisations of consumption, particularly within wider political and cultural debates on austerity, overconsumption, sustainability and waste.
2. To apply an innovative mixed methods approach to the research, including qualitative approaches in the form of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, alongside new quantitative methods such as time use diaries and surveys, as well as archival data in the form of a Mass Observation directive, and also online research tools including a website and a blog.
3. To work with organisations interested in thrift, particularly third sector organisations (including food banks and credit unions) and their service users to develop a reflective dialogue about thrift, with the long-term aims of improving and enhancing services, and communicating the findings of the research collaboratively to other such organisations

Methods

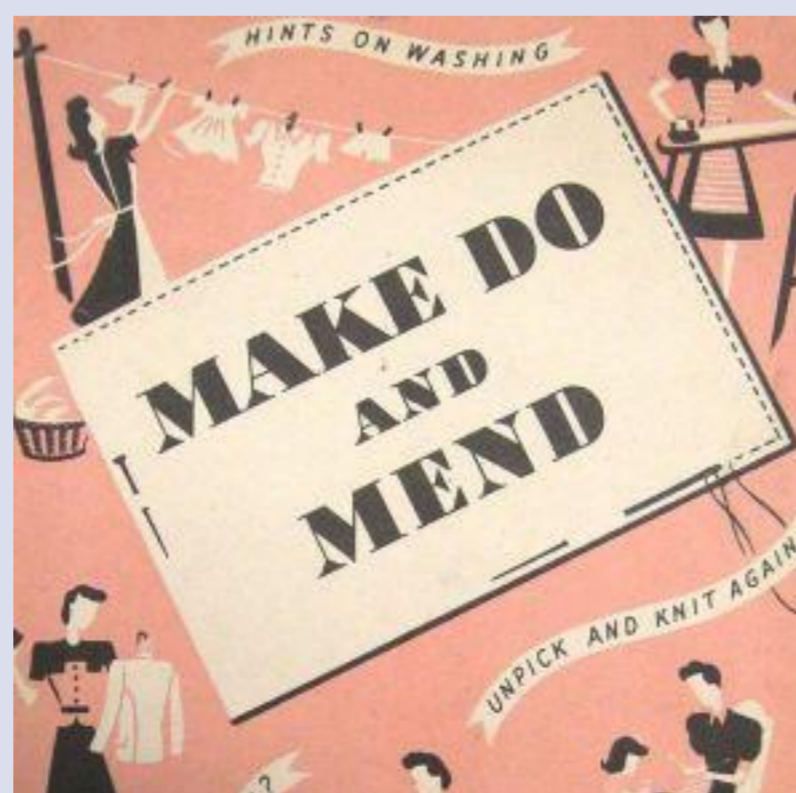
The research design consists of a mixed methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative empirical research, alongside more innovative and creative approaches to tease out thrift practice. It will involve:

Transect - the research will centre along and around a transect – the A671 Oldham to Whalley Road. The transect includes some of the least deprived and most deprived areas of the country.

Voluntary organisations - participant observation work for 18 months with four voluntary organisations in and around the transect who have agreed to support the project, including a credit union, a food bank, and community allotment society. Relationships are also being developed with three other supporting organisations, including Lancashire County Council.

Households – recruitment externally along the transect, using leafleting, community notice boards and visiting local groups. Recruiting approx. 30 participant households. The participant households will be interviewed three times over a 12 month period using a range of methods including time use diaries and material culture approaches, such as cupboard audits and visual methods to capture the lives of objects.

Mass Observation - funds permitting a Mass Observation Directive will be issued on the subject of thrift practice in Summer/Autumn 2016.



Impact

Several pathways to impact have been identified:

Collaboration and application

- Enthusiasm from organisations
- Co-production with organisations – collaborative analysis, knowledge exchange through research design and workshops
- Mass Observation collaboration providing an enduring and accessible account of contemporary thrift

Communication and engagement

- Clear communications plan – including project brand identity to ensure the project is recognisable and consistent
- Website and blog, alongside use of social media - enabling public to reflect and engage with project
- Workshop(s) to unite service users, providers, research participants and other parties (including policymakers) to reflect on findings of project and provoke dialogue potentially improve services and policy provision
- Publicity materials (funds permitting) for recruitment and to disseminate findings
- Reports to interested supporting parties – M&S, Trussell Trust

Evaluation and monitoring

- Monthly update meetings with mentor
- Ongoing feedback with participants
- Evaluation questionnaires at workshop
- Online feedback forms
- Web stats

Publications

A minimum of four journal articles will be produced:

- Two empirically based addressing thrifty consumption, its practices, materials and temporalities
- One that addresses the implications of thrift practices for sustainability and waste issues in the UK
- One methodological piece discussing the methodological innovations used with the research and their contribution to similar research on practice, temporality and material culture.

Conferences

Presentations at several key conferences to showcase the research:

- British Sociological Association, Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers
- Conference of the International Society for the Study of Time June 2016
- If funds permit an international conference – Association of American Geographers, International Sociology Association Conference, European Sociological Association.

Other activities

- Attending networking events on related themes.
- Giving and attending related seminars and workshops
- Optimising knowledge exchange opportunities with external partners – both for this project and for other potential research moving forward.
- Disseminating the research where possible through learning and teaching.

References

- Alkon, A., Block, D., Moore, K., Gillis, C., DiNuccio, N. and Chavez, N. (2013) Foodways of the urban poor. *Geoforum*, 48: 126-135.
- Bramall, R. (2013) The austerity larder: Mapping food systems in a new age of austerity. *Journal of Consumer Culture*.
- Evans, D. (2012) Binning, gifting and recovering: The conduits of disposal in household food consumption. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30 (6): 1123-1137.
- Flaherty, J. and Banks, S. (2013) In whose interest? The dynamics of debt in poor households. *Journal of Poverty & Social Justice* 21 (3): 219-232.
- Mintel (2014) *Consumers and the Economic Outlook: Quarterly Update*. October 2014. Available at (consulted 9th October 2014): www.mintel.com.
- Podkalicka, A. and Potts, J. (2014) Towards a general theory of thrift. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 17 (3): 227-241.
- Potter, L. and Westall, C. (2013) Neoliberal Britain's Austerity Foodscape: Home Economics, Veg Patch Capitalism and Culinary Temporality. *New Formations* 80/81: 155-239.