

## “When We Got Divorced, I Left All My Things Behind”. How the Lifespan of Household Goods Is Linked to the Biographical Trajectory of Their Owners

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**Abstract:** Social science research suggests that in our current affluent society, most individuals are accustomed to replacing their objects rather than keeping them at all costs. However, in this society, some individuals still try to keep their objects for a long time. How do they come to be concerned about products’ lifespan? The literature has proposed a whole series of explanatory factors, mainly in terms of resources (psychological, economic, social), but has never used a diachronic approach that takes into account the evolution of individual practices in the life course. In this paper, analyzing interviews conducted with sixty individuals seeking to make their objects last, I adopt a biographical approach to understand two things. First, I study how the practice of extending the life span of objects takes root: I show that the tendency to keep objects for a long time can come from the familial milieu, just as it can happen later, in connection with significant experiences with objects, with the reception of messages disseminated by the media and/or with personal events. Then, I wonder how biographical events affects products’ career in the households. I focus no longer on the general relationship of the individual to objects’ lifespan, but on the career of the objects themselves. I emphasize that professional, residential, family or more global events (such as the COVID-19 crisis), which punctuate the life course of individuals, determine the fate of objects in the home.

### Introduction

Diverse scholars characterize our western countries as “throwaway societies” (Trentmann, 2016), in which most individuals are accustomed to replacing their objects rather than repairing (Cooper, 2004). However, part of the population still seeks, at least for certain objects, to preserve them: many share an aversion to waste (Brough & Isaac, 2010), and are concerned about the durability of the product they buy (Gnanapragasam et al., 2017). What can, nowadays, lead individuals to make their objects last?

Many answers have been given; they vary according to the academic disciplines. In this

article, we will focus on practices by which individuals can play a role in products’ lifespan<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1).

Marketing identifies psychological “motivations” to keep objects: aversion to waste mentioned above, but also the sentimental, instrumental, economic value accorded to the object (Okada, 2001), or the skills and tastes for repair (Diddi & Yan, 2019 ; Scott & Weaver, 2014). Design evokes characteristics of the object itself that would make you want to keep it (Page, 2014). Economists take greater account of the financial trade-offs made by individuals, explaining the propensity to repair through GDP (McCollough, Bayramoglu & He, 2018), the economic capital of consumers (McCollough, 2007) or the price

— ACQUISITION	— USE AND MAINTENANCE	— REPAIR	— DISPOSAL
— Choose an object that lasts	— Take care (observe, clean, follow the instructions...)	— Choose to repair	— Keep or store
— Take an extended warranty	— Use until it is threadbare or out of order	— Use despite malfunction (if partial failure)	— Back to the store
— Borrow or rent			— Resell
— Buy second hand			— Donate
— Limit purchases			— Recycle

**Figure 1. Individual practices that the respondents link to their wish to make objects last**

1 Not all of the practices under study have the same environmental impact: one may say that storing objects that could be used by others is not good for the planet. As a sociologist, I focus on the practices

that the majority of my respondents value, because I’m interested in consumers’ points of view rather than on the environmental impact.

of repairing vs. replacing an object (McCollough, 2009).

Sociology identifies organizations which influence individual practices: environmental issues are highlighted in the media and in government discourse, which mainly reach the classes with a strong cultural capital (Plessz et al., 2016); market players often encourages objects turnover (Spinney et al., 2012); consumer magazines reorganize the offer by operating prescriptions (Mallard, 2000); professional repairers are resources that are more or less accessible to consumers (Adriaenssens & Hendrickx, 2009 ; Welfens, Nordmann & Seibt, 2016); the other members of the household also plays a role (Miilunpalo & Räsänen, 2019). Sociology gives us another lead: the relationship to products' lifespan can be explained by social belonging. In a Bourdieusian logic (Bourdieu, 1979), it can be hypothesized that the working classes (because they are economically constrained (Hoggart, 1957)) and wealthier classes with a high level of cultural capital (who enjoy "ascetic" consumption and develop an "eco-habitus" (Carfagna et al., 2014) that values practices with low environmental impact) may tend to keep their objects more than others.

This literature on social belongings suggests one thing: preserving objects probably depends on primary socializations<sup>2</sup> inherited from the original milieu. The biographical point of view, with a return to childhood but also to different moments of socialization, would allow us to better understand how individuals come to keep their objects for a long time. Indeed, objects' trajectories in the home depend on the biographical background of their owners (Young, 1991). For example, the fact of getting rid of certain objects is linked to personal bifurcations (Hebrok, 2016); it is well known that biographical ruptures make individuals more likely to transform their consumption practices (Andreasen, 1984). In this article, we draw on other work that has analyzed consumption from a diachronic point of view (Bauer & Auer-Srnka, 2012); one paper especially inspires us: conducted on food consumption, it identifies "turning points" in individual practices: change of household such as the arrival of a child; changes in social networks; constraints faced

by individuals such as a drop in income (Plessz et al., 2016).

