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MESS

On domestic overflows

What a mess...

Please excuse the mess! The French anthropologist Jean Paul Filiod (2003) starts his discussion of domestic disorder with this standard greeting of guests entering the home... He points out, that a current mess often is described as a temporary disarray of a home, otherwise in a state of perfect and lasting order. The truth is of course, as he points out, that mess is the constant state in most homes and the perfect order is just a recurring utopian dream, sometimes realized after a weekend cleaning – a shortlived situation.

Mess is a word with a rich array of connotations and synonyms, showing a heightened vocabulary, from the relative docility of *disorder*, *disarray*, *clutter*, and *jumble* to stronger moral charges like *mishmash*, *untidiness*, *eyesore*, *shambles* up to the utter confusion and disorganization of *turmoil*, *wreckage* or *chaos*. Messiness occurs in many settings: from messy kitchens to messy situations or messy minds. As a verb mess can turn in several directions, messing up, with, or about. Looking at suggested antonyms of mess one finds words like order, system, harmony, neatness, beauty, calm and peace. Such antonyms underline that mess and its many siblings share an intensely cultural and moral charge – be it strong or more subdued. My order may be your mess. Differences of class, gender, ethnicity and generation are at work here and result in different strategies in ongoing battles against mess. The production of disorder is, of course, a cultural practice, mirroring changing ideas about order, value and taxonomies. (Dion, Sabri, Guillard 2014).

Such issues of messiness have been important in an ongoing interdisciplinary project on *Managing Overflow*, a study of the ways in which people and organizations cope with “too much” - too much stuff or information, too many choices and activities (see Czarniawska and Löfgren 2012 and 2014). In this project my focus has been on the crowded home, overflowing with stuff, feelings and activities. Questions of domestic mess tend to be strongly related to the recurring debates on what is seen as over- or hyper-consumption, a strongly morally and normative charged territory. The same goes for definitions of overflows, which in some situations can be defined as blessing but in the contemporary Western world they are more often presented as a haunting problem. In our project we have looked at when, where, how and for whom is a situation defined as overflow and what kinds of attitudes and coping

strategies are present. Mess is often seen as “too much” or stuff out of control, overflowing, leaking, piling up...

The overcrowded home

There is a long history of heated discussions of domestic mess, often linked to nostalgia for earlier times of “simple living” or utopias of future minimalist lives, which I will return to. For now let us stay with the contemporary situation.

One attempt to explore such micro-universes of stuff is an anthropological study of thirty-two Californian homes, *Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century*, in which a team of researchers made detailed ethnographies of domestic life and stuff (Arnold et al 2012). The first household assemblage they analysed had 2,260 visible possessions in the first three rooms that were documented (two bedrooms and the living room), not counting all the stuff that was out of sight in lockers, closets or drawers. After that, they gave up counting. The people interviewed often complained about their homes “being a mess”. There were stations in which stuff piled up, or “dumping grounds” as someone called them. Storage spaces developed everywhere, often quite unplanned, like the garage, where there was no longer room for a car, or bedroom corners and other such unused in-between spaces. But the best example is empty tables, seducingly empty...

In these interviews with Californian families, the theme of messiness occurs frequently, mainly among the wives:

This is the office. It’s a total mess. We probably should, you know, organize it better... And here we have the garage, with everything. It is usually a total mess and it’s a total mess today again. This is where we have bikes and all the old furniture, sofas and things we don’t use. It is, how can I say it, it’s a mess. It’s not fun, it should be cleaned up and we should probably get rid of a whole bunch of stuff (Arnold 2012: 26).

In many ways the home is a good example of what Doreen Massey (2005) has called the throwntogetherness of everyday life. Affects, activities and materialities work together, reinforcing or transforming each other.

In such domestic entanglements, stuff, feelings and routines are transformed into new uses or functions. Just think about the ways in which waste, junk and dirt are, in cultural terms, produced by processes such as displacement, sorting out and recategorization, as in Mary Douglas’s classic credo: “Dirt is matter out of place” (see the discussions in Douglas 1966 and Thompson 1979).

Some collections of stuff survive by becoming invisible – domestic driftwood in plain sight on the top of the shelf or in the garage corner but no longer noticed. This state of affairs may survive for a long time. Other kinds of messes turn into a constant eyesore or provoke feelings of guilt.

The Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård (2012:260) takes a look around his overflowing kitchen and stops at the two shelves on the wall next to the window:

...swelling coral reef-like over all the small things the kids had collected over the last years, from sweet dispensers formed like princesses or different Disney-characters, boxes with pearls, pearl boards, glue pens, toy cars, and water colours, to jigsaw pieces, Playmobil parts, letters and bills, dolls...

He reflects on the constant battle between chaos and order that goes on in Western homes and the ways that the material world is always about to take over. What he describes is not a collection of discrete elements, but what he calls “a coral reef of stuff”. As Maurizia Boscagli has pointed out in her discussions of this abundance, contemporary Western homes are crowded not so much with objects but with *stuff*, non-descript heaps, bundles, piles, assemblages. She defines *stuff* as materiality out of bounds (Boscagli 2014:3). It is things on the move, displaced, left or lost. Taking Boscagli’s perspective into different domestic contexts, it is possible to explore some of the forms that the production of stuff takes.

Decluttering life

Following the transformations of the word mess during the 19th century from its original meaning of a dish of (mixed) food it came to be negatively charged, as in “an unappealing concoction of foodstuffs” and then into the contemptuous use for "jumble, mixed mass" (1828), and figurative sense of "state of confusion" (1834), as well as "condition of untidiness" (1851). (See the discussion in the Oxford English Dictionary and www.thesaurus.com.)

Later on in the 19th century mess metaphorically colonized new arenas: messy persons, messy homes or lives. It is tempting to see the rise this negative redefinition as a child of the Victorian middle class obsession with cultural order and the motto “there is a time and place for everything”. Do not mix activities and stuff in improper ways! The kitchen should be used for cooking only, food should be consumed in the dining room.

Words like tidy, neat and proper became frequent. This battle against improper mixes and combinations were carried out on many fronts: in rules of interior decoration, in everyday activities as well as in advice on cooking (see Frykman and Löfgren 1985:221 ff). Laura

Shapiro (1986) has discussed how American immigrants at the turn of the 19th century were taught to stop cooking their traditional mixed dishes, like stews and pots, but arrange meals with ingredients neatly placed next to each other: meat, potatoes, vegetables.

The battle against messiness grew and became part of the moral economy of the ideal home. Campaigns for de-cluttering came to be based on different ideological and moral grounds. As Scott Herring (2014) has pointed out campaigns for fighting domestic mess came to be linked to the new ideas of scientific management in household life, during the first decades of the 20th century. In 1925 scientific housekeeper Caroline Bartlett Crane wrote: "Are our houses cluttered with disguised liabilities, rooms we don't effectually use, pictures we don't see (and like, are not worth seeing), useless furniture and brica-a-brac we haven't the courage to get rid of?" (quoted in Herring 2014:91). De-cluttering campaigns came and went, often with the linking of material and mental cluttering: declutter your mind, your home and your life at the same time. In recent years inspiration has come from new directions, from Feng-shui to ideas about sustainable living,

The early 21st century has seen an accelerated growth in de-cluttering advice and services in self-help books, counselling and coaching, TV-shows, interior design and smart storage system developments, (see the discussion in Belk and Ferguson). In Sweden domestic cleaning services have expanded greatly, with names like *Peaceful homes*, *Clean living*, *Home Bliss*, *Eco Cleaning*, *Fresh Home*, *Easy Clean*, *Elite Clean*, *Lady Dust...*

What is most striking in this history, however, is the way storage technologies have expanded over the past decades. Compare IKEA catalogues, for example. Storage is not a big theme in 1990, whereas the pages are bursting with smart storage technologies in 2015. There are sophisticated wardrobe systems, as well as boxes, containers, and labeling systems in all shapes and forms. As Cecilia Cassinger (2010) has pointed out in her analysis of IKEA, the company not only sells storage systems, but also increasingly educates its customers in "smart storage solutions" and ways of organizing their day.

Never good enough

The torrent of advice and admonitions create attempts at reorganizing the home. There is the constant dream of a simpler or even a minimalist home, and there are many (often half-hearted) attempts at reform, of consuming less and getting rid of more and becoming a better organized household. There are fantasies about the perfect homes of others. An important domestic feeling and mood setter is guilt: guilt about not having a good enough home or family life perhaps, with a lack of control and order. Such questions of guilt and the gap

between ideals and reality are closely tied to the constant visits of invisible guests, those imaginary judges or censors that tell people what a perfect or good home should look like. Guilt about messy homes is attached to class. Among middle-class Victorians there was a constant discussion of the messy life in working class homes and organized campaigns for moral rearmament. Intellectual bohemians, on the other hand, were granted a greater leeway. Their domestic disorder could be seen as problematic but also as creative and thus excusable compared to working-class disorder.