My contribution asks the following question: how do individuals come to be concerned about their objects' lifespan, and how does this concern vary over time and events? The issue is divided into two parts. First, we will see how individuals come to a general relationship of preservation of objects. Second, we will study how some biographical events (first salary, moving...) have an impact on day-to-day practices (purchase, repair, disposal).

## Methods

I have looked for individuals who are concerned about extending the life of their objects. They were recruited through different channels (individuals who brought an object to a Repair Café, signatories of a petition against planned obsolescence, people who were recommended to me and declared they were concerned about products' lifespan...), varying in age, gender, social class, type and surface area of dwelling, type of household. I met sixty people or couples at their homes during semi-structured interviews, lasting on average 1h45. Among these interviewees, I followed up eight households via monthly meetings over six months, so that I could observe the way objects move in the households.

## The emergence of the concern about products' lifespan in people's life course

*For a majority, an inherited consumption pattern, especially among low-income backgrounds*

The individuals surveyed did not experience a unique socialization with respect to objects. However, for most of them, the family environment fostered a tendency to keep objects for a long time. Of the 44 respondents who mentioned their parents' relationship to objects, 34 said they transmitted them some consumption habits. They are of two types:

- Sober consumption. Several respondents noted that their parents bought few items compared to their classmates' families; they

is what is transmitted during childhood by the family and/or the school.

<sup>2</sup> Socialization is a sociological concept that refers to "the way in which society shapes and transforms individuals" (Darmon, 2016). Primary socialization

also gave them few gifts on birthdays or Christmas, or gifts they thought would be useful (a desk for their room, for example).

- Care practices. Their parents would formulate rules: no jumping on the couch, punishment if they lost a personal item or broke something. Many respondents say that when they were young, they had to be "careful". They acquired a culture of maintenance: cleaning, emptying, descaling and repairing.

The remaining 10 out of 44 respondents did not experience this type of socialization. Conversely, many have built their consumption practices in the rejection of the education they received and which they negatively qualify as "consumerist". Their parents often accumulated many objects - they call them "gadgets", emphasizing their futile aspect. This often led to a saturation effect: they now share, by contrast, an ideal of minimalism.

These differences in socialization are related to the standard of living in the original milieu. 88% of respondents from working-class backgrounds have experienced sobriety and object preservation practices among their parents, compared to only 64% of respondents from higher-class backgrounds. Probably because the objects had more relative value in relation to household income, the modest backgrounds from which some of the respondents come are more concerned about the future of their objects: they are careful because the act of buying another model is financially significant.

However, richer environments may also encourage objects' preservation. Charpy already mentioned it on the bourgeois households of the 19th century which maintain their furniture heritage (Charpy, 2010). Serge, a 62-year-old managing editor, testified in an interview about how both a bourgeois and a working-class milieu can convey practices of protection towards objects, with two ways of valuing and caring for objects. He himself comes from a modest family: his father, a blue-collar worker, repaired a lot and encouraged him to be careful. The value given to household objects was associated with the value of the work that had gone into making and buying them. Serge's wife comes from a more bourgeois background. As a child, she used to avoid putting her fingers on the beautiful family furniture in the house. Her parents also gave

value to the objects, but more symbolic and memorial: they maintained the familial furniture as a cultural heritage.

### *(Re)discovering the issue of products' lifespan*

We can find some roots in individuals' relationship to objects. But very often, it took other events to reactivate these dispositions. Indeed, several interviewees testify to an evolution in their relationship to objects: they compare themselves to a "before" when they bought and threw away more. What led them to be more and more concerned about the lifespan of objects? Often, a combination of causes led to gradual changes. I group them into three types:

- Misadventures with one or more objects. For many, it was the breakdown (or even a close succession of several breakdowns) that triggered a feeling of indignation and a desire to fight against obsolescence.
- Awareness raising through the media, the cultural industry, speeches promoted by the public authorities. Several individuals cite these, especially those that speak of "planned obsolescence" and "minimalism": they have a diffuse impact on their representations, leading them to discover the notion of lifespan and over-consumption.
- Personal biographical disruptions: a trip that raises awareness of ecology (1 case), illnesses that lead to a review of one's lifestyle (2 cases), the loss of employment questioning the meaning of daily activities (2 cases), a deterioration in the household's financial situation (4 cases) — this last change often leads individuals to adopt economy and self-production practices (Boost & Meier, 2017).