In such debates gender of course played a major role. Who is to blame for a home that is not living up to standards of order, normality or cleanliness? Or as Walsh xxxx:45 has put it:

Home work is a work done behind closed doors. Unlike cutting a board to make a bed, it leaves no evidence. Time is undone each time the bed is made up. Home work – cleaning, ironing, washing – is undoing.

The Swedish author Kristina Sandberg recently finished a trilogy she called “1500 pages of kitchen sink existentialism” (Sandberg xxxx). It is a story based on her grandmother’s life as a housewife from the late 1930s up into the 1970s. A male reader asked her why she didn’t write a short manual on cleaning instead. Why all these detailed descriptions of cooking, washing up, vacuuming, tidying the home? Sandberg answer was that she wanted the so called “little world of housekeeping” take on the leading part and we follow Maj not only over and over again going through all the routines of reproducing the everyday, going tired to bed with a shining kitchen, which will get messy again next day, a work rarely noticed – or only when it is not perfect enough. Maj constantly has to measure herself - is she up to standards as a housewife. To throw a last glance on to the shiny kitchen sink and the tidy living room before going to bed – or a perfectly laid out Sunday dinner table - those are moments of temporary bliss, then comes another day trying to clean out worries, anxiety or fear of new catastrophes. Never good enough!

Knausgård has a similar take. The stuff piling up in the apartment could give his wife panic-like attacks and lead to expeditions to IKEA:

...it was the feeling of chaos it gave her, which she couldn’t handle. Often she came home with storage utensils, which should sort of organize everything; different boxes for different things, a tray for my post, one for hers, marked with our names, as she had seen at other people’s places who seemed to be orderly, but the systems collapsed after a few days, and everything flowed out again as before.

Knausgård also embarked on projects of de-cluttering, but had to give up. It was as if the things “were alive, as if they lay there and pulled stuff towards them in order to grow and be powerful”. He keeps reassuring himself that this was not a moral issue:

We were not bad people, even if we were messy. It was not a sign of bad morals. This I tried to say to myself, but it didn't help, the feelings were too strong; when I walked around in the mess, it was as if it accused me, accused us, we were bad parents and bad people. (2012:262)

Guilt may transform the home, present it in a special light, demanding certain activities or blocking others. The power of guilt also becomes visible in attempts to fight it. In 2009, the Swedish artist Lotta Sjöberg started the Facebook project *Family living – the true story* by posting pictures of her untidy home – a project that would have shocked Maj deeply. The aim: to create a contrast to “the ideal of the perfect home that is swamping us in newspapers, TV-shows and real estate advertisements” (Sjöberg 2014: 3). In 2014 the project had 23,000 followers who contributed photos of their untidy and at times chaotic homes as well as supportive comments. One called the site “a refuge from perfection”, others sent in specimens of their hand-embroidered wall hangings with texts like “life is too short to be dust free”, “a clean kitchen is a sign of a wasted life” (to stay true to the ambition of non-perfection, some of the embroideries were only half-finished).

Materializing moralities

Over the last century mess has turned into a powerful concept in domestic setting, colonizing different arenas as a descriptive but also metaphorical concept, often with strong moral charges. A cluttered home may thus signal a cluttered home, a messy kitchen a messy person. Mess becomes a sign of personal shortcomings or lack of control. Domestic mess is disorder and incompetence materialized in very concrete and visible ways. This explains why questions of mess and cluttering easily are turned into battle arenas over normality, control and morals, not only for family members but between social groups or the state and its messy citizens – it is easily linked to hierarchies of gender, class and ethnicity.

For many people defining and handling mess is seen as an endless battle for a balanced everyday life. The rules for this ongoing fight change over time and between contexts. At times domestic disorder has been pathologized into hoarding or personal loss of control (see Herring 2014). Other times the focus has been on how the focus on tidiness and order becomes a dangerous and irrational obsession, taking over life. Abrahamson and Freedman (2007) discuss such changes and balancing-acts in their book “The Perfect Mess”. For

individuals questions of mess can turn into soul-searching reflections.

A male university lecture put it like this:

I cannot understand what the idea of mess does to me. When I have folded the children's clothes neatly in the cupboard, there is a feeling of blissful order, but as soon as they start wearing those clothes disorder is back again. Shouldn't I just keep the cupboard closed?

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