Let us take an example to illustrate this biographical turnaround, which combines two sources of change: that of Alexandre, a 35-year-old audiovisual technician, married and father of two children. He has watched documentaries on minimalism, which resonated with the reduction in income he experienced. Alexandre maintains that his relationship with objects changed when he and his family moved into their current apartment in 2016. He and his wife were still receiving the same income, but the rent for the apartment increased by €500 because it was bigger, and this coincided with the birth of their second daughter in 2015. This change in budget went hand in hand with the

viewing, mainly by Alexandre, of Netflix documentaries and series such as *Minimalism* (2016), or *Tidying up with Marie Kondo*<sup>3</sup> (2019). Following this trend, Alexandre argues that they have started to change some of their habits, including going to Repair Café<sup>4</sup> to repair rather than replace, or stop buying the last iPhone every year. The cause of products' lifespan allows them to live more serenely with the budget cut, as it makes deconsumerism desirable.

## How biographical events play on the fate of objects in the home

### *Household transformations and object careers*

Everyday life events are opportunities for new objects to enter and leave the household. These events can be regular, such as birthdays or vacations, which often bring new objects into the household. They can also be biographical developments, which are of more interest. Changes in the household strongly determine objects' careers in the home.

Youth (age of schooling or of first job search) is the age of sobriety. My biographical interviews show that young adults are focused on sociability and leisure activities, and that their household equipment is limited by their low income. They have little concern for their objects' lifespan, but have sober practices, in the sense that they own few objects and make a lot of recuperation. Household equipment comes with advancing age, settling down as a couple (Kaufmann, 1992) and the first stable job. Moreover, the first wage is an event evoked by several respondents: to mark the occasion, they often acquired a new object at that time.

Another biographical break, moving disrupts the respondents' household goods. For many, this is an opportunity to sort and get rid of numerous objects that, in their opinion, do not deserve to be transported, could be replaced by objects that they like better, or do not fit in the new home. Just before, the prospect of moving leads some of my respondents to disinvest in their

home, suspending their consumption in anticipation of future purchases.

Enlarging or reducing the size of household also plays a role among my respondents: in addition to the couple relationship already mentioned, the arrival of a child or separation can be the occasion for new acquisitions or removal of objects; the literature has shown that people who divorce get rid of certain objects that are too full of memories (McAlexander, 1991). Divorce can also affect repair practices: one respondent learned how to make improvised crafts once she became a single mother. Finally, retirement, with the slowing pace of life, also has an impact: having more time available allows Geneviève, 70, to repair more of her objects. She explains, using the example of the printer she brought to a Repair Café, that she would have taken less time to try to repair it when she was still working as a nurse with a dependent child.

### *The role of historical events: the case of lockdown*

With the COVID-19 crisis, part of the French population has experienced several lockdowns: we focus on the first one, which took place from March 17 to May 11, 2020. This experience implies several things about the relationship that individuals have with their objects over time.

Respondents strongly slowed down their consumption of new or second-hand objects, due to the temporary inaccessibility of stores and exchanges via the Internet. The lockdown was a boost to their existing practices of limiting consumption. It legitimized the path they had begun to take: deconsumption gave them a form of autonomy that they were able to put forward during this period.

The impossibility to buy easily also led to more reinvestment in existing assets. The time spent at home was an opportunity to rediscover some objects, in connection with the new activities experienced during this period. Depending on whether or not the situation freed up time, repair, do-it-yourself or sewing work was abandoned or undertaken. Due to the lack of

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<sup>3</sup> This reality TV series features families that Marie Kondo, author of a book on tidying up, comes to help them sort through their belongings and save space.

<sup>4</sup> Volunteer repair workshops available free of charge.

mobility, several small home repairs were attempted to prolong the use of objects. Lockdown also encouraged self-production: the famous masks, made by respondents familiar with sewing, are worth mentioning. The desire for self-sufficiency led to the learning of production practices at home and the rediscovery of manual skills usually absent in everyday life.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I showed that there are moments in the life course that can arouse individuals' interest in the question of products' lifespan, or which, conversely, can discourage practices aimed at preserving objects. First, we observed that the tendency to keep objects for a long time could come from primary socialization, just as it can happen later, notably through biographical disruption. Then, we saw that the stages of the life course, as well as the recurrent events of the year and the global events constraining consumption, can determine the fate of objects within the home, speeding up or delaying their end of life.

To go further and complete this work, it would be interesting to do the same work with individuals who do not develop an attachment to their objects, in order to understand which elements of primary socialization and life course led to a different relationship to objects.

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